Chapter IV

NILMANI PHUKAN'S POETRY: A STUDY
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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)

IV. 1

Nilmani Phukan and His 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 periodical called Jayanti.
Initially, Raghunath Choudhary, a noted poet, edited the magazine. Kamal Narayan Dev and Chakreswar Bhattacharya took its charge in 1943 and since then the magazine had began to represent class-consciousness in the light of Marxist philosophy. The poets who wrote in *Jayanti* were deliberately producing poetry embracing dialectical materialism, thereby exposed 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. Hem Barua also showed similar sensibility in his earlier poetry.

There was another group of poets who wrote poetry with the influence of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and other modern imagist and symbolist poets. *Ramdhenu*, a magazine that first came out in 1950, significantly inspired this group. Navakanta Barua, Mahendra Bora, Ajit Barua, Homen Borgohain and so on belonged to the group. Eliot had immense impact on Navakanta Barua and Ajit Barua. (Deka, *Nilmani Phukan Kabi aru Kabita* 29). Modernism, in true sense of the word, emerged in Assamese literature through their poetry.

Both the groups, in a way, rendered modern Assamese poetry a new colour. With a fertile environment for literary modernism led by *Ramdhenu*, Assamese poetry had left its romantic flavour and started
adhering to modern psyche and sensibility. Notably, the young poets seemed attracted more towards the modernist 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 started writing poetry during 1950s. The influence of literary modernism is seen in Nilmani Phukan. 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 was mainly romantic. (Deka, Nilmani Phukan Kabi aru Kabita 29). He carries profound feelings and taking recourse to a unique imaginative power, he exhibits a tendency to express his self. This is a distinctive feature of his poetry.

Phukan, nevertheless, is a modern poet. He responded to the world with his exclusive insight. He searches for a new language for the purpose. 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 periodicals 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 in the poetry of Phukan.

IV. 2

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 stratums. 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. He was attached to Gelabil, a small river in Dergaon, Assam in his childhood. (Thakur, n.pag). The surrounding atmosphere was an immense inspiration for Phukan. The vast silence of such natural scenes perhaps influenced Nilmani Phukan.

*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’, translated from Assamese)
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
Drifting 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. The journey is quite metaphorical which may symbolize the metaphysical nature of life. Phukan’s sadness in his earlier poems is also apparent:

Into the remoteness of the night

Descended

Each star

The breath of sprouting trees

On the other 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)
It will be important to mention that the titles of his two successive collections are *The Sound of Silence* and *And What Quietude*. He looked at various dimensions of life in his early works and his approach to life and the world then was of philosophic nature:

*Dhowar majedi uri gol Saraito*

*Jalasaytot kokbokai heito kar*

*Mat*

*Tirotajoniye enekoi hiya bhukawai*

*Kandise kiyo* - ‘Dhowar Majedi Uri Gol Saraito’

(The bird has flown away amid the smoke/ whose voice is there dying in the pond/ Why is the woman crying. ‘The Bird has Flown Away amid 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)

IV. 3

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’, translated from Assamese)

He shows a picture of a poor woman who sells vegetables in a local market in Azara in the poem. 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.

Phukan’s outlook to life and society took a turn from 1980s. Assam witnessed heavy turmoil in this decade as Assam Movement created a violent situation in the entire state. There were chaos, picketing, bloodshed and strike everywhere in the state. The movement greatly influenced the socio-political condition of the state. It was literally impossible for a poet or an artist to remain quiet in such situation. Nilmani Phukan’s initial obsession in poetry was with human feelings and nature and he did not directly incorporate the social and political issues in his poems. It was as if he was wandering almost in his own
world. Perhaps the terrible social condition during 1980s helped him to notice the realities of the outer 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 perceive a different Nilmani Phukan in two successive collections, *Poems* and *The Dancing Earth*. The Assam Movement initiated by All Assam Students’ Union’s (AASU) to force out the illegal Bangladeshi migrants from Assam led to stern violence, killings, blood shedding, and massacre in the state. The echoes of the burning time can be heard Assam in the following poem by Phukan and it appears from the poetic voice that the poet was greatly concerned about such turmoil:

For a good many days together

All day and night

I’ve been hearing just a single sound

The Smell of burnt tyres
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. Phukan has been voicing such chaos through his verses. Nimani Phukan considers himself a humanist. His poetry also reveals that he is a humanist. He believes that humanity sustains itself in a system of shared values amid 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’, translated from Assamese)

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

With the emergence of the new liberal economy and globalisation in 1990s, people experience a harsh life-struggle in various ways, particularly the lower and lower-middle class. There is a new world equipped with modern technology, but surviving in this world becomes a big challenge for common people. There is however no distinct voice regarding post-globalisation phenomena in Phukan’s poetry. It is perhaps because he has stopped writing poetry of late.
IV. 4

Nature and Love:

Many of Phukan’s images are associated with nature. That nature is basically derived from his attachment with the rural life. Harekrisna 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. The red colour symbolises bodily desire. Another poem indicates similar nous:
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.

Though Phukan is not a poet of love, we do see his treatment of love in some of his poems. Sometimes, it is sensual as stated above. It is of metaphysical nature at times 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. His feelings of love are naturally dense and readers can smell a unique aroma in his treatment of love.

Apart from these major dimensions, there are, of course, a number of issues in the poetry of Nilmani Phukan. However, keeping in mind our prime concern, we will try to explore the folk-elements and intertextuality in his poetry in the next chapter.
Works Cited


