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The question of the 'foreigners' in select fictional narratives from Assam

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Abstract

In this age of metamorphosis of cultural transition and assimilation, in this age where everyone in one sense or the other is a migrant, the issue of identity can never be resolved. Iain Chambers (1994) holds that migrancy "calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation" (p. 5). 'Home' sometimes becomes a provisional location as it fails to provide assurance and security; and hence, in many instances, one witnesses an individual's desire to break free, to migrate. Memory and narratives can be seen as symbolic ways of making homes, of negotiating different and competing allegiances. Jahnavi Barua's novel, *Undertow*, Arupa Patangia Kalita's novellas and stories like 'Face in the Mirror', 'The Half-burnt Bus at Midnight', stories from the Barak Valley of Assam like Moley Kanti Dey's 'Ashraf Ali's Homeland', Amitabha Dev Choudhury's 'Wake Up Call', Arijit Choudhury's 'Fire', among others, provide multiple perspectives on the question of identity. The paper seeks to delve into select fictional narratives from Assam and analyse the question of 'foreigners', keeping in mind the current discourses on the issue of migration, especially the issue of illegal Bangladeshi migrants.

Keywords: Assam, identity, migration, Bangladeshi, foreigners

Introduction: The question of 'foreigners'

Assam has been through different phases of ethnic nationalisms and the region has been through different phases of inclusion and exclusion geographically, ethnically and culturally. Assam has been grappling with the issue of 'foreigners' for a long time and the question of Bangladeshis, in particular, has become the most crucial factor in Assam's politics. Terms that are used to describe Bangladeshis in Assam are: settlers, *Bongal*, *bohiragoto* (outsider), *bideshi* (foreigner), illegal migrants, illegal immigrants, invaders, Bengali peasantry, land-hungry Muslims, land grabbers, Mia Muslims, undocumented migrants, etc. (Shamshad, 2017, p. 59). In the book, *Migrants, Refugees and the Stateless in South Asia* (2016), Partha S. Ghosh highlights how the issue of illegal Bangladeshi migrants is a "subject on which everybody seems to be knowing so much, still they know so little, largely because of the unavailability of hard data" (p. xii). There are assumptions, fragmentations, doubts, fears and lost/ forgotten documents that heighten the confusion.

Nandana Dutta, in the introduction to *Questions of Identity in Assam* (2012), points out "that existing interpretations of migration and nation did not and could not do justice to the location" (p. xx). When Assam was made a part of the Bengal Presidency in 1905, the fear of loss of identity because of the demographic changes, crept up, and the Bengali speakers were seen as the 'other'. Bodhisattva Kar (2011) highlights the forgotten history of Bengali racism, on the other hand,

during the partition of Bengal in 1905 where the Bengalis saw the Assamese as the 'other' (p. 45). Assam's position as a separate province was restored in 1911, with the unification of Bengal. The Muslim League demanded that Assam be a part of East Pakistan. Assam, as a British colonial province, included Sylhet while prior to 1874, Sylhet was a part of Bengal (Baruah, 2015, p. 82-83). In 1947, Sylhet became a part of East Pakistan (Bangladesh) except for a portion of it (a part of Karimganj subdivision in Barak Valley) which remained in India. Sanjib Baruah (2015) highlights that for Assam "the meaning of partition has been unfolding slowly over decades through a torturous process" (p. 81). The British colonial rule encouraged the settlement of Muslim East Bengali peasants in Assam while Partition instigated massive movements. Many people migrated to Assam in 1965, during Ayub Khan's regime in Pakistan, and Assam also sheltered refugees during and after the Bangladeshi Liberation War of 1971.

Shamshad (2017) lists five distinct phases of the anti-Bengali and later anti-Bangladeshi discourse in Assam. "The Bengali officials presented the immediate face of colonialism" (p. 253) and the anti-colonial, anti-Bengali discourse ensued from the fear of the Assamese elite – of loss of power. The second phase started with the fear of territorial loss which crept up with the arrival of the Bengali cultivators brought in by the colonial officials. The potential loss of demographic dominance during Partition is listed as the third phase. The tussle for language supremacy in the 1960s/70s is the next phase and the fifth phase is the Assam movement (1979-85)" (p. 253). The language issue in Assam created riots during the 1960s and 70s, where "the Official Language Movement of 1960 and the Medium of Instruction Movement of 1972...were based on the 'Assam for Assamese' ideology. The Bengalis of Barak valley had protested against it" (Ghoshal, 2021, p. xv). Weiner (1983) highlights that during that time Bengali Muslims had much to gain by siding with the Assamese (in securing their stay) but with the Assam Movement, this alliance faltered, where the "Bengalis in Assam – both Hindus and Muslims – became 'foreigners' to the Assamese" (Shamshad, 2017, p. 77). Shamshad (2017) highlights how gradually the Nepali migrants completely fell out of discourse and the only migrants who were considered 'illegal' were from Bangladesh (p.101).

The difficulty of identifying illegal immigrants persists and the question of rehabilitation or granting citizenship becomes complex and ambiguous. Neither the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act (IMDT Act) nor the Assam Accord could bring any resolution to the 'foreigners' issue. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) also has its shortcomings and pitfalls. The detection and repatriation of 'illegal foreigners' is an ongoing process as a recent news report states that "till October 31, 2021, as many as 1,42,206 illegal foreigners have been detected in the State. Among them, altogether 29, 663 were pushed back till December 15 of this year". (*The Assam Tribune*, 2021, p. 1)

Shamshad (2017) points out that with Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) entry into Assam's politics "Assam's anti-Bengali ethnic nationalist discourse" changed to "anti-Bengali Muslim ethno-religious discourse" (p. 254). The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)-BJP coalition further strengthened it. In Chatterji's *Breaking Worlds: Religion, Law and Citizenship in Majoritarian India – The Story of Assam* (2021), we find a strong criticism of the Hindutva ideology and the writer's voice their fear about 'absolute nationalism'. The agitation in Assam against illegal immigrants has targeted Hindus as well; but with the changing political scenario, largely the Muslim population begins to get targeted:

"In Assam, the NRC and Foreigners Tribunals have commenced the political segregation of "national subjects" and rights-bearing citizens from "invaders" without rights. A disproportionate number of persons who are alleged to be "foreigners" and "illegal persons" are Muslims. "Miya" Muslims, from marginalised social classes are the principal target." (p. 56)

We have seen the state changing its response to changing political scenarios. The recent development, i.e., the fourth amendment of the Citizenship Act in which the intent has been to grant citizenship to people who have fled religious persecution from neighbouring countries (including Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Christians, Jains and Zoroastrians), the Hindutva orientation of the government came under scrutiny amidst mass agitation. The anti-CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) movement was based on the "Assamese" people's "fear of demographic swamping...and raised, once again, questions about their citizenship rights" (Goswami, 2021, p. 1). While some saw NRC and CAA as discriminatory, especially against the Muslims, many saw CAA as discriminatory while they supported the NRC. The Hindus who have lived with the stigma of being illegal migrants in the region did not see the situation working in their favour either. The majority of the population did not seem to be aware of the historicity of the documents. NRC and CAA also saw opposite reactions from the general masses of the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys. The Bangladeshi issue has been a matter of much contestation heightening the difficulty of coming to any negotiable position.

To consider the citizenship debate, reports that show Indians giving up citizenship provide another perspective. According to a report published in *The Wire*, from 2016-20 just 4,177 persons were granted Indian citizenship – where "for every one person who has been granted Indian citizenship in the past four years and more, 145 persons have forgone their citizenship" (Bhatnagar, 2021, para. 2). Also, the statistics that four out of ten applicants were granted citizenship and that maximum applications came from the citizens of Pakistan are also data that need to be considered and evaluated at the national and regional levels.

Analysing Select Fictional Narratives from Assam

Fictional narratives from Assam provide different perspectives on the question of 'foreigners'. Telling or writing a story can, to a large extent, help in the process of negotiation. Narratives can be a form of travel, which can traverse the distance between communities or societies in their exploration of inner journeys. In Jahnvi Barua's *Undertow* (2020), the question of foreigners and the agitation against them is highlighted as an overpowering consciousness. The novel touches upon the turbulent times of the Assam movement, of how "the state had been thrown into chaos" (p. 17). The central character, Rukmini, has marched on the streets too. Rukmini ponders upon the bandhs in Assam (which has been absolute) where everything "came to a grinding halt" (p. 19):

"No one challenged the protests because everyone supported them, understood the need for them. Nothing so complete was possible without deep feeling. The people were gripped with an urgent desire to fulfill what the Boys had begun: to make the government do its duty; to expel illegal aliens, instead of arming them with citizenship and voting rights." (Barua, 2020, p. 19)

“Four years now and the Agitation – it was aptly named, the movement the students had launched in 1979 – showed no signs of abating. The people of Assam had not lost hope or courage or energy yet. They spilled out onto the streets in their thousands when summoned by the student leaders – the Boys, as they were affectionately called – to picket and demonstrate and protest, and stayed indoors with windows closed and lights out when ordered to by the same leaders.” (Barua, 2020, p. 17)

The question of illegal immigrants in Assam has been quite complex because of the political, historical, and geographical reasons, as highlighted in the introduction. There have also been cases of people acquiring documents illegally facilitated by communal sympathy, corruption or carelessness on the part of the officials. It is difficult to demarcate illegal immigrants from ‘original’ inhabitants and “as a result, neither the Assamese Bengalis nor the Assamese Muslims could fully identify themselves with the Assam agitation” (Ghosh, 2016, p. 224). What the character, Rukmini, refers to as “so complete” may not have actually been absolute. Through her research, Shamshad (2017) also studies how the Assamese and Bengali Muslims saw each other:

“The ethnic Assamese representatives of the civil society who were interviewed in this research did not express any hostile views or see the Bengali Muslims/ Bangladeshi migrants as an economic or security threat.” (p. 253)

Shamshad (2017) highlights how “the exercise of violence is a constant factor in the process of ‘Othering’” (p. 250) – violence that is state induced and also the ethnic flare.

In Jahnvi Barua’s novel *Undertow* (2020), when Rukmini decides to marry Alex (an outsider from Kerala) “she felt like a traitor” (p. 19) adhering to the insider-outsider tension in her consciousness. She has been a traitor even to her mother who accused Rukmini of betraying “state and race and family” (p. 19). Rukmini realises the pain of being treated as an outsider when she herself receives such treatment from Alex’s family. Rukmini’s daughter Loya, who is raised in Bangalore, is surprised to see how “strong a subject it (politics) was in life here” (p. 86). Loya comes to know that “the illegal migrants had been received with open arms by the government, which, sensing the opportunity for a vote bank, had even issued them with citizenship papers” (p. 86-87). Loya also comes to know about Robin Koka’s grandson, who, being fascinated by the revolution against foreigners, joins the insurgents, the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam). In Assam, the anti-colonial discourse surged with the ULFA, where India was seen as the coloniser (Shamshad, 2017, p. 254). Since its inception in 1979, the insurgent organisation emphasised on the national liberation of Assam. They maintained that “the question of ‘secession’ is a mistaken one since ‘historically’, Assam has never been a part of the Indian nation and its location within the political map of India has to be explained simply as a fact of ‘colonial occupation’” (Kar, 2011, p. 57).

It is interesting to note that in Barua’s *Undertow* (2020) Loya questions the idea of a ‘foreigner’. When her grandfather tells her about the Ahom dynasty – “a race of princes from the Shan state of Burma” (p. 148), she insists that they are migrants, to which her grandfather remarks: “Isn’t everyone, in the beginning?” (p. 148). Her grandfather tells her about their assimilation,

“Yes, but they settled down. Assimilated. Converted to Hinduism from Buddhism and married our local girls. Why, they even gave up their old Tai language” (p. 148).

The statement raises questions like if forsaking religion or language can be the only way an immigrant may be accepted? What are the grounds of assimilation? Can the 'foreigners' of Assam ever assimilate? Can assimilation not happen if cultural/ religious/ linguistic differences are respected? Will Kymlicka in *Politics in the Vernacular* (2001) highlights how minority nationalisms are not always illiberal, pre-modern or xenophobic and questions, "...is it permissible to adopt illiberal policies in order to create conditions under which civic forms of minority nationalism can emerge?" (p. 277). There are no definite answers. The sad disappearance of Loya towards the end of the novel, when a blast rocks the Bazaar in Guwahati, shows the futility of violence. Loya embodies both the elements of an insider and an outsider (her father being an outsider from Kerala and her mother from Assam). In her disappearance, both the insider and the outsider become victims, where symbolically violence consumes all.

The plight of the refugees, their lost homelands, their trouble and brutal torture – are mainly captured in the stories from the Barak Valley of Assam. The stories also highlight how threats to life and livelihood lead to migration from Bangladesh as "the migration of the uprooted refugee families was primarily for seeking refuge and a national identity" (Ghoshal, 2021, p. 37). In Arijit Choudhury's 'Fire' (2012), the protagonist, Mahendra Das, faces the consequence of not supporting the Assam Movement, the "cruelty meted out to innocent people, be it murder or arson" (p. 63). According to Mahendra:

"Spotting a Bengali-Hindu or a Muslim or a Nepali, immediately branding him 'foreigner' and inflicting torture on him is inhuman and unjust. Even if one is a foreigner that does not mean that he should be driven away or his house and belongings should be burnt down – Mahendra would never support this." (p. 56)

In the story, we see that the nearby villagers (who are Bengali-Muslims) are called Bangladeshis although they have never been to Bangladesh. Mahendra's house is set on fire by the people of his own village, who consider him to be a traitor, "an agent of the Bengalis!" (p. 56). Within the imagined nation/state, battle lines are drawn, as Siddhartha Deb in his novel, *The Point of Return* (2004), describes the nation as a fortress where "new battle lines were being drawn and fresh groups of people were being defined as outsiders, borders bristling with barbed-wire teeth" (p. 221).

When Ashraf Ali moves to Assam (to Karimganj) from Bangladesh as a child, in Moloy Kanti Dey's 'Ashraf Ali's Homeland' (2012), he feels happy –

"When? When did they cross the border? Why was there no wall anywhere? It was merely like a stroll from one street to another. Is this how the two countries were divided then? Ashraf seemed to be in a trance. Hindustan, Bharatbarsha. It's not a separate country – rather an assurance that promises supply of food." (p. 119)

The 'shadow lines' that borders are highlighted in his sentiments. When Ashraf Ali is marked as a foreigner amidst the Bangladeshi row, the fate of his family becomes uncertain. They are deported and their destiny remains unknown.

Fear and discrimination incite the surfacing of nostalgia for a lost or 'imaginary' homeland. In another story 'Wakeup Call' by Amitabha Dev Choudhury (2012), the narrator's family has had to flee Bangladesh in the 50's in order to survive. The narrator struggles to come to terms with his

own identity as a foreigner as he cannot think of any place as his home other than where he is, i.e., Assam –

“Yes! This is my homeland, my own soil. Eternal! Embodiment of my soul! My beloved nest of tranquility! My dream! My memory! My identity!” (p. 148).

The fond memories or stories of a lost homeland linger but that place is no longer home. In any tale of migration, there is always a contestation between humanitarian support and nativist backlash. Partha S. Ghosh (2016) asks the much-debated humanitarian questions, “Is not it, once again, the question of refugees’ rights, and not state doing a favour to them? Minorities in Pakistan or Bangladesh were not responsible for the Partition of India.” (p. 220)

During the Assam Movement, there were numerous attacks in places like Barpeta, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, among others. In the larger backdrop of the anti-foreigners protest, the Nellie massacre happened. Samrat in *Insider Outsider*(2018b) writes: “The danger in any tale of victimhood is the obverse: victims on the one hand and villains on the other” (p. ix). In her stories, Arupa Patangia Kalita (2015) highlights the communalisation of the Assam movement. In the story ‘Face in the Mirror’ Kalita writes:

“In August, a young girl took many bullets in her body, her body was perforated by gaping holes. She had come from outside the state, looking for the body of her husband, crying and beating her breasts in sorrow. In March, a talented professor had committed suicide. 1991. The killings that defied counting.” (p. 138).

The protagonist of the short story shows her displeasure when her cousin’s husband, “a leader of Assam’s *andolon*, agitation” (p. 142) becomes angry as she praises her Muslim house help, Zamila. He tells his wife, “I now know why your sister is so fond of Bangladeshis” and then addressing the protagonist, he says, “You know Baidew, don’t indulge these people. You were talking about cleaning the bedpan etc. If you allow them to enter the house, they will even lick your feet...Keep an eye, if nothing can be done about them we’ll kill them all” (p. 146). The protagonist ironically smiles and says, “We’ve heard that people of Assam should forget about humanity. This is the time to forget humanity.” (p. 146)

As a writer, Arupa Patangia Kalita, often gets targeted for her stand against the brutality of the movement. This resonates in another story, ‘Surabhi Barua and the Rhythm of Hooves’, where the protagonist Surabhi Barua –

“Became one of the few who stood against the Assam agitation. She wrote a few articles, saying again and again that this overwhelming sentimental outlook would stand in the way of constructing a strong Assamese national character.” (Kalita, 2015, p. 194)

Expressing her viewpoints calls for trouble as it calls for trouble for “a section of intellectuals who had to pay a heavy price for protesting against the unreasonable dictat of the so-called separatist leaders” (Biswas, 2015, p. 215). Kalita’s writings, thus, make a strong comment on the meaninglessness of jingoism, xenophobia and mindless killings.

The writers discussed above, both from the Brahmaputra and the Barak valleys of Assam, bring to light the humanitarian ground relating to the question of the ‘foreigners’ in Assam. They are able to transcend the ethno-religious boundaries in raising their voice against atrocities and mindless

divisions. In a world where border lines are rigorously drawn, the writers highlight the necessity of preserving borders from encroachers while at the same time they talk about the futility of violence. There is empathy and perceptiveness regarding what it actually feels to be an 'outsider'.

Conclusion: Between Memory and Forgetting

Citizenship continues to be a contested domain in Assam. There is a jostle between the ideas of nationalism and globalisation. Colonialism continues in the form of subjugation: "the domination and denigration of the Hills, the delegitimation and chastisement of *Bhati*, the inauthentication and vilification of the 'settlers'" (Kar, 2011, p. 54). This subjugation leads to 'othering' that brings in the question of authenticity. The search for authenticity has been crucial in any societal formation (province/ state/ nation). However, we can question if there is anything called authentic identity or if authenticity is a desire. In Assam the question of foreigners versus authentic citizens has been the reason for the region's political and social volatility. The definition of 'Assamese' still remains a matter of debate and contestation. A recent report states how a sub-committee formed by the State Government in 2006 to formulate the definition of 'Assamese' as per Clause 6 of the Assam Accord still could not come to a conclusion after seeking views from different organisations and bodies as only a few organisations could submit their views in this regard (*The Assam Tribune*, 2021, p. 1). It is difficult to resolve the politics surrounding migration. The Assam agitation while initially upholding the agenda of safeguarding Assamese identity in the face of the fear of 'foreigners' soon degenerated "from an anti-foreigner agitation to an anti-non-Assamese agitation by turning its wrath against even the domestic migrants from other parts of India, mostly Bihar" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 223-24). Kar rightly says, "territorial nationalism can never abolish its mythical other – colonialism – which always threatens to lodge itself within the very claims of nationalism" (Kar, 2011, p. 57). Memory and narratives, in this regard, can provide multiple perspectives while trying to negotiate different and competing allegiances.

"Memory is also about what you decide to remember, so that you can make sense of what has been irrevocably lost" (Deb, 2004, p. 192). Memory, which operates within the realm of forgetting, distortions, manipulations/ modifications, partial memory, selective memory, representation and narration, plays an important role in the process of negotiation. Memories help in reshaping boundaries and, hence, help in the process of negotiation. Collective memory, especially that of trauma, is difficult to erase. But then there are questions asking if amnesia will reduce the effects of trauma or if it is justified to forget the trauma, if it is necessary to carry the burden of trauma or if forgetting the history of violence will lead to its repetition and if acknowledging the memories will lead to a kind of resolution? In the book, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness* (1998), Martha Minow writes – "To seek a path between vengeance and forgiveness is also to seek a route between too much memory and too much forgetting" (p. 118). Forgetting is also a very important part of memory and hence narratives play an important role in developing perspectives, as Benedict Anderson asserts, "all profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives" (Anderson, 1983, p. 204).

Any one kind of reading or interpretation will be grossly inadequate while dealing with such a sensitive issue and this paper does in no way want to preach or put across a one-sided view of the question under discussion. However, the paper wants to highlight the dangers of a lack of

understanding and how across North-East India, as Samrat points out, “it will take only a little communal foolishness for a return to the bad old days” (Samrat, 2018a, p.171). Nationalism needs to be rethought and reinvented towards a more inclusive society where the aspirations of the masses are respected, the history of turmoil taken into consideration, where collective self-reflection, telling and re-telling of stories are encouraged. Most importantly, the political and media-hype that create fear-psychosis need to be regulated, systematic brain-washing that incites hatred needs to be avoided and the perspectives of “not only marginalised women but also other vulnerable segments like the indigenous and immigrant populations” (Goswami, 2021, p. 7) need to be heard and considered – where people are allowed to express their opinions without the fear of persecution, attack or marginalisation. Literary representations can help in negotiating different positions and standpoints – of memories, tales of loss, of place, of identities. They can be a means of cross-cultural travel, bringing revisions as well as a cultural revival and harmony.

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