

OF BORDERS AND BORDER CROSSINGS: THE TEA TRIBES OF ASSAM AND THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY IN SELECT LITERARY REFLECTIONS

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Abstract:

The paper attempts to explore the crisis of identity articulated in the literature of Adivasi writers of the Tea community of Assam. The history of migration and their subalternity have compounded the problem of subjectivity. The sense of alienation in their displaced conditions often invoke the trope of memory, culture and history in the writings in order to register an authentic voice for the community.

Keywords: *Identity, migration, history, ethnicity.*

For the Tea-Tribe community in Assam, the historical experience of migration, often enforced by economic and political necessities, has effectually rendered the community homeless even within their 'home'. What needs to be noted is that the phenomenon of internal displacement resulting in the formation of a diaspora also has a conspicuous ethnic character / identification. The term ethnic can be defined as, "a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members" (Hutchinson and Smith, 1996, p6).

Although displaced from diverse geographical locations, they are unified by their distinct ethnic character. The heterogeneous diasporas and their ancestral roots can be traced to present day Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal and Chhattisgarh. Brought as indentured laborers in colonial Assam, they share a common history of colonial exploitation. However, the migrant populations, in spite of producing and enacting different ethnicities are affiliated to the political identity 'Tribal' created by the post-colonial Indian State. The estrangement from their native lands as a result of geographical transition has problematized the issue of identity for them. The corresponding trauma and the contradictions that signify any marginal existence has, in this case particularly, taken an existential overtone. Often, the complex reality of being the 'insider from the outside' has compounded their dilemma of self perception at both the subjective and objective level.

The attempt to negotiate the personal and the political has in turn problematized the articulation of identity for Tea Tribes of Assam. A telling comment in this regard made by the academic turned activist Dr Kamal Kumar Tanti, can be cited to highlight the dehumanizing official nomenclature "Tea Tribe" and also the overlapping affiliations that shape the subjective consciousness of the ethnic groups. He contends:

Is there any community in this world named after a commodity?

It is the best example of the colonial domination of British, and later the internal colonialism taken over by power-hungry middle class Assamese. What I believe is that we have a duality regarding the nature of Identity.

I understand that we are also actively taking part in the formation of the greater Assamese identity.

The "Tea Tribe" as a blanket term smacks of the illicit contract of the capitalist ideology and the nationalist discourse perpetuating their peripheral existence both culturally and politically. Being a

colonial construct it promotes the idea of a historicized category with no signification other than a commodity. The imperial legacy of their subaltern status, marginality and powerlessness is perpetuated by the postcolonial nation state in maintaining the asymmetries of power.

The assertions of ethno-nationalism as a counter narrative to the systematic malaise and the imperative to integrate with the mainstream Assamese local identity, is a pointer to the double consciousness of the population producing hybrid sense of self. Dr. Kamal Tanti's outburst conclusively described the angst of the diaspora generation, trying to balance the two worlds they are burdened with. What Salman Rushdie theorizes about the translational Indian diaspora is truly valid a claim for these ethnic minorities. Rushdie famously exclaims, "We are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all the sense of that phrase ... Our identity is at once plural and partial ... Sometimes, we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times we fall between two stools" (1992, p. 12,15).

The hyphenated identity like "Adivasi Assamese" advocated by the people and articulated by Dr. Kamal Tanti is an attempt at negotiating the cultural divides created by migration between the land of their ethnic roots and their homeland. The state boundaries expose the futility of the political exercise to contain explosive emotions in a spatiotemporal framework. The cross border journeys often entail mental mapping of their lost native land, trying to find moorings in familiar landscapes, ancestry and ethnic roots. This search for origins is intertwined with the politics of identity emerging its ugly head as a result of the schism created by manmade borders. The cartographic exercise that defines modern nation states is discussed in Dr. Kamal Tanti's poem "Long Shadows of Reminiscence 1" which expresses the desire for cross border cultural coalitions and bonding. It has an underpinning of a political narrative of a bigger Adivasi identity canvas. The following lines from the poem encapsulates this eternal quest in the migrant's soul,

Where did I leave my roots,
my house, my heart, my village, my forest?
Medinipur or Barakuda, or Kalahandi?
Where? Where??"

(Translated from the original Assamese by Dr Manjeet Baruah)

Such a narrative deconstructs the political logic that borders mark out actual and unambiguous differences. The dispersal of this community with a shared history of exploitation often forms a continuity, similar to Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation as "imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (2006,6). The historical and cultural continuity aspired for and reflected in the literary endeavors of Dr. Tanti can be read as narrative self-fashioning that has a definitive echo of a revivalist politics as its sub text. Expanding the contours of ethnicity through a shared history of disenfranchisement and racial discrimination, consolidates the lateral bonding across borders that and consequently validate any claim to self-determination as morally indispensable. The poignant memories of their homeland find an unofficial register in the collection "Long Shadows of Reminiscence 2"

We left everything on that night of *karam*,
when the night of destitution grew sadder in the beat of the *maadol*.

At the dawn of that *karam*
we saw for the last time our house, our hearth.

The tragic strain of the above lines is reversed in the euphoric declaration in "Post-colonial Poems"
(*Uttar Oupanibeshik Kobita*):

But today we have got back
Our mind and our strength
Our conscience

And our speech.

(Translated from the Assamese by Dr. Manjeet Baruah)

This can be understood with reference to M.S. Prabhakara's article "Ethno nationalism: theory and practice" (28 Oct., 2009) where he states, "Sub-nationalism or sub-nationalist narrative was only reclaiming the history of a people that had been subsumed by the great 'nationalist narrative'. The 'sub-nationalist narrative' evolved in due course as assertions of 'ethnic identity', the reclaimed history now serving a political end."

However, Assamese ethnic assertions in the present scenario, not only reflects constant tensions with the Indian Identity, but the inherent exclusionary tendencies that fuel self determination, bring it in conflict with other ethnic nationalisms like the tea community. The ethnic fissures are obvious. The vehement contestations to be reinscribed into the unilingual 'Axomiya' identity is a pronounced sentiment that recurs in poem after poem and is embedded in the ethos of representational politics. The attempt to salvage an 'authentic' indigenous voice is repulsed in the wake of their subaltern reality. The poem "A Poem against you all: We are Happy" (*Tumalukor Birudhe kobita: Ami Xukhotei Thaku*) captures this heightened consciousness in the following lines:

You do not hear the rising voices of our souls
yet we hear your ramblings
listen to your glib talk, your oily voices
like purring cats.

(Translated from Assamese by Dibyajyoti Sarma)

Language as a tool of resistance for colonized peoples is particularly illuminating considering that cultures are never static or absolute, but are always dynamic. The Tea Tribe's assertion, though never overtly secessionist, is an attempt to rationalize their lived experience and also decolonize their consciousness from the trappings of colonial residues. Hence, the preoccupation with the linguistic paradigm has an important cultural signification.

Frantz Fanon quite pertinently observes in his essay 'On Colour Prejudice', "To speak means to be in a position to use certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization".

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