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The Bag

Arup Kumar Dutta

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Arup Kumar Dutta's new novel, *The Bag* has come as a surprise to most of his readers because no one envisaged that he would ever weave a tale on the insurgency in Assam that practically dominated the socio-political domain of Assam in the last two decades of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century. A recipient of Padmashri, the academic turned writer, Arup Kumar Dutta, is best known for his non-fiction books and adventure novels. However, in *The Bag*, he portrays the poignant tale of two brothers and an Inspector of Police who are caught in the maze of the conflict zone. Among the handful of Indian English novels based on insurgency movements in Northeast India, *The Bag* is indubitably the most poignant and exhaustive. However, it has certain affinities with another powerful Assamese novel, *KalantarorGadya* (The Prose of Tempest) (1997) by Dr. Dhrubajyoti Bora. In fact, a good number of novels on insurgency have been written in Assamese in the last two decades. Out of these, a few have been written by former insurgents like Anurag Mahanta, RoktimSarma and others from an insider's perspective. However, *The Bag* is a polyphonic novel where contesting voices espouse and critique the state's position and insurgent's position. Written in a realist mode, the novel is structured in the form of a *bhaona* that is enacted in the premises of the *Naamghar* on certain special occasions. Thus, the movement of the story is irregular— sometimes moving at a lethargic pace and sometimes jostled with frantic activities leading to a dramatic climax.

The Bagun unfolds the story of a dreaded ULFA militant Hiren Bora, his transformation from a morally upright and idealist youth to a trigger-happy militant without any ideology. The novel begins with a Prologue titled Lahiri's Civet. It encapsulates the intricate history of the region which was once a peaceful region but later becomes a conflict zone embroiled in mindless violence. In the Prologue, the narrator introduces the dispassionate Senior Inspector, Lahiri, of the Special Intelligence Branch of the Assam State Police Department who with age has turned cynic, but still dreams of bringing back the boys with different ideology back to the society which several military operations failed to do. However, certain members of the Unified Command, which has been formed to deal with the insurgency, particularly those from Indian Army and Paramilitary forces refuse to accept the position held by Inspector Lahiri and the government of Assam. They are of the opinion that insurgents are fanatic criminals, so they need to be dealt firmly by taking stern reprehensive measures which include "shoot at sight rather than capture" (14). On the other hand, the members representing the Government of Assam consider it to be a socio-economic and historical-political problem which requires "a political settlement" (13). However, the DGP of Assam Police devises a plan to circumvent the apparent hierarchy in the Unified Command by sending Inspector Lahiri undercover to catch the dreaded militant, Hiren Bora. Though they "can't dodge the system" the DGP assures that "the ones who matter in Dispur know the information for the raid come from our side" (41). Thus, it seems the novel probes into the working of the armed forces in the conflict zone, and also engages in understanding the nasty competitions the state repressive forces are involved in to score over each other at the cost of human lives.

The Indian army who, while enjoying the immunity given to them for their safety by the draconian laws like AFSPA, is determined to eliminate the last insurgent, and even does not deter from terrorising the innocent and law-abiding family members of the cadres of the outfit. Unlike them, Inspector Lahiri is inclined to sanitize them and bring them back to the society to which they rightfully belong. With such grand ideas in mind, Inspector Lahiri tries to collect information relating to Hiren Bora's family, his predilections and peccadilloes, his achievements etc as a teenager and as a village boy. He believes that knowledge is power. So, if he has this information, he will have power over Hiren Bora. Inspector Lahiri gathers that Hiren Bora was a very good student; in spite of hardship in his family, he managed to pass his matric

examination with first division. Having received a scholarship he completed B.Com, the first from the village of Chungijan to earn a graduate degree. Not only was he a member of the students' union, but he was also a leader of the youth in his village. He was also a good artist who led the *bhaona* team in the village. It is said that even the village headman used to take counsel from him. He was also an affectionate son and a loving brother. He was particularly very close to his stepbrother, Okon, who was half his age. As he failed to get a job in that sleepy town of Doomdooma after his graduation, his ego was shattered. However, he remained resolute to find a way to do something for the sustenance of his family. After working in a sweet-meat shop for a few months, he went to Guwahati and found the job of a security guard. With an aim to earn a diploma in Management, he enrolled himself in an institute and worked at night as a guard. However, one day while he was on duty, he might have fallen into sleep and someone stole a car from the parking lot earmarked for the residents of the flats. In spite of his innocence, he was dragged into the case and assaulted by the police before being dismissed from the job. With only scars and nothing else to provide to his family, he came back to his village. It was then he was indoctrinated and drafted into ULFA. Thus, it seems the novel explores the psychology of youths who undergo a dramatic change and also the environment which plays a significant role in such transformations.

At that time of his joining the ULFA, the recruitment has dwindled as the charm of joining the outfit was waning among the youths for numerous reasons. When he reaches the training camp "on the mountainous slopes of upper Myanmar" (81), which belong to the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), after an arduous journey, he finds himself among "mostly scrawny, underfed youths" (81). Sergeant Major Pradyut Basumatari, the trainer with hawk eyes, not only trains them "to withstand the physical rigours of their chosen course" (86) but also indoctrinates them with revolutionary lectures "so as to subjugate dominant egos, suppress unseen demons and instil within them genuine revolutionary fervour" (97). The official ideologue of ULFA, Lakhidhar Gogoi (Mama) teaches them the outfit's ideology, revisionary history of Assam and Maoist literature. Hiren Bora has been chosen as the leader of the batch. Just after their short three months of training, as many from the outfit have surrendered, Hiren Bora and his batch have been made ready for combat. On hearing about an important mission, Hiren Bora volunteers and successfully completes the mission. From that time onwards, there was no look back for him in the outfit and he

has accomplished several missions successfully. In a short time, he becomes an important leader of the outfit. He visits many countries as a close aide of the Commander-in-chief. Once while reaching the training camp in Kachin on the way back from China's South Yunnan Province in the entourage of the Commander-in-chief while on a visit to negotiate with Chinese authorities over the supply of arms and ammunition, Sergeant Major Basumatari, makes a request to the Commander-in-chief for some money to deposit in the KIA's coffer as they have been living on their bounty. Though the flow of new recruits into the ULFA has dwindled alarmingly, and though the time was not favourable for any mission in Upper Assam, Hiren Bora is instructed to help. With this mission, he enters Assam only to realize that it is tough to break the tight security cordon; further, the Intelligence network of ULFA has broken down. Nevertheless, he is determined to carry out the mission. In spite of all his caution, he is almost caught twice. It is often said that the character of a person is known during the time of adversity. The novel exposes the transformation of Hiren Bora alias Hirukai into a cold, brutal and unscrupulous person devoid of ideology. The novel seems to be raising a few meaningful questions --- is it because of frustration with oneself that a person like Hiren Bora becomes cold and brutal? Or, is it because of shattered hopes and an abysmal life? Or, is it because of his growing distance from his family/society?

As he realises that he can't complete the mission without the help of someone he trusts, he seeks the help of his stepbrother, Okon, who is hardly thirteen years old. Hirukai, the most loved person and safe refuge for Okon, does not hesitate to put the life of his stepbrother in danger. After his failed bid to reach home, he connects with his brother in the secret place amidst the thick bamboo grove called Daini's lair which is known only to them. As a gift, he brings a school bag for his brother which he keeps in the Daini's lair along with a letter of instruction. Having received the instruction, Okon meets Hiren Bora on the appointed day with filial affection. However, Hiren Bora instructs his young brother to do a bid for him, which Okon skilfully performs after taking an oath from his elder brother that he would surrender and come home to stay forever with them. However, after doing his bid, when he comes to meet his elder brother, he realises that his elder brother has no intention of keeping his promise. So, for the love of his elder brother whom he never wants to lose, he reports it to his maths teacher, Mr Saikia who had earlier told him that he knows someone in the higher-ups who could help his brother in surrendering without any drastic

consequence. As Mr Saikia has been working as an informer for Senior Inspector Lahiri, he takes Okon to meet Lahiri in the Circuit house where he is living. Lahiri promises Okon that nothing injurious will happen to his elder brother if he tells him the secret place where Hiren Bora is hiding. After getting the information from Okon, Lahiri calls up the OC of the police station and instructs him to prepare for a raid. However, the OC informs the Indian army. The army reports it to the state Home Minister, who on his part snubs the DGP. The DGP on his part could do nothing but had to lie to the Home Minister and distances himself from Lahiri. Meanwhile, when they reach the outskirts of the village, they notice the army truck with soldiers. It takes no time for Inspector Lahiri to realise that "the battle was lost" (284) and he would not be able to keep the promises made to innocent Okon. Ultimately, Hiren Bora being in a *chakravehu* could not escape and is shot dead by the sharpshooters of the Indian army in front of Okon and other villagers who have gathered there after being alerted by the youths who saw the advancing troop" (285). The novel seems to expose the inherent similarity in the working/ functioning of the state repressive forces and the insurgent outfits. Both put the lives of the common people in jeopardy. It is always the common people or the innocent members of their families who are targeted in violation of human rights.

The Bag by Arup Kumar Dutta has powerfully portrayed a story of the competing forces and obstructive circumstances in a conflict zone where no one wins. It not only probes into the psyche of the frustrated youths of the region who are educated but unemployed but also the state apparatuses which consider one as a rogue the moment one deviates from the normative path. The novel perhaps also points at the failure of society and state in taking responsibility of the zealous youths who somehow want to contribute to the general happiness of their families. This novel is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand the mindless violence and the human tragedies involved in the conflict zone of North-East India.

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