

Interrogating Issues of Identity: A Study of Violence in Dhurba Hazarika's *Sons of Brahma*

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Abstract: Human world is marked by heterogeneity. Multiplicity manifests itself in the forms of tradition, ideologies, history, race, language, culture, ethnicity, attire and nutritional preferences that people embody. Though diverse things are meant to co-exist, competition invariably forms the other face of the diversity coin. This sheds light on the 'survival of the fittest' law of nature. An analogous is seen in the human world, only that the competition between the two or more forces in society is driven not by nature's law that ensures equilibrium in the ecosystem, but by socio-economic, cultural, emotional and political factors that distorts equilibrium in the human world. The clashes between the competing forces results in conflict. The various forms of conflict may turn out to be violent or non-violent.

Among wide range of sources of conflict marring the society, ethnicity is one of the ancient and prominent cause. Ethnicity signifies classification of people or group relationships. Ethnicity is always seen as juxtaposing nationalism. While ethnic groups demand recognition of ethnic identities and territorial entitlements, nationalists ensure that political boundaries are not cut across by ethnic boundaries. The ethnic group forming the majority constantly conspires to dominate the state and other ethnicities. The clash between the two parties results in ethnic conflict. The ethnic conflicts often involve dehumanizing acts which are violent in nature. The insurgencies tainting the North-East India are an example of ethnic conflict.

North-East India comprises of 40 million tribes who are less similar and more distinct from each other. British colonization and Indian annexation of the region resulted in the division and unison of the inhabitants based on unnatural boundaries. The hegemony created a rupture between the political entity and the autochthons activating ethnic mobilization. North-East Indian tribes on the one hand are countering nationalism with ethno-nationalism and on the other hand, are engaged in inter-ethnic wars. The main aim of insurgency is to attain independence that will guarantee acknowledgement of unique identities and socio-economic progress of the tribes. Assertion of ethnic identities is a challenge to imagining India as a nation with single identity. Therefore, the explicit assertion of distinctness was harshly suppressed by the Indian government for convenience of administration. After decades of suppression, these distinct voices have now found expression and forums to record it; one such forum is fiction.

A qualitative analysis, in the backdrop of intertextual reading, of *Sons of Brahma* authored by writers hailing from Assam is conducted to discover how North-East Indian writer attempts to retrieve and assert the tribal identity and represent the same textually. Constant reference to violence drives the study to focus on the same and examine if violence is an expression of resistance to erasure of tribal identity.

Keywords: Identity issues, Conflict and violence, North-East India, Insurgency, Ethno-nationalism

Introduction

India is a land of diversity. North-East region of India is diversely rich in terms of its flora, fauna, culture and population. 40 million people belonging to different tribes, following divergent cultures and speaking discrete languages inhabit the region. The diversity arises from its geographical location and neighbors' cultural influence. North-East region of India shares its boundaries with China, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Though the term 'North-East India' homogenizes the tribes of the region, the denizens are less similar and more distinct from each other. The tribes of this region existed as independent kingdoms before the British government appropriated their territory. The unification of India with North-East region marks the beginning of the ravage of the tribes of North-East India.

Prior to colonization, India comprised many princely states which were ruled by either kings or clan leaders. Each community enjoyed its unique ethnic status. The advent of British marked the changes in the cultural and political status of the inhabitants. The kingdoms were annexed, borders were redrawn and newfangled rules were established for the administrative convenience. As a result, many tribal clans who previously never interacted formed a part of the British Raj. One such prominent region is the North-East of India. With intrusion of British in the pre-colonial Indian milieu, the tribes of North-East India and mainland Indians were, in Zupavisie Lhousa's words, "rudely brought into each other's knowledge most tragically."

The British perceived vibrant North-East region as vastly unused and uninhabited space. The British Raj focused on the monetary benefits that it could reap using Indian resources. The seven very distinct sub-national states constituting North-East India were all grouped together and called Assam. The name Assam, pre-independence and the North-East Indian boundaries, post-independence, were based on economic benefits and administrative convenience respectively. Under the colonial administration, it was suggested to change the name from Assam to North Eastern Province; however, the proposal was dropped as the change of name would affect the strongly established European owned Assam tea industry. In order to fetch laborers to work in tea plantations, they encouraged migration of people from neighboring states of present day Bengal and Bangladesh, thus causing a shamble in the cultural consonance that prevailed among the tribal groups. As a result of the advent of industrial revolution, establishment of factories in North-East India created large employment opportunities and influx of migrants. Post-colonization, India annexed the North-East region. As a result of annexation and demand for labor, mainland India began to permeate the territory and milieu of the tribes. The presence of mainland Indians in North-East posed a variety of problems. The control over the capital lay in the hands of the Indian government and the new changes occurring in the region caused forced acculturation. Naturally, the tribal identities were threatened.

The clash between mainland India, the colonizer and North-East India, the colonized sparked the fire of insurgency. The events that follow unfold chapters of violence, chicanery, atrocity, exploitation, loss, suffering, vulnerability and resistance. The tribes contented the circumstances by persistently striving to resist the imposition of Indianness through violent movements in the past and by boycotting elections or commemoration of events that mark the history, culture and emergence of independent India.

When British conquered dynastic India, Gandhi, envisioned and manifested a single nation that shed its ethnicities and united under one name – India in order to fight British exploitation. The seeds of nationalism were sown and the print media helped in materializing and disseminating patriotic emotions from which nationalism derives its functioning force. Eventually, nationalism became hegemonic, threatening the minority groups by gaining legitimate control over their territory. This resulted in ethnic mobilization. Indigenous revolted against the state and the state took measures to ensure that ethnic boundaries do not cut across political boundaries. Despite continued suppression of distinct voices, they have been persistently expressing themselves through various forums. One such forum is fiction.

Documentation of events is crucial part of history. While non-fictional works record ‘facts’, fictional works deliver alternate histories by questioning established facts. Hence, reading fictions give us an insight into the lives of the victims and help us understand issues from different perspectives.

Assam: A mosaic of Clashing Identities

Assam, one of the seven sub-national states of North-East India in late nineteenth century experienced, in Sanjib Baruah’s terms, ‘an economic revolution accompanied by massive ecological destruction’ under the British administration. It also experienced large influx of Bengali and Muslim immigrants. Assamese were naturally dwindling. Consequently, insurgency erupted in Assam to control the outgrowing population of outsiders and preserve Assamese ethnic identity.

T. K. Oommen has identified some Indian situations in which ethnicity plays a significant part.

1. The demand for a distinct homeland, either a sovereign state or a political-administrative unit within Indian state
2. The demand for expulsion of ‘outsiders’ when the entire state is engulfed by migrants from other states or neighboring countries
3. The demand for the expulsion of ‘foreigners’ belonging to other folk reigns within the state or from other states
4. The demand to expel those who do not belong to the same cultural region although they are from same state
5. The demand to expel migrants from other linguistic states who come to work and reside in metropolitan centers (Oommen 2002: 138-9)

Assam insurgency is an illustration of second type of situation mentioned above. The protest began with the formation of All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) which aimed to detect and delete names of illegal immigrants from electoral rolls marking the beginning of anti-foreigners movement in Assam. Gradually AASU split into smaller groups over the disputes like indigenous/immigrant dichotomy, Assamese/tribal dichotomy and Muslim/non-Muslim dichotomy. Also, the location of Assam within the power system influences the causes for insurgency – India, a nation versus Assam, a smaller nationality and Bengal, a bigger ethnic group versus Assam, a smaller ethnic group.

Assamese, after coming under India's wings, took different stances. Some of the population accepted the Indian citizenship; some others formed underground organizations to fight against India while the others remained neutral. However, even the detached folks were not left to stay in peace. All Assamese were either knowingly or unknowingly trapped in the Assamese freedom struggle movement. The following lines from the text *Sons of Brahma* summarizes the vicious circle the Assamese are caught in:

'I don't know, Pranab. These insurgents, they are strange, weird. They talk of freedom for our state from the Indian folk and yet they keep killing their own brethren. And how many have the army and the police killed? Look what the Armed Forces Special Powers Act has done? How many raped? How many dead over the years? Ten, twelve thousand? All young boys, boys who could have done so much for our land, otherwise. This cycle, this violence, it's insane.'
The rebels have turned everyone against everyone. Brothers against brothers.
'A race gone into pieces. We fight our own shadows. We kill our own brethren',
Pranab said... (Hazarika 2014: 80)

Sons of Brahma is a story that entails the fate of two innocent students who are caught in the trap laid by nationalism and ethno-nationalism. Pranab and his friend Jongom Hanse are caught in the snare between the police and the rebels. Anjan Phukan, an Assamese journalist supporting underground movement approaches Jongom to write articles to convince Assam people to fight for a separate and independent Assam nation. The exploitation experienced by Assam people is presented in the articles drafted by Pranab who writes like a hurt critic would. The articles discuss –

The quantum of oil being siphoned off from Assam and the absolute pittance by way of royalty by the centre to the state the tea industry and the way the lobby in West Bengal manages to retain the maximum percentage of profits, depriving benefits that otherwise would have accrued Assam subtle invasion of Hindi culture, language, movies, dress codes of women, into the otherwise unique Vaishnavite culture of Assam. Of a subtle Aryan drive into the ancient realm of the Mongoloid tribes, of New Delhi's arrogance in politics and the scant regard given to athletes while being considered for selection in national teams ... (Hazarika 2014, 33-4)

Though both Pranab and Jongom do not join any organization nor write on their behalf for the fear of being branded, police suspect them to be members of the underground and on the other hand, the death of Anjan Phukan in the police encounter leads to suspicion by the rebels.

The round logo comprising an orange sun slashed by two arrows stared back at me. Beneath the logo were the words: National Revolutionary Army. 'Greetings, Brother Jongom Hanse,' the letter began... 'You have been found assisting the colonial Indian government in exterminating our most honorable leader, Anjan Phukan, on 3 July 2002. The general council has directed me to inform you to present yourself at twelve noon on 10 July at the circuit house at Majuli. You are further requested not to confide the contents of the letter to anyone else lest your near and dear ones sustain unnecessary injuries. With revolutionary salutations. Robin Saikia. Area Commander. 26th Battalion, National Revolutionary army. (Hazarika 2014: 172)

While the two are on a run to flee the attack from the police and the rebels, the symbols of nationalism and ethno-nationalism respectively, the history of Assam, its political, economical and cultural exploitation is made known to the readers in the conversations exchanged between Pranab, Jongom and the people who aid them in their escape.

'And all because of some crazy idea of independence from our own country,' I said.
'When members of the educated class, like us, resort to large-scale corruption, what else can you expect?' Pranab declared. 'I tell you, the day each teacher, doctor, engineer, policeman, civil officer, politician, lawyer, corporate honcho and all the educated rest put together carry out their jobs the way a good citizen ought to, we will never have reels like the Revolutionary Army.'
'But the rebels here, they not only extort but hold the government responsible for looting Assam's natural resources. Oil, tea, forest, coal,' Srabana said. 'I don't know. It's all so complicated.' (Hazarika 2014: 12-3)

The larger section of the story is focused on explaining the bewildered state of Assam post integration with India and the forms in which the same is received by the citizens. Underworld member or not, the folks are

trapped in the dangerous situation. In the process of liberating oneself from the hands of one enemy, the inhabitants are inevitably allowing maggot of problems to feast upon them.

‘With most of the training being received in Bangladesh, directly or indirectly, the rebels support the illegal infiltration of these Miah into India, into Assam. You know, Pranab, I am more than sure that ISI of Pakistan has a say in all this.’

Pausing for a while, I added, ‘In cahoots with the Chinese. Or even the blessed CIA. To destabilize our country’. (Hazarika 2014: 84)

The story consistently hints on the shift in the attitude of the new generation with regard to citizenship and identity reclamation. The movement is towards universalism as indicated in the opinions of Jongom who constantly focuses on honesty and commitment towards the betterment of society rather than just reclamation of ethnic identity.

The curtain is brought down when the suspense regarding the head of the rebels is revealed – father of Pranab. This is an illustration to explain that however hard people try to accommodate to the imposed changes, they are inevitably drawn towards the need to reclaim and assert their ethnic identity. This is because, as Ross and Horowitz explains, “identity that is at the center of the conflict is an unshakable sense of worth, which makes life meaningful and includes the feeling that one is physically, socially, psychologically and spiritually safe”.

Conclusion

The rude and violent integration of North-East region with mainland India has penned the history of North-East India in blood and tears of many innocent people. According to Biswas, the elite nationalist project of integrating the smaller communities under a greater structure of the state became an elitist agenda that left out the possibility of affirming distinctive cultural claims on the part of the constituents of the nationalist whole. Consequently, ethno-nationalism became the obvious offshoot of hegemonic goal of Indian state (Sanjay K Roy). Despite the heavy and extreme sufferings in the clash between the state and ethnicity, these distinct people have consistently resisted the cultural hegemony of India. The resistance ranges from violence to impassiveness. The sudden rise in the publications from North-East India is a peaceful but extremely powerful form of resistance for it documents tragic experiences of North-East Indians and reclaims their ethnic identity eternally etching it in Indian history and also constructing new narratives to define their own nationhood while simultaneously challenging the state-constructed nationhood. The insurgency movements began as freedom movements but sadly ended up as a ‘cohabitation arrangement’ with the state and forces of liberation ended up as being ‘agents of integration of liberal democratic (colonizing) state. Though their political integration with India was more or less complete, their emotional integration and identification with pan-Indian nationalism remained weak, nagging and incomplete (Khangte 1996). Hence, authors today write also to unburden themselves of the responsibility of keeping alive the dead warriors and imprint their distinct identity in the minds of the new generations until accepted and respected.

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