

Dhrubajyoti Borah's Novel *Kalantarar Gadya*--- an Authentic Expression of Social Reality

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Abstract:

The role of fiction is extremely important as a reflection of society. In particular, novels often carry and represent a society in the form of a social document. Towards the end of the twentieth century, a generation in Assam showed a lack of faith in the prevailing social system and gave birth to an armed rebellion. Many novels have already been written based on this struggle, its outcomes and its impact on national life. In this context, Dhrubajyoti Borah's *Kalantarar Gadya* is a remarkable literary work. The novelist has compassionately crafted the novel, capturing the various dimensions of Assam's ULFA-centric armed struggle and a period of turbulent times. The novel reflects the decay of national life, hopelessness, uncertainty, anarchic violence, disastrous times and the plight of the common people. Alongside this phase of breaking and rebuilding, the course of history, the transition of eras and the tragic tale of time, the human eternal desire for peace and invincible hope are also deeply intertwined. In this paper, an attempt has been made to highlight the nature of such social reality as reflected in Dhrubajyoti Borah's *Kalantarar Gadya*.

Keywords: Armed rebellion, ULFA, Social reflection, Society

1. Introduction :

The Armed movements from the last two decades of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century have significantly influenced the socio-political life of Assam. The roles of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the Assam state are particularly noteworthy in this context. The history, rise and fall and told-untold stories of this armed struggle have enriched the contemporary Assamese novel. Dhrubajyoti Borah's *Kalantar Quartet* is a repository of his four novels named *Kalantarar Gadya* (*The Prose of a changing Era*), *Tejor Andhar* (*Darkness of Blood*), *Ortho* (*The meaning*) and *Topanit Khoj Karha Manuhar Xopon* (*The sleepwalker's dream*). These novels are written on the basis of ULFA's armed movement and its impact on Assamese society. Though no structural similarity in terms of story is observed among these novels; however, a thematic similarity is noticed in all of them. Only *Kalantarar Gadya* and *Topanit Khoj Karha Manuhar Xopon* have some similarity in terms of characterization.

2. Review of Literature :

Manoj kumar Nath (2019), in his book *ULFA xeujiya xapon tezranga itihax* sheds light on ULFA's

armed struggle in a descriptive way. A lot of information and analysis regarding armed struggle has been found in the book.

Pramod Sharma (2010), in his edited book *Oxanta Uttar-Purbanchal*, has included several article regarding the troubled times, problems and solutions of Assam and Northeast.

Dhrubajyoti Borah (2024), in his book *Xahityar Bastav aru Bastavar Xahitya*, has included an interview of himself titled ‘Nijor xoite mukhamukhi’. In that interview, he clearly mentioned about the background of the novel *Kalantarar Gadya* and contemporary Assam as well his philosophy of life.

Sanjoy Hazarika (2011), in his book *Strangers of the Mist*, has shed light on issues such as ethnic conflict, political instability and the problems of illegal migration from neighboring countries into Northeast India. The issues of ULFA has also been discussed in the book.

Moinul Haque choudhury (2015), in his Ph.D thesis, *A study on ULFA and its Socio-Political Impact on Assam with special reference to Kamrup District*, has comprehensively discussed the impact of ULFA’s armed struggle on the social and political spheres of Assam.

3. Objective of the study :

The objective of the present study is to uncover the nature of social reality reflected on Dhrubajyoti Borah’s novel *Kalantarar Gadya*. Through this, an insight into the depiction of ULFA’s armed struggle in Assamese novel will also be enriched.

4. Research Methodology :

The present study is descriptive in nature.

5. Discussion :

On April 7, 1979 the United Liberation Front of Assam , an insurgent organization of Assam was formed at the historic Rang Ghar in Sivasagar district. Although it began alongside the Assam movement, it later spread to a much wider area following the end of the Assam movement. The Assam movement moved forward with the primary demand for national self determination but it couldn’t be able to achieve its goal. ULFA had the same demand along with other demands. In the course of time ULFA was declared a banned organization. Even though the government officially termed ULFA an extremist group but a special leaflet published by them on April 7, 1989, introduced themselves as a revolutionary mass organization. Despite introducing themselves as a revolutionary organization, the movement also adopted a violent and anarchic path. This development remains a widely discussed chapter in the history of Assam.

Born out of the desire to seek national self determination for the people of Assam and to establish a society free from exploitation and corruption; the goals, objectives and ideals of the organization named ULFA find detailed mentioned in the manifesto published on their tenth anniversary---

“In one sentence, the goal of ULFA is ‘to establish a sovereign, independent Assam based on scientific socialism’.....By the word ‘independent’, we don’t mean a nominal or partial self-rule. We demand the right to full national self-determination for Assam without any foreign interference, which is the traditional aspiration of every nation in the world to be fulfilled. We seek total political, economic, social and cultural independence...”

(Nath, 2019, p.26)

Such struggles have continued up to the contemporary period. Although currently the former intensity

has faded, yet whatever the outcome may be, this entire struggle has kept itself alive in the history of Assam for many years. This historical subject, created by a group of armed rebellion who set out in search of a new path, has already found literary expression through various genres of Assamese literature. Dhrubajyoti Borhah's *Kalantarar Gadya* is a literary work shaped by this kind of thematic content.

Centering around a complex time in Assam's history, this novel depicts the stories of a freedom-loving generation, rising and falling, efforts to rebuild history, adventurous yet tragic tales of seeking new paths, an uncertain future and the glimmers of hope amid despair. The novelist has fully transformed the characters of the novel through a creative lens, without distorting historical reality. Therefore, *Kalantarar Gadya*, written against a realistic backdrop and referencing familiar struggles, strongly reflects a sense of historical consciousness.

The influence of society and the era on literature is a highly noteworthy aspect. The reflection of society is mirrored in literature. Compared to other literary genres, social and real life is more broadly expressed in novels. The armed struggle, which is a significant feature of contemporary Assamese history, has also served as the foundation for the novels of numerous novelists. In novels with such subject matter, the personal mindset and individual perspective of the novelist are also exposed. Genius novelist is able to rise above personal ideology and successfully bring out the true picture of history through dispassionate and impartial judgment. The novel under discussion is constructed based on many stories and characters from the history of Assam.

Kalantarar Gadya is a long-span novel and is highly descriptive. ULFA's armed movement is the core connecting link among the different characters of different stories depicted in the novel. Bridging all of these together, the character of reporter Partha Pratim Choudhury has beautifully brought out a slice of Assam's history. Through the struggle of Rondeep alias Ron, Alok, Bharat Hazarika, Praveen etc. the true reality of Assam's political landscape is portrayed. Similarly, through characters like Prabhat, Babula, Sombori, the plight of the innocent common people is highlighted, showing how they manage to survive despite the cunning diplomacy and exploitation by government factions. On the other hand, the text beautifully captures the mental state, internal psychological changes of the rebellions through their struggles and activities. The thoughts of high class society and their opportunistic viewpoints are also portrayed in the novel.

Even if a specific struggle achieves success at a particular time, day or date but no struggle happens accidentally. A long term process is involved behind it. The ULFA armed struggle was also a reflection of a long-standing dissatisfaction of the people of Assam. The struggle, which started with the hope of a successful conclusion to the anti-foreigner movement, gradually spread among the common people due to various circumstances. In the text *Kalantarar Gadya*, a description of these circumstances vividly expresses the resentment in the minds of the common people. The continuous exploitation, deprivation and neglect of Assam's natural resources, the indifference of the ruling class towards the indigenous people, the opportunism and the destruction of local traits -- all these reasons directly or indirectly led to the involvement of the common people in the armed struggle.

"Does that mean you have chosen a path other than armed struggle?

Do the people even have faith in any other path? Hasn't that faith evaporated like camphor? --- do you really think elder brother (kakaideo), that these can be established without armed struggle? Have the people not already tested the path of democracy for the past forty years?"

(Borah, 2012, p.66)

This is the real truth that reflects in the novel. In these words of the novel, one can hear the tone of the manifesto of ULFA, published on their tenth anniversary ---

- *“The natural resources of Assam are being extracted and used as raw materials in the industries of the country.*
- *The goods produced in Assam are being sold in the international market, thereby increasing the volume of foreign exchange.”³(Nath, p.36)*

The ideology of ULFA was a scientific socialism based on nationalism. Their socialism was based on giving equal status, equal rights and basic fundamental rights to every citizen of every ethnic community living in Assam. They envisioned building a free and independent country by uniting various indigenous caste and ethnic groups into an undivided Assamese nation---

“What is the goal of your entire struggle?”

“A free country based on a scientific socialism.”

“Distinct ethnic identities must dissolve to become one nation, one identity—Assamese. Otherwise we will never be able to advance against the enemy elder brother.” (Borah, p.69)

In the novel, through the character of Partha, the novelist feels the justification of the demands associated with ULFA’s struggle depending on the region. For example, the misuse of highly valuable natural gas in Upper Assam and the resulting resentment among the people are reflected in the novel in this manner ---

“Why wouldn’t there be anger and hatred towards the system in the minds of those people who have always seen this fire, yet remain far away from its warmth even in the freezing cold of the winter month of Puh? Why wouldn’t they feel the urge to take up arms?” (p.68)

On the other hand, the novelist also exposes the inner emptiness of the armed approach followed by the militants.

“But unfortunately, due to a lack of deep understanding of social reality and history, they have found the formula for a solution in denationalization. Partha strongly felt like saying that such a line of thinking is wrong; society does not change based on imaginary concepts, and social reality cannot be altered at will. Perhaps unity will only be possible if the aspirations of various ethnic groups are respected. (p.69)

In describing the opposite political ideologies of the novel’s revolutionary character Ron and his brother, the novelist has beautifully and concisely highlighted the operational and ideological contrasts between Marxists and ULFA. Although Ron’s Marxist brother believes that armed struggle might eventually be necessary to build socialism through class struggle, he does not support his brother’s ideology. Despite having a democratic veneer, the nationalism depicted in the novel falls into the category of radical, reactionary nationalism.

Similarly, by mentioning the revolutionary Che Guevara, who was adopted as an ideal by the armed freedom fighters, the novelist has reflected the universal form of revolution and the global concept of nationalism. ULFA is termed a separatist organization. The novel expresses skepticism, through the character of Partha, regarding the expected results from a revolution that has become widely isolated from the public. Partha also find mismatch between the actions and ideology of Ron and his group and their ideals and methods of Che Guevara. Partha also has realized that a successful outcome cannot be expected by mechanically imitating Guevara’s education and ideals.

The novel is basically a chronicle of the lives of common people. In the novel, we see a realistic depiction of how the problems arising from armed struggle create various crisis for the lower-middle class society and devastate public life. The novelist has depicted many such unwritten true pictures in

history, bringing the stories of ordinary people to the readers. The novelist himself has admitted that the story of Prabhat is derived from a real-life experience. Prabhat was a college student who faces police suspicion and interrogation without any reason and gradually loses his mental balance. Similarly, contexts such as framing and killing of innocent character Babula as a terrorist, the violation of Sombori's chastity at the hands of the military and her failure to receive proper justice, are realistic expressions of the untold stories of the subaltern society. The portrait of the armed insurgent can also be treated as a portrayal of the marginalized community of the society. During any movement or revolution in society, the subaltern and marginalized people are the most affected. Like the grass that suffers when elephants fight, these people lose their lives, identity and dignity in the clash between the government and armed militants. Prabhat, Babula, Sombori etc. are just very minor examples only. The novelist has empathetically portrayed the image of these historically ignored people.

The novel covers almost all major and minor aspects of ULFA's armed struggle. In particular, it reflects the rise of ULFA, the military operations launched against it, the internal division and weaknesses within the organization, the birth of SULFA, their alienation from the public and the psychological impact on both ordinary people and ULFA cadres.

Cruel truths of time are being uncovered through the novel. Over time, it brings about changes in people, society, values and perceptions. Seeking a change in these turbulent times, looking for answers to countless questions and searching for solutions to problems, a question arises in Partha's mind at the end of the novel----

"Where will it end? Where will the history of this tempestuous time end? This grand drama of conflict, confusion and tragedy. It is as if a sudden storm has blown in a heavy load of fallen leaves., threatening to tear all of their leaves apart. What is he witnessing before his eyes --- the making of history or the ominous prelude to a tragic devastation." (p.402)

This is the question that arises in the mind of novelist too. Through the readers, he has directed this question toward our society.

6. Conclusion :

At the conclusion of the discussion, it appeared that a bloody period of Assam's political history has been beautifully captured in Assamese novel. The reflection of Assam's political and social history is highly distinct in Dhrubajyoti Borah's *Kalantarar Gadya*. Along with external impact of the armed struggle on the common people, the scars of internal trauma leave an indelible mark. The value of this novel is also immense as a reflector of the unspoken and unwritten history of society.

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