

A person is shown in silhouette, looking upwards and to the right. Their right arm is extended, with the hand open. The background is a bright, textured surface with a radial pattern of lines, suggesting a sunburst or a similar light effect. The overall color palette is dominated by warm tones of orange, yellow, and brown.

Matrix of Redemption

Contemporary Multi-Ethnic English
Literature from North East India

Nigamananda Das

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**Contemporary Multi-Ethnic English
Literature from Northeast India**

Edited by
NIGAMANANDA DAS



Adhyayan Publishers & Distributors
New Delhi-110002

Published by

ADHYAYAN PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS

4378/4 B, 105, J.M.D. House, Murari Lal Street

Ansari Road, Darya Ganj, New Delhi-110002

Ph. : 011-23263018, 011-23277156, Fax : 011-23280028

E-mail : adhyayanpublishers@yahoo.com

**Matrix of Redemption : Contemporary Multi-Ethnic English
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808.095416
DAS

© Editor

Edition : 2011

ISBN : 978-81-8435-255-9

7088
28/01/11

Printed in India

Published by Harish Chandra Yadav for Adhyayan Publishers
& Distributors, Laser Typesetting at Net Graphics and
Printed at Tarun Offset Printers, Delhi.

Acknowledgements

The editor owes the debt of gratitude to all the contributors of this anthology for their contributions on various aspects of the contemporary writing in English from Northeast India. He is thankful to all his well-wishers and colleagues . He also likes to record the constant support of his daughter Ankita and wife Geetanjali. His thanks are due to Mr. H.C. Yadav, M/s. Adhyayan Publishers, New Delhi, for his support in nicely bringing out the book.

—Nigamananda Das

Preface

The Northeast India comprising of eight provinces of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura is an ecological paradise and anthropological museum. Known as Assam the provinces excluding Sikkim, are popularly called seven sisters. The vernacular literature of Assamese has a long history and tradition. It is as old as any vernacular literature of India. The literatures of the other provinces of Northeast were basically oral literature for many years until the roman script was adopted as script for the Tribal literatures. Tripura has a tradition of Bengali literature as the province has been dominated by Bengalis and their culture and literature. The writing in English which developed during the colonial period in other provinces of India beyond its Northeast, could not develop in Northeast. The first Indian Writing in English from this region to introduce the region to the outside world is Hem Barua's *The Red River and the Blue Hill* (1954). The writing in English from this part of the country has a distinct trend, a set of distinct concepts and techniques.

Though writing in English has been produced slowly, the tempo of writing has gathered momentum after 1990s. Established writers like Bhupati Das, Temsula Ao, Robin S. Ngangom, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Lakshahira Das, Dayananda Pathak, Mamang Dai, R.K. Madhubir, Mitra Phukan, Easterine Iralu, Homen Borgohain, Nirupama Borgohain, Dhruba Hazarika, Siddhartha Deb, Arup Kumar Dutta, Sanjoy Hazarika, Umakanta Sarma, Esther Syiem, Indira Goswami, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Ratan Thiyam, Arun Sarma, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, Nilakshi Borgohain, Rajendra Bhandari and Bhaskar Roy Barman have been assessed by various contributors in this anthology. The work is supposed to pave the ground for further critical harvest in this field.

Some writers have been discussed in this anthology and have not been explicated sufficiently. As such I beg pardon of the readers

and concerned writers also. I have a plan to edit another anthology as the second volume of the present work. The response of the readers, researchers and all concerned will decide it. The present work came out after more than four years. I began collecting essays in 2006. After a long process of selection and rejection, I decided upon the present shape. The Northeast India has a very talented band of writers. Some writers of other provinces domiciled in Northeastern states have also produced a good quantum of writing in English which have not been discussed in the present volume. I consider the band of writers discussed in the present volume as the first generation of writers in English from Northeast India. The second generation who have studied this first generation of writers and have been inspired by them have arrived in the literary map of the Northeast. But it will take time to collect and assess their works and also some time is required to distinguish them as the second generation with proper voice of their own. The present volume is the first ever representative volume assessing Indian writing in English from the Northeastern part of the country. I thought of writing a long introduction to this literature distinguishing it from the mainstream Indian Writing in English. But I gave up the idea allowing the essays to speak of their own merits. Earlier I worked on poetry in English from this region. But that other forms writing in English are available, that is represented in this volume. There are volumes/ monographs on biography of the prominent personalities of the region. Autobiography, travel writing, plays and non-fictional prose works are available in good number. As in mainstream Indian Writing in English, in the writing in English from Northeast also novel and poetry have been written profusely. Some works from vernacular literatures translated into English have also been discussed in this anthology.

The Northeastern Indian Writing in English has been prescribed in different Indian Universities in both the UG and PG syllabuses. Several M.Phil. and Ph.D. dissertations have also been written on this trend of writing. The students, research scholars, teachers and general readers will find this work a good companion volume. The editor and contributors of chapters will find their labour rewarded if the readers appreciate the work.

Nigamananda Das

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(1)

Mapping Contemporary NEIWE: The Road Not Taken

Bijay K. Danta

Opportunists prosper, goes an old saying, when specializations proliferate. This may appear true when we plead for NEIWE (North Eastern Indian Writing in English). For, NEIWE in essence means yet another addition to the already baggy discipline of English studies, stretched as it is by shifting intellectual foci and changing perspectives in global and local power structures. In fact, there are already discomfiting signs that we may have done too much too soon. It is natural therefore to take a close hard look at what we call or propose to call NEIWE. I wish to address these very issues. What needs to be done, in my opinion, is greater problematization and theoretical exploration of the very concept of NEIWE. Once we accept that any topographical definition is provisional, and therefore alterable, it is not surprising to see the North East paradoxically available as different exclusive sites to different groups: a colonial construct, a national imaginary, and a homeland. Each fact and figure has its own history and politics, and not to address them would be fraught with dangers, both disciplinary and interdisciplinary.

1

Tony Howard, a travel writer once wrote something that captures one's imagination, and yet shocks one to recognizing the incongruity of figures: "If India was the Jewel in the Crown of the British Empire, the remote North East of that country is its Hidden

Jewel". Given that the North East is available both as fact and figure, and given the implications of such a position, the very idea of a separate course comprising North East Indian Writing in English appears a little tremulous. There is also the feeling that the corpus of NEIWE is a little too slight for any long-term evaluation. What is more important is the fear that NEIWE may not be reflective of or responsive to what could be called a northeast spirit or worldview.

Thus, the ungainly phrase, north-east, which owes its origin to the centre-periphery model of state-formation and location, carries on the colonial legacy meant to describe what is territorially contained and culturally "contained" within the Indian nation-state. Culturally, a significant part of the territory is seen as an extension of Aryan otherness available in puranic subtexts and also as a Hindu outpost, especially in *Mâhâbhârata*, *Yoginitantra* and *Kalikâpurâna*. Geographically, the place begins by adverting for its between-ness, caught as it is between the flimsy Siliguri (chicken) neck and the international borders of Bhutan, China/Tibet, Myanmar and Bangladesh, each compelling a certain categorical recognition. In India's political imaginary the term serves to describe a region that is both fascinating and yet dangerous. In other words, the term seems to homogenize a location where homogeneity is neither automatic nor autochthonous.

Given that there was literature in the North East before there was the North East itself, we must ground our assumptions on inherited beliefs and specific realities. We should begin by re-reading some of the fascinating figures associated with writing in English in the North East. Verrier Elwin has produced fascinating accounts of the place and the people and pleaded for a particular kind of North East, but needs to be critically analyzed.

There is first of all a feeling that poets are not as successful as novelists. For, poetry in the north-east once meant, and in many ways still means, poets based in Shillong: Robin S. Ngangom, Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, Kynpham S. Nongkynrih. There are new names but the odds still favour the older poets. The issues that I address here would be mostly along expected lines, and they are: who writes poetry here and of what kind? Do we have enough of what could be called good poetry, and, in that case, is the poetry worth serious reading? How Indian is this poetry? I believe that readers would read these poets not only with an eye to what is here and now, but also with a sense of tradition. Could we say that we

have here poetry with a different focus, but the difference is rewarding and in a way rooted? It may therefore make sense to move beyond the immediate questions and look at the region's contested histories, contesting cultures, dramatically varying topography, and remarkable identity politics. I think the major strength of the poetry of this region lies in two features: its rootedness and its political consciousness. Having said that, the rootedness is neither unidimensional nor uniform or unilinear. The rootedness that we speak of is a kind of rootedness that we see in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra. His Orissa is not just a setting, it is the soul of his poems. It may not be out of place here to say that in many ways Mahapatra is an Oriya poet who writes in English, unlike somebody like Nissim Ezekiel whose preferred idiom is Indian English, different, but unmistakably Indian English.

The English poets of the North East are contestatory and dialectical sites where the private and the public coalesce. So in every private lyric utterance we see a complex web of social consequences. If we miss these resonances, we miss the poetry. The speaking 'I' of the lyrics of the region is not the reflective artist, who can withdraw from his material, and produce an impersonal modernist poem. On the contrary, we have romantics and rebels melting into each other where the lover of a young girl is also lover of the hills and the rivers. But it is not swooning over spring flowers and winter suns. Nature is not just an object to be *de/refamiliarized* as an art object, but a crowded melting pot of history, politics, and local and global mythologies.

This for instance is Desmond's poem on the city man U Di's visit to the village to know more about his past:

The stories burn our memories like
 a distant meteor searing
 the unnamed gloom; by their light I examine
 the great hurt I carry in my soul
 for having denied my own.

(“Letter from Pahambir”)

Or,
 I remain silent all the while
 as I did yesterday, when he
 took me to deep jungles and
 taught me the meaning of
 an upturned leaf, the furtiveness

of birds, the age of animal droppings
 ("Letter from Paham Ri-oh Village")

A woman's anger is heard in the poetry of Indari Syiem Warjri (b. 1962). "The God of Revenge" is bold in its theme and her utterance sincere. Published in the *New Welsh Review* this poem shows how poetry can address inhuman brutality that follows militant nationalism. The scene is that of a violent day of ethnic conflict.

I do not call you "brother"
 Who wage war on children and watch as they
 Choke in silent anguish
 The word brother has an ironical ring about it in that
 it is as much about the alienation caused by insurgents
 fighting for local rights as about Christianity.

Monalisa Changkija (1960-) writes of the uncorrupted land, Naga myths and legends and mourns the destruction of its old glory:

Yes, I have seen our rice fields
 Turn into factories and hills
 Reduced to barren brown
 Our rivers have dried
 And our once sparkling fish
 Lie dead on sandy banks.

Mamang Dai (1957-), from Arunachal Pradesh, seems to have avoided political concerns, but her poetry is rooted in her soil. There is a concern for a rapidly disappearing past:

I know
 From faces that I meet
 In these lives
 That have crumbled
 That the past lives
 In these eyes
 That the jungle shows

But as I said earlier, the poet who has made all the difference to the poetry in the North East is Robin S. Ngangom. In a poem titled "Poetry" he says:

And I saw my self-selected pain,
 the entire history,
 unveiled by memory and thirst
 And the last reflection I saw,
 was my naked shame, my empty hands,
 a lifetime of silence.

Again, the primary motif in his early poetry is silence:
 When you write you are silent
 silent with your thoughts,
 alone without your friends,
 silent without love,
 alone without joy or pain.

("When You Write You Are Silent")

But not all by Ngangom are personal responses to the condition of Manipur. This is for instance his self-deprecatory tribute to his "Mother Apopki":

Forgive me, for all your dreams
 of peace and rest during your remnant days
 I only turned out to be a small man,
 with small dreams and leading a small life.

("A Poem For Mother")

The poetry is therefore private yet public, combining the reflective power of the lyric poet with public muse, not unfamiliar to the singers and balladeers of the region. One has to explore the reasons behind this kind of poetic voice that separates the English poets of the North East from those of the rest of India. I would like to suggest that the poetry of this region has its roots in the indigenous bardic traditions but draws its new energy from the public voice of revolutionary poets. This later tradition is something with which students of English and American poetry may not be very familiar. For a perspective of this kind, one has to look more at somebody like Pablo Neruda or the Caribbean Walcott than T.S. Eliot. Then we must look at the role of translation, though there would be no consensus on what is and is not NE writing. For, there would always be texts that seem rooted in a specific state of the region and may not automatically form part of the kind of collective-critical imaginary that NEIWE entails. But these challenges would help us refine our skills and enlarge vision.

2

What interests me however is the new fiction of the region. As new novelists like Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Arundhati Roy, Boman Desai, and Vikram Chandra did in the 1990s to Indian Writing in English, so two new novelists have forced us to notice the fiction of the North East. Though there are many writers who are worthy of serious attention I shall be talking about two recent books. Interestingly, both are based in Shillong, though the themes and techniques vary. The names may be familiar to most of you but I feel privileged that I have a forum to speak on the writings of Siddhartha Deb and Dhruba Hazarika. I use an old yardstick to judge the novels, which some of you may find a little dated, but I believe my readings will justify my decision. A good novel should organize, explore, objectify and evaluate the material it uses. For the novelist to do that what is essential is a technique to separate one's life from one's art, to let the medium do the talking. To my mind, technique in fiction is the difference between the lived experience of life and the felt experience of art. This would cover even autobiographical writing. But that's not our subject today.

I would begin by mentioning a novel by Mitra Phukan titled *The Collector's Wife*. The protagonist Rukmini is married to a District Collector and teaches English Literature to wide-eyed students at a local college. She is a suitable Indian wife. Her life is interwoven with the political situation in Assam. Being a teacher, especially of English Literature, as well as the collector's wife, she has a view from both sides: the administration led by her husband and the students who have begun a somewhat idealistic anti-migrant movement. Rukmini's personal life is in a mess. Taunted by others for her incapacity to bear a child she enters into an affair with a young man but finds that her husband too is not far behind.

As the political turmoil escalates, Rukmini's story too spirals into horror and tragedy. Her story becomes Assam's story, as everything else falls apart. There is kidnapping, extortion, killing and fight for an independent homeland. As a novel from or even of the North-East, *The Collector's Wife* has the right ingredients. Interestingly the narrative confirms the depiction of the region as a formula. The novel is ruined, as Mark Schorer once said of HG Wells' *Tono Bungay* by its material, as it fails to explore and evaluate it.

Dhruba Hazarika's *A Bowstring Winter* is a tightly organized novel on life in Shillong in the 1970s. First of all it is a novel on

Shillong. In a way Shillong is its primary theme and main character. The novel records the elements of Shillong as a lover would at once be feeling and guarding. It is in essence a story of friendship, or rather a code of friendship; "Like a bowstring: tight. Like an arrow: straight." Set in the three months of "U Naiwieng" (November), "U Nohprah" (December) and "U Kyllalyngkot" (January), the coldest and the most romantic period in Shillong, the novel deals with teer-gambling, love, and revenge.

The characters are drawn from diverse backgrounds but the setting is unmistakably Khasi Shillong. A college teacher unwittingly saves a bookie's life while having a meal at the latter's restaurant. He is drawn into a circle of violence that strengthens his friendship with a loyal group comprising a Chinese cook, a Bengali manager, a Bihari cab driver, and a motley committee of Khasis. He steals his friend's girl, a passionate young woman who loves both, but fears the man who discovered her. The story is a replay of an earlier story: the bookie had stolen the girl of an ugly man in the past. The conscience-keeper in the group is an ace archer who also is friend, philosopher, and forgiving father. The story ends in violence with the death of the man who had saved many families from ruin, but must die for the lovers to go forward. But we are also told that he had killed the woman he had stolen from the bad man because she returned to him one afternoon. The novel has a clearly visible Hemingway touch, both in language and tone.

To some one interested in tracking the origin of the novel, I would suggest the everpopular story of *Dosti* handed down to generations of young men and women. In lighter vein, one could even say that the novel is the fictional version of the Hindi movie with a Khasi cast and a Shillong setting. The narrative is urgent, gripping, and riveting. I would propose one more look at the theme of friendship and love, though. Interestingly, the ambience dominated by momo, roasted pork, rice, and rum. Much of the charm in the novel comes through drunkenness and fantasies of innocence. The novel more or less celebrates the kind of violent initiation rites one associates with the Nick Adams stories of Hemingway. What the novel lacks, however, is a sense of history. For, the novel offers a sanitized version of Shillong that is part of a middleclass dream: love, food, romance, winter, and an inviolable code of friendship and inner truth. We have the code heroes of Hemingway, operating in the wintry recesses of a hilly paradise.

The Shillong of Hazarika's novel is also the Shillong of anti-Bengali and anti-foreigner riots. Hazarika's novel has a code of friendship and truth that applies exclusively to the tribal inhabitants of the hills. Again as in the *Deerslayer* stories of James Fenimore Cooper the innocence of the zone must be protected. So when the old man in the book speaks about the inviolable of the hillmen over his hills, we only ask for considered opinion. It is a fine love story but a story that withholds the ugliness of Shillong, the opinion. It is a fine love story but a story that withholds the ugliness of Shillong, the Shillong that drives out the enemy and the friend, as it had only one word to define the foreigner: *dkhar*, foreigner, unwanted. It is a novel limited by its order of exploration and evaluation. It fails to capture the multivalent tapestry that Shillong already is.

In contrast to the Shillong of Dhruva Hazarika's *A Bowstring Winter*, Shiddhartha Deb's engagement with Shillong, and, by implication with the Northeast, in *Point of Return* (2002), and *Surface* (2005), is resonant, and in a way sobering. As I propose to show, the clinically sanitized and youthful world Hazarika's Shillong is now replaced by a politically sensitive world where the outsider is not a creation of his own youth or idealism. Instead, we have the Bangladeshi refugee, a commonplace but compelling by-product of war and geopolitical transformations of the subcontinent, repeating and replicating in a strange act of mimicry and defiance of colonialism and nationalism.

The partition emerges as a powerful trope, this time with echoes from and in East Bengal, Assam, and other areas of the region including Meghalaya. Interestingly, the tragedy of the Bangladeshi finds little sympathy because of the overwhelming presence-absence of the figure who is at once the condition and consequence of this tragedy. The transformation of the Bangladeshi from a persecuted figure, shorn of home, work, dignity, to one of a menacing presence, is already a complex and multilayered web of politics, deception, and inevitability. The signature of religion and electoral politics is everywhere. It is necessary to see the social consequences obtaining in the North-east where the Bangladeshi is a figure either of scorn or fun, depending on his re-location. While the state of the Bangladeshi Muslim migrants and refugees is explained away either in religious or political terms, the Bangladeshi Hindu remains a paradoxically an insider-outsider. Due to rising concerns with ethnicity and identity, the receiving community in the North-east is either skeptical of the Hindu refugees from East Bengal or remains adamant that the

Bengalis have not done enough to integrate themselves with the local culture. Deb's comment on this issue is interesting:

We [Bengalis] were not perfect, we are not perfect now and never will be. We were insular and narrow-minded, with a false sense of superiority when we first came here [to Assam]. We saw the honesty of the tribal people as stupidity, and through that we taught them our own deviousness. That is the irony... that we should have learned to be more human only when they became less so.

In the novel, Babu, son of Dr. Dam, a veterinary surgeon in Meghalaya, actually a government official whose address and identity kept altering with the carving out of new hill states such as Meghalaya and Mizoram from what remained of Assam after the dissolution of the NEFA, reminisces about his father's life, trying to understand him—at least to the extent that sons can ever understand their fathers. Acutely aware that men of every generation are molded by the events and experiences which occur during their own lifetimes, Babu recognizes that though he and his father have shared many events, their views of these events are vastly different, in each case conditioned by their separate, though sometimes interesting, pasts. Part of a cultural minority which was threatened by religious and social upheavals in East Pakistan, Babu's family escapes to the then undivided Assam and settles down in Silchar.

In a narrative that is reminiscent of Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*, Dr. Dam finds that he cannot build a house for himself anywhere in Assam except Silchar, neither in Guwahati, where he buys a plot of land to assert his independence from his parents and his past in another country, nor in Shillong, a place where he works with great sincerity and even greater insecurity. His Guwahati plot is eaten up by the highway expansion project, and all he can do is watch in anger and disbelief. In what is clearly an ironic acceptance of ethnic cleansing, Dr. Dam allows the bulldozer man to borrow his broomstick to clear the rubble from what was once his "belonging" and symbol of belonging. Assam already in turmoil because of the numerous demands on its territory and status, and the impending bowdlerizations of the state to accommodate tribal sentiments, cannot accept his type. The ethnic population, which was denied its rightful political space by the colonial government and their historical

allies, the babus of Bengal, now regard the Dams, and all Bengalis as interlopers.

As Babu tries to understand his father, he does so as someone who was born in India, someone who has never known the places which were home to his father and grandparents and which shaped their lives and still live in their hearts. His own experiences in Shillong point at a "lost" world, but he also realizes that the loss is not unique or exclusive to him or his father or the Bengalis from East Bengal or the Assamese or the Biharis. He dislikes but recognizes a point of view that is unpalatable to the non-tribals: the point of view of the indigenous tribal, who, in turn, points to a loss that antedates the loss of the refugee or the foreigner.

There are multiple narratives involving the creation and destruction of Shillong, which emerges, in each case, as a paradise gone wrong, a paradise in ruins that must be either mourned or reclaimed. Each strand tells a different tale with its own built-in structural arrangements for heroes and villains. There is narrative that hints at the colonial origin of the place, essentially suggesting that the Shillong that the tribals claim as their own has a complex colonial past that cannot be ignored, implying that this Shillong perhaps belongs as much to the local and ethnic as to the colonial detritus called the *dkhar*, the alien, the unwanted foreigner. Then there is the Shillong that the men from the plains built or inherited from the free nation, the capital of Assam in independent India. This is where men like Dr. Dam worked with passion, honesty, and fearlessness, believing that they were contributing to the cause of the nation and, more importantly, to the welfare of the locals. This Shillong is different from the tourism paradise that is part of middleclass holiday fantasies. In addition, there is the Shillong of the missionaries that simultaneously spreads education and Christianity in the region. Shillong was till the early 1980s the destination for children looking for decent English-medium education. It is not just a coincidence that the entire region had for a long time Cotton College at Guwahati and St. Edmund's College at Shillong, two centres of learning that provided a window to the world outside the North-East. With the formation of the state of Meghalaya, Shillong has been forced to live a double life, with a colonial past that is now irrelevant but doubly resonant, and a present must perhaps disregard the past to move on its desired or destined path.

Each has a story to tell in Deb's Shillong. Even Shillong has a

story: its air, its smell, its winter and summer rains have recorded stories of friendship and betrayal. The novel mirrors the more mundane realities of life in this mountainous province. Deb also concentrates on universal values and the father-son search for understanding, with the result that the novel is less exotic, despite its unusual setting, than some other Indian novels, but more accessible to readers from other cultures and more potent in its observations about life. In an ironic twist, the narrator and Babu switch roles to provide Dr. Dam's personal history in a chronology which, though linear, moves backwards in time, telling of events which begin in 1987 and end in 1979. Babu, at 17 in 1987, recalls what he knows of his father and the events and people which shape their combined destinies.

As the novel moves backwards, we see through Babu's eyes the level of graft and corruption under which Dr. Dam has managed to maintain his integrity as a public servant. Adding particular poignancy to this turn of events is Dr. Dam's family history as the oldest son, supporting his brothers and sisters for years after their expulsion from them. Dr. Dam's stroke has profound effects on the family, and Babu, in particular, and the second half of the novel takes the reader from 1987 to the present, as Dr. Dam struggles to walk again, and Babu learns the necessity of subordinating his personal goals and dreams for the good of his family. When their town in Meghalaya gets dangerous, the family moves to Silchar, to a house which was supposed to be retirement dream of his father, but which turns out to be closer to a nightmare in terms of its construction, space, and level of privation. On the eve of his departure for Silchar, Babu reflects, "People think that those who have gone away have relinquished their rights to the place left behind, [and] are gone forever...Me? I return every day, sometimes under the cover of sleep, at other times stepping in full daylight across the chicken's-neck strip that divides where I am from where I was, when a certain smell or song or face emerges from the city's contested grounds". In confronting the dangers and leaving the "home" where he grew up, Babu experiences the same uprooting and sense of loss as his father did a generation before, bringing him closer to his father and making the old man's life a bit more understandable to Babu.

In the conclusion of the novel, years after the death of his parents, an older Babu pays a return visit to the town where he grew up:

I came back to find an end to the story other than Dr. Dam's death, and to find something that would recover the voice of the boy who had left with dreams of...another future where he would be free and successful and unafraid of his alienness...In the streets that had once been so familiar, [I expected] there would be two ghosts, one that of my father, the other of the child that was me. I thought it would be a way of seeing the two of them closer together than they had ever been actual life, without the wall of fear rising between them, without each trapped in self doubt.

Deb's point of view mirrors on the one hand the real-life experiences many of us have as we seek to understand our parents. It is in fact tempting to see in the reverse chronology an allegorical history created by children for parents. It should be much too easy to see in Babu's re-recovery of family history as a humanistic effort seeking to combine one's present experiences with whatever knowledge one has of the past of one's lives. This may also look like a universal attempt to find common ground in multiple histories where each tries to understand who he or she is, and who the others are, who they really are, or were. In a sense, our own changing experiences ultimately affect what we think is relevant about their lives and influence our understanding of our loved ones. It would be in a sense convenient to look at the novel as the story of a man coming to terms with his father's life, and on the yearning for home, even after it is gone, after models provided by VS Naipaul (*The Mystic Masseur*), Amitav Ghosh (*The Shadow Lines*) in the wake of Rushdie and Garcia Marquez. But the novel provides observations which compel us to look at the North East, as a cartographic logic and a cartographic baggage. The novel accommodates and challenges the notion of art as universal and local. Viewed as a universal tale of a man growing up to understand his father, as his father had perhaps done before him, Babu's story is allegorically bound, the history of his family's peregrinations a confirmation of an overarching humanist credo. On the other hand, the story stabs us like a bitter drink, tells us it is local, relevant in its historicity and specificity, relevant as a document of the many tragedies of the North East, to be recognized as such.

We are back where we had begun. We have to do the tracks again.

I want to end my paper with a quote from Robin S. Ngangom's

“The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom”:
 Patriotism is the need of the hour.
 Patriotism is preaching secession
 And mourning our merger with a nation,
 Patriotism is honouring martyrs
 Who died in confusion,
 Patriotism is declaring we should
 Preserve native customs, traditions,
 Our literature and performing arts,
 And inflicting them on hapless peoples,
 Patriotism is admiring
 The youth who fondles grenades,
 Patriotism is proclaiming all men as brothers
 And secretly depriving my brother,
 Patriotism is playing the music of guns
 To the child in the womb.

And a few lines from a poem by the noted Assamese poet Hiren
 Bhattacharjya “Of the Country and Others”:

1

Name my country and I need no commands.
 In my teeming blood gallop
 A thousand and one fighting horses.

2

Let there be a procession of my words,
 Let them guard the cruel, crooked night
 Let the sharp sword of anger shine
 in the enthused flow of blood of lively words.

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The anthology is the first attempt of its kind to assess the Multi-Ethnic Indian Writing in English from the Northeastern part of the country. The Northeast India comprising of eight provinces, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, presents a paradise of ecology and an anthropological museum. This hidden jewel, a biodiversity hotspot, is really an ecotopia. Indian Writing in English from this part of country which has a distinct trend, a set of distinct concepts and techniques, is over five decades old. Hem Barua's *The Red River & the Blue Hill* (1954) is the first attempt to showcase to the World the cultural and ethno-ecological wealth of the region. Though writing in English has been produced slowly, the tempo of writing has gathered momentum after 1990s. Established writers like Bhupati Das, Tamsula Ao, Robin S. Ngangom, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Lakshahira Das, Dayananda Pathak, Mamang Dai, R.K. Madhubir, Mitra Phukan, Easterine Iralu, Homen Borgohain, Nirupama Borgohain, Dhruba Hazarika, Siddhartha Deb, Arup Kumar Dutta, Sanjoy Hazarika, Umakanta Sarma, Esther Syiem, Indira Goswami, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Ratan Thiyam, Arun Sarma, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, Nilakshi Borgohain, A.J. Sebastian, Rajendra Bhandari and Bhaskar Roy Barman have been assessed by various contributors. The work is supposed to pave the ground for further critical harvest in this field.

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Ph. : 011-23263018, 23277156 Fax : 011-23280028
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ISBN 978-81-8435-257-3



9 788184 352573

₹ 895