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Representation of Discontentment and its Dynamics in English Writings from India's North East

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Abstract:

The north eastern part of India has often been ineffectually represented or misrepresented in the national socio-political, economic and cultural discourse. The *otherisation* is so intense that a psychological gulf has evolved between the so called mainland and the north east. The situation in further worsened when natives of the region experience non-acceptance, non-identification and misinterpretation of the region that they call their home outside the socio-politically sensitive geographical space. The resultant *peripheralisation* has bred violent movements centering on the issues of identity, distrust in the motives of the mainland policy makers as well as executors and a categorization strengthened by a mutual sense of being exploited and uncared for despite the strong presence of intra-regional differences. The writers have made realistic presentation of the society and trials and tribulations and the reactions of the people under difficult circumstances. That discontentment lingering in the lives of the people is one of the prominent thrust areas of literature can be easily gauged by a reader. The paper shall attempt to make an analytical study of the contours of this sense of discontentment punctuating the lives of the natives and its literary representation in select works in English from writers of the region.

Keywords: mainland, otherisation, peripheralisation.

Discontentment, as a thrust area of discussion, in the creative writings of northeast India has to be studied from the perspectives of people who have grown up with an awareness of a great divide between them and their brethrens of the *mainland*. The term *mainland* instantly raises pertinent issues like *otherisation; peripheralisation; socio-political, cultural and psychological divide*. Being home to one of the longest running insurgent movements of the world which appears to grow off-shoots when authorities at the mainland barely comes into terms with one faction or the other; a student movement that started with the intention of chasing the foreigners out of the land; concerted mass scale protests to prevent *outsiders* from marrying tribal girls in order to prevent property from being used by them – one can judge the insistence on identity as a fragile and sensitive issue. In such circumstances conflicts are imminent but the highly heterogeneous society makes the conflict situations even more complex to decipher.

A disconcerting occurrence disturbing the conscious citizen of the region is the presence of glaring instances of human rights violation. These have deeply affected the perception regarding the defence forces personnel and the mainstream policy makers. Human Rights may be defined as those conditions of life that allow human beings to fully develop and utilize the human qualities of intelligence and conscience and to satisfy spiritual needs. Such rights are fundamental for our existence and whenever such rights have been denied to people there has been social unrest and hostility between nations and various groups within a nation. Such rights are not only an abstract subject for philosophizing and political theorization but are something that has become a part and parcel of every individual's life. The expression "human rights" is all comprehensive in nature and includes civil, political, economic and cultural rights and even rights like rights of minorities, indigenous people and right to development. They are universal moral rights with non-discrimination as the guiding principle. Professor Hohfield has enumerated four aspects that the term 'right' covers- claims, privileges or liberties, powers and immunities. These are necessary if an individual is to live a dignified life or the society is to remain perennially peaceful.

The sad case is that there has been a continuous flow of records and news related to issues of human rights violation. There may be different ways of protecting human rights: a pluralist and accountable parliament, an executive who is ultimately subject to the authority of elected representatives and an independent, impartial judiciary are necessary, but not sufficient, institutional prerequisites. Besides these basic 'institutions' there may be other mechanisms whose establishment and strengthening will enhance the existing mechanisms. The case with northeast India is that decades of social unrest has made the human rights a fragile issue to handle. Atrocities have been too many and the government machineries are themselves responsible for the sufferings of the people. In fact the situation is so grave that the Prime Minister of India Dr. Manmohan Singh had to assure tribal leaders from Tripura that the central government would suitably amend the controversial Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) 1958 that gives unlimited powers to the paramilitary forces to shoot on sight and arrest anybody without a warrant. Creative writers from the region have been ceaselessly trying to draw the attention of mainland India towards the incidents of northeast which have made life difficult to endure for the common man. The region has quite a few unsung heroes who have never received due attention from the centre or even national media at most times. Deepti Priya Mehrotra's *Burning Bright* is a tribute to Irom Sharmila who is on an indefinite fast since 5th November, 2000 protesting against the controversial Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958. The blurb of the book states-

Burning Bright is a hard-hitting account of a people caught between the crossfire of militants and security forces; a once-sovereign kingdom whose culture has been brutally violated.....This is a moving portrait of a heritage under attack and of Irom Sharmila.... who has staked her life to bring peace to her ravaged land. (Mehrotra blurb)

The northeast is a highly volatile zone today and it is increasingly getting difficult for the policy makers to reach at an acceptable solution for everybody. Sanjay Borbora has described the space as "politically convenient shorthand to gloss over complicated historical formations and dense loci of social unrest" (Barbora May- June 2008). This has resulted in some rash steps on the part of the governments both at the centre and the state often leading to heart rending harassments on the part of the common man. Irom Sharmila is one of the many who has directly borne the burnt of military atrocities but one of the few the world has seen till date who has the courage to protest in the manner chosen by her. She has been jailed, hospitalized and on nasal feed yet her unflinching spirit continues to simmer. It is a tragedy not for Manipur only but for the entire nation that despite of such a protest the draconian law continues to exist and Sharmila's crusade continues unhinged by her failing health. The Delhi based social activist Mehrotra's book is a praiseworthy venture as it promises to objectively analyse the reasons behind the creation of the crusader Sharmila. It is not the biography of an individual only; in fact it is contemporary history of a state where, out of sheer desperation, a group of women had to protest parading naked with the slogan "Indian Army Rape Us". She has been liberally compared to the American pioneer of civil disobedience, Henry David Thoreau; the ancient Greek philosopher who stressed on asking questions before accepting something, Socrates; the Burmese epitome of fearlessness and champion of democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi and to the likes of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. It is a truth that India has no crusader of her strength today yet the government has not thought it proper to look at the issue from a humanitarian perspective. The work will certainly serve as an eye opener for the readers in the mainland India where northeast is nothing more than a land of trouble- shooting ultras.

Temsula Ao, Padma Shree Awardee and noted writer, is a cautious and adroit onlooker of the contemporary events that have put indelible marks in the history of the entire nation in general and the northeastern region in particular. Her fiction has emerged out of real events that have cast a lasting mark in the minds of an entire generation. She has skillfully transferred human rights violation from a social scientist's manual to the fiction writer's diary to sensitise the people across the globe regarding the instances of human rights violation in India's northeast where violence has, in effect, become a part of everybody's life. Her stories deal with the experiences of ordinary people in a trouble torn world and how they cope with mindless violence, negotiate power and force and how the people try to discover spaces for themselves in an atmosphere darkened by terror. As an artist her issues are too far and too many- nationality, identity, home- each having a northeastern milieu. For an *outsider* the issues might appear universal in essence but it must be accepted that most cases of human rights violation in northeast have been the aftermath of a quest for exerting one's distinct socio-cultural or political identity. In her own words:

.... what the stories are trying to say is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms. For the victims the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life-

their very humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves the survivors scarred both in mind and soul. (Ao 2006 x)

Rooted in the real world, the extent of human rights violation can be easily estimated in Ao's works on the basis of the aforementioned quote. The primary demand of the Naga insurgent groups is the creation of a united Nagalim comprising of Naga inhabited areas cutting across national as well as international frontiers. The question is one of Naga identity which has been weakened by the geographical or political divides. With the government taking a serious note of such a development the armed forces soon swung into action often resorting to extreme measures threatening the life of the people. The common man is the worst sufferer of such a situation- neither can they show allegiance to the armed forces for fear of the militants nor can they exhibit the slightest of sympathy for the militants who are their own people for fear of violence unleashed by the government machinery. Most of the stories in her anthology *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* show instances of gross human rights violation sometimes by men in uniform and at times by the underground forces. *The Last Song* deals with the prominent themes of identity crisis and human rights violation by armed forces. The identity crisis is the outcome of the gradual spread of Christianity in the hill state and the snatching of the basic right of a peaceful existence by armies, both underground and overground. Fear psychosis is bound to be very common among the people of such a race and Tamsula Ao has been an honest chronicler of a troubled time. Irrespective of her concerns as an artist it must be accepted that the book has succeeded in making a lot of persons faintly aware of the happenings of northeast India look at the situation with sympathy. Most surveys carried out by various Non Government Organisations and government agencies usually end up blaming the armed forces for indulging in acts leading to violation of human rights but the separatist forces cannot escape unblamed for there have been numerous reports of such groups seeking aids in cash and kind from the people. The short story *A Simple Question* anthologized in *Laburnum for my Head* describes such a scenario- a snapshot difficult to overlook:

The situation was gradually getting worse: from the meagre harvest the villagers had to meet with the demands of the belligerent 'collectors' of the underground. Now the taxes were in all three forms; rice, livestock and money. (Ao 2009 84)

When such a picture is compared with another situation where the epicenter of attention is the armed forces the extent of human rights violation will get more distinct-

Villagers who persistently resisted the setting up of army camps would be forced out of their villages; their houses and granaries would be burnt and they would be relocated along with other recalcitrant villagers in a 'grouping' zone and kept in fenced- in areas, not allowed to cultivate their fields, their movements monitored and under constant surveillance. (Loc. Cit)

Easterine Iralu, who presently stays in Norway, is another writer of fiction from India's northeast to have caught the attention of readers outside the region through her gripping tales. Her novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* is basically the tale of a young girl growing up in a traditional society in India's northeast and has to experience a wide generation gap with her headstrong grandmother often resorting to steps that smack of gender discrimination. But as she is a novelist presenting the Naga society in transition therefore chances are rare that she would be able to totally do away with the issue of insurgency. The novel has heart rending accounts of army men punishing rebels or even those suspected to be in any manner related to the insurgents. Arbitrary arrest, illegal detention and torture are commonly heard issues during army operations. Such acts directly violate human rights bestowed upon the people but it is a tragedy that draconian laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 have made such instances quite commonplace. The central character of the novel speaks out the kinds of punishment meted out to those caught plotting against the state:

I had heard horror stories of what the Indian army did to those who were captured. Some men were hung upside down and electrocuted. The boys said that the soldiers especially liked to strip the men down and give them electric shocks in their private parts. (Iralu 174)

The army was not right at all times and often they indulged in arbitrary arrests on the slightest of pretexts thereby creating an atmosphere of terror:

...the police and the army are picking up young men at night. And they have become so brutal. The army especially, they seem to be looking for an excuse to beat up young boys...Even when he showed them his student identity card, they called him a liar and kept beating him with rifle butts. (ibidem 175)

Iralu's characters might be the produce of her fertile imagination but one will find numerous persons in northeast India who have been brutally tortured by the armed forces on the slightest of doubts. The idea of political independence highlighted by the novelist is again the outcome of a deep sense of insecurity which is watered by the fear of losing one's identity.

Mitra Phukan has picked up the famed Assam Agitation as the subject of her only novel *The Collector's Wife*. The agitation spearheaded by Assam's one of the most powerful and influential students' organizations initially began as a movement for self-determination but grew into a full blown insurgency. The movement was not the outcome of a single day's maneuverings but the prospect of fructification of a prophecy made by C. S. Mullen that the Pakistani (East) immigrants would one day ruffle the demographic fabric of northeast India including Assam. With the agitation at its peak kidnappings, extortion and political instability grew much to the dismay of many who lived on daily wages. The movement is severely criticized for its excesses but it is one of the few instances in post-independence Indian history when the quest for preserving one's identity got so strong that hundreds of agitators were martyred often in gross

violation of human rights. Human rights in northeast India are also threatened by acts of abductions, planned encounters and secret killings. Mitra Phukan's *Hope* is a portrayal of disillusionment and discontentment. The story is of an old lady and her daughter-in-law who comes to meet the author as a fictional character resembles the man they are searching for. Such a situation is not uncommon in a state like Assam where many relatives of *missing* militant leaders move from pillar to post looking for the whereabouts of the missing *person* only to get vague answers at most instances. Such mysterious disappearances and their possible secret annihilations do not speak well of the civil society as such incidents amount to violation of right to equal opportunity for justice.

Sanjib Baruah's *Durable Disorder* throws light on the dynamics of ethnic conflict in northeast India. The United Liberation Front of Assam has often been harshly criticized for disturbing the region's peace but its ideology focuses on the unity of all the indigenous people of the state. He is a bit apprehensive regarding the prevalent situation of the entire region in general and Assam in particular and while being severe towards the law breakers he has not been appreciative of the law enforcers either:

While human rights violations in India's troubled regions receive attention in scholarly and policy circles, the impact of the use of coercion on the legitimacy and longer-term viability of India's political and legal institutions are rarely examined in any systematic manner. Most discussions go little beyond charges made by human rights groups on one hand, and on the other, attempts by government and defenders of its anti-insurgency policies to frame the issue in terms of the challenge posted by independentist militants and the role of foreign governments in supporting such groups. (Baruah 145)

Subir Bhaumik in his book *Troubled Periphery* has used the rather ignominious term "problem child" to refer to the northeastern frontier of India. Bhaumik has placed considerable interest on the issue of ethnic cleansing. Manipur has been the witness of tremendous internal displacement and relocation as a result of continuous tussles between the Nagas and the Kukis and also between the Kukis and the Paites. That the Government of India did not include northeast within the purview of the linguistic reorganization process itself shows that the policy makers often commit the mistake of conceiving the region as being different from most other states. The opinion is not without logic either as the region is linguistically highly heterogeneous. Such conflicts directly infringe with the human rights of these tribes. The situation is made further complex by incendiary remarks made by political leaders who are too opinionated to rein in the surging sentiments of the people. In an interview to BBC World Service in 2001 the then Chief Minister of Mizoram had made a very controversial remark unbecoming of somebody occupying such an important position in the government machinery-

...the Brus are from Tripura and if they are not happy in Mizoram, they are welcome to go back to Tripura. (Bhaumik 145)

The irony of India's northeast is that while the region protests against grave human rights violation by the government forces but the intra-tribe conflicts assume such frightening proportions that the minor or vulnerable tribes often experience disastrous situations irreparably affecting their life and livelihood. The major or dominant tribes assume the mane of human rights violators. Such an ironical picture of Mizoram has been described by Subir Bhowmik-

Besides the Chakmas, there are two other autonomous district councils in Mizoram meant for the smaller Mara and Lai tribes. They want to join hands with the Chakmas and turn the territory of the three district councils into a centrally administered area, that is, a Union Territory. If that movement gains momentum, Mizoram police and administration will attempt to curb it with a heavy hand and thus create fresh displacement. (Bhuamik 145&146)

The situation is tricky and resorting to human rights violation by the majority tribe is another manifestation of the fear psychosis deeply ingrained in the psyche of the people of the region- a fear of losing their identity as the dominant and rightfully indigenous ethnic group of the region.

Human rights are the indices of peace and prosperity of any civilized society. When denied backlash is imminent thereby causing greater unrest in the society. India's northeast is a hotbed of human rights violation which is primarily fuelled by a fear of loss of social, political, cultural, and even linguistic identity which results in violent modes of self exertion. The stronger the attempts of self-exertion, greater will be the quantum of state-sponsored acts of violence to quell such movements. It will be a mistake to expect lasting peace in this region if issues related to the identity of the indigenous ethnic groups are not handled with tact. The writers of the region have a task in their hands - to make the world outside the region realize the truth behind instances of human rights violation and reasons behind endeavours of creating homelands. As most people of India and the world at large are insufficiently aware of the issues unsettling peace in the region, therefore the writers have the duty to draw the attention of the concerned quarters towards it leading to the formulation of a healthy public opinion so that a tangible solution of the burning issues of the region might be evolved out.

Another disturbing aspect of the society is the threat perceived from *mainstream cultural intrusion*. The facets of material culture (attire, food, crafts, art) and social folk customs (festivals, folk religion, folk medicines and traditional games) have been directly and visibly affected. The societies cannot remain aloof from the intrusions of the politically, economically and socially powerful groups/ nations in today's globalised world. Whereas at the global level nations apprehensive about superpowers decimating smaller or comparatively weaker powers, there are voices of protest within the boundaries of a state as well where intra-national forces are considered responsible for cultural annihilation of politically fragile or culturally marginalized groups. In the context of north east India the perceived fear is less from the global powers but from mainland forces, which is again a debatable stance, that threaten to decimate the cultural richness of the region in the name of national integration and assimilation. This has created a rift

between those struggling to preserve the customs and belief systems of the predominantly tribal societies of the region and the others who are not apprehensive at the onslaught of what commentators have termed cultural imperialism. The resultant ideological conflict is detrimental for the fate of the societies whose numbers are very limited in certain instances.

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