

Memoir of a forgotten Indian - American from Assam



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gp narua 16 January 2011 15949 views

Thirty years ago, I was told by Jagdish Phukan, all time great Assamese Entrepreneur cum visionary writer,' had Amrit been staying back in Assam the state would have transformed into a most livable place in the country'. The remark of Phukan was a personal assessment on his great friend who has been forgotten by most Assamese by now ! The conversation veered round our state when I escorted ,in seventies of last century, the then American Ambassador to India in a visit to Kaziranga and stopped over for a couple of hours in Kamrup Komplex to dine. Amrit was none other than Harvard educated Amrit Baruah who left Assam, in search of mythical El Dorado, back in fifties to USA but could not snap the emotional umbilical chord with his state even now, despite having American citizenship.

Dr. Amrit Baruah, who taught in Yale university, now has penned down yet another book – Perhaps a memoir- which is worth its weight in Gold that is capable of inspiring the new generation Assamese youth to empower themselves. Amrit went to the same Middle school, MCME, at Guwahati where most of us studied later. His dear classmate and fierce competitor was Prof. Binoy Tamuli .Once Tamuli sir, who himself was a great student, intellectual and teacher told us that he could not top the class till Amrit left Guwahati.

It's never too early or too late to write one's memoir. As for the difference between memoir and autobiography, I think, an autobiography is an all inclusive look at life, a memoir would look at a smaller part or parts. Life is full of stories and a memoir is a gift you can leave behind, a legacy when you're no longer around to answer questions. Fortunately Amrit is alive and kicking even now. Being an author, an educator, and a workshop leader he would be available to us to answer our queries of life.

In fact his recent book, on sixty years back America , has made an excellent reading. While writing on America, especial on Boston, he returned time and again to Kolkata, Shillong, and Assam, in his reflections. America was not the same then as it is now. America did just emerged ,in fifties of last century, as a new super power militarily and economically and opened up its door for brilliant people all over the world. Unlike now, there were very few Indian occupying the top positions in universities, corporations and in Scientific Centers. Apartheid then was the rule of the day Dr. Martin Luther King was not a martyr then. Under those circumstances what Amrit saw, found, experienced and realized was the theme of his new chronicle. Can it be called memoir, novel or autobiography or a leaf of history?

A memoir is a beacon of light sent out to illuminate the journey of life for others. Writing a memoir invites author to encounter his “Real Selves” on the page and guide the reader through his journey from innocence to understanding. Amrit as a writer has done that very capably. The book blends intensely private event with that of public affairs and that is the most significant part of the expression which would appeal to the readers most. It is almost a creative non fiction story telling efforts. The book has an excellent storyline mixed with history where persons from Nehru, to Nixon and Robert Frost to Suzuki traverse. Of course, the book has the character of historical value, without being a book of history. In the book, while Amrit expresses himself with the spirit of a liberated American yet reflecting the sensitivity of an ethnic Assamese Indian. The first chapter of the book starts with Amrit’s preparation to visit USA in 1952.

On the evening before his departure, Amrit went for a walk with Chitra near Happy valley, Shillong of then Assam. He was working in Shillong, and later resigned. While taking a stroll that evening both remained silent for while. It was Chitra who broke the silence with pains in her words, "I think of your departure and cry myself to sleep..." Amrit was silent but he felt like crying too. The description of their impending separation reads like Novel in verse. Amrit wrote "For the first time in my life, I felt that lights also cried". Finally Chitra and Amrit spent that night quietly. In anguish, he wanted to reverse his decision to visit USA but saw the bridge linking his return path completely devastated by fire.... The second chapter superbly depicted his unsettled mind during those Days. His aspiration and frustration reflected in his senseless globe tottering spree. This would have been the case for any young persons leaving his home town keeping aside his loved one for the sake of his burning desire to reach high and higher achievements of life.. The middle class mentality to constantly aspire to reach greater height, despite struggling circumstances, helped Amrit to qualify for Master and Doctorate degree in public administration in universities of Boston and Harvard. He taught in the University of Maryland, after his first spell in Yale. He ultimately worked in the field of Mental health and community organization.

Born, raised and initially educated in Assam Amrit later studied in Presidency College, of Kolkata. He worked in jute Mills of Bengal and later in Labour Department of Assam for a while before snapping all relations with corporate and governmental services. Amrit Baruah was one of the most dynamic minds Assam has ever produced in late twenties, of last century.

Writing a memoir requires that we select our vignettes from many stories and memories, so learning techniques helps to make this process easier and helps the writer focus on the most important stories and themes. Amrit Barua has exactly done that and divided his experiences of America into eleven eventful chapters. His work did not only make inspired readings it also helped to empower younger generation to think big, no matter what be the economic condition of persons concerned. His experience as a community organizer in South Philadelphia for “coloured people” would be an eye opener for all of us.

He wrote passionately on poet Amiya chakrvarty whom he met in 1940 as a fresher at Calcutta and later in Boston as a professor of comparative Religion and literature. The information given in this chapter would be most valuable for the student of history and literature. It is in America he first encountered a spiritual Guru who brought peace of mind during his tormented time.

How did Amrit view America? In his words “My America was a net work of people and not the vast net work of super highways connecting towns and cities. the peaks and valleys that have glowed in my experience were the peaks and valleys in relationship and in the lives of those people.”

According to an intellectual friend of mine “We all are living stories, we carry them in our bodies and they haunt our dreams’. Many writers worry whether they should write their memories, since they’re also the stories of others that reveal family secrets and hidden truths. What about Amrit’s view on the stories of life? He confirmed that all of his stories in America are not the same that he had carried from India. He had written new stories for his life in America but there have been supplements, appendices. However, our research has shown that writing stories helps to put the past in perspective and creates a path of forgiveness for ourselves and others; writing is a powerful way to witness our own lives. Weaving back and forth as both the character “I” and the narrator in a story is an integrative process that transforms us through the process of writing. Amrit’s memoir almost ended with a request from Chitra, girl friend from India, to “settle down”. He finally ended his book with a story about Daisy, his new found friend during his Boston days and how in most crucial time he lost her “.She also disappeared from the life of someone who had hurt her deeply, trying to help her because he had come to care a lot for her.” Amrit ended. Was it a tragedy? Was it a Memoir? Or is it a historical document? I do not know what it actual is. But I am sure it is one of the most empowered creative writing. I am feeling its sensation even now!

So, what makes a compelling memoir? I believe that in order to become a bestseller, a memoir must have a strong storyline. That means that there is a beginning, middle, and end to the events that are recounted in the book. Examples of breakout memoirs with clear timelines are Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*, where the author, Danish baroness, Karin von Blitzen-Finecke, describes the political and emotional barriers she faced while trying to build a coffee farm in Kenya, and *Before Night Falls*, by Reinaldo Arenas, the rebellious and flamboyant Cuban poet and playwright, who describes both his early years as a homosexual artist under the Castro regime, including his imprisonments and escapes, and his last days as an exile in the United States. “My experiment with Truth” of Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru’s “Discovery of India” are fine example of best Memoir of our time. I have no hesitation to place Amrit Baruah’s “America Sixty years Age: An Indian’s Story” in the same category!

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BY GPNARUA

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