

## **Memories of Violence and Trauma in Selected Short Stories in the North-East in India**

Dr. Shashank B. Mane

Associate Professor,

Tuljaram Chaturchand College, Baramati

[maneshashank80@gmail.com](mailto:maneshashank80@gmail.com)

*After India's independence several states demanded separation from India. In the name of religion, language or ethnicity people from several parts of India protested against the 'forceful inclusion' of their regions in the country. The North-East in India suffered greatly in 1980s and 90s due to insurgencies and separatist movements in India. The war-like situation in the region threatened the sovereignty of the country. The Indian government first tried to pacify the protesters, listened to their demands sympathetically, tried to negotiate with them and also agreed to give them some freedom but denied separation. Later all the separatist protests were forcefully curbed down by the central government. Writers from the North-East such as Tamsula Ao, Jahnabi Barua and Nitoo Das etc. recreated the past traumatic incidents through their memories and wrote short stories about the military force implemented by the government to subdue the protests, especially in Assam. The present paper deals with the selected short stories of the North-East writers such as Tamsula Ao, Anuradha Sharma Pujari and Jahnabi Barua which depict the lives of the common people amongst the protests for freedom in Assam. These stories are either written in English or translated into English. The writers narrate how civilians were harassed by the militants and also by the government forces. The paper deals with the short stories which bring out the period of insurgency in Assam which was full of violence and terror.*

**Key words:** Memory, trauma, protest, violence, insurgency

Last year India entered the 75<sup>th</sup> year of its independence. Since independence India's journey is rather difficult; in the early years there were challenges of separatism, insurgency and a sense of neglect in many parts of the country, especially in the North-East. Among the seven

states in the North-East, the separatist movement was more intense in Assam. Several groups in Assam felt that any association with India is unreal and impractical because of the difference in language and ethnicity; there was no common thing which would bind Assam with the rest of the country that was the narrative invented by the protesters. Narendra Mohan rightly points out that

. . . consciousness towards fundamental rights, tendency to struggle and a sense of independence and liberty are the basic ingredients of protest which are liable to come into conflict with the dread power of the establishment.<sup>1</sup>

The Assamese thus protested against the inclusion of the state in India, as they became aware of their ‘rights’. Initially the protests for freedom in Assam were rather peaceful; they followed the non-violence method to get their rights. But soon the younger generation became aggressive and took to violence to achieve their goals. The violent protests got momentum in 1980s when the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) became stronger, gaining control over the majority parts of the state. The ULFA’s objective was to attain an independent, sovereign Assam ‘Swadhin Asom’ (Prabhakara 72). The Indian government first tried to pacify the protesters, listened to their demands sympathetically, tried to negotiate with them and also agreed to give them some freedom but denied separation.

Trauma, defined as the psychological effects of suffering on an individual or a collective, has been conceptualized in memory studies as a temporary or permanent interruption of the ability to represent the traumatic event and to make meaning of it.<sup>2</sup>

Lately, the writers from the North-East narrated the past traumatic incidents which they witnessed through their stories. The war-like situation in the region affected the people deeply. Literature has long been an integral part of the protest tradition. John Strauffer points out: “protest literature functions as a catalyst, guide, or mirror of social change. It not only critiques some aspect of society, but also suggests, either implicitly or explicitly, a solution to society’s ills”<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the stories selected here mirror the social reality of a certain geographical space. They represent a variety of experiences of the life under the shadow of gun. The stories also depict the experiences of minorities, settler-communities and tribal people and their experience of caste and class. Long after the insurgency ended in Assam, Nagaland and other states in the North-East, writers from the states tried to recreate the past

through their memories. The stories reveal the difficult period in the history of Assam and show how the people protested the insurgency and how they negotiated everyday reality during the period. The stories also represent the resilience of the common people in a space disturbed by political conflict. After the end of insurgency, when peace finally settled down in Assam and in the North-East, the writers narrated the common man's efforts to fight violence and threat; they showed the relentless efforts of the ordinary people to fight for justice and human rights. These stories represent how people coped with violence, how they protested power and force. Assamese writers wrote about the military force implemented by the government to subdue the protests in Assam, they also pointed out the mistakes committed by the youths in taking up arms against the government. The present paper deals with the selected short stories of Assamese writers such as Temsula Ao, Uddipana Goswami, Anuradha Sharma Pujari and Jahnabi Barua, which depict the lives of the common people amongst the violence and threat in Assam. These stories are either written in English or translated into English. The writers narrate how civilians were harassed by the militants and also by the government forces. The paper deals with the short stories which bring out the period of insurgency in Assam which was full of violence and terror.

In "The Last Song" Temsula Ao shows how the tribals suffered at the hands of the Indian military for paying 'taxes' to the militants who were fighting for independence. Ao might be referring to the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in the story which granted special power to the army to maintain peace and harmony in the Northeast. The story shows how it was misused in the region. The villagers were tortured by the militants as well as by the government forces. The protestors extracted money from the natives and the army punished the villagers for supporting them. The story depicts how common people were victimized by the conflicts, violence and politics of the state; how the separatists and the government violated human rights. In the story a young girl Apenyo, who was called a 'singing beauty', was gang raped by the army during a religious festival. The narrator maintained that in order to punish the villagers for helping the militants, the soldiers purposefully attacked the village during the celebrations. The story depicts how the women and children were brutally treated, how the people were killed in the church by the army. The people lived in fear long after the incident and a mental stigma hovered over the village. The

army, which was supposed to maintain law and order in the state itself became a cause of destruction.

The conflict in the state among the Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and Bodos were effectively narrated by the writers. Assamese suffered not only because of the army but also because of ethnic and religious conflicts among the people. ‘Colours’ by Uddipana Goswami deals with such conflicts. Through the love story between Deepti, a college going Bodo girl and Dambaru, a compounder, Goswami shows the differences among the people in Assam in the name of ethnicity. The people in Kalguri, the village, opposed the love relationship between Deepti and Dambaru because of their ethnic differences. Since the boy came from a non-indigenous tribe, the resistance became more intense. The Bodo youths, especially, were against such marriages because they wanted to free their land from the occupation of the outsiders. The ethnic cleansing of their homeland was their aim and hence they had taken up arms. After Dambaru was killed, two Bodo villages were retaliated killing 20 people. The Bodos then took revenge by killing more than 50 Assamese. The story also traces the reasons why the youths joined the militants. Deepti unable to cope with the situation later joined a militant group who wanted to free Assam from India. She gave vent for her anger by joining a separatist group. However, towards the end of the story the writer shows how the government tried to satiate the militants and tried to bring them back in the main stream.

During the insurgency families were torn apart on the issue of an independent Assam. In a family some would support militant activities while some would oppose it. ‘The Vigil’ by Jahnabi Barua explores this family tension. Barua shows a mother’s emotions as she had to balance her affection between her two sons – a police officer and an underground rebel. Her sons fought on opposite sides of the war and Nirmala being the mother of Moina and Bapukon could not take sides. Moina, the elder brother joined the militants a decade ago, since then he kept visiting his mother secretly during night. Through Moina the narrator presents the life of an underground militant during the insurgency. Both the brothers loved each other when they were young. However, Bapukon after getting into police services cut off any relations with his brother. He felt that his brother was fighting a losing battle. He knew that the rebels would never succeed. Hence, he told his mother:

but these boys. . . what on earth has got into them? No government is going to give them independence; yet they continue to fight, appearing from nowhere and disappearing like ghosts into mist. (23)

Bapukon, thus, was aware of the futility of his brother's attempts in fighting for a free Assam. He being the part of the state machinery knew its plans for the insurgents. He informed his mother that the government had been patient with the separatists for a long time but now 'there is to be a crackdown on the insurgents; the army is baying for blood, straining like a dog at its leash'. (27) The mother, too, was aware that the path Monina had selected was wrong but she could not dissuade him from his motives. She constantly lived under threat because both her sons were at war and any one of them or both of them might die in it. Whenever she heard the siren of an ambulance, she feels that she has lost her son.

The complications in the family increased due to the growing tensions between the two brothers. Although at deeper level they loved and cared for each other, they could not face each other, hence Moina could not visit his mother while Bapukon is at home. Secondly, Bapukon refused to get married first. He felt that his older brother should get married before he did. But Moina had no such plans; also, it was highly impossible for Moina to get married because no girl would choose an underground militant as her husband. Later in the story Bapukon who had crossed 30, decided to get married as he realized that his brother would never surrender and would live a normal life. On his wedding day Nirmala secretly received the news of Moina's death; she was caught in a dilemma as she did not understand how she should react.

The narrator in the story voices the attitudes of the people towards the insurgency. People were divided on the issue of the separate country for the Assamese. Several separatist groups were vehemently fighting to gain freedom, while many believed that the dream of the separate land would not come true; there was no need for it! The insurgency in Assam literally affected everyone in the state. The trauma of the protest was so devastating that people were just bewildered with its experience. They realized that they were fighting against each other, cutting their brothers' throats to earn freedom.

Another facet of insurgency was accepting the rebels in the mainstream again, giving them a chance to live a normal life again. The government appealed the protesters time and again to surrender and to give up arms; they were told that they would be rewarded if they

stopped fighting the war. Several militants in Assam responded to the call and gave up arms. But were they truly accepted by the society and the government? In ‘Surrender’ Anuradha Sharma Pujari narrates the complex issue of the integration of the former rebels in the society. Dipok, a former militant in Assam, had given up arms and wanted to live a normal life. But his past, his former connections with the Assam liberation militants made his life unbearable in the present. The mark of the ‘militant’ could not be erased on him. Anuradha Sharma Pujari weaves the plot of the story on the idea that ‘once a rebel, always a rebel’! The surrendered militants were not at all accepted by the society. They were humiliated, distrusted and the complete integration of these former rebels in society was not possible. The narrator states: ‘Though he had returned to the mainstream, he had never received a warm welcome from any of its members. None of his neighbors would welcome him warmly’ (7). Dipok had been considered as the ‘other’ and constantly lived in the ‘web of suspicion’. Dipok’s wish to lead a normal life of a civilian was never fulfilled. Although he cut himself off from the revolutionaries, he was still considered as ‘one of them’. Dipok, in order to prove his innocence and affiliation to the state, finally helped the police to find the militants. But the militants later murdered him for the act. Ironically even after his death his neighbors suspected a foul play in his death; they believed that finally the ‘former militant’ was killed. He was seen as the militant long after he had left the path of the protest.

Thus, the selected stories in the paper reveal the effects of insurgency on the lives of the Assamese. The stories attempt to elicit empathy and create shock value by what they show. These stories succeed best in humanizing the faceless representations of protests in Assam shown in the media. Eric Leuschner rightly says that literature of protest “shapes our memory but in contrast to media representations or even historical representations, it allows us to enter into the experience and not merely consume it.”<sup>7</sup> These stories do give us the experience of the troubled era of Assam. They remind us that the complexities cannot be reduced merely to a tripartite division between insurgents, the army, and the civilian population. The war-like situation in the state kept every citizen disturbed. People were caught in such situations from where they could not escape. There was no future for the insurgents and they did not have the people’s support. The writers artistically depict the disturbed period of Assam in front of the readers.

These writers through their stories protest against the atrocities inflicted upon the people. They narrate about the conditions in which the people lived in Assam. Through their writings about the period, they protest cruelty and terror. These writers do not take sides; they reveal that both the militants as well as the defence forces treated people inhumanly. Also, they suffered due to the ethnic conflicts among them.

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