

**THE “UNEASY COEXISTENCE OF PARADOXICAL
WORLDS” IN CONTEMPORARY POETRY FROM
NORTH EAST INDIA**

ABSTRACT



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Introduction

This dissertation is a study of ten poets from North East India – Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh; Nilmani Phookan and Anupama Basumatary from Assam; Thangjam Ibopishak from Manipur; Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin S Ngangom from Meghalaya; Mona Zote from Mizoram; Temsula Ao and Nini Lungalang from Nagaland and Chandrakanta Murasingh from Tripura.

North East India originally comprised of the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, erstwhile known as the seven sister states, before another state, Sikkim was added to it. “A salient feature of Northeast India is the high concentration of tribes in close territorial contiguity. Located on one of the great migration routes of mankind the region has various ethnic elements held to be remnants of the ancient Mongolian overflow into the country”¹.

Their poetry forms a cross-section of the kind of poetry being written throughout the region. Since, almost no critical material on them is available, much of the work has been based upon an attempt to understand the poets, as being representative of and speaking for a particular region

which has come as a result of the close reading done of the poems and the interviews conducted with them. This dissertation attempts to arrive at a comprehensive view of the kind of poetry that simultaneously encompasses nature, myth and violence within its purview holding together paradoxical realities that have formed the social and political texture of life in the region. Hence transcendence, as an aesthetic or a philosophical objective will not be a possible part of this study.

The dissertation is divided into the following chapters:

Chapter-1: Introduction

Chapter-2: Images of Violence

Chapter-3: The Realities of Nature and Myth

Chapter-4: Confronting the Paradox

Chapter-5: Conclusion

Chapter 1: Introduction

“ The image of the North East region of the country is that it is a mosaic of tribal culture. That it is very remote. That it is full of trees and mountains and that it is a troubled place with lots of insurgency and army, and counter insurgency operations... Many people also associate the region

with a beautiful landscape, a naturalist's paradise, a land of big rivers and colourful festivals in worship of benevolent gods and goddesses."² It showcases a rich variety of tribal culture and natural beauty that has drawn a good deal of attention. Contradictorily, however, the region is also known for its political instability that stems from a variety of causes. The poets of the region have been continually examining the nature of these causes and attempting to give voice to their concern for the growing deterioration that seems to be endemic to the region.

"Here men and women, with common origins but different nationalities, share a racial, historic, anthropological and linguistic kinship with each other..."³ that seem to be more vital than their links with the rest of the country. Many of the communities of this region have not been able to negotiate themselves into the national mainstream. Some have been demanding separate states on the basis of their ethnic and linguistic identities resulting in violent confrontations. Most of the time, the region is in the news for its violence, insurgency, bandhs and protest rallies.

The ethno-linguistic complexities and the accompanying violence has submerged North East India in a cauldron of unresolved conflicts. The state capitals and important towns "have the crackle of gunfire and fierce cries

which disturb the night... bullets sprayed from guns at point-blank range, passing through one or two of several bodies, the slash of steel on soft flesh, the dull thuds of blows, the crack of broken bones - all that picturesquely is the northeast.”⁴ A major issue in the region is the search for identity, a quest for self-assertion, which has a “highly emotional content including a feeling of age long deprivation.”⁵

On the other hand North East India “holds a special, magical attraction with its mist-clad hills, lush green forests and smooth valleys, the bewildering range of its languages and the rich, colourful mix of its people ranging from former head-hunters to city slickers.”⁶ It is the home of many tribes and communities where “there are upwards of 130 major tribal groups in North Eastern India, including the few inhabiting the plain areas.”⁷ Being inhabited by diverse tribes and communities that have different cultures and traditions, it is an area teeming with a variety of people following their own cultural patterns.

It is against this backdrop that the contemporary poetry of North East India has been examined. Emerging from different states of this region, the poetry of North East India is seen to be distinctive from the rest of the country in its concern with issues that characterize the paradoxical make up

of their world. The dissertation has also attempted to examine the elements that set poetry from this region apart from other regions of the country.

CHAPTER 2: Images of Violence

Unrest and violence has engulfed most of the states of North East India essentially because of a deep sense of deprivation. The problem of insurgency has been endemic to the region after Independence. "Most states have been besieged by three to five decades of armed conflict; ranging from demands for self-determination and greater autonomy to assertion of complete secession from India"⁸.

Thus, in North East India, where violence, bloodshed, conflict and corruption have spilled over into everyday life, poets from the region show their concern by speaking about them in their poetry. Their poetry is often referred to as *Poetry in the Troubled Zone*⁹ or *Poetry in a Time of Terror*.¹⁰ Poets from this region are often engrossed in the writing of the poetry "of survival with guns pressed to both the temples: the gun of revolution and the gun of the state."¹¹ With a sense of terrible loss, poets speak of their land and people in a language that is filled with images of guns and bullets,

anger and frustration, politics and corruption, bloodshed and destruction,
thus:

... where pregnant women were pierced
by abortive lead, and children were sometimes burnt
as offerings to dark gods,
I come from a country where they took our past
and returned them as terrible dreams.¹²

These poets cannot close their eyes and remain oblivious to the brutalization of life when “heartrending events are happening” around them. One hears of “chilling accounts of what man has done to man.”¹³ Realizing that their land is in a state of anarchy, these poets attempt to shake people from their slumber. They speak of the horrifying incidents happening in their region where their poetry reflects the agonies and fears of society:

Fear like a militant
had silenced every sound¹⁴

One envisions the fear that creeps into society as insurgency makes its way into the town itself and silences everyone. Nongkynrih further says that as peace is fast disappearing, people begin to live in fear.

“The crisis of identity is the cornerstone of various social, political and insurgent movements”¹⁵ in the region. Aware of their distinct cultural and ethnic identities, militants from different parts of the region are demanding for autonomy, and independence. Nongkynrih depicts these conflicts and ideologies, thus:

Somewhere in a forgotten little corner of the world
a hill tribe of one million, fearful of its extinction,
waged an arms insurrection against a nation.¹⁶

Proud of their own language, dialect, culture, custom, tradition and historical background, they are not willing to merge completely with mainstream India. They want to maintain their distinct identity and so have been demanding and fighting for separate states on the basis of the respective ethnic and linguistic identities. In the process, many lives are lost and their goal seems to be a distant dream. Women poets too show their concern by refusing to be mute spectators. “Each family in Nagaland has a story to tell: of personal loss, of bereavement; of physical and emotional trauma.”¹⁷ Lungalang depicts the loss of innocent life as a result of violence:

I saw a young man gunned down

As I shopped in the market place

Two thick thuds and then he fell,

And thrashed a bit, on his face¹⁸

Here, she talks about a lost homeland where people live in fear, guilt and pain. They remain silent spectators even when their loved ones are killed. The poet mentions the death of her own brother slain in a similar way. Everyone seems to be travelling on the road of destruction. She too feels that she has been stained by scarlet, the colour of death in her poem. In the same way, Mona Zote speaks about a present marked by violence. People not willing to support such violence will have to suffer:

A boy & his gun: that's an image will do

to sum up our times¹⁹

The poet even feels that she had spent her youth in vain “self enforced isolation” because tradition had obstructed her view of the present. Further she expresses her views against what she considers a faulty independence “Swaraj: acid anthem in our veins”.

Compared to other regions of the country, North East India is behind in many areas of development. The reasons cited for this are, that the “... Central government fails to provide adequate funds for development.

There is massive corruption on one state or the other... that the Central Government gives money to make the people corrupt.”²⁰ The poets’ reaction to the rampant corruption is reflected in poetry that is filled with anger and disgust:

Here everything is bought and sold
to the highest bidder²¹

Grief-stricken at the present condition of his land, Ngangom compares it with its glorious past, thus:

Once prime land, beneficent and fabled
And now playground of black-marketeers
...
as you feed money, sell honour, peddle justice.²²

Money rules the land and everything, including honour is peddled cheaply. Injustice prevails everywhere. The corrupt government official who wields influence and power in the region is a powerful symbol in his poetry:

A cashier counts old one rupee notes
...
Then after the final count, washing his hands clean with dettol.
He eats up the notes, one by one.²³

Thus, the region has become a “capital of thieves, pimps, cutthroats.”²⁴

Using irony and satire, poets from the region talk about the “peril of lawmen turning terrorists,”²⁵ and politicians creating instability in the region, changing parties and governments for their own interests:

for here they change parties and
governments
like Hindi film stars changing dresses
in a song²⁶

where they merely indulge in meaningless talk:

The minister has neither inside, nor outside,
No air, no fertile soil on a sandbank
There are only words,...²⁷

evoking images of politicians with empty promises and no action.

Riven by forces which work under “slogans that have been twisted,” people have “witnessed growing ethnic aggressiveness, secessionist ventures, cultural and religious bigotry...” Images of violence are used to evoke the terror of the land “threatening moral and social dangers.”²⁸ Thus, these poets reveal through their images, the reality of life for people of the region. Through their poetry, we begin to understand the troubled torn

region of the country, the fears, sufferings, miseries and insecurities of the people. Using the evocative colours of red and black, Nongkynrih portrays the region, thus:

I close my eyes
turn towards the sun
the colour I see is disgorging blood.²⁹

Likewise, Nilmani Phookan depicts the uncertainty that holds everyone ransom:

Who can tell of morrow's sun
Rising in red or in black³⁰

The future is bleak but each poet shoulders his/her responsibility of awakening his/her own people. They take upon themselves the task of making people aware of what is happening around them. Their poetry is both a wake-up call and an indictment against the society that tolerates the violence and corruption, that they are witness to.

Chapter 3: The Realities of Nature and Myth

Myths form a significant part of the oral literature of the people of North East India. The oral tales that deal with them or those that have a

mythical base, signify the depths of traditional wisdom. They are inextricable from the oral history of the region. The richness of this region lies in its vibrant cultures, traditions, rituals, festivals, dances and folklore, “the way of life of the masses is still rooted in the traditional social base, - group solidarity and group consciousness for collective endeavour and welfare..., creativity is collective and participating. As a result, folklore is still a major component of the living culture of the people of the region. It has been growing and absorbing new elements.”³¹

To many writers of this region, “legends and stories are still a wellspring of thought and emotions that are restored in a peculiar blend of myth and memory unique to the region.”³² Most of the poets of this region use myth and nature alongside themes of violence, corruption and politics. Being deeply rooted in their past, these poets speak about their history and their past, the land and its people, its myths and rituals, culture and tradition, festivals and dances. Legends are portrayed with the “intensity of reality and reality is portrayed with the intensity of longing for a vanished past”.³³ Thus:

The history of our race
begins with the place of stories.

We do not know if the language we speak
 belongs to written past³⁴

In these lines, Mamang Dai, a poet from Arunachal Pradesh talks about the mystery that shrouds the origins of the people of this region. “North-Easterners are conscious that they have no recorded history about their antecedents. Their historical past and migration routes are shrouded in mystery.”³⁵ Some of their myths and legends are concerned with the coming of the first progenitors of their own communities. In relation to this, in one of her poems, Temsula Ao refers to an Ao-Naga myth:

Lungterok
 The six stones
 Where the progenitors
 And forebears
 Of the stone-people
 Were born
 Out of the womb
 Of the earth³⁶

According to the Ao-Naga myth, “the first people, three males and three females, emerged out of the six stones at a place called Lungterok,”

which literally means 'six stones'. The males were Tongpok (of the Pongener clan), Longpok (of the Longkumer clan) and Longjakrep (of the Jamir clan); and the females were Longkapokla (of the Pongener clan), Yongmenala (of the Longkumer clan) and Elongse (of the Jamir clan). Tongpok married Elongse, Longpok married Longkapokla and Longjakrep married Yongmenala. "This was the institution of exogamous marriage established by the first fathers, which continues till today and is an inalienable tenet of Ao-Naga social custom."³⁷ Here Temsula Ao has been able to bring out the historical and mythical foundation of her own society. Her poem articulates the mythical sense of history that characterizes most communities of the region.

A poet like Nongkynrih draws upon his own myths for purposes of moral education. As a poet, he would like to remind his people, "of the virtues of their ancestors' ways and the necessity of perpetuating them."³⁸ In this poem, he talks about Ren, a fisherman from a village called Nongjri, who falls in love with a river nymph and goes to live with her in the river leaving his old mother with this consolation:

"Mother," he had said,

"listen to the river,

As long as it roars

You will know that I live.”³⁹

Here, “symbolically, Ren is asking later generations to listen to the sound of his people’s life.”⁴⁰ According to the poet, the sound of his people’s life and their ways can only be voiced through one’s mother tongue. He feels that it is only through his mother tongue, that he will be able to reach out to his own people and impart their culture and tradition, thereby, helping them in preserving it. However, Nongkynrih also continues to write in English.

The treatment of rituals, traditions, dances and festivals form an important layer of the poets of this region. Rituals are performed on different occasions and have a “pronounced role to play” in folk religion as is the assertion of “identity”.⁴¹ Mamang Dai describes the rituals performed during funerals, thus:

When the singing rises

death itself will cease

Blue beads in your hair will turn you.⁴²



Here the poet explains the strengthening of ties, through women who tell stories and men who sit near the dead. They sing songs of lamentation

recalling childhood and youth, as the relatives of the deceased fasten beads and sacred twine to their hair and wrists.

The overwhelming presence of nature in the poetry of North East India is an important aspect. One hears the “river with its magical voice, the twin gods of water and mist, the land heavy with memories, the forest that lingers...”⁴³ They speak about their disappointment over the environmental degradation that has taken place in the region, the disappearance of forests and the overwhelming barrenness all over the region. They recall the virgin forests of the past with their tall trees that seems to be “Unpenetrated / Even by the mighty sun”.⁴⁴

Living close to nature, poets from this region elicit the sounds of nature like the “Woodland notes of the birds, / Melody of the flute floating from the hut on stilts” and “Bark of the deer from the northern hills” which “the cool wind carries all the time”⁴⁵. Anupama Basumatary describes the setting of the sun through metaphors:

You know well
 how the crimson lass
 enters the blue house
 opening the cloudy door⁴⁶

The picture of the setting sun as a crimson lass and the sky as the blue house with a cloudy door into which the lass enters is a evocative presentation of nature's best moments. These lines also emphasise again and again the sense of rootedness that these poets keep alive within them. Thus, they are always trying to recapture nature in their poetry. This consists of the mosaic of myths and legends, rituals and dances, festivals and cultures, traditions and people that make their poetry dense with meaning. Nature images and metaphors derived from this mosaic give their poetry a sense of rootedness and belonging for they go back into the past to emerge better able to understand their present.

Intimately interwoven into their poetry is this sense of history that is animated by their deep interest in their own myths and legends. These are the other realities that they are bent upon preserving through their poetry. One sees that these poets are also conscious of themselves as being the interpreters of the natural landscapes of their homeland whose poetry captures the essential beauty of the land, when that beauty is almost on the brink of being wiped out.

Chapter 4: Confronting the Paradox

The poetry of North East India consists of the paradoxical realities of violence and myth, past and present, love and bloodshed, cultural and political dilemmas. Even as they talk about contemporary evils, they must go back to their myths and legends as their poetry reveals the “complex terrain of everyday negotiations where nature and politics, the physical and the cultural, are inextricably engaged”.⁴⁷ They take their poetry into areas that are distinctively associated with the kind of experiences that are unique to them. On one hand it brings the gunshots and the bloodstained faces of the region “within earshot distance”, while on the other hand’ “ it takes us right into the hearts of the people, their dreams and desires, myths and memories and long struggles through history”.⁴⁸

Their journeys into the past bring out the realities of the cruel present that they have to live in:

Childhood took place
 among fairies and weretigers
 when hills were yours to tumble
 before they housed soldiers
 and dreaded chambers of torture.⁴⁹

Some poets prefer to believe that the past is far better than their present, "Our past, we make believe, is pristine/ Even as we reaped heads and took slaves."⁵⁰ They return to their childhood years with nostalgia:

How we hunted small-game in the rice fields
and covered every land of Imphal on bicycles,
making passes at almost every girl!⁵¹

Ngangom recollects his childhood when he roamed about freely in his homeland without fear. Reality has, however, changed completely. Thangjam Ibopishak speaks of his homeland as the land of the half-humans: "...nameless citizens the nameless representatives govern the land/ of the half-humans. Because whether to give human names to the/ head or to the body - no one can decide ..."⁵² The image of 'half-humans', conveys a picture of the degradation that has crept into a society that is now described as the land of "perpetual internal strife"⁵³ hitting the headlines almost everyday. This image evokes a candid picture of the degradation of the land and its people. According to the poet, people have stopped acting like humans, they live decadent lives that bring no profit to anyone.

In an age of conflict and violence, a poet like Phookan takes refuge in the legend of the protective Da-Parvatiya:

Ageless

Those two women

At the gate of *Da-Parvatiya*

In a gesture of welcome⁵⁴

Da-Parvatiya is a tiny hamlet near Tezpur on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. It has the remains of a temple in the Gupta style which has a relatively undamaged door-frame with two river goddesses on either side. These goddesses seem to welcome everyone and are like a refuge for the poet. He chooses to believe in them rather than in the bullets that have done enough damage to his land.

However, even as their land is swollen with violence and corruption, they take refuge in a past consisting of their myths, legends, traditions and rituals. In ‘A Day In Cherrapunjee: I-V’, Nongkynrih talks about the beauty of his native land and the myths associated with it. In ‘A Day In Cherrapunjee: II’, he tells about the Dainthlen Falls, where according to the Khasi myth, the *thlen* or serpentine master was killed and cut into pieces, “how the evil Thlen was killed / in the very spot”.⁵⁵ In attempting to resurrect myths along with his childhood memories, he tries to impart a

sense of folk history to modern readers unacquainted with a valuable dimension of their past.

In 'The Voice of the Mountain', Mamang Dai speaks about the people who still follow tradition even in a fast changing world:

The other day a young man arrived from the village.

Because he could not speak

he brought a gift of fish

from the land of rivers.

It seems such acts are repeated:

We live in territories forever ancient and new,

and as we speak in changing languages

...⁵⁶

A gift as a way of showing gratitude is part of a tradition that her people diligently try to preserve even in a fast growing world.

To quote Jayanta Mahapatra "the miseries of contemporary dilemmas are apparent"⁵⁷ in the poetry of North East India. This is specially reflected in its persistent search for identity. Some have had to leave their lands because of the ethnic cleansing that has taken place in some parts of

the region. This has become an all consuming passion for poets like Ngangom. A deep sense of loss is thus felt:

But I need a homeland
 where I can recognize myself
 just a map or even a tree or a stone,
 to mark a spot I could return to
 like a pissing animal
 even when there's nothing to return for.⁵⁸

Torn away from his native land, Ngangom experiences a deep rift in his personal life resulting in a sense of exile in his poetry.

Most of the poets from North East India feel threatened that “outsiders” may swamp their identity, tradition and culture. This fear surfaces in their poetry. They blame them for distorting their culture:

They dislodged me from my moorings
 They tore me from her side
 They chipped and chiseled
 They gave me altered dimensions.⁵⁹

Using the chipped monolith as an image, Temsula Ao tells us how the ways of the hill people have been changed by “outsiders” who come from far off

places to influence them. She feels that her people have not been allowed to grow and have been made to deny their real selves.

They talk about the influence of the West and how their boys now “...sit on terraces / with their dolorous guitars...” Before the white people came, all of them worshipped the same gods and goddesses. But with their coming they brought in the kind of conflict that is familiar even today: “...religion to divide us, before politician-priests/ who laboured for their own redemption, / mouthing the name of god among benighted heathens”.⁶⁰

Corruption and materialism have also taken hold of society in the region. Talking about materialism, Ngangom says that “poetry can never be an ally of this numbing materialism or a party to mindless violence. Materialism, wherever it abounds, begets a particular kind of terrifying alienation, for the simple reason that we forfeit our ability to love when we place commodities above our fellow men. And someone who cannot love is always alone.”⁶¹ Lungalang seems to share the same view as Ngangom. She talks about how a man has become “...a stranger among his own,/ And his home, a space between walls”.⁶² Thus, showing one how materialism has created alienation. The stature of a man in this materialistic world according to her is “a terse of equation of his bank books”.

However even in a land filled with violence, bloodshed, hatred, revenge and corruption, nature's presence is felt even in the face of sure destruction:

The haunting *madhavi* fragrance escapes the rustle of spring,
It is acrid with the smell of gunpowder⁶³

Poets like Phookan persistently long for renewal and search for a better world, " I have seen several times / the sighing hand of his / among countless hands."⁶⁴ Even though destructive forces seem to have been let loose in the world, he still has immense faith in humanity. He urges people not to look at life in a negative way but to be positive:

No do not tell me
we shall never arrive
No water in the river
No fire in the water⁶⁵

Confronting the paradox has always been a challenge for the poets of this region. They articulate the contradictions and speak about them in order to be able to make sense of the senselessness around them where "tradition rubs shoulders with modernity, folk rhythms jostle uneasily with the western pop, virgin forests stand a mute testimony to the debauchery of

urban life, and recalcitrant nativism co-exists with the ‘otherness’ of the outsiders”⁶⁶. They succeed to the extent that they are able to recognise and accept the realities of a conflicting world.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The contemporary poetry of North East India provides insight into a region that is lush, with verdant forests, hills, valleys, rivers, and waterfalls. Myths and folklore tell of “ancestors from the shadowy past, from mountains steeped in mist and romance, from lands far away, of snake gods and princesses, epic battles and great warriors”.⁶⁷ The other aspect of its poetry reflects the terror and grief of warfare and tragedies of wasted lives that have taken over the region. This poetry is also pregnant with images of violence, corruption, politics as also of the countryside, rhythms of village life and its rich cultural heritage. Mamang Dai constantly brings out this double-edged aspect of poetry, “we wade through gutted entrails slippery with blood, and we run through the green bamboo crushing earthworms and frogs, living amidst death and resurrection all at the same time”.⁶⁸

Since, North East India has been synonymous with militancy, poets from the region cannot remain silent when they are witness to horrifying

incidents. Their poetry has always reflected the chaos that has erupted in the region. They speak of innocent people being killed in fake encounters and also of others who have had to flee to jungles to escape from the tortures of the Indian Army. They sympathise with the young who join rebel groups but make waste of their lives. They follow the conflicts and write about the ideologies of people who want to maintain their identity. These poets also talk about the corruption and materialism which are prevalent in the region.

However, against all odds some of these poets still believe in the survival of life. They celebrate life as it were and for some of them, poetry “is the voice of humanity”; each poem is “a human moment...Moment of inexpressible joy and sorrow, culminating in a silent but sure regeneration of awareness”.⁶⁹

They are rooted in their past, their land and people and talk of their origin and creation myths, traditions, rituals, festivals and dances. These form a significant dimension of poetry that moves backwards and forwards in time, in order to establish a pattern of thought and understanding. The presence of nature does not outweigh the images of violence that erupts in their poetry. Rather these poets reveal an innate ability to understand the

true nature of things, thereby taking an unambiguous stand against violence and yet refusing to idealise the past.

Poetry from North East India thus reflects two opposite worlds – the world of myth and nature on one hand and the world of violence and bloodshed on the other. They have skillfully maneuvered their poetry through these paradoxical worlds. While caught up in issues like insurgency, corruption, political turmoil and conflict that have taken over everyday life, their poetry also reveals the beauty of natural landscapes and the enduring quality of their myths and legends. The coexistence of these paradoxical worlds in their poetry is a strong motif that identifies them as being poets of this region, consciously writing about the rifts that divide and control them. Though rooted to their land, yet their poetry has a universality that communicates itself to all readers.

End Notes

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