

The Civil Society, Subnational Politics and the Narratives of Disillusionment in Rita Chaudhuri's *Ei Samoy Sei Samoy/These Times Those Times*

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Abstract

Lack of attention of the Indian policy-makers towards the north east have also provoked Assam to express its demands for self-determination and greater autonomy through subnationalist dissent that also expanded to insurgencies and counter insurgencies. Assam has been engaged in subnationalist politics intermittently in the past, but continuously since the 1980s. This paper takes the case of the civil society which played an important role in the growth of subnationalism in Assam. This paper locates the space of the civil society as the root of subnationalist politics. It takes Rita Choudhury's novel "*Ei Somoy Sei Samoy/These Times Those Times*" which is set against the backdrop of the Assam Movement(1979-85). Here Rita Choudhury narrativizes the Assamese Civil Society and the major role it played in the Assam Movement

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Lack of attention of the Indian policy-makers towards the north east have also provoked Assam to express its demands for self-determination and greater autonomy through subnationalist dissent that also expanded to insurgencies and counter insurgencies. Assam has been engaged in subnationalist politics intermittently in the past, but continuously since the 1980s. This paper takes the case of the civil society which played an important role in the growth of subnationalism in Assam. By subnationalism I mean the subnational "imagined community" that co-existed with the pan- Indian national community. Thus, I use the qualifier 'sub' to refer to Assamese nationalism that co-existed with the mainstream nationalism. During the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early half of the twentieth century, Assamese students studying in Calcutta tried to organize themselves and work for Assamese nationalism. The writings of Lakshminath Bezbaroa, show a deep commitment to the idea of an *Asom Desh* or homeland of the Assamese people (Misra:81).

Earlier subnationalist political mobilization in Assam had focused on cultural policy demands such as the use of Assamese as the official language and as the official language of education. Around the 1980s, subnationalism was accentuated by the heavy immigration into Assam from East Bengal which had produced a fear amongst the Assamese people of losing their identity. This paper locates the space of the civil society as the root of subnationalist politics. It takes Rita Choudhury's novel "*Ei Somoy Sei Samoy/These Times*

Those Times which is set against the backdrop of the Assam Movement(1979-85). Here Rita Choudhury narrativizes the Assamese Civil Society and the major role it played in the Assam Movement. Timothy Brennan asserts that “nations then are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role(Brennan:49). Besides, Brennan’s claim that the novel allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation, I would like to locate the imagined community in the context of subnationalism from the space of the civil society in Choudhury’s novel. During the six years of the Assam movement, the civil society stood united for the cause of Assamese identity. But after the signing of the Assam accord, which saw a section of the student leaders being elected to power into the state, the common bond of unity that had sustained the civil society was disintegrated. This paper will also focus on the narratives of disillusionment that the members of the civil society encountered and how it had been relegated to the periphery after the Assam Movement.

The civil- society concept derived from political theory is used to describe the fact that people meet, communicate, and organize in ways that are not established or controlled by the state, nor by kinship and family ties, and with purposes that are driven neither by the power logics of the state nor by market interests (Orjuela:197). Michael Edwards defines civil society as all organizations and associations between the family and the state with the exception of business(cited in Upadhyay:63). According to Gellner, civil society constitutes institutions strong enough to counterbalance the state whilst not preventing the state from fulfilling its role of keeper of peace and arbitrator between major interests (cited in Upadhyay:63). Thus the civil society is that space between the family and the state which acts as the site of producing critical discourses and also produces the power of interrogating the state. Standing between the state and the family, where associational life and collective solidarity takes place, this space had become the arena for new social movements.

Sanjeev Baruah has pointed out that the space of the civil society has been responsible for the politics of subnationalism in Assam(Baruah: 125). During the Assam Movement(1979-1985), the civil society organized itself to voice the dreams and aspirations of the people. This space had developed the spirit of subnational “imagined communities”, where we have a collective memory and a collective will that the people of Assam shared. This feeling of a shared identity had inspired the people of Assam with a sense of autonomy and distinctiveness. Since the 1980s, Assam had attracted exceptionally high immigration from other parts of South Asia, especially from the densely populated East Bengal. While the problem of continued influx and the ever – growing pressure on land coupled with the fear of the Assamese losing their socio-political identity seemed to be the immediate motivating factor of the Assam Students’ Movement, it was in actuality a popular outburst against decades of economic neglect of the state by the Central government(Misra:122-123).

Sanjeev Baruah says that two key organizations had played a central role in the constitution of the Assamese civil society; “the Asom Sahitya Sabha” and the “All Assam Students’ Union.” (Baruah:138) These organizations played a major role in giving a distinct identity to the people of Assam. In *These Times Those Times*, the space of the civil society is represented in the Students’ Union which had won the mass support of

the people during the days of the Assam Movement. Udayon Misra points out that the Assam Movement had been one of the greatest mass upheavals in the history of post independence India(Misra:122). The narratives of “those days” in Rita Choudhury’s novel present how the civil society united together to raise its voice against the exploitations of the centre during the six years of the Assam agitation:

Those terrible days brought the people together. The whole of Assam from one corner to the other bonded with a feeling of intimacy as never before. The people respected the leaders of the All Assam Student’s Union, the Assam Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad, The Assam Yuva Samaj, the Karmachari Parishad, the Purbanchal Lok Parishad and the Assam Sahitya Sabha. It was considered very fortunate if one could invite them for a meal, to give them shelter for a night or to be able to talk to them. The common people wholeheartedly abided by them; followed the path they showed(46).

Organization is one of the important components of the civil society. An organized association grew up during the time of the Assam movement. Sudipta Kaviraj upholds that authoritarian repressive governments face challenges to their unrestricted power. Even in democracy “it is not easy to translate the desire of the people into stable responsible government”(Kaviraj:6). Hawthorn asserts that in these cases it is the civil society which can challenge the government(Hawthorne:281) Thus the power of civil society would consist in its associations and organizations to meet the interest of the people for whom it exists. Hawthorne claims that such associations and organizations are generally particular in their purposes and most energetic and effective in meeting particular interests in particular places(Hawthorne:281). “These Times Those Times” show how the civil society organizes itself to assert the rights of the people against the centre.

The narratives of Aditi, who is the protagonist in the novel, show the hopes and aspirations of the civil society during the time of the Assam movement and its disillusionments after. Her narrative recalls the days of the Assam Movement, how it came into inception from the long standing grievances the Assamese people had against the centre. It historicizes the collective solidarity which bound the Assamese people during the six years of the Assam movement. During the Assam Movement, the civil society voiced its furor against the attitude of the centre and this was aggravated by the immigration issue. It fervently accused the centre for its attitude towards the region – an attitude which had been viewed as marked by ignorance, arrogance, discrimination, coercion, co-optation and “divide and trivialize”(Misra:7). Aditi, as a member of the civil society recalls the beginning of the movement when the people protested against the attitude of the centre. She recollects how every Assamese felt during those times:

Lakhs and lakhs of foreigners have surrounded our *desh*, O people of Assam its time to take up wars against the centre. We will not part with our oil, our tea and our forest. We were independent before and shall continue to be so(44).

The use of “our *desh*” foregrounds Assam as a distinctive identity. Benedict Anderson says that the unconscious use of the ‘our’, foreshadow the language of nationalists(Anderson:17). The use of “we” reflects

the collective identity of a subnational imagined community and its distancing from the national mainstream. Even in Lakshminath Bezbaroa's writings, *Asom Desh* is an autonomous socio-cultural and political entity (Misra:81). The narrative of "those times" focus on the impact the movement had on the masses.

The whole of Assam came to be filled with slogans written in the walls with a big hand. The passers by stared at the walls, shared those thought with their fellow men and made sense of them. These thoughts began to make ripples in the people's mind and thus out of these grievances was born the spirit of patriotism and the need to preserve Assamese national identity (44).

Here we have a subnationalist imagined community as Benedict Anderson's concept of the imagined community where the fellow members without meeting and hearing of one another, conceive themselves as a community (Anderson:6). Aditi's narratives of the Assam Movement present the distinctiveness of an Assamese identity. She recalls how this spirit of patriotism bound the entire people of Assam from one end to the other:

The people felt that Assam had never been dependent in the past. History says that Assam resisted the Mughal attacks as many as seventeen times and only after the Treaty of Yandaboo, Assam came under the British control. After the British left, the Indian nation at the centre had complete control over the state of affairs of Assam. The natural resources of Assam were exploited by the centre. The Assamese had to assert every right as the centre neglected the state and exploited it. The people of Assam realized that Assam was not independent even after India's independence and if the people of Assam did not assert their rights they would lose their identity and the refugees coming from the borders would capture the vote bank (45).

These emphasizing on an Assamese identity rejuvenate the outburst of Assamese subnationalism during the six years of the Assam movement. Aditi's narratives reminiscences those days when people from all walks of life participated in the movement:

The streets of Assam were filled with a long line of agitationist who came up spontaneously to take part in the movement. Women too came out in large numbers, keeping aside their looms and household chores. Those in service left their office and courts to join the mass movement. Schools, colleges and other institutions were closed. People forgot to eat, sleep and rest. They even forgot fear (46).

While talking about the forms of fiction of a nation, Brennan points out that the 'folk', the 'plebians', the working class' were important components of the nation (Brennan:53). This narrative also places the common people as important components of the civil society. The sense of being deprived by the centre came to be realized by the people. The mass support of the common people in the movement is repeated several times in the narrative.

After the end of the British rule, the Indian government completely brought Assam under its dominance. Assam was fleeced out of her resources. The Assamese people realized that they were not independent in an independent India.....They realized that by opening the doors to the Bangladeshis the state would increase its vote bank and if they let themselves a prey to this conspiracy without resisting it, one day the Assamese people would lose their identity. The Bangladeshis coming from the borders would establish their citizenship by their voting rights and soon establish their power over the state(45). The Assamese would become a minority. If they thus subordinated themselves they would lose their voice, their food, their culture, society and also would gradually lose their national identity(85).

The collective feelings that bonds a civil society can be seen in the common fury of the people against the centre. During the days of the Assam Movement, a spirit of unity prevailed. Aditi, Aranya, Prabhakar, Subhankar, Balabhadra, Bibhuti and other boys and girls worked together: “the different communities never thought that they were different- all the different communities were united by a common cause.”(45)

But soon after the Assam accord was signed and after the new government came to power this sense of unity was lost. Kasturi, Kajari, Sukanya, who represent the new generation in the novel, can see nothing but a feeling of disunity, hatred and suspicion prevailing in the different communities. People of different communities have demanded their independence. Kasturi, Aditi’s younger daughter, comes to read in the papers about the different communities asserting their rights. As a contrast to those days, Kasturi had not come across any social movement which had ever united the people of Assam from one end to the other:

The kinds of agitations that Kasturi gets to see in these times are very different from those she had heard from her mother. Now instead of the common bond of unity, everybody has become everybody’s enemy. Most of the communities living in Assam had asserted their own identities; they did not want to conceal their identities beneath the cover of Assam. (72).

Thus the narrative is built with a contrast between these times and those times and this heightens the narrative of disillusionment in the novel. Against this narrative of “those days” when the people collectively came together sharing the commitments of its leaders, we have the narrative of “these times” when Aditi confronts with disillusionment after her marriage with Chandan Phukan, one of the leaders of the movement, who had become a minister after the new government had come to power. The experience of being a minister’s wife had given her nothing but uneasiness. The waning away of the past hopes and commitment are emphasized by the patriotic songs of mother Assam ringing in her ears.: “How will I worship thee O mother.....I will worship you with my life.....” or the number “Oh the fire of the 83 elections/ My brother’s missing/ Do you have any news?” (25).

Suffocated by her position as a minister’s wife she remembers the clarion call and the many promises of the movement: “O come out one and all/ O drive out the foreigners” and its slogans, “What have we got these long forty eight years-batton, bullets and CRPs”(25). Aditi sees the disintegration of these hopes and aspirations

from close, after her arrival in the MLA Hostel as a minister. The mother motif which resonates in these lines, focus on the collective allegiance and the responsibility of the people towards their motherland during the time of the Assam movement. Anderson points out that the vocabulary of kinship or shared identity is accentuated in images used to denote something with which one is naturally tied (Anderson:143). Here the trope of the mother is attached to a subnational imagination. The faint echoes of these promises which ring in Aditi's ears show the slow waning away of the subnationalist spirit. The emotional bond of imagined communities which had inspired the spirit of subnationalism develops further fragmentation as various competing homeland projects make claim to the land making the politics of homelands very violent prone (Baruah:143). The exploited motherland is represented in the character of Asomi, the daughter of Balabhadra, who stands for the homeland against the national narrative of *Bharati*. Asomi, who in the beginning of the novel is the embodiment of innocence and simplicity, is subjected to the onslaughts of "these times" which try to abuse her. She becomes the metaphor for the Assamese nationality which in "these times" had become a victim of violence; her scars represent the assault that the Assamese nationality had been subjected to in the present times. Aditi in her letter to her friend, Alakesh writes about the disintegration that has overpowered the political scenario of Assam. "You must have heard about the ethnic conflicts. It seems nightmarish to see the people, who had been living in harmony for such a long time, suddenly become violent. The feelings of hatred amongst different communities have made them indulge in violence" (382). She writes:

After the Assam Movement the different communities living in Assam have asserted their identity by taking recourse to agitation.....Men have been living in fear since long. It has become difficult for them to breathe the air which has become heavy with fear, terror, suspicion, uncertainty, insecurity: afflicted by all these fears how can the people afford even to ponder about their condition with patience (384).

After becoming the wife of the AGP minister, Aditi received a major shock when one evening, she happened to see Proloy Goswami, sitting in her drawing room. During the times of the Assam Movement, Proloy Goswami had been the superintendent of Police. He had ordered to fire on a peaceful group of picketers and this had led to the murder of five young boys. Besides, he had physically assaulted many of the agitationist. In repercussion, Aditi had poured out her scorn in the whole city by opposing his actions and as a consequence, Proloy Goswami had let loose a storm of violence; he had taken her to jail, piled a heap of abuses on her and put her to various inconveniences. Aditi was shocked to see the same Proloy Goswami being welcomed in the drawing room of her husband. Proloy Goswami had come to request minister, Chandan Phukan for the post of a member in the Assam Public Service Commission. After this incident Aditi could see the demolition of the ideologies of the Assam Movement. After the Assam Movement, Aditi had encountered several disillusionments. As a minister's wife, she could see the true colours of many significant personalities of the movement. The people whom she had held in high esteem, had come down in her eyes one by one (87). She could see how power had addicted the leaders of the movement, she could witness the fearful reality. Arun

Barua's and Prabhakar's narrative critiques the position of the new leaders of the Asom Gana Parishad whose main aim was to usurp political power.

Thus in "These Times" and "Those Times" the narrative refers to two distinct phases of time- the former refers to Assam after the signing of the accord and the latter refers to the six years covering the period of the Assam movement. The present as represented in the narratives of *Ei Somoy* or "these times" show the shattering of the hopes of the civil society at the failure of the new government to fulfil the dreams of the people. In contrast, the narrative which presents the six years of the Assam movement, shows how the civil society organized itself with a sense of commitment. It echoed the aspirations of the people who dreamt of a golden Assam. After the signing of the Assam Accord some of the members of the students union became the ministers of the new regional party, which had come into power. The post Assam accord brought a feeling of mistrust, fissures, and multiplication of identity amongst various ethnic groups as the new state machinery failed to study their problems. The protection mechanism for *Asomiya* (Assamese speaking) people to protect Assamese identity and culture made no mention of tribal identities and this had led other groups to fight for their own protection mechanism (Mahanta:103). The Civil society which had played a crucial role in the region, had been relegated to the periphery (Mahanta:105).

However, Rita Choudhury shows that in *These Times Those Times*, the civil society can still play an important role as the custodian of the state. During the time of the college elections, the narrative presents how the student's union, with the support of some of the teachers like Aditi and Ruben and journalist Ranjit Dutta, play an important role in bringing to light the dirty power politics which try to intrude upon the college environment. This body of the civil society which consists of students, intellectuals and journalists succeed in destabilizing the ugly politics that try to disintegrate the sanctity of the college environment. The narrative in *These Times Those Times* shows that the civil society can play a crucial role in public life, if it does not allow its interest to be subordinated by the state.

All citations from *Ei Somoy Sei Somoy / These Times Those Times* are from Rita Choudhury. *Ei Somoy Sei Somoy*. Guwahati: Banalata, 2011. The translations are mine.

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