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# Regionalism, Radicalism, and 'Political' Literature of North-East India

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# **Abstract:**

North-East India's literature is a dynamic field of study in Indian Writings in English. It is the hub of tribal literature, folklore studies, gender studies etc. This area has enormous literary areas which are still to be explored. Political literature is one of them. The 1980s Assam plays a pivotal role in the writings of literary work in Assam. Assam became a breeding point of protest against deprivation, marginalization, poverty, economic backwardness which in the end led into insurgency and Assam Agitation of 1983. The other part of seven sister state as well indulged in protest for statehood. The fictions based on that period of time are mostly conflict narrative. Regionalism is an indelible aspect of a political system. The history of regionalism is implicated with utter extremism. Regionalism and radicalism works as an impetus in the development of political literature of the region. The writers like Jahnu Baruah, Robin S Ngangom, Rita Chaudury in their fiction exposed the political chaos of this frontier part. These fictional but political narratives are legacy of the hard times of this region. These narratives of violence can be counted as a voice of protest. These protests are against the mainland India, against the extremist groups that are terrifying the civil citizen's life. This regionalism is still prevalent within the north-eastern part. The nature of radicalism can be analyzed in two formative phase- (a) pre 2000 and (b) post 2000. Due to the recent mass protest against CAA, NRC farce, high intensity radicalization of youth minds, illegal immigration from foreign countries are the never ending story of North-East India. This paper will look into the political fiction's approach in articulating radicalism and regionalism in the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century and present time.

**Key –words:** - extremism, regionalism, politics, north-east, radicalism.

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## I. Introduction:

India is celebrating glorious 75 years of its independence. The historical background of India is mostly dominated by the colonial history during the pre-independence period of the nation. India was a colony where the British rule over the India people. For the Indians, the history of British Raj in India is a bad dream. It is stained with blood, war, conflict, loot, torture. People were exploited in the name ruling by a single community. Politically, India emerged as an independent nation. Democracy was established in the country. Therefore, the scenario of pre and post independence India is not alike. The natives ruled the natives in region. But one common aspect between the two periods was diversity of India. The land is beautified with the unity in this diversity. This diversity is found in the sect of religion, festival, language, caste, creed, culture, food, dressing sense. India celebrates the diversity being a single nation. India is credited for being the foster mother of these different diverse aspects. Every region has its own diversity. One or two particular group of people lives in such a region. That place is unique because of its peculiar characteristics.

Indian subcontinent is the second largest country according to its population. This large part of the region keeps an important part of the land aside which is none other than the North-Eastern part of India. North-East India is geographically situated in the north-eastern corner of the nation. Tibet, Bhutan China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh are the bordering countries of this region. This part of the nation has been occupying the central place of discussion because of its unique features. This place has a number of unsaid and unheard stories which are needed to be heard and to be said. North-East India covers basically 7 states for which it is considered as states. Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and later on Sikkim are added to North-east India. From the inception of India, the nation is categorized into two parts politically, historically, culturally. They are (a) main stream India and (b) North-East India. India has a century long history of exploitation by a foreign group of people while on the other hand this land carries the history of exploitation and deprivation not only by the British but also by the central government of India. This land is marginalized

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after the independence also. Both the regions are not treated equally by its native people. The sense of *other* has worked as an impetus for this region to establish its identity. Consequently, the indigenous people of North-Eastern land grows an own narratives in terms of politics, literature, culture. India is widening time to time not even considering the complexity and diversity of the world. It eventually led to the birth of regionalism.

## **Regionalism in North-East India:**

Regionalism is a prominent field of study as well as a political ground which mostly emerged in the 21st century. The notion of regionalism is time and space concerned. It refers primarily to a political movement which proceeds with a particular ideology based for the advancement of the region. Regionalism focuses on the gradual development of political, cultural, geographical, trade relationship with the other contiguous areas. Regionalism can be studied from different dimensions. But in case of North-East's regional cooperation and regional integration is not of a particularly defined agent's aspiration. It is mostly a for the North-East frontier itself or for the statehood. 'Regionalism refers to a process in which sub-state actors become increasingly powerful and independent of the state. Power develops from the central state to the regional government within it' (Gochhayat, 10). The territory that it implies may be within the state or the nation. North-East region is a colonial construct. They administered this part of land differently considering its geographical features such as mountain, communication inconveniences. Besides these, this area was largely populated by the tribal. After independence India does not remain as a colony, but the political policy that the central government opted to rule over the people of North-East is colonial. All the seven states were as a cluster considered as North-East India. North-Eastern Region (officially NER) is a political division of the country. Regionalism in North-East India emerged after India's impendence. This movement for advancing the region can be looked at from two formative time angles- (a) Pre 2000 and (b) post 2000

From the time of political emancipation of India, the north-eastern region of it is failing to entrust and ensure peace in the people of this region. This part has been a pinpoint precision of violence, agitation, insurgency and brutality. The political and cultural experiences of the Assamese people in the time of 1980s are significant for the land and its people. During this period of time, the people of Assam indulged again in insurgency even after Indian Freedom struggle. Assam became a breeding point of protest against deprivation, marginalization, poverty, economic backwardness which in the end led into insurgency and Assam Agitation of 1983. In Assam, this famous Assam Agitation (Asom Andolan) is the starting point of mass protest. This decade becomes crucial for Assam because of the question of regional identity, linguistic identity, and illegal immigration from foreign countries. The sense of state implanted in the mind of youngsters lead to the birth of first student's organization of Assam. That is All Assam Students Union (AASU). This organization for the first time in the history of Assam stands in support of the indigenous people and their needs. As a result, in assembly election of 1985, the first regional political party of Assam Asom Gana Parishad(AGP) formed the government. Regionalism in North-East India paved the way because of the denial, deprivation and rejection that the central government did with the people. Besides Assam, other NER also has the same story. Earlier they all were union territory. In this period of time, the native people fought for their statehood. "History tells us that 'region' not only has a geographical but also a political connotation" (Travers, 2004; Söderbaum and Shaw, 2003). The 1980s is a crucial time period for the politics of these states. Earlier these states were union territories.

India is experiencing the democratic drills in and out of the nation in the global context. From its beginning, the NER is satisfied with the treatment of the mainstream India. They are identity is maligned as well as twisted. Their Identity is most of the time denied as Indian considering them *peripheral*. It suggests that region is a prominent factor of defining identity. It generates a political identity which is enough to communicate the cultural, linguistic, historical, religious essence of that region. Identity politics is understood as political push undertaken by the state agents through which resulted in a sense of regionalism. "Regionalism is a complex phenomenon and to look at it either as a movement for greater autonomy or as a reaction against federal administrative imbalances" (Gochhayat, 11). It is realized that seeking statehood for different state is the one and only solution for bringing equality and socio-economical justice to the land. Identity politics, economical deprivation, exploitative administrative system of the central government, imbalance political power distribution, distrust fuelled the people to fight for celebrating the differences which can be termed as regionalism.

# Radicalism in Northeast India:

This sense of regionalism developed in not only in Assam but also in the rest of NER through bloodshed, violence, and massacre. Regional cooperation was built among the neighboring states. They all promised to make their identity with a single statehood. But the establishment of regionalism was not accomplished in a peaceful manner. Rather the movement of regionalism began with the loss of several souls. At the outset, NER announced its discontent against the central power, but gradually the people of this part of land became dissatisfied with the regional government as well. The regional turmoil did not stop from the

beginning. The centre-state conflict created the sense of regionalism. The failure of regionalism resulted in intense radicalism in the area. In the agitation of 1980s, 856 people from different parts of Assam lost their lives in the time of insurgency. Undoubtedly, 1980s Assam movement arose affection among the native people for its own region. Consequently, because of the indomitable spirit of regionally conscious people established Asom Jatiya Vidyalaya in Guwahati so that the people can practice their own language. Though regionalism paved its way for the sake of its people, but politically it failed to do the same. The political failure of regional party created again a tensed situation. Besides the long run discrimination by the mainstream India, a group of people embraced the extreme ideology. In Assam, the formation of ultra group called ULFA is just a repercussion of the failure of regional government. Secret killings, Nellie Massacre are some blood stained chapter of Assam's political history. Almost 39 years ago, on 18th February 1983 there was mass killing at Nellie village (now it comes under Morigaon District) of Assam. In this riot, according to government source, most 1819 religious minority died. It is a total reflection of communal disharmony in the state. They fought for a regional cause adopting the radical way of fighting against the government. They went for war and weapon in order to gain statehood. United Liberation Font of Assam (ULFA), Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF) in Assam, National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in Nagaland Revolutionary People's Font in Manipur generated a climate of violence in this region. These all are separatist group still active in different parts of the place. The main motif of this extremist group is same. That is to gain statehood for the own region. 1980s is the beginning point of regionalism and radicalism as well. But till now the succession movement is going on.

## 'Political' literature of Northeast India:

There are various riots and fights by a multiplicity of people for liberation to pave the world of a new era of true communal self-regulation and self-determination. People struggled to make an own identity and to get the control of their native land. Awakening of regional consciousness is one of the means to gather all people against the menace of power and politics. Regionalism and radicalism are more significant in the context of Assam and its neighboring states in this present time too. The historicity of the region is a significant factor in discussing the land from the ground of politics and history. Literature holds the impact of politics on that writer. The writer depicts his characters with the realistic experiences. Political literature of this part of region needs to hear to understand the geo-political politics that was happened and is being happened in this present time also. The historical fiction attempts to make a balance between the fact and fiction. The reality of 1980s radicalism and regionalism is well portrayed in the imaginary world of the writers. The historicity of one region can be studied from the 'political' literature of the place. The writers who experienced directly the regional concentration of the people and their latest move for extremity demonstrated the political atmosphere of this region. Literature and politics share a common context which is history. Both the terms are historically related. The politics of nation state made the narratives of North-eastern India different. It develops the political literature of North-East India. That is the literatures which have been written with and for a political cause, are not beyond the political history of the land. As it is mentioned earlier that North-East India is colonial invention. The British political system made the region a frontier because of own profits. The fact why it was being treated separately in compare to the mainstream India is divided into two causes. These are

- (a) Transforming this part of land into a colony,
- (b) Ruling this place with different administrative mechanisms.

The British left the place physically but left their political system in India itself. The Indian administration was in dilemma how to treat the land whether it is politically, administratively, or militarily. All these mechanisms were imposed over the people. The results of this political system were terrible. Through the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958 the mainstream India announced military administration. The Arm forces were given ultimate power which they misused over the people of the area. This creates an unsafe, terrific environment. The administration for ruling Assam and its neighbor state is not out of fault. Assam is a land filled with various natural resources. The raw materials were exported to high tech cities but the manufactured products were sold again among the people at high rate. People from NER realized the oppression of the Indian state. In order to claim the democratic rights, to bring justice, equality and peace, they undertook an outright secession. The succession movement which is still active in North-East India is rooted in the pre independence time. All this causes had driven the people to generate an attitude against the Indian government. "Anti-Indian nation state paradigm (due to the choice of government policy) could emerge or become into political movements and secessionist movements that could sustain itself for over half a century. It is also extremely necessary to note here that over the last two decades, the Indian nation state's approach has been to highlight only the secessionist movements rather than the political movements and thereby justify the military approach to deal with the frontier" (Baruah, 30). The word 'political' in political literature is termed within inverted comma as this narrative is not only a composition of imaginary ideas rather it is the discussion of the experiences of Assam and the Northeast during the various insurgency. This literature analyses the regions' destiny and identity and it establishes the regions' relationship with New Delhi.

Political formulation has been started in the 1980s. The literature originated based on this decade. Literature expresses the experiences of the preceding year. The insurgency time over the land like Assam agitation and subsequent radicalism is well portrayed in the works of different North-eastern writers. The poetry of Megan Kachari, the fiction of Aurag Mahanta, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya and the stories of Indira Goswami are some of the prominent writers who kept the historical sense of the period in their words. In Identity and Violence in India's North-East (2013) Sanjib Goswami emphasized on how the violence and identity and violence are interrelated in the context of India's North-East. Jahnavi Baruah's Rebirth (2010)Aruni Kashyap's The House with a Thousand Stories (2013) Dhruba Hazarika's Sons of Brahma (2014) are exemplary fictions which studies the cold blooded struggle of the people to gain an identity at individual level and at state level. The post colonial political development created a huge impact over the literary sensation of the place. This political writings too underwent changes. Method of narration and narrative structure is different depending on the time period of its composition. The 'political' literature can be analyzed with the following category based on the writers approach to the regional consciousness and regional turmoil. These are- (a) Historical approach and (b) Humanitarian approach. Violence can be and, is a recurring motif in Literature. It is emblematic of a disorder and chaos which jeopardizes thought processes and militates against happenings, which in turn is reflected in Literature and Art. Violence then is a means in attaining a higher end of aesthetics and the subliminal. 'Violence can deeply affect sensibilities, disturb the psyche and embed a deep seated urge to communicate and share whether in Literature, Films or Paintings. Violence is a demonic myth to be subverted, but in this very process is communication and urgency to share. It requires a lot of guts to depict violence in a creative manner because it is truth telling of a high order, dismantling obfuscation with clarity'. (Guha, 5)

### 'Political' Literature of North-East India:

Megan Kachari is the pseudonym of the author Mithigha Daimary. He was the central public secretary of the banned extremist group ULFA. He was the leader of the Assam's largest secessionist movement. He authored the books The Unconcerned World (1995), Melodies & Guns (2006). In his works the frightful and fearful lives of the militant groups have been described. His poems are written in discussion of the relation between the political rights and the human rights. He lost his normal life due to the participation in the extreme outfit. A sense of loss and grief prevail his poems. The title of his book Melodies and Gun is representative work of the militant people. In one hand, their hearts are filled with soft emotions like melodies while on the other hand they have taken up the guns for killing people. This jailer portrayed the belief and distrust over the government in his works. He revealed his longing to die in his idyllic janambhumi (home land). 'Sanglat Fenla' (Soldier of Revolt) published in 1993 is another remarkable Assamese novel of this genre. This novel is primarily based on the militant group operating in Assam and being trained in Burma ULFA. Parag Kumar Das who was a journalist in the book attempted to show the Assamese had to take the armed resistance after the failure of democratic political system. It can be considered as a written defense of the conduct of ULFA extreme activities. Through the character Digonto, the novel celebrates the struggles of the committed cadres to get freedom for Sadhin Asom (Independent Assam). This book reflects the harsh time of violence and struggle followed by the community support of the Assamese people to make this movement successful. This two works are representative of the struggle of people for human rights and political rights.

In contemporary times, Anurag Mahanta's groundbreaking books Aaulingar Zui (A Harvest of Ash, 2007) and Kongliangor Mat (The Voice of Kongliang, 2015) are on the North-east India's insurgency period. He is the former AASU leader who joined militant group. He experienced the people's yearning for 'independent' which was 'coming' through the radical struggle of the people. Kongliangor Mat is merely the history of the movement rather it deals with people's approach (acroos the area of NER) how they considered the movement. Aaulingar Zui is written on the Naga political problem. This contemporary novels show that he secessionist ideology is an integral part of the political movement of North-East India. 'There is no take on political methods (violence/non-violence) towards achieving political ends. In fact, there is little discussion on morality of political methods in the novel. There is only the abject reality of war". (Baruah, 31). Both the works tells the tale of struggle for independence. Mahanta in Aaulingar Jui, expressed the clashes of political objectives. The Indian state and the frontier are never the same in the political system. Without emphasizing the humanitarian perspective, the writer herein attempts to place the problematic situation of the land. For Mahanta, this problematic condition of human and non-human being is interlinked with a larger political system. The ideological differences of the writer make the works different. It is the writer's point of view where the meaning of the text rests. Mahanta portrays the militant group's activities in and around the land to get 'independence'. Either a political ideology or a earned experience of a person influences the writer's literary temperament or his psychology. Harekrishna Deka is a contemporary Assamese writer whose literary works are a blend of Assam's transitional phase and the participation of the people. His prominent work Bandiyar (Prisoner, 1994) is a collection of short stories for which he was awarded with 'Katha Award'. He reflected in his book the Indian nation state and militant critique. The plot, setting, and characterization of the same clearly focuses on the

imprisonment of people in a political ideology. The problematic politics of the region is of different ideologies. While Harekrishna Deka's approach is political ideology based on the other hand, Indira Goswami's *Jatra* is humanitarian approach based. All these books are 'political' in nature but the treatment of politics is a defining factor for considering the meaning of the texts. The story *Jatra* asks the reader people to restore and to recognize humanism. Upholding human values is an essential part to live a healthy life. The story intends to examine the humanist assertion of its characters. It discusses how they are in a quest to uplift the civic virtue of the society. During the jeopardous time of terror and fear the utopian imagination of writers is a literary trace of contemporary political writer of the region. There is a great loss of human values in the time of terror. The contemporary writer longs to treat the violence in a different way. Violence is not considered well in their works.

There are several literary works written in Assamese language. The literature can be characterized as 'political' looking at their traces. The voice of the writers is new voice against the age old political system while on the other hand it is a different voice of the same political existence. The genre is emerging as defining factor due to its sustainable body of works. Nirupma Borgohain's Gohani Aai Gokhani Aai (1987), Sayed Abdul Malik's Moi Morinu Nejau Kio (1997), Arupa Patangia Kalita's Felani (2003), Dilip Bara's Kalijar Aai (2006), Birendra Kumar Bhattarcharya's Baliya Xamay (2009), Rita Choudhury's Aei Xamay Xei Xamay (2010) are the Assamese novels which is set in the historical atmosphere of regionalism and radicalism in the region of North-East India. The different time of composition is considering factor for understanding the writer's approach to conflict and violence. All these works are written on the basis of humanitarian ground. For the writers, As a human, it is foremost priority for the people to live a peaceful life without indulging in bloodshed. They are in favor of bringing independence without harming the human values and essence. The novels are political allegory of the outbreak of regional turmoil and extremism in Assam. Nirumapama Borgohain as she is professionally a journalist expressed in her work the real nature of the movement. The terrible violence of that time is treated in her novel from a humanitarian perspective. Sayed Abdul Malik's Moi Morinu Nejau Kio (1997) is rooted in the mass killing that took place at Nellie of Assam. The writer is quite depressed at the political ideological imprisonment as well as the extremist nature of the regional militant group. With the passes of the time, regionalism took another turn. In Assam, the separatist move of the community has become a recurring feature of the regional politics. The picture of Assam Agitation and subsequently the intense protest of the tribal Bodo community for saving their identity is captured in Arupa Patangia Kalita's Felani. The 'Political' literature after 2000 discusses the results of radical regionalism over socio-economic, political, cultural experiences of the North-eastern people. Though North-East India has come out of that radical regional turmoil but its history is taken for discussion to analyze the transmission of period. Rita Choudhury's Aei Xamay Xei Xamay (2010) is a critical discussion of that period. As an active participant of 'Asom Andolan' she discovered the society and herself in an imaginative world. The works is important to comprehend how the writers consider the political sites and problems in their works. The personal and political experience of the writers leads to the subjective construction of history. The 'political' literature is rewriting historical events as an attempt to resist the repression. Many of the works deal with the relationship between repression and resistance. The light thrown upon the fact and fiction, action and reflection is self sufficient to look at the region's politics.

The temperament and approaches regarding problems in different nation and culture lay in the literature. 'Political' literature interrogates those problems interrogates those problems and discusses the relevance of present political scenario which people encounter today. The political clashes and literary representation can be analyzed with two approaches. One is to discuss the imperialist tradition. This imperialist agent involves the colonial government, the independent government and even the regional government. On the other hand, a resistant hand is another concern of this literature. The misleading interpretation of North-east India like *tribal*, *chinki* has been more often popularized by the mainland media. In that sense, the North-eastern writers of 'political' literature is bestowed with accountability to tell the truth of unity and peace with their words. Sidhhartha Deb's novel *The Point of Return* (2002) is set in the hill state of Meghalaya. It tells the story of East Pakistan forming a new nation. The trauma of the character Dr Dam is representative for the people of North East region. The people of this region suffer from an identity crisis. They live an uncertain live. Their identity is not recognized within the borders and outside the boundaries as well. Robin S. Ngangom addressed the political issues in his works. In his poem, 'Native Land' he deals with the terrific Manipur in the time of insurgency. He describes the conflict between armed forces and the insurgent group.

# **II.** Conclusion:

North-east India with rich culture and custom is a representative of regional history and politics, indigenous people and integrity, traditional customs and religious practices. The 'political' literature articulates the people's unique experience of conflict and extremism. The genre of literature showcases the power politics, identity crisis of this region. North-east India emerged as a region in the pre 2000 era. Colonial legacy and the heterogeneous ethnicity also impacted the land politically in shaping the regions political identity. But post 2000

time too is not peaceful in Assam. Though all the eight states gained statehood in different course of time and are being ruled its own government, still the land is a hot bed of bloodshed. Earlier the reasons of regional radicalism were against the mainstream India, but in present time there are various elements who are defining the political destiny of the land. Regionalism and sub-regionalism, demand for separate state, politics of autonomy, politics of migration, identity, politics of ethnicity are some of the major concern of North-east region. Inter-state conflict (Brahmaputra and Barak valley in Assam), border dispute in this part land (border tension between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Meghalaya, Assam and Nagaland) have given a significant dimension to the political nature of the part. Recently, the political battle over Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 burned India especially Assam. The illegal immigrants have already changed the demographic and linguistic statistics of Assam. A sense of xenophobia has entered into the mind of the people. Violent protest against CAA claimed five lives due to police firing in Assam. Besides there was another updating process National Register of Citizen (NRC) which aimed to indentify the illegal immigrant and it was planned to take strict action for them. Though it was a judicial process but eventually it became politically controversial and not reliable. This political immaturity has given birth of one or two opposition party. Raijor Dal led by Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti and Asom Jatiya Parishad led by by Asom Yuva Chatra Parishad are the example of that. Politics exists in the realm of literature. Therefore, political literature of North-east is a significant point of discussion to explore the unheard tale of the land. The approaches of the writers vary time to time but the root of North-east India's politics lies in the sense of regionalism and sub-regionalism. Regionalism is a wider phenomenon at present time, at some place like Northeast India politicization of regionalism and radicalism have emerged as significant factors to sharper the Indian politics as well as the literary development of the area.

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