



Witnessing the Bodo Identity Movement: A Reading of Mangalsingh Hazowary's Poetry

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Abstract

Literatures from the Northeast of India has now become a separate genre within Indian writings in English. The rich and diverse traditional culture and their erosion in the face of rapid modernization, as well as the effect of the long-drawn political turmoil on the common people of the region are some of its main concerns. Although writers in English are more known than others due to their accessibility by a greater number of audiences, there are a great many writers from the region who write in other languages and whose poetry express similar urge to bear witness. But they are lesser known either due to unavailability of translations or bad translations. While Assamese writers like Hiren Bhattacharyya, Nabakanta Barua, Nilmani Phookan, Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi and Indira Goswami have been translated and stand as representative voices from the state, the same cannot be said about Bodo writers from Assam. Despite occupying much attention of the media as well as the academia with stories of conflict, ethnic cleansing, and a long-drawn separatist movement, the availability of Bodo literature to non-Bodo readers is conspicuous by its absence. This essay is an attempt at engaging with this absence by looking at Mangalsingh Hazowary as one more important voice among the many poets from the Northeast of India. Some of his poems in his anthology of poetry *Jiuni Mwgthang Bisombi Arw Aroj (True Memoir of a Life and Some Prayers)* shall be read as bearing witness to the Bodo identity movement, and thus fulfilling one of the tasks considered most crucial for writers from the region.

Keywords: Northeast Literature, Literature In Translation, Bodo Literature, Witness Poetry, Mangalsingh Hazowary, Bodo Identity Movement, Witnessing Conflict

Introduction

Robin S. Ngangom, Desmond Kharmawphlang and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih were three of the first poets from the Northeast of India who gained popularity outside the region. Writing in English since the 1970s, they wrote about Shillong (Meghalaya) where they are all based, about its landscape and folklore, about conflict and political turmoil, and about the sense of alienation from what Ngangom called “the mainland”. Together, they came to be called the Shillong poets. In theatre, Ratan Thiyam from Manipur gained much popularity in the 1970s. An alumnus of the National School of Drama, New Delhi, Thiyam initiated the ‘Theatre of Roots’ movement by using traditional Manipuri forms of performance in order to portray both local and global issues. From Assam, it was Indira Goswami who became an established name in the 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s through her works written originally in Assamese. The above-mentioned writers wrote much before “Writings from the Northeast” or “Northeast Literature” became known as a separate genre in itself in the first decade or two of the 21st century. Whether it is literatures from the 1970s or from the early 21st century, we can say that concerns about the backward socio-economic conditions of the region, the perceived negligence by the centre and the experiences of living in a region fraught with conflict and violence have prevailed as persistent themes. These themes and concerns are what differentiates the literatures from this region from Indian writing. “The writer from the Northeast differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way. While it may not make him a better writer, living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but perforce master the art of witness” (Ngangom and Nongkynrih ix-x).

A writer from the conflict-ridden region of the Northeast of India is thus more of a witness, speaking out the unspoken conditions of living in the region, and less of a poet-artist dealing with ‘woolly aesthetics’. Ngangom, a Shillong-based bilingual poet writing in Meitei (Manipuri) and English often

portrayed the precarity of life in conflict-ridden Manipur, his home state. A telling example of his witness poetry is his “My Invented Land” where he speaks about a homeland that is elusive, lost and ravaged, even as the youth dream of finding it. Expressed in very economical words, Ngangom highlights the nature of life in a state ravaged by the violence of insurgency and counter-insurgency forces. The gun is therefore, pressed not only against one temple, but both. If on the one side there are the insurgency forces, on the other there are the state forces. The common men and women are sandwiched between the two forces, leading an unspeakably precarious life, not knowing when their end would come, and from whom. Literature from the Northeast region of India, irrespective of the language they are written in, of the locations they are written from, or of their concerns, appear to be bound by a common trait. This unifying common trait is, the desire as seen in Ngangom’s poem above, to bear witness to the conditions of conflict, violence, and corruption, and by bearing witness, find meaning in the precarious lives lived in the region.

It is due to the rather compulsive desire to bear witness that literature from the region may also be called “Witness Literature”. Laura Sasu defines “Witness Literature” as this new genre born in the 20th century out of the necessity to testify to the horrors and atrocities experienced during the Holocaust and the communist totalitarian regimes that followed. A literary witness (read writer) is according to her, “one who *can* (is still alive and still has the ability to) speak up and does so in testimony” (Sasu 8). While Sasu highlights the importance of personal experience in producing ‘witness literature’, Nadine Gordimer believes that many a times, it is also the perpetrators who may have testimonies and stories to tell. Poetry and fiction emerging from conditions of evil and injustice have been termed as ‘Witness Literature’ by Gordimer. In her lecture later published in *The Guardian* as “Testament of the World”, Gordimer says, “Witness Literature finds its place in the depths of revealed meanings in the tensions of sensibility, the intense awareness and the antennae of receptivity to the lives among

which writers experience their own as a source of their art". Literature then, has an important function of comprehending the meanings of events which may otherwise be incomprehensible. It is a political function that must be fulfilled by writers in tune with their milieu. The literary witness may not necessarily be a victim/perpetrator testifying from experience; but he or she may adopt an 'existential condition of witness' (Gordimer). A literary witness may assume the role of someone who has experienced conditions of conflict, violence or injustice and feels the urge to invest those experiences with meaning. It is this that Gordimer considers as the highest calling of a writer. Carolyn Forché similarly attributes a political function to the act of witnessing through poetry. According to her, witness through poetry "is not a recounting, is not mimetic narrative, is not political confessionality" nor an act of memory, but an experience that occurs through the "readerly encounter with the literature of that-which-happened" (Forché 20-22).

Most writers from the Northeast of India fulfil the above-mentioned political function by attempting to capture a picture of their lived lives as well as of those around them in their works. Despite the discomfort of some towards a straightjacketed definition of literature from the region as 'literature of conflict', most of them are indeed largely concerned with conflict and political turmoil. The gruelling task of portraying lives as precarious as the ones lived under the shadow of constant turmoil, and the unspeakable and ludicrous nature of existence makes it often difficult for writers to simply tell the tale as they are. It is probably because of this that most poets "seek refuge in absurdist irony often directed towards oneself, in parody, and in satire" (Ngangom 300). Ngangom was describing the extreme realism found in contemporary Manipuri poetry when he said the above words. But what he said about contemporary Manipuri poetry is very much true of the various writings from the region that attempt to portray life in the here and the now. To irony and satire, one may also add an assumed detachment, as the poetic device used by Mangalsingh Hazowary who wrote in the '90s and bore witness

to the Bodo movement and its repercussions in the society. This essay is an attempt to examine the poetry of Hazowary, a poet very well-known among the Bodos, but never so far looked at as one of the representative voices from the region.

Mangalsingh Hazowary: The Individual and His Poetry

Mangalsingh Hazowary is a noted Bodo writer who has contributed immensely towards the growth of Bodo literature through his poetry, prose and drama. If writers and their literary creations may be considered as playing important roles in the consolidation and definition of the identity of a people, then Hazowary's works have played instrumental role in mapping the Bodo identity. Many of his poems and plays draw from Bodo oral history and folklore, and thus contribute to the rhetoric of the Bodo nationalism and Bodo identity movement. For instance, his plays like *Jaolia Dewan* (1979) and *Swmdwn* (1979) are based on legendary and historical figures respectively who fiercely fought for the Bodo soil. Even as he drew from oral history, he gave those plays a contemporary character by highlighting contemporary socio-political issues. His poems such as "Echoing Melody" and "How Much Longer?" trace the oral history of the Bodos which portray the Bodos as an ancient people with a glorious past having migrated from Siberia, through China, Tibet and Bhutan, till they reached the Brahmaputra and the Barak valleys. Drawing from colonial ethnography, he claims the residues of Bodo existence throughout the region by referring to names of places and rivers. Through such poems and other literary creations, Hazowary participated in the milieu of his time in which the Bodo identity movement was the most enduring.

Mangalsingh Hazowary had been sporadically involved with the then nascent All Bodo Students' Union when he was yet a schoolboy in the late 1960s. When the Plains Tribal Council of Assam launched a militant movement for a union territory called "Udayachal" in 1967 for the tribal and indigenous peoples of Assam, he had provided his support. He was also involved with the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, and was an

active participant in its Bodo Script Movement of 1974. As told to Suryasikha Pathak during an interview for *The Sentinel* in 2007, Hazowary believes in the constructive role writers and intellectuals can play in sustaining the society by creating a positive environment. While development of Bodo language and literature led by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha strengthened the Bodo identity movement, he had felt that the Bodo cultural and religious life must also be regenerated. Therefore, he along with some other associates initiated the All Bathou Religious Mahasabha in 1993. Through this organisation, Hazowary succeeded in reviving and reforming the practice of Bathou worship among Bodos in several parts of Assam. In 2005, after the Bodo language was included in the 8th schedule of the Indian Constitution, Mangalsingh Hazowary became the first Bodo writer to receive the Bhasha Samman from Sahitya Akademi for his anthology of poems called *Jiuni Mwgthang Bisombi Arw Aroj* (2003)¹. The Bodo identity movement had succeeded to bring recognition for the Bodos as a people, and Bodo politics was entering a new phase after having gained an autonomous council for the Bodos in western Assam. The early years of the 21st century was a momentous period for the Bodos. During such a time, Mangalsingh Hazowary's bagging the Sahitya Akademi award for an anthology of poems composed during the decades of turmoil and violence of the Bodo movement was only apt. The poems in the collection bear witness to the changing trajectory of the Bodo movement and Hazowary's own relationship with Bodo politics. While poems like "Echoing Melody" and "How Much Longer?" reiterates the Bodo nationalist discourse of a rich Bodo history, "Freedom! We Want Freedom!" is a revolutionary poem that repeats the narrative of Bodos as victims of oppression. As the revolutionary speaker cries out, "We shall rise and revolt, / We shall bring freedom, / We shall bring change...", he also questions –

How long shall we be cheated and exploited?

How long shall we be neglected?

Dominated by others,

How long shall we continue?

How long shall we tolerate? (Hazowary 51-52)

The poems in the anthology can serve as a historical account of the Bodo movement from its inception to its violent turn, from the birth of insurgency and conflict with the State to the inter-factional conflicts within the movement, from the mindless killings and immeasurable tragedies to the new categories of people born out of the movement. We see Hazowary bearing witness to all that he had experienced in the three decades from the 1960s to the 1990s assuming different poetic voices such as that of the young and hopeful revolutionary, the victim of violence wrought sometimes by militant nationalists and sometimes by the state, the betrayed nationalist leader, the helpless common man, and often the detached observer.

Witnessing the Birth of a Revolution

As mentioned above Mangalsingh Hazowary's early life was touched in a great way by the wind of revolution that has swept through the hearts of generations of Bodo youths since the 1960s. The Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) had launched the movement for "Udayachal" in 1967. The following year the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) was formed in support of the demand for "Udayachal". Around the same time the Bodo Sahitya Sabha had begun to mobilize for the replacement of Assamese script with Roman script in writing Bodo. Hazowary was a school student then. But like all others of his generation, he was greatly inspired by the call for devotion to the cause of Bodo language, culture and identity. Speaking about the times to Suryasikha Pathak in the 2007 interview, he says that the movements led by the PTCA, ABSU and the Bodo Sahitya Sabha brought awareness to the Bodo people about their identity. He says, "Almost everybody in some way or the other, was involved with various struggles, if not overtly then silently. People from all walks of life have experienced it and become politically conscious" (Hazowary,

Writing Culture). It is this political consciousness, awareness of one's ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity and the desire to fight for its preservation that we see in poems like "New Envoys", "Freedom! We Want Freedom!", "Our Pledge for Life", "We Shall Triumph", and "Lads and Lasses". In these poems, the poetic voice is that of the youth inspired by the zeal to struggle and sacrifice one's life, if need be, for the sake of the Bodo 'nation'.

"New Envoys" announces the rise of this youth to political consciousness, as they march with a new thought and new aim to fulfil new demands of the times. The arrival of this youth into political awareness is sometimes compared to a tempest and sometimes to the arrival of revolutionaries in the battle-field. They are heroes of the new age marching to the battle-field to "vanquish the cunning of the enemies," and overcome their "intrigues" (Hazowary 61). "March to the Battle-field" begins with the onomatopoeic "March! March! March! / March ahead to yonder battle-field," painting a verbal picture of the march of hundreds of Bodo men and women down the streets of western Assam demanding for equal representation (Hazowary 61). In "Freedom! We Want Freedom!", marching ahead in order to fulfil their new goals and stand unitedly against exploitation and oppression, the Bodo youth announce that they are ready for a revolution, ready to defeat the enemy and hoist the flag of victory (51). The 'enemy' or the 'new aim' or goal are not clearly outlined in many of these early poems. However, in "Our Pledge for Life" we learn that the new goal which has inspired the youth is to "worship" and "serve/ Our Mother tongue,/ Our literature and culture". Having pledged their lives for the sake of the "Motherland", the youth vow to "uphold and spread/ Our language and literature" and "cherish and develop/ Our culture and tradition" (Hazowary 53).

Witnessing the initial years of the Bodo movement, these poems highlight the struggle of the Bodos to emerge out of a feared oblivion and claim a place in history through their language, culture and literature. While some of the poems

illustrate the Bodo youth's political awakening, "Our Pledge for Life" highlight the moment when political awakening was joined with a cultural awakening. Within the lines of the poem, the motto of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, "Boro rao geolangthwng" (Let the Bodo language bloom) is seen to be expressed. The pledge to fight for the cause of Bodo language, culture and literature are reiterated again and again in poems such as "Lads and Lasses", "Tempest of the New Weather", "New Dreams of a New Hope", "Heroes", etc. which are infused with the vigour of revolutionary zeal and the hope of a new dawn. "We shall triumph!" and "we shall rise!" cries the poetic voice in "We shall triumph", expressing hope for the success of the revolution and fulfilment of the cause. "March to the Battle-Field" and "New Dreams of a New Hope" celebrate that hope.

Through these poems Hazowary bears witness to the nascent stage of the Bodo identity movement when the combined efforts of the PTCA, ABSU and the Bodo Sahitya Sabha triggered a mass movement for the Bodo's political, cultural and economic rights. The discourse that nurtured the movement was that the Bodos were an oppressed people suffering political, cultural, linguistic and economic backwardness. In order to rise from that backwardness, the Bodos must go through a cultural and political awakening, recognize their true identity and learn their history, only after which educational and economic backwardness would be overcome. While these early poems may not meet the definitions of "witness literature" provided by Carolyn Forché, Laura Sasu or Nadine Gordimer by not being accounts of violence or conflict, they nevertheless witness the wind of change that blew through the region among the Bodos which culminated in bigger political and social conditions.

The Aftermath of Revolution: Bearing Witness to Conflict

The cultural movement led by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha had seen some success with the introduction of Bodo medium of instruction first in primary and then secondary schools in the Bodo majority regions of Assam². Bodo language and literature

was also introduced at the university level as part of Modern Indian Languages. This was in the 1960s. As seen above, the cultural movement of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha supplemented the political movements of the PTCA and ABSU through the late 1960s and '70s. In the 1980s, however, the rise of the Assam Movement led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), and its culmination in the Assam Accord of 1985, aroused among some section of the Bodos a sense of betrayal and further alienation from the mainstream Assamese society, politics and culture. It was also the decade when the All Bodo Students' Union made their final crossover to active and radical political activism. They found their distrust of the mainstream Assamese society strengthened, and felt the need for a more vigorous movement for a separate state in order to counter what they perceived as Assamese chauvinism. What followed was a period of tumultuous political upheaval in the Bodo areas, marked by not only the agitation for a separate Bodo state and state suppression of it, but also factional dissent and conflict, birth of insurgency and violence. This is also the period when the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, which had set out as a non-political organisation was marred by the political situation of the community.

Mangalsingh Hazowary's poems composed in the 1980s and 1990s are shorn of the revolutionary zeal, enthusiasm and hope of his earlier poems. They bear witness to the tumultuous times when life, surrounded as it was by conflict and incomprehensible violence, was utterly precarious. He appears to be overwhelmed by disillusionment at the changing trajectory of the movement and the seeming loss of the 'great' cause. The committed poetry of his youth transforms and take on a distanced observer's tone. In "No Man's Land: The Name of My Province", he highlights the bestiality he sees around him. In this land which he wants to call a "no man's land", beast have fallen silent; dogs do not bark and crows do not caw. Vultures and eagles do not squabble for food. There is a sense of contentment and inertia among these creatures, as meat is abundant and they are well-fed. Hazowary conjures up a gory

image of dead bodies lying all around, left to the mercy of wild creatures as the world around him falls silent. The songs of the *common mynah* and that of the cuckoo are no longer heard. These and the melody of the *kham, jotha, serja, siphung* (traditional musical instruments of the Bodos), which were typical features of a Bodo village, have according to him, all fallen silent. As the mass movement for the preservation of Bodo identity and the demand for political rights gave way under ideological differences, insurgency, inter-factional divide and fratricidal killings, the youthful enthusiasm of the poet seemed to have sobered down. He expresses his loss of hope and sadness at the turn of events as follows:

For the sake of this vast land
For the province of the dreams,
The leaders have lost their lives;
From Udayachal to Astachal,
From Mising-Bodoland to Bodoland
Or the land of the Bodos;
Not one of the above names
I like for my land;
All of them are now lost
To history,
Turned into a home for beasts. (34)

The above lines also throw light at the various stages through which the Bodo movement went, and how from a land that could accommodate all the plains tribals of Assam, the fight narrowed down to the demand for Bodoland. None of those grand dreams were fulfilled. The piece of land to name which, so many had fought and lost their lives, the poet sees, has been reduced into a home for beasts, worthy of none of the names the leaders had dreamed of. As the poet attempted to make sense of the insensible violence and corruption, he perhaps realised that the youth of a decade ago, who marched ahead in a revolutionary zeal to fight against oppression and

regain dignity and identity, have somehow strayed from their goal along the way. The anger and the passion, which were ignited to raise the Bodos from oblivion, has turned inward and instead of burning down the oppressors, burned the very revolutionaries. Therefore, in “An Offering of Flowers to Bodofa Upendranath Brahma”, he prays to the Bodofa or the ‘Father of the Bodos’ to guide the Bodo youth, “To stir (them) away from hatred/ And disunity” and to “Inspire them to believe in/ Love, faith, and tolerance” and to move ahead armed with the slogan “Live and Let Live!” (37)³. He recalls the charismatic leadership of Upendranath Brahma by remembering how his very cry had awakened innumerable Bodo youths to the cause of Bodo identity and political rights. However, after the death of their leader, the youth appear to have strayed from the cause, and have become ‘truly rudderless” (37). Instead of the ‘master race’ that the “Father of the Bodos” had dreamt of, the Bodos, according to the poet, have been corrupted into bestial beings trapped in the quagmire of unaccountable violence and counter-violence. As the true cause begins to recede into the far horizon, the nationalist spirit that had initially ignited the movement turns into narrow parochialism. Thus, even a person who dares to speak of inter-community love and tolerance or universal peace and unity are suspected of treason. The dead soul in “Cry of the Dead Soul” demands from the living world the cause for his killing, wants to be heard, and reminds the living of their cowardice and their corruption. He understands what his guilt was. He knows that he met his death because he “spoke about love, tolerance, faith, and peace”, he loved the entire world and often said “This world is home to all,/ Learn to live in it peacefully” (7). This implies that preaching universal love, tolerance and peace brought him dead at the hands of “some who preach peace” while “some looked on dumbfounded” and “others held their head low” turning into mute spectators of a gory murder, silenced by the fear of the gun (8-9). The dead soul here may be perceived as the collective soul of the Bodos, whose revolutionary spirit fighting

for change has been overwhelmed by the unaccountable violence which was one of the outcomes of that very revolution.

The violence and senseless killings that Hazowary bears witness to through his poetry had become a part of the ordinary rural landscape and life in the Bodo areas in the 1990s. Glaring ideological differences between the PTCA and ABSU, the breaking away of more radical factions to take armed revolution and a further divide among the militant faction had introduced into the Bodo society several fissures. Repercussion of these fissures were felt severely by the ordinary men and women as well as the not so ordinary. "A Souvenir" composed in the year 2000 is a telling documentation of this violence and conflict emerging from factional in-fighting. Dedicated to Mohini Basumatary and written after he was gunned down by unidentified men in his native village in August 2000, "A Souvenir" is the poet's attempt to invest such incomprehensible events with meaning⁴. Here, he is the literary witness as defined by Gordimer, who fulfils the political function of trying to understand and describe his milieu. "A Souvenir" begins by referring to the way he was chased around his house and the paddy fields before being shot at from close range.

You were hunted and butchered like a beast!
This heart-rending and terrible news
Came flowing with the dark clouds
To the banks of the Gourang,
Where the burial pit
For the martyr Bineswar Brahma was dug. (21)

Even as he receives the dreadful news, the poet/speaker appears to understand that the deaths of the two personalities – Bineswar Brahma⁵ and Mohini Basumatary are linked, not only by the perpetrators of this crime and by the cause of their deaths, but also by the sheer madness into which the entire movement has been reduced to. As people pay their last respects to Bineswar Brahma standing by the banks of the River

Gaourang in Kokrajhar (Assam), their minds are filled with questions about why and by whom was Mohini Basumatary killed. While some recall him as a good person, there were others, speaking in harsh murmurs, who said, "This is the revenge for killing our Bineswar" (21). That these were conclusions arrived at through judgements "ensnared by politics", the poet knew. He knew that the true cause for both the deaths was their "service to society of all races", "attempts to end divisions and quarrels", for "dreaming of a strong Bodo race" and for dedicating their lives for the revival of the Bodo language, literature, culture and society (22). He knew that in the crossfire between the two warring militant factions, both Brahma and Basumatary were mere victims of suspicion as to where their loyalties lay. Paralysed by fear and helplessness, hearts brimming with anger and frustration, yet mouths shut, and tongue-tied, he wonders "Who could blame whom" for these murders. Therefore, the poet looks at the changed circumstances and this new phase of movement and poignantly concludes, "Who comes when, goes when/ No time to enquire" (22).

If important people of the community, who had been part of the long movement and participated in its changing trajectory became mere victims of suspicion, the common men and women were in worse circumstances. Their lives were fraught by all the dangers of living in such times, trapped between the state and the rebel factions. This condition was worsened by the utter silence in which their predicament was shrouded in. "Memorandum of a United Village" presents this precarious existence of the ordinary village folks, who seek to make their voices heard. It is significant that this is a 'united village' that the poet presents to us. Ideologies and factional loyalties might differ, but they were all united by their tragedies and in their desire for the end of conflict and violence. As they gather to put forward their complaints and voice their opinions, they are all overwhelmed by fear, irrespective of what their position in society was. They were determined to let their collective voice reach the leaders (revolutionaries turned political leaders)

through a memorandum even if their “Hearts fail them due to fear” (24). Each individual gathered there recount their horrific encounter with the brutal aspect of the revolution. What follows is a series of images of young men either killed by state forces on suspicion of being a militant, randomly killed in a false encounter or kidnapped and murdered by one of the rebel factions on suspicion of treason, and of women raped and widowed, or kidnapped by rebel groups or state forces and turned into their messenger. The impression that these images provide is that Gadam, Raona, Gabda, Bimaishri, Daohakhungur, Gendao, Maldang or Ringao, irrespective of gender, age, class or loyalty, have all been victims of the political turmoil that ravaged throughout the region. None of the possible negotiations they made in order to survive could buy them their safety – be it helping the state forces, or any one of the rebel factions. Apart from these distressed people, we however, also see people like Onthaitapa, Lela Dewani and Celepha – a new breed of people, the by-products of the revolution. Onthaitapa is the gun-wielding angry young man demanding loyalty from the frightened people. “Learn to do and act exactly as we say,/ Else, we know how to punish and kill man”, he says, shooting in the air (26). Lela Dewani is an opportunist who continues to pay lip-service to the ideologies of the movement crying out “Live and let live!” and “Do or die!” and assures the villagers the actualization of the dream for a “golden land”, but is also aware that he must keep his own advantages first and keep step with changing times (26). Similarly, Celepha the social-worker is a fence-shifter, who needs to first “watch and analyse, / Where the water flows” before taking any step (26). These are the people who contribute in silencing the voices of protest and demand for peace made by the villagers. “Memorandum of a United Village” thus not only bears witness to the predicament of the common men and women, but also acts as a medium for their voices to reach the rest of the world.

Conclusion

How does one respond to the crumbling of a dream with which one has been so invested? How does one respond to the incomprehensible corruption of the very ideologies to support which one had provided part of the discourse? How does one react to the utterly unspeakable nature of events occurring around him? Hazowary attempted to deal with all those questions through his poetry. He responded to his milieu first by writing the enthusiasm-filled revolutionary poetry in his youth when he was much invested in the movement, and by capturing the changing colour of the movement when he had withdrawn from political activism and moved towards literature, culture and spiritualism.

In the 1990s when the very fabric of the Bodo society crumbled under the weight of the prolonged strife, Hazowary's poetry showed the tendency to oscillate between extreme concern and pathos to extreme detachment. At times, his inability to remain indifferent is expressed through irony and satire, while at other times, he dwelt on graphic description of the gory brutality all around. Most of his poems lack subtle symbolism and resemble mere documentation of events. If not this stance, Hazowary's poetry perhaps would not have had the language to bear witness to the Bodo movement. For, in witnessing such turmoil, conflict or violence, as Forchè points out, language itself experiences a change. Faced with extreme conditions, when the witness emerges to write, Forchè says, he or she writes the experienced wound. "At the sight of the wound, language breaks, becomes tentative, interrogational, kaleidoscope" (Forchè 25). The poems in the collection trace the long trajectory of the movement documenting the political and cultural awakening of a people, their political activism as well as the disillusionment and frustration of innumerable Bodo people, leaders as well as common men and women who had dedicated decades of their lives to the cause. More importantly, they present the aftermath of the revolution, "a region of devastated consciousness of barbarism and the human capacity for cruelty and complicity with evil" (Forchè 25).

Endnotes

1. The anthology was translated into English as *True Memoir of a Life and Some Prayers* in 2011. All the poems discussed in the essay are from the English translation.
2. These successes however came with their own problems. For instance, schools in the Bodo majority regions faced acute shortage of teachers (instructors in the Bodo language) as well as books. Often entire academic years passed by without books. After secondary school, when students went for higher education in the urban centers such as Guwahati, students faced severe problems as medium of instruction in those places was Assamese.
3. In the 1980s, when the ABSU emerged as the leading stake holder in the movement for a separate state of Bodoland, Upendranath Brahma, Satish Basumatary (who later took the name Sansuma Khunggur Bwiswmuthiary) and Garlabatha Basumatary were some of the young men who led the movement. Together, they had hoped to bring about immense socio-political, economic, educational and cultural development and transform the Bodo people into a 'master race'. They had led the movement with slogans such as "No Bodo land, no rest", "Divide Assam 50-50", "Do, or die" and "Live, and let live". Upendranath Brahma died of cancer in 1990 with his dreams for a Bodo master-race incomplete. His associates named him the 'Father of the Bodos' (Bodofa) in view of his great contribution to the Bodo cause.
4. Mohini Basumatary was a member of the Assam Legislative Assembly from Bijni in the now Chirang District of Assam. He represented the People's Democratic Front. He was only 35 years old with a young family when he died. His killing was just one of the many who were killed by the rebels of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) faction between 20th and 21 August, 2000. A report titled "Another Bodo Leader Falls" in *The Telegraph* on 21st August, 2000 had reported that Basumatary may have displeased the NDFB by favouring Bineswar Brahma's move for unification.
5. Bineswar Brahma was an influential voice in the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. He was one of those who had strongly advocated the use of the Devanagari script for writing the Bodo language. This placed him at odds with the NDFB, which advocated the use of Roman script. When he was shot

dead by members of the NDFB on 19th August, 2000, he was working on peace efforts between the different factions of the Bodo rebels, as well as with the Assam state and Indian governments.

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