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## **Writings on Insurgency from North East India: A Reading of Anuradha Sarma Pujari's "Surrender"**

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### **Abstract:**

*Be it poetry, fiction, or non-fiction, one of the most dominant tendencies, which can be perceived in the literature from North East India written since the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is to portray the issues, such as insurgency, identity crisis, ethnic violence, immigration and so on. While such issues have given birth to many insurgent outfits, there are many writers from this region who have genuinely used the issue of insurgency not for the sake of literature or thematic purposes, but for a realistic portrayal of it so that one can go deeper into the issue. This paper attempts to give a glimpse of writings on insurgency from North East India, in general, and that of Assam, in particular. For that purpose, Anuradha Sarma Pujari's "Surrender", translated by Aruni Kashyap, which appears in the anthology *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency*, has been discussed and analysed.*

***Keywords: Assam, insurgency, insurgent outfits, North East India, writings on insurgency.***

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**I. Introduction:** The North East region of India is a unique concoction of cultural, geographical and linguistic diversities. Though this diversity has given birth to literatures written in diverse languages focussing on multiplicity of aspects concerning the land and people that any regional literature attempts to do and is boast of, the writers of this part of India, however, have also given considerable attention to portray the burning issues. One such issue is insurgency. It has often been said that writings from North East India, in general, and more particularly writings from Assam are reflective of the social as well as political instabilities of the region. This is true to a great extent. In that sense, Mamang Dai, one of the prominent voices of this region, is right to a great extent in her observation that a good many writings from the region are based on issues that have connection with 'bloodshed and killings' (Dai 2-7). A long list of novelists, short story writers and poets can be framed who have focused on multiplicity of aspects concerning insurgency in this region. Many writers from this region including, Assamese fiction writers Arupa Patangia Kalita and Anuradha Sarma Pujari, Manipuri Poet Robin S Ngangom and Thangjam Ibopishak Singh, Khasi poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynirh and Mizo poet Malsawmi Jacob have

reflected on how insurgency and counter insurgency operations have destroyed the peace and tranquillity of the region putting the people of this region into a state of psychological trauma. These writers have also reflected on how insurgency has become counter-productive to the wellbeing of a society. While the theme of insurgency has attracted a host of young fiction writers like Ankush Saikia, Jahnavi Barua and Uddipana Goswami, at the same time, many young writers have devoted to search for writings on insurgency in various languages of the region for translating them into English for a wider readership. The anthology, entitled *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency*, edited by Aruni Kashyap, is such a prominent work which contains fifteen stories, both original and translated. These stories are reflective of the multiplicity of aspects entangled in the issue of insurgency. For understanding the multiplicity of issues entangled in insurgency and counter insurgency Anuradha Sarma Pujari's "Surrender", translated by Aruni Kashyap, which appears in the anthology *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency*, has been discussed and analysed in this paper.

## II. Objectives and Methods Applied:

This paper attempts to find out the following objectives:

- a. A brief understanding of insurgency in North East India
- b. Giving a glimpse of the writings on insurgency from North East India
- b. Understanding the issues concerning insurgency through Pujari's "Surrender"

To arrive at these objectives both primary and secondary sources have been used. Primary source here is the reading of the anthology, entitled *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency*, which has also included Anuradha Sarma Pujari's "Surrender". Secondary sources are the books, articles and research papers available in print as well as online modes. After collecting available data these have been properly analysed. Hence, while preparing this paper, the researcher has used both descriptive and analytical methods.

## III. Insurgency in North East India:

Insurgency in North Eastern region owes largely to the formation of many separatist outfits with their basic demand for distinct identity with a separate land. In the post-independence era, the inclination for forming insurgent outfits to solve societal and state issues is led to the birth of many separatist outfits in North East India. Such separatist tendencies ultimately started to divide Assam since 1963 and culminated in the division of Assam into seven states. But demands for separate statehood or sovereignty and also issues concerning identity and immigration have still continued, since the problems of many communities have remained unsolved and the immigration which started during the partition of India from erstwhile East Pakistan and now from Bangladesh still persists. In the post-independence era, the region has been troubled by many separatist outfits such as MNF (Mizo National Front), UNLF (United Nations Liberation front), NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland), NLFT (National Liberation Front of Tripura), ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam), NDFB (National Democratic Front of Bodoland), BLTF (Bodo Liberation Tiger Force), KLO (Kamatapur Liberation Organisation), GNLA (Garo National Liberation Army) and many more. While the emergence of such militant outfits has naturally called for enforcement of laws such as

Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act, 1958 (AFSPA) to prevent mass killings, extortions, robbery and so on, enforcement of such stringent laws coupled with counter insurgency measures have pushed the region to the midst of a deep humanitarian crisis (Das) and all these aspects find expression in the writings on insurgency. The story, "Surrender", was written in the backdrop of military crackdown of militant outfits, especially ULFA, and members of the militant organisation becoming overground laying their arms either under the pressure of security forces and appeal of the Assamese people, or being disillusioned with the objective for which the outfit was formed. It should be noted that ULFA militants started to return to the mainstream laying their arms since 1992. This fraction of surrendered militants came to be rebranded as SULFA (Surrendered United Liberation Front of Assam), a splinter counterpart of ULFA (Nath).

**IV. Discussion and Analysis:** Pujari's "Surrender" is the tale of a surrendered militant, named Dipok, who passes through the hardship of living in the society in which he once lived happily before joining a militant outfit, as, after his surrender from the militant outfit, the society looks at him with suspicion, fear and hatred. Moreover, every time his name is dragged to any wrong doing in the town and hence the local police station summons him first providing him little scope to get rid of his past memories. In the story, Dipok marries Sandhya, a close friend of him, and the wife of a person whom Dipok, when he was an active member of a militant outfit, had killed on charges of corruption which eventually proves to be a turning point in his life as he discovers that the person, whom he had killed, was not corrupt at all. Sandhya was instrumental in motivating him to surrender and lead a normal life. However, he fails to get over the haunting memories of his past wrongdoings not only because of himself, but also because of the society which regards him only as a surrendered militant.

The story begins with the death of Neelakanta Baruah, whom Mouman, the daughter of Dipok and Sondhya, addressed as *koka* (grandfather). He was the next-door neighbour of Mouman, a gentleman who was known for his honesty. At his death many people gather in front of Neelakanta Baruah's house. Mouman fails to understand the reason of such gathering in front of his house and so she asks her parents various questions relating to death. When she expresses her desire to join her grandfather in the sky with the question 'May I also fly in the sky?' (2) Dipok, her father, immediately plants a tough slap on her cheeks. As a sharp reaction to Dipok's action, Sondhya snatches Mouman from Dipok's arms and says, 'I thought you had become a human, but it seems you are still an animal!' (3). The problem in Dipok starts from the utterance of the word 'animal'. It was the same word she uttered when he ruthlessly killed her husband; the memory of which is still alive in his mind and even if he tries, he cannot escape from his past memories. The word reminds him of his past wrongdoings which he wants to avoid and his failure to get over his past wrongdoings ultimately keep on traumatizing him. It should be noted that trauma, as defined by Laurie Vickroy, is a response or a series of responses to such events which disrupt psychological or emotional functioning of a person (Chakraborty 86-95). What one can understand is the same case, she is also haunted by the memory of how Dipok ruthlessly

killed her husband and how violent he could be. Hence, just as Dipok is traumatized after hearing the word ‘animal’, Sandhya is also traumatized when she sees him planting a tough slap upon Mouman’s cheek. ‘In the traumas of civilian life, the issues of public acknowledgement and justice are the central preoccupation of survivors’ (Herman 72). What one can see in Dipok’s case is just the opposite for neither the society in which he lives in, nor the administrative systems allow him to forget his inglorious past. Hence in his case circumstances are such that he can never get out of his unpleasant past memories.

The story shows how the life of an insurgent is filled with confrontations in every step, be it physical or psychological. Dipok suffers from the first jolt when he realises that his killing of Sandhya’s husband was the result of misinformation and this incident becomes a turning point in his life. Dipok is a rebel against a social and political system, not a thoughtless person whose main objective is to extort money killing innocent people or whose main ambition is to create chaos in the society. Hence, this incident puts him into a psychological conflict as he realises the futility of the organisation to which he belongs to. Here comes the influence of Sandhya who not only forgives him for destroying her marital life, but also becomes instrumental in convincing him to come back to the mainstream. Through the role played by Sandhya in Dipok’s life, the author wants to show the importance of someone in someone’s life for a larger interest of man and society. The role of family and the society in turn are of utmost importance to help the surrendered militants living a normal life. In Dipok’s case, society fails miserably to remove the sense of alienation that keep on burning his heart and mind each moment. The author incorporates Shantanu, who never looks at Dipok with a sense of compassion, understanding and belief, to represent the kind of middle-class people in the society who never allows the deviated mind of a society to return to the mainstream. In one of the writings, Sunil Nath, former Central Publicity Secretary and Spokesperson of ULFA, mentions how Assamese middle class ‘played the role of Frankenstein’ in applauding the emerging ULFA in late 1980’s and how a section of ‘middle class led Assamese Media’ provided strength to the rise of the organisation (Nath). There is, however, grounds for the middle-class people to react sharply to the insurgent activities, because they also perhaps never thought that the power of arms and ammunition someday would lead their youths to destroy the social peace and harmony. In one of the poems, entitled “These Hills”, Mizo poet and novelist Malsawmi Jacob pathetically writes,

‘Come night  
Doors shut to bar  
Shots that shatter  
Silence often  
Straining green hills  
Red.’ (Jacob, lines 10-15)

Again, in the short story, entitled “The Vigil”, Jahnvi Baruah expresses how family members of the insurgent outfits pass through the horrors in the sleepless nights (Barua 15-37). Arupa Patangia Kalita clearly expresses in one of her stories, entitled “A Precarious Link” how the scare of bomb, gunshots and imposition of curfew ruined peace and stability

in Assamese society (Kalita). Likewise, Pujari's "Surrender" is also reflective of those days in which military operations against the insurgents became just like a regular event of the day. The horrors of counter insurgency operations find expression in many writings from North East India, be it poetry, novel or short stories. Manipuri poet, Robin S Ngangom, in his poem "The Strange Affair..." (31-36) describes how his state was ravaged in the conflict between Indian armed forces and the insurgents.

'When I turn with a heavy heart  
towards my burning land,  
the hills, woman, scream your name.  
Soldiers with black scarves  
Like mime artists  
Turn them in seconds into shrouds.' (lines 70-75)

Such kind of conflict could be witnessed in the whole of North East India. Under pressure from the security forces and being frustrated with the ideals of the outfits as well as being tempted by the government offer to surrendered militants many members of various insurgent groups laid their arms to live in the mainstream. This made the outfits divided into two fractions leading to severe clash between the two. Many of the surrendered militants, who wanted to lead a normal life could not do so because of society's doubt and use of them by government machinery against the underground militants. Again, it was a conflicting situation for the surrendered militants in the sense that if one surrenders, he becomes a member of the main stream and in that case to identify criminals becomes a social obligation. But this led to counter attack by the insurgent groups. In the story Dipok informs police about the killers of two security personnel. As a member of the civil society, it is the utmost obligation of any citizen to stand against crime and criminals. But in performing that obligation, Dipok is killed by two unidentified gunmen. In contrast to that the society is sceptical to accept the surrendered militants with a sense of trust. The questions of their daughter, Moumon, 'Ma (mother), was Deta (father) a good person? Should I join hands for him? (14)' is significant in understanding how a surrendered militant is always looked into with a sense of doubt and distrust, a feeling which keeps on haunting a surrendered militant. A similar situation always haunted Dipok, for, except Sandhya, not a single member of her family was ready to trust him. Dipok's act of informing police about the killers of the security personnel is also mixed with his desire to prove that he is now a responsible member of the civil society. He knows that this act of him will invite his death, but he finds no other option to convince his becoming an ethically responsible member of the society to people like Shantanu, in particular, and the society, in general. The fate of a surrendered member is such that even if he surrenders his life to remain in a civil society, still a sense of doubt and question still loom large in the society and it is reflected in Moumon's question as well as the author not giving any reply through Sandhya in the end of the story.

The story gives a picture of those days in which multifaceted conflicts troubled the society. On one hand, there was a conflict between the surrendered militants and those who did not lay their arms, at the same time there was a constant war between military forces

and the underground militants. Again, the militant organisations of that time waged war against the government officials, contractors or any other persons, who were reported to be highly corrupt or who made illegal money by adopting unfair means. Such persons were considered by the insurgent outfits as the enemy of the society and such people were given punishment either by extorting their money, or eliminating them. However, sometimes misinformation led to loss of innocent lives, as seen in case of Sandhya's husband.

One vital point that the story focusses on is the feeling of a sense of alienation which is very dominant in case of a surrendered militant. This alienation is the result of changing perspectives of the society along with the change of time. The extremist organization, which was once conceived of as having the power to stick to its promises and fulfil the dominant aspirations of the society, has catastrophically proved itself to be much weaker force in all fronts and hence when any of the organisation surrenders, he is ignored in the society simply as a surrendered militant. This is what happens in case of Dipok. This pain of being alienated from society burns his hurt so much that every time he tries to prove his ethical strength. The incident that occurs in a hotel is reflective of an internal conflict within him that results from society's rejection of the militants. In his case it was a trauma that results from past wrongdoings and his utmost effort to prove that he has adopted the path of virtue, truthfulness and non-violence. In this incident Dipok is seen to be asking for price details of various items. The author narrates that Dipok did not have much money to pay though he was very hungry. When the hotel manager finds the waiter spending more time with Dipok, he calls the him harshly with the words 'Hey waiter, why are stuck with one person! There are more people in this shop!' (09). Though there is nothing objectionable in his words, but it enrages Dipok so much that he would have given a befitting reply if he had not seen Shantanu in the hotel. Though understanding the gravity of the situation, the manager offers him much food at free of cost, he leaves the hotel without touching the food items. The incident also exposes how people offers respect when one has the power of weapons. If looked from this perspective, a militant cannot expect the same treatment after he surrenders.

Militants believe that power rests on arms and ammunition which is in sharp contrast to what the civil society cherishes. The dominant ideology that of the civil society nurtures is peaceful resolution of all the burning issues, not through the power of arms and ammunition. Hence, after surrender a militant has to abandon his ideals. This transition, however, is painful for a surrendered militant because, the people, who were compelled to subdue to the power of weapons, act differently when a surrendered militant remains without his previous power. This belief gets avowed expression in the behaviour of Dipok in the hotel. However, more powerful is the society and its cultural ethos as well as family influence which mould a person in such a way that even if one is deviated from this ethos, one is bound to suffer from an internal conflict so strongly that unknowingly it keeps on haunting him till one is subdued to the dominant culture of the mainstream society. What one can see in case of Dipok is the reflection of the same ethos. Dipok's effort to merge with the society becoming a responsible member is the result of the same ethos. His leaving the hotel without taking food offered to him emanates from the same ethos of the society for

he knew that he did not have required money to pay and it was unacceptable to take anything forcefully in a society he lives in. It is the same sense of social responsibility and observance of ethos because of which he reveals the identity of the insurgents who were involved in the killing of two military personnel though he apparently can foresee the outcome that may result from revealing the identity of the gunmen to the police.

**V. Conclusion:** Anuradha Sarma Pujari's "Surrender" is one of those rare writings which very realistically mirrors a period in which sound of gunshots and bombing, news of kidnapping, killing of innocent people became just like a regular event in the day-to-day life of people living in this culturally and geographically diverse region. She is one of those writers who have genuinely used the issue of insurgency neither for the sake of literature, nor for thematic purposes, but for a realistic portrayal of deeper aspects intertwined with the issue. In highlighting how a surrendered militant suffers due to haunting memories of the past and society's failure to rid him from that trauma for which a constant war goes on within his mind, the story serves the very purpose of literature which is to mirror and reform the society.

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