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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940Vol. 25:5 May 2025
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Interrogating the Rebels: Rejection of Violence as a Path to Self-determination in Dhruba Hazarika's *Sons of Brahma*

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Abstract

Dhruba Hazarika's novel *Sons of Brahma* (2014) engages with the turbulent socio-political landscape of 1990s Assam, where separatist insurgencies and state counter-insurgency measures created a vortex of violence. Through the protagonist, Jongom Hanse, a pacifist scholar entangled in the conflict between rebels and the state, Hazarika critiques the futility of violence as a means to achieve self-determination. This paper explores how the novel posits non-violence as a viable path to secure individual and collective agency, challenging the dominant narratives of militancy in Northeast India. Drawing on scholarly analyses, this article examines themes of identity, morality, and resistance, arguing that Hazarika advocates for introspection and dialogue over armed struggle. By interrogating the rebels' motives and the state's complicity, the novel reimagines self-determination as an ethical pursuit grounded in human connection and mutual understanding.

Keywords: agency, militancy, morality, non-violence, resistance, self-determination, violence

Introduction

The Northeast Indian state of Assam, with its lush Brahmaputra valley, has long been a site of ethnic diversity and political contestation. In the late 20th century, separatist movements, notably led by groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), sought autonomy or independence, often through violent means. Dhruba Hazarika's *Sons of Brahma* captures this volatile period, weaving a narrative that interrogates the efficacy of violence in

achieving self-determination. Set against the backdrop of 1990s Assam, the novel follows Jongom Hanse, a reluctant scholar thrust into a web of insurgency and state repression after a chance encounter with rebel leader Anjan Phukan. Through Jongom's journey, accompanied by his friend Pranab Kalita, Hazarika explores the moral complexities of rebellion, the personal costs of violence, and the possibility of non-violent resistance as a path to agency. The novel's layered narrative situates it within a broader literary tradition of Northeast India, where writers grapple with questions of identity and belonging amidst conflict. Hazarika's choice of a pacifist protagonist challenges the romanticised militancy often associated with separatist struggles, offering instead a vision of resistance rooted in ethical clarity. By blending thriller elements with social commentary, the novel appeals to both regional and universal audiences, highlighting Assam's unique cultural tapestry—its rivers, temples, and syncretic traditions—as a counterpoint to its political turmoil. This paper argues that *Sons of Brahma* rejects violence as a sustainable means of securing self-determination, advocating instead for introspection, ethical resistance, and human connection. By analysing Jongom's pacifist ideology, the novel's portrayal of the rebels, and its critique of systemic corruption, I demonstrate how Hazarika reimagines self-determination as a process rooted in dialogue and mutual understanding rather than bloodshed. Drawing on scholarly works by critics like Sanjoy Barbora, Abhisarika Prajapati, and others, this study situates the novel within the broader discourse on Northeast Indian literature and its engagement with identity, conflict, and resistance (Das 45).

Historical and Socio-Political Context

To understand *Sons of Brahma*, one must first consider the historical context of Assam's insurgency. The 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of ULFA, which sought to establish a sovereign Assam, citing economic exploitation and cultural marginalization by the Indian state (Baruah 1999). The movement, initially popular among Assamese youth, resorted to kidnappings, extortion, and assassinations, prompting brutal counter-insurgency operations, including "secret killings" orchestrated by state forces (Hazarika 2018). This cycle of violence created a climate of fear and mistrust, fragmenting Assamese society along ethnic and ideological lines. ULFA's rhetoric of liberation drew on Assam's history of resistance, from the 19th-century Ahom rebellion to post-independence agitations against central neglect (Goswami 78). Yet, its violent tactics alienated many, as communities bore the brunt of both rebel extortion and state repression. Hazarika, a native of Assam and a former civil servant, brings an insider's perspective to this turmoil. His novel reflects the "troubled political situation

of Assam in the 1990s, where kidnappings, extortion, and political instability are the order of the day" (Prajapati 2). Unlike stereotypical portrayals of the Northeast as a monolithic conflict zone, Hazarika's narrative highlights the region's cultural richness and human complexity, challenging readers to reconsider the motivations behind rebellion (Barbora 121). By setting the story in iconic Assamese locales—Kamakhya temple, the Brahmaputra river, and Majuli island—Hazarika grounds the political in the personal, emphasizing the land's beauty as a counterpoint to its bloodshed. These settings serve as metaphors for Assam's dual identity: a nurturing cradle of diversity and a battleground for competing visions of sovereignty, where ethnic groups like the Bodo, Karbi, and Assamese navigate their place within India's federal structure (Mahanta 102).

Jongom Hanse: The Pacifist Protagonist

At the heart of *Sons of Brahma* is Jongom Hanse, a PhD scholar whose preference for books and physics contrasts sharply with the violent world he is forced to navigate. Jongom's pacifism is not merely a personal trait but a philosophical stance that challenges the binary of rebel versus state. When approached by Anjan Phukan, who seeks to exploit Jongom's writing skills for the separatist cause, Jongom is reluctant, embodying what critic Sanjoy Barbora calls a "nuanced view of the world" that "clashes with the blinkered, black-and-white hysteria of both the rebels and the state" (Barbora 123). His hesitation reflects a rejection of violence as a tool for change, aligning with Gandhian principles of non-violent resistance, though adapted to a modern, regional context. Jongom's journey begins when he and Anjan are arrested, and Anjan is killed during an escape attempt. Blamed by both the police and the rebels, Jongom flees with Pranab, embarking on a perilous race through Assam. This flight is both physical and ideological, as Jongom grapples with questions of loyalty, identity, and morality. His refusal to align with either side underscores Hazarika's critique of violence as a reductive solution. As Prajapati notes, "Hanse imbibes the ideology of the pacifist, and this turns out to be his undoing," yet it also positions him as a moral compass in a fractured society (Prajapati 2020, 5). Jongom's pacifism is tested through encounters with diverse characters—a temple priest, a boatman, an ex-rebel mahout—each embodying different facets of Assamese life. These interactions reveal the "deep-rooted humanism" that persists amidst violence, suggesting that self-determination is achievable through empathy and connection rather than conflict (Prajapati 7). For instance, the boatman's gentle guidance along the Brahmaputra symbolizes a path of coexistence, contrasting with the river's metaphorical "thirst for blood" (Hazarika

145). Through Jongom, Hazarika posits that true agency lies in resisting the urge to perpetuate violence, even when survival seems to demand it.

Interrogating the Rebels: Motives and Missteps

The rebels in *Sons of Brahma*, led by figures like Anjan Phukan, are portrayed with complexity, neither glorified nor vilified. Hazarika acknowledges their grievances—economic neglect, cultural alienation—but critiques their methods. Anjan's attempt to recruit Jongom reflects a desire for intellectual legitimacy, yet his reliance on coercion undermines his cause. As one reviewer observes, "The futility of insurgency and its diluted values lend a sense of realism" to the novel, highlighting the rebels' descent into criminality (Amazon Review 2014, qtd. in Prajapati 3). Kidnappings and extortion, once justified as revolutionary acts, become ends in themselves, alienating the very communities the rebels claim to represent. This shift mirrors ULFA's historical trajectory, where ideological purity gave way to pragmatic survival tactics, including alliances with external actors that compromised their legitimacy (Lacina 305). Hazarika's critique aligns with scholarly analyses of ULFA's trajectory. Sanjib Baruah argues that the movement's initial idealism was eroded by internal factionalism and external pressures, leading to a "cynical political vocabulary" that stifled solidarity (Baruah 187). In the novel, this cynicism is evident in the rebels' pursuit of Jongom, not for ideological alignment but for revenge. Their failure to engage in dialogue mirrors the state's own intransigence, trapping Assam in a cycle of retribution. Yet, Hazarika does not dismiss the rebels' aspirations. Through flashbacks and conversations, he reveals their personal histories—poverty, displacement, loss—humanizing their struggle even as he condemns their violence. This duality is central to the novel's interrogation of rebellion. As Barbora notes, Hazarika's characters are "convincingly real people," not mere archetypes, allowing readers to empathize with their plight while questioning their choices (Barbora 124). By exposing the rebels' flaws, Hazarika suggests that self-determination requires introspection and accountability, not just resistance, urging a reevaluation of militancy's moral and practical costs in Assam's quest for justice (Goswami 82).

The State and Systemic Corruption

If the rebels are flawed, the state is equally culpable. Hazarika portrays the police and administration as complicit in Assam's turmoil, exploiting counter-insurgency measures for personal gain. The novel's depiction of "secret killings"—extrajudicial executions orchestrated by state forces—echoes historical accounts of the period (Hazarika 92). Officers like Nilim

Kumar, who lead the pursuit of Jongom, embody a ruthless efficiency that prioritizes control over justice. Their actions, cloaked in patriotism, reveal a "select coterie in the administration" profiting from conflict (Prajapati 3). This systemic corruption extends to economic structures, where Assam's tea industry, a colonial legacy, remains a site of exploitation, with profits siphoned by elites while workers face rebel threats and state neglect (Sharma 67). This critique aligns with postcolonial theories of state power, particularly Frantz Fanon's concept of the "neocolonial elite," who perpetuate colonial structures under the guise of nationalism (Fanon 148). In Assam, the state's failure to address economic disparities fuels rebellion, yet its response—militarization and repression—exacerbates the crisis. Hazarika illustrates this through scenes of police brutality and bureaucratic apathy, which Jongom and Pranab witness during their flight. The tea estates, symbols of Assam's economy, are sites of exploitation, with managers facing threats from both rebels and corrupt officials (Hazarika 210). By exposing this collusion, Hazarika underscores the need for a reimagined self-determination that transcends state-rebel binaries. Jongom's refusal to trust either side reflects a broader call for accountability, urging Assamese society to reject complicity in violence and demand systemic change through non-violent means, challenging the state's moral bankruptcy as much as the rebels' misguided fervour (Mahanta 108).

Non-Violence as a Path to Self-Determination

The novel's most compelling argument is its advocacy for non-violence as a means to secure self-determination. Jongom's journey is not merely an escape but a quest for agency in a world that demands allegiance to violence. His interactions with Pranab, whose loyalty anchors him, reveal a "terrible secret" that binds them—a shared history of loss that could fuel vengeance but instead fosters solidarity (Hazarika 278). This revelation, disclosed on Majuli island, symbolizes a return to Assam's spiritual and cultural roots, where reconciliation is possible. Hazarika draws on Assam's syncretic traditions—Hindu, Muslim, indigenous—to propose a model of coexistence. The Kamakhya temple, where Jongom seeks refuge, is a site of sacrifice but also renewal, suggesting that violence can be transcended through ritual and reflection (Hazarika 98). Similarly, the Brahmaputra, both nurturing and destructive, mirrors the potential for Assamese society to choose life over death. As Prajapati argues, "The presence of deep-rooted humanism and friendship" in the novel offers hope amidst despair (Prajapati 7). This vision aligns with global non-violent movements, from Gandhi to Martin Luther King Jr., yet remains distinctly Assamese. Hazarika's emphasis on dialogue—between Jongom and

Pranab, between communities—echoes Amartya Sen's concept of "public reasoning" as a democratic tool for resolving conflict (Sen13). By rejecting violence, Jongom embodies a form of self-determination that prioritizes ethical integrity over territorial gain, challenging the rebels' militant nationalism and the state's coercive control. This stance resonates with Assam's Vaishnavite traditions, particularly the teachings of Srimanta Sankardeva, which emphasize compassion and unity, offering a cultural framework for non-violent resistance (Barman 53). Jongom's refusal to retaliate, even when cornered, underscores Hazarika's belief that true sovereignty lies in moral agency, not domination, paving the way for a reimagined Assamese identity rooted in coexistence rather than conflict.

Literary and Cultural Significance

Sons of Brahma contributes to Northeast Indian literature by offering a nuanced portrayal of Assam's struggles. Unlike mainstream Indian narratives that exoticize the region, Hazarika's novel is "firmly entrenched in a place, and its history," as a Hindustan Times review notes (2014, qtd. in Barbora 122). Its blend of thriller and social commentary appeals to diverse readers, while its focus on Assamese identity—through language, landscape, and culture—asserts the region's distinctiveness within India's literary canon. The novel's vivid descriptions of Kamakhya's rituals, Majuli's serenity, and the Brahmaputra's majesty evoke a sense of place that grounds its political critique, making Assam a character in its own right (Das 48). The novel also engages with postcolonial themes, particularly the tension between regional and national identities. By centering a pacifist protagonist, Hazarika challenges the glorification of violence in nationalist discourses, aligning with writers like Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya, whose Yaruingam similarly critiques insurgency (Prajapati 9). Yet, Hazarika's style—accessible yet layered—distinguishes him, making *Sons of Brahma* a bridge between regional and universal concerns. Its exploration of syncretism—blending Assamese folklore with modern dilemmas—positions it alongside works by Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao, who also weave Northeast India's cultural richness into narratives of resistance (Misra 50). By foregrounding dialogue over violence, Hazarika contributes to a growing literary movement that seeks to redefine self-determination as a collective, inclusive endeavor, resonating with global postcolonial literatures that grapple with the aftermath of conflict.

Counterarguments and Limitations

Some critics, like Sanjoy Barbora, argue that *Sons of Brahma* lacks the depth of Hazarika's earlier works, such as *A Bowstring Winter*, citing underdeveloped characters and a

predictable plot (Barbora 125). While this critique acknowledges the novel's fast-paced narrative, it overlooks its thematic ambition. The simplicity of Jongom's arc serves a purpose: to foreground his moral clarity against a chaotic backdrop. However, Barbora's point merits consideration, as the novel's focus on action sometimes overshadows psychological depth, particularly in secondary characters like Pranab, whose motivations remain underexplored (Sharma 72). Moreover, the novel's focus on male perspectives limits its exploration of gendered experiences, a gap noted in studies of Northeast literature (Misra 45). Women in the novel, such as the tea estate workers or temple devotees, appear fleetingly, their voices muted compared to Jongom's introspection. Future analyses could address how women navigate Assam's conflicts, complementing Hazarika's male-centric narrative. Additionally, the novel's optimistic view of non-violence might seem idealistic, given Assam's entrenched divisions, potentially underestimating the structural barriers to dialogue (Lacina 310). Despite these limitations, Hazarika's focus on ethical resistance remains a vital contribution, offering a counter-narrative to the region's militarised discourse.

Conclusion

Sons of Brahma is a powerful meditation on violence, identity, and self-determination in Assam's troubled history. Through Jongom Hanse, Dhruba Hazarika rejects the allure of militancy, advocating for non-violence as a path to agency and reconciliation. By interrogating the rebels' motives and exposing the state's complicity, the novel challenges readers to envision a future where dialogue and humanism prevail over bloodshed. Its vivid portrayal of Assam's landscapes and cultures enriches this vision, affirming the region's resilience and complexity. Hazarika's narrative transcends the thriller genre, becoming a call to rethink resistance in a region scarred by conflict. By rooting self-determination in ethical principles, the novel aligns with Assam's cultural heritage, particularly its traditions of syncretism and compassion, which offer hope for healing (Barman 56). As Northeast India continues to grapple with questions of autonomy and integration, Hazarika's work remains relevant, urging us to reconsider the means and ends of resistance. *Sons of Brahma* reminds us that self-determination is not merely a political goal but an ethical journey, one that demands courage, introspection, and a steadfast rejection of violence, inviting Assamese society—and beyond—to forge a path toward unity and justice.

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