

Interrogating Cultural and Identity Negotiations in the Poetry of North- East Tribes

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History of a society is the history of its culture – its religious, moral and ethical beliefs, languages, dialects, mythologies and cultural practices. With the 1970's a new generation of the poets emerged on the literary map of Indian writing in English where majority of them were taking native cultures and roots to a never seen height. This new-found confidence that attempts to erase the boundaries between subaltern traditions and 'Great Traditions', however, in itself, is an assertion of a poetical awareness on the part of these communities. Significantly for mainland India, the region known as the North-East has never had the privilege of being at the centre of epistemic enunciation except perhaps at some ancient time when Assam was recognized as the centre of occult knowledge associated with tantric worship, magic and astrology, and, strangely enough the imagination of the 'mainland' has even today not outgrown those constructs of the mysterious 'other'. Contemporary poetry in English from India's North-East has multifaceted voices. It is an expression of an individual poetic self as well as the saga of the tribal people of the region in general. It presents a vista of images of the mountains, hills, rivers, myths and legends, tradition and culture, and multi-ethnic people of the region. Identity crisis, a sense of alienation, increasing globalization and migrancy are some of the dominant features of contemporary politics in the North-East. There has also been a conscious use of folklore as a means for an assertion of identity in the different works of the poets of this region.

The sense of being denied fair representation in the great Indian civilizational discourse or even in the nationalist discourse, has deeply affected the emerging literati of many of the regions of North-East India in the post-independence era. The creative literature of this period, however, displays a mature sensibility of focussing on the more complex issues facing the composite state of Assam in the years immediately following independence. The problem of forging new cultural ethos through interaction with different communities and the crisis of identity brought about by the redrawing of boundaries that began with the partition of the subcontinent affected the North-East representation more than any of the other regions of the country. North- East Indian poetry is marked by the kind of tension that generates all great poetry, it may be at one level the poetry of violence, of torpidity and fear but it is also the poetry of searching, soul searching for peace. Among the poets who write in English there is the remarkable expression of mythology and folk-tales, whether in the poetry of Robin. S. Ngangom, Desmond. L. Kharmawphlang, Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai or the poets of the younger generation like Nilmani Phookan, Udippa Goswami, Aruni Kashyap and so on.

While discussing terrorism, insurgency, folklore and mythical elements in their poetry, the poets "find common ground in chronicling their subjective realities and the particular predicament of their people" (Ali 41). Jayanta Mahapatra in his 'Foreword' to the *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* writes about this common subject - the values and patriotism for their land shared by the North-East poets: "Undoubtedly it is poetry that unites us. It is the poets who will not keep us

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away from one another, who will not separate us. This is the strongest feeling one gets in when one reads these poems from the very different regions of the Northeast of our country" (ix). The seven states of North-East India are inhabited by different people belonging to different tribes and following different religion and culture and speaking different languages, but when it comes to poetry the poets write on the situation in their homelands. This rooted-ness is what unites the seven states of the North-East and in this rooted-ness is evident the uniqueness of the North-Eastern poets of India. These "...roots of their beloved land; the roots of their people's culture; the roots of their times; and most of all, the roots of the past that is "lost" to them, have sunk deep into their psyche. And this is the chief reason why their poetry is found to be bonding- even though it may come from "very different regions..." (Sen viii). The search for the past is no escapism in their case; rather, it is a hiatus, gripping and painful, between past and present. Tamsula Ao's lyrical expression in her poem, *"Stone-People From Lungterok"* marks an animated discovery and re-definition of the past:

*"Lungterok, The six stones
Where the progenitors
And forebears
Of the stone-people
Were born
Out of the womb
Of the earth."*

The North-East region has a special character of its own; the socio cultural milieu of this region holds up in the present day, as it has done in the past, a picture that somehow distinguishes it from the rest of the India. There is a continuous urge for going back to the native tradition in search of roots. These writers strongly advocate preservation of their own culture and tradition, which they seem to believe as a powerful way of asserting their own identity amidst cultural and political hegemony. In doing so, they also emphasize on preservation of the ecology of their region, which is synonymous with their self-identity in their perception. Tamsula Ao is one poet among the group who is conscious of her vibrant past and rich gift of story-telling passed onto her by her ancestors. Her poem 'The Old Story Teller' raises this question in a very appealing manner-

*'When my time came I told stories- adding that
'they ran in my blood'.
And: "each story reinforced
My racial reminiscence."
The significance of this tradition is beautifully pointed out in these lines:
'Grandfather constantly warned
That forgetting the stories
Would be catastrophic:
We would lose our history,
Territory and most certainly
Our intrinsic identity.'*

Contemporary poetry from the North-East seems to play a pivotal role in the search for identity, root, traditional values, culture, etc. which are lost in the humdrum of modernization and urbanization. Another prominent poet from the region, Mamang Dai's poems landscape the past and the present with recurrent images embedded in nature. They are not just an impassive witness to the existential despair of men and women as in the contemporary wasteland of modernist poets, but a living presence for the aspirations of the victimized common people. Hailing from a place where hills and rivers are also deities, her poem – 'The Missing Link' – says:

"there are no records
the river was the green
sand white vein of our lives,
linking new terrain in a lust for land..."

Thus, stating, that the loss of archives has sealed the fates of many natives in the trappings of modernity.

A journalist herself, she speaks here of the Sang river which remained unexplored by the Survey of India. The poet's belongingness to Arunachal Pradesh is celebrated through the mythic world:

"the twin gods
water and mist
and the cloud woman
always calling from the sanctuary of the gorge..."

The immortality of the river is strikingly suggested; its soul still survives at the frontiers of the civilized world. It flows with the dreams of the marginalized people: "In small towns by the river / we all want to walk with the gods". Similarly, rivers connote a crucial symbol for all ills, suffering and violence in the poetry of Uddipana Goswami too. Her poem "Guwahati," and Mamang Dai's "Tapu" both of which once had associations with rituals, fertility, happy memories are now invoked in all its barren grotesqueness. Assam and Arunachal Pradesh respectively bristle with thorns of confrontations and mindless despair. She writes:

"My Guwahati... they revel now in your cosmetic charms
you are their whore to be bought and sold...
the tears I shed are partly yours
the hope I carry floats on your river – and – mine."

In comparison to this, Mamang Dai's verse holds out the bleakness of female existence under terror:

"...and they are talking about escape,
about liberty, men and guns,...
Ah! The urgency for survival.
But what will they do
Not knowing the sorrow of women". (From 'The Sorrow of Women')

One prominent feature of the region is folklore which provides a peculiar local flavour to the poets of the region. Folk elements are an integral part as they establish

the identity of the culture of a tribe, which is also an identity of the North-East. Tamsula Ao and Aruni Kashyap's poetry effectively combines the oral and the written folk elements generating new literature rich with indigenous flavour. In his poems "Journeys" and "Me", Aruni's narrator makes it evident:

"Even I have words.
I have languages, literatures ...forest songs.
With time, they have descended
Like seasons and mists, to rest with us."

Lamenting the loss of folklore, Tamsula Ao examines how their Naga tribe became a victim of the forces of globalisation and wars resulting in confusion, chaos, changed identities in her poem "Blood of Others". She writes that Naga people:

"Discarded our ancient practice
Of etching on wood and stone
And learned instead to scratch on paper..."

The language of contemporary writing from the North-East is thus multi-faceted. There is a war with words; there is a subaltern history which is unwritten, a chain of folklore unsung. In the paganism of Mamang Dai, the melancholic nostalgia of Uddipana Goswami, the magnificent history tales of Tamsula Ao and the vigorous songs of the canon, their poetry clearly act as a resistance to any form of cultural hegemony of the mainland. Their poetry is by and large embedded in identity politics. We can study, in more than one sense, a postcolonial narrative. The power differential that exists between the centre and the North-Eastern states is a replication of the colonial power structure. Their relationship is qualified in terms of binaries like centre/margin; colonizer/colonized; domination/exploitation. The emerging multiple perspectives help to deconstruct the multi-layered reality of the region and the people and in turn enrich the poetry canon. It is indeed true that only the poet can, freely and courageously, without deception, reveal the farcical contradictions of the North-East and speak out the unspeakable without losing the essence of humanity, peace and love. Nilmani Phookan's poem significantly titled "Poem" speaks of the hope alive:

"From here
One sees on opening the door
Eternally turning
An earth warm with love"

Thus, the poetry of the region is an expression of the experiences of entire generations of people who have grown up under the shadow of terror and trauma. As Nongkynrih and Ngangom have argued:

The writer from the North-east 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 and woolly aesthetics but perforce master the art of witness. (2003, ix)

Most notable are their endeavours and efforts to share their stories with the rest of the world, to talk about their incredible past, rich culture and a lineage which makes

them a distinct community in a very special way. Although, the North-East Indian poets have ambivalence towards militarism, but their agonies are transcended into love: love for woman, love for the hills, ravines and deep gorges, precipitated by gushing waterfalls; in short love for the land. Politics and love complement each other with lyrical utterances. They are able to transmute the chaotic into the subliminal. That is, in the final analysis, the poetry of peace; out of disorderliness, they create orderliness.

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