



Nationalisms in Context: Somnath Batabyal's *Red River*

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Abstract: This paper seeks to explore the concept of 'nationalisms' as they occur in Somnath Batabyal's *Red River*. It will map the variable ideas of 'nationalism' as they appear and morph over time to three central characters of the novel – Rizu, Samar and Rana, three young friends in Assam of the 1980s. Benedict Anderson's idea of nationalism as a fragmented, imaginary concept will be referred to in this context. Additionally, the paper seeks to question the idea of one homogeneous 'nation' by referring to Homi Bhabha's idea of the nation and explore the various manifestations of resistance to it, thereby also drawing attention to 'identity' and its intricacies. The paper also intends to look at the concepts of home, migration and identity in Assam of the 1980s, at a time of intense political violence.

Keywords: home, identity, nationalism, nation, resistance

I

"This red river carries all our tales, Samar. If you listen, wherever you are, you'll hear them. Carry the river in your heart and, I promise you, you'll never walk alone" (Batabyal 353).

The quest for identity in Assam has long been connected with the issue of language. The separation of Sylhet from Assam and its inclusion in Bangladesh in 1947 assuaged the Assamese fears of marginalization and gave the Assamese a hope of a 'homogeneous' homeland, excluding all other communities and particularly Bengalis. The roots of this desire for isolation may be traced to the rather "one-sided engagement with linguistic nationalism" (Misra 7). Nandana Dutta mentions in *Questions of Identity in Assam: Location, Migration, Hybridity* that at one point during the British rule, Assamese nationalism grew in relation to their interactions with the Bengalis, since in the movement for self-formation, Assam was considered as not having things that Bengal did (50). The Assamese soon began to define themselves on the basis of their differences with the Bengalis. This intensified into a more full-fledged conflict which came to be known as the Assam Movement of the 1980s, to which the issue of migration (illegal or otherwise) came to be added simultaneously.

II

The Assam Movement has been defined as a movement that seized the initiative for self-construction. The movement started with the desire to oust the 'outsider' in Assam, who comprised mostly the Bengali, Marwari and Bihari population. It was spearheaded by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU). It, however, made enemies of people who previously inhabited the same landmass peacefully and now belonged to different countries due to the Partition. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), created in 1979 at Rang Ghar in Sibsagar, stated that a more militarily strong attitude was required to quell the problems of 'illegal' immigration into Assam. The ULFA decided to take up the demands and problems of many sub-



nationalities in Assam. This endeavour was taken up with a zeal to further Assamese sub-nationalism and this soon grew to a great magnitude. The text in question, Somnath Batabyal's *Red River* reads this troubled scenario in Assam from the perspective of three young boys – Rizu, Samar and Rana who are the dearest of friends and yet of different backgrounds and languages. Nationalism for each boy has a unique and different significance; their ideas of 'nationalism' also challenge the ideas of one single 'nation' and 'country'.

A large part of the story is set in the 1980s Assam when political turmoil had reached extreme heights, mainly centred on the crisis of 'illegal' immigration from Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan). This migration, 'illegal' or otherwise, was considered to be the principal threat to the creation of a homogeneous homeland for the Assamese in post-Independence Assam. It must be remembered that with the Partition of India in 1947, migration became a complicated issue because previously legitimate movements were now considered to be illegal. This worsened with the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. In Assam of the 80s, problems of xenophobia and jingoism soon grew, concerning the non-Assamese communities, of which Bengalis were the foremost at the receiving end.

The story opens with a family who had their roots in East Pakistan, but now reside in Assam at Gopalpur House. Here they are able to retain some of their previous traditions of erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) but mostly have to adjust to a new land with a new language. Lucky Dutta, or Banalakshmi, is married to Amol Dutta, and they are often exposed to threats of speaking and behaving like the Assamese and not as Bengalis although they have a Bengali identity. Often in the vicinity, they can hear shouts of 'Jai Aai Asom' (Hail Mother Assam). In one episode, a group of young men barge into their courtyard with sub-nationalistic demands. These people clearly resist the idea of India as their nation and insist that Assam is to be regarded as their motherland. Lucky and Amol are threatened by the boys; "We are sons of our motherland and have taken an oath to free her from the foreigners who have subdued her for centuries" (Batabyal 28). As the idea of 'nation' is not uniform for every community in the novel and the meaning of the word bears different yet significant connotations, 'nation' for the Assamese, encompasses only Assam which is also their 'home'. For the Bengalis in Assam and some parts of Bangladesh, the idea of 'nation' is not tangible - they lose their 'nation' and 'home' all at the same time during Partition. Like Lucky and Amol, there are several other Bengali families in their vicinity, who also look for a safe haven where they would not be victimized on the basis of their language and identity.

Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* defines a nation as "an imagined, political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). He says it is imagined because although members of even the smallest nation will never know or see their fellow members, yet there will be an image of the nation and its members in their minds. Anderson also mentions Ernest Gellner as he says, "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist" (169). Anderson states that communities are to be understood as they imagine themselves. In Assam, similarly, the Assamese 'community' and who would be included in it – are imagined in much the same way, since the Partition created a fear of being outnumbered in the psyche of the Assamese. The idea of an 'Assamese' community also included a question of identity. Thus, a comradeship was always imagined among the people which also signified being unified as a community. This nationalism, which people envisioned amongst themselves, was not only restricted to one's national identity but soon extended also to the issue of language.

Lucky and Amol have a son named Samar who is quite young and quiet at the beginning of the novel, but turns out to be one of the most important protagonists of the novel, as a large part of the story is narrated from his perspective. In fact, as he grows up, he becomes friends with Rizu Kalita and Rana



Chaudhary, two other important protagonists in the novel. The ideas of 'nation' and 'home' are read differently from each boy's perspective and not one of them coincides with the other. It is interesting to note also how resistance builds up in their minds against notions of the 'country' / 'nation'.

The dissatisfaction and discontent that certain sections of people in Assam felt towards the Indian Union led them to consider only Assam and not India as their motherland. In fact, not accepting India as their motherland and also disregarding 15th August as Independence Day was quite common among other states of Northeast India. In Assam, the complaint was that Assam was facing problems of underdevelopment, lack and unequal distribution of resources and so on. Organizations with sub-nationalistic demands violently fought against the Centre about these issues, since they found that no solutions to these problems were devised by the Central Government. What they demanded was an independent or 'Swadhin Asom' which would be free from the control of the Indian 'mainland'. Udayon Misra writes:

What took shape in the form of secessionist militancy in the late 1970s or early 1980s needs to be seen against the backdrop of the pre-Partition politics which spawned seeds of suspicion and distrust about the newly emerging Indian nation-state and strengthened autonomist/separatist tendencies in the entire region (41).

The only way, according to many sub-nationalists, for Assam to gather an independent identity within the Indian nation state was to adopt violence against the control of the Army, which included bomb blasts, ransom killings, abductions and so on. The Centre, in response to the violence and unrest, adopted even stronger measures and thus, the matter ultimately transpired to a state versus centre clash. A huge number of families were affected in the process and many young members joined groups like ULFA, having undergone a shift of allegiance. In the course of the narration in *Red River*, one finds this very interesting shift of allegiance reflected in Rizu Kalita.

Rizu is the younger son of Madhob Kalita, the Headmaster of the local school in a fictional locale, Moramela, and quite a respected figure in the locality. Madhob Kalita's elder son, Romen had announced recently that he would be enlisting with the ULFA. As Madhob Kalita is aware of the perils of joining such an organization, he discourages his son Romen and sends him away from Moramela. Madhob is also well aware that it is only a lack of money and food that leads young men to join revolution, and therefore they must be given aid accordingly to dissuade them from their path. He is accosted by ULFA cadres for letting some land within the school for training young cadres. He is also told by them, "No more singing the Indian national anthem. Train your students to sing *Joi Aai Asom*. A new country must have its own songs" (Batabyal 60). Under such circumstances, Madhob Kalita is extremely careful to let his sons steer clear of sub-nationalist politics, since he himself is not a supporter of their views.

Romen Kalita still joins the ULFA without his father's knowledge, and unfortunately is killed by the Army. His body comes floating down the river where the parents and the brother, Rizu are able to see him for the last time. However, amidst this immense grief, the Army's routine questioning almost destroys Madhob's mental stability - because it is impossible for him to imagine that his carefully sheltered son could have been part of such an organization. Rizu reacts as well; at this point, the Army people are his worst enemies and murderers of his brother. As Rizu grows up, he is aware of anti-Army feelings growing inside him too, although the manifestation of it is seen much later in his life.

The story skips back and forth in time to accommodate several different characters from different backgrounds. Rana Chaudhary, the third member in the trio of friends, is of a different league altogether; he



would soon join this group of friends. He is the son of a military officer, Kabir Singh Chaudhary, who is incidentally posted in the northeast of India as part of a mission to rid the region of terrorism and violence. Kabir Chaudhary is not in favour of indiscriminate violence in the northeast despite the retaliation against the Army. When he first takes over in the region, he wishes to use as little force as possible. He says to his subordinate officer, "The use of force must be minimal. We're fighting fellow Indians" (Batabyal 33). He is quite different from the rest of his peers, he has a deep sense of fellow feeling with the people in this marginal land of India and yet, he is bound by duty to protect the country and its people from acts of violence and terrorism. At this juncture, Kabir is posted in Nagaland, which had previously disregarded Indian Independence too. He regards not only Nagaland, but the entire region as a miniature form of Southeast Asia, as it is a melting pot of cultures. Kabir is perhaps unique in considering the heterogeneity of the region, since almost all conflicts arise from the Centre disregarding the diversity of peoples in the region. The imposition of AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) and the control of the Centre on the states was an issue of discontent between two parties which later manifested into a greater crisis. The novel also portrays Kabir being in two minds about Army activities in the northeast. He says, "That Chacha Nehru Act has given us immunity from everything. We can loot, kill, plunder, do anything in the name of internal security" (36).

The idea of one nation imposed on the region without considering that differences exist among the people was countered by the people in several ways. People in the region refused to acknowledge that they belonged to the Indian nation-state. This may be read from various theoretical perspectives, of which Homi Bhabha's view in *Nation and Narration* may be considered here. He has questioned the idea of the 'nation', by stating that nation is not a homogeneous identity, rather it is a contested and ambivalent space shaped by competing narratives and cultural representations. He also states that the nation may be 'written' differently from different perspectives, thus one finite idea of the nation is never possible to come up with or imagine:

What I want to emphasize in that large and liminal image of the nation with which I began is a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it. It is an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the 'origins' of the nation as a sign of the 'modernity' of society, the cultural temporality of a nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality (1).

Thus, the Centre putting forth one idea of the nation on the entirety of India becomes problematic. Regions considered 'marginal' by the 'mainland' India often object to the idea of 'one' homogeneous nation, just as the 'mainland' refuses to acknowledge the margins. Partha Chatterjee, in *The Nation and its Fragments* talks of the nation being a fragment; it is not a monolithic identity but composed of different parts, each of which has their individual relationship to the 'national' project. Chatterjee states that nationalism as defined by Anderson is a derivative of the Western concept, and would never be suited to the postcolonial nation-state since 'nationalism' here developed out of a resistance to the Western dominance. Thus, in a postcolonial state like India, the 'nation' can exist in multiple forms and features. Bhabha writes in *The Location of Culture*, "It is the emergence of the interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference - that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (2). In the 'in-between' spaces, as it were, new selfhoods are created. This creates the scope for a heterogeneous nation. The novel has references to some other examples of sub-nationalism too, albeit of a different nature, taking place in a different part of the country. The Khalistan Movement was assumed to have been aimed at similar objectives of creating an ethno-religious sovereign state for the Sikhs in the Punjab region in the 1980s. It included widespread violence and militant activities, which then faced



retaliation from the Centre in the form of Operation Blue Star. Kabir's father, a Sikh, was killed in 1984 as a result of the violence that broke out in northern India due to the assassination of the-then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi.

It is almost as though the lives of the characters in the novel are interwoven with each other and they are all part of each other's story. While Kabir and his team are instrumental in nabbing Romen Kalita, Madhob Kalita's son, Kabir's son Rana will eventually become best friends with Rizu. Kabir issues orders that the young Romen should not be killed, but unfortunately, he is. His body floating across the river bears a sudden and incomprehensible shock to his parents and neighbours alike. Following this episode, the police begin to suspect that Madhob Kalita is also involved in such underground activities. The police, who are representatives of the Central forces, care little for the calamity that has befallen the Kalitas; instead, they seem to mock and ridicule the family for harbouring a 'militant'. Madhob Kalita is injured very badly in his encounter with the police; he is left with a ruptured kidney due to the blows and kicks that the police inflict on him. The Kalitas become a heroic family – with the local people supporting them in their endeavours as Madhob Kalita soon works towards benefiting the land and its people.

When Rana meets Rizu and Samar at St Joseph's school in Guwahati, he is hardly aware of Rizu's history since Rizu is sent off to Guwahati after the horrific incident of his brother's death. Samar, a Bengali in Guwahati, has a secondary role as compared to Rizu since he is an Assamese in Assam. Rana joins school late in the session, and is not immediately friends with Rizu who has become quite a hero in school by now. The Headmaster of St Joseph's was used to donations from powerful organizations who wanted their sons to be admitted mid-session, but Rana was the son of an Army brigadier and therefore there was "no negotiating with the Indian Army" (Batabyal 82). While the requests of ULFA cadres could not be turned down, the Army diktat was also something that no one dared defy. Certain sections of Guwahati had now been transformed by the ULFA money, and yet, inequality was perhaps never more rampant than now. It is also the Headmaster's wish to develop the school more and more, however, he hardly has the money for it. The situation in Assam at this point is precarious; while the ULFA brings in a lot of money, the holistic development of Assam does not happen as the problems they fought against at one point of time still persisted. On the other hand, the atrocities of the central forces increase manifold and there are recurrent clashes between the sub-nationalistic organizations and the central forces. The people, therefore, go through a severe crisis and disillusionment as they do not know which way to look for peace and stability. There is a tacit rivalry between Rana and Rizu about who would be more popular in school among the boys. This continues for some time till Rana swoops in magically one day to save Rizu and Samar from blows, punches and beatings by a group of miscreants. Eventually Rizu and Rana turn out to be the best of friends with Samar as their constant companion.

It is not uncommon for Bengalis to be forced to speak and behave like the Assamese. Samar and his father bear the brunt of it often, and while they refer to Gopalpur House as their 'home', both of them know all too well that as migrant Bengalis from Bangladesh, they hardly had a 'home'. Samar knows that his parents, like most of the locality's elders, were migrant Bangladeshis; "They had paid their dues in an earlier revolution for a country no longer their own. Burdened with memory and longing for that land across the border, their only wish now was to be left alone" (Batabyal 131). Rana, however, is quite unaware of the political intricacies in Assam. He does not know what AASU or ULFA mean; neither does he see the necessity for blackouts and protests. It is Rizu who enlightens and acquaints him with the scenario: "We are at war. AASU is protesting against the army presence in Assam" (133).



Further, Rizu questions Rana about what his 'country' is. Rana of course, lightens the mood by saying that he belongs everywhere because of his movements across the country. This is also reflective of Rana's perspective of 'nation' and 'country'. For him, a country exists where there is fellow-feeling and no hatred among people. For Rizu, however, it is different because Rizu's country is Assam. He cannot bear with the fact that the Armed forces infiltrate into people's homes and massacre them ruthlessly:

I haven't moved anywhere, Rana. This is my home. Assam. I was born here. I will die here. Now, imagine people you don't know, inside your home with guns, torturing your brothers and your fathers, killing them even. If you belonged anywhere, you would know why we do not like the Indian Army here (133).

The ULFA in the 1980s had become a household name, and received adequate support in the early years. However, it failed to create a common united national platform for the people of Assam since its perception of national identity was always "confined to that of linguistic identity alone" (Misra 157). There was also a rapid rise in violence and encounter deaths which soon reached alarming levels towards the beginning of the 21st century. From 31 deaths in 2009-10, it shot up to 54 the next year and to 87 in 2011. Thus, Rizu's reason for disliking the Army presence in Assam seems to be quite natural as most people during this time were of the same opinion. The trauma unleashed on the people of Assam during this time had far-reaching impacts; even after the violence ended, the trauma existed in people's lives and minds for a very long time to come.

When Rana visits Samar's home for the first time, he is exposed to a very different kind of life than the one he is used to. Samar's family is not of the same opinion of the 'nation' as Rizu. Rana is an immediate hit with them, since both Lucky and Amol consider Rana to be a better influence on Samar than Rizu. It may be mentioned here that Lucky or Banalakshmi had known Kabir Singh Chaudhary while in Dhaka. For Lucky, Dhaka was her home and East Pakistan/Bangladesh her country, much more than Assam could ever be. Thus, seeing Rana at Gopalpur House rekindles memories for her, as she is immediately reminded of Dhaka and her association with Kabir Chaudhary.

It is interesting to note that for Samar, 'nation' is fluid; it is not restricted only to Bangladesh or Assam, but wherever life would take him. In what is only perhaps a fictitious recounting of history, Samar writes of his journey away from Guwahati to Kadamtala on Bangladesh border and then back to Dhaka again, where with the help of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, he ventures on to Britain, to return for a brief time again to Assam. Perhaps in the course of the entire journey, Samar never really feels at 'home' since it is elusive for him. It does not exist in Dhaka, or in Kadamtala and perhaps never in London. The closest that he could feel to home was in Guwahati where he had spent his childhood. It is perhaps this desire to return home that brings him back to Guwahati many years later, when he has changed a lot from what he was in his childhood. Undoubtedly, his vision of Guwahati these many years later also changes as he misses the sleepy northeastern town of his youth; instead, it is now filled with vehicles, new buildings and many different people from various corners of the country. The last he remembers of Guwahati were the memories shared with his friends and his cousin, Leela, who had come to stay with them for some time. Now when he visits St Joseph's, he is astonished to learn that a lot of the development of the school was funded by Rizu Kalita who had become quite a big name in Guwahati. Samar also comes to know that Rizu had been a member of ULFA, and all his money was earned after he quit membership of ULFA and surrendered to the Police, becoming thereafter a Surrendered(S)ULFA. To his great dismay and despair, he also comes to know that Rizu is no longer alive. No one is able to tell him the exact reasons and circumstances of his death and it is an issue that no one really wishes to talk about.



Throughout the novel, Samar is never really an insider, but continues to observe the course of events from an objective distance. To him, his friends Rizu and Rana are never the representatives of different nationalities and identities; when he returns to Guwahati so many years later, he still wishes to find his childhood best friends and a slice of the youth he had left behind here before they abruptly left the town. Instead, he is now left only with memories of Rizu which he shares with Leela, who had also incidentally married Rizu after he quit the ULFA. On his return, he is also introduced to Madhob Kalita who has turned out to be a taciturn old man. Madhob Kalita is also quite cynical now; like most other people in Assam he has lost interest and hope in the politics of ULFA which has been corrupted by money, greed and dishonesty. He is also coping with the death of his son Rizu. It is Leela who finally lets Samar into this deeply guarded secret and it is not something he is prepared for.

Rizu's time in the mountains as an ULFA cadre taught him many difficult things. However, not for once had he been unfaithful to Leela whom he had promised to marry. Leela and Rizu get married too, yet Leela is drawn towards Rana who also reciprocates. This creates confusion for all three of them because the Army wants Rizu killed for he is the kingpin of the arms smuggling racket that goes out of hand, and Rana can never execute this plan, primarily because of his deep care, protection and friendship towards Rizu. At this point again, it is almost a struggle between the state and the centre, as Rizu and Rana are pitted against each other with their common thread being Leela. On the discovery of the affair, Rizu intends to shoot Rana but events take a different turn: it is Rizu who is killed – not directly by Rana but on his orders. It is poignant that even though Rizu was a member of an organization that insisted that identity be based on language, he never let that interfere in his friendship with Samar and Rana. Rizu remains true to the core ideals of friendship, love and loyalty as do Samar and Rana, albeit in their own ways.

Red River thus explores love and loyalty in the time of violence. It is as much a tale of friendship as it is of rivalry, between two very different kinds of people. Borders among nations in this novel are porous; they clearly do not define the 'nation' as the definition of nation is not steady. It is, therefore, a tale of a journey that transcends space and time and yet, brings together friends torn apart by history and destiny.

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