

Address by
Hon'ble Mr. Justice Ranjan Gogoi,
Chief Justice of India
On the release of book

'POST COLONIAL ASSAM (1947-2019)'

By
Mrinal Talukdar

on

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I am given to understand that, more than the Book, its author and his thoughts hold the centre-stage at a book-release function. Today, the author in our midst Mr. Mrinal Talukdar is a gentleman who is known for wearing different hats with equal ease. A senior journalist based out of Guwahati, his articles and pieces of reportage having been reaching the Assamese homes for years now. Mrinal is known to be equally effective in using both the English and the Assamese language in his pieces, and his brand of investigative journalism has brought him acclaim and earned him the trust of his readers, through his journey of nearly three decades as a media-person.

After about three decades of hard work, Mrinal has emerged as a front-rank News-anchor besides a documentary film-maker. In fact, he has to his credit over 20 documentaries on diverse subjects. During this period of time, Mrinal has also evolved into a prolific researcher and a writer of books touching issues that have influenced contemporary socio-political history of Assam as well as of other areas in North-East India. His books on the Indo-China conflict, on the history and growth of insurgency in the North-eastern States, on the infamous rhino-horn poaching trail of south-east Asia running from Kaziranga to Kunming, among several others, have been acclaimed as well-researched and incisive works by him. In fact, a documentary titled 'Tezpur-1962' that was based on one of his works, went on to win the National Award for Best Investigative Film/Documentary in the year 2016.

Those who have been reading Mrinal's books would find that his style of writing and choice of words reflect his roots in serious journalism - they are fearless and high on content, and less on rhetoric. In fact, as a bi-lingual writer, Mrinal uses the grammar of

the common man and his narratives have a distinct flow of storytelling in them. His instincts as a journalist also find expression in the 'issues' that he chooses to write - he may address a contemporary readership, but writes about historical events that have either left a profound influence on contemporary developments or would have invariably touched the life of every citizen. This rare combination of skill and instincts that Mrinal deploys in his works, have made them not only widely accepted and acclaimed, but also made him popular across the northeast. In fact, it is no surprise that you would find him invited to different forums, to talk on a wide range of issues, ranging from contemporary social and political history of Assam to the historical backdrop behind rise of insurgencies & workers agitations.

I am not one amongst those whom you would come across at book-launches, but I decided to join this one as I was truly impressed by the idea and the project that Mrinal has been pursuing with dogged diligence and devotion, titled "Nanda Talukdar Social History Project" which aims, among others, at

documenting the epoch-making post-independence developments and events in Assam like the National Register of Citizens (NRC) etc that have left a mark in the social history of Assam.

This Project is a collaboration between Axom Xahitya Sabha and the Nanda Talukdar Foundation, that's named after Mrinal's father, who was an eminent literary figure of Assam. I am told that Mrinal launched this Foundation in 1996 to preserve and promote a collection of over 11,000 books that he inherited from his father. I understand that Mrinal lays credit for his passion for research and writing to this vast collection, that is now considered a treasure house of the Assamese literature of the period from early nineteenth century to the twentieth century.

For all that I have said, I deem it an honour for me to join all of you at this national-book release function of Mrinal's '**POST-COLONIAL ASSAM' (1947-2019)**.

Assam is an ancient land unrivalled in its picturesque natural beauty. Such is its antiquity that it finds a mention in both

resultant violence have deeply impacted socio-political life in Assam.

In the above context, the present effort by Mrinal Talukdar titled '**Post-Colonial Assam (1947-2019)**' is laudable for it revolves around facts and perceptions, that display a chain of events over decades which have been perceived as discriminatory, regressive and un-constitutional by the wider section of the citizenry in Assam, with a palpable undercurrent of detachment from the national discourse that has been fuelling a sense of isolation and alienation in the Assamese minds. On the one hand Mrinal's book seeks to bring to the fore the sheer lack of understanding and acceptance of the enormity of the geo-political turbulence that was unleashed amongst the peace-loving citizenry of Assam and other North-Eastern States, by the waves of human migration triggered in the aftermath of the partition of the sub-continent by the retreating colonial power. The contents of the book need not be thought of as any rhetoric, as it is nothing but core reality - and a living truth. Added to this is the unexploited and undeveloped avenues of the tourism potential;

lack of State assistance in tea research though Assam produces 50% of the Indian tea; the neglected mineral resources and the impoverished academic institutions. All speak for themselves.

But perhaps what has affected Assam and its population the most is the issue of illegal migration, which has come to dominate not only all aspects of life in Assam but also all narratives emanating from it. Political mobilisation and actions in this regard have resulted in over four decades of political turmoil and instability. There are numerous accounts of how the student agitation got initiated and progressed to give voice to a long-standing grievance, most vividly articulated in the famous 3D demands of the year around 1978 i.e. *detection, deletion and deportation*. The movement was revitalised by the events of the subsequent years, which witnessed coming together of almost all major political outfits seeking a redress of this matter. From the very beginning these movements were able to mobilise enormous support and enjoyed a tremendous response from all walks of life. But we all are painfully aware of the vicious cycle of violence that took hold thereafter and the great human and material cost it

exacted on the daily lives of the ordinary Assamese. For the next four decades suspicion, panic and hostility fed continuously by furious political rhetoric and relentless violence became the new normal, with the state machinery remaining unable or unwilling to tackle it.

One is, therefore, forced to ask, in a constitutional democracy what place does violence hold? What are the limits of tolerance of violence that is typical in such confrontations? What forms of public spheres are best suited to articulate differences? From a governance standpoint it becomes imperative to seek a mechanism that is capable of fostering diversity while providing a framework for cultivation and expression of shared basic values and common interests.

The Assam Accord of 1985 and its concomitant features - introduction of Section 6A in the Citizenship Act and the promise of a National Register of Citizens was an attempt to evolve a solution through the legal framework. What are the results? Section 6A is waiting for a nod from the Supreme Court while the

NRC is not without contestations. The NRC is neither new nor a novel idea. It found expression as early as in the year 1951 and in the particular context of Assam, in 1985 following the Assam Accord. Infact the current NRC is an attempt to update the 1951 NRC. Prior to this exercise, the whole discourse had been repeatedly fed with enormous amount of guesswork as to the number of illegal migrants, which in turn fuelled panic, fear and vicious cycles of lawlessness and violence. Callous reporting by few media outlets only worsened the situation. There was an urgent need to ascertain with some degree of certainty the number of illegal immigrants, which is what the current exercise of NRC attempted.

In fact, the entire exercise is nothing but a manifestation of one of the most peaceful means by which the stakeholders seek to remedy the wrongs and omissions of that turbulence, whose effects changed the courses of lives of not only individuals but of communities and cultures across the region. Those changes have had cascading effects, down the generations. The cascade still operates, in indescribable ways and manifestations. The wounds

of that turbulence haven't healed as yet. There isn't any place for any fresh wounds or any political conundrum. The Assamese people have displayed great magnanimity and large-heartedness in accepting various cut-off dates, for the purposes of preparation of the NRC, that are at a considerable distance from the time when the first onslaught of forced migration hit them or their ancestors. This humaneness is 'acceptance', that is one of the first steps towards inclusivity. It needs to be told and brought on record that people who raise objections, including to these cut-off dates, are playing with fire.

At this cross-road, we need to keep in mind that our national discourse has witnessed the emergence of arm-chair commentators who are not only far removed from ground realities, but also seek to present a highly distorted picture. The emergence of the social media, and its tools, have also fuelled the intent of such commentators, who thrive through their 'double-speak' language sitting in the confines and comforts of their spaces. They launch baseless and motivated tirades against democratic functionalities and institutions, seeking to hurt them

and bring down their due processes. These commentators, and their vile intentions, do survive well in situations where facts are far removed from the citizenry, and rumour-mills flourish.

Assam, and its development agenda, too have been victims of such arm-chair commentaries, wherein the 'due-processes' have been questioned and challenges have been thrown at vital initiatives that were aimed at ushering in a new era of peaceful co-existence, leading to overall progress and prosperity of the entire region. It is here that Mrinal's work, together with the backdrop of events narrated therein, would help the knowledgeable and the discerning readers understand the socio-economic and geo-political realities of Assam and its neighbourhood, upon which all well-meaning future endeavours would require to be based. This is an occasion to put things in proper perspective - the NRC as it will finally emerge is not a document of the moment - 19 lakhs or 40 lakhs is not the point. It is a base document for the future - kind of a reference document to determine future claims. This is its intrinsic value, in my comprehension.

Having said this, I must emphasise that the trend is one of mutual peaceful co-existence. We must remember that across varied ways of life globally, one common thread that runs through us all is the fact that matters to which we are attached most or we love most are those that we never got to choose, but were trained to accept and cherish. Our parents and our siblings, our birthplace, our culture, our religion and even our nation! We never got to choose any of them, yet we accept them and live happily with them. We are most attached to them too, - aren't we !!?

Unfortunately, this simple idea of 'acceptance', especially of people who may be different or diverse from us, is an idea from which people are at great distance. We seem to be in an era where our failure to accept what is different from us, is no longer considered a short-coming. In fact, we wear such 'failure' on our sleeves, with misplaced pride and vanity, little realising that the very basis of all societies or communities centred around and grew upon the 'idea of acceptance' of the diverse. Progressive

Societies were meant to grow on bonds nurtured by 'acceptance' and 'inclusiveness', growing around the objective of 'peaceful, mutual co-existence'. The present world around us seems to suggest otherwise. I would rather leave this esteemed audience to ponder over these thoughts, which I consider fundamental if we, as a nation that emerged from the shadows of its dim past, are to plan our future course together, and if our choices, as a nation, are to remain the same.

And while so pondering, I would request a little insight as to what might be the expectations from various stakeholders, in particular the fourth estate. Given the composition of this august gathering, I believe this is an appropriate forum to discuss the issue. It is our duty to participate in the political life of the community, the society and the state as public citizens. Without such involvement, there remains the danger of becoming irrelevant and sinking into cynicism, endlessly creating and diagnosing problems without playing any part in solving them. One can see this happening these days, in the manner in which working of the institutions are assessed, especially by the media

and particularly on the social media. A case in point would be the nature of reporting about the whole NRC process, and institutions engaged therein. One has to ask, is this a constructive manner of engaging with any institution, particularly one tasked with the crucial responsibility of protection of basic rights of all. We must desist the urge of finding wrongs and shortcomings everywhere we look and merely for the sake of finding one. The constant desire to play to the gallery by demeaning institutions and all their efforts, must be resolutely avoided. This of course must be a self-check. At no point is this a suggestion for uncritical affiliation, for public scrutiny and critical engagement are an absolute imperative for attainment of a vibrant and meaningful democracy. But where is the critical engagement, when unrestrained mudslinging, casting unsubstantiated aspersions and launching personal attacks against both the institution and its members, masquerade as public discourse. We all will do well to remember, that it does not take long to tear down an institution but it takes eons to build an effective one.

Today it seems that Assam with its irredeemable past is being saddled with an unrepresentable present. Do we run the risk of an unimaginable future as well? What lessons must we draw on to avoid such an eventuality? It is often said that those who forget history are bound to repeat its mistakes. It is in that context that I believe Mrinal Talukdar's work "*Post-Colonial Assam 1947-2019*" is extremely relevant. It is an adroit collation of what has transpired politically in the Assam over the last seven decades, a treasure trove of knowledge and information, which I am confident, will contribute substantially to the understanding of anyone inquisitive about the socio-political developments in Assam. His journalistic experience of over 30 years has enabled him to effectively map varying strands and nuances of Assamese political history. The lessons and insights he provides are worth learning, and we would do well to pay attention to the concerns he attempts to draw our attention to. I commend him for this work, and sincerely hope that it will inspire minds, young and old, to think deeply and work actively for the genuine causes afflicting both the Assamese society and the nation at large.

Thank you. Jai Hind.