



Exploring
North-East
Indian Writings
in English

Volume - 1

Indu Swami

The present anthology entitled *Exploring North-East Indian Writings in English*, Volume I is a modest attempt to evaluate some prominent literary figures of North-East Indian Writings in English. It includes twenty five critical essays on some of the latest perspectives of the region by eminent scholars. The writers that have been focused are: Temsula Ao, Manang Dai, Easterine Iralu, T. Monalisa Changkija, Nini Lungalang, Esther Syiem, Mona Zote, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Robin Singh Ngangom, Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, Indira Goswami, Siddhartha Deb, Daisy Hasan, Mitra Phukan, Bhaskar Roy Barman, Anjum Hasan, Jyoti Prasad Agrawalla, etc. There are references to many other writers as well in the process of discussion.

The anthology would surely serve as a valuable source book for the writers, readers, scholars, teachers and academicians who want to be fully acquainted with the works of North-East Indian Writers in English. I would feel delighted if it is used by the students in the changing canonical scenario of the twenty-first century. It will undoubtedly help them sharpen their critical understanding with its ample food for thought.

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1

Tribal Identities, Literature and Contemporary Reality in North-East India

—*Jasbir Jain*

The term 'identity' has always been problematic and in the case of the tribal, it becomes even more so as the first battle is against stereotypes. I recall, the films of the late 50s and 60s presented a strange image of half-naked people immersed in song and dance, magic and superstition, in fact a world that presented a contrast to the filmic mainstream of urban middle class representation. It was only in the 70s that a whole range of NDFC films, mainstream media and writers like Gopinath Mohanty and Mahasweta Devi enabled a different vision approximating a more realistic presentation. Just as we have in the writing of African writers like Soyinka, Ngugi, Bessie Head and Achebe who present tribal myths, rituals, world views. There is also the political representation in the media which, despite its many limitations and highlighting of backwardness, works towards establishing connectivity. In addition to the above, there are a whole range of political movements which, however, I don't propose to dwell on for the moment. My concern here is with the uses which literature can serve and has served in the articulation of the tribal identity and culture and in enabling the outsider to understand them.

Yet, I must confess at the outset that every definition I encountered of tribal identity, every image I looked at had a host of exceptions. There are too many generalizations that have entered our discourse of such classifications and stable positions and there is no simple way of putting the differences existing in the differently located tribal cultures in any single category. The journey – intellectual and emotional – has been difficult.

The two issues which ordinarily surface and are debatable are: 'who is a tribal?' and whether there exists the possibility of 'learning from margins'. The first focuses on the notion of identity, the second on the polarities which beset our thinking. But there is often a meeting point between the two or there are ways in which the possibility of learning can help dismantle stereotypes. Claude Lévi-Strauss in his work *The Savage Mind* has an opening chapter the "Science of the Concrete". As one reads along, Lévi-Strauss's subtle and substantiated argument blurs the boundaries between scientific and intuitive epistemology, dismantles their hierarchical positioning and restores a notion of reciprocity and a sense of equality to both. The intuitive mind's desire for exactitude and objective knowledge is as real as the scientific mind's. Knowledge which grows out of need and is the basis of survival, often in hostile environments, emerges through similar processes of observation, even if they are not connected to scientific concepts. The difference is therefore "less absolute than it might appear" (Lévi-Strauss: 19).

Unfortunately, Lévi-Strauss's dismantling of uneven polarities has not been followed up. Today, more than ever before, our categorizations tend towards binary oppositions, fixities and 'othering'. The question 'who is a tribal?', to my mind, is directed at upsetting this fixity and the image of the tribal as alien or 'other' or as oppressed and powerless, that has been stereotyped. It immediately recognizes the possibility of a change, a shift, a moving outside territorial identification, and it carries within it an acceptance of

heterogeneity. The search for a definition brings in a whole lot of issues related to belief, cultures, economics and politics; it is equally a search for relationships and commonalities. Identity actually is a search for 'difference', in the way we find ourselves distinctive from others. Thus, there is always an acknowledgement of an underlying sameness. Terms like identity and ethnicity act like frames hindering change, like satraps that hold us back and thus need to be used with caution.

In fact, somewhere along the mid-nineteenth century with the growth of industrialization and imperial aggression, a major split took place between culture and civilization. Their interweaving together was disrupted through the intervention of the scientific approach which increasingly sought to systematize, define and bind and thus it proceeded to become dismissive of cultures which had not galloped along the same highway at the same pace. The split is not inevitable. It is irrelevant. Culture and civilization are close allies and need to work together.

The image of the tribal is similarly caught in a moral dilemma: how much to identify with the past, and how far to go ahead. The Nigerian crisis, as Soyinka, analyzed in *The Open Sore of a Continent* (1996), had its origins partly in the problem that a minority was constantly engaged in playing up "innately innocuous differences, be they ethnicity or religion, in order to set one section against another and thus assure itself of political control" (128).

A short while ago, I mentioned that the question 'who is a tribal' admitted heterogeneity. To take this further I turn to Mahasweta Devi. Without meaning to be disrespectful, there appears to be an over-generalization when she refers to "Palamu as the mirror of the whole tribal world". Differences of local circumstances, cultures, educational and economic levels are all brushed aside as the category of the oppressed raises its head. Between oppression and violence, somewhere we lose sight of the human being. In

all fairness to Mahasweta Devi, one need to admit that hers is an impassioned involvement, she is deeply conscious of the strengths of cultures which have developed as the tribal world has done through marginalization, loss and hostility. She speaks for the “potential that has survived in them through all these centuries” (xv). It is by going across that one learns from the margins, by recognizing their inherent patience, their ability to endure, their oneness with environment, their histories of courage and resistance. The recognition of the multiplicity and interweaving of histories and historical forces is important for the realization of common goals. In the Mahasweta Devi and Gayatri Spivak dialogue, two terms which emerge are worthy of detailed attention. One is “ethical singularity” (Spivak, “Translator’s Preface”: xix) and the other “organic intellectual” (Ibid: xxi). Ethical singularity, Spivak elaborates is neither mass contact nor engagement with the common sense of the people: it is a profound engagement with one person when responses come from both sides – “this is responsibility and accountability” (xix). The beginning with the smallest human denominator at once does away with stereotypes, myths, generalizations and over-riding solutions while the ethicality ensures a social and a moral conscience. All the while one is aware that one is fighting against odds: there is the ‘impossibility of full ethical engagement’ in the sense of ‘impossibility of love’ in the one-on-one way for each human being’ (xx) and also the awareness of ‘impossible social justice’ (Spivak, Appendix, 199). The only way through these impossibilities is through a constant human effort.

The organic intellectual is a term which is built on the sense of ‘responsible resistance’. Spivak falls back on Gramsci’s use of the word ‘permanent persuader’, and goes on to add that the “organic intellectual is not a concept of identity but rather of a focus on that part of the subject which focuses on the intellectual’s function” (xxiii). Literature restores the human to this political discourse. It

looks at history, opens out myths, explores the unconscious, affirms belief and like the phoenix raises its voice against oppression. As Mamang Dai has written:

The history of our race
begins with stories

(“An Obscure Place”: 85)

She plays with fluctuating roles in her poem “The Voice of the Mountain” - ‘an old man sipping the breeze/ that is forever young’, “a child who died at the edge of the world” and “The woman lost in translation”. The poet’s persona is inhabited alike by desert and rain, by the ‘breath that opens the mouth of the canyon’ and the ‘sleep in the mind of the mountain’. This oneness with nature with the physical world and the history of the people is what defines the ‘tribal’ sensibility (“The Voice of the Mountain”: 87-88). The poet has captured a sense of being permeated with the past and the present as no outsider can do. The contrast with a portrayal even from an involved outsider who seeks to transfer her sensibility as Mahasweta does is sharp and pointed. It is not the mere difference between prose and poetry, but the difference goes much further than that. There is, in Mamang Dai, an attempt to capture the lost innocence which Robin Ngangom also speaks about in his poem “A Libran Horoscope” when “childhood took place/ free from many fears when I had only my mother’s love/ to protect me from knives,/ from fire and death by water” (“Poetry in the Time of Terror”: 168). The inter-textuality by reference to death by water immediately establishes connection with Elliot’s *Waste Land* and with myth. Further this innocence explores its transformed world by the recognition of violence which now inhabits both the sides of his world – the hills which have yielded place to ‘soldier’s barracks’ and the friend who worships a gun and has turned a ‘widow maker’ (Ibid:169). The association of creativity with death – the act of making widows in ‘widow maker’ – sends a chill down one’s spine. It opens up a view of claustrophobic spaces with no open end in sight.

Writing is an act of survival. It re-inscribes a whole being, a culture and a history. It helps go across, it breaks insularities, questions separation, suspects 'otherness'. Ngangom writes, 'I suppose I've always tried in a naive way to invite the reader into my small world. Perhaps I've written poems because I have felt this desperate need to be understood and accepted.' He believes that the written word is longer lasting than the spoken word (Ibid: 169). Identities get formed and located in histories, memories and spaces as much as they do in political circumstances. If Ngangom considers the hillside integral to his growing up, he also realizes that external reality encroaches on any Wordsworthian glorification of it. The writer, "from Northeast India" he says, "consequently, differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way". He has grown up amidst "ethnic aggressiveness, secessionist ventures, cultural and religious bigotry [...] and [...] the banality of corruption and the banality of terror' (Ibid: 171).

Another poet Dilip Das (from Tripura) locates power struggles within the metaphor of conjugality where the couple shares divided domestic space, where division is permanent and strife resurfaces every now and then, Outside negotiators firmly kept out while the exact line of control remains uncertain ("Conjugality", 42). The fatality which the notion of an identity carries within it is described in an extremely stark manner by Mihir Deb in his poem "Killed or Ousted the Rest Would Be". When a man is killed and the killer asked why was he killed, the answer is likely to be one of the following:

- (a) He was Hindu
- (b) He was Muslim
- (c) He was a Bengalee
- (d) He was not a Bodo
- (e) He was not a Manipuri.

In brief “He was not like us”. Difference takes away the right to live (*IL*: 229, 57).

Yet how different? The Northeast has many languages, and at this point of time more than one religion. Buddhism, Animism, Hinduism and Christianity all live side by side. Thus region, race, religion or language – which of these is the mark of identity? Or are all of them equally irrelevant to the political reality? But religious constructs and myths do inhabit the poetry of the region. Buddha’s life and *The Mahabharata* find their way into Yumlembam Ibomcha’s poetry (Manipuri). In the poem “Yayati”, titled after the man whose desire overrode all other claims, Ibomcha contrasts Yayati’s desires with Buddha’s abnegation of them and invokes Krishna as the arbitrator. Did Yayati really find his happiness and Buddha his salvation? “Renunciation and desire/ where does the difference lie?” (“Yayati” *IL* 179: 15-16).

Poetry even as it celebrates landscape, nature, heritage and mourns the looming presence of death, violence and the loss of meaning in life, captures intensity but does not necessarily enter into the crevices of everyday life, of the processes of bringing up families and adjusting to fear, violence and guilt. But it beautifully captures the hidden longing for a normal human existence – itself a creative urge, a shift out of the stagnant mood of despair. The Northeast today lies caught between its own past and its historical memory of conflict, between the over-ground and the underground. Ngangom in a long poem titled “The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom” moves through four long sections and interrogates the make-belief picture of a pristine past (10). It is a tense loaded poem loaded with admission of guilt all around, of despair that has entered young lives and the news full of “rape, extortion, ambushes, confessions” (11). Maybe, the poet feels, “The land is tired/ of being suckled on blood/ maybe there is no peace/ between the farmer and his fields,/ may be all men everywhere/ are

tired of being men" (13). Freedom at the moment also means freedom from history, from retaliation and revenge.

Oral literatures as they come down to us have their value but the reality they represent is mythical in essence whether they write of creation, man's relationship with nature or of kinship which breaks down under rivalry and jealousy like the story of Cain and Abel. At times one finds oral folk tales being relocated in literary narratives. Like the long story of the doves and the transformation of Singwil back into a human form in the Garo tale of "The Wild Dove" is reflected in Jonmoni D. Shira's poem "The Dove", knocking at cultural memory, summoning back men and women to the eternal truths of being (See *Garo Literature* Ed. Caroline Marak).

When one reads the literature coming out of the Northeast, one is faced with multiple realizations: one, the portrayal of violence, of men and women caught between opposing forces is no different from several other parts of the country. Again, literature is moving away from narratives of victimization to a more humanly structured relationship conceding the indifference of the system and stressing the brutalization of the victims themselves. There is also a generation of a discourse of forgiveness which accepts the fact that the circular pattern of hate and revenge needs to be interrupted. A school teacher from a Kashmir village, in an interaction voiced the feeling:

Community makes nation. Silence the community and the nation dies. War takes place. In war, one side wins, the other loses. What neither wins nor loses, but simply dies as a result, is humanity. Human values, human relationship, faith, trust. I fear for the end of all this. I fear that humanity will not survive.

(A school teacher, Avan-Porgaon, Pulwama District, *Speaking Peace: Women's Voices from Kashmir*, ed. Urvashi Butalia)

It is this sense of loss which pervades Temsula Ao's collection of short stories *These Hills Called Home*, subtitled 'Stories from a War Zone', the collection proceeds to provide

different responses to the harsh reality and the manner in which new survival strategies have to be evolved in the changed environment. Most of the stories focus on the events of the seventies either in retrospect through recollection or contemporaneously through participation. Trust, security, hope, friendship are either sacrificed or yield to other loyalties. "An Old Man Remembers" works through memory and the telling of his life story to his young grandson. The day had begun with rain and the death of his childhood friend Imlikokba. Together they had lived through sad and happy moments and once while escaping from the wrath of the soldiers, they were trapped by the underground and recruited by the Naga National Army. Then follows a bad leg, a confession, a prison term and a return to life in the village which also meant recurring nightmares, a life time of silence and retreat. Imlikokba had often insisted that he pass on the story to others. The young had a right to know people's history and Sashi was a better storyteller of the two. But drawing a veil of silence, he had continued to live his lonely widower's life, bearing the pain of his bad knee. It is now, when his friend is dead, he responds to his grandson's query. Aesthetically the narrative is deeply moving as it moves non-chronologically, gives graphic details of the ember lit hut, of the old man's sadness, of the fears that haunt him and the helplessness he experiences. But towards the end the eastern sky was "brightening with the light of a new dawn. And the earth continued to be" (Temsula Ao: 113). This was the secret of his lost youth of his interrupted childhood and was a final facing of the truth - "Truth about the Self, the land and above all, the truth about history" (112).

In another story, "Shadows", jealousy and rivalry are juxtaposed with a sense of honor. The story is about brutality. Hoito, jealous of his senior officer, the second-in-command of the Naga army and disapproving of the almost automatic induction of his son into a group of volunteer

trainees, engineers a brutal murder of the young Imli. Two of his friends discovering his dead body, give him a hurried burial and bury the secret within their breasts. Later when an inquiry is held and Hoito's deliberate act of murder comes to light, Imli's father buries the truth in the interest of the larger movement. The story highlights two things in equal measure – the brutality that lives in the human mind and the loyalty to a collective cause which rises over a personal loss.

Even as these characters come to terms with their compulsions, other cases of being trapped alike by body and need are also discussed. "The Curfew Man" is the story of a laid-off employee who lives on a meager pension and is enticed into turning an informer against his own people. Unable to live with this, he sacrifices his second leg because now fully crippled he would be no use to his employers. The loss of a limb is his only way to opt out of the disloyal act of 'informing' on his fellow men. "The Curfew Man", like several other narratives in the collection, makes it amply clear that the forces are not binary oppositions; instead there is a complex network of contradictory forces, impulses, factors and considerations pushing men and women into positions from where they can find no escape.

While each story explores a different aspect, there are two which touch the emotional chords much more intensely than the others -- "The Pot Maker" and "The Last Song". "The Pot Maker" is not concerned with violence of external aggression or encroachment; instead it is concerned with a mother-daughter relationship. The mother refuses to teach the child the art of making pots as she wants her to learn weaving which would be monetarily more advantageous. The child persists in her desire. And finally when she miraculously inherits the talent, it is the dying breath of her mother which brings her the gift. The story evokes all that is mysterious and mystical, all that is inexplicable and creates an atmosphere of wonder even as it lays open the material causes which introduce change.

The other story, "The Last Song" is a moving narrative about the faith of a young girl who at the dedication of a new church building sings a song even in the face of terror. Even as the soldiers summon the *gaonburrus*, Apenyo bursts into her solo number. The soldiers consider it open defiance. But while many of the crowd 'were seen trying to run away to safety' Apenyo continued to sing. The Captain rapes her and her mother as an act of punishment, resulting in their death and the church building is set aflame. But Apenyo's story is oft-narrated on a "cold December night in a remote village when an old storyteller gathers the young to mourn the dead" (33).

Literature does not take sides: it simply deals with the human situation evoking both thought and feeling. It is about those who are placed in-between and who have to face moral choices. Literature is about humanity and the loss of humanity. Like Intizar Hussain's stories about the partition, about the guilt that makes a permanent home in the hearts of man, it opens out discourses of resistance, of the desire to belong, of values that sustain and faith that inspires, of ties that matter and the desires that beckon. The writers do not merely talk of terror or violence; they talk of democracy, of freedom, of nationhood, of survival and compulsion, of territorial affiliation and also of peace bringing one full circle to the questions I raised initially – the question of identity and learning from the margin. As one travels down social and historical shifts, it is more than evident that the factors of identity construction at all levels – individual, collective, regional or national – also shift. The cluster is re-formed. Economic forces and personal ambitions force the borders to open. One perhaps wants to be located in one's origins as the Assamese girl in Nilakshi Borgohain's short story "A Local" demonstrates. Aparajita's childhood memories of her mother hoisting the national flag come to nought when she is mistaken for a foreigner time and again. People are ignorant about India's geography, they have never heard of

Shillong and her fellow-students expect her to demonstrate habits they associate with foreigners. It is hard to live down stereotyped approaches. Finally it takes a much travelled ex-army personnel to locate her as Assamese (*IL* 227: 42). In Temsula Ao's stories also we have Imli studying in Allahabad and young men wanting to join the army. There are signs of every need to belong, of wanting to be part of a larger entity than one's immediate neighbourhood. One needs to ask like Soyinka not what is a nation but when is a nation? (*The Open Sore of a Continent*: 19, 21, 35). How does the concept of nationhood relate 'to the lowest common denominator, the human unit?' (*Continent*: 117). The nation is a human construct, imagined as well as emotionally entered into, one where one wants to bypass divisionary aspects like class and race. Identities are individualized and different, even as the educational levels, exposure, travel and environments of violence intervene to mould them. In the Northeast history has worked on somewhat different lines than in tribal areas of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The role of the missionaries in the spread of education is an important factor. Their location between China and India is another factor, another added reason for the multiple pulls in their lives. Another question, which one often tends to ignore, is how do they see themselves and view their relationship to the 'other', and how they relate to their own traditional practices and cultures, questions which even with half answers provide an insight to their self-image. Is there a romanticisation of tribal cultures? Or is there a movement away from it into other lifestyles?

Even as old myths both of politics and culture collapse, new myths come into existence literature constantly resurrects, revives and reshapes. The reality which it reflects goes beyond the merely visible or analyzable. To that extent art carries a richer burden than science as literature both reflects and constructs reality. It is here that individual activity enlarges itself to enfold a collectivity. The literature

of this region, as it absorbs and articulates the atmospheric influences and attempts to express its contrapuntality, also begins to generate a healing effect and an affirmative view of the self. The indigenous ways of storytelling and of orality interlace with the written word creating an aura of its own – one of hope and involvement. Temsula Ao's *Laburnam for My Head* (Penguin: 2009) is a collection of more individualized stories than *These Hills Called Home*, especially the title story which sends out waves of nostalgia for the past and feelings of attachment to the land.

Spivak at one point commented that “technical papers will not be accompanied by any change of mindset in the researchers” (a statement I’ll qualify it by adding ‘not necessarily’). But by contrast literary and social texts are conducive to change in the mindset, because they probe our conscience even as they lay bare their own. This amounts to learning from others, margins or not, but people like us and sets the path to understanding and relating to each other.

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