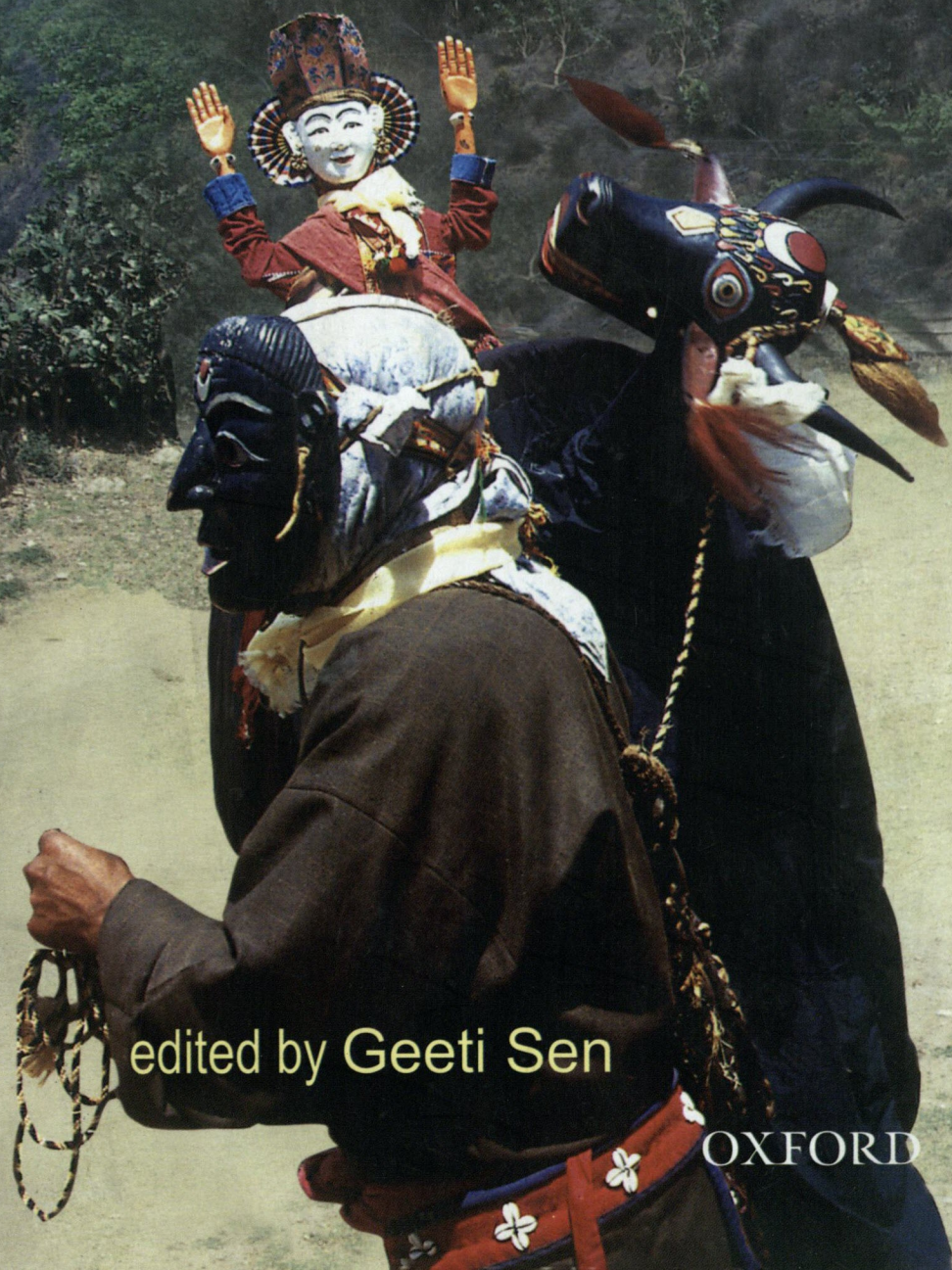


WHERE THE SUN RISES  
WHEN SHADOWS FALL

# THE NORTH-EAST



edited by Geeti Sen

OXFORD

## WHERE THE SUN RISES WHEN SHADOWS FALL THE NORTH-EAST

For most people living in India, little is known about the North-east, its myriad cultures and value system. This book paints a broad canvas by introducing readers to the rich cultural heritage and history of the states; the outstanding modern poetry from this region, acknowledged to be among the best from India; and the dual or plural identities which have led to the immense crisis of political development.

Over thirty leading personalities, most of them from the North-east, have contributed to this volume essays, oral narratives, poems, interviews, and around 40 photographs.

Oral narratives from eight states including Sikkim, evoke a world in harmony with nature. This idyllic image is juxtaposed with impassioned, pungent, and sardonic poetry, which expresses the pain and brutality of political oppression. The cultures of these different states are also shown experiencing transformations in social values, beliefs, and lifestyles, as they adapt to radical changes.

Three cogent essays deal with political turmoil—partly engendered by a 'mindset' leading to a conflict of loyalties between the state and the country. The Brahmaputra becomes a metaphor for destruction and survival.

The book is enriched by two interviews held with luminaries: Indira Goswami speaking with candour about negotiating on behalf of the ULFA; and Ratan Thiyam speaking on bringing the aesthetics of his repertory theatre group based in Manipur to performances worldwide, investing the local Manipur language and culture with universal significance.

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*Cont'd from front flap*

This poignant and gripping account of the North-east and its cultures, will deepen readers' understanding of this little-known part of India, especially scholars of anthropology, cultural studies, and literary culture, as well as general audiences.

**Geeti Sen** is Chief Editor, Publications, India International Centre, New Delhi. She is a cultural historian, art critic, and the author of five major books on Indian art. She was conferred the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fellowship from 1998–2000.

**Sanjoy Hazarika** is Managing Trustee of the Centre for North-east Studies and Policy Research, and is a Consulting Editor for *Statesman*. He is an award-winning former correspondent of the *New York Times*.

**Mamang Dai** is a journalist and writer, and is Vice-President of the North-east Writers Forum. Her published works include two books, a collection of poetry, and a collection on folklore.

**Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih** is Deputy Director in charge of publications at North-eastern Hill University, Shillong. He is the recipient of the first North-east Poetry Award conferred by the North-east Poetry Council, Tripura, in 2004.

*Jacket Photograph: Masked Dance at Dirang-Dzong by Mon Buddhists, Arunachal. Photo Credit: Geeti Sen.*

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## *On Creation Myths and Oral Narratives*

**I**n the villages the young girls are busy again at their looms. They are weaving new cloth for the celebration of the festival. I know if I asked them who taught us to weave, they would burst into laughter and say, "Who knows about these things? It was here before we were born!"

With oral narratives, there are no reference books, and few recorded volumes in print. If you approached a village elder who might be a storyteller, he would say, "What! What kind of story, eh? How can anyone pull a story out of air, eh?"

Yet I also know that if I persist, I will receive interesting information and know, perhaps for the first time, that the implements of weaving are a woman's protection, that the first cotton grew out of the white feather of a kite, and that yes, women do not hunt; but when a man kills a tiger he is received at the village gate by women first, who hold out woven red cloth around him to shield the hunter from the avenging eyes of the killed animal.

Who said this should be done? Who instructed men and women to erect a guardian gate at the entrance to every village? Who told us that the leaves and branches of certain trees are auspicious? One gateway leads to another. The Greek word *mythos* means 'talk' or 'story.' And like the original meaning of 'story' derived from the word 'storehouse,' a story begins to unfold as a storehouse of many meanings....

The first stories we heard as children were about the war between the fish and stars. That is why the catfish has a big head because it had been struck with a large rock in the course of the battle. The war is also the reason why fish have gills, a sign of the slash marks made by the arrows of the stars.

In many instances oral narrative is perceived as a simple recounting of tales for young readers; but I have tried this with children, showing them the first colour illustrations of these old stories, and they have said hurriedly, just to be polite, "Oh, what's that?" before dashing off to watch *Bhoot Kahani*, or Batman and Hatim conquering the world.

This is the other characteristic of oral traditions. It seems that their significance returns to us only when we are older. By then we realise the need to identify ourselves again as belonging to a particular place, a community; and some signs for this lie with our stories. We are here today as members of a particular community with a particular set of beliefs, by an act of faith, because we reposed belief in the 'word' as composed in our myths and legends. In the world of our ancestors this was the art of the storyteller, the medicine man, the orator, the priest. Everyone knows the stories, in one form or another; and it is this knowledge that links the individual to a group. Perhaps this is why if you asked someone to tell you a story they would say there was nothing to tell, because now the stories are inseparable from the routine of daily life, the customary practices of a community... They are not even perceived as stories anymore but as beliefs determining a way of life.

In this section the stories are but a small part of a vast oral literature of the different linguistic groups of the region. The North-east region of the country is known for its scenic beauty, and most of the stories here focus on its myths of creation: the birth of mountains, stars, good and evil, and the birth of man; and these stories convey a sense of grandeur in concept and feeling.

However, it must be owned that all our home states are totally changed from what they once were. Today the stories emerging from this region are more about bloodshed and killings. This is an area that provokes thought and

debate today, both amongst writers of the North-east and those who review these writers—as if the choice for contemporary literature of the region today is between guns and bullets or ancient tales and rhapsodies that should now be discarded as idyllic irrelevance. Yes, there is writing about bullets and guns and death and betrayal. It can hardly be otherwise, when we are confronted with changes that bring such terror and anguish. Yet, while the idyllic concept is gone, for many of us the 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.

All the authors represented in this section are scholars, writers, and poets, engaged in research, translation and documentation of this oral tradition. It is not 'dead' literature; there is a whole new generation of storytellers and song makers keeping this unique literature alive and evolving, as is evident in numerous new works inspired by the collection of older, memorised narratives.

The legend of U Thlen is still very much alive in Meghalaya; and in the dim, rain-wet hills of Sohra, better known as Cherapunjee, it is not difficult at all to conjure up the shadow of the serpent and hear the ghostly beat of a drum. Then there are the stories of migration and the days of valour, resurrecting the names of warriors and legendary forefathers. All these are recounted in songs and ballads across the North-east, as are the songs of creation, and the instructions given to man by benevolent gods and goddesses on how to conduct his life and guard against the god of unexpected happenings, flying high above the earth.

Of course, in this tradition the meaning of stories remains open to many interpretations. The names of places, gods, goddesses and legendary characters vary even from village to village. Nevertheless, there are similarities across the world in the first stories of wandering tribes and vanished empires. Since the history of mankind began, a family, a group or a community have, from the beginning, arranged for themselves a world in which certain phenomena were explained and recognised. So it is with the Homeric legends, Hindu mythology, the gods and myths of Northern Europe, ancient Egypt and Rome. Viewed in

this way, the myths and stories can be interpreted as an ancient religion of the world which, over a period of time developed into parables and a set of beliefs—through which certain concepts were sanctioned and practised to become the basis for the rituals, taboos, and obligations of a community.

This is one more aspect of oral literature. The stories did not come into the minds of men like a bolt of lightning. They must have seeped in over the centuries, like a gift of understanding generated by life itself. This is the substance of faith—so many questions remain unanswered, the evidence available is never conclusive; yet the quest for a starting place to define and guide the rest of our journey of life continues. There is good humour here, wit, imagination, and that patience and skill called ecological wisdom which equipped the tribes with the requirements for co-existence in a harsh environment. Today the mysteries of the universe are being rolled back. We are aware the sun is a dying star. Yet, tell a villager about a shooting star and the old women will say, “Yes, yes, the stars are flying, but that is Awawa’s daughter flashing her hairpin at the demon pursuing her across the sky.”