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Writers of Assam: For a Sustainable Peace Process

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Abstract:

For the last over half a decade Assam is reeling under the pressure of an unending agitation. Literature that has emerged from the region in the last two decades has a very strong political tone and recreates stories from a history that has been bypassed; while telling the ancient, medieval and modern history of the region.

Corruption which is eating into the society has not been dealt with firmly by the government. The writers make the readers aware that we need to learn from past mistakes because a generation has already suffered untold damage. As such, the writers of Assam produce new metaphors to describe and articulate their sensitivity for social change which becomes possible through thinking anew and possibilities for a better prospect. They present the dynamics of socio cultural and political scenario of Assam focusing on history, culture and society. What come to the fore are the shifting structures of meaning, power and action. In this paper I have focused on the literary contribution of contemporary writers of Assam, in their efforts to maintaining social, cultural harmony in the state.

The authors write with an intense sense of awareness for the cultural loss as a result of violence in the states and try to reconstruct tradition. For writers living in an atmosphere of daily violence and the experience at the sight of the innocents being killed, maimed and brutalized by violence, the intrinsic faith in the capacity of human beings, to heal and rejuvenate comes through the anguish – laden writings of the writers in this time of violence. The writers suggest that for a sustainable peace these structures needed to be transformed in the social and political institutions, situations and relationships. As such the belief in the essential power of human efforts to change the course of history seems to be gradually gaining ground in Assam.

1. Assam

The state of Assam commands a unique and significant place, among the states of north eastern India. Because of its location on a very sensitive front, (surrounded by Bhutan, China, Burma and Bangladesh) Assam has always enjoyed a unique place in the annals of Indian history. The location of Assam on the international border and her uneven landform with towering mountains, forest clad hills, ranges, gorges, canyons, valleys of varying dimensions and shapes, plateau surfaces, foothills, plains, river terraces, has rendered it a place of sensitive and strategic location. If the international boundaries are not properly guarded, it can be used as a sanctuary for the guerilla and insurgent activities.

2. Agitation and Corruption

For the last over half a decade Assam is reeling under the pressure of an unending agitation. This mass movement which has not meaningfully abated in spite of negotiations, suppression and other gestures transcends all political parties, religious faiths, ages and sexes. Immigration to Assam is considered to be the major cause of this problem. The problem of immigration has spread tension to all political units of North eastern India through Assam. Communal riots and other factional feuds have very often disturbed the peace of the country and that of Assam in particular. The communal riots of 1950, 1960, 1968 and 1971, that ravaged parts of Assam are still fresh in the minds of the people. The British administration preferred to keep this region isolated. They did not like much progress of this region and also did not allow people from other parts to enter this region. The British initiated a policy of segregating Assam from the rest of India. The policy enacted by the Bengal Eastern Frontier regulation of 1873 allowed the Government to prescribe, and from time to time alter by notification. These policies were continued in the post independent period as well, which has led to political unrest, insurgency and ethnic classes. Paula Banerjee in her article, *Woman and Borders in Militarized North East India*, explains how the right to life of North Eastern women is being repeatedly violated in the name of curbing insurgency. In 1958, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was passed specifically for this region. The region's history under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act reflects how women have suffered under the two patriarchies of rebel and the armed forces deployed by the state.

Endless festering conflicts, which have spread to new areas of the region, leading to sustained deployment of Indian army and federal paramilitary forces on 'internal security duties', that, in turn has militarized rather than democratized the social and political space in Assam. These troops are deployed often against well-armed and relatively well trained insurgent's adept at the use of the hill terrain and often willing to use modern urban terror tactics for the shock effect. It has culminated into the present ugly development of the region. Insurgency related violence continues in the North East Indian state of Assam. Even though the fortunes of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) have declined significantly, a political settlement remains elusive and unresolved. The eight states of the North East have been long besieged by insecurity and violence, death, kidnappings, rape and torture on a daily basis, governmental apathy, corruption, poverty and unemployment.

- “People are caught in the crossfire of insurgents, military, non-state actors and the government’s counter –insurgency operations. Values have been distorted, youths have started running after easy money, and the quality of education has fallen. Insurgency has affected the lives of people in their day to day activities, like normal movement, going to work place, sending children to school, movement of women – people constantly live in fear, anxiety and suspicion. In such a situation, terror and counter terror have emerged as the order of the day.” (Gill, 2010)

Corruption which is eating into the society has not been dealt with firmly by the government. The writers make the readers aware that we need to learn from past mistakes because a generation has already suffered untold damage. As such, the writers of Assam produce new metaphors to describe and articulate their sensitivity for social change which becomes possible through thinking anew and possibilities for a better prospect. They present the dynamics of socio cultural and political scenario of Assam focusing on history, culture and society. What come to the fore are the shifting structures of meaning, power and action. In this paper I have focused on the literary contribution of contemporary writers of Assam, in their efforts to maintaining social, cultural harmony in the state.

3. Literature

Literature that has emerged from the region in the last two decades has a very strong political tone and recreates stories from a history that has been bypassed; while telling the ancient, medieval or modern history of the region. They also look at the changes in values in the society brought about by modernization and use of technology and mechanization which has resulted in the demographic process of migration, the general migratory trend from rural to urban areas in search of lucrative employment. As a consequence of globalization, there have been changes in the political and economic domains, which have affected the cultural realms. Rapid urbanization has also resulted in feminization of poverty of the woman migrants who almost always provide the cheap labour in the urban settlement. Since the writers have witnessed the great changes in Assam’s history during their lifetimes; therefore, they have turned to be harbingers of those changes in the state, which brought about tremendous transformation of mental outlook in the society. In this study, I would like to focus on the literature of Assam which represents a complex region and times that the state had experienced. The writers make a sustained effort for peace and development in the region and therefore have something very different to say. Apart from a distinct regional sensibility, the political natures of these writings make them different.

4. The Writers

The writers write with an intense sense of awareness for the cultural loss as a result of violence in the state and try to reconstruct tradition. Haunted by the past the writers write with a view to enable them to bring desirable changes in the society, torn apart by socio political unrest, ethnic conflicts, and insurgency and separatist movements. Militarization and state repression are frequently the main source of human rights violation in Assam and in the country at large. Political crimes fake encounter and various abuses are committed in the name of safeguarding public security and fight against terrorism and secessionism. There is the need to be a retrospection for a paradigm shift in the administration and governance of Assam, so that the human rights of the women and the indigenous people can be protected and defended.

Thus the works of a generation of writers reflects the strains of violence and death. Indira Goswami’s *The Journey*, Arupa Patangia Kalita’s powerful novel *Felanee* and short stories like *Someday Sometime Numoli*, Sebastian Zumvu’s story, *Son of the soil* (about a young boy caught by the army for pretending to be an insurgent in order to extort money.) TemsulaAo’s *These Hills Called Home: Stories From a War Zone* (a vivid depiction of what happened in Nagaland in the 1960s and 1970s), Bimabati Thiyam Ongbi’s story *He’s Still Alive*, Dhrubajyoti Bora’s trilogy on the insurgency, Rita Chaudhury’s novel *Ei Samay Sei Samay* on the North East agitation, we can also see these concerns reflected in works by almost all writers like Manorama Das Medhi, Mousumi Kandali and Anuradha Sarma Pujari. Samudra Gogoi’s (A former ULFA member) *Memoirs* - to name but a few, have dealt with these themes in terrifying detail. Many younger writers continue to grapple with these issues. Aruni Kashyap’s first novel, *The House with a Thousand Novels*, seeks to understand why so many educated thinking young men took to the gun. In all these stories there is a query and a ‘retrospect’ to find answers to today’s troubling questions. There is scathing attack on the exploitative social system, subjugation of the marginalized, dehumanization, poverty, which continues in the new patriarchy that dominates the post-colonial world - the rich, selfish and privileged classes of corrupt politicians and leaders of the government exploiting the common masses who suffer and their dreams are differed. Nevertheless, questions of choice and determination remain at the heart of the change agents in the society. Their fictions function as powerful tools of counter-memory. Through their acts of return to unacknowledged pasts, they impel us to confront the legacies of life worlds destroyed by or remade in the wake of extreme violence. There is a great creative motivation now in the writers of Assam in the new movements - which consists of socio political scenario of unrest, violence and instability in the region; it incorporates youth movements and politics of cultural identities, where people are caught in the crossfire of insurgents, military, non-state actors and the government’s counter –insurgency operations.

By juxtaposing the present with the past the writers give us a thorough understanding of the impending dangers and a culture of violence. The writers further imply that sadly not much is done to lessen and diminish the situations of violence by the government and the society. The writers are living in an atmosphere of daily violence and the experience of violence brings all members of Assamese writers together in writing about the contemporary socio political conditions in Assam and cements them in a common bond. “In a society where values are being torn apart so rapidly and conflict is a reality, the least that one can do for the future is to see that the lives of the people are disrupted as little as possible”. By writing on the contemporary socio political unrest, they warn the readers of a future threatened by violence, suggesting the possibility of nonviolent means for the progress and development in the region. As humans, it is essential that we learn to survive in society, and we have to be taught what is considered to be the proper

behaviour towards our fellows, which always entails a complex orientation programme involving social responsibilities and expectations.

- “To perceive the world, it is necessary for us to engage with it. To cope with the resultant conflict of interest, we need to negotiate our relation with others. Culture also becomes what emerges from such negotiation, mediating our social reality and being an essential feature by which we establish our own sense of identity. It reflects a constant need for renegotiation of the dialectical relationship between individual and society and between different classes and interests within a given society. Thus culture can be said to provide the conduit through which we can construct reality. Reality is formed through the relationship we construct with the world.” (Richardson, 2001: 5-6)

The 21st century is certain to witness episodes of ethnic based conflicts as ethnic communities struggle for self-determination that the rulers of their state consider unacceptable. The question that arises is, how is ethnic conflict to be managed – this can be done through peaceful debate, negotiation, give-and-take, and accommodation- so that the lives of innocents can be spared and the horrors of terror and warfare averted, so that ordinary men and women can at least coexist with members of other community in the same political space, and look forward to fulfilling their lives in security and peace. This is evident in the writings of the Assamese writers.

For writers living in an atmosphere of daily violence and the experience at the sight of the innocents being killed, maimed and brutalized by violence, the intrinsic faith in the capacity of human beings, to heal and rejuvenate comes through the anguish – laden writings of the writers in this time of violence. Although violence, degradation, dehumanization has paralyzed human life of the last century, yet the writers constantly display empathy and concern about the happenings around them. The writers suggest that for a sustainable peace these structures needed to be transformed in the social and political institutions, situations and relationships. As such the belief in the essential power of human efforts to change the course of history seems to be gradually gaining ground in Assam.

5. References

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