

## **Socio-Political Realities of Assam Reflected in Uddipana Goswami's Short Stories**

Lekhika Gogoi

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar (JRF), Department of Assamese, Dibrugarh University, Assam

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**ABSTRACT:** *Socio-political issues always influence literary works directly or indirectly. Literature from a particular region may therefore act as mirror to a specific society by presenting the vivid picture of everyday life, beliefs and ideologies of the people. The short stories of Uddipana Goswami, a well known journalist and writer from Assam also depict the same. The present paper tries to examine how her short stories deal with the issues of social discrimination, communal riots, insurgencies and problems of immigration in the midst of serene ecology of Assam. In some of her stories Goswami shows the gradual increase of social disintegrations among people from different backgrounds. She hints out the issues of economic disparities that prevail in Assamese society as well. The stories basically focus on the downtrodden communities residing in tea estate areas as wage labourers.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Northeast Writing, Uddipana Goswami, Assam, Discrimination, Violence, Society, Politics.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Uddipana Goswami is a renowned journalist and writer from Assam, a state from northeast India. She is editor of Northeast Review, an online journal of arts and literature. Her published works include: Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam, two anthologies of poetry We Called the River Red: Poetry from a Violent Homeland (2010) and Green Tin Trunk, one short story collection No Ghosts in the City and Other Stories (2014) and an edited volume Indira Goswami: Passion and the Pain (2012). Her works depict some true pictures of Assam and entire northeast from the perspectives of culture, ecology, society as an institution, politics and ethnicity.

The present study is focused on some such issues that are presented in her short stories selected from the collection No Ghosts in the City and Other Stories (2014). There are twelve short stories in the collection which talk about everyday life and political realities of Assam. In the stories the author does not focus only on dark sides of society, rather she gives the readers some hints as to how the darkness can be overthrown. She believes that all the social problems are deeply rooted to the ideologies that we possess. She in her afterword of No Ghosts in the City and Other Stories remarks:

My stories are a lot about darkness but they are also about the small sparks of light that occasionally dispel the demons in our souls. The brief luminosities of love, life, relations, remembrances, penitence and possibilities are, after all, the things that make life worth living. (119)

To discuss the above mentioned issues the researcher has chosen the short stories like Virginia Mahi, Andolan and The Hills of Haflong from the collection of the stories. All the three stories possess abundance of evidences related to social realities, political scenario, racial and communal discrimination as well as beautiful and diverse ecological pattern of Assam.

### **II. METHODOLOGY**

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data includes chosen works of the author. The secondary data includes critical references, journals and internet sources. All the collected sources will be used to analyse the proposed objective of the study.

### **III. DISCUSSION**

It is almost impossible for authors of any literary text to escape from the contemporary social realities. Most literary historians and critics have taken some account of the relation of individual authors to the circumstances of to the social and cultural era in which they live and write, as well as of the relation of a literary work to the segment of society that its fiction represents or to the audience toward which the work is addressed. M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham in their book A Glossary of Literary Terms write:

Sociological critics treat a work of literature as inescapably conditioned-in the choice and development of the subject matter, the ways of thinking it incorporates, its evaluations of the modes of life it renders, and even in its formal qualities- by the social, political, and economic organization and forces of its age. (368-369)

Uddipana Goswami's short stories are also of no exception. Picture of society in a vivid way is evident in her stories. The everyday life of rustic Assamese society is shown in the short story Virginia Mahi. She depicts the way of life of the baganiyas (tea-tribes). The narrative presents their occupation and belief systems among them. It shows the traditional midwifery system in their society. Such midwives are known as dhaimaa in Assamese. Rojina is such an expert midwife who can sort out complicated pregnancies in their society. She has helped many women in bringing babies into the world with her extraordinary skill. In the story it is revealed that this expertise has come from experiences over the years. The following narration from the collection of stories No Ghosts in the City and Other Stories shows her expertise in the field as well as a glimpse of social orientation:

The midwife was a tea-tribal woman who lived in the labour lines and picked tea leaves like all other labour women. Her name was Rojina. Midwifery was Rojina's "side business" and they said there was no one who knew more about bringing babies into the world than she did. Even Bijoy Roy Compounder, who was the only medic in the tea estate, had had to take her help in many complicated pregnancies. (48)

The position of tea-tribal women in the society is also noticed here. They help the family economically by picking tea leaves. Woman like Rojina has to work hard for living by running the side business of midwifery in addition to picking leaves. This side business may be a compulsion for her. Another woman character and protagonist Virginia mahi herself shows responsibilities of a woman toward both family and society. She started taking care of father and two brothers after demise of her mother. She even forgets to take care of herself. Here the level of dedication and sacrifice of a woman toward her family is presented vividly through Virginia Mahi's character. The narrative shows, "Virginia mahi looked after her brothers, and when Baganor koka came home on his monthly visits, she looked after him as well. Only, in the process, she forgot to look after herself." (49)

Another issue that has been raised in the story is the rate of death of women during child birth and related causes. Lack of awareness among common mass and proper medication is a big issue. Women die due to frequent pregnancies, improper diet, improper ways of child birth etc. Most of the women were dependent on midwifery system for giving birth. Virginia mahi's mother too died for the same reason. She continued to be weak and fell ill after giving birth to the twins and could never recover.

Different socio-political circumstances led the youths of Assam to join a revolutionary xangathan (organization). In the story the name of the organization is not mentioned. The only hint the story gives us is that the organization breaks some sort of constitutional rules and the members are considered to be anti-national or terrorist. Virginia mahi's brother Bortee mama joins the revolutionary group and eventually got killed by Indian army. These things hint out some sort of political unrest in Assam. Traces of these insurgencies and turmoil have been found in other stories of Goswami as well. In the story Viginia Mahi Goswami writes, "After we had left Kopati, Bortee mama had joined the xangathan. He had given up his studies and became a revolutionary. And last week, he had been picked up by the army. They had beaten him to death." (51) A hint of a pathetic situation is given in the narration of the story.

In another story The Hills of Haflong readers may get similar scenario. The narrator joins a college of Haflong in Assam as lecturer. It seems to be one of the most serene and calm places of Assam with rich flora and fauna. The whole town is surrounded by green and beautiful hills. But in the midst of such serenity and calmness the narrator witnesses violence, bloodshed and terror. Insurgency is in peak point at this place. Goswami writes:

Haflong, was, after all at the center of Dimaraji Movement, where violent armed insurgent groups were waging a war against the state and against each other. People got killed here every day and so, I had had a tough time convincing my parents to let me come here. (112)

Dimaraji Movement is led by the Dimasa people of Northeast India demanding a separate state for them. It would comprise the Dimasa inhabited areas, named Dima Hasao district, parts of Cachar district, parts of Nagaon district, Hojai district and Karbi Anglong district in Assam together with part of Dimapur district in Nagaland. The name of the proposed state is Dimaraji or Dimaland. The havoc created by this movement is tremendous. Social lives have also been affected a lot by the insurgency. Unpredictable firing and bomb blast created terror in the minds of common people. Bombing becomes a common phenomenon in the locality. The narrator of the story gets surprised by seeing the everyday life of Haflong. She gives an instance for better understanding of the situation:

Sometimes I wondered how people could take living under the shadow of constant violence so casually. Like, for instance, one day, when a bomb went off at the agricultural department's office, and I asked our peon what the commotion was all about.

"It was a small bomb, madam. Not a big one. A personal matter, not political," he shrugged and walked off. (114)

The reaction of the peon toward bombing is shocking for the narrator of the story. He took it so casually just like a usual action has happened just now. Such was the socio-political situation of Haflong during the Dimaraji Movement. People became so blind that they did not hesitate to kill their own brothers too. Here the question of social safety for individuals arises.

The other story *Andolan* (Agitation) deals with the factors behind immigration from East Bengal to Assam, communal riots and root causes, discrimination based on caste system, evolution of society from harmony to disintegration and many other issues. The story sets upon a fictional sub-urban area called Barbari where Hindus, Muslims, Miyas, tea-tribe, Nepalis, Bengalis, Marwaris, Brahmin and Dalits all used to live with peace and harmony. All the people made up the total population of Barbari and its surrounding areas like Kalguri. Their collective identity was Axamiya (Assamese). But in course of time everything has changed. Every one of them started demanding individual identity. Now atrocities can be seen instead of peaceful environment. When the narrator visits Barbari after a long time she realizes the derogatory change of the place. She writes:

We were just a few kilometers away from Kalguri when we sensed something was wrong. The roads were lined with armed parliamentary policemen standing guard every few feet, and armoured trucks could be seen here and there. We stopped in front of one of the policemen and asked him what had happened. He said a young baganiya boy had been found murdered last night in Kalguri and any day now, ethnic riots were likely to break out. (106)

Causes behind such ethnic violence are not clear in the narrative. But the narrator finds out some probable causes behind it. She gives us hints of some of them. Knowingly or unknowingly the lower groups of people had been discriminated by the society for ages. They are now trying to uplift themselves and take the revenge. Here the narrator feels when her family used to live with other people with harmony even then also there prevail discrimination. It seemed like the word 'harmony' existed only because the downtrodden were silent then. The baganiyas and miyas were not allowed to enter the houses of Brahmins. They were not treated equally in the society. But they were not protesting at that moment. Even narrator confesses that her mother could not become liberal toward them.

Jeuti, the narrator reminds an incident of her school days in the story. She tells the readers how Bhikhu, one of her baganiya friends was insulted by Shastri saar (sir) for no reason. He was scolded for the fault of Jeuti when she was late for school and there was no seat for her to sit. Shastri saar says, "Oi lora, get up. Go stand against the wall and let Jeuti sit." (108) When Bhikhu tried to protest he was slapped and scolded, "You coolie dog! You dare question my authority? Do you know who she is? She is the daughter of the king of this town..." (ibidem)

Such incidents may lead toward uprising of downtrodden in near future. Jeuti feels that the upper caste people had sowed the seeds of discontent since the very beginning. Now she has regret that they had provided the fuel for the fire. Today's incident of ethnic riot is nothing but outcome of misdeeds of past.

In *Andolan*, one of the root causes of immigration of peasants from East Bengal to Assam is also unveiled. Then society was extremely in need of cheap labourers in various fields, basically in tea gardens. So they decided to allow migrant peasants from East Bengal to come and settle in the region. Most of the peasants were landless and poor. Some of the natives denied such decision by saying, "...these peasants are Muslims. How can we allow them to settle here? We will be accused of harbouring enemies of our faith." (97) Jeuti's shrewd father tried to convince the people and said:

Don't worry; there are ways of dealing with these miyas. They are not like the Hindu Bengalis; they will not try to prove superior to us. They will be subservient, and if we are tactful, we can control them. Besides they will live in their own clusters and villages. We need not worry about their religious customs vitiating our environment. (ibidem)

Gradually this decision led to chaotic situation in the entire locality. A kind of explosion in population is witnessed. Various kinds of social imbalance have been noticed in Barbari and its surrounding areas. The ecology, demography, society, politics, religious status and harmony have been hampered. Almost an irreversible change has taken place in the locality.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

From the above discussions it may be concluded that the stories of Uddipana Goswami give pictures of a society where prevails not only poverty but also discrimination based on caste, class and culture. Political situation of Assam is found to be in threat during the time when the stories were written. Several agitations and insurgencies were witnessed. Readers may come across these issues while proceeding toward the narrative. The Assamese society is depicted as multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and even multi-religious one where social integrity and harmony is merely a myth. The select short stories seemed to be true mirrors of socio-political scenario of Assam presenting various challenges that the state has been undergoing.

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