

Representation of Insurgency in *The House With a Thousand Stories*

Northeast had been a part of mainland India. It is the British rule which forcefully annexed Northeast with rest of India. After independence of India various ethnic groups from the region demanded secession as Indian government failed to fulfil local grievances and wishes. Hence by 1970s many states of the region experienced rebellion for secession and autonomy. As a critic Krishna 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 the 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). Others maintain that this is one of the reasons why northeastern states remained inactive during the independence movement (Rustomji, 1983; Bhawmik, 1998). Some even go a step further, highlighting the attitude of India's government after independence, which continued policies of isolation and alienation of northeastern states from the rest of the country (Savyasaachi, 1998). The economic situation and development also worsened after independence; while the rest of the country surged through rapid economic progress, the northeastern states lagged behind and are designated 'special category states'" (607).

Aruni Kashyap, one of the most original voices of Northeast India, has realistically demonstrated the insurgency at Assam in his debut novel, "The House with a Thousand Stories." The novel exhibits the violence caused by the rebellion of the ULFA, and the secret

killings organised by the government amidst the backdrop of rural Assam in the late 1990s & early 2000s, when the armed Separatist Movement was at its fiercest. Following the ban on ULFA by the Indian government to counter the threat posed by the group, this period is infamously known for the secret and brutal killings by the two forces in conflict- the Indian government and the ULFA.

The story of the novel is narrated by a young boy Pablo, who lived in Guwahati with his parents. It is in 2002 that he visited his ancestral village for his aunt's wedding at Mayong. The story narrated by him, moves back and forth in time (1998 & 2002), between Guwahati and Mayong (Land of Black Magic) during his two visits to his native village in four years. It generally speaks about the atrocities that had to be borne by the people of Mayong. Throughout the narrative, Pablo narrates his experiences at Mayong to the reader, especially the unearthed secrets of the village that he had become aware of and which serve to display the state of affairs owing to insurgency. The story is being told by Pablo in 2006 when he has come for vacation and his friend Mridul, Bolen's son comes for a visit in Guwahati and talks about the past.

In popular myths, Mayong is alluded to as the land of magic but in this novel, it is presented as the land of unending military brutality where mutinous locals are ordinary. Violence rips apart young men; dead bodies hang upside down from trees. The situation is one of total chaos. The Indian Army's omnipresence is felt throughout the novel. The ULFA has mutated to SULFA (Surrendered United Liberation Front of Assam)—both glorious in their inability to offer hope to the people. The society is steeped in prejudices. In such a scenario, shocking incidents were commonplace. Dr. Nani Gopal Mahanta comments on the rebel groups in this context: "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 in itself" (25). Dr. Mahanta's views help us to understand the social context the novel presents. Violence on the part of the militant groups and the counter-insurgent groups was a norm in the village the novel narrates.

There was an atmosphere of terror in the village, a state which the villagers found themselves unable to recover from. One such instance which exemplifies the terror that people lived with is seen in the episode when Pablo came across the patch of land around an electric pole and felt strange when he noticed that the people of the village carefully crossed the road whilst avoiding the area. On seeking to clear his doubt, he was told that it was here where the horribly mutilated corpse of the brother of an ULFA member, whom the army had tortured, killed, and strung up on the pole to terrorise the people of Mayong, years ago. Mridul, Pablo's cousin and friend narrates the incident to him: "But we saw him first. I don't remember who informed the police. 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 had 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—the brother of an ULFA member. Why did they have to torture him like that?...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 the money that the government was dishing out so that he could return to society by setting up a business" (52-53).

Beautiful greenery, freshness and peace are the jewels in search of which people return to their native villages from cities. But unfortunately, the village of Mayong had the opposite to offer. It had turned into a warring village where the armed forces were committed to obliterate signs of the ULFA and the latter retaliating in same proportions, ultimately leading to a significant number of deaths taking place in the village. These groups vitiated the atmosphere with their competitive killings, extortions and kidnappings and all of this cast a shadow of imminent tragedy over life and the events of the novel, in this case a wedding. In *The House with a Thousand Stories*, the wedding becomes the occasion for dark secrets to come tumbling out.

What is striking about this novel is stories of violence here set and direct the action of the narrative. As Pablo reflects 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 is not an external occurrence; it becomes the verdicts for many characters' life in the novel. Pablo encountered a military group while visiting Brikodar's house with Mridul. The narrator articulates the army's entry to the house in the following way: "And it was then that the army jeep stopped in front of the bamboo gate. Crushing the laburnum flowers with their boots, the soldiers walked in. Flowers bright like gold smeared with dust" (109). They were suspected as many boys were assembled in the group. Everyone was scared to reply the army men as their fluency in Hindi and English were also bad. Pablo came forward to talk and explained to army men they came to meet him as he had come to the village after many years. Throughout this period Brikodar's sister Mamoni remained couching on the floor in the corner of a veranda. After the army left she started screaming like a lunatic until she fainted and urinated on the courtyard without her consciousness. Later

on, Mridul told Pablo that Mamoni was raped by four military men when she went to the river bank to wash clothes a year back”.

The bride of the wedding which Pablo comes to attend takes phenyl to take her life when she comes 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 men because she had witnessed what army men could do to the common people in her own village. As the narrator says: “The signs of which she had seen on the bodies of women in the village. One of them was, of course, Brikodar’s sister Mamoni who had screamed and fainted, leaving behind a pale yellow trail, when she had the sounds of boots marching girip-garap. When she saw the jeeps, when she saw khaki dresses, when she heard the men in uniform speaking in Hindi” (191).

Later on, the narrator again reiterates: “It is difficult to explain how scared she was— like many other women in Hatimura village— of khaki dresses. After all, till this day, mothers in Hatimura scold their children saying, ‘Don’t cry, or else the army will get you.’ After all, they are always more scared of the government than the insurgents. 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 narrator’s observation further focuses the critical discussion on counterinsurgent operations in Assam and the North-East. The unthoughtful counterinsurgency operations on the part of state and central governments results in atrocities on the common innocent people. They try to eradicate the insurgent groups militarily without giving a thought to the root cause of that insurgency. There are so many instances in the North-East of unthoughtful killing and deaths because of counter-insurgent operations. Manipur’s Manorama case is one such. As Ananya Vajpayee puts it: “It may or may not be an option for the ordinary citizens of the North-East to fight back when multiple assailants terrorize them: the Indian army, the para-militaries, the counter-insurgency units, the local police and the rebel groups, sometimes impossible to even

distinguish from each other” (26). Manorama is a victim of the Armed Forces Special Power Act who was raped and murdered by army men. Later, many Manipuri women protests 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 villagers are terrorised more by the activities of the army men than the insurgents. Moina pehi, the bride does not drink phenyl for fear of the ULFA man who is the brother of the groom. She tries to kill herself knowing that as she would belong to an ULFA family army men would torture them the most and she finds it better to kill herself than being raped by the military men like many women in the village.

Nani Gopal Mahanta in his article in “Economic and Political Weekly” in 2005 quotes the views of the then governor of Assam, “Recently the governor of Assam, at an all-India police golf tournament at the Shillong Golf Club, talked about his version of bringing peace to Assam. His approach to the peacemaking process had certain characteristics. 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 just 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’. Another point he made was that militancy in the region has substantially declined due to fatigue and disintegration among militants groups, and now seeing no other alternative, they were coming to the peace talks (The Sentinel, October 31, 2004). 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.

Owing to the gory incidents taking place almost every day, the common people had lost their peace and liberty. The affect of the secret killings upset the village. They were terror stricken to such an extent that they were afraid of even to speak or laugh out loud in their own village. The narrator related the time when he was with his friends and the aunts of the neighbourhood were sharing their childhood memories. The gathering aroused the suspicion of a patrolling officer, who happened to ask them the reason of their gathering. Unable to understand his language, the questioning frightened the villagers and they dispersed at once. They were dumbfounded as they thought they were being scolded of something. The narrator then explained the situation to the officer in Hindi. Hence it is seen that language acted as a barrier that further widened the gap between the villagers and the army; the safeguarded and their guards respectively, acting as a loophole in the communication between them.

Pablo describes the wretched state of the victims in the following way: “I wanted to think of something else, but the image of Moina Pehi howling in pain, the white of Mamoni’s eyes, loomed over me like the charred remains of electrocuted bats from electric poles. Suddenly I felt something heavy on my right shoulder. The tears that I was longing to get out of my system were showing upon my shoulder, shaking me, taking shelter in me.

I turned around, shrugging off the throbbing, sobbing, shaking face from my shoulder and stared at Mridul for some time. ‘Deuta always wanted Moina-pehi’s wedding to be the best wedding in the whole village.’ He could hardly speak. ‘What will happen now?’

‘It’s a rumour Mridul. Relax.’

‘No, it’s not! Anil-da has heard it from Lokhimai-pehi. Her son’s marriage was fixed with a girl who lives in the same village. It can’t be a rumour. Pehi heard it yesterday when they went to fix the date of the wedding’” (216).

This is how the future of a girl, the future of a family was destroyed by the rumour that the groom’s brother is an ULFA. Pablo expresses the deathlike condition of the victims who are alive only physically not mentally.

The novel also throws light on the issue of secret killings. When Pablo was talking with two of his friends in the village an army jeep enters which disrupts their conversation. The narrator informs, “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. Several masked gunmen had come twice already to ask where they were. By then, I could take part in those discussions. When I had gone back home in 1998, I had started reading the two local Assamese newspapers regularly and had realised the great disparity between news published in the English papers and the Assamese ones. 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 displays the tensed atmosphere which killed the spontaneity and freedom of the people living there. They are trapped in the fight between ULFA and government.

The story takes a tragic turn in the episode when a girl on her way to collect water is raped by militants. This account of molestation shocks the narrator. But then again, this instance only hints at the atmosphere of terrorism in the village as the total picture is truly unimaginable. The terror was intricately woven into the everyday lives of these people. Young girls did not feel safe in the surroundings they had grown up in and nor did innocent civilians feel shielded from danger. Their modesty was at stake and stepping out of their houses was a challenge for them. Such was the terror that these people lived with.

Not only had the ULFA rebels themselves, but their family members and relatives also suffered at the hands of the militants. It seemed as if the government sought to get rid of all the people even remotely associated with the ULFA. They were harassed when they could not tell the army of the whereabouts of their ULFA rebel relatives and were punished with having to witness the brutally killed corpses of them at their own doorsteps in the night. Also, these families got treated like outcasts by the other villagers. They were not allowed to participate in any events or common gatherings that took place in the village. Marital alliances with such families were out of question, so much so that the elders of the village equated it with sending off of a girl to hell. Even the wedding for which Pablo had visited the village turns into a horrendous occasion because of a rumour that broke out at the local market. The rumour that the groom's brother was an ULFA rebel slowly became the talk of village and the resulting disturbance in the already tense atmosphere gave rise to a new series of events, culminating in the bride's attempted suicide.

Thus, it is seen that insurgency was not just a political problem in Mayong. In the wake of the eradication drive by the government, its consequences had permeated all walks of life and insurgency had slowly become a social problem. But it is true that, the vested interests of ULFA masqueraded as goals to liberate Assam were turned futile when the Government of India decided to ban the organisation and put an end to it. However, the situation took a

different turn when the State Government became a part of the action. The novel starkly explains the consequence of counter-insurgency policies in Assam. The resultant rebellion culminated in the secret killings of ULFA members along with their kith and kin by unidentified killers, suspected to be the SULFAs by many. It is this confused state of affairs that the novel seeks to portray. The overlapping values of tradition and modernity, over which hovers the sinister shadow of insurgency and the army's brutal measures to quell militancy have been wonderfully brought out in the novel. The unrelenting face of insurgency which has battered the pages of Assam's history emerges as one of the prominent themes in the novel, along with the exhibition of the society's struggle to rise above the pain and suffering of extremism it has unfairly been subjected to.

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