Quest for Another "New Literature": Poetic Contours of Northeast India

Saikat Guha

The word "new" denotes anything that is not old. If the "oldness" in "old" is missing in "new", the concept "new" inherits something absent in it. The journey of "new" thus begins in deficiency. What is the lack? Is it the lack of something that gives "old" the attribution of affluence? If so, the "new" in the context of literature can encompass instances of marginality which lacks what gives "old" its centrality or authority. "New" poetry of marginality lacks the centrifugal tendency which is its paucity, and at the same time, its potentiality for insubordinate "becoming." The concept of the "new" can be perceived as giving impetus to some optimistic spur that destabilizes the old and can be immensely promising. Thus "new" is both a deficit and a surplus—newness intensifies the problematic transition that is a qualifier of epistemic and ideological cataclysm. "New" literature, in so far as perceived from postcolonial perspective, emerged as a reaction to the Eurocentric, and then Nationalist, hegemony that predominated the cultural scenario. The propaganda of superiority of Western culture which Derrida calls "white mythology" requires its opposition for its sustenance and hence the binary the West and the rest. The repressive binary had long dominated the literary discourse in which the West was considered to be superior, rational and civilized while rendering the rest (especially Asia and Africa) to be inferior, childish and barbaric. The "orientalist" formulation was detrimental to the attempt at self-realization of the colonized people who had been represented so far by the West. Nationalist movements which were instrumental in fighting for and achieving independence of the colonies soon bred disillusionment among the people. Nationalism ironically did not replace the oppressive and suppressive mechanisms of the colonizers, rather, continued their hegemonic legacy in silencing the voices of the lower classes, lower castes, tribals and women—all of whom constitute the social subaltern section. McLeod's observation is especially relevant here:

> [F]ollowing Fanon, anti-colonial nationalism can result in the replacement of a Western, colonial ruling class with a Western-educated, 'indigenous' ruling class who seem to speak on behalf of the people but function to keep the people disempowered. (108)

Against the hegemonic and coercive rule of the neo-elite emerged the postcolonial protest literature which questions the concept of a unified nation characterized by an illusory democracy. The emergence of the independent nation-state, like India, owed much to the nationalist movements but in long run it gave birth to only frustration because its ambit failed to accommodate the requirements of the people belonging to poor, dispossessed, lower stratum of life. One of the major sub-genres of New Literature is postcolonial protest literature which reacts against the intra-nation subordination of certain sections of people to whom the fruits of independence remained largely unattained. The poetry of India's Northeast which has seen a flourish in recent times voices the disillusionment of the people of its marginalized, neglected and underdeveloped regions. The hilly regions as well as the plains are populated by scattered masses of Mongoloid stock of people who are absent in the discourse of

"mainland" India. Even if they are present, they are represented by the "mainland" scholars as "ethnic" or "tribal" people whose specificities and singularities are overlooked. The popular slogan "unity is diversity" in a mythic formulation, especially in the present context as the myth erases "difference". Nation, cites Homi K Bhabha, can never be conceived as a unified whole because it is a site of differences which is unstable and ambivalent. We must not err in considering a unified nation because plurality can never be obliterated, as Bhabha says:

> We are […] confronted with the nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population. The barred Nation *It/Self*, […] becomes a liminal signifying space that is *internally* marked by the discourse of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference. (qtd. in McLeod 119)

India is spilt within itself because the hegemonic "centre" oppresses and represses its Northeastern periphery. Northeast India is geographically disadvantaged—its remote hilly areas are still quite inaccessible and hence heavily unprivileged. But more than that, political laxity is the greatest problem that the area has been suffering since India's Independence. Northeast India had been a victim of exploitative rule since the British regime, but what is ironic is that India's Independence failed to cater its basic needs. The region's numerous ethinc groups or tribes are heavily deprived of the minimum needs of life. In the words of Pramod K Nayar:

> If the native was the subaltern during the colonial rule, postcolonialism created its own subalterns. Women, 'lower' castes, and classes, ethnic minorities rapidly became the 'Others' within the postcolonial nation-state. The new elite was as oppressive and exclusive as the colonial master. Democratic approaches failed, and economic and social emancipation slipped across the horizons as millions of 'postcolonials' saw themselves colonized by the new powers. (100)

The marginalization of the ethnic minority belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid stock began in times immemorial through the process of Sanskritization. The process received a spur at the fifteenth-sixteenth century at the backdrop of the Sankardeva movement in Assam which contaminated the old Manipur State which embraced Vaishnavism as the state religion. The second sway of acculturation of the ethnic tribes began at the nineteenth century when the British annexed the Northeast to Indian mainland. The Christian missionaries did much to spread Christianity among the hill tribes a large number of which forsook ancient beliefs, like nature-worshipping and Shamanism, for the sake of Christianity. The missionaries set up Western model of education and provided scripts to a number of hill tribes, like the Khasis and the Garos, and rendered the age-old folklore to be uncivilized, uncouth, and something to be ashamed of. In the words of Ngangom and Nongkynrih:

> While, on the one hand, they gifted the tribes with a common literary heritage, on the other, they made them deny the existence of their own literatures in their rich oral traditions and taught them to be ashamed of whatever is theirs, as something pegan and preposterous. (*Dancing Earth* xi)

Temsula Ao's poem "Bloods of Others" employs her profound concern regarding the contaminating of native blood by the outsiders. This virgin land was occupied by "a tribe of strangers" who invaded the hills "Armed with only a Book and/Promises

of a land called Heaven" (82). The obvious reference to Ao's strangers is the British missionaries who baptised a large numbers of the hill tribes into Christianity and "Allowed our own knowledge of other days/To be trivialised into taboo." Out of their profound confusion, the hill tribes finally refuted their native religion of nature-worshipping as well as their customs and traditional beliefs. Folk identity felt a threat of extinction which gave way to detribalisation of the region in the Westernised mould:

> Stripped of all our basic certainties
> We strayed from our old ways
> And let our soul-mountain recede
> Into a tiny ant-hill and we
> Schooled our minds to become
> The ideal *tabula rasa*
> On which the stranger intruders
> Began scripting a new history. ("Bloods of Others" 82)

Although the cultural infusion and transmutation—or rather, the Sanskritisation or Aryanisation of the plains of Northeast—had been in constant progression for centuries, it was only during the British rule that the entire region was annexed with the "mainland" India politically. Both the repressive and ideological apparatuses of the administration only augmented at the Independent India which too overlooks the demands of the Northeasterns and their sentiments. T Raatan comments on the far-reaching political ramification of this annexation in his discussion of the history and culture of the Northeast India:

> Many leaders of the present day "underground outfits" of the region may argue that the political integration of the region to India was done without the approval of the people themselves. The lack of cultural relatedness, especially of the "tribal" culture, weakens the new political association, and the racial and cultural difference, thus, came to play vital role in defining the self-identity. […] While the Northeasterners are *politically Indian*, they are *racially and culturally Mongoloid*. (11, emphasis added)

The exclusion of the poetry from Northeast India is ideologically manoeuvred in which it is labelled as "mediocre" or revolving around the familiar themes of insurgency and violence, and hence, ineligible of inclusion in the standard "Indian" canon. The poetry of Northeast India can be seen as that of resistance which resists the familiar allegations of mediocrity whose propaganda it strives to expose. Northeast poetry, for obvious reasons, is not included in the mainland canon of poetry which alone is considered to be "standard" and "authentic". It is thus a lack in the very corpus of Indian literature.

The oral forms of folk literature, and the recent written poetry of the region too, are overlooked in the mainland India. The mainland Indian poetry, partly Sanskritised and partly shaped by European models, is considered to be superior to the poetry throbbing with ethnic lifeworld of Northeast tribes. Rajeev Patke, in his discussion of postcolonial poetry, cites that the aborigines or tribals and recent migrants to settler countries who write from minoriterian position face several cultural disadvantages arising mainly from the hegemony of majoriterian cultural canon from which they are excluded:

> They find themselves drawn to a poetics of resistance in relation to a dominant majority. Their protest has a sense of the belated about it, since it occurs after the success of decolonisation and nationalism in the former European colonies. Their circumstances remain colonial, even though the societies on whose margins they live cease being colonial. (163)

In his poem "What Does an Indian Look Like," Cherrie L. Chhangte sheds light on this aspect of the "minoriterian" Northeast condition in the context of India:

> The 'largest democracy in the world.'
> Sounds good on paper; not too good
> For those who, in a land that professes
> To deny the presence of a mainstream,
> Still has little rivulets and brooks
> Furiously trying to keep pace with the river,
> Sidelined, side-tracked, side-stepped,
> A minority in a majority world. (76)

The dissatisfaction of various tribes with the political system of the "mainland" India which they considered to have been forcibly imposed on them without any care for the ethnic sensibilities of the people of the region gave rise to insurgent activities. Northeast India is full of natural resources—a reservoir of natural oil, coal and other minerals, and forest-products. Nevertheless, industrialisation in the region has never happened in expected rate. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih voices the crude reality of the hills: "There is nothing remarkable here/only this incredible barrenness" ("Ancient Rocks" 66).

Insurgent activities in Northeast region began with Naga militancy at the immediate aftermath of Indian Independence as a protest of the region's annexation to the sub-continent. Chandrika Singh succinctly defines insurgency as "discontent of a group which uses violence to achieve its goal. […] it is born out of some committed ideologies of a particular group, a sect, a tribal or a community, religious or secular" (218). The Naga insurgency began under the leadership of A. Z. Phizo who became rebellious and took up arms against the Indian Government. The frequent peace accords failed time and again as the instances of insurgency fogged the air of the region. At subsequent periods, Assam witnessed the violent insurgent activities of ULFA, Bodo militants. Manipur and Tripura too did not remain untouched by such insurgent activities. A large part of poetry of Northeast India reflects violence, turmoil, unrest and bloodbath that result from insurgency and counter-insurgency. Robin Ngangom's formulation of the general tendencies of contemporary Manipuri poetry is almost exhaustive of the entire Northeast poetry in general:

> Today, when heart-rending things are happening all around a poet, when he hears only chilling accounts of what man has done to man, how can he close his eyes to the brutalisation of life and remain narcissistic? When a man of even an iota of conviction is in immediate danger if he speaks up, when a gun points at you if you don't observe a prescribed code of behaviour, how can I claim that I am living in a free society? In contemporary Manipuri poetry, there is a predominance of images of 'bullets', 'blood', 'mother', 'the colour red' and, paradoxically, 'flowers' too. A friend told me of how they've been honing 'the poetry of survival' with guns pressed

at both your temples: the gun of revolution and the gun of the state. ("Poetry in Time" 172)

Ngangom's poem "Native Land" portrays his beloved home Manipur in its present insurgency-ridden anxiety. The violence that emanates from the insurgent activities in the land has become an everyday incident and no longer surprising. The poem of Ngangom is written from the perspective of a commoner, apparently the poet himself, who is so habituated with bombs and bullets, murder and bloodshed that he recoils in his smug stupor. The native land of Ngangom is a troubled quarter open for the invention of the inner realities which only emits agitated reality. It is not the land that he dreamt as a child to have been "created from tiny sparks/that clung to grandmother's earthen pot/which conjured savoury dishes," but it is a plate where he found "rice mixed with stones" ("My Invented Land"). His invented land is what the young people found in their dreams a colourless "white substance" which offers no better hope for the future. The old people and the leaders have passed away and only live in the memory of the young as mere "caricatures" whose dreams have rotten in futile consequences. What has become the destiny of Manipur is a saga of unending sadism:

My home is a gun
pressed against both temples
a knock on a night that has not ended
a torch lit long after the theft
a sonnet about body counts
undoubtedly raped
definitely abandoned
in a tryst with destiny. ("My Invented Land")

At the post-Independent period, the Nehruvian optimism, says Ngangom, gave way to "a darker, more somber, and questioning mood that gradually turned into deep disillusionment with the values on which a modern state had been founded" ("Contemporary Manipuri Poetry" 298). But the Shillong poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih sees in the spirit of terrorism sheer wastage of property, energy, and of course, valuable lives. In the poem "Play of the Absurd" he satirises these kinds of military and rebellious activities rampant not only in Meghalaya or North-East, but throughout the world. He ridicules the Khasi rebels' attempt at expecting something beyond reason:

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
of one billion. ("Play of the Absurd")

Nevertheless, ascend of terrorism is not an abrupt incident. Nongkynrih does not support the ideals of terrorism but he is keen to the problems of his motherland. He registers his discontent with the step-motherly behaviour of the Central Government which does not pay any heed to the development of the region. He satirises the visit of the then Prime Minister of India, Mr. Indra Kumar Gujral, at Shillong, which was a much coveted incident. The local ministers and leaders hoped something real good for their State. But Nongkynrih captures the mood of the visit and its futile consequences in biting satire:

But when he came, he was
only the strident sounds of sirens
like warnings in war-time bombings.
The bamboos watched in silence. ("Play of the Absurd")

The Prime Minister came with the maddening, shrill sound of sirens and made the "scam-stained" ministers wet in cold sweat, but he left Shillong like a "diffused bomb." The people could not get closer to him; he seemed to them "rumbling in the cloud." Gujral was never to know the reality of the land, its people, tribal culture and heritage. After he left, they went on speculating "what he could have seen", and "sought answers/like little children." The Central Government is formed and dismissed, Ministers visit Meghalaya and leave, but no development is seen anywhere except the strengthening of the Army which coerce every bits and starts of revolution amid the tribes. Nongkynrih expresses his discontent of the administrative corruption, insurgency, and also, counter-insurgency operations in the region—all of which destabilises the peace and harmony of common people's lives.

The political upheavals caused by insurgent activities in Assam get significant treatment in the poems of Hiren Bhattacharjya, Nilmani Phukan and Harekrishna Deka. For decades, Assam has been in the hotbed for the militancy that only increased with the passage of time. The major militant groups in Assam are the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). ULFA was founded by Arabinda Rajkhowa in 1979 at the backdrop of the popular Assam Agitation which, cites Sanghita Das, "was primarily a movement against the illegal Bangladeshi migrants in the State and the ULFA "too raised similar concerns, which contributed to its popularity and acceptability among the common populace" (31). While the Assam Agitation, led by All Assam Students' Union (AASU) the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 and subsequently the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) which was given sufficient autonomy of administration, ULFA, aided by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muiva (NSCN-IM), had been successful in creating a reign of anarchy. More than 10,000 people, according to Sanghita Das, lost their lives due to insurgency and counter-insurgency in Assam during the decades 1980s and 1990s.

But such unrest and ruthless deaths did not happen without any reason. The ULFA began with protest against illegal Bangladeshi migration into the state which definitely imposed unsolicited burden on the state and its native people. What seems to be the core issue behind such insurgent actions is identity crisis. The native people and tribes felt the greatest threat to their culture and heritage at the large scale immigration not only from Bangladesh but also from other states of India, notably West Bengal and Bihar. Another cause of dissatisfaction is the negligence by the Union Government. In spite of its rich natural resources and possibilities of industrialisation and wholesale development, Assam (in fact, the entire Northeast) remained underdeveloped because of the negligence of the Central Government. The various attempts of peace processes, without reaching at the heart of the problems, and above all, the counter-insurgency operations by Indian Army and other armed forces, which often violated human rights, were bound to deteriorate the condition instead of improving it. The counter-insurgency operations only made the militants angry and

desperate to indulge in indiscriminate bloodshed. The innocent, common people became the victim of their assaults. The insignificance of life has been touchingly captured by Nilmani Phukan in these lines from the poem "Do Not Ask Me How I Have Been":

> Do not ask me how I have been
> down the Kolong flows
> a young female torso
> because, for forty-two hours
> my corpse lay there
> on the footpaths of Guahati
> For even now I have my eyes open
> even my death stares open-eyed (230)

This form of cultural hegemony, worked out in linguistic terms, is perceived by new generation of ethnic masses with discontent, who consider it responsible for the destruction of their distinct identity. And hence, dissatisfaction among the various groups of people. But the seemingly negative acculturation is not the only problem of the region and its ethnic minorities. But poor development condition, exploitation and destruction of natural resources—these are also posing challenge to the sustenance of convenient living in the region.

At the face of the exercise of political hegemony, culture can not but inevitably follow the route of politics in marginalizing the folk tradition of Northeast India. However, folklore also becomes a form of resistance against the dominant culture because folk culture is the means of assertion and celebration of age-old tribal-treasures of various ethnic groups. Folklore is the giver of identity to those groups whose subaltern presence it deploys in the bifurcation of the central and marginalised discourses. The collection and preservation of oral literature have thus become a part of cultural agenda especially at the postcolonial era where folklores occupy a central role in identity-formation, especially in the marginalised communities. Tilottoma Misra observes in this regard:

> People whose history and civilisation had been pushed to the margins as not conforming to the norms of the Eurocentric concept of modernity, took up the task of re-creating their past and re-inventing tradition so as to represent the present as a stage in the continuous process of marching from the past to the future. (xvii)

All forms of poetry arising out of the collapse of Empire are not modeled on Eurocentric assumptions. And hence, the use of folk wisdom, local myths and legends has become an important way of recuperation and reconstruction of cultural identity. The retrieval of past is not possible in its pure form because much of what had been in cultural antiquity was lost in colonial despotism. But the reconstructive attempts are successful to a certain extent where the myths and folktales play vital roles because these are the core of indigenous cultural heritage. In the poem "Ren," Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih depicts the life of a Nongjri fisherman whom he considers to be the "beloved of a river nymph." Ren's union with the roaring river provides Nongkynrih its apt metahopr for a wistful return to his own atavistic self throbbing with the rhythms of nature which is again invariably coupled with his tribal ethos. He mourns over the

loss of good old days since the catastrophic time has blurred the memory of a once-affluent tribal culture:

> Still it was too faraway
> from the year dot
> what he had said—
> times have changed
> few care to listen
> many only wish to be left
> to their separate dreams.
> And mine always end
> with lurking policemen
> their eyes longing
> to eat us up. ("Ren" 158-59)

The severed bond with the ethnic tradition inevitably espouses identity crisis. A number of poets of the region, notably Temsula Ao, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Mamang Dai have explored identity issues that are formidably knotted with ethnic dialect of their respective communities. But even when they go back to their past and dig up ethnic spectrum of tribal Northeast which is facing the greatest threat at this fast-changing, unhinged, simulacrum era, the present thrusts its uneasy presence almost violently in the poetics of Northeast. Within this bullet-bomb-blood inflicted region literary flower blooms with its distinct hues however uneasy the juxtaposition may appear.

The exclusion of the poetry of Northeast from standard Indian canon cannot be justified although the ideological manoeuvering of such tactics cannot be disregarded. As Louis Althusser said, ideology does not function merely through coercive mechanisms (Repressive State Apparatuses) of a State-power but also though its Ideological State Apparatuses. The latter does not overtly exercise power over the populace to dominate them, rather, works through such bodies as cultural, educational and religious institutions, which can hide its real motifs. In the context of India's Northeast, while the mainland India employs its Armed forces (Repressive State Apparatuses) to suppress the ethnic insurgency the ideological agenda of excluding minority tribal voices from the "standard" canon of Indian literature is deployed in the branding of Northeast literature as "mediocre" or unfit for inclusion. These ideological ravages have been partly convalesced by the attempts of some "insider" publishing houses which have come forward to voice the Northeasterns, and preserve their folklore and literature. The Sahitya Akademi of India has published poems by a number of Northeast poets in its journal *Indian Literature*. In recent years two anthologies have been published by reputed houses—Penguin Books (2009) Oxford University Press (2011). These anthologies turn the attention of broader readership to the fact that Northeast, notwithstanding its marginal status, is capable of producing poetry and might establish a separate, parallel canon with its uniqueness. It seems from the slender bulk of criticism on the poetry of Northeast, of which Ngangom and Nongkynrih's are almost reflective of their poetic credo—that Northeast poetry is different from "mainland" Indian poetry in English and it does not need to be like it. Rather, its distinctiveness is its appeal that is worth celebrating. Ngangom's concise formulation of the Northeast poetry in general is worth noting in this regard:

> The writer from Northeast India […] differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way. While it may not make him a better writer, living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry or woolly aesthetics but must perforce master 'the art of witness.' […] We have witnessed growing ethnic aggressiveness, secessionist ventures, cultural and religious bigotry, the marginalisation of minorities and the poor, profit and power struggles in government, and as a natural aftermath to these, the banality of corruption and the banality of terror. Further, the uneasy coexistence of paradoxical worlds such as the folk and the Westernised, virgin forests and car-choked streets, ethnic cleansers and the parasites of democracy, ancestral values and flagrant materialism, resurgent nativism and the sensitive outsider's predicament, make the picturesque Northeast especially vulnerable to tragedy. ("Poetry in Time" 171-72)

Insurgency, clash between ethnic groups and tribal barbarism—these have become the stereotypical view of Northeast India which has proved to be detrimental to the blossoming poetry of the region, as the eminent "mainland" poet Keki Daruwalla writes in a review of a Northeast poetry anthology,

> Regrettably, any mention of the Northeast to the average Hindustani brings visions of insurgencies, tribal feuds, Izak Swu and Khaplang, the Moreh-Imphal drug route et al. That there is some very fine poetry also being written here would astonish most. ("Poetry and the Northeast")

Northeast poetry presents a variety of themes—the most notable being politics, ethnic heritage, local myths, folklore and nature—which are all significant constituents of a lively definition of its poetic philosophy. This co-existence, although not infrequently in an uneasy footing, of conspicuous aspects promulgates the Northeast as a macrocosmic heterogeneity that the poets of the region sing in their poetry. In the age of "globalization" and "transnationalism," Northeast India reflects the flight of poetry from the ground of ethnic tradition and folklore, and its contextualisation in the growing corpus of a "new" poetics which blissfully incorporates the marginalized minority voices, as Mark Bender observes:

> With the recent rise of globalization and increased opportunities for transnational contact and interaction, it is timely to explore how ethnic minority poets in both these "near yet far" regions have addressed similar and dissimilar cultural, environmental, and social influences to produce their artistic works, stressing the common strategies of utilizing traditional "local knowledge" or folklore in emerging contexts of modern-style poetry for purposes of personal and ethnic expression. (109)

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