

**Re-(visiting) the Past through Narrative: Reading Rita Choudhury's
*Ai Samay Sai Samay (These Times, Those Times, 2007)***

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North East India is considered one of the most troubled regions of the country with a long history of secessionist movements. The Assam Agitation (1979-1985) and the armed nationalist movement of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA 1979-2009) are two important milestones that mark the present socio-cultural and economic history of Assam. These incidents have immensely affected the socio-political scenario of the state. Obviously, the impact of socio-political tension has been experienced by the common people of the state. One way of gauging the impact of these socio-political movements is to undertake a critical reading of the literature that has been written in recent times by activists who were directly involved in these.

In this paper, I look at Rita Choudhury's **narrative** *Ai Samay Sai Samay (These Times, Those Times)*. The novel is written in Assamese and revolves around the Assam Agitation. It would, of course, be naïve to assume that the narrative that I have selected for discussion here is a "direct" reflection of the situation or to assume that this reveals "absolute" or truths about the troubled state and its people. A prominent Assamese writer, Rita Choudhury was an active participant of the Assam Agitation. However, the narrative appears to be a selective rendition of the past. In my paper, I have tried to analyse how this narrative looks at the past, the past that the writer had once lived, the past that she was once very proud of and how memory is rendered retrospectively through the critical lens of an academic.

I have divided the paper into three parts. In the **first** part I look at the Assam Agitation (1979-1985) and the armed nationalist movement of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA 1979-2009). Along with this I have tried to look into the reasons that led to the movements and their impact on the common people. In the **second** part, I look at select pieces of literature based on these movements. I have restricted my discussions to the fictional writings related to the most

powerful students' and secessionist movements of Assam. We believe that literature on such movements can be divided into two groups. One group is constituted of literature by observers who were not directly involved in these movements. The other group is made up of the literature by the activists who were directly involved. In the **third** part I will discuss the select narrative. Rita Choudhury's novel was written almost thirty years after the Assam movement, in 2007. As such, it is interesting to observe the position of the writer. While analyzing the narrative I have addressed the question of the writer's position and her conscious/unconscious use of memory that make the readers remember certain things and events from a given perspective and wipe out some others.

Part I

When I recall my understanding of the Assam Agitation and the armed nationalist movement of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), it evokes a combined feeling of fear, anxiety and terror as well as a sense of pride that we as school children had experienced. I would like to begin my discussion with two personal anecdotes from my life. These personal anecdotes, I believe, would define the ways Assamese common people looked at these movements and how these movements influenced the lives of the common people. It was during 1984-85, when I was in class IV or V when we used to take our dinner a bit early. I still remember my father used to sleep in some other place, not inside our home. We had finished our food early; he silently walked out of the house through the back door and my elder sisters washed the utensils quickly beside the well. If by any chance we heard a jeep or motor vehicle passing by, we were frightened. Sometimes, my sisters left the dishes unwashed and hurried back to the house. This was the Assam Agitation for us. We didn't know what it was, what it was for or what are we going to gain from it. My father was neither an activist nor any active member of any political party. But, it was a regular scene in those days in almost every household.

It was during 1985-87 that we heard and saw some strange punishments being meted out to fraudulent and illegal businessmen, contractors and miscreants who were tied to big trees or compelled to kneel down in open fields for public view. We were happily waiting for some kind of 'magic-power' that would definitely turn Assam into a place full of wealth and happiness. In those days ULFA was not a name to be frightened of. Instead, it was a matter of pride for us if we could talk about the members of this association. I happened to listen to (in those days I believed that it was nothing short of a privilege of listening to) an ULFA leader who tried to persuade one youth to join the then "glorious" group of revolutionaries. It was a 'glorious secret' I shared with my classmates with pride. During those days people used to work for public welfare facilities like establishing schools, repairing bamboo or wooden bridges, building roads etc under the banner of ULFA. There was joy and pride in doing these. Even the school students were involved in these activities of ULFA in the rural areas. I remember going to a remote village from our school and offering our service for building an approach road and a bridge. All

the students along with all the teachers worked for the cause. This was what ULFA was for us for a long time. Of course, gradually, ULFA started to lose its popularity and confidence among the common people.

I shall now try to analyse the reasons behind the emergence of these two movements as well as their impact on the common masses. According to some historians and intellectuals, Assam was an independent and sovereign province before the colonial rule. They believe that Assam was always a free nation and therefore, its accession to the 'British India' as a result of the Yandaboo Treaty (1826) was meaningless. Kamalakanta Bhattacharya in his series of essays on "Assamar Unnati" (Development of Assam) insisted on the self-reliance and hard work of the Assamese people through which they could achieve prosperity and happiness. Kamalakanta believed that foreigners would one day occupy the land of Assam and then Assamese people would lose their land along with their identity (1982: 22). He insisted that the Assamese should constitute an independent, self-reliant nation (Misra, 1987:195). Chandradhar Sharma and Ambikagiri Roychoudhury were two names famous for their radical views on the issues of an independent Assam. Prof Udayon Misra says that Chandradhar Sharma "voiced his concern about the threat to Assamese identity from unchecked infiltration" (Misra, 2000: 90). Amalendu Guha mentions about a letter that Chandradhar Sharma wrote to one of his friends in which he says, "...something has to be done by the Government regarding the foreign settlers. Otherwise, the country will have to face very bad days and a miserable situation; our national identity will disappear" (Guha, 1977: 121-122). Ambikagiri Roychoudhury also urged for a free and independent Assam in his article "Bharatiyar Swaraj Aru Asamiyar Swaraj" (*Chetana*, 11, 1920). In the pre-Independence period, Jnananath Bora spoke for an independent Assam in his article "Kamrup aru Bharatvarsha" (Kamrup and India) which was published in *Awahon*. In another article, "Asom Desh Bharatbarshar Bhitarat Thakiba Kiya?" (Why Should Assam Stay in India?), Bora insists that Assam was an independent province and it should be left independent. He believed that Assam's restoration is possible only when it is separated from India. I would like to quote from this article as translated by Udayon Misra: "The Assamese have always lived a distinct country with its own distinctive administration and never seen Assam as part of India (Bharatvarsha)" (quoted in Misra, 2000: 96). In these two articles by Jnananath Bora, it is evident that he pleads for an independent, sovereign Assam which will have all the necessary means for economic stability and progress. Here, he appeals to the British Government to give Assam an independent status.

Considering these writings of the Assamese intellectuals, it is evident that the issue of a sovereign state of Assam is not an absolutely new idea that suddenly emerged in the minds of a section of Assamese youth. The concepts of economic and administrative independence, and freedom from the socio-political as well as financial exploitation by the British has always been

a cherished dream for the Assamese intellectuals. It is this dream for which a section of Assamese youth took resort to arms. They believed in this dream and they also believed that Assam could be rescued from the clutches of the colonial masters. There have always been confusion and discontent among the Assamese middle class and the Assamese people at large and this took the form of a movement.

At first, we shall look into the historical background of the Assam movement. In the general election of Assam Assembly held on 25 February 1978, no single political party could gain majority. Golap Barborra of Janata Party led the Janata coalition government. On March 20, 1979 Hiralal Patwari, an elected member of Mangaldoi Lok Sabha Constituency died. As such, a by-election was required to fill his seat. It is said that during the process of the election, people noted that the number of registered voters had increased dramatically. And, the All Assam Students Union (AASU) demanded that the elections be postponed till the names of foreign nationals were removed from the electoral rolls.

This was the moment of origin of the Assam Agitation. The Assam Agitation (1979-1985) was a movement against undocumented settlers in Assam. The movement, led by All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the 'All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad' (AAGSP), staged various activities of protests and rallies to try to compel the government to identify and expel illegal immigrants. The agitation programmes were non-violent, but there were cases of extreme violence as in the case of Nellie massacre where thousands of people were killed. During the years of protest in the Assam Agitation, altogether 855 activists died.

The agitation ended in August 1985 following the signing of the Assam Accord, which was signed by leaders of AASU-AAGSP and the Government of India. The agitation leaders formed a political party, Asom Gana Parishad. It came to power in the state of Assam in the Assembly elections of 1985 and later in 1996.

The Assam Agitation started with a demand that the central government should take strong measures to stop the illegal influx of illegal immigrants. Later on it became a movement for expulsion of all the East Bengal Muslim peasants, tea garden labourers coming from different parts of India, the Hindu Bengalis and also the Nepalis. Uddipana Goswami rightly says, "...it became more and more xenophobic in nature and demanded the ouster of all *Ali Kuli Bangali, Nak Sepeta Nepali*...whose immigration into Assam had also begun during the colonial period" (2014: 6). This intolerant, parochial nature of the movement wiped out all the distinction between legal and illegal migrants. People started to believe that one day these 'foreigners' or 'outsiders' would prove to be a threat to the land, livelihood, language and identity of the Assamese people. Gradually, the movement started to confine itself among the Assamese

speaking Hindu middle class of Assam. In the process of this narrow grouping and dominance of the Hindu middle class, the other small ethnic groups started to feel alienated and agitated. Distancing themselves from the greater Assamese identity, the indigenous settlers of the state began to ask for separate ethnic homelands. Assam movement “marked a period when every small and big ethnic group began distancing itself from the Axamiya identity and subsequently started placing demands for separate ethnic homelands” (Goswami, 2014: 4). Prof. Manirul Hussain in his book *The Assam Movement, Class, Ideology and Identity* and Amalendu Guha in his article “Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam’s Anti-Foreigner Upsurge” discuss how the Assam Movement was a movement against the resource exploitation of the Indian state. It is actually a bloodstained massacre of thousands of innocent men, women and children. On 18 February 1983, over 3,000 Muslims were killed in the tiny town of Nellie in the aftermath of the All Assam Students’ Union’s agitation against illegal migrants from Bangladesh. And this was only a part of a number of minor incidents that marked the blood-stained days of 1983 and the Assam movement.

Alongside the Assam Agitation, different militant groups started to voice their resistance to the Indian state. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was one amongst them. The ULFA thus began its journey asking for ‘sovereignty’ of the state of Assam. It has already been said that many historians and intellectuals had been demanding *Swadhin Asom* (autonomous Assam) in different ways even before the rise of ULFA. In that sense, many have tried to substantiate the opinion that Assam’s demand for self-determination (independence) is an issue that has been addressed by political leaders, intellectuals and social activists from earlier times. Prominent Congress leader of Assam Gopinath Bardoloi too “demanded fullest possible autonomy for the province so that Assam could utilize its resources in its own interest” (quoted in Misra, 2000: 110).

The armed nationalist movement of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) began in 7 April 1979 as an organization committed to end Indian rule which some sections of Assamese youths considered to be exploitative and imposing. During the height of the anti-foreigner agitation, a hard line section parted from AASU (All Assam Student Union) to form the ULFA. “ULFA was born at a gathering in the historic Rong Ghor in Sibsagar, a palace of the Ahom kings who ruled Assam before the British. Its aim was to "establish scientific socialism in an independent Assam." It regarded the Yandaboo Treaty of 1826 between Burma and the British rulers of India, which incorporated Assam into British India, as the episode that marked the end of Assam's independence, and it sought the restoration of that "lost independence." (Quoted in Baruah, 1994: 868).” ULFA leaders Rajiv Rajkonwar alias Arabinda Rajkhowa (chairman), Samiran Gogoi alias Pradip Gogoi (vice-chairman), Paresh Barua (chief of staff) and Golap

Baruah alias Anup Chetia (general secretary) declared their aim of “liberating Assam from the illegal occupation of India” and to establish a ‘sovereign socialist Assam’.

At first the ULFA received support of the masses for all the productive works that the members of the organization had initiated. Gradually however their activities started not only to displease the Assamese people but also to annoy them. Hiren Gohain has aptly said, “They built roads where none existed, honoured artists and writers, chastised notorious local thugs and hoods, forced licentious rogues into instant virtue and rectitude, banned wine drinking among habitual wine-bibbing communities whose sudden temperance mightily conflicted with nostalgia for the good old days. In fact, many of the bitterest critics of the ULFA these days used to be eloquent in praise of their spotless and great character in those days” (Gohain, 2007: 1012). Without going into the details of the activities of ULFA, it can be said that the nationalist movement of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) did start with some ‘great ideals’, but neither could it fulfill its own ‘great goals’, nor could it meet the expectations of the common masses of Assam. For majority of people in Assam, the ULFA symbolised a point of resistance to Indian control over the state of Assam. It was a resistance to exploitation and dominance of Indian government. “But the extortions, killings, bomb blasts, targeting of civilians and of migrant workers from north Indian states, led to erosion of whatever support and sympathy it enjoyed” (Misra, 2010: 13-14).

Part II

Much has been written on the issues of the Assam Agitation and the movement of the United Liberation Front of Assam. These writings include both fictional and non-fictional writings. Issues of these movements find expressions in poetry, stories and novels since the beginning of the movements till the present time. Research articles and books have also been published regarding various issues related to these movements. The facts and figures as well as the reasons and impacts of these events in the Assamese mind and society are discussed from various perspectives by scholars and social scientists in all these thirty five years (right from its beginning till the present time). Along with this there are fictions that express the facts and figures and also the causes and effects of these movements. I shall restrict myself only to the fictional writings related to this secessionist movements of Assam. While exploring the literature (fiction) based on the issues related to these movements, I would like to divide these into two broad groups. One is literature by observers who are not involved in these movements directly or otherwise, and another is the literature by the activists directly involved in it. Thinking of fiction writers who have written on the Assam Agitation and the movement of ULFA, the name that comes immediately to mind is that of Rita Choudhury. It was actually her *Abirata Jatra* (1981) which is considered as one of the first novels to directly speak about the political tension in Assam after the formation of ULFA and also the Assam Agitation. This novel bagged the first

prize in the manuscript contest organized on the theme of the Assam Movement by Asom Sahitya Sabha, one of the most powerful cultural and literary institutions of Assam. In an interview she says, “It was in 1981 when the Assam agitation was at its peak that I began to write formally. I was an activist. It so happened that during my underground days, a literary competition was held by the Asom Sahitya Sabha. I wrote '*Abirata Jatra*' in three months. The Asom Sahitya Sabha conferred an award on me after this” (2012: *The Times of India*). Rita Choudhury was an active participant of the movement then and of course a powerful writer. Two decades later she won the Sahitya Akademi Award. *Akou Saraighat* by Lakhinandan Bora was another novel composed during the same time that captured the intensity of the period. About a decade later, Parag Das’s *Sanglot Fenla* (1992) placed itself in a totally different pole by expressing some reasons why the Assamese people had to take to the course of armed rebellion after the failure of the Assam Movement and the Assam Accord. The novel is based on the real time experience of cadres in the jungles of Kachin. His *Swadhinotar Prostab* (A Proposal for Independence) is his vocal demand for a sovereign state of Assam which was banned by the Government of Assam in 1994. Dhrubajyoti Bora’s *Kalantarar Gadya* (Prose of Transition) published in 1997, *Tejor Andhar* (Darkness of Blood) and *Arth* (Meaning) is a trilogy based on the Assam agitation and the days of insurgency of Assam. These works have been acknowledged as major literary creations not only of Dr Bora but of Assamese literature. In the words of Aruni Kashyap:

With a large cast of characters, many subplots, the novel tries to provide an in-depth analysis of the situation of Assam from multiple angles. In Babula’s gruesome death through torture at the hands of the army, Bora narrates the violation of human rights during the counter-insurgency. Through Sombori’s regular, multiple rapes by the army officer, the novel underlines how the conflict was inscribed often on the bodies of women. Through the story of Gojen’s disintegration from a rational human being to a man who walks naked in his room in frustration when asked to choose between his former comrades or become a government informer, Bora tries to show the conniving process of co-option that the state launched in order to curb the insurgent movement, leading to the bloodbath called secret-killings between 1998 and 2001 (December 2012).

Retired IPS officer Dilip Bora and a college teacher in the department of English from a small town of Assam (Tangla), Arupa Patangia Kalita wrote fictions on the issues of insurgency in Assam. While, Kalita’s treatment of the theme in the novella *Arunimar Swadesh* is emotional giving an account of the true story of the gruesome massacre of the entire family of Umakanta Gogoi, Bora in his novel *Kolijar Aai* (2006) depicts the life of an insurgent who suffers from guilt and regret after choosing the path of violence. The novel ends with a note of internal conflict in the mind of the protagonist who is in a doubt whether to think of his

biological mother or the metaphorical ‘Mother Assam’ for whom he had taken up the path of violence.

Megan Kachari (Mithinga Daimary) and Kabiranjana Saikia, two members of ULFA are also two well-known names in Assamese poetry. Megan Kachari’s poems were translated into English and was published with an introduction and it was released at the Frankfurt Book Fair 2006 by Indira Goswami. Rakhee Kalita has rightly observed, “What is perhaps most interesting with Assamese vernacular literature of the last two decades is the volume of writing contributed by actual participants of the rebellion and insurgency. Whether one looks at Mithinga Daimary’s poetry written from his prison cell or earlier, the slain rebel Kabiranjana Saikia’s many poems that have endured his brutal death, an ex-combatant Jibon Goswami’s perilous account of seeking safe homes across the Burmese border ... there is a concerted attempt to speak from the margins of civil life and record the voices of dissent” (2012). It is really significant that actual participants of the insurgent movements as well as the surrendered ULFA wrote fictions dealing with issues related to the armed militant movement and also the inner feelings of joy and happiness, pains and sufferings, conflicts and struggles of them. A critical reading of the literature that has been written by the activists who were directly involved in these movements is definitely one significant way of gauging the impact of these socio-political movements.

Part III

The narratives about insurgency and of the insurgents can never be seen as the direct reflection of the time and activities of the movements. Nor can we accept these as “true”, unmediated expressions of the views, tension, insecurity, sighs, cheers and lamentations, pains and pleasures or ambitions and limitations of the members of the movements. It has already been said that the narratives of and about the insurgents want us to remember only certain things, certain events, in a certain way, and therefore, very carefully try to wipe out some other things from the popular mind.

Rita Choudhury’s novel *Ai Samay Sai Samay* (These Times, Those Times) was published in 2007. The novel expresses the hopes and aspirations as well as of the frustrations of the masses and activists with respect to the Assam Agitation. The novel was written almost thirty years after the Assam movement. As such, it is interesting to observe the position of the writer who was an active participant in it. While the memory of Assam Agitation as well as the movement of ULFA is still fresh in public minds, the writer tries to re-interpret, re-remember, re-think and re-present the ideology of these movements from the vantage point of someone who has the benefit of retrospective observation. And, the writer’s conscious/unconscious use of memory, makes the readers remember certain things and events from a given perspective and wipe out some others.

In “A Few Words by the Writer” of the novel, the novelist says, “The pen throws light on different aspects of society...this vision is not complete. It is just a fraction of the whole” (Chowdhury 2008; trans. mine). Choudhury uses the Assam movement against Bangladeshi infiltration as her backdrop to reflect upon the young angry Assamese mind. It is a postmortem of the troubled times of Assam.

Ai Samay, Sai Samay (These Times, Those Times) does not refer to any of the massacres of the movement and tries to portray it as a mass revolution based on ideological grounds of sub-nationalism. Rajarshi Kalita aptly sums up, “She (Rita Choudhury) tries to interpolate past idealism within a generation brought up to believe the forces of globalisation and selfish individualism but does not really manage to link up these disparate processes of thought... Another strong point of the novel is its ability to illustrate the spirit that went into the Assam agitation and also the disappointment, disillusionment and the consequent distress that follows when ideas do not work the way you intend them to do. It captures a period and sentiment in the history of Assam which one can look back at with anger, shame, remorse or pride, but which one just simply cannot ignore” (2008: 31).

Aditi Choudhury is a lecturer in a reputed college of Guwahati. She was an active member of Assam Agitation once upon a time in her life. It is through her eyes that the novelist tries to look back at the past, the past that she was so much attached to at one point in her life. At first, the capital city of Assam appears as a beautiful city full of new hope and prosperity. But, she understood that it was not the ‘golden Assam’ that they were aspired for. It was just a symbol of that unaccomplished dream, nothing more than that. In actual sense, there were devastated dreams and hopes all over the state. It was the graveyard of dreams” (Chowdhury; 18 trans. mine). Focusing on the details of the personal lives of Aditi and the writer, the readers tend to draw a parallel between the writer and Aditi. Interestingly, Aditi Choudhury, the protagonist of the novel *Ai Samay, Sai Samay* wants to write about the past, about the Assam Agitation and its after-effects and she contemplates, “Will she be able to do it? Will she be able to write all the things which she heard, understood and saw? Will she be able to illustrate that particular time that spreads across time? Does she possess that transparent vision? Does she possess that detached objectivity?” (Chowdhury; 84 trans. mine). As such, Aditi’s thoughts very well reflect the writer’s mind. The novelist moves between the past and the present while writing. She is not writing about a static time and space. Aditi dwells between the times of her deep attachment with Assam Agitation where she used to communicate with all her past comrades and the present times with her colleagues and her two daughters. Her feelings very often shuffle between these two worlds. While sitting in the admission hall for her daughter’s admission, she looks back at her past. She is thinking of writing about the past and travelling down memory lane. She is confident at one point of time that she would be able to critically analyse the past. She believes

that she was competent to adequately explore that particular time which began with the fiery slogan “Joi Aai Asom” (Glory to Assam) and remained stagnant in a valley of death. She will analyse these times objectively (Chowdhury 91; trans. mine).

In the beginning we are introduced to the protagonist’s loss of hope and her disillusionment after her marriage with her companion who had become a minister by then. Her husband who was once a leader of the movement turned into a completely different man after gaining political power. He, the new powerful minister of Assembly turned to a person devoid of principles and values. Aditi says, “There were no memories of Assam Agitation, nor were there any responsibilities towards the state in the new house. There was only a cheap, repulsive ultra-modernism in the new house (Chowdhury; 23trans. mine)”.

The novelist expresses her views on Assam Agitation, its effects on Assam and its social and political life not only through the protagonist, Aditi. Instead, her opinions are very well reflected in the statements of some other characters’. Aditi saw the Agitation from close quarters, she lived it and it definitely had a huge influence upon her personal and social life. When the novelist tries to talk about the Assam Agitation and its past effects through the eyes of Aditi, very often she desires the readers to remember some specific values and ideals of the movement. The ideals and principles of the movement are highlighted, at the same time the greed of power, loss of honesty and loss of integrity of the representatives in power are discussed with utter sorrow and regret. At times, the novelist’s belief in the good effects of the movement is very well expressed. In an interview when Rita Choudhury is asked, “Has the Assam Movement been successful?”, she answers: “Every movement has its positive and negative sides. It was a very strong movement but the people mistook it for a political movement. The AGP and the Assam Movement are two different aspects” (2012: *The Times of India*). Here, we feel a sense of desire of showing the agitation in a positive light by separating it from the political party that has been formed after the agitation by the leaders of the same agitation.

It is significant that the novelist expresses the positive points of the agitation and the virtuous effects of the movement not in Aditi’s words, but through another character Manabendra who is Aditi’s colleague. He says, “In my opinion the Assam Agitation was not a mistake. The demands of expulsion of illegal immigrants and of preservation of constitutional rights...these were some valid issues....Can a movement, such a big social movement be completely wrong, entirely corrupt and fully negative?” (Chowdhury; 127 trans. mine). At this point the novelist seems to be deeply attached to the movement, to its ideals and principles. But, the same author expresses her grief, remorse, frustration and loss of hope on several other occasions. It is the novelist’s inner uncertainties that we hear in the thoughts of Aditi’s daughter

Kajori: “On what ground is this a different political party? In what sense was the regional party that was born out of the Assam agitation a different one?”(Chowdhury; 61 trans. mine).

We can say that the novelist’s return to memory or attempt to revisit the past operates at multiple levels. Very frequently she shuttles between the worlds of her deep involvement in the Assam Agitation and her present world. She sometimes looks back in anger, regrets her inability to fight against the loose immorality, corruption and dishonesty among her companions (including her own husband) after the participants of the movement attained power. Finally, the novelist portrays the protagonist as a strong character who came out to fight for justice. She (Aditi) became furious when she saw D.I.G. Praloy Goswami sitting in her drawing room talking to her husband (who was once a leader of the Assam movement and the powerful minister of parliament at that time). She questions her husband about the promotion of Goswami who shot her comrades of the Agitation. All her respect for her husband withered in a minute. In the novel there are numerous evidences of such emotions. Loss of faith in the powers that be and as the result of the sense of regret, pain and suffering, Aditi leaves her husband and starts a new life. Here we see the departure that the novelist tries to focus on. The novelist tries to make the readers believe what Aditi says and she succeeds in doing this to a great extent.

Through the conversation between Aditi and Prabhakara in chapter 21, the novelist gives a glimpse of the political scenario of the state after the Assam agitation. When the leaders of the agitation formed the government, the socio-political condition of the devote followers of the agitation underwent a change. Jealousy for the new members of the parliament and the desire for unaccomplished ambitions started to blur their paths of righteousness and values. In the words of Prabhakara, we are introduced to such a world, “The wife of the leaders are flattered/pleased by some MLA to get a seat in the ministry, some do that to enter the state cabinet, some others do that for many other vested interest. And the businessmen and high officers try to please them for posting, transfer of jobs etc” (Chowdhury; 190 trans. mine). Aditi replies to Prabhakara saying that there are many politicians’ wives who are intentionally outside the territory of politics.

We know that Rita Choudhury is the wife of Chandramohan Patowari, who had hailed an important post in the Asom Gana Parishad ministry. But, in spite of being so integrally connected to the Assam agitation, she never joined electoral politics. She has been a faculty in Cotton College of Guwahati. While Aditi says, “People with self-respect do not try to snatch the power of other people” (Chowdhury; 190trans. mine), we hear the writer’s voice. She wants us to remember that this is not a general situation. Instead, there are more positive things to be said. And for her, these positives are more true. At one point of time, one of the characters of the novel expresses the view that getting involved in a movement is totally different from the field of politics as a movement is guided by some rules, ideals and principles. But in politics lot of other factors work simultaneously. While the protagonist is critical of the change of attitude, behaviours and mentality of the activists of the movement who came to power, she is countered

by others with substantial arguments. But, she raises her voice against compromise. When she was told that compromise is a must for political survival, she says, “Why should one compromise to survive politically? Why could not he (her husband Chandan) protest against injustice alone? If he had spoken for his demands vehemently, there would have been thousands of people behind him? He would have been respected by all even if he was refused a ticket in the election” (Chowdhury; 194trans. mine). At times she repents her inactiveness after the Assam movement. She repents not speaking for the truth, for not exposing the injustice, and for not standing behind the common masses. Can we here draw a parallel between Rita Choudhuri and Aditi, the protagonist and the wife of the powerful minister of government?

It has already been said that conscious/unconscious use of memory by the writer make the readers remember certain things and events from a given perspective and obliterate some other things. This at times makes this work of Choudhuri a political statement. Therefore, when the novelist tries to focus on the achievements of the new government mentioning the gas cracker project, fourth oil refinery, Sankaradeva Kalakhetra, the Bogibeel bridge over the Brahmaputra river, we sense an urge for clarification from active participants of the Assam Agitation. It is not Aditi but her friend who tries to convince Aditi that the new government has increased the royalty for oil and it has arranged 90 percent grant-in-aid and 10 percent loan of the money received from the central government (Chowdhury 212; trans. mine). Mrinmay Dutta, a committed communist leader says that due to their strong ideological principles they cannot support a movement which covers the profits of those who earn three lakhs rupees per day but fight against those whose earning is just thirty rupees per day. While the ideological differences between the supporters of Assam agitation and the left-wing intellectuals is quite obvious during the days of movement, ironically the novelist tries to question the validity of their own principles and to substantiate the Marxists’ principles. After 30 years of the movement, she is now in a position to view the things more objectively and more critically. Therefore, along with the story of the novel there are constant discussions on different political beliefs and ideologies. In fact, in some chapters, there are hard political discussions which are loosely connected to the plot and theme of the novel. In chapter 23, the dialogue between Aditi, Prabhakara and the communist leader Mrinmoy Dutta seems to be more a discussion of political ideologies, of the pros and cons of the Assam Agitation and the communists’ opposition to it. Towards the end of the novel, Rita Choudhuri tries to look into the issues of political ideologies of different parties in the light of the college election of Mrs Aditi Choudhuri. In a sense, after Chapter 21, the novel is about the writer’s clarification of her strong faith in the ideology of Assam agitation and justification for whatever the participants of the movement did in their attempt to establish a ‘sovereign’ and ‘golden’ Assam. It is noticeable that whenever the novelist clarifies the position of the agitation activist or of the extremist (ULFA), it is always either by a less important character of the novel or by a character who is not depicted as an ideal person. After a bomb blast by the extremist

organization, Aditi is countered by someone, "...but, they speak the correct thing. Aren't the centre exploiting us? What did the centre give us after independence? We have to start an agitation for an oil refinery, for a bridge. India is an independent country, isn't it? Why then the government just submissively watch if lakhs of foreigners enter here? Why are they safeguarded? To establish the government with the help of the foreigners 'votes? And if we protest for the safety of our identity, if we start a revolution for the demand of expulsion of the foreigners, we are shot dead (Chowdhury 232-233; trans. mine)".

One of the characters of the novel, Arun Bora (who is portrayed as unsophisticated, crude person but also a vocal activist of the Assam Agitation who knew each nook and corner of the movements and also the lives after the people attained power) declares loudly that everything about the people involved in the movement and their present greed and lust for power. Aditi has met this person to collect some resources about the Assam agitation. In their conversation, Bora says, "Yes, we betrayed the Assamese people, we did not expel the illegal immigrants, we hadn't done anything. As such, people had dethroned/removed us from power. That is all right. We are very bad, we are sinners. They have rejected us as we could not expel the 'foreigners'. If that is true, those who have brought the 'foreigners' from fifty years ago, even now they are bringing, why are these people sent to Dispur laying red carpet? (Chowdhury 205; trans. mine)". These statements by the unsophisticated, drunken man, a former minister of the Asom Gana Parishad assembly definitely throws light on state politics. It is significant that Aditi has received a grant for a project to work on the Assam agitation and her friend took her to Arun Bora to get genuine facts about the movement.

In the process of self-explanation, the novelist makes some political statements. But, who uttered these statements in the conversation is neither made insignificant or is kept hidden. In a conversation among the group of friends who worked together for a greater cause of 'making Assam free from illegal immigrants', someone angrily expresses his voice, "...our people have again brought that political party into power which when in government power killed hundreds of Assamese people by using police and C.R.P.F. and safeguarded foreigners. We can accept that the regional party has not done anything good, it has not utilized the accord, has not expelled the illegal immigrants. Therefore, people have barred them from power. But is the political party that has now been voted to power going to expel the illegal immigrants? This party keeps on saying that there are no illegal immigrants in Assam?" (Chowdhury 300; trans. mine). The writer's disappointment with the new system is well expressed in these lines.

It is important that novelist Choudhury tries to probe into the idealism of the agitation days, while she feels that the new generations born after 1983 do not possess that idealism, nor do they try to feel it. The novel ends with the failure of ideological formulations that the writer

tries to incorporate in her companions and the new generation who “believe the forces of globalisation and selfish individualism” (Kalita, 2008: 31). The correct statement regarding the novel, I believe is

Another strong point of the novel is its ability to illustrate the spirit that went into the Assam agitation and also the disappointment, disillusionment and the consequent distress that follows when ideas do not work the way you intend them to do. It captures a period and sentiment in the history of Assam which one can look back on with anger, shame, remorse or pride, but which one just simply cannot ignore (Kalita, 2008: 31).

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