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## MAMONI RAISOM: THE CROSSROADS FROM JNANPITH TO PEACE BUILDING

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### ABSTRACT

Mamoni Raisom Goswami is a legendary writer in Assam. Her works are a treasure to world of Assamese literature. This versatile writer has written many novels that contain appeal of humanity. Apart from her wonderful writings, as a human being she was an amicable person with dignity and fame. Her writings have such power that they encourage people to live life and go forward. She has written her tremendous novels on the basis of her experiences in life. In her social life she had contributed a lot to the upbringing of our Assamese society to peaceful situation. The soil of Assam has witnessed lost of thousands of lives of innocent people, revolutionaries and soldiers in the dreadful conflict between the ULFA and the Government of Assam as well as Government of India. As a part of our civil society Mamoni Raisom Goswami has patronised the initiative of peace process after the 25years of bloodshed in. She experienced and tried to go insight the deep realities of the conflicting armed group and acted as a bridge between two warring sides.

The paper will be an endeavour to light on the life and unique role of this magnificent woman as a facilitator of peace process which will be written with golden ink in the history of Assam.

### **A brief introduction of Mamoni Raisom Goswami and her works:**

The soil of Assam has witnessed many legends and great persons in centuries. Dr. Mamoni Raisom Goswami is one of the greatest persons. Though she was famous as 'Mamoni Baideo' her real name is Indira Goswami. She was born on 14<sup>th</sup> November, 1942 in Guwahati in a Brahmin family. The name of her father is Umakanta Goswami and name of her mother is Ambika Devi Goswami. Unlike other girls, her school life started at Latasil Primary school, Guwahati, then Pine Mount School in Shillong and finally passed her matriculation from Tarini Charan Choudhury Girls School, Guwahati. She did her graduation from prestigious Cotton College. Her life was unique and exceptional. It was full of misery and agony, from her childhood she remained in depression. Her tragic life continued till the death of her beloved husband Madhavan Roysom Iyenger but she triumph over her all miseries through her writings. She started her writings with short stories and that collection of stories was published in her age of thirteen only. Since then her pen never stopped until her death. Several novels and short stories



had been penned down by her where she focused on the sufferings of disadvantaged sections of society. In her novel like *The Rusted Sword, The Mouth Eaten Howdah of a Tuskar*, she championed cause of vulnerable sections of our society the women from Harizons and Brahmin widow. For her great works, she received the Sahitya Akademi in 1982 and Jnanpith Award in 2000. Apart from these highest literary awards she got many prestigious awards.

For her writings with classics we can depict her as a humanist who understand the joys and pathos of common people by experiencing and seeing their life from very near in her real world. This was continued to a momentum when she took an active part as civil society of Assam in mediating for achieving a resolution to the conflict between ULFA and the State. She referred her involvement in the peace process merely as an 'observer'.

### **The theory of peace, and peacemaking:**

In Assam, United Liberation Front of India (ULFA) has a long 30 years history of extremist activities which hinders a development of peaceful environment. So far as the peace building is concerned, state generally adopts coercive steps regarding the conflict resolution. It is seen that the state is not keen to give a space to the Civil Society Groups in resolving conflicts in the region. The State's main aim to resolve conflicts is to create a conflict settlement in the region. During conflict, civil society organizations often define themselves in opposition to the state. In the face of repressive or authoritarian governments, an autonomous position is important and consistent with the aims of civil society organizations (Helman, 1992). Civil society cannot replace the state.<sup>1</sup> But it can be independent from state, but not in a complete sense, since civil society is oriented towards and interacts closely with the state and the political sphere.<sup>2</sup> The term civil society refers to the space in a given society that exists between individuals or families possible, and is independent of the state (Varshney: 2002).

There are three levels of work as John Paul Lederach suggests regarding conceptualisation of Conflict transformation. This simultaneous work for conflict transformation are- top policy level, middle range (community and leaders) and grass root work. In addition, involvement of multiple tracks is very important for enduring peace. All parts of community need to be involved including government, NGO/professional, business, private citizen, research/education, activism, religion, funding and communication/media. By bringing the civil society to the peace process, the



peace table can become more democratically inclusive both in the process and content. In this way, involvement of civil society in the peace process reflects the multi aspect nature of peace and peace building. As mentioned above, Mamoni Raisom Goswami's involvement in the peace process is the participation of civil society in peace building.

### **The Journey of peacebuilding:**

She came to contact with the ULFA militants for formal reasons. As she mentioned in her own writings that she agreed to attend their caderal meetings organised at their camps. It is the homage and pure respect of the ULFA cadres to Mamoni for her noblest writings as well as great personality. As per her own writings, when she came into contact with them, the ULFA had in their initial periods of outfit activities. For the most of the cadres, especially for the women cadres, her strong and bold writings were the source of inspiration. In 1993 when she visited any of the transit camps of the ULFA somewhere in Darrang district, she came to know that her Academi Award novel *The Rusted Sword* was given to read to the women cadres to know the struggle of women in different places in different ways.<sup>4</sup> Later in due course of time she visited to the family and houses of the leaders Paresch Barua, Arabinda Rajkhuwa and she felt the misery and harassment the family members get in the name of army operations, raid etc. because during the period of 1993 Bajrang, Rhino operations were being conducted by the state.

In the name of army operations, immense human rights violation had happened in hook and corner of different villages in Assam. The family members of the cadres in particular and the villagers in general are the victims of army operations through various human right abuses like arbitrary arrests, beating, rape, killings etc. On the contrary, the killings by ULFA and human rights violation to some people were also concern of Mamoni Raisom Goswami. The killings of some of her relatives Manobendra Sharma and Girish Goswami who were killed by the outfit on May 1985 made her look the outfit in a different way. The violence perpetrated on innocent civilians by both outfit organisation and state agencies made her anxious and restless. She believed that peace and welfare of the people could not be achieved through the barrel of the gun. Her mind told her to raise voice against the atrocities on the common people both by the army and ULFA. The voice turns to a strong protestation against the violence through her pen and she started to write some short stories based on the activities of ULFA and circumstances in army operations. Jaatra was such short story written by her. The story of Jaatra depicts three types of violence and how these three types



of violence mutually related with each other. Again her story “Endless Journey” has been translated into all the Indian languages. The protagonist of the story is a ULFA cadre whose parents exclusively depend upon his son. The story describes the atrocities of army on life of family members of ULFA cadre and the common people living in villages.

She enormously visited the transit camps and family of some of the leaders like Commander-in-chief Paresh Baruah, President Arabinda Rajkhuwa and digs out the feelings of the family members these was cordially felt by her. During the period due to the armed conflict people from all sides lost their lives. The number of lives loosing life had strike into the mind of her so that she decided to do something for bringing peace to her motherland. This decision had got the extreme momentum when ULFA perpetrated the Dhemaji massacre which is one of the black days in Assam. She could realise that the mass support to ULFA had been declining day by day for their terrorist activities. She has written that

“The ULFA gained great sympathy in 1994 at Madhupur cremation ground when on June 24 of that year the army killed five cadres and tied their bodies to tyres and burned them instead of handing them over their parents. Thousands of people led a procession with the bodies and a public ceremony was also observed. Gradually as years passed by they lost this public support. The idea for peace talk had been germinating in my heart for quite sometime till then.”

The Dhemaji incident has deeply mourned her and so by the sufferings of both sides-police and militants. She said,

My question is: If the Indian Army can fight stop the Siachen Glacier and in other adverse conditions, couldn't they capture those women rebels and put them behind bars?... I was gripped by the same agonising feeling on the Dhemaji College. When I saw the memorial built in the memory of young children killed in Dhemaji during August, 15, 2004 bomb blast, I was pinned...

Thus, the killings and loss of innocent lives with personal experiences in different phases of life make her mind and soul to gear up for doing something for ending up the violence in Assam. So, she was keen in bringing peace to Assam. She said,

“My yearning for peace in my native became stronger after I visited several families of the victims who were killed during insurgency, especially in the



interior areas of Kamrup, Darrang and Nalbari districts. Some estimates say that during the past twenty five years, more than 12,000 people were killed. They included poets, doctors, engineers, and others, many of whom I knew rather well.”

For her the blessings of each and every common people were the encouragement and faith was the strength of her work. For this reason she had the courage to face the realities whether she would succeed or failed. Hence we can say her as the first ever facilitator of the peace process between GoI and ULFA. A renowned journalist of Assam Wasbir Hussain has written about Mamoni Raisom Goswami’s effortless works as

“Indira Goswami, a celebrated Assamese writer and Delhi University professor, was already working as a peace facilitator in her individual capacity since November 2004. The ULFA had endorsed her role although she had restricted herself to only appeals for a negotiated settlement. In fact, Goswami is the first person to have been approved by the ULFA to play the role of peace facilitator since the group’s formation on 7 April 1979. Therefore, it was not surprising to find her being vested with the responsibility of acting as coordinator of the PCG after its formation.”

It is alleged that the state government has never been showed up any heartiest sign up to resolve the conflict. But Mamoni Raisom Goswami’s endeavour has turned the minds of Assam Government to take the steps forward to initiate the peace process. Otherwise over the years, New Delhi has tried to resolve the conflicts with the militaristic hand. Different army operations like Bajrang, Rhino etc. as mentioned above are the examples of militaristic way of resolving conflicts through wiping out ULFA by killing and arresting them. Mamoni Raisom Goswami said that Chief Minister of Assam Tarun Gogoi had wanted her to become a mediator long back. But she candidly confessed that she was encouraged to take up the job after the ULFA wanted her to act as a facilitator.<sup>8</sup> So, ULFA constituted the Peoples’ Consultative Group (PCG) for facilitating talks between ULFA and the GOI for an amicable resolution of the armed conflict. The Group had total nine members accordingly Mukul Mahanta, Arup Borbora, Dr. Brajen Gogoi, Ajit Kumar Bhuyan, Haidor Hussain, Hiranya Saikia, Dilip Patgiri, Lachit Bordoi and Diganta Konwar pus Professor Indira Goswami as the Chief coordinator and Mr. Raboti Phukan as the coordinator. The Commander-in-chief of ULFA, Paresh Baruah had chosen Indira Goswami alias Mamoni Raisom Goswami as he found a very patient listener to his side story as both of them had a lot of telephonic conversations from the mid of 2005. Moreover, she



had the all loving image of 'baidew' among every Assamese people for her non-political literary personality of national repute.

The PCG held three rounds of talks with the Central Government in New Delhi in three different times. The first meeting was held on 7 February 2006 and that meeting was attended by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. For the sake of ULFA and Mamoni prepared the draft of peace appeal to initiate the peace process with the help of her colleagues in Delhi University and subsequently approved by ULFA's 'commander-in-chief' after some initial hiccups was submitted to the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.<sup>9</sup> She tried all her best to talk and raise the all issues in front of the Prime Minister. But the issue of 'sovereignty' was becoming the blockage of the peace process. After the meeting with Prime Minister she thought she had to do more work on it. Soon after the meeting, Paresh Baruah apparently called her up insisted for keeping up the demand of 'sovereignty' as their main and foremost issue to be discussed with. Later other two rounds of talks were held in New Delhi, the second round PCG-Government meeting was held on 7<sup>th</sup> February 2006, and the last one, on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2006, was attended by the then Prime Minister Shivraj Patil.

### **Conclusion:**

It is fact that Mamoni Goswami had started the peace process with all moral, ethical and good intensions- unfortunately the endeavour did not seemed as much fruitful in results. Because, merely having a good intensions is not sufficient to resolve an issue which has already crossed 30 years of insurgency; moreover hindering facet from bureaucracy and decision of top leaders had affected the peace process to remain in stalemate position. However, Mamoni Raisom Goswami's endeavour will be remain as a path finder asset in the history of peace building in Assam.

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