


Ripples of Insurgency: A Reading of *The House with a Thousand Stories*

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ABSTRACT

Assam and the other North East States are troubled by the problem of insurgency since a long time. However, how truthfully the sufferings of the people of this land are represented in the national level in different platforms is always questionable. Compared to other ways of factual representations like newspapers, magazines and other mediums the literature produced in this region seem to represent the actual scenario more authentically. The paper looks at one such delineation by a young writer from Assam, Arun Kashyap in his English novel, *The House with a Thousand Stories*.

Keywords: *insurgency, counter-insurgency, terror, terrorism.*

In general terms insurgency is a revolution against the authority where the rebels involved in the revolution are not considered as belligerents. Hence all acts of violence cannot be called insurgency. Looking back at history Russian civil war and American civil war can be considered as instances of insurgencies. However, many instances of insurgency raise the question regarding their credibility. At many times they fail to maintain their social commitments and turn into terrorist groups. As Michael F. Morris said about terrorist groups,

“Terrorists are physically and psychologically removed from broad popular support. Because terrorists remain isolated from the social movements from which they sprang and their political goals become, over time, more and more divorced from reality, it is neither necessary nor possible to negotiate with them. They are a blight, like crime, that one cannot eliminate but which states must control to limit their impact on society. Of course, states must hunt terrorists possessing the means and will to conduct catastrophic attacks not only with national and international police resources, but also with all the diplomatic, informational, military and economic instruments of national power” (6).

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The violence they spread and at the same time the social influence they exert make it difficult to eradicate them from the society in a straightforward manner. Hence counter insurgency groups need to be extra careful in handling them and should also use more strategic plans rather than employing violent ways to treat violence.

When we talk about the situation in the North East India, this region enjoyed a separate existence since days beyond recall. Culturally and politically, it was never a part of mainland India. During the time of India's Freedom struggle the idea of nation building and nationalism affected Assam; but it was not able to affect the other states of the North East in the same way. In spite of that the North East states were adjoined to the mainland India after India's independence. Correspondingly it triggered different separatist movements in the North East after independence. A critic named Chaitanya Vadlamannati explains: "In the northeastern states of India, the relative deprivation is noted by many as being very strong. In fact, sentiments for secession in this region existed even before Indian independence. This sentiment stems from historical connections among the traditional tribes in this region to East Asia rather than India. Some historians also argue that people from this region have failed to psychologically integrate because they see the region as being annexed to India by the British" (Bhawmik, 1998). Hence a sense of alienation remained in the minds of the people residing in the North East India. The lack of economic growth unlike some other states of India which displayed rapid economic growth after India's independence resulted in a sense of deprivation which heightened the feeling of alienation which was already present in the psyche of the people living in this region. The same sense of deprivation and alienation compelled one section of post independent Assamese to take arms and resulted in the birth of ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam). As Rakhee Kalita explains: "This sense of alienation and isolation from the mainland is not just a matter of perception: there are frequent instances of people from the rest of the country (especially the metropolises) referring to young people from the region as 'Chinese' or 'Bhutanese', aside from the common manner of alluding to people from the region as 'northeasterners', as if to suggest a distinct, peculiar, and implicitly non-Indian category" (103). So, insurgency in Assam has its roots in political and economic deprivation.

Coming to the idea of terrorism normally when we think about terrorists, we visualise armed men and gunfire. Terrorists are those who openly wage a war against the establishment. Assam and the other North-East states are seemed to be full of terrorists from different militant groups. However, terrorism can be carried out under disguise too. One most recurrent happening in

North- East region is terrorism accomplished under the guise of khaki dresses and uniforms. Manipur can be cited as the worst affected state by this disguised type of terrorism. All of us living in the North-East region are aware of the havoc created by the armed forced special power act in Manipur. Many common people suffered and became victims of this disguised terrorism not only in Manipur but in the other states of North-East too. Again another statement by Dr Rakhee Kalita stimulates our thoughts to a different angle in understanding the idea of terrorism. She writes: “Terror, I should think, is not merely the bomb exploding, or the several unsuspecting dying or dead, or even the awareness of who the ‘enemy’ is. Terror is the sense of being swamped, as it were by a systemic derangement in which social structures are steeped. It is, perhaps, more significantly, our doubts about who or what is responsible for it” (101-102). The want of desired governance and continuous failure to address the issues which were raised by the people living in this region transformed the sense of deprivation to the sense of desolation and compelled one section of the people specially the youth to take up armed rebellions in many cases. For instance, the issue of illegal immigrants which triggered Assam agitation in 1979 also impelled one small portion of the population to take up arms as a way of agitation which eventually culminated in the birth of ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam). The end result of Assam agitation or students’ agitation was the signing of the Assam Accord which promised deportation of illegal immigrants. However, it is a matter of concern that it is yet to be implemented in the real sense. The ULFA members were not pacified by the signing of the accord; they were totally disgruntled by the way of functioning of the Indian government towards Assam and were firm in their urge for a separate Assam. Subsequently more violent acts of rebellion followed the signing of the Assam accord.

Thus Assam suffered for this armed upsurge for many years and the people living in all corners of Assam had to bear the effect of it. They suffered from a sense of insecurity and unpredictability in every walk of life. Extortion, bombings became daily occurrences. Situation worsened when Indian government deployed armed forces to control the insurgents. The common people became victims of the operations of both insurgents and counter-insurgents. It had left an impact on the psyche of the population inhabiting here. Evidently the literature produced during this period too mirrored many instances which affected social, economic and political aspect of life of the state. The selected novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* too captures the repercussions of insurgency in a small area in Assam. Aruni Kashyap in his

realistic style represents the violence caused by the rebellion of ULFA and the secret killings organised by governments in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the imaginary space.

The narrator in the novel is Pablo, a young boy, who lives in Guwahati with his parents and the narrative largely focuses on the narrator's experiences in his ancestral village at Mayong during his visit in 2002. In fact, the story of the novel begins with his remembrance of this visit. The story moves back and forth in time (1998 and 2002) between Guwahati and Mayong during his two visits to his native village in four years. The story is presented through the flashback mode as the narrator reminisces about his past. His memory gets stirred up by the visit of his cousin and friend, Mridul from Mayong. Once the story begins the readers are left dumb found by the revelations the narrative makes of the austerity, cruelty, chaos and terror imposed by insurgency in the village. The readers are touched more by the terrible conditions under which the villagers lived their lives than by the personal miseries in Pablo's life.

Ironically the villagers suffer more because of the counter-insurgency operations than for the violence accomplished by the insurgents. In popular myths Mayong is famous for the practice of occultism and is known as a land of magic. Nonetheless, this magical place turns stale by the atrocities it bears. The brutalities in the village were not laid out by the recognised militant groups but by the forces hired for the defence and security of the villagers. The presence of the Indian army was looming large on top of the villagers like an alien figure. The period of time that the novel covers was the time when a considerable number of ULFA members surrendered to SULFA (Surrendered United Liberation Front of Assam) after which they received a big amount of money to build their life anew. Many were lured by this contract. Slowly the ULFA suffered for the lack of dedicated members and deviated from its chief goal. As Nani Gopal Mahanta commented: "These groups, in connivance with neighbouring countries, are waging a war on behalf of the people where the mandate of the people is missing. What Assam has witnessed in the past two decades is massive weaponisation of society and acceptance of violence as a social norm. Violence in this part of the world, as an instrument of ventilating grievances by social groups, has become a liability and an end itself" (25). Exactly in the village violence meted out by militant groups and counter-insurgent groups was a norm which the villagers learned to accept quietly.

Dread, terror, fear, panic were part of the normative life of the villagers. Once Pablo noticed a small area with an electric pole; he became curious it because villagers looked intimidated and disconcerted while crossing that place. Upon inquiry he came to know that the mutilated dead

body of a brother of a ULFA member was dangled on the electric to terrorise the dwellers of Mayong and to deter them from challenging the counter-insurgent groups in any way. Mridul Pablo's cousin narrated the incident to him in the following manner:

“But we saw the body first. Only in his red underwear. He didn't have legs. They had been chopped off. He didn't have fingers. They have been cut off too. His face was twisted— as if he was repulsed by a bad smell. It was such a horrific sight! Hanging from the electric pole like a dead, electrocuted bat. He was from a nearby village— ... His only crime was that he was the elder brother of an ULFA member and the ULFA member, his brother, had refused to surrender to the government and take money that the government was dishing out so that he could return to society by setting up a business” (52-53).

The clash and conflict between insurgents and counter-insurgent groups obliterated the lives of the villagers casting a shadow of gloom.

The novel begins with incidents of violence and the central action of the novel also took a different course because of violence. Pablo came to the village to attend the wedding of one of his aunts, Moina pehi. The novel delineates how the mirthfulness of the wedding was marred by the incidents of violence. Pablo reflected towards the end of the novel: “Rumours inevitably destroy all happiness in weddings. But the girip-garap sounds of boots, with the fratricidal violence in the state, I guess such rumours became verdicts, alternative realities, faceless voices turned real. Some of those faces had scars. And you could count the number of stitches on them” (190). Violence was ingrained in the lives of the many of the characters. Brikodar's sister Mamoni started screaming like a lunatic after the army had left. She fainted and urinated on the courtyard without her consciousness. Pablo came to know from Mridul that Mamoni was raped by four military men when she went to the riverbank to wash clothes a year back. The bride of the wedding, Moina pehi, which Pablo came to attend took phenyl to take her life when she came to know that the brother of the groom is an ULFA member. It was totally unacceptable to her to become a member of a target family of the army because she had witnessed what army men could do to the common people in her own village. As the narrator reported: “The signs of which she had seen on the bodies of women in the village” (191). The observations, descriptions and their own experiences further accentuated the fear of counter-insurgent agents among the characters. The narrator again reiterated: “Actually, they are rarely scared of the insurgents. At least the insurgents speak their own language and address women as baideo, pehi, khuri and borma, with great respect” (196). The unthoughtful counter-insurgency operations by state and central governments resulted in atrocities on common innocent people. The young male members were in many instances misunderstood as ULFA

members and young women were misbehaved and molested. Safety and security were far distant realities for the villagers.

In actual scenario too there were so many instances in the North-East of unthoughtful killing and deaths because of counter-insurgent operations. Manipur's Manorama case was one such. Hence Ananya Vajpayi opines: "It may or may not be an option for the ordinary citizens of North-East to fight back when multiple assailants terrorize them: the Indian army, the paramilitaries, the counter-insurgency units, the local police and the rebel groups, sometimes impossible to even distinguish from each other" (26). Manorama was a victim of the Armed Forces Special Power Act who was raped and murdered by army men. Later on, many Manipuri women protested the act by coming naked on the streets. Vajpayi writes about the protest: "The originality of this protest, so powerfully conveyed in the nakedness of the participating women, lay, I would argue, in their bringing into the public sphere the emotion that probably lies concealed in every heart in the North-East: resentment against Indian state" (28). In the novel of our discussion too the same situation gets replicated as the villagers were terrorised more by the activities of the army men than by the insurgents.

Nani Gopal Mahanta in his article in "Economic and Political Weekly" in 2005 quoted the views of the then governor of Assam, "The governor said that more and more insurgent outfits are coming forward for dialogue and this could be an indication of two things: a) they were so broken that there was no other option left for them, and b) they were trying to regroup themselves by using the strategy of talks. In such cases, 'dialogues are an escape route,' the governor argued. Also, in a clear disapproval of the United Liberation Front of Asom's (ULFA) demand for preconditional talks, he categorically said that the dialogues should be on 'our terms and pressure should be maintained on the ULFA'...The governor on a number of occasions, has also talked about the 'final battle' to 'wipe out' ULFA forever" (25). This reflects the views of the political thinkers who play a pivotal role in solving the problem of insurgency. This one-way approach results in performing atrocities on common people. They want to wipe out ULFA and they are least concerned about the fact that in that wiping many innocents will be killed. In this way the lives of common people turn desolate by the heedless actions of the insurgent and counter-insurgent groups.

The novel of our discussion outlines how the effect of secret killings upset the village. Between 1998 to 2001 several members of ULFA family were killed by unidentified gunmen which explains the dark history of secret killings in Assam. When Pablo was talking with two of his

friends in the village an army jeep entered which disrupted their conversation. The narrator informed,

“The army jeep came when Binod was telling us about Diganta and Tapan, SULFA members who had fled, leaving their milk and vegetable business for good...I was talking to Gogon, who was telling me excitedly how the peace of the village was lost since the army camp was built in Mayong. ‘It is quite certain that it is the government that is doing all this.’ I almost dropped a bomb. It exploded and spread a thick blanket of silence for some time. Brikodar’s mother raised her voice, ‘What are you saying, Baba? Please don’t say such things. There are ears everywhere in this village nowadays. You will be in trouble. It’s not the same village where we grew up fearlessly’” (108).

It displayed the tensed atmosphere which killed the spontaneity and freedom of the people living there. They were trapped in the fight between ULFA and government and were compelled to sacrifice their joy and laughter in family life and in community life.

The counter-insurgency operations targeted not only the ULFA rebels but also the family members and relatives of the militants. They were brutally harassed when they could not tell about the whereabouts of the rebels. The families of such members could not be a part of normal social lives because the other members of the society treated them as outcast as free mingling with them would convert them into targets of counter insurgency operators. Marital alliance did not happen with those families, and they were not allowed to participate in any event or common gatherings that took place in the village. Even the wedding for which Pablo had visited the village turned into an appalling occasion because of a rumour that broke out in the local market. The rumour that the groom’s brother was an ULFA cadre slowly becomes the talk of the village. It transformed the happy atmosphere of the wedding into a tensed atmosphere. The rumour reached the bride’s ear and procrastinating about the future where she would become the member of an ULFA family she found death to be a better option than remaining alive and attempted to commit suicide.

Thus, it can be inferred that the government’s action to root out ULFA and the consequences of it influenced every aspect of people’s lives. Correspondingly insurgency could not remain a political problem which afflicted only the insurgents and counter-insurgents groups; it became a social reality of that time affecting each aspect of existence. On the other hand, if we observe the consequences of government’s banning of ULFA it brings to light how it turned many of the vested interests of ULFA futile. The government believed in counter-insurgency operations; but how could it be eradicated if the root causes were not addressed? At this context the views of Harekrishna Dekha become relevant:

“I believe that extremism in the long run fails as a strategy to achieve a mission and it often degenerates into terrorism...But at the same time, the state cannot dismiss it simply as a senseless ideology and itself use only extreme measures to crush the extremists abandoning all other modes of action or strategy...An important component of the state’s strategy has to be reduction of social discontent by means of developmental plan and political dialogue. Terrorism may be self-defeating, but what causes terrorism becomes enduring and contaminates the social soil if the soil is not nourished properly” (14-15).

The novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* bleakly expounds the outcomes of counter-insurgency policies in Assam. The novel portrays the actual situation in the village which reflects the advances of modernity in a traditional set up and displays how the villagers are not able to enjoy the advantages owing to the sinister shadow of insurgency and the army’s brutal measures to quell militancy. The novel flawlessly depicts how the villagers were wrestling to free themselves and to get a normal life above the society’s struggle to rise above the agony and trauma terrorism had imposed upon them. Mridul still enjoyed his lonely life and even Pablo got engaged in an amorous relation with a young girl in the village which he repented later.

Addressing the issue of insurgency again neither the rebel groups nor the central government had a clear vision about the future of Assam. The rebel group was of the view that everything will be fine once they got independence. They never tried to address the burning problems of Assam like flood or immigration. The rebel groups were involved in such criminal activities that it had become difficult to differentiate between the criminals and insurgents. They were involved in all kinds of criminal activities to raise fund for their group. As Bethany Lacina puts it:

“Much of the fighting in the region is inter-communal, aimed at running a rival militant group off certain pieces of territory, ethnic cleansing or programmes against civilians, or dispensing vigilant justice. And commentators point out that many insurgent groups in the area are difficult to distinguish from criminal organisations because they are heavily involved in extortion, kidnapping, and the cross-border drug trade” (332).

In this type of a situation the insurgent groups have lost all the ethical norms and have deviated from their original goal remarkably. The counter-insurgent agencies, on the other hand, should follow the spirit of the task rather than the letter. The numerous police, military and other counter-insurgents often got involved in aggressive control method. They never tried to analyse and understand the real situation. Instead of such rigid deployment if the state and central government deployed them to study the ground realities so that they became one with the mass and understand their trouble; then it would be more viable. It is important to be aware of every stakeholder’s opinion in such a situation. The situation may beget competing narratives, but it

is important to know their contrasting views. Then only the counter-insurgent agents can take more fruitful and effective steps to prevent the violent activities of the insurgent groups.

In an essay entitled, “State Response to Violence in North-East India (With special reference to surrender issue in Assam)” Dipesh Bhagawati, a professor commented that the money and security the surrendered militant received after they surrendered might create a misunderstanding in the minds of the youth that to join a militant group is more lucrative than toiling hard for some other business. He viewed that government should give them a secured life but not a luxurious life immediately after they resign the insurgent group. They could be given free education but should be encouraged for hard work (54-55).

In this way many loopholes remain both in the activities of the insurgents and counter-insurgents. A wholesome approach seems lacking in both where they also need to be more sensitive and sensible to the interest of the common people. In this context the literature produced both in vernacular and English renders a much more sensitive portrayal. The literary representations make us aware of the actual predicament, miseries and hardships of the common people because the characters in those representations are always the deprived, disadvantaged and destitute ones. These representations provide us an insider’s view enabling us to empathise us with the victims of both insurgent and counter insurgent group. Hence we can hope that messages passed through this kind of literature can sensitise the readers more to the scenario of violence.

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