

## Women Vis-À-Vis Politics And Insurgency In Northeast India: A Reading Of Mitra Phukan's The Collector's Wife And Easterine Kire's A Terrible Matriarchy

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**Abstract:** *The issues like politics and insurgency has been influencing lives in Northeast India in the past as well as in the present scenario. Literature from Northeast India has reflected the challenges and realities of their land. Women in this region have been the worst sufferer during such political disturbances. Mitra Phukan portrays the plight of women during insurgency when frightful insecurity was the growing storm of the town. Easterine Kire paints the true realities of the weaker sex who always become the worst sufferer in times of conflict and political issue. This paper attempts to study the effects of politics intermingled with insurgency on the women of Northeastern part of India as reflected in Mitra Phukan's The Collector's Wife and Easterine Kire's A Terrible Matriarchy.*

**Keywords:** *Women, politics, insurgency, conflict, traditions.*

Literature of a culture is a powerful window that enables one to view, understand and emulate with the outlook of cultural transposition when studied along with anthropology, sociology and history. Relativism is reflected in any cultural studies. Therefore, it is very significant that such literatures be written by the bona fide individuals who belong to that culture rather than others which may not reflect the reality or mar the picture with uncommon biased outlook. Historically many indigenous people groups in the world followed oral tradition which is more binding than many written traditions as presented in today's world. *The Seven Sisters and Sikkim have always had gripping stories to tell - of political upheavals, multiple cultures, tribal lore, hills and forests. Only in the last decade or so has the vibrant contemporary writing from the Northeast region written in many languages really begun to reach the rest of India and the world through translation and anthologies. The writers like Mitra Phukan and Easterine Kire reflect the tradition and culture of Northeast people in their writings. These women writers not only portray the culture and political scenario of Northeast but through their writings women's lives are explored.* Today in Northeast India there are many writers who bring out the beauty and reality of their

community through their writings. The writers like Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire presents the Naga way of life thus emphasizing on the Naga traditions and bitter realities in Naga life. Mitra Phukan is not hesitated to present the ugly picture of life in Assam. Her fiction shows a clear picture of the present situation in Assam where insurgency has gain much popularity. Northeast India is often called the land of paradise unexplored but because of the richness in literature, today it's open to the rest of the world.

India's Northeast is considered as one of the most beautiful regions in India. The Northeastern parts of India are endowed with natural beauty, cultural hues and rich traditions, consisting of the eight states, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. In this region of India various ethnic groups of people live together in peace and harmony. There lays one of the most beautiful peoples of the world with gentle touch, giving hearts and rich hospitality. Like a coin has two parts, in the same way we cannot deny the fact that there are many issues in Northeast India which have been influencing the lives of people, particularly women. Northeast India is filled with different tribes and communities. As a result it leads to

different political issues and the formation of different extremist groups which are formed to serve their respective tribe and community. They are supposed to safeguard their ethnic identity and customs. However, the ethnic clashes are very much common in Northeast India which has led to serious disaster in the past as well as the present. Ethnic clashes in Northeast India may lead to serious loss and starvation. Women as the weaker sex always become the worst sufferer in times of conflict and political issues. These issues and factors influence women's life and may bring a great change in the lives of women.

Northeast India is one such region in India where women enjoyed equal privileges with men. When we compare to the other parts of India, the status of women in Northeast is comparatively high. We cannot deny the fact that almost all the states are patriarchal in nature but that does not mean that women are dominated. There are also states like Meghalaya where matrilineal system prevails. In such a system the status of women is higher. Because of the coming of Christianity and the advancement in science and technology there has been a rapid change in the role and status of women. There is a wide gap between the concept of Grandmother in Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* and the concept of Rukmini in Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*. The old age culture has been replaced with the new customs. During Grandmother's Age in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, a woman's role was only to do the household chores like washing dishes, cleaning, cooking, looking after their infants and serving her husband. Women though weak in strength had to work more than men. It is true that in the Northeast Context, there has not been any record of sati, female infanticide and child marriage but even today women from Northeast too faces gender discriminations in many grounds. Though the world has been changing rapidly yet women in Northeast still find themselves within the four corners of home. The notion regarding women remains the same even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century though many changes have been taking place. Northeast India is rich in its culture and traditions. Every community have different customs and the sad part is most of the customs are meant for women than for men. Women are still facing discrimination in the name of customs. There are still many norms set by society for women. In Assamese Society a barren or a widow is belief is to bring bad luck when present during special occasions. In spite of the high position she received because of being the DC's wife, the character Rukmini in *The Collector's Wife* faces discrimination for being barren even after ten years of her marriage. This is evident from the following lines from the novel. When Rukmini was seen sitting beside her friend Rita on her wedding day, the other women commented,

'What times we are living through! In my days, even the shadow of a barren woman wasn't allowed to fall on the bride' (Phukan 2005 p.15)

Though influence by customs and traditions, women in this century have gone out of their homes and kitchen and are doing great job for family and society. The role of women have shift from kitchen to offices. The literacy rate among women has been rising rapidly. Today women are seen at home, hospitals, offices, airplane, schools, colleges and universities, boxing match, in games and sports department, etc. Today's' women stand side by side with men heading

towards the common goal. However, there is always a struggle that women face. Women are still considered inferior to men in many ways. Women are still expected to wake up early and start the household chores. When compared to the other parts of India, the status of women in Northeast is comparatively high but when compared with men in Northeast, there is a wide gap in their status. Women in Northeast do not suffer because of dowry system or purdah system but they do have struggle of their own for being a woman.

Insurgency and political issues are another important factor in Northeast India which has deeply impacted women's lives in the beautiful region of Northeast India. Many writings from Northeast have portrayed the ugliness of politics and insurgency problem. The novel of B.K Bhattacharyya *Yaruingam* gives us the picture of war and political disturbances in the climax of the historic Second World War. In the novel, Bhattacharyya portrays the traumatic transition of Tangkhul Naga society amidst the changing consequences of post-colonialism through the life and plight of a Tangkhul Naga girl named Sharengla who lost her virginity to a Japanese soldier Ishewara who later died. Because of this mistake, she was not accepted in the society even to the extent of denial for marriage with her former lover Rishang. It was Rishang who rescued her during bomb raids by British forces. As an influential leader, he also sheltered her in the village against the villager's opinion. However, he couldn't accept her any longer as his potential wife and marries Khutingla. After the war, encouraged by the Christian missionaries Rishang went for study in Calcutta to serve his village school. Videssellie, a nationalist, mobilizes the movement for Naga freedom which affects the life of the society particularly youth. Cliché groups of confusion starts between transformation through education and violence. It was a war of ideologies between non-violence and violence. The novel ends with an uncertain future for the society while Sharengla remains a spinster helping the village hospital as a Nurse. This novel makes an effort to decipher the resulting intricate complications of human relationships in society that is torn and almost tailor-made so as to fit the concrete box of few so-called elite or dominating voices. As the saying goes, "The rich get richer. The poor becomes poorer," the socio-economic needs drive the helpless to seek shelter in the wrong avenues at times. These woven inseparable political scenarios display a vivid image of how different sections of people particularly women suffer with varying degrees of name. The call and need for justice in the light of gender differences speaks even louder in times of war and social transition where the survival and emergence becomes highly questionable.

Any serious enquirer of the Northeast context finds that the age old issues of politics and insurgency runs skin deep which calls for right historical reconstruction of land and identity. Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* presents lives of common people particularly women who suffered and loss their near ones because of insurgency. Set in the small town of Assam, it clearly indicates the presence of violence in Northeast India. Problems and issues like insurgency and politics cannot be separated from women's lives. *The Collector's Wife* shows how the characters in the novel are deeply and closely connected to these issues. 'Every week, reports of fresh incidents of extortion or looting, or of gunning

down unarmed citizenry, appeared in papers' (Phukan 2005 p.81). The town of Parbatpuri could have been a peaceful and beautiful town without those issues.

Throughout the novel, Mitra Phukan portrays the ugly picture of insurgency. The main protagonist Rukmini had to face judgment in the society because of her inability to be a mother which had deeply affected her but it was not bigger than the result of violence in her life. As she moved ahead with her fertility treatment, the violence around her that grips the whole town of parbatpuri is reflected in her own life. The activities of the extremist group 'MOFEH had drastically changed even the shopping habits of the people of Parbatpuri' (Phukan 2005 p.95). There was time when people shopped in the evening, but because of the incidents and the rise of insurgency in the town, people moved out of their home in the noon time. The high Officials of the state have to move with high security. With the rise of insurgency in the town, kidnappings, bombing, protest, bandh, strikes, blackout call became a part and parcel of the lives of people. During the blackout calls given by the MOFEH, there would be total silence. Nandini Deuri was accompanied by her security everywhere. But Rukmini being a DC's wife preferred privacy over protection. She was only accompanied by Anil, her driver. Rukimini belief that the MOFEH will be sensitive towards women as MOFEH tries to keep women away from their business.

'Besides, MOFEH had not yet kidnapped or threatened a wife or a child' (Phukan 2005 p.134). They loved to negotiate with men than women and were seen to be considerable towards women.

War, bloodshed and hatred always break relationships. The result is never a happy ending. The character Nandini in *The Collector's Wife* became the victim of hatred and war along with her husband. The murdered of SP Mr. Deuri by the MOFEH was a turning point in the novel. Insurgency and hatred have made Nandini Deuri widow whereas it has made their children fatherless. It has broken the sweet family of Nandini Deuri which she truly treasured. According to Rukmini, Nandini and her husband Hrishikesh Deuri was a perfect couple where Nandini was a perfect housewife. 'She looked after her cows, her house, her children, her husband, her garden, the Parbatpuri police wives welfare club, and the Parbatpuri ladies club with a zeal that was legendary in the district' (Phukan 2005 p.165). But insurgency had put an end to such a happy married life. On her fifteen wedding Anniversary, Nandini became a widow. What a scene it would be to see her husband shot death right in front of her eyes on their fifteen anniversaries. It was a moment of joy indeed but it turned into tears and bloodshed. She recalls the incident:

'So sudden. We were laughing- we were just beginning to eat... he seemed to see something, I mean he stopped laughing, and his eyes, they became, became frightened. I turned around but I could only see a hand with a gun... I saw a finger on the trigger... when I looked back again, Deuri wasn't anymore...' (Phukan 2005 p.172)

Nandini saw her own husband being shoot. Nandini Deuri's happy world came to an end because of hatred and bloodshed. She had to face the consequences of politics and insurgency.

The result of violence is always painful. Rukmini's own life took a different turn because of politics and problem of insurgency. Not only did Nandini become widow because of hatred but Rukmini too loses her husband and her friend Manoj on the same day at the same time. In spite of the challenges Rukmini faced, she found her happiness back when she met Manoj but insurgency had put an end even to that friendship. Rukmini's joy knew no limit when she learnt that she was pregnant but hatred had put an end to such joy. Manoj was not privilege enough to know that Rukmini was bearing his child. Rukmini believed that if he had known that, it would have given him some kind of courage and hope to move on in even such time. It was just a while Rukmini began to enjoy her life again, find her dream once again to be a writer but all those dreams faded away in a glimpse of an eye. Her companion Manoj Mahanta and Pronob Bishaya were kidnapped by MOFEH and Rukmini was grieving over it when suddenly the news of the death of her husband by MOFEH reached her. Siddharth on the other hand desired to live long and would have accepted the baby and Rukmini. As he stated:

'Living here in Parbatpuri, I've come to respect life. Life and birth. Life is so cheap here. Death is everywhere. Sudden death, like Deuri's... just because life is so cheap here, just because of that, I hold that life is precious ... the child is yours. And you...we're married, aren't we?' (Phukan 2005 p.315)

But death made an end to everything. There was no Siddharth not even Manoj. Both these men were killed at the hands of MOFEH. Rukmini's tears were for two men. 'one who had died, not knowing that he was going to be a father and another who had prepared to be a father to an unborn child, not his' (Phukan 2005 p. 349). The novel ends with a very sad note which convey a message to all mankind about the ugliness of hatred and bloodshed. She sympathize with all men and women who had being victim of hatred and insurgency. And she added in the concluding lines: 'and tears for all the other women who had stood over still pale bodies, as she herself was now standing. Nandini Deuri and so many others, all coalescing into a single figure of tear shrouded grief, as they looked down at their slain bodies of their husbands, their brothers, their sons, wrapped in blood-blotched sheets' (Phukan 2005 p. 349)

The beautiful hills of Northeastern India have a gripping story to tell. Though Northeast is rich in its culture and traditions yet because of political issues and rise of insurgency, people in Northeast are facing challenges everyday. The fire of insurgency has been increasingly burning in Northeast India. Easterine Kire's *Mari* set in the midst of violence portrays a young girl named, Mari who was caught in the great battle of Kohima. Throughout the battle, Mari and her sisters struggle and move from one hiding place to another for shelter and protection. This fiction from Northeast has presented the presence of political disturbances in the Northeast region. Since ages, Nagaland has been one of the worst affected areas.

Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* portrays the realities of Naga way of life. Kire is not hesitated to bring out the ugly realities of a Naga society, particularly the Angami Naga society. With the battle of Kohima in the background,

Kire tells us a beautiful story of a girl name Delieno and the society she lived in. As Kire records the account of Kohima war in her fiction, she presented how lives changes after the war. The Battle of Kohima is considered to be the turning point in the lives of the people of Kohima. It plays a significant role in the history of Nagaland. It was fought between the British Commonwealth forces and the 31<sup>st</sup> division of Japans' imperial army in the year 1944. By the time the war ended, many innocent lives were loss and many became homeless. The war cemetery in Kohima stands as a memorial dedicated to over 1,420 soldiers of the British Division who died in the Second World War at Kohima, the capital of Nagaland in 1944. The memorial in the cemetery carries on it the famous Epitaph which read as:

'When you Go home, Tell Them Of Us And Say  
For Your Tomorrow, We Gave Our Today'

The Battle of Kohima have left many people in tears and pain. The innocent villagers and citizen became the worst victim. Easterine Kire presents the changing Kohima after the battle. This change is presented through the life of Lieno's mother. Life before the war was beautiful. Lieno's mother recalled how the Manipuri's traders come with their special varieties of fermented fish as well as jiggery and peanuts balls. She and her mother would happily buy. Those were the days for Lieno's mother. 'For her, life was divided into two phases, before the war and after the war and , life, in her opinion had always been better before the war. She had been a very young girl then, loved dearly by her parents and getting educated at the Mission School' ( Kire 2013 p.170). To Lieno's mother, life before the war seemed to be like a long series of picnics and festive times where there was joy and happiness everywhere. 'When her mother died in 1943, rumors of war were all over the town and villages. She had heard her father's friend report that Japanese spies had come into the southern villages. . .Most of the boys in her class joined the army or went to work as cook's helpers in the army camps and the Government school soon closed down.' (Kire 2013 p.170) After the closing down of schools, Lieno's mother confined herself in the kitchen looking after her siblings.

During war and communal riots, women are abused and raped because of their weakness in their strength. *A Terrible Matriarchy* records one such event in the life of Lieno's mother. When Lieno's mother was seen alone in the kitchen, a German spy came into the kitchen and pulled her into his arms and tried to molest her. She moved out and desperately called for help. Lieno's mother though escaped from him was shaken by the incident. The economic condition of the people before the war was prominent. Starvation had never hit the villages and the villages never knew what hunger was because they worked very hard and so, they never ran short of food. 'It was only when the Japanese moved into the town and villages that people found what starvation was. Terrified of the Japanese soldiers, the local people fled to the fields and field huts' (Kire 2013 p.172). Their houses were then occupied by the Japanese soldiers. Kohima was unrecognizable after the war. The war of Kohima is one such event which can never be forgotten. The war cemetery in Kohima is the living testimony of the lost lives. War brings nothing but destruction and hatred. The war

had a strong influence on the lives of people in Kohima who experience a different phrase of life after the war. It broke relationship between husband and wife, sons and mothers as many young innocent lives were lost in the war. K B Veio Pou in his book *Literary cultures of India's Northeast* stated:

'The mentality that girls are weak was a belief affectively adopted by the society since the olden times because those were the days of constant warfare, when sudden attacks from enemy use to occur frequently. And since the physical attribute was the measure of a person's strength, men ruled the society. Hence the classification of women as weak and not as strong as men. Yet, even generations after such gory warfare, the "boys are boys" mindset is still endorsed' ( Pou 2015 p.178)

The problem of politics and insurgency has strong hold on the lives of women in Northeast India. Women become the worst victim in war and ethnic clashes. It is a land where women are given special privileges but sadly it is also a land where women still lived in fear because of the unhealthy atmosphere within and outside their homes. The issue such as politics and insurgency is still a hindrance to women's freedom. How can a woman be free in such an environment where she is not able to move freely? The problems of insurgency and political issue should be put to an end. There is a need of mutual love and peace in the society. Only when the land is peaceful, there will be advancement in the field of education and improvement in the status of women. It is time for Northeast India to put down their weapons and wear humanity. The government of India should also take these problems seriously and take necessary actions for the upliftment of the people of this region. Northeast people should not be neglected in their own state as well as in the Capital city like New Delhi. The cultural diversities should be respected. In times of violence, common men always become the victim. At last what will people gain through all those bloodshed? Nothing!

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