

Exploring The Poetic World: A Reading Of Nilmani Phukan's Poetry

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Abstract

Nilmani Phukan's firm entry to Assamese poetry started in 1963 when his first poetic venture *Surjya Heno Nami Ahe Ei Nadiyedi (The Sun is said to Descend Along this River)* came out. Since then, he has been writing poetry for well-nigh five decades and has earned himself reputation as a major modern poet in Assamese. Redolent with native imagery and forceful yet lyrical cadences, his poetry waves together a variety of themes, capturing the myriad nuances of Assam. He carries a new sensibility into Assamese poetry through his thought, language and style. This paper is an attempt to explore the poetic world of Nilmani Phukan, one of the distinguished modern poets in Assamese.

Key Words: Poetry, Style, Language, Nuance

Full paper:

“Phukan often appears to have been exploring an area of solitude, turning his poetic gaze inward, discovering the longed for solitude within his self and not outside. The familiar world gets defamiliarised in that region, this defamiliarisation achieved through a metaphorical exploration of language that acquire symbolic suggestiveness.”

(Deka, *Nilmani Phukan Kabi aru Kabita* 102)

Nilmani Phukan and Contemporary Poetic Trends:

Assamese poetry took a new turn after the Second World War. A group of poets was influenced by progressive ideas and they reflected social imbalances through their poetry in a magazine called 'Jayanti'. Initially the magazine was edited by noted poet Raghunath Choudhary. But in the year 1943 Kamal Narayan Dev and Chakreswar Bhattacharya took its charge and then the magazine had began to represent class consciousness in the light of Marxist philosophy. The poets who wrote in 'Jayanti' were deliberately writing poetry embracing dialectical materialism, thereby exposing the condition of the working class and immense exploitations on them. Poets like Amulya Barua, Bhabananda Dutta, Kamal Narayan Dev, Chakreswar Bhattacharya, and Dhiren Dutta and the like fell into this group.

There was however another group of poets who started to write poetry as a result of the influence of T.S.Eliot, Ezra Pound and other modern imagist and symbolist poets. Essentially 'Ramdhenu', a magazine which first came out in 1950, inspired this group. Navakanta Barua,

Mahendra Bora, Ajit Barua and so on were in this group. Eliot had immense impact on Navakanta Barua and Ajit Barua. (Deka, *Nilmani Phukan Kabi aru Kabita* 29). Both the groups in a way rendered Assamese poetry a new colour. With a fertile environment for literary modernism led by 'Ramdhenu', Assamese poetry had left its romantic flavor and started adhering to modern psyche and sensibility. Significantly the young poets seemed attracted more towards this trend than the fashion exercised by 'Jayanti'. Assamese poetry thus entered into the modernist experiments in true sense during 1950s. 'Make it new', the motto of literary modernism, was also seen in Assamese poetry of the time. It led to amazing experiments in poetry and a new attitude towards a changing world. The poets looked at how modernity and modern experiences brought out uncertainty, crisis, chaos, disorder to life. Nilmani Phukan also started writing poetry during 1950s. The influence of such changes is seen in Nilmani Phukan. But at the same time Phukan remains mostly a sensitive observer in meditation like many of his romantic predecessors. Phukan did not move on the road paved by Eliot. His sensibility is mainly romantic. (Deka, *Nilmani Phukan Kabi aru Kabita* 29). He has deep feelings and a tendency to express his self along with imaginative power. This is unique about Phukan. Yet Phukan is a modern poet. He responded to the world with his exclusive insight. To do this, he took recourse to a new language. His use of language shows that he was also initially influenced by the imagist poets of the twentieth century.

Nilmani Phukan's firm entry to Assamese poetry started in 1963 when his first poetic venture *Surjya Heno Nami Ahe Ei Nadiyedi (The Sun is said to Descend Along this River)* came out. Prior to the publication of the book, he wrote poetry only in some magazines and journals. The first anthology had established his worth as an emerging modern poet. Since then, he has been writing poetry for well-nigh five decades and has earned himself reputation as a major modern poet in Assamese. Redolent with native imagery and forceful yet lyrical cadences, his poetry waves together a variety of themes, capturing the myriad nuances of Assam. He carries a new sensibility into Assamese poetry through his thought, language and style. Following is an attempt to discuss some of the major areas and traits which create his poetic world of Phukan.

Nilmani Phukan: A Poet of Silence

Nilmani Phukan is a sensitive poet, his sensibility rests on different aspects of life and the world: nature, love, paddy field, river, history, folklore, tradition, alienation, trauma, exile, silence and so on. Likewise his poetry encompasses people from various stratum. They are shepherds, peasants, boatman, women and children. But in the first place, Phukan is a poet of silence. Several critics have come to consensus in this regard. In his childhood, he was attached with Gelabil, a small river in Dergaon, Assam. (Thakur, n.pag). The surrounding atmosphere was a vast inspiration for Phukan. He was influenced by the vast silence in such natural scenes.

*Sarapat pot jay
Hridayat*

*Mara Jilir kholat
Rodor rong*

Bahor aagot dhowai are

Nirjanata (Dhowar Samay)

(The fallen leave sink
Into the heart

The hues of the sun
Into the remains of dead cicadas

Smoke clips solitude
At the tips of bamboos (The Time of Smoke)

Phukan, in a way, seeks to explore the pain and sorrow of life through such silence. That pain is not necessarily of the poet's own. Rather he sees the soreness of human life in general. To an extent, thus, his poems reflect the restlessness and anxieties of modern life. That world is sometimes blurred; reality is vague for him or he compares life to an endless journey:

Both of us were rowing past a forest ablaze
The birds waded through a sea of mist-like smoke
We saw the serpents so many
Driting along the waters

Moving on and on we came across
A little cottage close to waters
And we moored just as the sun was to set
There was none in the dwelling, from one corner

It too was beginning to smoulder
We heard the shackled sky sob in the distance
Like a helpless alms-seeker

Again we slowly started to row
Through the smoke and night ('History', translated from Assamese)

The poetic voice is sad in the above lines while the persona is taking the journey which seems endless. It is a metaphorical journey which may symbolize the metaphysical nature of life. Phukan's sadness in his earlier poems is quite apparent:

Into the remoteness of the night
Descended
Each star
The breath of sprouting trees

On the oher side of the river
Along the moon's path of descent
Scaled
Countless columns of mystery

Into the remoteness of the night
 Descended
 The past and the present
 Within the howling range of the jackal
 The shriek of emptiness ('The Shriek', translated from Assamese)
 Significantly the titles of his two successive collections are *The Sound of Silence, And What Quietude*. He looked at various dimensions of life in his early works. But his approach to life and the world then is of philosophic nature:

Dhowar majedi uri gol Saraito

Jalasytot kokbokai heito kar

Mat

Tirotajoniye enekoi hiya bhukuwai

Kandise kiyo - 'Dhowar Majedi Uri Gol Saraito'

(The bird has flown away through the smoke/ whose voice is there dying in the pond/
 Why is the woman crying so much - 'The Bird has Flown Away through the Smoke')

It seems that the poet has so many curiosities regarding life and the world. These come out as questions in his poems. At one level, such questions express the mysteries of life. The following lines sufficiently reflect it:

Why does the rice-plant
 sprout in the dark

Why does rain fall why
 seeds grow in man's loins and
 Milk in woman's breasts

I wonder if

I have ever seen all the earth and
 All the sky

All the faces of men

Living and dead

Did I ever find one morning

Myself in awakening lacerated face ('The Dancing Earth', translated from Assamese)

Phukan's Social Concern:

By and by Phukan starts exploring some harsh realities of the contemporary situation:

muthi muthikoi kati tor dhekiyar anguli

Ajarar andharat toye beso

Bai tor kon gaont ghar

manuh morene tat- 'Muthi Muthikoi Kati Tor Dhekiyar Anguli'

(Cutting and bundling your finger of fern

Thou sell them in Azara's darkness

Sister, in which village you live

Do people die there?) ('Cutting and Bundling your Finger of Fern')

In this poem he shows us a picture of a poor woman who sells vegetables in a local market in Azara. Her appearance itself speaks about her poverty. The poet speculates several probable reasons of her poverty and thereby her struggling life as well: flood, unexpected accidents in life, scarcity of food and so on. The woman represented by the poet reflects hard humankind where she is living.

It is seen that Phukan's outlook to life and society took a turn from 1980s. His initial obsession in poetry was with human feelings and nature. He then did not directly incorporate the social and political issues. He was wandering almost in an abstract world. He gradually became concerned with the chaotic globe, particularly with the burning socio-political crisis of Assam. His vision thus widened to a new horizon. Hiren Gohain holds:

At one point he (Phukan) moved backward from society and took shelter in silence. He thought that he could explore certain truths through meditation in silence. But that was not adequate to attain absolute success. But one day such self exile ended and he has returned to the world of flesh and blood. The holy journey to explore human life now has achieved totality.

(Gohain x-xi, translated from Assamese)

We notice a different Nilmani Phukan in two successive collections *Poems* and *The Dancing Earth*. The following poem represents the crisis in Assam during early 1980s. All Assam Students' Union (AASU) started a movement against the illegal migrants from Bangladesh and it led to stern violence, killings, bloodshed, massacre and so on in the state. The poet was greatly concerned of such turmoil:

For a good many days together
All day and night
I've been hearing just a single sound
The Smell of burnt tyre

In my tears
The stones are soaked
That grassy plot bathed in blood
Is soaked

(‘For a Good Many Days Together’, translated from Assamese)

This condition has been very common in Assam from the time of Assam movement till date. And Phukan has been voicing such chaos through his verses.

Nilmani Phukan regards himself a humanist. His poetry also reveals that he is a humanist that humanity sustains itself in a system of shared values amidst its destructive propensity. Therefore he discovers a metaphoric sun taking a bath in the eyes of the child made dumb by sorrow. (Deka, *Nilmani Phukan Kabi aru Kabita* 105). In the poem called ‘the Dancing Earth’ in which the earth epitomises wholeness absorbing the dead and the living, destruction and creation, he expresses his faith in the humanity in the midst of death and madness. The poem is a magnificent expression of the poet's humanism, which is essentially a compassion for fellow beings and a belief in the wholeness of human existence. The Earth's dance is eventually a dance of creation that absorbs the destructive energy in its motion. The earth's dance is in agony and in

anger, but finally it is of joy. That is why the poetic persona asks reader not to respond to the phenomenal world in a negative manner:

Never say you don't have any
That you would never reach there
That the river is without water
That the water does not have fire

(‘Dancing Earth’)

Here water and fire are essential elements for the survival of the humanity.

Nature and Love:

Many of Phukan's images are associated with nature. That nature is basically derived from his attachment with the rural life. Harekrishna Deka opines:

The representation of nature in the nature centred images in Phukan is not overt. Their role in most cases is symbolic. It shows that his environment during his childhood greatly touched his sensitive mind. (Phukan, *Sampurna Kabita* 33, translated from Assamese)

Nilmani Phukan remains mostly a sensitive observer like many of his romantic predecessors. He is a keen observer of the world around him discovering a symbolic correspondence between his inner world and the outer world. Images from nature abound in his poetry but his mental connection with his natural world is unlike that of the romantics. The romantics appear to feel a separation from the natural world and try to bridge the gap through their inner visions and often recreate this natural world as a world kept under tension in unstated comparison. Nature usually enters into Phukan's images metaphorically in symbolic dimension, defamiliarised in order to restructure the order of reality in the imaginative plane. In a poem on sexual ecstasy, the evocation of ecstatic response is in terms of natural images suggesting a correspondence between the sexual and natural:

In the forest, inside the forest
Call of a crane
Open your arms
Let the clustered stars die down
In your hair's fragrance
The wind rumbles in the lotus pond
In the body, in your body
a red flower (‘Mating Song’, translated from Assamese)

It suggests that natural elements contribute to the poet's realization of someone with whom he has been attached both mentally and physically. Another poem indicates similar sense:

She'd been pursuing me even in my sleep
Well, where could she be now
Could that uprooted tree be there
Upon her face

Are the twin streams with reddened waters
Flowing in her lips

Could those two black horses be there
 In her eyes

Each night even today
 She pauses trampling my heart

(‘She’d Been Pursuing Me’, translated from Assamese)

Here there is a haunting presence of an unnamed entity simply designated by the pronoun. This entity is desirable (she’d been pursuing me even in my sleep), but it is present only in its absence. The absence is known to us from question of the poetic persona (where could she be now?). This paradoxical entity who continues to remain present being absent is not presentable in human terms, so nature enters the poem as metaphors, ‘could that uprooted tree be there/ upon her face’ and ‘are the twin streams with reddened waters/ flowing in her lips’. If this entity is a form of beauty, it also carries destructive energy within its self. Thus we often encounter images appearing as metaphors from nature that open up windows to give us glimpses of the symbolic order of the perceived world. It is beyond what is seen and complex in its suggestiveness. Phukan is not necessarily a poet of love. But we do see his treatment of love in some of his poems. Sometimes, it is sensual as stated above. Or sometime it is of metaphysical nature as we notice in ‘As a Sesame Flower’ where a person looks for his beloved on the bed and the beloved is flowering, on the contrary, at the foot of a hill. However, Phukan’s treatment of love is quite appealing.

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