The NEHU Journal

Special Issue on Literature

Jayanta Mahapatra
Sarangadhar Baral
Nigel Jenkins
Nandini Bhattacharya
Robin S. Ngangom
Esther Syiem
S. J. Duncan
Debabrata Deb
Vanneihtluanga
Anima Dutta
Keisham Priyokumar
Easterine Iralu
Temsula Ao
Desmond L Kharmawphlang
Emmanuel Narendra Lall
Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih
Bevan L Swer

Vol 1 No 2
July, 2003

The NEHU Journal

Editor : **T B Subba**
Associate Editor : **Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih**

Production Assistants : Surajit Dutta & Binod Rynjah
Layout and Design : Shongdor Diengdoh

The NEHU Journal is published bi-annually (January-July) by the North-Eastern Hill University Publications, Shillong. The focus of the Journal is on India's Northeast and countries bordering it. Articles on other areas are also welcome. Contributors are advised to consult notes at the back.

Subscriptions

Single issue	- Rs 55.00 / $ 2
Single year	- Rs 100.00 / $ 4
Two years	- Rs 175.00 / $ 6
Three years	- Rs 250.00 / $ 8

**The rates above stand revised from the next issue.*

Payment may be made by cheque/draft payable to "NEHU Pubications" and be sent to the Deputy Director, NEHU Publications, Bijni Complex, Laitumkhrah, Shillong-793003. Outstation cheques/ drafts may kindly add Rs. 10/- or $ 1 towards bank service charges.

All correspondence related to the Journal may be addressed to the Editor, NEHU Publications, Bijni Complex, Shillong-793003.

The NEHU Journal

Vol.1, No. 2, July 2003

NEHU

EDITORIAL THEME

The Writer and the Community: A Case for Literary Ambidexterity

Literary ambidexterity is essentially a discourse on the virtues of knowing two languages and writing well in both. In a vast and complex country like India, these languages would mean one's mother tongue and the language of interaction. In my case, they would mean Khasi, the language of my tribe, and English.

Heard and spoken since birth, the mother tongue is of fundamental importance to creative literature. This also relates to the nature of creative writing itself and the need for communication.

As a practitioner of poetry, I believe in a poet who is a witness, one with the seeing eye, a retentive memory and the innate instinct to catch the soul of his generation. My own poetry is deeply rooted and I see my role as a poet as that of a chronicler of subjective realities. I have talked, in my poems, of leaders lording "like the wind" and fickle "like Hindi film stars changing dresses in a song." I have talked of my impoverished land, and with sardonic humour, of real people who are at once individuals and types. I have tried to capture the changing times, aspects of my culture and issues on the fringe.

But chronicling realities is not an end in itself. Pablo Neruda believes that a poet should always live close to his people: "I have gone into practically every corner of Chile, scattering my poetry like seed among the people of my country." Neruda seems to point up the poet's need to communicate with his people. If the foundation of a poet's art rests on his people's life and character, then what

better audience is there than his own people? And if the audience is his own people, then what better language is there to communicate with them than his mother tongue?

I too wish to address my people directly. I would like to tell them of the colossal threat to our land posed by the ceaseless flood of humanity and the growing aggressiveness of migrants. I would like to speak to them of the perils of terrorism and the greater peril of lawmen turning terrorists. I would like to tell them of the absurdity of trying to deny their own roots and the anarchy that follows in forgetting their own identity. I would like to talk of our great festivals, of Weiking, and the vitality of their part in our social life:

Weiking! Weiking!
Spring is back, begin your whirling motions
and let our life live on.
.....
Whirl on, whirl on,
what if some of us
sneer at us for fools?
We are not here to pay obeisance
to the gods for a plentiful harvest
(do we ever have a harvest now?)
whirl on, whirl on to a time
when women stood by their men
and men were tigers guarding
their homes with jealous swords.

('Weiking': self-composed)

But most of all I would like to remind my people, as a poet raconteur, of the virtues of their ancestors' ways and the necessity of perpetuating them. I would like to talk of our myths and legends and let those, who will, cull lessons from them:

Faraway
from the year dot

Ren, the Nongjri fisherman,
Ren, the beloved of a river nymph
Ren, who loved so madly
who left his mother and his home
to live in magic depths
also left a message:
"Mother," he had said,
"listen to the river,
as long as it roars
you will know that I live".

('Ren': self-composed)

Symbolically, Ren is asking later generations to listen to the sound of his people's life. But the sound of a people's life and their ways can be voiced only through the mother tongue. The mother tongue is the sound of life itself, and in this sense, writing in it would mean for me helping the sound of my people's life grow stronger.

Czeslaw Milosz and his poem "My Faithful Mother Tongue" have only strengthened this conviction. But the shocking reality that Milosz speaks of his mother tongue as "a tongue of the debased, / of the unreasonable, hating themselves" is unfortunately true of the Khasi language as well. As Milosz again puts it, "perhaps after all it's I who must try to save you [mother tongue]."

It is in trying to do this, that literary ambidexterity can play a critical role. It is neither desirable nor profitable to keep one's own writings confined to one's own language or the language of interaction.

A native author's work with any literary merit must be brought to the notice of other literatures. As Neruda suggests, it does not matter if one's poems have sunken their roots deep into one's native soil; it does not matter if they are born of indigenous wind and rain or have emerged from a localized landscape. If they are worth their salt they must "come out of that landscape… to

roam, to go singing *through the world*...."

To do this the author must be able to translate his own work into the language of interaction. But if he is not ambidextrous in this sense, then his work must risk lurking forever in the dark recesses of his own small world.

On the other hand, if he writes only in the language of interaction, he must be able to translate his work into his own mother tongue or risk being cut off forever from the heart and mind of his own people.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih
Associate Editor

CONTENTS

My Writing, My Times

ROBIN S NGANGOM

I wrote my first faltering line in the relative innocence of childhood. Caught as I was in the flush of youth, I wanted to explore the world by writing romantic and sentimental poetry. That well-meaning world is no longer recognizable now. Manipur, my native place in Northeast India, is in a state of anarchy, and my poetry springs from the cruel contradictions of that land. Manipur boasts of its talents in theatre, cinema, dances and sports. But how could you trust your own people who would entrust corruption, AIDS, terrorism and drugs to their children? Naturally, the Manipur that I go back to every year ritually is not the sacred world of my childhood, because

> Childhood took place
> free from manly fears
> when I had only my mother's love
> to protect me from knives,
> from fire, and death by water .
> I wore it like an amulet.
> Childhood took place
> among fairies and weretigers
> when hills were yours to tumble
> before they became soldiers' barracks
> and dreaded chambers of torture.
> Childhood took place
> before your friend worshipped a gun
> to become a widowmaker .
>
> ('A Libran Horoscope')[1]

If anyone should ask why my poems[2] do not speak of my land's breathtaking landscapes, its sinuous dances, its darkmaned women, I can only think of Neruda's answer: "Come and see the

blood in the streets!"[3]

It is natural for someone from the Northeast of India to exploit the folk traditions he grew up with, to write of the hills when he is living in the hills. It is Shillong, which has moved me into this kind of poetry, Shillong with its gentle hills, the Khasis with their rich oral literature. You would notice this preponderance of images from the hills in many of my poems — the vast pines, the mountains with their great rains. But this, I've realized, is mostly artless, unoffending poetry. My poetry, in other words, seems to be drifting towards something 'more'. It is no longer a mere diary of private incidents, or a confessional. And I've perhaps opened my eyes to insistent realities and have stepped out of the proverbial ivory tower.

And what can a poet-aspirant do in such contrary circumstances, when he can no longer nurse a magical vision of the world? For the first time I've begun to understand Camus's words: "Whatever our personal weaknesses may be, the nobility of our craft will always be rooted in two commitments, difficult to maintain: the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance to oppression."[4] Today, when heart-rending things are happening all around, when you hear only chilling accounts of what man has done to man, how can a poet close his eyes to the brutalisation of life and remain narcissistic? When a man of even an iota of conviction is in immediate danger if he speaks up, when a gun points at you if you don't observe a prescribed code of behaviour, how can we claim that we are living in a free society? In contemporary Manipuri poetry, there is a predominance of 'bullets', 'blood' and, paradoxically, 'flowers' also. No one writes about sexual love. A friend told me that they've been honing the 'poetry of survival' with guns pressed at both your temples: the gun of revolution and the gun of the state.

The writer from Northeast India, consequently, differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way. While it may not make him a better writer, living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry or woolly aesthetics but must perforce master 'the art of witness'. Forces that work under

slogans that have been twisted — slogans such as 'self-determination', rive my society. We have witnessed growing ethnic aggressiveness, secessionist ventures, cultural and religious bigotry, the marginalisation of minorities and the poor, profit and power struggles in government, and as a natural aftermath to these, the banality of corruption and the banality of terror. Further, the uneasy coexistence of paradoxical worlds such as the folk and the Westernised, virgin forests and car-choked streets, ethnic cleansers and the parasites of democracy, ancestral values and flagrant materialism, resurgent nativism and the sensitive outsider's predicament, make the picturesque Northeast especially vulnerable to tragedy.

I think the task that literature of the Northeast must address is what Camus called "the double challenge of truth and liberty."[5] Truth, because what can the writer hope to accomplish now except tell the truth. When the unspeakable is out there being enacted and quickly consigned to oblivion, when cruel things are done but never undone, and media machines are busy feeding one-sided lies, the writer can only tell the truth about what he knows. Literature cannot bring harmony or a moral revolution by telling us what we must do. At the most, poetry of the Northeast can only mirror the body and the mind of the times. I've never, of course, imagined myself as any conscience-keeper, but I've tried to speak of my people, the terrible things happening in Manipur, as in my poem 'Native Land':

> First came the scream of the dying
> in a bad dream, then the radio report,
> and a newspaper: six shot dead, twenty-five
> houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied
> behind their backs inside a church...
> As the days crumbled, and the victors
> and their victims grew in number,
> I hardened inside my thickening hide,
> until I lost my tenuous humanity.

I ceased thinking
of abandoned children inside blazing huts
still waiting for their parents.
If they remembered their grandmothers' tales
of many winter hearths at the hour
of sleeping death, I didn't want to know,
if they ever learnt the magic of letters.
And the women heavy with seed,
their soft bodies mown down
like grain stalk during their lyric harvests;
if they wore wildflowers in their hair
while they waited for their men.

I didn't care anymore.
I burnt my truth with them,
And buried uneasy manhood with them.
I did mutter, on some far-off day:
"There are limits," but when the days
absolved the butchers, I continue to live
as if nothing happened.

After all, it was none other than Czeslaw Milosz who said: "There is no such thing as an innocent bystander. If you are a bystander, you are not innocent."[6]

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Robin S Ngangom, "A Libran Horoscope", unpublished poem.

2. Robin S Ngangom, "I Want to Describe Myself", unpublished poem; "Native Land", poem already published in journals such as New Statesman & Society, London; "I Told You the Stories…", unpublished poem.

3. Concluding line of Pablo Neruda's poem, "I'm Explaining a Few Things", *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985) p.107.

4. From Albert Camus's *Banquet Speech*, Stockholm, December 10, 1957.

5. Ibid.

6. As quoted by Michael Ignatieff in review article "The Art of Witness", *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. XLII, No.5, March 23, 1995.

***Ngangom Rabindra Singh** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, NEHU, Shillong 793022. He is also a well-known poet and has published two books of poems.*

Book Review

Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast edited by **Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin S. Ngangom**, NEHU Publications, Shillong, 2003, pp.270 + xii, Rs. 230/- .

Undoubtedly it is poetry that unites us. It is the poets who will *not* keep us away from one another, who will not separate us. This is the strongest feeling one gets when one reads these poems from the very different regions of the Northeast of our country.

History and time become the subsequent strengths of these poems, although these are not immediately noticeable in the lines of many poets. It is strange that a poet from Mizoram might be speaking of the same values as a poet from Assam or Manipur; the humane intensity of the poems remains a matter of understanding and ultimate celebrations:

> One by one we'll recover
> the ornaments of grace.

In a number of poems one is touched by the poet's treatment of the local and the personal, that moves toward an involvement in the collective longing for renewal and the search for a better world.

> I have seen several times
> the sighing hand of his
> among countless hands.

It was Robert Frost who said once that politics deals with grievances, poetry with grief. I do feel that it is important for us to have this anthology at this time, now when a lot of turmoil and violence has shaken the peaceful air of the Northeast. The poems help us see that devotion and anger, hunger and passion, desire and loyalty are not supportive of each other, but lift our minds.

for managing to love
an object of scorn,
although
they place around my neck
a garland of threats.

These poems have a universal appeal that cannot be denied. Their reach is more to sympathy than to rightness, and more to compassion than to belief. But from the poetry of these peoples, of different cultures, the miseries of contemporary dilemmas are apparent. I felt both pleasure and pain in reading the poems; they pointed out to me what all good poetry in the world is about, irrespective of where they are written, in their insistence that to expect justice out of a long history is impossible to attain. They certainly convey, in spite of our differences, our commonality and mutuality.

This is a remarkable anthology; there is much hope, and considerable faith in these seemingly simple lines that come from places where

the haunting *madhavi* escapes the rustle of spring,
acrid with the smell of gunpowder.

Jayanta Mahapatra, *a renowned Indian poet writing in English. He currently edits* **Chandrabhaga,** *a prestigious literary journal. He lives at Tinkonia Bagicha, Cuttack, Orissa, 753001*

Translating Nations, edited by **Prem Poddar**, Aarhus University Press, Aarhus, 2000, 269p.

The notions of nation and nationalism have engaged the minds of social scientists for over two centuries now and yet they seem as elusive as they were in the beginning. Scholars from various

disciplines have come together to come to grips with these notions at different times but more vigorously during the last fifty years or so. No other notions have perhaps sustained the academic interest for so long and across the disciplinary boundaries. There are lull periods in the history of these notions but there never has been a total cease. With the publication of the book under review it is clear that young scholars in the field of literature have taken these notions in a big way though there is no dearth of senior, and indeed very influential, writers from literature in this field. Further some of the most exciting theories and debates related to these notions have been seen in the post-colonial literature. One of them is about their future, which has been a matter of much speculation by both anthropologists and literateurs.

Translating Nations is one of the latest works in this field. It includes ten articles, including the introductory one by the editor. The book is a collection of different voices on the nation but spoken in similar language, or made similar by the editor's translating! The vocabulary of the nation that has been built up over the years is abundantly distributed over the various chapters; often making the authors appear interchangeable. This is a serious problem in any translation of culture, whether it is a cultural idiom or a cultural symbol. This well justifies the focus of this book which deals with the problems of representing nations by translated texts for they are not only translated but are often transformed.

One of the current themes in social sciences in many parts of the world is violence. The study of violence is intimately connected with the field of human rights studies, which is also a growing field today. This theme has not escaped the attention of the contributors to this volume and they have been able to touch areas that a social scientist normally cannot reach due to her/his obsession with facts and evidences. In fact, the violent aspect of the nation is one of the most important, if not the most important, themes of this book, as evident from the introductory chapter itself.

There is no dearth of dilemmas in the book, often lurking behind innocuous concepts. The authors, including most prominently the editor himself, show a strain between nationalism and trans-nationalism. While they articulate various identities, they show their own ambivalence about it. Nationalism seems to indicate personal security but intellectual insecurity whereas trans-nationalism gives intellectual security but personal insecurity. There is some kind of craving in this book for both, for one can easily blend both, harbouring one inside and the other outside. In short, this book depicts what most of us intellectuals truly are. It is a naked form of ours that many of us might not have seen. It is certainly worth seeing in black and white for our own benefit.

T.B. Subba, *a Professor of Anthropology, NEHU. He is the Editor of The NEHU Journal.*

Humanities and Pedagogy : Teaching of Humanities Today edited by **K.C. Baral**, Pencraft International; New Delhi, 2002 price Rs.100/-; PP 159.

Humanities and Pedagogy Teaching of Humanities Today attempts at a constructionist's viewpoint on the teaching of humanities today, particularly in the Indian context with its association of inter-disciplinary (post modern?) concepts. The essays holistically brought together are part of an international seminar held in Shillong under the auspices of the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages.

The essays are structured on two largely defined points or categories, one is the need for modern or post-modern dialectics cutting across disciplinary barriers and the other attacks the very need and basis of such a *diktat.* For example J.C. Mahanti's essay: "Literature as a Discipline of Thought: the Why of Literary

Pedagogy" demythicises the need for "the new critical, structuralist, post-structuralist, post-colonial nationalist, post-modern Marxist and Feminist..." modes of pedagogy pleading on the other hand for the innate good sense of literature with "teachers who proceed from their experience of life and literature..."

Similarly S. Nagarajan's critique restores the Keatsian sense of 'negative capability', which is the intrinsic logic of a text. He contends that this is the spirit or 'approach' to the study of literature. However Nigel Joseph's "The Idea of 'Truth' in the Humanities" is a radicalisation of the teaching of humanities; "A greater openness, within each humanities' discipline, to developments in the other humanities as well as to those in the social and natural sciences". The cornerstone of today's pedagogy as one might put it is the "opening out of disciplines". Nigel Joseph's exegesis refreshingly avoids jargon and clichés to speak for a humanistic yet inter-disciplinary approach to the study of humanities. Cross-cultural some might call it yet Joseph's metabolism is shorn of any jargon-hype or the present polemics of post modernism.

This then evinces that the essays hinge on an internal dialectic of 'truth' on the one hand and the sophism of modern thinking and intellectual trends on the other. By highlighting an inter-disciplinary yet pragmatic rationale Joseph does not deliberate any idiom or an arid Waste Land. His is "a plea for cultural rapprochement ...a genuine eclecticism." The cross-cultural hypothesis is indeed very much present in the essays, the 'Indian', reading of an American or English text. That is why perhaps as A.V. Ashok in "English in India Today: Discipline, Post-discipline and Indiscipline" asseverates (almost triumphantly one senses) there is today the prevalence of English Literature "deconstructors". So we have the departments of English Studies and not necessarily that of English Literature. The pedagogy borders on this kind of subversivism. This also is perhaps a heresy: a decolonising of literature (i.e. English Literature) and thought. English studies in India today remain largely disturbed as a result of such a refrain: a post-modern clique has attempted some kind of an iconoclasm, or a transcendence of certain verities.

The language literature / epistemological connection is Mohan Ramanan's answer to literary problematics. On the one hand there are the advocators of the *bhasa* primacy as the dominant cultural synergy and on the other there are at times the effeteness of English teaching. What should the teachers of English do in such a crisis caught as they are in troubled tunes or in that of a post-modern indiscipline, its wave of antipathy attacking the very citadels of a cherished tradition? Mohan Ramanan's "English Agonistes, Reflection on English in India" debates with fortitude on the middle path, 'the humanist centric vision of teaching and learning. Once again this to my thinking is an invitation to cross-culturalism to invade the territories of our higher education in the humanities disciplines.

There is thus "modernism's epistemological failure" as Glenn Bowman argues in the last essay of the book: "Constituting the Space of Identification in Anthropological Discourse". The epistemic or knowledge processes are caught in this tangle between theoretic devices and the need to synergise, the need to synthesize. This is the basic problematic, which the book articulates in attempting to revisit dichotomously the epistemic domains of literature, philosophy and culture. M. M. Agrawal's "Education as a Cultural Process" speaks critically of a "cultural alienation of education". Has education served its purpose of cultural assimilation or has it led to the growth of more alienation? This is the ontological question here. The essay is a nostalgic reflection on getting 'education back to where it belongs'. K.C. Baral's "Critical Theory and Pedagogy" applies certain critical precepts to the author/text/reader polemics. Literature is applied criticism, which seems to go against the Arnoldian standpoint of criticism.

The essays/papers are interrogative in nature asking some very fundamental questions as to the need of addressing the teaching of the humanities with discourses or subtexts. However pedagogy is some kind of a given assumption, most of the essays fail to take into account the cognisable reality or the 'why' of pedagogy: the teaching methodologies as it were.

Today the scenario has witnessed a virtual expansion of the classroom; such ramifications have been due to the influence of the media and technology. In this cultural context the essays of D. Venkat Rao and Bernard Sharrat capture this new technological revolution and ambience; applying it to the practices of teaching / learning. D. Venkat Rao in his "Critical Pedagogy and Global Networks, Re-turning English Today" argues that "Digitaracy is literacy...in digital media;" a seminal statement. Sharrat in his essay "Teaching, Multimedia and the Internet" delightfully countenances the argument for a virtual classroom. On-line learning is self-learning. The essay borders on Distance Education aspects of pedagogy.

The book collectively provides not only ample food for thought on dialogic discourses but is a daunting intellectual exercise in the need for a re-defined pedagogy mostly shorn of exhibitionism or vapid writing which is clichéd. The articles are insightful, evolving cultural contexts or broad frameworks to take us into the embattled areas of knowledge /information dichotomies.

Dr. A.S. Guha, *Regional Director of IGNOU, Shillong, Nongthymmai Pohktieh, Shillong 13.*

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

1. All contributions should be sent in electronic form as well as hard copy printed on A4 size paper in double space and with adequate margin on the left side. Notes and references should be numbered in Arabic numerals, with details provided as endnotes. The title of the paper, the author's name and address should be typed on a separate cover-sheet. Telephone & fax numbers, e-mail ID's and **a brief biographical sketch** should be provided.

2. Non-English words should be italicised or underlined. Spelling should be British. Quotations should be reduced to a minimum and where used should be put under double inverted commas or if necessary indented. Quotations of more than 50 words from published or copyright sources should have the permission of the author/publisher enclosed with the manuscript.

3. Contributors shall be given a copy of the journal. Those interested in reviewing books or have received review copies from publishers should write to the Editor with some indication of their field of specialisation.

4. Contributions accepted for the Journal are not normally returned. Authors are therefore advised to keep a copy of their articles to facilitate reply to any queries, the Editor and/or referee(s) may have. All articles, book reviews and enquiries should be sent to the Editor, NEHU Publications, Bijni Complex, Shillong-793003.

The responsibility for the facts stated and opinions expressed is wholly that of the contributors and the Editor and the North-Eastern Hill University Publications accept no responsibility for them.