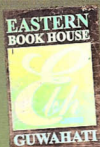


THE OXFORD ANTHOLOGY OF
**Writings from
North-East India**

POETRY AND ESSAYS

edited by **Tilottoma Misra**



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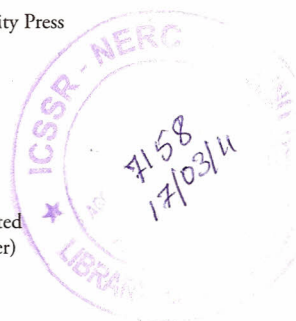
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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	xi

POETRY

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Mamang Dai

The Voice of the Mountain	3
The Sorrow of Women	5
An Obscure Place	5

ASSAM

Navakanta Barua

Judas	7
Bats	8
Silt	9

Nilmani Phookan	
Poem	10
After a Couple of Days	11
Mating Music	12
Hiren Bhattacharya	
The Lone Prayer for Poetry	12
The Earth my Poem	13
Sylvan Song	13
Let There be Crop	14
Harekrishna Deka	
Another One	15
A Word for Love	15
Towards Freedom	16
Nilim Kumar	17
I had Nothing to Offer	17
To my Son	17
Sameer Tanti	
The Night of Kadams in Bloom	20
As the Night Thickens the Stars Nod Off	20
Anubhav Tulasi	
Prodigal	21
The Infernal Playground	24
Jiban Narah	
Rhythm	25
Colours	26
Mother	26
The Subaltern	27
Shaktipada Brahmachari	
One Birth of Love, Another of Household Duties	28
Assassin, Turn Horse	28
Anupama Basumatary	
Seasons	29
Earthy	29
Aruni Kashyap	
Journeys	30
Me	32

MANIPUR

Rajkumar Bhubonsana

- Should Light be Put Out or Mind Kept in Dark 35
 The Smell of Pomegranate 40
 E-nga 40

Robin S. Ngangom

- Poetry 41
 Gangtok, February 1998 42
 The First Rain 44
 Everywhere I Go 46

Yumlembam Ibomcha

- For the Next Birth 47

Saratchand Thiyam

- Shillong 48
 Hillworld 50
 Hill 51
 Pokhran, Kargil, Gaisal 52

Gambhini Devi

- Hansapadika 53
 A Village Girl 53

Memchoubi

- Red Chingthrao 54
 The Goddess of Lightning 55

Thangjam Ibopishak

- I Want to be Killed by an Indian Bullet 56
 Gandhi and Robot 57

MEGHALAYA

Desmond Kharmawphlang

- Letter from Pahambir 59
 Poems during November 60
 The Conquest 61

Esther Syiem

- Retelling Nam's Tale 62

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

- The Colours of Truth 66

The Ancient Rocks of Cherra	66
A Day in Sohra	67
A Farewell Letter of Cherries	68
MIZORAM	
Mona Zote	
What Poetry Means to Ernestina in Peril	71
Girl with Black Guitar and Blue Hibiscus	72
Cherrie L. Chhange	
Rain	73
Night	74
Plea	75
What does an Indian Look Like	76
Lalrinmawii Khiange	
Betrayal	76
For a Better Tomorrow	77
L. Biakliana	
Cry of Mizo Women	78
True Love	79
NAGALAND	
Temsula Ao	
Blood of Others	81
The Old Story Teller	83
The Spear	85
Easterine Iralu	
Genesis	87
Monalisa Changkija	
Mist over Brahmaputra	88
One of these Decades	89
Shoot	90
Nini Lungalang	
Mirror	91
I Will Be	92
Rock	93
TRIPURA	
Chandrakanta Murasingh	
O Poor Hachukrai	95

Of a Minister	96
The Python's Call from the Deserted Tong	96
Your Dreams	97
Pijush Raut	
Feelings	98
Picnic	98
Bijoy Kumar Debbarma	
Eklavya of the Longtarai	99
Jogmaya Chakma	
The Martyr's Altar	100
Narendra Debbarma	
The Border	101
ESSAYS	
Mrinal Miri	
The Spiritual and the Moral	105
Birendranath Datta	
North-East India and its Socio-Cultural Milieu	118
Esther Syiem	
Social Identity and the Liminal Character of the Folk: A Study in the Khasi Context	128
Thingnam Kishan Singh	
Encounters and Literary Engagements: A Critique of History and Literature in Manipur	142
Sanjoy Hazarika	
There Are No Shangri-Las Left	157
Udayon Misra	
Peasant Consciousness as Reflected in the Oral Literature of Assam: A Study of Two Assamese Ballads	164
Moushumi Kandali	
The Colonial Impression on Vaishnavite Art Form of Assam: A Study of the Sculptural Reliefs of the Srihati Satra	186
Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh	
'Kurukshetrangi Peeraang'—Ratan Thiyam's Gift to Mothers	200

Margaret Ch. Zama	
Mizo Literature: An Overview	205
Tilottoma Misra	
Crossing Linguistic Boundaries: Two Arunachali Writers in Search of Readers	214
Cherrie L. Chhangte	
'Loneliness in the Midst of Curfews': The Mizo Insurgency Movement and Terror Lore	237
Sukalpa Bhattacharjee	
Narrative Constructions of Identity and the Sylheti Experience	245
Charles Chasie	
A Naga View of the World	259
Easterine Iralu	
Should Writers Stay in Prison?	272
Chandrakanta Murasingh	
Kokborok: Her People and Her Past	276
Patricia Mukhim	
Land Ownership Among the Khasis of Meghalaya: A Gender Perspective	285
Robin S. Ngangom	
Contemporary Manipuri Poetry: An Overview	297
Anungla Aier	
Folklore, Folk Ideas and Gender among the Nagas	301
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	309
<i>Copyright Statement</i>	325

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Introduction

An intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation with 'other' cultures is a recurrent feature of the literatures of the seven north-eastern states. Each small community or linguistic group has responded through its oral or written communication to the encounters with the majoritarian cultures from either mainland India or from outside the borders of the country, in its own distinctive manner. The main waves of cultural invasion that have wrought significant changes in the literary world of the region originated in the Bhakti movement, followed by the various reformist dispensations of the nineteenth century, colonialism and the Christian missionary activities that accompanied it, and the new culture of development that has become a part of global culture. Each of these encounters resulted in different forms of resistance as well as appropriations. The clash of cultures has often led to the loss of traditional forms and the adoption of new cultural icons that threatened the existing ones. While there have been attempts at reviewing and critiquing one's own society and culture in the light of the new ideas that have invaded the region from time to

time, yet whenever the xenophobic fear of the 'outsider' has seized a community, a tendency to retreat into the cocoon of cultural isolation has been quite evident. In Assam, Manipur, and Tripura, this process of cultural intermixing began long before the advent of colonialism. Shaiva, Shakta, and Vaishnava forms of Hinduism together with Buddhism and Islam spread their distinctive influences in the region, while the Tai-Ahoms who entered Assam from the east and ruled the country for almost 600 years till the advent of the British in 1826, made immense contribution towards the creation of a syncretic culture in the region. It is significant that the literature of the pre-colonial period in all these three kingdoms was deeply rooted in the wonderfully mixed cultural life of their respective societies. Colonialism, however, superimposed a Eurocentric concept of modernity derived from the Enlightenment on the literatures of the region, thereby creating a rupture between the past and the present. The Christian missionaries took the lead in ushering in a print culture by establishing printing presses and bringing out textbooks, books on grammar, and Christian literature and journals in the local languages. The standardization of the Assamese language that took place as a result of this encounter, however, led to the marginalization of the other spoken dialects of the language, thus creating a distance between the oral and the written. This interference with what a recent historian has termed the 'robustly polyglot character'¹ of the pre-colonial administration of Assam, helped the colonial administrators to cope with the problem of managing the bewildering and mindboggling heterogeneity of speech which they encountered in the colonial province of Assam which constitutes much of what is called the 'North-East' today. The initial attempt of the British to impose a standardized form of Bengali to serve as the vernacular of Assam, met with stiff resistance from the Assamese literati of the time who received unexpected support from the American Baptist missionaries. The creation of a standardized print language in Assam was, therefore, the result of a joint effort by the missionaries and the Assamese intellectuals schooled in the metropolitan culture of Calcutta in the nineteenth century. This language, which emerged as the medium for the new literary creations of the nineteenth century, contained elements from many existing speech practices of the various indigenous communities of the region as well as from Persian, Hindi, Bengali, and other languages of the neighbouring communities

¹ Bodhisattva Kar, 2008, 'The Tongue has No Bones; Fixing the Assamese Language c. 1800–c. 1930', *Studies in History*, Vol. 24, No.1, February.

with which the pre-colonial rulers of Assam used to carry on political and commercial intercourse. The modern Assamese language has, therefore, been termed as a 'philologist's paradise'² because of the heterogeneous elements mobilized within its structure.

The Assamese language in its various oral forms has also served as the lingua franca amongst many of the hill people in the neighbouring states of Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. But these oral forms of the language have remained as pidgin languages and are, therefore, termed as 'non-language' even by the speakers who use these forms of the language for communicating with people from the neighbouring tribes.³ It may be noted that before the advent of identity politics amongst the various ethnic communities in the region whose mother tongue is not Assamese, the writers from the different communities used the Assamese language as the medium for creative writing. This resulted in the language acquiring distinctive characteristics because of the infusion of elements peculiar to the culture of the different indigenous communities. In this collection, the translations from the Assamese writings of Lummer Dai and Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi belonging to the Adi and the Sherdukpan communities respectively, an excerpt from an Assamese novel of the Karbi writer Rong Bong Terang, poems of the Mishing poet Jiban Narah, and those of the Bodo poet Anupama Basumatari, would show how a language acquires new dimensions and vibrancy when handled by writers from other cultures.

While setting out to compile this anthology, the most daunting task has been to make the best possible selection from the available works in English and in translation. Of the three generations of writers of the post-Independence period included here, a significantly large number of the younger writers are writing in English. A variety of reasons may be cited for this phenomenon. Many of them have had the privilege of being educated in English-medium schools and they are more capable of handling that language rather than their mother tongues. This new band of writers writing in English is bound to grow in number because most of the hill-states of the region have adopted English as the official language, thus ensuring that it would be the first language of the new generation of literates and it would be used to the best advantage both in the professional as well as in the academic arena. While whether the English language would be able to replace the regional languages

² Maheswar Neog, 2004, *Essays in Assamese Literature*, Delhi: Omsons, p. 1.

³ See my essay, 'Crossing Linguistic Boundaries: Two Arunachali Writers in Search of Readers' in this volume.

in creative writing may be a contested question, it is a fact that some of the best writings from the North-East have been produced in acquired languages, including English. Moreover, given the small sizes of the linguistic groups to which many of the writers belong, it is understandable that the aspiring writers should choose to write in a language through which they can reach out to a wider reader base. Indeed, many of the writers writing in English have reaped the benefits of acquiring a worldwide audience through national and international forums. Reflecting on this phenomenon, Nigel Jenkins, a Welsh scholar who has edited a collection of Khasi poetry in English and Welsh, has expressed the hope that the Khasis would go back to their own language after the 'purging of the clutter' that is under way at present. He says: 'It is a painful fact of literary life for certain young writers that although Khasi is their everyday medium, they are not sufficiently confident in the language to make poems in it. This real or imagined incapacity is largely the fault of an education system which obliges secondary school pupils to abandon their native tongue and matriculate in English.'⁴ In contrast, a completely different view has been expressed by Salman Rushdie who finds no reason to be apologetic about the choice of the English language by Indian and diasporic writers. Commenting on the status of the Indian writers 'working in English', he says: 'English is the most powerful medium of communication in the world; should we not then rejoice at these artists' mastery of it, and at their growing influence? To criticize writers for their success at "breaking out" is no more than parochialism (and parochialism is perhaps the main vice of the vernacular literatures).'⁵

In the present anthology, the English poetry of Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Robin S. Ngangom, Desmond Kharmawphlang, Esther Syiem, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Thanesia, Cherrie L. Chhange, Lalrinmawii Khiangte, Easterine Iralu, Monalisa Changkija, Nini Lungalang, and Aruni Kashyap represent the new voices in the literature of the North-East. These poets have effectively combined the music, rhythm, and patterns of their own languages and cultures with the forceful communicative power of the English language.

⁴ Nigel Jenkins, 1995, 'Introduction', *Khasi in Gwalia: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose from the Khasi Hills in North-east India*, West Glamorgan: Alun Books, p. 18.

⁵ Salman Rushdie, 'Introduction', in Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West (eds), 1997, *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing (1947-1997)*, Vintage.

The lack of first-rate translations of Indian literature in vernacular languages has been mentioned by most editors who have compiled anthologies of Indian writings. Though the effort of Sahitya Akademi and some other institutions in collecting and publishing Indian writings in translation is laudable, yet many areas have still remained untouched. Despite the claims of some scholars that 'in India we keep translating every moment of our active life' and that much of the pre-colonial literature in India was founded on translations of the epics and the puranas,⁵ it is sad that some of the best writings in the Indian languages can be read only by the readers who belong to the same linguistic community as that of the author.

Most of the communities from north-east India can pride themselves for possessing a vibrant storytelling tradition. The culture of the 'face-to-face communities'⁶ which is distinguishable from the abstract nature of social relationships in the 'modern' world, is a distinguishing feature of the oral and it has continued as the dominant influence on the literary creations from the region. After the introduction of print culture into the region during the colonial times, collecting, re-telling, and printing the folklore of the different communities became an important part of the colonial ethnographic agenda of mapping the region for more effective administrative control over the bewildering variety of races that the British encountered here. P.R.T Gordon, J. Shakespeare, T.C. Hodson, Major A. Playfair, J.P. Mill, Sidney Endle, and many other colonial ethnographers had collected, translated, and printed a rich body of folklore material, the latest in the line being the valuable additions made by Verrier Elwin in the post-Independence period. Collecting and printing the oral and written literature of one's own community also became a part of the nationalist agenda of identity-assertion. People whose history and civilization had been pushed to the margins as not conforming to the norms of the Eurocentric concept of modernity, took up the task of re-creating their past and re-inventing tradition so as to represent the present as a stage in the continuous process of marching from the past to the future. Amongst many indigenous communities of Africa and America too there has been a resurgence of a conscious attempt to adopt elements from their own oral tradition in order to create a modern literature of their own which would resist the colonial project of a denial of history or literature to

⁶ This phrase has been used by Madhu Dubey in 'Postmodern Geographies of the U.S. South', in Saurabh and Ishita Dubey (eds), 2006, *Unbecoming Modern: Colonialism, Modernity, Colonial Modernities*, p. 101.

the colonized. But Temsula Ao, whose own writings display a sensitive blending of the oral and the written, claims that the 'new literature, rich with indigenous flavour' that is being created by the modern storytellers and poets from the North-East, does not seem to have a political agenda like the postcolonial literature that is emerging in Africa and amongst the Native Americans in recent times. Drawing a dividing line between African and native American literatures and that of north-east India, she says:

... the people of North East India seem to have attained a new 'maturity' in their perceptions about themselves, that the 'other' of their position vis-à-vis mainland India was not 'them' elsewhere but very much within their own sense of isolation in an oral culture. Once articulated through the written text, similarities of world-views with other cultures have helped forge new affinities, and at the same time enabled them to accept the differences as only uniqueness of any given culture rather than as denominators of any deficiency or inferiority.⁷

This new-found confidence that attempts to erase the boundaries between subaltern traditions and 'Great Traditions', however, in itself, is an assertion of a political awareness on the part of communities that have been seen as living in 'enchanted spaces'⁸ bearing unpronounceable names. Significantly, for mainland India, the region known as the 'North-East' has never had the privilege of being at the centre of epistemic enunciation, except perhaps at some ancient time when Assam was recognized as the centre of occult knowledge associated with tantric worship, magic, and astrology, and, strangely enough, the imagination of the 'mainland' has even today not outgrown those constructs of the mysterious 'other'.

The sense of being denied fair representation in the great Indian civilizational discourse or even in the nationalist discourse, has deeply affected the emerging literati of many of the regions of north-east India in the post-Independence era. A recurrent note in the journalistic as well as academic writings of Assam from the colonial times till the present has been the resentment at the province being turned into a virtual colonial hinterland of Calcutta. Assamese creative literature of the post-Independence era, however, displays a more mature sensibility of focusing on the more complex issues facing the composite state of Assam in the years immediately following Independence. For instance,

⁷ Temsula Ao, 'Writing Orality', in Soumen Sen and Desmond Kharmawphlang (eds), 2007, *Orality and Beyond*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 109.

⁸ The term has been borrowed from Saurabh Dube, 'Mapping Oppositions: Enchanted Spaces and Modern Places', in *Unbecoming Modern*.

the problems of forging new cultural identities through interaction with different communities living within undivided Assam becomes the subject matter of much of Assamese fiction of this period. The crisis of identity brought about by the re-drawing of boundaries that began with the Partition of the Subcontinent affected the Assamese self-representation more than any of the other states in the region. This crisis has been best reflected by the writers from the state in their works of fiction.

Making a choice between the path of armed resistance and the road to peace through dialogue has long remained the unresolved issue before the post-Independence generation of the region, and this becomes the central theme of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's novel *Mrityunjay* published in 1970. Birinchi Kumar Barua's *Xeuji Pator Kabini* (1954), which he wrote under the pseudonym 'Rasna Barua' and from which an excerpt has been included in this anthology, is a sensitive portrayal of the relationship between the indigenes and the immigrant tea-plantation labourers who constitute a sizeable proportion of the population of the state and whose status, vis-à-vis the locals, still remains uncertain. Rong Bong Terang writes about the transformation brought about by 'modernization' to a secluded Karbi village. His *Rongmilir Hanhi* (1981) traces the process of social mobilization amongst the new generation of the hill-people who learn to articulate their demands for the protection of their distinct identity on the eve of India's Independence. Moushumi Kandali takes up from where Terang left. In her story, *Lambada Machor Seshot* ('The Crossroads of Mukindon') written in a refreshingly original style, she holds up a disturbing portrait of the dilemma faced by the younger generation of the same Karbi community, poised at the crossroads between a traditional way of life and a metropolitan modernity with its alluring temptations that can sweep away the ground beneath their feet.

The invasion of an alien culture that lays exclusive claim to modernity and progressiveness and compels the indigenes to be apologetic about their own culture has been the subject matter of much of the satirical writings from the region. In Assamese literature, Anglophiles had been the target of ridicule in the works of many nineteenth-century satirists, including Lambodar Bora and Lakshminath Bezbaroa. Saurabh Kumar Chaliha's *Golam* (1974) is thematically in the same tradition, though structurally it represents the innovative style which was introduced into modern Assamese short-fiction by Chaliha. The stories by Wan Kharkrang, S.J. Duncan, and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih of Meghalaya are also

in the tradition of the comic satire, exposing the social and academic pretensions of a newly emerging urban middle class amongst the small ethnic communities. While S.J. Duncan gives a hilarious version of the old story of the women being smarter than men in business matters and Kharkrang tells a simple comic tale of the effect of sartorial changes on a would-be sahib, Nongkynrih's is a ruthless exposure of the intellectual emptiness of a new class of people with academic pretensions.

While the first generation of fiction writers from Arunachal Pradesh represented here by Lummer Dai and Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi wrote in Assamese because that was the language through which they received their school and college education in the early years after Independence, the situation has changed now after the shift in the language policy of the government. The new official policy is guided by the agenda of 'integration' of the tribes with the Indian 'mainstream' through the induction of Hindi as the medium of instruction in secondary schools. At present, however, the new generation has accepted the prime position of English in the intellectual sphere of the country and would rather write in that universally powerful language than in their mother tongue or any of the Indian languages. The change in the medium of expression has brought about some significant innovations in the choice of the subject matter as well, and this has happened within a short span of a decade or so. Lummer Dai and Thongchi have sought to depict the sensitive questioning of the values represented by the traditional institutions which give little space to the voices of the youth and the women. These two writers may be considered counterparts of the litterateurs of the Indian Renaissance of the nineteenth century who encountered the challenges posed by the ideals of 'modernity' and 'progress' aggressively pushed forward by the European Enlightenment. Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is written in lyrical prose and evokes the memories of an entire community of people. It represents the predicaments of the sensitive young minds in contemporary Arunachal Pradesh, who too are at crossroads and find it difficult to come to terms with the inevitable break with the enchantment of the past and to re-model their lives according to the demands of the changing times. In her powerfully lyrical style, in verse as well as prose, Mamang Dai depicts the experiences of the new generation inhabiting what she calls the 'in-between' places of the mind.

A sizeable number of the selected stories is about the growing awareness of the effect of the wanton destruction of the forests and wildlife in the name of development. Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi's 'The

Forest Guard', Monalisa Changkija's 'The Hunter's Story', Vanneitluanga's 'Innocence Wears Another Look', and Arupa Patangia Kalita's 'The Conflict' reveal this growing awareness about the problem of the ecological balance being disturbed in the states across the North-East.

It is surely not a coincidence that the dominant theme of the fiction writing included in this collection happens to be that of violence perpetrated by various militant outfits as well as by the armed forces in their counter-insurgency operations. Violence features as a recurrent theme because the story of violence seems to be a never-ending one in this region and yet people have not learnt 'to live with it', as they are expected to do by the distant centres of power. Writers across the states of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, and Tripura are deeply concerned about the brutalization of their societies by the daily experience of human rights violation and the maiming of the psyche of a whole people by the trauma caused by violence. Manoj Goswami, Imran Hussain, Atulananda Goswami, Temsula Ao, Manorama Das Medhi, Yumlembam Ibomcha, Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh, Shekhar Das, Kallol Choudhury, Haribhushan Pal, and Bimal Choudhury, all depict their perceptions of the traumatic experience of a people living in the midst of terror and fear and yet cherishing hopes that human values will triumph some day and a new dawn of peace would emerge out of this trial by fire. The feeble child born in the midst of every possible form of adversity in Manorama Das Medhi's 'A Time to Come' holds out some promise of a new life against all odds.

Not all the states of the 'North-East' have produced an equally large harvest of good poetry in the last 50 years and it is even more difficult to come across translations that are reasonably satisfying. Ultimately, therefore, a compromise had to be made between established names and quality translations so that at least some of the representative names from each region could be included in this anthology. The selection has not been totally fair in the case of the states that have a richer production of poetry. An honest attempt has, however, been made to include at least some of the significant poets who have initiated new trends in the modern poetry of the region. Another problem faced has been the need to maintain a judicious balance so that the amount of space allocated to the states with a richer corpus of literary works is not disproportionately large. This has, however, not always been possible and the only way to justify the selections is to assert discreetly that for the purpose of this anthology at least the whole of the 'North-East' should be viewed as one unit.

Three Assamese poets, Nilmani Phookan, Navakanta Barua, and Hiren Bhattacharya have dominated the post-Independence poetic scene of Assam with their distinctive styles that bear the marks of a variety of influences from Anglo-American and European modernist poetry, combining these with elements from the classical Indian tradition. Phookan and Barua delve deep into the world of a modern man, trying to discover logical connections between the shattered images of a modern post-war situation and the inner world of a poet which strives to establish some logical connections between the inner and the outer world. Navakanta's language has great evocative power and his poems as well as novels reflect a deep sense of history. Some of the most memorable images in his poetry spring from this historical sense. Nilmani Phookan has been considered as a gifted poet whose poems are 'concentrated as well as chiseled'.⁹ Though his craft has received much attention from critics, his treatment of a variety of themes that signify the tragic dilemma of the modern man deserve equal attention. Hiren Bhattacharya's poems are unique in their capacity to bind together a deep commitment to a socialist cause, especially in his early poetry, with his brilliant handling of words which gives his language a life of its own. According to Harekrishna Deka, it is difficult to capture in translation 'the hypnotic magic of the sounds' in the poetry of Hiren Bhattacharya.¹⁰ Harekrishna Deka's early poetry seeks to explore the human unconscious, but his mature poetry concentrates on 'the facets of hideous violence confronting man' and the complex relationships of urban life.¹¹ All these poets have assimilated a variety of trends from the modernist poetry of England, America, and Europe with the tradition which they have inherited from Indian literature of the past. Their innovative handling of language, form, and imagery has left its mark on the new generation of Assamese poets. The younger group, represented here by Nilim Kumar, Anubhav Tulasi, Sameer Tanti, Jiban Narah, Anupama Basumatari, and Aruni Kashyap, reflect the heterogeneous sensibilities of a truly polyglot culture. Images, metaphors, myths, and folklore drawn from the different linguistic communities of the region have enriched their poetic language and given it a life of its own. Similarly, the poets from the Barak valley of Assam, like their counterparts in Tripura, have given a new dimension to

⁹ Hirendra Nath Dutta, 2005, 'Introduction', *One Hundred Years of Assamese Poetry*, Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, p. 16.

¹⁰ Harekrishna Deka, 'The Modern Era in Assamese Poetry: From Romanticism to Modernism' (unpublished essay).

¹¹ Hirendranath Dutta, p. 17.

the Bengali language by bringing in the unique experiences of a diasporic community. Some of the Bengali poems of Shaktipada Brahmachari and Pijush Raut have been included here.

The rich and powerful poetic voices from Manipur have been represented here by the selections from the poetry of Yumlembam Ibomcha, Saratchand Thiyam, R.K. Bhubonsana, Robin S. Ngangom, Gambhini Devi, Memchoubi, and Thangjam Ibopishak. The history of modern Manipuri literature, as has been discussed in the article by Thingnam Kishan Singh in this collection, marks a significant departure from the general pattern that is visible in the emergence of a new literature during the colonial period in the other states of the region. The Christian missionaries could not make much of an inroad into the Manipur valley where a vibrant Vaishnava culture patronized by the ruling dynasty of the kingdom was strongly entrenched. This Vaishnava tradition continued to exercise its hegemonic power over the cultural arena throughout the colonial period and it almost seemed as if the Manipuri writers had not taken any notice of the entry of the British into the region after the Anglo-Manipuri war of 1891. It is significant, therefore, that the birth of modernism in Manipuri literature in the early years of the twentieth century was not marked by the missionary enterprise of translating Christian texts and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, but by the growing awareness of the indigenous Meitei identity which had been suppressed during the rule of the Manipuri kings who had offered active patronage to the alien Vaishnava culture. The roots of the present-day militant identity movement in Manipur, therefore, can be traced back to the early part of the twentieth century which was marked by the efforts of the writers to re-invent a glorious Meitei past for Manipur. The poems in this collection, even in their translated form, display a maturity and vigour of expression that come from a sensitive tapping of the rich resources of the Meitei language. Modern Manipuri poetry, according to Ngangom, was born amidst the ravages of the Second World War, of which Manipur remains a forgotten theatre.¹² The political events that followed soon after the War—the departure of the British, the questionable accession of the kingdom of Manipur to the Indian Union, the disillusionment with the new political arrangement, and the subsequent militant resistance movement were all reflected in the literature of the post-War period. The

¹² Robin S. Ngangom, 2007, 'Contemporary Manipuri Poetry: An Overview', *Muse India*, Issue 16, November–December.

anti-romantic trend that characterizes much of the modernist literature of post-War Manipur is reflected in the work of all the poets included in this selection. The poetry that has been published in the 1980s and 1990s, unlike the writings of the 'angry young poets' of the 1970s, is marked by a deeper probe into the social reality and the journey inwards into the tortured soul of the poet.

The history of modern Manipuri fiction is in many respects similar to that of poetry. Though the tradition of the prose narrative can be traced back to an ancient text *Numit Kappa* written probably in the tenth century AD, modern fiction in Manipur emerged in the first half of the twentieth century.¹³ After the events of the Second World War which left their indelible marks on the popular psyche of this eastern state, fiction writers abandoned the romantic tradition of the Bengali novel which had inspired a few earlier writers, and wrote boldly about the new social realities and the changing patterns of human relationship. The short stories included in this volume are picked from the writings of the post-1970s when fiction writers began to display a deep concern about the destruction of the traditional way of life and the wanton violation of human rights by the different militant organizations and the security forces involved in counter-insurgency operations.

The scribal tradition is a recent one amongst the Nagas and before the development of a script for the Naga languages through the efforts of the American Baptist missionaries, literature was confined only to the oral form. Amongst the 14 major Naga tribes, speaking about 30 different languages, there is a rich tradition of the oral. So adaptations and transcriptions of oral literature constitute a significant part of print literature in modern times. Since, under the initiative of the missionaries most of the Naga writers from the first group of literates honed their literary skills on translations of the Gospels, written literature of the early phase took on a moralistic note. Amongst the Ao Nagas, who were the first to come into contact with the Christian missionaries stationed at the adjacent district of Sibsagar in Assam, the first printed book was one of alphabets in the Roman script published in 1880 by Rev. Edward Clark who came to work among the Ao Nagas in 1876. The story of Ao literature was later repeated in other areas of the Naga Hills where Christianity gradually spread in the twentieth century. For example, the Tenyidin (Angami) language was given a written form

¹³ For details, see Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh, 2002, 'Fiction in Manipur', *New Frontiers*, Vol. V.

by the missionaries in the third decade of the twentieth century, but secular literature in its written form began to take shape only under the initiative of the Angami Literature Committee in the 1970s.¹⁴ The literature that developed in the different Naga languages during the early years of their acquiring written forms, bore the recognizable stamp of the style, imagery, and diction of the Bible.

The change came after the outbreak of the war between the Naga underground army and the Indian government forces which completely transformed the cultural ethos of the people, bringing in significant changes in what was considered the 'Naga way of life'. The possibility of making quick money by providing supplies to the military contractors or amassing wealth through corruption in government service, raised great expectations about 'progress' and 'development' which are inimical to the notions of a distinctive old-world tradition. Commenting on this change, Temsula Ao says, 'The sudden displacement of the young from a placid existence in rural habitats to a world of conflict and confusion in urban settlements is also a fallout of recent Naga history and one that has left them disabled in more ways than one.'¹⁵ In the rural areas too, the regrouping of villages during the operations of the Indian army against the Naga underground resulted in displacements of another kind that also snapped traditional ties. The post-1950s generation of Naga writers have journeyed through territories of the mind which are distant from the world of simple Christian pieties upheld by the newly converted Christian writers of the earlier period. The new literature, most of which is in English, has sprung from the staccato cry of the machine guns and reflects the revolutionary ideals of the militants as well as the disillusionment with their ways that followed. The course of the struggle has also transformed the whole idiom of poetry as well as prose fiction and words with sinister connotations have crept into the vocabulary of common speech.¹⁶ In a recent biographical note, Easterine Iralu writes about her experience of growing up in Nagaland: 'Curfews and continued periods of gun-fire were all a part of growing up in Nagaland.'¹⁷ Yet, the new literature that is emerging from Nagaland is

¹⁴ D. Koulie, 'Tenyimia Folklore and Verse: Quest for Beyond', in S. Sen and Desmond Kharmawphlang (eds), *Orality and Beyond*, p. 128.

¹⁵ Temsula Ao, 2006, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, New Delhi: Zubaan, p. x.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

¹⁷ Easterine Iralu in *ICORN International Cities of Refuge Network*, Norway, Autumn 2006.

not all soaked in blood. The old storytelling tradition, which is common to all oral cultures of indigenous people, has been creatively integrated into modern literary genres to give a distinct identity to the literature of this region.

Modern Mizo literature too draws from a rich oral tradition. While much of the secular prose literature is derived from myths and folktales, the poetry draws inspiration from the rich corpus of folk songs that the various Mizo groups possess. As has been discussed in Margaret Zama's article 'Mizo Literature: An Overview', included in this anthology, the coming of Christianity to Mizoram infused a 'non-secular mindset' which determined the character of the songs and narratives written during the early phase of written literature in Mizoram. The Christian missionaries entered the Lushai Hills, then a district in the colonial province of Assam, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, accompanied by British colonization. As in Nagaland and Meghalaya, the Roman script was adopted for the Luesi dialect of the Duhlian language which became the standardized Lushai language, by the Christian missionaries. The first major literary task accomplished by them was the translation of the Bible into the Lushai language. The rich secular tradition of oral literature of the pre-colonial period was almost marginalized in order to underscore the success of the 'civilizing' mission of the British. But the natural genius of the people stood out even during the height of the religious phase, in the writings of Biakliana and others. During the period of insurgency when normal life was paralysed in the hills, a new trend developed in Mizo literature which was subversive in nature but reflected the anguish of the people traumatized by violence. The Mizo militant movement and the counter-insurgency programme undertaken to curb it, led to social upheavals that changed the character of the communities and the social institutions. B.G. Verghese and others have discussed the effects of the village regrouping programmes of the Indian government on the whole social structure of the community: '... it was a painful interlude resulting in an erosion of village institutions, the social fabric and traditional way of life.'¹⁸ These events also accelerated the process of urbanization of the society, thus paving the way for the emergence of a new literature that is now taking shape in Mizoram through the efforts of a host of writers who can handle both their mother tongue as well as the English language with equal confidence and skill.

¹⁸ B.G. Verghese, 1996, *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, New Delhi: Konark Publishers, p. 143.

'The Khasis,' says the Welsh scholar Nigel Jenkins, 'were weaving stories long before the Bible-thumping, hymn-crazy Welsh arrived on the scene.'¹⁹ The same story of a colonial 'civilizing' mission persuading a people to abandon their rich indigenous oral tradition and to adopt an alien way of life which was projected as the only 'universal' civilizational model, was repeated in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills as elsewhere in the region. The Khasi language which belongs to the Mon-Khmer group of languages, was rich in the oral tradition, though in the absence of a script of its own, written literature developed only in the nineteenth century. It was a traditional practice to compose *Phawars* or rhyming couplets orally to celebrate important social events. In the pre-colonial times, the Khasi rulers used the Assamese, Bengali, Persian, or Devanagari scripts to maintain administrative contact with their neighbours.²⁰ Significantly, the *New Testament* was translated into the Khasi language at the Serampore Baptist Mission in 1831 and this massive work, running into 898 pages, was in the Bengali script.²¹ The Welsh missionaries were the first to introduce the Roman script for giving a written form to the Khasi language and they took the initiative for almost 40 years to publish hymns, moral fables, and Bible stories in the Khasi language. However, 'a great cultural revival' took place in the Khasi Hills towards the end of the nineteenth century when three Khasi writers and a social activist following on the footsteps of S.M. Amjad Ali, a Bengali poet who wrote secular lyrics in Khasi, initiated a new secular trend in Khasi literature and posed 'a purposeful challenge to the influence of Christianity and the missionaries' monopoly over the intellectual and cultural affairs'.²² The leading personalities in this group who went about in a bold and determined way to create national awakening amongst the Khasis were Rabon Singh, Radhan Singh Berry, Soso Tham, and Jeeban Roy. Soso Tham laid the foundation of a new trend in Khasi poetry by exploring the world of myths, legends, and folklore to find new idioms and subject matter for his poetic creations. The poems included here are written by a new generation of Khasi poets who share a deep sense of cultural loss which came with the conquest

¹⁹ Nigel Jenkins (ed.), 1995, *Khasia in Gwalia: Poetry and Prose from the Khasi Hills in North-east India*, Port Talbot: Alun Books, p. 10.

²⁰ Hamlet Bareh, 2003 [1962], *A Short History of Khasi Literature*, Shillong: Don Bosco Press, p. 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²² R.S. Lyngdoh, *Ka Histori ka Thoh ka Tar: Bynta II* (in Khasi), 1983, quoted in Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, 2004, '*Hiraeth and the Poetry of Soso Tham*', unpublished thesis, p. 37.

of the territory and the mind by waves of colonizers of different hues. While they strive to seek out roots that would firmly bind them to the racial memory of the past, at the same time, they also display an eagerness to master the new modernist poetic idioms that can link them with a global audience.

Tripura's cultural history has been greatly influenced by its long history of close proximity to Bengal. Though the ruling dynasties of this small kingdom had always belonged to one of the indigenous tribal communities of the state, the cultural dominance of the plains by people from the neighbouring Bengal under the patronage of the Tripuri rulers continued to create tension in the region. The unending migration of Bengali-speaking people from the neighbouring districts of eastern Bengal during the colonial period, increased steadily during the pre-Partition days, until the small state became a 'safe haven' for Bengali migrants escaping from communal conflicts in East Bengal.²³ After Partition, the problem of refugee influx took on frightening dimensions, altering the demographic map of the area completely and reducing the local inhabitants to a small minority. At present the Bengali-speaking population constitutes about 70 per cent of the population while only about 900,000 people belonging to the eight indigenous communities speak Kokborok. The inevitable fallout of this was the rise of ethnic mobilization and a long-drawn militant struggle for identity preservation by the tribal groups of the region comprising the five major groups—the Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, and Halam. Since the Bengali language had been receiving royal patronage and it was the language used for administrative purposes, a vibrant tradition of Bengali literature had developed in the region. Rabindranath Tagore was often a royal guest in Tripura and Maharaja Birchandra Manikya Bahadur (r. 1870–96) and his daughter published several books of poetry of their own in Bengali.²⁴ It was only after the rise of militancy amongst the indigenous groups of Tripura that the Kokborok language attained its status as an official language, and at present conscious attempts are being made to retrieve the rich oral culture of the people which reflects the economic and social life of the communities. It is significant that while the modern Bengali literature from Tripura strives to follow the tradition of mainstream Bengali literature, yet as in the case of the Sylheti writers of the Barak valley in Assam, the writers

²³ Ibid., p. 168.

²⁴ Sisir Sinha, 'The Poetry of Tripura: Past and Present', *Indian Literature*, Vol. 191, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.

from Tripura too are struggling to come to terms with their diasporic existence and the need to search for new tap roots for their literature. The modern literature that is taking shape in the Kokborok language, on the other hand, displays a self-confidence and a rootedness in the lived experience of the people. Some of the poems and stories translated from Kokborok which have been included in this collection are refreshingly original, and in their depiction of certain enduring truths about life they defy all stereotypical constructions about notions of mainstream and peripheral culture.

II

A collection of writings which represents a wide variety of cultures, nationalities, and languages cannot be subjected to any accepted notion of compiling an anthology based on similarity of style or content. Considering all the practical limitations mentioned earlier, the present collection like other such existing collections, does not make any claims of comprehensiveness. But at a time when the region is striving to reach out to the rest of the world from its historically and geographically marginalized position, the diverse writings which this anthology has brought together, representing a complex region posited at a historically difficult time, would serve as yet another attempt at the synthesizing of intellectual opinions. The response of the writers to the onslaught of the 'modernity' of the postcolonial state, their negotiations with the idea of the gradual erasure of the notion of community, their understanding of human relationships, especially the complex relationships between communities which had only marginal links with each other in the past, their sensitive approach to the problem of violence and its after-effects—all these could be some of the distinguishable markers that bind together an anthology of this nature.

The stories, extracts from novels, poems, and essays included here are from the post-Independence era. Most of the writers who find a place in this anthology are, in a sense, the children of violence. Many of them have grown up in close contact with people who have memories of the Partition of the Subcontinent and its tragic after-effects in the North-East. Others have experienced at close quarters the violence associated with the insurgent movements in different parts of the region that have changed the very character of the societies in many ways. Still others, including the large influential group of younger writers, are living through the traumatic experience of those daily incidents of

violence that disturb the seemingly idyllic surroundings of the region and leave a deep scar on the sensitive mind.

Care has been taken to include some of the representative works in fiction and poetry which have introduced new trends in contemporary literatures from the seven states. Some of the well-known works of an earlier generation of writers have been included not only because they are pioneering works that show a new awareness about the emerging social and intellectual concerns of the post-Independence period, but also because of the evocative power of their language or other finer qualities of style. These are also the resources from which the newer group of writers has drawn inspiration. Many of the new writers whose works find a place in this anthology are perhaps yet to produce their best works, but they hold promise of new possibilities in creative writing from the region. In literary compositions, especially poetry, aesthetic qualities may be considered more valuable than didactic ones. This anthology, however, while endeavouring to follow that ideal, has not lost its focus on the social, political, or moral issues that are of intense concern to contemporary life in the region. It is not merely accidental, therefore, that most of the fiction writings in this volume, and some of the poems too, represent the deep-seated concern of the writers for social issues. While an overwhelming majority of the stories reflect on the theme of violence and peace, yet there are quite a few which deal sensitively with the theme of human endurance and the beauty of relationships in the midst of terror and violence. There are also a few enduring tales on the theme of the growing awareness about the nature-man conflict and the need for conservation of nature which is increasingly being threatened by human rapaciousness. Dissenting voices at the crossroads of history, which question the relevance of cultural practices that are totally at odds with the modern notion of rights of the individual as against communitarian rights, also find a place in this collection.

And finally, it is necessary to mention another departure that this anthology makes in the nature of its collection of fiction. Inclusion of oral literature in an anthology of contemporary writings may be considered unacceptable by some critics because it questions the often implicitly accepted hierarchy between the written and the oral. However, the old definition of folklore as the strange and exotic material produced by a 'primitive, backward' culture no longer holds good after the dissemination of a host of exciting modern ideas about the significance of oral literature as a lens through which to view the negotiations with the various practices of modernity. Traditional myths, in their transmuted

form, have often helped modern poets to give shape to their unique visions of the world. They have also continued to exist as a vibrant part of the living present of many cultures, merging with newly created rituals and traditions and giving a new lease of life to the ancient lore. Further, the need to mythologize could also be a response to a sense of loss—subversion as it were—of the changing social order in the region. This could perhaps explain the recovery of orality in recent times by a significant number of writers. Some of the oral narratives selected for this anthology have been retold or ‘transcreated’ by the modern writers because they are an intrinsic part of the literature from the region. Some of them may be interpreted as civilizational myths that have some relevance to the understanding of the cultural identity of a community. As Esther Syiem discusses in her essay ‘Social Identity and the Liminal Character of the Folk’, the oral discourse which has always been central to the Khasi society may seem to have shifted to a peripheral space in a more complex modern situation, but it has never ceased to occupy a significant position in the worldview of the community.

The essays included here range from the philosophical to the analytical and the descriptive. There are essays that deal specifically with the literature and culture of particular ethnic or linguistic groups of the North-East, and there are also studies that reflect on the different dimensions of the multi-ethnic and multilingual cultures of the region. In his philosophical essay on the different traditions of spirituality in the West and in India, ‘The Spiritual and the Moral’, Mrinal Miri comments on the uniqueness of the tribal vision of life which is applicable to the world of the tribesman in the North-East as well. He points out the ‘moral lapse’ involved in the dismissive tendency amongst many scholars when they judge the concept of self-knowledge amongst the tribesman as ‘irretrievably erroneous or lacking in autonomy’. Birendranath Datta, in his discussion of the distinctive features of the culture of the region, highlights the significance of the mixture of ‘Hindu-Aryan’ and ‘Indo-Mongoloid’ elements in the culture of the region in relation to what is generally known as the ‘mainstream’ culture of India. He provides a comprehensive overview of the syncretistic culture of the North-East, highlighting the distinctive features of its ‘physical folk-life’ as well as the verbal folklore.

The umbrella term ‘North-East’, which is often used as an emotive connotation for the seven states nestled together in one corner of the country, does not actually denote anything more than a geographical region. But, as it happens elsewhere in the world, geography is history

in many ways. The 'seven sisters of the North-East' which had only marginal historical links with each other in the pre-colonial times, had their doors open towards South-East Asia, eastern Bengal, Bhutan, and Tibet—regions with which they shared boundaries and lively commercial and cultural contacts. It was only after the Partition of the Sub-continent that the region became totally landlocked with almost all the doors closed except for a narrow corridor that kept it linked with India. This geographical isolation has led to erasures and marginalization on multiple levels, the effect of which is clearly discernible in the writings from the region.

The creative writers from all the small ethnic communities whose works find a place in this collection, have sought to reach out from the level of the personal to that of the universal. A clear evidence of this may be seen in the flexible attitude of most of the writers towards language. Contrary to the stereotypical notion of the region being prone to chauvinistic, xenophobic tendencies, almost every writer in this anthology is bilingual if not multilingual. Several writers have been writing with equal confidence and facility in both English as well as their mother tongue or in one of the other languages of the region. Boundaries and barriers which hampered an earlier generation of writers are being crossed easily by a new group which believes in sharing of experiences. A tangible evidence of this aspiration is the effort being made in recent years to set up writers' forums which are taking the initiative in translating and publishing literary works from the region.

The task of compiling and editing this anthology has been an immense learning experience for me. Not only have I had the opportunity to interact with writers and translators from all the seven states (and in that process making new friends), but while reading through the stories, poems, and essays I have discovered that in the midst of all the plurality there are certain elements of commonality which give a sense of distinctiveness to the writings from the region. At a point in history when no community can afford to live in isolation despite all the myths that have been circulated about the 'self-sufficiency' of societies geographically isolated from each other and from the rest of the country, the discovery of emerging affinities amongst a new group of creative writers for whom boundaries have ceased to interfere with thought processes is, in itself, a rewarding experience.

THE OXFORD ANTHOLOGY OF
**Writings from
North-East India**

POETRY AND ESSAYS

For a region marred by decades of violence, its literature is not just a social and historical map of events, but also a medium of telling its story to the world. In the yarn of such a region, one often finds anger, fear, and pain but also endurance, restraint, and hope intricately woven. The poetry and prose of North-East India are no different.

This two-volume anthology celebrates the richness and diversity of culture as evinced in writings from the seven states of North-East India: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. Representing around 70 writers and almost 60 years of literary output, this collection includes nearly 150 selections from poetry, short fiction, and essays.

Divided into two sections, this volume includes poetry and essays by leading writers from the region. In poetry, we have works by Navakanta Barua, Nilmani Phookan, Shaktipada Brahmachari, Rajkumar Bhubonsana, and Rong Bong Terang, among others, who initiated new trends in the genre. The essays, including those by Mrinal Miri, Esther Syiem, Moushumi Kandali, and Easterine Iralu, range from the philosophical to the analytical and the descriptive. Poetry and prose meld to reflect on and discuss the multi-ethnic and multilingual cultures of the region.

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Cont'd from front flap

Carefully selected and introduced by Tilottoma Misra, this representative collection of writings will appeal to readers of all hues as well as students and scholars of literature, in particular of North-East India, comparative literature, and translation studies.

TILOTTOMA MISRA was formerly Professor, Department of English, Dibrugarh University, Assam. Her published works include *Literature and Society in Assam: A Study of the Assamese Renaissance 1826–1926* (1987), *Swarnalata* (1991), *Louhitya Sindhu* (1997), and *Ramnabami–Natak: The Story of Ram and Nabami* (OUP 2007).

*Jacket painting: On Guard by Hemanta Misra,
courtesy Delhi Art Gallery*

Anungla Aier Temsula Ao
 Navakanta Barua Anupama
 Basumatary Sukalpa
 Bhattacharjee Hiren Bhattacharya
 Rajkumar Bhubonsana L. Biakliana Shaktipada Brahmachari
 Jogmaya Chakma Monalisa Changkija Charles Chasie Mamang Dai
 Birendranath Datta Narendra Debbarma Harekrishna Deka Gambhini
 Devi Sanjoy Hazarika Yumlembam Ibomcha Thangjam Ibopishak
 Easterine Iralu Moushumi Kandali Aruni Kashyap Desmond Kharmawphlang
 Lalrinmawii Khiangte Nilim Kumar Nini Lungalang Memchoubi Mrinal Miri
 Udayon Misra Tilottoma Misra Patricia Mukhim Chandrakanta Murasingh
 Jiban Narah Nilmani Phookan Pijush Raut Esther Syiem Sameer Tanti
 Saratchand Thiyam Anubhav Tulasi Mona Zote Cherrie L. Chhangte Bijoy Kumar
 Debbarma Robin S. Ngangom Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih Tayenjam Bijoykumar
 Singh Thingnam Kishan Singh Margaret Ch. Zama Anungla Aier Temsula Ao
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 Rajkumar Bhubonsana L. Biakliana Shaktipada Brahmachari Jogmaya Chakma
 Monalisa Changkija Charles Chasie Mamang Dai Birendranath Datta Narendra
 Debbarma Harekrishna Deka Gambhini Devi Sanjoy Hazarika Yumlembam
 Ibomcha Thangjam Ibopishak Easterine Iralu Moushumi Kandali Aruni
 Kashyap Desmond Kharmawphlang Lalrinmawii Khiangte Nilim Kumar Nini
 Lungalang Memchoubi Mrinal Miri Udayon Misra Tilottoma Misra Patricia
 Mukhim Chandrakanta Murasingh Jiban Narah Nilmani Phookan Pijush
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 Mona Zote Cherrie L. Chhangte Bijoy Kumar Debbarma Robin
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 Sukalpa Bhattacharjee Hiren Bhattacharya
 Rajkumar Bhubonsana L. Biakliana Shaktipada
 Brahmachari Jogmaya Chakma Monalisa
 Changkija Charles Chasie Mamang
 Dai Birendranath Datta Narendra
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