

Insurgency, Violence, and the Transformation of Assam's Social and Political Landscape: A Literary Study

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Abstract

The body of literature emerging from decades of militancy in Assam has become crucial to understanding the region's shifting social and political discourses since the inception of the Assam Movement. The political turmoil caused by such a violent uprising became the source of utter misery and destitution for the people. Through this paper, an attempt has been made to study the works of select authors, including Arupa Patangia Kalita, Jahnabi Barua, Mitra Phukan, and Aruni Kashyap, by employing a close textual analysis of their texts to understand the consequences of these incidents in the social and political context as reflected in the literature of the period. We propose to study the theme of transformations and alterations in familial life in fiction set during the insurgency period and its aftermath in Assam. The fervour of Assamese Nationalism was deeply seated in the hearts of the Assamese intelligentsia and the students of the state, and hence the violent uprisings of the period became an agitation of the masses affecting every household. The systemic violence of the period gave a new direction to the functioning of society, and we are interested in tracing these changes through a literary study of the fictions written about the period.

Keywords: Insurgency, Northeast India, Familial life, Political turmoil, Assam Movement.

Literature from Assam, either in translations or even in English writings themselves, has a limited visible presence in the Indian literary canon. However, it does not mean any dearth of influential literature of the place; rather, Assam is highly rich in its literary heritage. Even after the occurrence of one of the biggest political turmoils that shattered the state, it didn't limit the corpus of literature; rather, it has come up in the form of fiction as well as nonfiction to describe the inflictions of atrocities upon the multitude. With the rise of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in 1979, the demographic dynamic evolved to form a new structure of Assamese society. Insurgency and violence became the reflection of daily manoeuvres. Starting off with the industrialists and big tea planters of the state, the militancy engulfed everyone under its storm.

A reign of terror prevailed as ULFA assassinated and threatened businessmen and industrialists across the State. In 1990, the governance in Assam broke down, which led to the declaration of President's rule in the State with a subsequent ban on the ULFA by the Government of India (Insurgency in Assam report).

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Hence, a section of literature that has come after the ULFA agitation is driven by the trauma erupting out of the violence of the period. Authors coming from different parts of the state had a similar experience growing up, and hence this is visible in the similarities in the literature centred on that arena.

People want developmental measures, employment and not bloodshed, which has been continuing for over two decades in Assam. They have fully understood the cumulative disastrous effect of militancy, which is multiplying unemployment, impairing productivity, devastating infrastructure and furthering economic deprivation of the poorer sections of people (Kotwal, 2230).

In this paper, we will examine the select fictions of a diverse range of authors such as Arupa Patangia Kalita, Mitra Phukan, Jahn timer Baruah and Aruni Kashyap to understand the impact of the disruption of familial and conjugal life. We would try to focus on the intricacies of changes that have come as a result of the conflicts and violence of the ULFA agitation, which did not come to an easy halt and destroyed the familial life of lakhs of people.

In Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel *The Story of Felanee*, the protagonist is a displaced, homeless vagabond trying to protect her and her son's lives in the face of intense violent turbulence, which killed her husband, Lambodar. Having escaped by a miraculous turn of events amidst the turbulences of insurgency and violent operations of militants, Felanee has a life full of struggles, which forces her to live a life of destitution. On the other hand, an interloper in the house of Dhiren Mazumdar in Janice Patriat's story *The Patriot* is on the run even after being party to an insurgent operation. The dichotomy of a distilled position of Felanee and the interloper poses a significant question regarding such terrorising aggravation. Anindita Dasgupta, in her paper regarding the role of civilian protests, has discussed this position at length. She says, "Insurgent organisations that present themselves as 'liberators' or expressions of 'people's power' may, paradoxically and at critical junctures, find themselves challenged by unexpected expressions of resistance by the very same people they claim to represent" (116). Being an instrument of the violent agitation disrupted the same families that were scapegoated under political conflicts. The juxtaposition in the lives of the interloper and Felanee has led them to a similar position, marked by a difficult life characterised by constant struggles to secure necessities, which ultimately leads to a desperate need for decisive action.

The rise of ULFA from a student rebellion to a staged terror front became a defining moment in the history of Assam. It changed the structure of familial life to a great extent, and this is visible in the literature of the period. Joba, the female protagonist in Mitra Phukan's short story "A Long Drive," became a widow at the tender age of thirty-five as a result of a bomb blast and is venturing out to find a new life, away from the shadows of the past, with Deepak

(Phukan 197). The haunting of the traumatic past returns as extortion in the present. Under the pressure of the government, ULFA had to surrender in the year 1992, but most of the members managed to flee to the camps they had set up in Bangladesh. A section of the money from the extortion was being used to build the safe site for this move, preparation strategies for which began with the rise of political tidings. The aggression of the violent struggle of the ULFA agitation was a continuous hustle for a prolonged period of time, and parts of which are still prevalent in the North Eastern states. Terrorism impacted the roots of the societal structure in these states.

The nationalist discourse on the two counter-insurgency movements by the Indian Army against this ULFA-sponsored militia does not reveal the details of the period. In the 1990s, with strong strategic manoeuvres, the Indian Army was able to tone down the intensity of the ULFA-led movement, but at the cost of strong abuse of the human rights of the people of the state. “Despite accusations of human rights abuses in Assam during the army operations, Indian officials claimed that their strategy in Assam was successful. Members of the ULFA surrendered their weapons and agreed to give up their armed struggle as well as their desire to achieve independence for Assam” (Baruah 1). Stories such as “The House of Nibha Bou” (16) and “Ayengla of the Blue Hills” (26) by Arupa Patangia Kalita provide a glimpse of the actual happenings taking place during that period. Nibha Bou’s beautifully set house, with years of effort, is subject to distortion by the army searching for her insurgent brother-in-law. The wounds of the forced extortion delve much deeper than the surface of a shattered household and give an insight into the lives of the families of youths being part of the ULFA-led agitation. Ayengla’s extortion in the form of rape by the army sends her to a state of traumatic shock from which she never recovers. The whole family shatters into pieces. The blue hills, which were a source of beauty and fulfilment for Ayengla, became the source of her ultimate despair.

She was almost finished when somebody came from behind and grabbed her. Four to five army jawans lifted her up and took her to the jungle near the brook. Ayengla turned to stone... she was now a stone-like person devoid of emotion. Wherever she was told to sit or lie down, she would, without any protest, without any response (Kalita, 30-31).

The negotiation of the humanitarian crisis between the insurgents and the Indian nation state put the civilians in an obscure position. Even if there were grave human rights violations and a large-scale death toll of civilians, they were also solely dependent on the paramilitary forces for protection from the aggression of the insurgents. As the counter-insurgency operations began in Assam, there was a receding phase of the rebels. Hence, to come back with more force, the rebels became more violent in their approach against the civilians. The sympathy

for the ULFA and their cause of working for the motherland declined to even a greater low. However, it is also significant to note here that in the rising tide of the romantic frenzy of patriotic fervour, a lot of youths indulged in and believed in the cause of the movement. Imagining a future with golden prospects, these youths were led to the darkness of unemployment, mentions Anindita Dasgupta. Even if there was no visible support for the violent methods of ULFA, the Assamese people at large were conscious about the issues raised by the rebels.

It is interesting to note that the violent methods of operations undertaken by the ULFA-sponsored rebels are not the initiation of insurgency in Assam. Insurgents had also taken up arms against the colonial regime. Mitra Phukan, in her novel *Dawn: A novel* emphasizes on the political turmoil of that time and the repercussions of these aspirations. Through the eyes of Binapani, the protagonist, life under the changing times is described as a birdscape. The families of the insurgents are sent into a dark pit and are tortured till their last breath. In the name of being martyred for the cause of nationalism, the family only goes to ruin and becomes void. Mahanendra Barua's activism in the insurgent movement against the colonial regime forces him to be on the run in *Dawn: a novel*, and leaves the family in a desolate state, living on the fate of assistance from others. After his brutal death, Barua is not even given the due recognition and the family is left in a state of starvation. Similar notations followed with other rebels of the ULFA insurgent movement.

After the movement was shot down, a new term for these rebels emerged: SULFA, which stands for Surrendered ULFA. After being on the run for such a long time, returning home was not the same for them. Spending the past years of life amidst death and destitution, the haunting memory of the people they killed filled their dreams in the present. The idea of home has become an alien concept to them. Their minds are filled with the screams and cries of the innocent people they have killed. Dipok Saikia, in Anuradha Sharma Pujari's short story "Surrender" (Kashyap 1), is one such surrendered ULFA living in the contempt of his own past. Using abuse on his wife and child as a coping mechanism drives him to the borderline of insanity and to his ultimate death. Living with the fear of being seen as a miscreant in a society because of his past demeanour keeps him on his toes in his daily life. Dipok left the life of militancy because of his love for Sondhya. He wanted to have a normal life and believed her words of confidence. But the memories did not let him live in peace. He was always sceptical that "his name would probably never be erased from the police register of surrendered militants." And hence, "every day, he lived within the web of suspicion. Occasionally he would get angry with Sondhya and would want to take revenge" (7). After being part of an operation that killed thousands of innocent civilians at their disposal, restoring the idea of normalcy for these militants was very difficult. In other instances, some

of the militants ran away from their own organisation and tried to go back to the life they had before. Holding on to a past that existed and carving a new future with the fear of the consequences of the action didn't let them have a stable familial life. Sorukon, in the short story "What Lies over Here?" by Sanjib Pol Deka (Kashyap 59), is battling with his past, which he has given up on, and a future in which he wants some stability. Contemplating all the time he lost in between and the future that is not for him to live, he finds himself caught by some of the former comrades of his old organisation. He could reflect on how he had held so many prisoners before and similarly killed them. His whole life flashed before his eyes. He hears the voice, "You seem happy with life-home, family, a beautiful wife, occasionally spying for the army. Seems you have a tremendous desire to live, don't you? Okay then, run. Run, I say!" (Kashyap 84). It reverberated in his ears as he had so many times repeated these lines before killing them. He just closed his eyes, and tears rolled down his cheeks.

The reasons for which insurgency sprouted in Assam have long been discussed and sought after. It was a very much known fact that Assam was a multi ethnic and multi diverse arena. According to J.B Bhattacharjee, "a province in which the traditional Assamese area and the Assamese population formed only a minority, and yet by naming it Assam, the British colonialists planted the seeds of future discord, and this may be seen as an important root of insurgency in the post-colonial period" (9). The rise of ULFA in 1979 happened simultaneously with the onset of the Assam Movement (1979-85). The agitation for the cause of deportation of the Bangladeshi immigrants was raised by the student led Assam movement. They strongly emphasised the protection of the identity of the indigenous people. Along similar lines, ULFA fought to take Assam out of the clutches of Indian nationalistic fervour and make it a sovereign nation. Both these movements led to a surge of highly aggrandising spirit in the youths. The convergence of the agendas made the common people the victims of violence and torture. A glimpse into the lives of the upper middle-class families and the repercussions of the aggression of the ULFA agitation is visible in Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories*. It is set around the political disposition; the narrative of Pablo describes the influences and reflections of the scenes of atrocities across the rural and urban dynamics. Similarly, in Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*, the Assam Movement has turned from a small student movement to a mass-scale insurgent mobilisation. The violence of the period is seen through the perspective of Rukmini Bezboruah, the wife of the District Collector. Hence, it introduces the readers to the tensions faced at the bureaucratic level to get a grasp of the situation.

In the writings of this period, one thing that can be deduced for certain is that amidst all these struggles, women were the biggest victims in both the public sphere and the private sphere. This is predominantly evident in patriarchal societies in which women have relatively smaller

roles in social and political decision-making. However, the situation of the women in the Northeastern states was comparatively better, looking at the literacy rates from the period. “According to the estimates of the UN, systematic abuse of women, sexual slavery, rape, forced sterilisation and murder are often used in conflict situations as ‘effective’ strategies of war” (Bushra & Lopez, 2004). The two facets of this violence could be observed through Arupa Patangia Kalita’s two stories, “Daiboki’s Day” (224) and “The Loneliness of Hira Barua” (196). In the former, Daiboki becomes the victim of physical assault by the military personnel. In the latter, Hira Barua had to struggle, living in a space filled with insurgents. During those atrocious times, they had to save the pieces of a shattered family to earn a livelihood on their own after the men had gone to war. The stories of broken lives of women because of the desertion of the man of the house to join the militant groups or the abduction of the man by the same militants left them in a position of destitution and utter helplessness. However, on the other hand, though very few, we also find instances such as Surabhi Barua from the short story “Surabhi Barua and the Rhythm of Hooves” who is associated with the movement of insurgency and hence is rejected by the family supposed to marry her.

She found that Alok’s mother has come to visit. To tell them that she was unable to welcome Surabhi as a daughter-in-law of her house. The people were on one side, and Surabhi was on another, she had said. They did not have any problem with her as a bride-to-be, but now she had become a dangerous association (Kalita 52).

It is also important to note that the education sector of the state was generally traditional and lacked any decisive direction in the line of opening vocational and professional courses, and no initiatives were taken to establish a connection between industries and educational institutes. One major factor that contributed to the promotion of insurgency in the region was the rise of the unemployment problem. The universities and other institutes went on producing thousands of graduates every year, but there were no employment opportunities. The only space where one could get a job in the beginning was the government sector and teaching in public or private institutions. Within a few years of independence, this sector also became exhausted of job opportunities as the governments failed to create new positions. Eventually, they ended up declaring a halt on recruitment and also withdrew the vacant posts.

By the 1960s, unemployment had already become a serious problem in the Northeast, and despite this resounding unemployment problem, in the years after 1970, more colleges and universities were established. In fact, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a mushrooming of schools and colleges in the region. The result was that several thousand youths were added to the educated jobless category. It is a well-known fact that this educated unemployed category filled the ranks of the militants in the 1970s and 80s. The militancy not only created job opportunities but also fetched big income (Bhattacharya 21).

The frustration among the youth to find a place of relevance and situate themselves in the geography of the country built up a rage within them. And that's why the insurgents also enjoyed the silent support of the people in the beginning. The state of the economy and society was even worse than the British times, when insurgency fully became a visible presence after the 1970s and already penetrated all parts of the Northeast, either directly or indirectly. The politicians and intelligentsia of the state have been observant about the fact that the agriculture of the state suffered from a lack of new inputs of modernisation. On the other hand, raw materials from the state were taken out for profit motive in various factories. And the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers were also causing flood havoc each year with no relief from the central government.

The intellectuals in the region highlighted the potential of the Northeast to progress based on its own natural resources and the manpower, while the politicians began to blame the central government squarely for the indifference and step-motherly attitude to the Northeast. These issues were systematically highlighted through the media during the years of the Assam Movement and became popular themes of household discussions (Bhattacharjee 18).

Therefore, it can hardly be refuted that the educated unemployment problem became one of the significant reasons that contributed to the rise of insurgency as a phenomenon and sustained its presence as well in the state. Youths freshly out of college were stuck in a conundrum of choosing a side, either joining the insurgent movement in the name of fighting for the motherland or joining the state forces fighting it. Some of the employment opportunities included joining the state defence forces, which was usually not safe, but having no other choice, they were forced to join them. One instance can be seen in Jahnavi Barua's short story "Honeybees" (49), where Anupam's responsibility for his household, including his sick parents and his younger sister, who is to get married at an eligible age, leads him to join the counter-insurgency movement. The job that he took to save the families from the woes and despair of economic and financial desperation led to his doom as a result of constant conflicts with the insurgents. On the insistence of his friend Madan, for the first time, the thought comes into mind of Anupam. Madan says,

The Assam Police are recruiting in Nalbari-they are looking for men to join the Home Guards. It's not too bad, really. The pay isn't much, only fifteen hundred rupees a month, but you get food and clothes and shoes, and all the money can be saved" (Barua 57).

To secure the future of the family, Anupam ends up losing his life. And this also became the norm for so many unemployed youths of the state.

Hence, the militant uprising in Assam was a defining moment in the state's history, profoundly impacting the social and political lives of its people and altering the concept of family life

altogether. Many discussion forums across northeast India initiated the dialogue on the prevailing situation for half a century and raised concerns. J B Bhattacharjee, in one of the similar discourses, emphasized:

India's northeast is considered one of South Asia's hottest trouble spots with armed conflicts reported for the last fifty years or so. The Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt of India, reports for 2002-03 listed 24 active insurgent groups in the various states, besides many other inactive militant groups which continue to have the potential of flowering into an active group at any given moment" (Bhattacharjee 49).

The discussion on this insurgency movement was significant because it revealed the social, political and cultural dynamics of the state, which bear undercurrents of the systematic violence of the period. The politics of identity, migration and political marginalisation, which developed as a result of the friction between the insurgents and the resistant counterinsurgency movement, have shaped the lives of people living in Assam. Leading a life circumscribed by military operations, curfews and violence, people were living under constant fear of death and destitution. There was a sense of cultural anxiety that developed as a result of this turbulence and led them to question the roots of their Assamese identity and sense of belongingness. Literature of the period reflects this sense of disillusionment and the dual role of the nationalist individuals as seeking to contribute to the growth and development of the society and seeking an identity for themselves in the war-torn state.

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