

Democracy and the State in Select Post Independent Writings from North-East India

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ABSTRACT

Indian democracy is considered to be one of the largest and best forms in the world. Its constitutional democracy has been maintained since the creation of modern states including the present-day Indian North-East states. The meaning and usage of democracy may vary from time to time and place to place, yet it has been associated with economic, social and political equality of its citizens. Various communities in North-East India were baffled by the government of India's policies and programmes that were implemented after India gained independence. This paper attempts to examine how the North-East Indian select writers personalize the political and politicize the personal experiences of the issues and challenges of Indian democracy in the North-East states in select stories of the North-East Indian writers during the last 60 years of independence. The first part of the paper deals with the introduction stating the broad theoretical framework, the second part engages with the select texts and the last part draws a conclusion to the paper.

Keywords: *Democracy in North-East India, Common people and low-rank officials, Arms Power Special Acts 1958, Insurgent and uniformed personnel.*

The present India State became one of the largest democratic countries in the world by merging many small provinces and princely states, including North-East India. In a literal sense, the word 'democracy' comes from the Greek 'demos' and 'cratein' which means 'rule by the people'. The meaning and the usage of the word 'democracy' have varied over time. The concept of democracy in ancient Athens is now different from what is understood in the contemporary world. In ancient Greece, democracy was understood to be a system of government' (Lane and Svante, 2003, p. 25). However, the important consistent notion of democracy is that it has been associated with economic and social equality. During the time of the French Revolution "economic equality became a permanent part of the democratic creed" (Lane and Svante, 2003, p. 25). According to John Dewey, a "democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (cited in Lane and Svante, 2003, p. 25), and MacPherson states that "Democracy in the broader sense requires not just equality but also freedom from starvation, ignorance, and early death" (cited in Lane and Svante, 2003, p. 25). The success of democracy is considered if there is significant 'development' over a while. By 'development' it means employment, equality, poverty eradication, and fulfilment

of basic needs not necessarily either economic or material enhancement alone. To form a democratic form of government, the then-colonized natives in the Indian sub-continent had been challenging the hegemonic discourse and the domination of the colonial or the empire either through active or passive resistance. After gaining independence in 1947 from the British Empire, India adopted a democratic form of governance by merging many small provinces and princely states, including North-East India.

The present North-East India consists of different eight states, namely, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. When India gained independence from British rule, the states Manipur, Sikkim and Tripura were separate independent entities. The rest of the whole North-East was Assam as one large state. Each state consists of various communities which have their distinct cultures, traditions and languages. Various communities in North-East India were baffled by the Government of India's 'modernization', 'development' and assimilation programmes and initiatives. Most people in this region considered that their local and 'indigenous' voices were ignored and sidelined in the newly formed independent country, India. As a result, the people of this region were not sure about their identities and place in the new nation as their political aspirations differed from those of the

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mainstream Indian states. Several revolutionary and insurgency groups sprung up in the region on the pretext of 'reclaiming' their political goals of pre-independent India eras. A survey says that almost all the states in North-East India have various insurgency groups operating like the way any government operates in a country. It is estimated that there are around 35 militant organizations in Manipur, 34 in Assam, 30 in Tripura, 3 each in Nagaland and Meghalaya. Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Sikkim are relatively free of militancy (Baruah, 2002, p.4178).

Considering the evolving socio-political conditions of post-independent North-East India, this paper highlights the issues and challenges of democracy in select texts (short stories) of North-East Indian writers. The selected stories, Kallol Choudhury's *Haflong Hills*, Shekhar Das's *The Treasure Trove*, Yumlembam Ibomcha's *Nightmare*, Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh's *The Mauled Club* and Temula Ao's *The Last Song*, were written during the last 60 years of India's independence. By engaging with these stories, this paper examines how the writers by personalizing the political and politicizing the personal depict insurgency, excess power of the state against the civilians and sexual exploitation of women in the democratic setup of the Indian State.

II

Insurgency

Kallol Choudhury's *Haflong Hills* describes the governance of the state being challenged by the perceived power of insurgency groups. In the story, Dipankar Goswami, Head Assistant of Central Excise, has been posted at Haflong, a hill station in Assam. On his first day in the office at Haflong, Dipankar got the information that an insurgent outfit had demanded over the phone to hand over twenty per cent of the income of all the office staff at a specific time and day.

... a message came from the other end of the phone that twenty per cent of the total salary of all office staff should be sent to them at Dhopaline along with a list of the employees at 4 p.m. (Choudhury, 2011, p. 146)

No sooner had Dipankar and his wife Minati reach Dhopaline, than the sound of bullets exchanging filled the air. Within no time they boarded the auto for home. Later on, Dipankar learned that the washer men, whom they saw in the place, were plain-clothes policemen. Having received the information, the police intelligence had already been observing the insurgents and Dipankar. It is evident in the story that due to the operations of the insurgency group, the rule of law and the institution of governance get subverted.

As stated above, in North- East various insurgency groups operate in the way any government operates in a country.

Later in the story, a liaison officer of the insurgent group came to meet Dipankar and the latter was ordered that he should come the following day to the Begatar rail crossing at 4 p.m. along with the money (Choudhury, 2011, p. 148). This time they could successfully hand over the money to the 'commander-in-chief'. Dipankar, being the Head Assistant of the office, takes all the responsibilities to fulfil the demands of the insurgent group to the extent of losing his job and life. Considering this episode, it can be inferred that Indian democracy is for few people. While low-rank staff are risking their life due to the ongoing conflicts between the insurgent groups and the govt. of India, high-rank officers are free from those risks even if they are posted in the 'disturbed areas'. These high-ranking officers come to the office once in a while. In the story, Dipankar, one of the low-rank staff risks his life and even his wife's due to the pressure and demand of the outfits. Even though he is also a government employee, he succumbs to the orders of insurgent groups' demands by sending twenty per cent of all employee's monthly salaries. The high-rank staff in the office, however, are free from such risk of losing their lives. Most of them are absent in their workplaces, though they are available days before the disbursement of salaries:

... and the bosses spend their time outside the office on the plea of tour programmes. They arrive a few days before the disbursement of salaries. We have noticed this practice everywhere..(Choudhury, 2011, p.147)

In the story, the explicit objectives of the insurgent group are clearly defined; their objective of agitations is to form a separate 'nation-state'. Regarding the unrest in the North-East Indian states, Majumdar (2009) expresses that the violent agitation for an independent state or nation in North-East India has its roots in the colonial period. The practice of indirect rule in the hills of these areas insulated the region from the spread of the pan-Indian movement. During colonial rule, policy was made to foster separate religion, culture, social and national identity. Unfortunately, even after independence, little has been done to mitigate the political and social isolation of this region (p.xxvii). These agitations for a separate 'nation' can be considered as one of the most dangerous challenges to India's democracy. The success of a democratic form of government in any state depends on certain factors. The factors are social, economic and cultural conditions, beliefs and values, ethnicity, religions, modernization or modern society, good communication channels and a certain number of resources. In most cases, agitation against the State happens due to structural violence considering that the region has been ignored in various domains mentioned.

Similarly, Shekhar Das's *The Treasure Trove* (2011) narrates the helplessness of government employees and common people who have been trapped between the

conflicts of the State forces and the insurgent group in Assam. This story describes the experience of his family member when his elder brother, Bikash, was abducted and killed with an AK-47 by 'they' (the militant), from the camp where he had been working as a government servant. As a part of the assigned duties, his brother had been surveying the Barail Hills in Assam. The writer highlights the helplessness of the innocent common man when they are caught between the two conflicting forces, the government and militant outfit. The writer also shows that the role of the government to protect its citizens has failed. From the day when Bikash is killed by the militant, all the family members lose their meaning of living. Aditi, the youngest among the siblings, was once a happy-going girl with lots of hope in life. She had given up the beauty of this life. As the narrator narrates:

Aditi has become like a stone. Yesterday she was trying to smell Dada's coat. She picked out a one-inch hair that had got stuck to the coat and preserved it...I can smell Dada in that coat. Once again, she sank into her grief and desperation putting her head on my chest. (Das, 2011, p 159, p. 161)

Even after so much suffering, the narrator expresses the helplessness of bringing consolation to the family members and himself. He feels that the grief has to be transformed into anger, and it can only be redeemed from the current state. However, he realizes who he is and how much he is sure about the security of their lives, "What is the role for people like me? Who will ensure the security of our lives?" (Das, 2011, p. 163). Such is the condition of helplessness of the common people. In a democratic state, the primary objective is to ensure its citizens have social equality, freedom from threats and early immature death apart from the fulfilment of basic needs, such as economic stability and enhancement. Bikash, the breadwinner, has an unnatural immature death due to the conflicts between the State and the insurgent group. His death also causes mental agony to the bereaved family members to the extent that Aditi leads a living death life.

Power of the State

Yumlembam Ibomcha's *Nightmare* (2011) explores the civilian as the victim of the uniformed personnel in Manipur under the Arms Power Special Acts 1958. This story tells about events in the nightmare of a daughter, Tombimacha, whose father, Chaoba, had been abducted by the uniformed personnel from home and never returned. He was a simple cultivator and no one knew why he was arrested. The dream sequences of Tombimacha unfold the events in the story. Her dreams may suggest the unconscious longing trauma that every child in Manipur society feels due to the operation of the armed forces personnel of the State.

In her dream, Tombimacha saw a man, who happened to be her father, surrounded by the uniformed men. It was an

open meadow and several children including her, were also playing in it. He was made to kneel and shout like a dog and cat. Some of them wearing heavy boots kicked him mercilessly on his buttocks. Seeing Choaba mimicking the cries of dog and cat, uniformed men and the children laughed happily considering it a sort of entertainment.

One of the uniformed persons shouted loudly, 'Bark like a dog!'

One of the uniformed men shouted suddenly, 'Meow like a cat, now.'

(Ibomcha, 2011, p.173-174)

Tombimacha started crying seeing how her father had been tortured and shouted, "Baba (father) will die, our Baba will die if you treat him like that" (Ibomcha, 2011, p.174). Having failed to bear the torture of her father, she ran towards home to inform her mother, but one of the uniformed persons caught her hair. Shivering with frightened, she cried to the uniformed persons to release their father because he is an innocent and good man, who is also quite old. Rather one of the men roared and asked him if he was a member of insurgent groups.

Are you a member of an insurgent group? Aren't you a member of PLA (People's Liberation Army)? If not PLA then you must be a member of PREPAK (People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak) (Ibomcha, 2011, p. 175).

They chopped off his tongue and he was finally buried alive. Tombimacha, being gagged by the personnel, could not shout. By chance, she managed to escape from the clutches of the personnel. She started running and cried as she ran. Suddenly, her mother woke her.

Tombimacha's narrative shows how the military commands politics and excessive power in the name of governance and the welfare of the state of Manipur. The Indian army is viewed as one of the most professional and apolitical forces when they are compared to Pakistan, Bangladesh and South Asian countries. However, the narrative in the story shows the Indian army who are supposed to be the guardians of the common people become the perpetrators of the horrific crimes against the innocent farmers. Chaoba had been abducted by the uniformed personnel from home and never returned. He was a simple cultivator and no one knew why he was arrested. The dream sequences of Tombimacha show how brutal the armed forces are in exercising the State power in the region. Due to the deployment of the army in the state to deal with insurgent groups who were/are seeking autonomy or independence, the individual and citizenship rights of Chaoba have been diminished, superseded and rejected. This suspension of laws within a state of emergency or crisis can become a prolonged state of being. If the operation of the state of exception is prolonged it will deprive individual rights of citizenships.

Citing the USA Patriot Act issued by the president, Agamben (2005) writes that President Bush's order erases "any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally unnameable and unclassifiable being" (p.3). In the same way, Thoiba has no legal status despite being a member of the society. He has been reduced to an animal to be played with by tricksters in a circus. Thoiba has been transformed literally into a dog or cat. The army asking him to bark and cry like a dog and cat implies that Thoiba has been denied to speak in a meaningful language thereby silencing his voice against the excess power of the State. Chopping off his tongue in the story suggests the total silencing of the victims.

Stephen P. Cohen (1988) views that post-independence expansion of the military's control and influence in governing Assam and Punjab, in addition to Mizoram and Nagaland is a challenge to democratic values. A survey shows that in 1984 at least 40 million Indians were living under military rule, if not military law, making India one of the world's largest military-dominated states (p.100). The issue is not whether there will be a coup, but is the libertarian dimension of a democracy maintained. Are the common citizens free from police harassment, and unlawful search and seizure? Are civil rights protected; Do the common citizens have the right to travel and assemble without fear and threat? According to a survey, it was found that around 50000-60000 persons in the state of Manipur have mental ailments due to insurgency-related problems (Sonker and Shalini, 2011, p.270). The rise of violence and insecurity has caused mental disturbance to the youths and children. One of the factors why many students from Manipur study outside their state is due to the ongoing conflicts between the two: the insurgent and the uninformed. Like, Tombimacha, "the children are devoid of a healthy environment to grow due to the constant presence of terror" (Ibomcha, 2011, p.271). Like Thoiba, who has been abducted and untraceable in the story, there have been reports of many civilians who were picked up from their houses and have never returned.

Sexual Exploiting of Women

In the story, *The Mauled Cub*, Tayenjam Bijoyjumar Singh depicts women becoming the victims of both the insurgents and the armed uniformed personnel. Tombi, the daughter, and her mother have a small grocery shop at Moirang junction, a place 45 kilometres away from Imphal, the capital of Manipur. About five years ago, his brother, who was a brilliant student and had a future, was picked up from home by security personnel. He has never returned home and no one knows his whereabouts. Her father also died as a heartbroken man after having spent considerable time and energy to find his abducted son. Unfortunately, he could not know the whereabouts of his abducted son. Both the mother and the daughter live all alone in the house without any financial support from

others. They are very vulnerable to insurgent groups and the uniformed personnel's powers.

Sometimes, any insurgent group, mostly men, could come in the night and take shelter in their homes. If any informer passed the information to the police intelligence, both lives of the mother and daughter would be in danger. They are also prone to sexual and financial exploitations. As it is shown in the story that Tombi, the daughter, was sexually abused or rather raped by the insurgent when they were taking shelter for nights in their house.

... she was lying asleep peacefully. A hand placed on her mouth to stop her from shouting in alarm suddenly woke her. 'Don't panic. It's me...' He was the leader of the three youths who claimed to belong to one of the numerous insurgent groups and had forcibly stayed in their house. They had done so earlier many times. (Singh, 2011, p.190)

Tombi wanted to tell her mother what had happened the previous night but she was afraid that any disturbing news might put her mother in a state of delirium. She also felt that they had suffered so much.

On a particular morning, Tombi was all alone in the house. Suddenly, the rattle of machine guns filled the air and people were shouting and crying in agony, and silence followed. The uniformed personnel came inside the house and one of them announced in a rumbling voice: "Search all over. We have information — this house is their hideout" (Singh, 2011, p.192). Tombi did not have time to hide herself and came out of the house. Without saying anything the uniformed personnel jumped to her bed and raped her.

Without a word, whining like animals they jumped on her and pinned her down on the bed. She opened her eyes wide in horror and screamed but no sound came out. One man grasped her hands while another held her legs. She struggled and tried to kick herself free but they were too strong for her. With a cruel smile on his lips, the third mounted her in haste. (Singh, 2011, p.192)

Tombi lost consciousness, and when she gained her senses, she heard people calling her name. After some time, her mother came and lamented calling her name out. Hearing her mother's voice and feigning unharmed, she shouted loudly: "Mama..I'm up here..in my room" (Singh, 2011, p.192). This narrative highlights the plights of women in the troubled society due to the conflicts between the armed forces and the insurgents. Women become a soft target of sexual exploitation both for the Indian army and the insurgency groups operating in the state. They cannot speak against these perpetrators and they become the silent victims. Speaking against them will invite more troubles to their lives leading to the loss of their honour and the family's. Tombi, in the story, has suffered enough in life. She had lost her brother and then her father

due to tensions and conflicts in the state. Women like Tombi become vulnerable to sexual perpetrators considering that they would not speak against them. This story depicts the plights of women in a democratic society. Likewise, Ao Temsula's *The Last Song* talks about the Indian Army's atrocities on simple villagers and the brutal killing and raping of women of Nagaland who had gathered for the inauguration celebration of a new church building. As the crowd was waiting to listen to the song, an unexpected sound of gunfire in the distance was heard. Including the pastor, all the people looked worried. The soldiers surrounded the crowd and commanded the pastor to identify himself along with the village heads. At the time, Apenyo, a girl who had been gifted with the talent of singing, started her solo song, and the entire choir also joined her. Such a gesture was considered by the soldiers as an open defiance. They pushed and prodded the pastor and the village heads with the butts of the guns and were taken to the jeeps parked below the steps of the church. Everyone had almost run away to safety. Apenyo stood all alone and continued singing as if she had been guided by some spirits. Before her mother, Libeni, rushed towards her to stop her singing, a soldier grabbed her and dragged her towards the old church building. People started running here and there as if a war had been declared against the armless villagers. Instead of following the crowds, Libeni called out her daughter's name frantically. She followed the path which her daughter had been taken by the soldiers. When she finally reached the spot:

What she saw turned her stomach: the young Captain was raping Apenyo while a few soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn. (Temsula, 2011, p.28)

Libeni seeing the scene, almost lost her senses and came forward to save her daughter from the clutches of those soldiers. Instead, she was grabbed and pinned down on the ground by a soldier. Libeni's resistance to counter the soldier only aroused him.

He bashed her head on the hard ground several times knocking her unconscious and raped her limp body ... The small band of soldiers then took their turn, even though by the time the fourth one mounted, the woman was already dead. (Temsula, 2011, p.28)

Some of the villagers who had been taking shelter in the old church building saw what was done to the mother and the daughter. They came out to lift the limp bodies. Looking back to the old building the Captain realized that there were witnesses to what they had done. So, he ordered "to open fire on the people who were now lifting up the bodies of the two women" (Temsula, 2011, p. 29). Knowing that "it would be a waste of time and bullets to kill off all the witnesses inside the church, the order was given to it on fire" (Temsula, 2011, p. 29).

Both the stories narrate the rape of women of different communities by the armed forces personnel and the insurgent groups. This shows that rape can happen to any community, either Manipuri or Nagamese. The first story, *The Mauled Cub*, narrates the rape of a Manipuri woman, named Thoibi, by the armed forces personnel and the insurgent groups. The latter story, Ao Temsula's *The Last Song*, shows the rape of Nagamese women. Women's bodies are often politized in particular during conflicts and wars. Both the conflicting parties perceive that women's bodies are territories to be occupied to bring under their control. The raping of Thoibi in the story may be read as the insurgent's control over the body. The armed forces personnel's raping of Thoibi on suspicion of links with insurgents can be read as an effort to counter the claim of the insurgents. The raping of Nagamese women by the armed forces personnel in the church premise in *The Last Song* can be read as the personnel's efforts to claim over the enemy's territory and to justify their perception that tribal women are less bound by moral codes that are followed in mainstream Indian regions. The reasons for the raping of women in both stories are different, yet the sexual violation against the women can be read as a way of targeting the 'perceived honour' of the women's bodies.

III

To conclude, in a democratic form of governance, citizens are free and equal in all realms; they are free to access skills, resources, and opportunities. Asymmetries of power arising from diverse sites of domination can erode the project of democratic autonomy that fosters the creation of equal participative opportunities (Held, 1994, p. 234). The select stories show the challenges of the democratic form of government in various parts of North-East India. Killing, abductions, financial extortion and brutal rapping have been recurring. The lives of the poorer or common people or women or assistant government officers have been threatened at various levels both by the state power and insurgent groups. Observing the functioning of democracy in the stories implies that there is structural violence. Though declared one of the most powerful democratic countries in the world, the stories discussed above show that some parts of India have been a "state of exception" as a "paradigmatic form of government" (Agamben, 2005, p.5) since the inception of the notion of India. The legal production of the state of exception appears an ongoing imperative to colonize 'life itself'. Considering the 'exception of state' laws which are used though such laws seem 'necessary', the state should woo and regain the poor, and military operations should be checked. A military solution will hamper the spirit of democracy. These are the challenges that democracy in India faces.

However, Surinder K. Shukla (1994) is still optimistic about the nature of democracy in India. He believes that India has yet to adopt democracy as a way of life. He believes that something can become “a way of life” only after a long and gradual process involving generations (401). Democracy in India appears to be anomalous as the country is a multinational, multiethnic, agrarian society with a hierarchical social structure and various internal insurgency problems. Kohli (1988) feels that India’s democracy is not genuine and may even falter soon as have compared to stable democracies with industrialized and capitalist economies (3). In the evolution of democratic politics, certain factors, such as capitalism and a high level of development in terms of economic and proto-democratic political traditions, are deemed important. Provided these factors are significant, acute poverty prevailing in India will deny the possibility of a successful democratic state. Culture, beliefs and values are also linked with the success of democracy. In the context of Indian democracy, it appears that focus is given to the political rather than the socio-economic factors. Despite all the challenges and limitations, it is widely considered that India has been maintaining its constitutional democracy since the creation of the modern state after its independence, except few years of emergency rule in the 1970s (Lane & Svante, 2003, p.167). It is also considered that the Indian form of democracy is considered to be one of the largest and best forms of democracy in the world. However, the selected stories show the challenges and limitations that democracy faces in India. As it is observed in the stories, there are problems of insurgency, excess power of the State and sexual exploitation of women by the armed forces personnel and the insurgents in North-East India. By personalizing the political and politicizing the personal, the writers narrate the plights of Dipankar Goswami, Bikash, Aditi, Thoiba, Tombi, Apenyo, Libeni and others who experience unnatural immature deaths, threats, interferences and sexual exploitations.

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