

## **ISSUE OF INSURGENCY IN ASSAM AND ITS REFLECTION IN CONTEMPORARY ASSAMESE LITERATURE**

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### **Abstract:**

Insurgency and violence are not an alien topic in the context of North East India in general and Assam in particular. Right after India's independence, the flame of insurgency started to engulf then Naga Hills district (now Nagaland state) of then undivided Assam. Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Nagaland all had severe insurgency problems right from 1950's and 1960's. Finally, a formal insurgent group called ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam), formally took shape in 1979 in upper Assam with overt and covert support of other insurgent groups in neighboring states. The perceived perception of alienation and exploitation in the minds of a group of handful misguided youths kept Assam burning for next 30 years and sporadic incidents are still continuing as not all members of the banned insurgent group have given up the path of violence till now. Naturally literary work in Assam too started reflecting a diverse set of views during this turbulent period. Some literary works were protagonists, some were antagonists to the insurgents. Yet some other literary works were totally neutral that depicted the travails and sufferings of common people both in the hands of insurgents and security forces. It was the perfect cauldron of grief, sorrow, fear and revenge. Numerous writers paid the price for being bold with their pen, both in the hands of insurgents and occasionally in the hands of law enforcement authorities. Finally, a powerful mediator group headed by noted literary personalities in Assam was tasked by both sides to broker peace. This mediator group, with the presence and clout of several noted literary personalities of the state, finally succeeded in persuading a sizeable section of insurgents to shun the mindless path of violence and resolve their grievances through dialogue and peaceful means. This broadly sums up the influence of literature in a very turbulent period of Assam.

### **Key words:**

Insurgency, ULFA, peace broker, literature, sedition, AFSPA.

### **Introduction:**

With a population of about 3.6 crore as on end of 2023, Assam has been a cauldron of turbulence and violence just after India attained independence from colonial British reign on 15th August, 1947. Assam's tryst with insurgency followed immediately in then Naga Hills district. Present day Nagaland was part of Assam till mid 60s. Independent India's first armed insurgency commenced immediately after independence in restive Naga Hills district with a clamour for a totally independent country for

the Nagas. Situation became so fragile that Indian Parliament had to enact Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) in the 1950s. This act was first introduced in then Naga inhabited areas of Naga Hills and also in Manipur. Indian Army marched in to the disturbed areas and a cycle of killings and counter killings followed. Very unfortunately this vicious cycle of violence is not yet completely over and many areas of North East India (including few districts of Assam) still remain under AFSPA Act. But insurgency did not hit mainstream Assamese society till 1979. On 7<sup>th</sup> April, 1979, a group of disgruntled youths formed United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in Sivsagar district of upper Assam. The cycle of violence soon followed in the misguided quest for freedom from so called Indian mainland. Literature is always a reflection of the past, present and future of a society. Soon Assamese literature started reflecting the travails of the society. 90's of last century was a highly turbulent period in Assam. Naturally both sections of society whether protagonists or antagonists tried to make their view known through Assamese literature. So Assamese literature in the period from late 80' to late 90's of last century is replete with poems, novels, short stories etc to reflect the views of both protagonists and antagonists of insurgency issue. Then another section of literature expressed the views and sufferings of a large section of common people in the society who were totally neutral and yet torn between devils and deep sea. This section of helpless people bemoaned the economic slowdown due to deteriorating law and order situation in Assam and lost of innocent lives either in the hands of insurgents or security forces. Two large scale military operations (namely Operation Bajrang and Operation Rhino) were launched in early part of 1990s and lots of atrocities were reported in the name of counter insurgency operations by security forces. A sizeable section of Assamese literature depicted this side of the suffering of common people. Government had to ban few novels and start legal proceedings against a selected group of writers who were perceived to be openly advocating the view of insurgent groups through different forms of literature. Noted journalist late Parag Kumar Das ( an alumnus of St Stephen's College of Delhi and Delhi School of Economics) was booked under different sections of law and one of his very controversial novel was banned by Assam government . Many poets were put behind bars for their perceived overt and covert support to the insurgent group. Still literature continued to reflect those turbulent times in Assam in different formats be it novels, short stories or poems or articles in newspapers.

### **Objectives:**

The present study aims to reflect on the literary works in Assam from late 80's till mid 2014/15 which witnessed vicious cycle of violence in the state and numerous literary works were compiled to represent the views of all sides of the unfolding situation. The study tries to encompass the writings of protagonists, antagonists and also neutral views with respect to the vexed insurgency issue of the state.

### **Review of Literature:**

The issue of insurgency in North East in general and Assam in particular has already generated lots of interest in both national and international levels. "Strangers of The Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast " by Sanjay Hazarika, published by Penguin Books (first published in 1994) is

an internationally acclaimed work on the subject. His second book " Strangers No More", published by Aleph Book Company (2018) as a sequel to his first book on the same topic is another masterpiece. "There is No Good Time for Bad News" by Aruni Kashyap, published by Future Cycle Press, Georgia, USA (2021) has garnered lots of interest in the subject. This book is a compilation of poems and short stories (first published in Assamese language) on the topic. " The Sleepwalker's Dream " by Dr. Dhurbojyoti Bora, published by Speaking Tiger Publications (2016) is another masterpiece novel on the subject. "The State and Separatist Militancy in Assam: Winning a Battle and Losing the War? by Sanjib Baruah, published by University of California Press (1994) is another literary masterpiece on the topic. "History, Memory and Trauma in Selected Works of Arupa Patangia Kalita" by Manashi Bora, *Rupkatha Journal*, Vol. 14, Issue 2, April-June, 2022. Pages 1-9 is an insightful work on the topic.

### **Data source and Methodology:**

The researcher relies on secondary data already available in different forms of print and electronic media that already have a treasure trove of information on the subject.

### **Literature that were overtly supportive of the insurgency cause**

Banned novel " Changlot Fenla" by late journalist Parag Kumar Das tops the name of this category of Assamese literature. Parag Kumar Das wrote this novel (which did well commercially before it was banned by the government) to justify the cause of insurgency from economic viewpoint. The novel, in the form of conversations between different sections of people, gave an economic perspective of upliftment, development and control over vast natural resources be it coal, crude , tea gardens if Assam attains independence and chalks out its independent economic policy to benefit local people. The novel was based on perceived perception of alienation, exploitation and negligence of indigenous people of Assam from mainland India. Now defunct Budhbar (meaning Wednesday) weekly newspaper edited by late Parag Kumar Das and another noted journalist Ajit Bhuyan (who is now a Rajya Sabha MP from Assam ) published several short stories , poems , discussion in this particular newspaper who seemed to advocate the cause of insurgency either directly or indirectly. For his part, journalist Ajit Bhuyan too faced the ire of law and had to spend long days behind bars. A secret monthly booklet " Swadhinota" ( means independence) was circulated among a large sections of Assamese people to intellectually garner support for the banned outfit. Many stories, glorifying the sacrifices of insurgent youths, were regularly published in popular magazines like Prantik, Bisoi, Rohoysa under pseudo names of writers. Even some popular and quite well known singers were accused by government authorities for espousing the cause of insurgents through songs and lyrics.

### **Literature that analysed the psychological issue of insurgency**

The foremost novel in this category was written by noted literary figure Harekrishna Deka, an IPS officer (who retired as Assam Police DGP) and native of Assam. Harekrishna Deka is a Sahitya Academy Award winner and during his long career as a senior police officer, he closely observed the insurgency issue in Assam. Based on his experience, he published Bandiar (meaning captive in English).

This novel too was a hugely popular and award winner. This novel depicts the psychological condition of an ULFA cadre who is guarding a captive or Bandiar. The author describes the condition of the captor and captive with that of a flowing river and a kingfisher bird. The kingfisher bird cannot escape from the river as it provides it food. Same way the ULFA cadre (captor) is also tied down by the captive. Till the captive is with the ULFA captor, the captor too is somewhat captive of the situation. In the novel, the inner conflict of the ULFA insurgents while engaging in subversive activities in quest for their goal is beautifully analysed by a senior bureaucrat who is in charge of advising the government to deal with the issue. Readers of the novel get a feeling that this senior bureaucrat character in the novel is none other than IPS officer Harekrishna Deka himself.

Another novel " Sanjoy's Assam ", published by Penguin Random House and authored by Sumita Ghose depicts the tragic end of Oxford educated social worker Sanjoy Ghose who came down from Kolkata to do some really memorable social work in world's largest river island Majuli in upper Assam. He was killed by ULFA in the mistaken belief of being an Indian government spy. The tragic death of this social worker (who was a close relative of then a senior Indian diplomat at United Nations) caused lots of anguish and grief among a large section of Assamese people. People vented their anger through poems, articles, novels in Assam. The strong outpour of grief through all forms of popular literature is believed to be one of the strong catalysts which turned the last remaining bastion of support against ULFA in mid 90s.

### **The scourge of surrendered militants and their depiction in literature**

A new nomenclature SULFA (surrendered ULFA ) gained prominence in mid 90's and continues even today. The name SULFA is commonly associated with deceit, betrayal, torture, illegal confinement, illegal tax collection and so on. To fight against diehard ULFA cadres still active, government and administration openly embraced this group of surrendered militants and offered them tacit approval to engage in many illegal activities. Soon the scourge of SULFA got depicted in Assamese literature. Noted writer Anuradha Sharma Pujari (also a Sahitya Academy Award winner) published a short story called Surrender. The transformation from a diehard underground militant to a SULFA member is depicted here. Then another popular novel "Sleepwalker's dream" (Tuponit Khojkarha Manuhor Hopun in Assamese) was published in both English and Assamese by Sahitya Academy Award winner writer Dr. Dhurbajyoti Bora. This novel beautifully depicts the perilous journey of a group of misguided youths like the proverbial sleepwalker who does all the walking in sleep and without any conscience. The typical sleepwalker struggles to remember what and where he or she walked last night during sleep. Author Dr. Dhurbajyoti Bora beautifully depicts the fateful journey of such a group of misguided youths who fails to see the reasoning of logic and truth of daylight.

Another popular novel "Kolijar Aai "(which means mother in my heart in Assamese) was published by another senior IPS officer and writer Dilip Bora who retired from the position of DGP in Assam Police not so long ago. IPS officer Bora is a native of Assam and was intimately involved in anti insurgency operations for a very long time. This popular novel was first published in a forthright

magazine in parts and created quite a sensation. The IPS officer cum writer depicts how greed and moral turpitude turned a large section of surrendered militants into open curse for the society. The novel beautifully depicts mutual hatred and suspicion among once former comrades who are now in two opposing camps, baying for each other's blood. Due to his senior police officer's experience, the author of this novel has been able to vividly depict the scene of encounters, formulation of strategies to outsmart insurgents, tug of war between security forces and insurgents to win public support, playing the proverbial cat and mouse game to outsmart each other.

### **Story of common people: neither protagonists nor antagonists**

"How to tell the story of an insurgency: Fifteen Tales from Assam " by Aruni Kashyap is a collection of 15 such poignant stories originally written in Assamese by several noted writers /authors and which were later translated into English and compiled as a book by Aruni Kashyap. This book depicts the 15 touching stories by noted literary figures from Assam including Anuradha Sharma Pujari, Monikuntala Bhattacharya, Arup Kumar Nath, Uddipana Goswami, Nandeswar Daimari and others. These stories depict suffering and travails of innocent local people both in the hands of insurgents and security forces for no crime of theirs. Their only crime, depicted in these 15 stories, is to be in the wrong place in the wrong time. The wrong place being turbulent Assam in mid 90's to early 2000's.

The gruesome unexplained murders termed as 'Secret Killings ' during this period ( ostensibly by state machinery in collusion with surrendered militants) on outspoken critiques of government finds mentions in many such stories of this book.

### **Noted writings by renowned Assamese intellectuals against insurgent groups**

At the peak of insurgency, few notable intellectuals stood out in both regional and national media for their outspoken writings against insurgents. One such intellectual is Dr. Hiren Gohain, who has a much acclaimed Ph.D. from Cambridge University and who retired as head of English department in Gauhati University. Through his sharp, insightful analysis and writing in many Assamese newspapers and journals, Dr Gohain attacked the might of guns of the insurgency with an even mightier pen to drive home the point that pen is always mightier than a sword. At personal risk to himself, Dr Gohain attained a cult figure among a large section of society as a powerful anti insurgency fearless intellectual. Dr Gohain is also a Sahitya Academy Award winner and his book " Assam: a burning question " was first published in Assamese language and a treasure trove of information and analysis on insurgency issues, social unrest in Assam.

Another noted intellectual journalist and author Kanaksen Deka too fearlessly attacked ULFA even at the peak of insurgency. His book " Amar Jubosamaj Biswabijoy Koriboloi Ulai Ahak" (which means let our youth come forward to conquer the bigger world) advocates the cause of universal brotherhood and positive mindset to conquer the world rather than looking through the narrow , impractical prism of chauvinist Assam as advocated ULFA. Kanaksen Deka, at great risk to his personal safety, kept on writing vigorously against insurgency from early 90's till date.

**Some unlucky ones paid the supreme price for being fearless with their pen:**

Not all were lucky for being outspoken with their pen against insurgents in Assam. The first to fall to insurgents bullets for his fearless writing was noted journalist and freedom fighter Kamala Saikia who was killed by insurgents in 1991 for his relentless writing against them. Then to fall to bullets is another journalist Parag Kumar Das in 1996 who was an advocate but also a critique of banned ULFA many times. Nobody has been convicted so far despite his killing being probed by CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation). Then another noted journalist Anil Mazumdar who was the editor of Assamese newspaper was killed by suspected insurgents in 2009. Scores of lesser known journalists, news correspondents were killed by insurgents for mere suspicion of being hand in glove with security forces or being critical of insurgents through their writing.

Noted journalist Rajiv Bhattacharya in his recently released acclaimed book " ULFA: The Mirage of Dawn" depicts the series of mysterious deaths of many writers, authors either in the hands of ULFA or SULFA (surrendered ULFA). Most of these killings still remain unresolved.

**Social media proliferation and rampant use of the same by some insurgency supporters**

A new trend has been observed in recent years with the proliferation of popular social media platforms like Facebook. A section of self declared poets and writers either using real name of pseudo name have been writing poems etc in either direct or indirect support of insurgency. One such name is young poet Barshashree Buragohain. Her poem which translated into English from Assamese ( ' One more step in the direction of the sun of liberty, I will commit treason once more') was published recently in Facebook and authorities put her behind bars for more than 2 months for writing such a seditious poem. Even before the advent of social media, a popular poet Kabiranjana Saikia alias Swadhinota Phukon created quite a sensation in Assam for his poetic glorification of so called 'martyrs ' in their ' quest for freedom for motherland '. Later it turned out that this particular poet was himself the deputy publicity secretary of banned ULFA. Due to his popular poems, Kabiranjana Saikia was widely known as a 'poet's soul in a rebel body ' before eventually he was killed by police in 2000.

In the name of freedom of expression, social media is rife with articles and poems from anonymous writers, authors or poets whose literary works somewhat falls in the category of sedition against Indian state. As publication in social media doesnot require any reputed publishing house, anybody with virtually with any idea can reach out to a large section of people through social media. This has become a new headache of late for security agencies in Assam. The fine line between literary freedom and voice of sedition has really become blurred in this new context.

**Noted literary personalities as peace broker between government and insurgent groups in Assam**

Perhaps realising the importance and clout of literary personalities on social life, government of Assam and government of India constituted mediator group headed by Gnanpith Award winner Dr.

Indira Goswami also known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami. Dr. Indira Goswami, a noted retired professor from Delhi University's Assamese language department is the only second Gnanpith award winner from Assam. She was already well respected in the world of literature due to her numerous touching stories and novels which won several awards at both national and international levels. The other prominent literary personalities from the mediating group were Dr. Hiren Gohain and Dr. Apurba Baruah. Under the guidance of this literary group, several rounds of formal and informal talks happened between insurgent group ULFA and government. Perhaps due to these powerful mediators, finally a large section of banned ULFA came overground to shun violence and embrace Indian Constitution. Sameway, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the apex literary body of the Bodo community in Assam took numerous steps to help broker peace among numerous Bodo insurgent groups and government. Same role was played by other prominent literary groups in brokering peace among small fringe insurgent groups in other parts of Assam and government. This again amplifies the role and clout of literature both in times of peace and violence.

## Conclusion

Literature is nothing but a reflecting mirror of the state of an affair in a society from the past, present and also a prognosis of the future. Unlike living beings like us humans, the soul embedded in literature is immortal. People, however great and mighty, come and finally go from this mortal world. But literature lives forever. Powerful literary works have already demonstrated how they can change society. Literary work of Charles Dickens influenced the course of French revolution. His famed novel "A tale of two cities" describes the glaring discrepancy among population in France just as French revolution was unfolding. Sameway great literary work of Karl Marx and Engels contributed a lot to the Bolshevik revolution in former USSR. In India also, during freedom movement, patriotic poems and writings played a big part in stoking nationalistic feeling among ordinary Indians. Who can forget the great lines of 'Sare Jaha Se Atcha, Hindustan Hamara' by poet Iqbal. Nobel Lauretee Rabindranath Tagore, Bankimchandra Chatteropadhyay and numerous others contributed a lot during freedom movement through their great literary works. Literature always works as an instrument of introspection and retrospection for both the ruling class and common subjects. Sameway, incidence of insurgency in Assam have also left lots of literary footprints in Assam in last 3 decades. It would be of interest for everyone to have a basic understanding of these particular literary works to prevent occurrence of such incidents again in future. Those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it, unfortunately.

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