

### **Representation of Insurgency in *Sons of Brahma***

The impact of insurgency has woken up Government of India and made it acutely aware of the existence of a region of the country called the North East. India's ignorant mass is made aware of the extent of the country and it has taught them that it is not only the face or the chest or the parts in the front that make a person. Smaller limbs are also equally important. And that the apathy of the rest of India which is mainly triggering such acts of violence, needs to be looked into. The chapter seeks to examine the problem of insurgency and explore its impact on the people through the works of literature by Assamese writers. The novels that have been included for study are Dhruba Hazarika's *Sons of Brahma* and Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories*. In comparison with the other North-eastern states, Assam has the highest density and diversity of population. The problems of Assam too, are extraordinarily complex - insurgency, terrorism, kidnapping, extortion, killings, demographic aggression, ethnic heterogeneity, student politics, border disputes with the neighbouring states, flood, poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment have mired the state in an imbroglio with no parallel anywhere.

The insurgency and turmoil occurring in Assam are rooted in economic and political deprivation. While one would most likely think about armed men and gunfire when "terrorists" are mentioned, it wouldn't be wrong to address the fact that there are disguised terrorists as well. For instance, the terrorists hiding in khaki clothes or in the finesse of well-dressed suits, these terrorists subvert the system to advance their agenda and are actually more harmful to the society and to the people. Giving a thoughtful insight into the idea of terror Dr. Rakhee Kalita Moral 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 systematic derangement in which social structures are steeped. It is, perhaps, more significantly, our doubts about who or what is responsible for it” (101-102).

All the states of Northeast suffer from the syndrome of governance deficit. Absence of effective, responsive and transparent governance make people desperate and it leads to anger and violence. The total absence of any mechanism to curb corruption has only made it no risk high return industry thereby accentuating the deprivation quotient, which fuels militancy and violence. Immunized corruption is the twin brother of extortion; both misappropriate resources with impunity. All the states in this region have to depend heavily on central assistance on financial matters, their own revenue collection till date is not enough to pay even their employee's salary. While efforts have been made in the past few years to curb this kind of widespread corruption, there is still a long way to go.

Assam being the womb of the northeast suffered the most. With the formation of the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) in 1979 and by the series of violent activities executed by the group, Assam was stooped into a phase of violence and terror. However, one can never deny the sense of deprivation and alienation felt by post-independent Assamese people which compelled a section of them to take up arms. During its formative period ULFA successfully won the hearts of Assamese people as it dreamt of an Assam where small communities and minorities too will get a democratic space. The allure that the guerrilla organisation could create in the mind of many Assamese was because its mission seemed to address the immediate need for justice, development and the much sought after regional autonomy.

Assam was economically poor in the post-independent India despite possessing some best resources of the country like oil and tea. When ULFA explained it as an extension of colonial



exploitation even after independence, the argument appeared plausible to many. The Assamese people could connect to this idea of exploitation because they always felt a sense of alienation from the mainland India. As Rakhee Kalita claims: “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). Many youths of the state took resort to armed rebellion as there were widespread unemployment and corruption in the state in the 1980s and early 1990s.

As the state reeled under this state violent rebellion for decades the subconscious and conscious minds of the people of the region were steeped in a disturbed emotional state. Obviously literature produced during this period too mirrored those emotional alerting the readers to the need of truth, introspection and justice.

Dhruba Hazarika’s novel, *Sons of Brahma* is set in an Assam of those tragic times. The book starts in the prestigious Gauhati University where Jongom Hanse, an unassuming scholar student absorbed in the world of quantum physics, nebula clusters and black holes gets involved in a macabre and dangerous journey when he is singled out by a rebel leader Anjan Phukan, the revolutionary army’s self-styled secretary general, who wants him to write for the separatist cause. Jongom who is totally unaware of the world represented by Anjan Phukan, realises only little later that he is talking to someone who belong to a clandestine group. As the narrator informs: “He glanced towards the door and then straightening his back, said, ‘We have a magazine, Voice,’ and stopped just as suddenly. I looked hard at him now, knowing I was with someone who belonged to an organisation that was clandestine in essence but vehement in its opposition to the concept of a sovereign, socialist, secular

republic that governed my country. 'I have been told by our civil wing that with your brilliance we can convince more people about our cause'" (19).

Both Jongom and Anjan are caught by police in their conversation in Jongom's hostel room. After that Jongom had to live a life of fugitive along with his friends Pranab and Srabana who aid him on this journey. The novel paints the image of Assam when clashes between militant separatist groups and the state were at its heights. Nani Gopal Mahanta comments on the separatist tendency in the following way: "The Assam Movement had laid down the foundation for the growth of an independent Assam by ULFA. Although some writers have expressed serious doubt about the democratic content of the Assam movement in the post-Independence period of India. A strong emotional content notwithstanding, for the majority of the Assamese this was the last fight to ensure their identity and culture. The Assam Movement surfaced the already palpable secessionist feeling in Assam" (xix-xx). In the novel it is named National Revolutionary Army. In the novel we are introduced to a host of politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen, in the parties hosted by Srabana's father attended by both Pranab and Hanse. We see through their eyes the different kind of officers; honest ones like Srabana's father Mr. Banerjee as well as the corrupted ones like Numol Deka, the Inspector General of Police, anti-terrorism department, who was even awarded the State's Bravery Medal and who, not surprisingly according to Hanse turns out to be one among the many bureaucrats who "won his spurs gambling on the weaknesses of others." The observation he makes, is when he overhears him talking to Deka and Rothin Chaliha another corrupt officer conspiring to take 80 lakhs illegally which was obtained while conducting a raid. The incident proves Srabana's friend Maria's view to be correct. Maria observes: "But you should meet some of the other officers. The bureaucrats, the doctors and the engineers, the advocates... No different from these petty, arrogant, self-centred cops, I swear!" (11). This is brought to the fore quite clearly when Maria, who is a daughter of a liquor baron, also tells



them how her father has to bribe everyone in lakhs from the local political agent and the excise inspector to the cops in Digboi who would otherwise blackmail him. These officers according to Pranab are “bloody, self-serving goons” his complete disappointment in the state’s governance as well as the hopeless condition of the state with “ teachers fleecing the poorest of students or businessmen evading taxes” comes out in spurts, to a point where he believes the “National Revolutionary Army” have a just cause for rebelling not until he is again reminded of their absurd cases of ransom, killings and extortion from honest businessmen and even dhobis and pan-wallahs. Pranab says, “That’s why we have the rebels. The National Revolutionary Army... Think of the young boys and girls sacrificing everything else for a cause. Aren’t we partly responsible for their state of affairs?” However, Maria interrupts her as she utters: “They are killers, murderers... They exhort money from even honest businessmen. Even from paan-shop-wallahs. From roadside-dhaba-wallahs” (12). The depiction of the extremist group in the novel justifies what Rakhee Kalita Moral remarks about ULFA. She views: “It is still unclear how posterity will refer to ULFA: as rebels, political terrorists, revolutionaries, or as mere opportunists. Much of the writing, critical and creative, in contemporary Assamese literature reflects the unease that the Assamese have about how to name or more importantly define the way of these rebels, seen as both necessary and problematic, in the shaping of Assam’s destiny in the larger national space” (104).

It is the very next day when Anjan Phukan arrives as an uninvited guest in Jongom’s hostel room as he had stated prior to that day to discuss about what he desired of Jongom to write about for their magazine “Voice” but then their conversation is soon interrupted by the police cars who arrest both Anjan and Jongom despite a lot of protests from the other hostellers who knew Jongom was completely innocent of the accusations. It is frightening to think now that the police had earlier barged into the college premises without even the dean or the registrar’s



permission. Those were definitely the troubled times. Nevertheless with his books and laptop confiscated because of Anjan Phukan's call records on his phone Jongom is arrested and taken to the police station and on the way to the station he stands witness to the heinous crime committed by the policemen when they shoot Anjan Phukan who ultimately gets killed by two bullets from Nilim Kumar's service revolver in the outskirts of the city and is further threatened by Nilim Kumar to not let this out in front of anyone otherwise there would be consequences.

Much later from the incident which leaves Jongom flabbergasted he is questioned by Numol Deka in the Fancy Bazaar police station regarding Anjan Phukan's sudden interest in him and also informed about the fact that now he would be constantly under observation by both the rebels and the police, for the rebels would believe that it was Jongom who had led Anjan to the police and as Numol Deka states ironically "It is always better to trust the police"

The very next day, Jongom Hanse receives calls from Robin Saikia first asking him about Anjan's death and then to let him know that they knew Hanse's life. Jongom's life changed drastically overnight from being tailed around by the SP's men to being threatened by the rebels, he now had nowhere to go as even Prof. Lahiri had asked him to move out of the campus for safety as he stated, "nobody, wanted him around"

What started in the rooms of institutions and people's homes with the fear of being swamped by immigrants, and the fear of losing the Assamese language twenty five years ago no matter how good the results were, initially haunted them with its destructive effects. Later we see how Jongom was forced to go into hiding in the Kamakhya Temple stuck in the tug of war between the police and the rebels where he meets Suren Sarma's son a living example of the terror caused by the rebels. With a plan to move to Kaziranga with Pranab on a ferry, they are safely escorted by the rebel hating panda Suren Mama and into the trusted hands of Hakim



and his son Rekib, both Bangladeshi “Miahs” who had their own story to tell as victims of insurgency. Tricked by a man Romen Dasgupta, Hakim along with his brothers had been carrying ammunition for the underground, what they thought were statues of Ganesha turned out to be guns for the rebels and soon Hakim was castrated for that along with his brothers left wounded. The scar left him unmarried when he finally adopted Rekib, his brother Ghulam’s son whom he loved as his own. The novel narrates starkly how the underprivileged too suffered by the atrocities of the insurgents. The narrator informs: “When he regained consciousness fifteen minutes later, the six Assamese boys had already sped off in their boat. Ghulam and Habib had been savagely kicked and punched and then the boy who had sliced off Hakim’s penis had struck Ghulam on his right arm with the same dao. But the blow was not as sharp as had been intended, the boat’s lurch blunting the swing. The same boy had snarled, ‘If any of you report this to anyone, we will come back and finish you off. You understand, Miah? Finish you off and feed your flesh to the fish’” (99).

Even the privileged, aristocratic class is equally tortured by the insurgents as Lopamundra’s (Srabana’s friend) Uncle Haresh Bordoloi too loses his entire family. He was given an extortion notice of rupees one crore which his self-respect did not allow him to get bogged down by the boys’ demand. To avoid any inconvenience he decided to take his family to a rented house in Kolkata. The rest the narrator describes in the following manner: “It was the driver who first saw the two Yamaha bikes closing in. Haresh Bordoloi remembers the man’s eyes widening in sheer terror in the reflection from the rear-view mirror, above the dashboard. Then the two bikes closed in, one behind the other. From the AK-47 held by the two pillion riders bullets rained in, the staccato like Diwali crackers. As the glass splintered around them he felt his wife’s body jerking against him. The windshield crumbled, his daughters’ screams mingling with the gunfire. And then the car slammed into a tree as the driver swayed and fell over Haresh Bordoloi’s daughters” (193).



The narrative throws light on how the whole society is rocked by terrorist activities. After reaching Tezpur Jongom reads the news paper and visualises in his mind all the incidents in the following way:

“At eight in the morning, the day before, Suren Sarma was picked up by unidentified gunmen in a white maruti van from the foothills near Kamakhya. At twelve noon, his son. Suresh received a phone call from an anonymous caller representing the National Revolutionary Army. No demands were made, no direct threats issued, merely the information that Suren Sarma was their guest for a few days. At 3pm the same day two boys on their bikes had driven up to Bokajan Primary Health Centre. Despite the presence of six medical personal and a few villagers the two boys, brandishing revolvers, had whisked away Po, speeding towards Numaligarh. Along the highway. At 5pm, a young boy named Rekib had tottered into the Fancy Bazar police station: two men had walked up to his father as he was haggling in a *haat*, a market, by the river and shot him twice in the chest at close range” (182).

The paragraph reports activities of the insurgent group in one day. It helps us to make an idea how the insurgent group has invoked terror at every front of life for every member of the society. It also reveals the bitter truth how it has deviated from its original goal and has ended up performing atrocities on common people.

Towards the end of the novel when Jongom and his friend Pranab were taken to Jorhat and were questioned by Captain Rakesh and Nilim Kumar about their sojourn, Jongom reflects as Pranab answers to them: “As Pranab repeated what we had narrated to Uncle Harry, I thought, how must you have felt when they shot your sister, Nilim Kumar? What is it like to know the pain and emptiness that arises from such a death? A life wiped out by depraved beings born of hatred? What kind of love can they have for a land when death follows people who do not toe the line? The yin of love and the yang of hatred. Twins that blow apart upon



meeting” (200). The death of Nilim Kumar’s sister was caused by sheer feeling of hatred of the National Revolutionary Army towards the police and the Indian army. However, it also shows how ULFA or in the novel National Revolutionary Army has deviated from its goal by killing innocents from its own land of dream. It definitely resulted in its loss of credence in the eyes of the people of its own land. The whole management of the insurgent group became bloody and anarchic. They try to manage their finances by giving extortion notice to the wealthy. In the novel itself it is narrated how they send extortion notice to Haresh Bordoloi i. e. Lopamudra’s uncle (Jongom and Pranab’s friend) Harry. Harry dared to challenge their extortion notice and decided not to pay the demanded money. The result is all his family members were brutally killed by two Yamaha bike riders, the members of the insurgent group. As the narrative goes: “It seemed to him hours had passed since the moment when his wife’s body fell against him. From nearby fields farmers came running up. His mind verging on insanity, Haresh Bordoloi kept cradling his wife’s head as the life went out of her. In the front seat, the driver, with a bullet inside his shoulder, kept repeating ‘Bhagwan, hey Bhagwan’ even as he tried to gather the two little girls against his chest” (193). This kind of gruesome incidents which make our hair to stand on its own reveal the ultimate inhumanity and barbaric nature of the insurgent group.

After the cold blooded murder of Anjan Phukan, a rebel leader of the National Revolutionary Army by Anti- which was later portrayed as an encounter, because of which, Jongom terrorist squad Assistant commandant, Nilim Kumar, (lay in danger for having known the truth) Pranab, his best friend suggested that he flee until the matter cooled down, for the rebels were dangerous and neither did the police offer him security from the obvious danger that awaited him. Pranab was the student leader of the AASU of the Gauhati University wing and thus had a fantastic network of people whom he knew who could protect them. And thus is how the escape ensued. From Suren Mama in the Kamakhya Hills, to Hakim and Rekib on the



Brahmaputra, to Tilak in Orang and Lopamudra, Srabana and Haresh Bordoloi in Kaliabor Tiniali, Pranab shielded Jongom from all possible danger like a true friend until they ended up in Nilim Kumar's custody when circumstances went from perilous to dire. Tilak is a surrendered member of the National Revolutionary Army. From his perspective we come to know how some members of the group leave it after being demoralised. The member of the National Revolutionary Army had to become poachers by the instructions of their leaders. Tilak had to kill one police personnel unwillingly following the instruction of Anjan Phukan. Tilak agrees when Pranab utters: "'But, it's the National Revolutionary Army that indirectly encouraged the infiltration, Tilak.' Pranab countered, 'And you know it. Your comrades took shelter in Bangladesh. Under the ISI's diktat. Hah! I feel like puking.' Pranab exhaled, the disgust in his voice swirling around in the room. 'Selling one's own motherland! Goddam traitorous scum'" (145). The discussion further gives vent to Pranab's pent up disgust to the entire violent and vulnerable social atmosphere. He asks Tilak about the cop he killed and then he further questions him, "How many have your ex-comrades killed? Over ten thousand? May be more. And the retaliation from the army? From the police? Another ten thousand. And all the sons and daughters who were witness to the killings? Did not they too die? Did not their minds die? The living dead, ha, Tilak? The living dead" (145). The common people are the most vulnerable to these activities of insurgent and counterinsurgent groups. Many of the critical thinkers are suspicious of the central government's policies to manage insurgency in the North-East. As Sanjib Barua says, "The national security-centric discourse about the Northeast – shaped mostly by former bureaucrats and retired army, police, and intelligence officials— is 'heavily pro-state and insensitive to the vulnerabilities of the common man and dismissive of the frequent transgression of rights of its own citizens by the state'" (2009:3).



However, Jongom also realises the fact this rebel (Tilak) whose sense of ethics compels him to leave the insurgent group is far better than the hypocritical politicians and bureaucrats. He says: "I jumped down and rounding up to the front shook hands with Tilak. Cop-killer or no, he was of a different breed. There would come a time when the law would catch up with him but until then he was in the midst of all that he cared for in life. I thought him to be far more honest than either Chaliha, the commissioner, or Numol Deka. At least he had the courage to admit his crime" (163). From there began Jongom's solitary journey into the den of the rebels for the sake of his father (Po) alias Brahma Hanse and Suren Mama. As Hanse the narrator, describes: "I do not remember exactly how long it took us to reach the monastery. Perhaps it was ten, or perhaps it was twenty, minutes. All I remember is the sudden slowing-down as the boy swung one leg down and guided his cycle, one foot on rubber pedal, the other dangling in the air. We eased in through an archway, the pillars painted red, ochre and yellow, the sculpted cement figurines beckoning us, gods whom I knew as much as any Hindu would. There was no one around us as we entered the wide, open yard but I thought I saw someone sneaking away fifty feet beyond a grove of guava trees to our right" (244). Finally after a long cycle ride the boy guiding him stopped near a house and he met his father, Po there. He could not see him as he was blind-folded but he could recognise him by the smell : "Even as a child I would take in his soft, dusky smell as I lay with my arm around him in bed. I was a smell as old as the mountains and as young as the first orchid blooming in a forest. I was a smell from old clothes preserved in a school dormitory and the waft from an aftershave that possesses no known brand. It was the smell of protection and love, of a kind that only a son would ever know" (245). Their meeting ended up in sobbing and hugging with still a hope in a bright future. However, before meeting Po, his conversation with Nilim Kumar and Captain Rakesh divulged secrets that changed his life forever. Nilim Kumar confessed that he killed Anjan Phukan to avenge upon the death his sister, fondly called



Matu. Nilim Kumar also knew that Police officer, Numol Deka used Anjan Phukan to kill his sister as she was pregnant with his child. Nilim Kumar tells, "Numol Deka planned Matu's execution. He put the blame on Abhishek when he came to know about the pregnancy. He was merely playing around with her in much the same way he had been playing around with numerous other women. Official power and the narcissistic belief that he's an irresistible ladies' man led him from one woman to another. Even after his marriage soon after Matu's death, he still continues his philandering" (225). Nilim Kumar continued, "But Numol Deka planned it otherwise. He worked it out with the rebels. It was Anjan Phukan riding pillion who shot her dead in front of the doctor's chamber that day, Jongom. It was Pranab's brother, his bloody, bloodthirsty half-brother who shot dead my beautiful Matu" (226). Jongom felt pity and sympathy for Nilim Kumar, but was astounded by the phrases, "Pranab's brother, his bloody, bloodthirsty half-brother" and within his mind was felt intrigued to know more.

Finally he comes to know that the man who was the off screen leader of National Revolutionary Army was Lohit Kalita, Pranab's father. Jongom was always impressed by the personality of Lohit Kalita and he also knew that his incomparable love for his land; but this identity was unimaginable to him. Jongom was surprised and he thought: "The words did not really strike home at first. Two words framing two proper nouns; two words that I had heard time and again over the last few days. Two words denoting a man's name, drawn from a river and a race; two words that now plunged into me like a hammer. Then, just as quickly, it was gone, the incredulity, with only the knowledge now overpowering me. As the crows built up a racket once again, all I could immediately think of, then, was Pranab and his easy smile, his quick decisions, his bravery that came instinctively, his great leadership qualities. And then reluctantly, almost miserably, I thought of his father, a man who wrote like one demented, a man whose love for his land and his people had scourged his soul, a man warped in clandestine telephone calls, secret meetings, plotting, planning, sanctioning executions even



as he taught children from textbooks that saluted man's nobility and the quest for nobility, a man who commanded Robin Saikia and his ilk, a quiet, unassuming man, a doting father and perhaps a duty-bound husband, the man who had loved a woman named Mala, the man who had fathered Anjan Phukan, a father who perhaps did not know that Anjan was his own progeny, a man sculpted by destiny's relentless convolutions and by the unrelenting genes carried down by his forefathers. Like a man in haze I turned to look at Po" (258-59).

Set in the 'troubled times', when clashes between militant separatist groups and the state were at their height in the 1990, the story attempts to illustrate the scenario of the Assam Separatist movement through the tale of Jongom Hanse and his best friend, Pranab. Caught in a snare between the police and the rebels the bulk of the book is a race against the odds by the two friends across the lush valley of the Brahmaputra. The nomadic life of the two friends help the readers to comprehend the beauty of mighty Brahmaputra.

In the latter half of the novel, the gory face of the rebels is presented through the atrocities inflicted on innocent people like Hakim, Ghulam and Habib, wherein mistakes were punished with the maiming of body parts. The novel provides ample examples how rebel groups resorted to cruel and brutal tortures for even unintended mistakes as the narrator describes: "Without any warning someone hit him on his neck. Two others punched Ghulam and Habib. They were too tired to resist but Hakim got up and made a dash for the dao meant for cutting wood. 'But I slipped on the deck, babu. Then the two boys pushed me down and sat on top of me. One of them, I will never forget his face, picked up the dao and came over to me. The other two still holding Ghulam and Habib.'

'The one with the dao said, 'Sala, Miah! Three crates of AK-47s! All lost. Because of your stupidity.' Each word was punctuated with obscenities that Hakim refused to repeat now.'

‘The other boy continued to hold me, gripping my arms. Then another boy came and held on my legs. I did not know what was happening, babu. Only when they lifted my lungi I knew what they wanted to do.’

The boy with the dao grabbed Hakim’s penis. With a single, swift stroke he severed it, very much like a wood-cutter slicing off an unwanted extended twig in a branch. Hakim did not faint but he could hear his own agonising cry as the pain shot through him, the act all the more terrifying as the boy stood up and swung the blood-drenched piece in his hand, waving it in front of Hakim before throwing it at Ghulam’s face” (98-99).

This type atrocities reveal the sheer inhumanity of the rebels and also raises serious doubts with regard to their commitment to their original demand as well as goal. How can they be builders of an independent Assam? How can people trust them?

Barbaric acts of violence abound the novel as is seen in the episode of the “jungle survival” style of rhino poaching narrated by the ex-rebel Tilak, who told them how rhinos were decapitated for meat and money to accumulate arms and ammunitions by rebel poachers. Tilak, the ex rebel who helped Pranab and Jongom to hide themselves from police, explains to them, “ ‘Poachers killed a rhino a week ago’, Tilak said, ‘This is the fourth one this year.’ He focused his torch under a banyan tree, and there in the middle of a watery hole I saw the headless figure of a rhino. It seemed to me like a wooden table, four legs and a surface...

‘But it’s got no head,’ breathed Pranab. ‘What the hell, Tilak!’

‘Rebels,’ Tilak responded. ‘They saw the head off the neck. The horn they keep for selling. Two to three lakhs rupees in India. Much more abroad.’ He swept the torch into the trees and then focused it on the rhino again. ‘ They eat the flesh after decapitating the body, severing the horn.’



‘You mean the poachers are from the underground? The rebels?’ said Jongom

‘Not all of them,’ Horen spoke up. ‘But there’s a group that was trained by Anjan Phukan. Their trademark, unlike the other poachers or even the other rebels, is to cut off the head. Jungle survival they were told. The flesh for meat and instant energy. The horn for money to buy more arms’” (138).

Then Pranab and Jongom wanted to know how the rebels could enter into the forest which was under the protection of the government. Horen one of the forest guards replied in the following manner:

“ ‘They have a complex network. Some of the villagers in the forest support them. Some of our own forest personnel help them out,’ Horen explained. ‘Only a few of us guards are loyal. With such low salaries, most of us are easily bought out.’ (139).

In this way the rebels exercise violent activities to exert their power. The way the rebels maimed Hakim. The complex network through which these rebels operated, by way of villagers and underpaid forest personnel bought with money, only serve to show how flimsy and loophole-ridden the forest administration was.

Rightly denoted as terrorism, fear was the driving principle of these militant groups. Killing on orders was a proof of trust among comrades. And the costs of these operations were borne by the numerous extortion notices, threats, kidnapping ransom and so on. Even after many of them surrendered, the problem was far from being over. After a section of these “surrenderees” had been utilised by the police to ferret out hard-core rebels, most surrenderees had taken advantage of the special status accorded to them by the government and had created serious law and order problems: from illegal grabbing of both private and government land and threatening law-abiding businessmen while settling major contracts to



operating syndicates that imposed taxes on consumable goods brought into Assam from other states. For the help rendered to the law-enforcing agencies, a kind of impunity was allowed to them which in many cases, worsened the situation as many of these surrenderees were stuck in this vicious circle of terrorism, unable to come out of it. Hence Dipesh Bhagawati expresses doubts over this issue of surrender. He opines, "Surrendering of some of the members of extremist group has created some novel problems in the social milieu of Assam. Though there are several reasons behind the surrender of the members belonging to the extremist groups, temptation of the government machinery in the form of material gain and comfort has sent an unwanted signal to join such groups in order to have a life full of physical comfort and security" (50).

The terrorist group in question, the National Revolutionary Army, was no different. The slightest premonition of danger, revenge, favouritism or non-compliance with demands—anything under the sun that triggered them, could have got lives ended and families finished. Life was of no significance to them unless it was one of their own kind, so much so that the Jongom refers to them as "dogs turned mad from gun-wielding power". Just like Nilim Kumar's pregnant sister who was killed by Anjan to avenge the death of the four hard core rebels he'd killed earlier and to cover up the tracks of Numol Deka's illegitimate affair with her which he didn't want to acknowledge; and Haresh Bordoloi's entire family being finished by Anjan Phukan for refusing to pay the extortion money.

Ruthless killings done on the most trivial reasons were commonplace. From time to time, lives were taken to ensure the terror did not die away from the minds of the common masses; as was in the case of Haresh Bordoloi's faithful servant Jonathan, whose arms were chopped off by Anjan because he refused to join the rebels. The network of these rebel leaders infiltrated ranks and professions of all kinds, which kept them safe from the hands of law. These networks comprised of people in the most important positions, like inspector general



Numol Deka, who were bribed with money and tempered with fear from time to time so as to warrant a safe haven for these rebels in the unlikely event of them being caught; as was in the case of Anjan Phukan when he was nabbed by Nilim Kumar, a true and honest officer.

Anjan Phukan, the implacable rebel leader who wanted Jongom to write for the separatist cause initially in the story, drives the action in the novel forward, despite his death in the very beginning of the narrative. Through him, we come to know of the National Revolutionary Army and all the misdeeds the organisation was responsible for. From the helpless fugitive, he transforms into the ruthless sadist devoid of pity and humanity in the progression of the narrative. Stories like the one Nilim Kumar told Jongom, which made the rounds when Nilim was a child serve to show how inhuman Anjan Phukan must have been in reality- "He'd thrust a split bamboo pole into a cow's rectum. He'd keep on driving it deeper and deeper until the pointed edge came out at the throat. He'd laugh as the cow bled to death. There was absolutely no mercy in him." The avenging of his death leads to all the twists and turns in the novel, like the death of Hakim for having helped Jongom and Pranab flee through the waterway or the kidnapping of Suren Mama and Po, alias Brahma Hanse to reach Jongom Hanse. The taking of life is never justified. But after we come to know of the barbaric acts of violence Anjan Phukan was responsible for, one begins to see his culmination as the justified end.

These acts of inhumanity on the part of the National Revolutionary Army which abound the novel would make one wonder as to what drives these people to be so barbaric and insensitive. But what is clear is that these factions do not offer any positive ramifications for the society they thrive in. They do not seek to liberate the people and nor do their goals seem to support the idea of regional autonomy for the state. What drives them is just a hunger for power, a lust for autonomous, unjustified and terror-driven control. The initial aim and motto of the insurgent group never gets reflected upon in the narrative of the novel. They seem to



have deviated from their actual goal and are caught in a turmoil of ego and revenge. In this context of insurgency thus, the following quote rings true:

“Insurgencies are easy to make and hard to stop. Only a few ingredients need to combine to create an insurgency; like oxygen and fire, they're very common and mix all too often. The recipe is, simply, a legitimate grievance against a state, a state that refuses to compromise, a quorum of angry people, and access to weapons” – Richard Engel

From corrupted officers and policemen, to the ones taken up by rage who lost their families in war with the rebels, a doctor who crippled a woman for life to the violence that ensued on the Bangladeshis and even the Local Assamese folk as well the secret killings, *Sons of Brahma* takes us to an Assam which was too dark to comprehend. The novel makes us realise and understand the gruesome corollary to Assam movement and formation of ULFA. The struggle was for identity, to retain the Assamese identity which was threatened by the onslaught of immigrants from a neighbouring country. It was followed by incidents where many uninvolved, innocent Assamese and non-Assamese were killed which is very unfortunate and which resulted in the loss of credence in ULFA. The novel of our discussion elaborates how the insurgent group and the counter-insurgent group are involved in diplomatic and political turmoil. The novel offers a very detached and ruthless critique of both insurgents and counter-insurgents. At this point the common people can deter the evil from its further advancements. The novel, in this sense endow the reader a perspective where they are able to form an impartial view of the entire situation.



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