Echoes from the Hills: Poetry in English from Northeast India

A thesis submitted to Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

This thesis entitled **"Echoes from the Hills: Poetry in English from Northeast India"** submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other university and is my original work.

In keeping with the general practice of reporting scientific observations, due acknowledgement has been made wherever the work described is based on the findings of other investigations.

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Certificate

This is to certify that RajashreeBargohain has prepared the thesis entitled **"Echoes from the Hills: Poetry in English from Northeast India"** for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati. The work was carried out under my supervision and in strict conformity with the rules laid down for the purpose. The thesis is the result of her investigations and has not been submitted either in whole or in part to any other university/ institution for a research degree.

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Abstract

Echoes from the Hills: Poetry in English from Northeast India

Writing in English from Northeast India is gradually emerging as an interesting and promising body of literature and makes for an exciting research area, because of inherent literary excellence as well as its correlations to the numerous socio-political issues of the region. From an analysis of the available literature in the area it has been found that the poetry in English written in Northeast India has not received enough attention in terms of full-length academic studies. This work is an attempt to make a systematic study of the contemporary poetry in English produced in the Northeast, with a focus on works of selected poets. The study has focused on the poetic works of Anjum Hasan, Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, Mamang Dai, Mona Zote, Robin Singh Ngangom and Temsula Ao, although works written in English by several other poets have also been taken up for study. Moreover, English translations of works in other languages by several other poets from the region have also been taken up for discussion.

Northeast India has generally occupied a marginal position in the Indian imagination. Speaking particularly in the context of Assam, Yasmin Saikia notes, "The problem of Assam's positionality within the Indian union was confounded by the politics of location to which was added a religio-cultural complication" (*Assam and India* 9). Historically, the region has never been too closely associated with the rest of India until the advent of the British. It seems to have more in common with East and Southeast Asia than the rest of India. Thus, the region is quite different from the rest of the country in almost every aspect. This becomes an impediment for the assimilation of the region within the greater Indian nation, in spite of the multi-cultural and inclusive nature of the country. This complex relationship extends to the literature of the region too. However, at times it is its distinctiveness that becomes the strength of the region, especially in cultural terms. Kailash C. Baral remarks, "Marginality becomes a defining trope that signifies this literature's location as well as its reception by mainstream critics" ("Articulating" 5). When we look at the literature of the Northeast, stark contrasts with the literature from the rest of the country become visible. The poets Robin Singh Ngangom and Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih speak of

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the singularity of the poetry they write when compared to the works of the Bombay poets. They claim that the poetry they write is emotional and politically engaged and contrasts with the intellectual, differently crafted poetry of the Bombay poets. Robin S. Ngangom, who writes poems in Manipuri and English declares. "I believe in the poetry of 'feeling', which can be shared, not cerebral, intellectual poetry which is inaccessible, and which leaves the reader outside the poet's insulated world" ("Poetry in the Time" 169). Moreover, the restive political situation in the Northeast is another reason why the poetry of the region takes on an overtly political character, making it yet more different from the poetry of the rest of the country. Ngangom and Nongkynrih believe their kind of poetry flows from the situation in the Northeast and have argued that the expressive concerns of the writer from the Northeast cannot be the same as that of a writer from elsewhere in India:

> The writer from the Northeast 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. (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. xii).

This study has undertaken a close analysis of the poetical works in English from the region, along with a few English translations of poems written in other languages. The analysis is facilitated by critical perspectives drawn from postcolonial theory, especially subaltern studies. Critical studies on the concepts of nationalism, sub-nationalism and identity politics have shed light on parts of the work. Drastic socio-cultural upheavals brought about by colonialism as well as protracted violence throughout the postcolonial period have turned the societies of Northeast India into deeply scarred collectivities. Poetry from Northeast India is coloured by this deep undercurrent of trauma found among its societies. The study therefore borrows perspectives from contemporary explorations in the field of trauma studies to examine the traumatic undertones in the poetry from the region. It has also made use of theoretical insights from various areas of gender studies, with particular focus on the relationship between gender and war. Perspectives borrowed from eco-critical studies have also facilitated the study at certain points. Extensive readings in relevant spheres of the history, politics, economy and anthropology of the Northeast region as well as nearby areas have informed the work with a holistic understanding and multi-disciplinary perspectives. The work has also been facilitated by personal interviews

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conducted with a couple of the poets under study - Desmond Kharmawphlang and Mamang Dai, which have been added as appendages to the thesis.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Northeast India[1], a region marked by its unique geographical terrain and culture, has a large and complex body of literature, which, like the region itself, embodies diversity and vitality. This writer, however, must express here her awareness that the blanket term 'Northeast India' is often accused of being limited and of failing to take into account the distinctiveness of the multiplicity of identities within the region, many of which are also in conflict with one another. The literature from Northeast India emerges from this cultural multiplicity and historical plurality and an attempt to discover or impose an absolute homogeneity within this literary body would be a major blunder. Many writers express their discomfiture with the terms 'Northeast India' as well as 'Northeast Indian literature'. They claim that the term is a colonial coinage, a construct devised for administrative convenience. Northeast India, they believe, is nothing more than a geographical entity, beyond which the term does not represent a composite cultural identity (Baruah, "Northeast India" 31; Gill, *The Peripheral Centre* 3; Sarma, "Towards" 37). The alleged neglect and lack of knowledge about the region in the country's mainland is also suspected to have led to such a convenient clumping together of identities through the use of a vague concept like 'Northeast India'. What makes the concept even more suspect is an underlying tendency towards a certain amount of stereotyping and racial discrimination often meted out to the people of the region. Duncan McDuie-Ra calls 'Northeast' "a category constructed by the Indian state for the purposes of controlling, governing and applying extraordinary legal provisions to its rebellious eastern frontier" ("Solidarity" 27). He alleges that "it homogenizes and depoliticizes the peoples and territories claimed by the Indian state and subjects them to a perpetual process of state-making characterized by violence and (mal) development" (ibid). However, he also points out the curious 'acceptance' of the term by the peoples of the region, in spite of widespread misgivings. He says that this acceptance can also indicate an affirmation of a certain kind of solidarity between the peoples of the region: "Not by all people, and not all the time, but certainly the category is used enough by those subject to it to warrant some consideration of its value for those seeking to claim it as a positive

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affirmation of who they are and where they fit, or don't, in the national picture" (ibid). S. Thianlalmuan Ngaihte also stresses on the practical validity of "Northeast India" as an emergent category. He calls it an emerging reality which continues to be shaped by various common issues shared by the people of the region and points out that it is they who seem keen to capitalise on it, "perhaps for solidarity and for gaining more prominence, knowing very well that divided they fall in a land where numbers matter" (15).

Mitra Phukan, a writer from Assam who writes in English points out that the lumping together of works from different parts of the region into a single category of "Writings in English from Northeast India" is guilty of homogenising and omitting the vast differences of history, culture, language and political experience that the works embody. However, she also admits that these works do contain significant commonalities ("Writing in English"). In his foreword to the *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from Northeast India*, Jayanta Mahapatra has observed, "It is strange that a poet from Mizoram might be speaking of the same values as a poet from Assam or Manipur; the humane intensity of the poems remains a matter of understanding and ultimate celebration" (xi). Northeast India is a region of enormous diversities in terms of cultures and languages and the literature coming out from diverse parts of the region is produced within the context of the socio-political and cultural specificities of that particular region and community. To construe these works as a homogeneous body of literature would therefore be fallacious. Yet, the poetry in English produced in Northeast India is conspicuous for certain shared features as well – firstly, these poems exhibit a sense of rootedness in the local culture and secondly, they display a steady engagement with the socio-political atmosphere of the region. This study has been undertaken with a similar awareness of the differences as well as similarities in the body of works produced in English from Northeast India.

India has a century and a half long tradition of writing in English. Indian Literature in English, with representations by writers from all parts of the country, has established itself in the national and global platforms as a site of serious literary activity with a remarkable array of writers who have won recognition for their works worldwide. Northeast India too has a large and interesting body of literary works in English. However, in comparison with the rest of the country, poetry in English in the Northeast region is of rather recent origin.

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The practice of writing and publishing poetry in English began in the region only around the 80s of the last century. There are long and rich traditions of writing in many indigenous languages in the Northeast, like Asamiya and Meiteilon. Yet, most other languages in the region do not have a body of written works. Although these languages are treasure houses of rich oral narratives and folklore, most of these languages did not have scripts of their own until recently. The following section will examine in brief the linguistic background of the region.

1. The Linguistic Background

Northeast India is home to as many as 220 indigenous tribes and an equal number of languages, which in turn have numerous dialects and variations. With a geographical area which makes up merely 9% of the total area of the entire country and a total population of approximately 40 million (2011 census), which accounts for a bare 3.1% of the total Indian population, this concentration of varied communities and languages, which is the largest of its kind in the country, is quite astonishing and remarkable. The total number of languages in Northeast India is more than the total number of languages in the rest of India put together. This staggering concentration of languages however also poses unique problems. Most tribal communities of the region have lived in a state of relative isolation throughout the pre-colonial period; a difficult terrain and frequent internecine tribal wars are generally assumed to be the reasons behind the limited contact between different tribes. As a result, each tribe speaks a distinct language and most language communities do not understand any other communities' languages. In fact, two persons belonging to two neighbouring tribes may not understand each other's language at all.

In this deeply multilingual environment, communication between two communities speaking different languages has always been a difficult task. Yet another problem is the selection of particular languages for administrative or academic purposes, which is often made more complicated by the unavailability of scripts and written literatures in most of the languages. This complex situation has given rise to much political debate and even violence on linguistic lines, with language playing the role of a national identity marker for different

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communities, whose aspirations for achieving certain rights within the Indian Union have time and again led to widespread clashes.

However, the linguistic diversity in the region should not lead one to naively assume that communication between different language communities has always been an impossible task in the region or that they have been living in an absolute state of mutual isolation. In spite of the huge linguistic diversity, which has existed for thousands of years, people in the region have been interacting with each other and carrying out activities of trade and commerce, administration and other day to day exchanges and activities with considerable effectiveness. Initially, the Asamiya and Bengali languages worked as *lingua franca* over large areas of the region. The people of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh developed pidgins of their own, which came to be known as Nagamese and Nefamese respectively, with inputs from Asamiya, Hindi, English and the local languages of the tribes. The Nefamese pidgin is currently extinct as it has been replaced by the use of Hindi. The creolised form of Nagamese, however, continues to be used by the people of Nagaland for inter-tribal communication as well as public broadcasting.

Most languages of the Northeast did not have indigenous writing systems or written literatures, although they are very rich in oral literature. In linguistic terms, these languages are relatively underdeveloped. Primitive life-style, isolated existence, lack of exposure to the outside world and a rough topography are often cited as possible reasons for this linguistic underdevelopment. The coming of the British to the region in the 19th century, accompanied by the arrival of the Christian missionaries, brought about major upheavals in the socio-cultural lives of the people of the region. Christian missionaries undertook the study of the local languages for evangelical and educational purposes, and tried to develop writing systems and to encode their grammar. The Khasis who inhabit the region which is today named as Meghalaya had no script of their own. Originally, the Serampore Baptist Mission tried to use the Bengali script for Khasi language, but it did not find acceptance with the Khasi population and the project turned out to be a failure. The Welsh missionaries who arrived in the Khasi Hills during the mid nineteenth century, succeeded in popularising Christianity in the region. They adopted the Roman script for the Khasi language which is still in use amongst the Khasis (Bandopadhyay 71; Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* xxvii). As

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the Church headquarter was based in the Cherrapunjee area, they began to use the dialect of the Cherrapunjee region for their publications. Subsequently, the Cherrapunjee dialect came to acquire the status of the standard variety of the Khasi language. Thomas Jones (1810-1849), the Welsh priest who devised the Roman script for the Khasi language has the following epitaph on his gravestone in Kolkata: "The Founding Father of the Khasi Alphabets and Literature". The Khasi people readily acknowledge Jones as the father of written Khasi language and literature. (Jenkins 9). In the case of the Garos of Meghalaya as well, the American Baptist missionaries discarded the Bengali script which had been previously in use and adopted the Roman alphabet towards the last decade of the nineteenth century, which is still in use. The Roman script was adopted for the scriptless Mizo language by the London Baptist Missionaries towards the end of the nineteenth century. They selected the Lusei dialect of the Duhlian language for the purpose which led to its becoming the standardised variety of the Mizo language (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* xxvi). The situation is quite complicated in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. None of the languages spoken in the state, which number around 70, has a script of its own, except Khampti which uses an ancient Shan script. The Monpas use the Tibetan script for religious purposes (Das Gupta, "A Few" 146). There have been efforts by independent scholars as well as the state government to use different scripts – Nagri, Roman and Phonetic, as per convenience, for the many languages spoken in the state. However, in the absence of written literatures, they have not reached much development. Thus, most languages of the Northeast have only very recently adopted writing systems and hence their literary traditions, at least in written and print mediums are still not fully developed.

When a society possesses such a highly multilingual culture, it is only natural for the people of these societies to be generally bilingual. The people of Northeast India display a very high level of bilingualism; more than 75 per cent of the tribal people in the region are bilingual. Even in the past, administrators in the region often chose non-tribal and relatively more advanced languages for use in courts as well as for other administrative purposes. The tribal languages were not considered mature enough to suit serious official purposes. This was the case even though most of the rulers as well as the ruled belonged to tribal communities (Tunga 119). An example is the case of the Tripuri kings of Tripura who patronised and used Bengali as the court language in spite of the presence of indigenous

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languages. In the postcolonial scenario, the need for inter-tribal interaction has made tribal populations adopt more widely known languages such as Asamiya, Bengali, English or Hindi to communicate with people from other communities. Thus, bilingualism has become a convenient and indispensable tool for the people in the region. Different languages are used in different parts of the region for administrative purposes and the medium of instruction at the school level also varies from region to region in the Northeast. In the hill states, English is often preferred as the medium of instruction at the school level in both public and private sector institutions, while it is invariably used as the medium of instruction at the level of higher education throughout the region. English has proved to be the most convenient and most popular contact language in the entire region and the knowledge of English has become imperative. This is especially so in the tribal zones. It is noteworthy that in spite of receiving their education in second languages and having no tradition of written literatures, the tribal population of the Northeast has achieved high levels of literacy, and this despite the economic and infrastructural backwardness of the region. Except Arunachal Pradesh, all the hill states, which are mostly constituted by ethnic tribes, have 80% or more literacy rates. Tripura, with a literacy rate of 94.65% (2012 Census) ranks the highest in the country, against the national average of 74.04% (2011 Census). Mizoram, with a literacy rate of 91.58% (2011 Census) ranks the third in the nation. The literacy rate among the tribal population of the region in general is quite high compared to the literacy rate of the tribal population in the rest of the country. Conversion to Christianity and progressive thinking are often cited as the possible causes leading to high literacy rates in the region.

Thus, high linguistic diversity, lack of written literatures, the relative immaturity of the indigenous languages as well as high rates of bilingual competence have laid the road to the easy acceptance as well as widespread use of a contact language in the region and this role in the region is fulfilled by the English language. Most of the hill states in the Northeast have adopted English as the official language, and the populations of these states display a substantial amount of confidence in using the language in professional, academic as well as day-to-day communication.

In spite of possessing long and rich oral traditions, the lack of written cultures amongst most ethnic communities of the region has impeded the growth of strong literary

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traditions in the indigenous languages. It must be mentioned, however, that there have been several instances of writers from the ethnic communities of the Northeast producing large numbers of literary works in the Asamiya language[2]. Writers like Lummer Dai and Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi from Arunachal Pradesh, and those like Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Rongbong Terang and a host of other eminent writers belonging to various ethnic communities of Assam have shown remarkable confidence in handling the Asamiya language which is not their mother-tongue. Tilottama Misra comments that the use of the Asamiya language by writers of different communities for creative writing enriched the language by bringing in elements peculiar to these indigenous cultures (*The Oxford Anthology* xv). However, the preponderance of ethnic and identity politics in the region since the turn of the century has halted the production of writings in Asamiya by writers from other ethnic communities of the region. Tilottama Misra alludes to a tendency discernable in recent times amongst the people of the hill states: of denying their knowledge of any language other than English or their mother tongue. She holds up the tragic case of Lummer Dai who is recorded to have shared his grief with fellow writer, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi: "Writers like you and me", he said, "have no place in Arunachal Pradesh. In fact, people ridicule us because we write in Asamiya. When I sit down to write, these thoughts trouble me and I say to myself, for whom should I write and what? Is there any use in writing? And then my pen stands still, my words dry up" ("Crossing" 3656).

Growing ethnic consciousness and assertion, along with resentment towards Assamese chauvinism and the hegemonic designs of the Assamese middle class, led the later generations of these communities to move away from the established literary traditions of the valley. Most of the hill communities find themselves limited within the confines of their local languages which, in most cases, do not have more than a few thousand speakers, and even less readers. The pidgins which have since centuries enabled hill communities to communicate with each other and with the world outside, are considered unsuitable for literary and cultural expressions. In fact, the usefulness of these pidgins to these communities notwithstanding, there is a growing resentment about their incursion in these societies. The Nagamese pidgin has been in existence, for example, for almost two centuries. Yet, as Rohini Mokashi-Punekar points out, it "does not reflect Naga culture and its ethos in their deepest sense, beyond certain mannerisms of thought and speech" (138). Although they

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are widely used in public broadcasting and even in Assembly proceedings, these languages are not promoted by the states, as they are considered 'unrespectable' and 'illegitimate' (ibid). It is this vacuum concerning a 'useful' link language which is rapidly being filled up in these societies by the English language. Tilottama Misra points out,

> in their 'march towards modernity', the tribal leaders did not waste precious time bickering over the suitability of one or the other tribal language or Hindi as the medium of instruction in schools, but opted for a language that would put them at par with the ruling elite of the 'mainstream'. The newly emerging tribal elite in these states had realised that in modern India no matter how emotional one might get about one's mother tongue, no regional language can em-power the people as much as the English language can. ("Crossing" 3656)

She further states, "The tribal elite of the north-eastern states have unambiguously taken up a stand in favour of joining the ever-growing 'new brahmin' class of India which is at home with the English language rather than being left behind with the 'new dalits' who speak and write in the regional languages" (ibid.). It is within this complex linguistic and ethno-political situation that the rise of a group of writers opting to write in English in the region must be understood.

2. Literature in English from Northeast India: an Overview

Literary texts in English began to be produced in the Northeastern states from the mid 80s of the last century by writers such as Temsula Ao from Nagaland, Arup Kumar Dutta from Assam and poets like Robin Singh Ngangom from Manipur and Desmond Kharmawphlang and Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih from Meghalaya. The quaint hilly city of Shillong seems to have played a pivotal role in the growth of these writers, as all of them are, with the exception of Dutta, connected to the city of Shillong in various ways. This is somewhat similar to the emergence of the "Bombay poets", for many of whom the city had become nothing less than a muse; most of them may not have been born in Bombay, but they worked there and many of them also published there. However, the poetry produced by this Shillong based group and its succeeding generations turned out to be markedly different, on several fronts, from that produced elsewhere in the country. Robin Ngangom has termed the poetry written by the poets of the Northeast as "an alternative to the poetry pioneered by the metropolitan poets of the 1960s and their present-day descendants". He explains:

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> Schooled as they were in the Pound-Eliot academy, these metropolitan poets perfected a detached, formal, craft-driven poetry. It is a self-regarding, albeit passionless, 'internationally minded' pursuit, motivated by a fashionable philosophy of exile and alienation. The poetry of the Northeast, on the other hand, can be 'statemental' in comparison to the verbally dazzling metropolitan artefact, rooted as against the alienated stance of modernist city poets, autobiographical as against the impersonal. The Northeast poets are also not particularly concerned with technique, form and symmetry; they are not remarkable experimenters with metre or craft. Their verse often lacks the linguistic sophistication of the metropolitan poets, and read like 'translations', as someone pointed out. Further, instead of the expected radical break with the near past, Northeast poetry written in English suggests a continuity with the past. ("Alternative")

Shillong was the capital of undivided Assam till 1972 when Meghalaya was carved out of Assam and Shillong became the capital of the newly formed state. Until the formation of the new state, Shillong had acted as a political and cultural melting pot for the entire Northeast region. It still continues to be an important cultural and educational hub. This facilitated the growth of a literary culture in Shillong which has subsequently inspired writers from various corners of the Northeast.

Temsula Ao (b. 1945), a poet, short story writer and ethnographer, retired as a Professor of English at North Eastern Hill University (NEHU). Ao has published two collections of short stories - *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum for My Head* (2009) along with five collections of poetry - *Songs from Here and There* (2003), *Songs from the Other Life* (2007), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs that Tell* (1988) and *Songs that Try to Say* (1992). As an ethnographer, she collected the myths, folktales, folklore, rituals, laws, customs and belief system of the Ao-Nagas which was published as *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* (1999). Her ethnographic experience is reflected in her short stories, most of which depict the lives, customs and struggles of the Naga people while following a lucid narrative style which appropriates the oral style of narration found in the folktales prevalent among the indigenous communities of the Northeast. Her stories, while depicting the cultural lives of the Nagas, also act as narratives of the violence that has torn the state apart in the form of both militant and state violence. Her stories are tales of suffering, struggle and the survival of the peoples of the Naga Hills. Her poetry displays a similar sensibility where she interweaves personal experiences with the experiences of the community as a whole. Ao's poems have been compiled into a single collection entitled

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Book of Songs (2013). She has also recently published her memoir titled *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags: A Memoir* (2014).

The poet trio based in Shillong - Robin Singh Ngangom, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih and Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang began publishing their works in the 80s and 90s. Their poems, published in the poetry section of *The Telegraph Sunday Magazine*, edited then by Jayanta Mahapatra, drew the attention of critics in India and abroad. In 1988-89, Ngangom and Kharmawphlang got together to form the Shillong Poetry Society; Nongkynrih and Anjum Hasan were soon members of the society. The group began a journal of poetry by the name of *Lyric*. In the first few issues it carried contributions by poets like Nissim Ezekiel as well as regional writers like the Assamese poet, Nabakanta Barua. The Shillong Poetry Society and *Lyric* gradually petered out and are now defunct, mainly due to financial contingencies. But the active and vibrant literary atmosphere of Shillong continued to nurture many young voices emerging from the region which has laid a remarkable foundation for a tradition of writing in English in the Northeast. This has since been enriched by many young and promising writers from all states of the Northeast. The primary setting for the departures sought to be effected in their works by this group of poets was laid out in the journal. The very choice of its name can be now read as a preamble to the kind of poetry that would be produced by the writers of this region. As Sumanyu Satpathy has highlighted, "the great attraction of the poetry of this region is the peculiar interface between its preferred generic mode – that of the lyric – and the political/ideological motivations and compunctions" ("Locating").

One of the important writers to emerge from the region in subsequent times is Anjum Hasan. Born and brought up in Shillong and now based in Bangalore, Hasan has written three novels so far - *Lunatic in My Head* (2007), *Neti, Neti* (2009) and *The Cosmopolitans* (2015) to her credit. She has also published a collection of short stories titled *Difficult Pleasures* (2012) and a collection of poems, *Street on the Hill* (2006). Hasan has won accolades for her works and is often cited as one of the most gifted young writers of the country.

Another distinctive voice from the region is that of Mamang Dai, a writer and journalist born and brought up in Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh. Her collection of poems

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River Poems (2004), with an introduction by Keki N. Daruwalla drew much attention and appreciation in the national poetry circle. Her works have since appeared in many anthologies of Indian poetry in English. Dai's work *Legends of Pensam* (2006) is a retelling of myths and tales from her homeland Arunachal Pradesh in lyrical prose. In a review of the work in *Biblio*, Kallol Bhattacherjee says, "Mamang Dai has cleared the flight-path of the hornbill and exposed through literature the dilemmas of the Northeast. *Pensam* gives its "peripheral people" access to greater history and grants them a voice by clearing away the undergrowth of ignorance and amnesia" ("A New Voice"). Dai has also published two other novels - *Stupid Cupid* (2009) and *Black Hill* (2014). Dai's other published works are *Mountain Harvest: the Food of Arunachal Pradesh* (2005), *Arunachal Pradesh: the Hidden Land* (2009) and two books for children, *Once Upon a Moontime* (2005) and *The Sky Queen* (2006). *Hambreelmai's Loom* (2014) by Dai is a retelling of a Mishmi folktale.

In the past half decade, the Northeast has produced a host of young and promising writers writing in English, which include Ankush Saikia, Aruni Kashyap, Bijoya Sawian, Cherrie L. Chhangte, Chetan Raj Shrestha, Daisy Hasan, Dhruba Hazarika, Dhrubajyoti Borah, Easterine Kire Iralu, Esther Syiem, Guru T. Ladakhi, Ibohal Kshetrimayum, Indrani Raimedhi, Jahnavi Barua, Janice Pariat, Jobeth Ann Warjri, Kaushik Barua, Lalrinmawii Khiangte, Malsawmi Jacob, Mitra Phukan, Monalisa Changkija, Mona Zote, Nabanita Kanungo, Nabina Das, Nini Lungalang, Nitoo Das, Paul Lyngdoh, Prajwal Parajuly, Siddhartha Deb, Siddhartha Sarma, Shimanta Bhattacharyya, Uddipana Goswami, Yumlam Tana and others. Many of them have won awards, honours as well as critical acclaim for their works.

2.1. Northeast India and Literature in English

An increasingly large number of writers from the Northeast have taken to the English language for literary expression since the turn of the century. Margaret Ch. Zama cites the high literacy rate in the region as one of the main reasons for the wide use of the English language in the emerging literary works from the region (*Emerging* xi). The usefulness of

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the English language as a unifying and communicating medium is emphasised by Hiren Gohain, a scholar-critic from Assam:

> Mercifully, the English language not only allows a dialogue among the educated Indians of different regions but puts us at some distance from our native preoccupations and obsessions, so that a genuine dialogue on equal terms can get going. It thus continues to be a civilising influence in barbarous times, provided of course it does not become insulated from regional cultures. ("Assam" xii).

Tilottama Misra points out that its ability to reach out to a wider audience acts as an important underlying factor in the choice of this language for the contemporary group of writers in the region (*The Oxford Anthology* xvi). The Khasi writers writing in English are recorded to have stated that "they wish to dissociate themselves from the daffs and cuckoos of "the old fogeys", and to appeal through newspapers, the radio and Indian publications to a wider public" (Jenkins 18). Misra predicts that this group is only likely to expand in numbers in the near future.

The English language as a medium for composing literary works is not the subject of as much misgiving in the Northeast region, as it has been in the rest of India. However, the ambivalent love-hate relationship with the English language found among the Indian English writers is not altogether absent among the writers of the Northeast. The poet Desmond Kharmawphlang, like some of his Khasi colleagues, despairs at having to express himself in English:

> My burdensome English learning
> assails me, and the tomb it has become
> laughs and cackles without end.

He cannot yet forgive the "alien patrons", the colonisers:

> Hiding under dark cloaks of
> my alien patrons, I was taught to be ashamed
> of my own. ("The Conquest") (qtd. in Satpathy, "Weiking" 17)

The Khasis themselves have also had a powerful folk tradition, much of which was destroyed by the "conquest" of the "alien patrons" who gave them the written word with one hand but took the spoken one with the other (Satpathy, "Weiking" 18). The Welsh poet Nigel Jenkins, who has edited a collection of poetry and prose from the Khasi Hills, expresses his surprise at Khasi writers preferring to write in English rather than in their

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mother tongue. He comments, "A sad consequence of Khasi poetry's apparent retreat into quaint irrelevance is that many of a talented younger generation, who cut their teeth on Lorca, Seferis, Arghezi, Neruda and the hard-edged modernists of the Third World, have abandoned their native languages as a creative medium and taken to English, contributing thereby to 'Anglo-Khasi literature'" (18).

The poets Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih and Robin Singh Ngangom observe that due to the crucial role played by Welsh and American missionaries in the development of writing systems in most languages in the region, most of the tribes seem to have taken to the same kind of literary influence, which is exclusively Christian and English. This, they say, is in contrast to the Assamese, Manipuri and Bengali populations who were exposed to Sanskrit and Hindi literatures as well (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. x). They further point out that while, on the one hand, the missionaries gifted the tribes with a common literary heritage, on the other, they made them deny the existence of their own literatures as part of the rich oral traditions, and inculcated an attitude that stereotyped these traditions as 'pagan' and 'preposterous'. The literary education and culture imparted by the missionaries in the Northeast therefore becomes "double-edged' (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. x-xi). Despite their relative comfort with the English language, the need to work for the development of literatures in their relatively undeveloped indigenous languages often burdens the writers choosing to write in English with a sense of guilt. Another Khasi poet, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih apologises for what he calls the "literary ambidexterity" of a writer in his position: the proficiency and ability to express himself in the mother tongue as well in a language like English, which is much more widely known and can reach out to a larger readership. He expresses belief that writing in a widely known language like English, which also has a long and rich literary tradition, can act as a test of merit for his own compositions. He says that thus, driven by circumstances and supported by literary ambidexterity, the creation of every one of his poems becomes essentially "the birth of twins" ("The Writer").

Northeast India is an under-represented and unexplored region in many respects. In the sphere of literary mapping too, the literature of the region is often overlooked and discounted by the mainstream Indian literary circles as well as publishing organisations. The available literature examining the representation of literature from Northeast India in the

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national literary arena often rallies around the inadequate attention allotted to the literary works of the Northeast in the mainstream conception of what constitutes Indian literature. Prasanta Das refers to the case of a recent anthology of Indian English poetry titled *60 Indian Poets*, edited by Jeet Thayil and published by Penguin Books India, which is likely to become one of the most comprehensive volumes of Indian English poetry, and yet fails to incorporate any of the poets based in Shillong, in spite of Thayil's claims to inclusivity. Das provides a list of many other recent anthologies of Indian English poetry which display a similar trend. Das says that "Because Ngangom, Kharmawplang and Nongkynrih feel they have an obligation to write about the crucial contemporary problems of their region they write about terrorism, insurgency, human rights abuses, environmental and ecological concerns, erosion of tribal values, and the corrupt politician-businessman-bureaucrat nexus" ("Anthology-Making" 20). He claims that the reason for their non-inclusion within Indian English Poetry is this overtly political character of the poetry produced from the Northeast which sets it off from the poetry produced in the other parts of the country. The poets from this region do not emulate the poetics of Anglo-American poetry, which, Das believes, has a dominating presence in Indian English poetry. Instead, they emulate and find inspiration in the works of the more political poets like Pablo Neruda, Czeslaw Milosz, Mahmoud Darwish, and Yehuda Amichai who by choice or circumstance (or both) voice the anguish and aspirations of their land and its people. Das cites this 'public' nature of the Shillong based poets as another reason which makes their inclusion in the tradition of Indian English poetry rather problematic. ("Anthology-Making")

In another paper, Prasanta Das explains his thesis more elaborately. He points out that the tradition of Indian English poetry has eschewed political and public themes and developed as largely personal poetry. This tradition begun by Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, and Dom Moraes continues in the work of the new generation of poets. He claims that this is the reason Ranjit Hoskote did not include Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih in his anthology, *Reasons for Belonging* (2002), and that Jeet Thayil left out the three Shillong poets from the anthology he recently edited for the American poetry journal *Fulcrum*. Since Ngangom, Kharmawphlang, and Nongkynrih write poetry that is narrative, emotional, and lyrical, and also make statements in their poems, their poetry runs counter to the taste of the Bombay poets, who generally prefer intellectual poetry and a playful use of language.

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However, Hoskote included Anjum Hasan in *Reasons for Belonging* and Thayil included Hasan and Mamang Dai in his collection. In Das's view neither Hasan nor Dai write political poems. Thus, the real objection to the poetry of the three Shillong poets seems to be political rather than literary (Das, "Waiting"). Elsewhere, he alleges, "Thayil's refusal to include the work of Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih is rather like New Delhi's reluctance to listen to the demands of the politically restless groups and communities of the north-east" ("Anthology-Making" 21). Sumanyu Satpathy too expresses his surprise at the lack of attention paid to the writers based in Shillong. He says that this lack is all the more surprising in the context of the long history of violence, oppression, subjugation, neglect and exploitation in the trouble-torn region. He comments sardonically, "No wonder, it is not poetry but ethnic strife which comes readily to the mind of a 'mainstream' Indian whenever the north-east is mentioned ("Weiking" 13).

A contrasting view is however presented by Manjeet Baruah who does not endorse an uncritical inclusion of literature from Northeast India within the ambit of mainstream Indian literature. He points out the distinctiveness of the literature from this region. Although Prasanta Das argues for the inclusion of writings from the Northeast within the anthologies of Indian writing, Baruah warns against an uncritical acceptance of such inclusion. According to him, it is not the process of exclusion but inclusion that needs to be critiqued. He calls the process of inclusion of Assamese literature into the larger paradigm of Indian literature a "systemic violence inflicted on the historical and cultural peculiarity of the valley" (*Frontier Cultures* 679). He argues that Assam should be especially studied because 'it comprises a region with a difference, with a history which cannot be studied as part of either the great Sanskrit tradition of ancient period or as part of the Indo-Muslim tradition of the medieval period" (ibid.).

Nevertheless, the anger and hurt at the lack of appreciation and recognition of the poetic voices from the Northeast by the metropolitan centres of India is expressed in the poem "Me" by Aruni Kashyap:

> I, too, have words
> I can clay-mould them
> I have languages, literatures,
> forest songs.

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They crawl back centuries,
earthquakes generational.
Grandmas circulated them; with areca nuts
on courtyards, under honeyed moons,
like rains, they drench minds, and more-
when first-drenched ones are time-parched,
the new ones who are parched for stories.

With time, they have descended
Like seasons and mists, to rest with us.

I have tunes too, books
written on bark with earthworm's blood;
they are different,
independent, like these rivers
in my chest, legend-laden
mournful, yet swelling with energy furious
Love-lost like singing spring birds
Anonymous, beyond the hills
Where rivers and rains are born
To flow down as legends, life-blood.

My history is different, defined
by grandmas, rivers, hills,
singing spring birds behind green trees
and seventeen victories.

My words: they have legends in them
The way tea-leaves run in my veins
instead of blood.
Stories, of new-born speaking from backyard graves
About dogs transforming into man
Man to sheep, goats
And a girl, singing through lime trees,
gourds and lilies from backyards.

And I still wait, for a warm embrace
My throat peacock-parched, in longing
All the rivers from my land
legends, rains weary
Cannot quench my thirst, I need your love
Don't you see
I'm different?

I too have words,
Languages, literatures
And stories to tell you
Are you eager to listen, at all? (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* 32-33)

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However, more recently, writers from the Northeast are gradually beginning to be recognised on the national as well as the international platform. Writers Workshop, Kolkata has been very supportive of writers from the region all along. More and more mainstream publishers are beginning to show interest in works from the Northeast, both works written in English as well translations into English. Publishing houses like Zubaan and Katha have turned out to be pioneers in this field and are helping bring much good work from the region to the forefront of national as well as international attention. Many recently compiled anthologies of Indian English poetry have included works by poets from the region. While *60 Indian Poets* (Penguin 2008) edited by Jeet Thayil (referred to earlier), included only the works of Mamang Dai and Anjum Hasan, *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry* (HarperCollins 2012) edited by Sudeep Sen includes poems by Ananya S. Guha, Anjum Hasan, Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih and Robin S. Ngangom. *We Speak in Changing Languages: Indian Women Poets 1990-2007* edited by E.V. Ramakrishnan and Anju Makhija includes poems by Anjum Hasan and Mamang Dai. The anthology adopts its title from Mamang Dai's poem "The Voice of the Mountain", which is a telling gesture in itself. In the introductory note to the volume, the editors write that the angst-ridden, confessional and existential writing of the Indian poetry in English of the sixties and seventies, which used to be largely a metropolitan phenomenon, has now given way to a self-assured critical voice and has an inclusive social perspective. The editors cite the inclusion of Hasan and Dai as a case in point (Ramakrishnan and Makhija eds. xiv). Oxford University Press has published a two-volume anthology of writings from the Northeast, edited by Tilottama Misra and featuring some of the region's most brilliant authors such as Nabakanta Barua, Hiren Bhattacharya[3], Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, and Kynpham S. Nongkynrih. Another anthology of poems from Northeast India, *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India* edited by Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham S. Nongkynrih has been published by Penguin India. A host of young writers from the region are also being published by major publishing houses.

Yet, the rather fraught relationship between the states of Northeast India and the Centre is considered by many as a fertile ground for good writing whether it is in English, or indigenous languages. Aruni Kashyap, a budding writer from Assam, comments that

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"Because of this, the writers here have something very different to say. Apart from a distinct regional sensibility, the political nature of these writings makes them different" (Borpujari). Uddipana Goswami poignantly questions whether those writing from the troubled Northeast would be acknowledged as poets, in spite of their being different:

> Your vocabulary is no longer mine.
> My language you may not know.
> But would you call me a poet still
> If I did not write the words you spoke?
>
> Would I be a poet still
> If I wrote instead the cacophony
> Of insurgent crossfires
> And false encounters, secret killings?
> Will you consider it poetry
> if it were splashed with mud from military boots
> Mixed with the blood of revolutionaries and mercenaries
> And political touts and merchants of ideology? (Goswami, *We Called* 42)

The dramatic spurt of interest in writings from the Northeast region in recent times could also be related to the glamour and market value that the political nature of the writings and the tenuous relationship of the Northeast region with mainland India provides. However, this has its own dangers as it may lead to the exoticisation and glamourising of the differences, troubles, and violence of the region in order to enhance the appeal of the works from the region and increase their sale value. With such market forces in play, the exercise of writing in the region could easily turn into 'pornography of violence' (Gill, "Narratives").

3. Poetry in English in Northeast India

Northeast India has been geographically, politically, socially, economically and culturally different and isolated to an extent vis-à-vis the rest of the country. Talking particularly in the context of Assam, Yasmin Saikia states, "The problem of Assam's positionality within the Indian union was confounded by the politics of location to which was added a religio-cultural complication" (*Assam and India* 9). Historically, the region had never been too closely associated with the rest of India until the advent of the British. Culturally and historically, it seems to have more in common with East and Southeast Asia

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than the rest of India. Thus, the region is quite different from the rest of the country in almost every aspect. This becomes an impediment for the assimilation of the region within the greater Indian nation, in spite of the multi-cultural and inclusive nature of the country. This complex relationship extends to the literature of the region too. However, at times it is its distinctiveness that becomes the strength of the region, especially in cultural terms. When we look at the literature of the Northeast, we find stark contrasts from the writings from the rest of the country as seen above. Kailash C. Baral remarks, "Marginality becomes a defining trope that signifies this literature's location as well as its reception by mainstream critics" ("Articulating" 5).

The poets Robin Singh Ngangom and Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih speak of the singularity of the poetry they write when compared to the works of the Bombay poets. They claim that the poetry they write is emotional and politically engaged and contrasts with the intellectual, differently crafted poetry of the Bombay poets. Robin Ngangom, who writes poems in Manipuri and English declares, "I believe in the poetry of 'feeling', which can be shared, not cerebral, intellectual poetry which is inaccessible, and which leaves the reader outside the poet's insulated world" ("Poetry in the Time" 169). Moreover, the restive political situation in the Northeast is another reason why the poetry of the region takes on an overtly political character, making it yet more different from the poetry of the rest of the country. Ngangom and Nongkynrih believe their kind of poetry flows from the peculiar situation in the Northeast. In the Editors' Note to their *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*, they have argued that the expressive concerns of the writer from the Northeast cannot be the same as that of a writer from elsewhere in India: "The writer from the Northeast 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" (xii).

Most poets writing in English in the region generally make use of the free verse form and not much effort is seen to emulate formal poetic structures. However, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih has experimented with the Haiku form. Most of them have experimented with prose-poems as well. Poets of the region regularly make use of irony and satire. Mona Zote (b. 1973), a young writer from the state of Mizoram makes a striking use of prose and long

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passages in her poems. Arundhati Subramaniam remarks, "Zote's poetry startles with its unsentimental and disquieting imagery, its register that moves from the formal to the colloquial and its determinedly fragmentary, non-linear style" (Subramaniam, "Mona Zote"). A similar style is found among the works of Nabanita Kanungo, another young poet from Shillong.

In spite of the presence of a great amount of diversity, a few similarities in terms of themes are discernible in the poetry in English written by the poets of the Northeast. The following is a brief discussion of the major themes:

3.1. Conflict, Violence and Unrest

The postcolonial period ushered in a period of great turmoil and unrest in Northeast India. This pervasive atmosphere of violence and unrest in the Northeast has entered the general psyche of the people of the region and has become a part of their daily lives. The violent atmosphere often forms the backdrop and sometimes even the core of contemporary writings in the region. "Terror-lore", a term coined by poet Desmond Kharmawphlang very accurately describes much of the literature produced in the Northeast, which emerges out of the prevalent atmosphere of fear and collective insecurity (Chhangte 237). The poetry written in English in the Northeast is steeped in this tragic reality of the region, of its "terrible beauty" in being laden with beautiful peoples, cultures and landscapes and yet being a home ground of incessant turmoil and strife. The ubiquitous presence of violence and insurgency in the region has had a major influence on the literatures produced in the region in the post-Independence period. As a result, much of the literary work produced in the region in the contemporary period is political in character. Sumanyu Satpathy borrows the term literature of "real conflict" to describe the contemporary poetry written in English in Northeast India ("Weiking" 14). As Tilottama Misra explains, "Violence features as a recurrent theme because the story of violence seems to be a never-ending one in this region and yet people have not learnt 'to live with it', as they are expected to do by the distant centres of power". She draws attention to how a deep concern about the brutalization of the societies and the maiming of the psyche of an entire people through unending experiences of violence have a dominating presence in the literary works of writers from Northeast India (*The Oxford Anthology* xxi). Robin Singh Ngangom asks:

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Can poetry be smuggled like guns or drugs?
We've drawn our borders with blood.
Even to write in our mother tongue
we cut open veins and our tongues
lick parchments with blood.

I read my smuggled Neruda
and sometimes listen to the fading fiddles
and the mourning voices of my land.

I'm the anguish of slashed roots,
the fear of the homeless,
and the desperation of former kisses.
How much land does my enemy need?

.....
.....
I'm the pain of slashed roots
and the last rain is already here.
I'll leave the cracked fields of my land
and its weeping pastures of daybreak.
Let wolves tear our beloved hills.

I'll leave the bamboo flowering
in the groves of my childhood.
Lets rats gnaw at the supine map
of what was once my native land. (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* 45-46)

Aruni Kashyap's poem "Journeys" captures the dominant images one comes across in the region of 'Flesh, fragrance, jasmine/fish, cow-dung, women/and the red colour/sometimes sun, sometimes silk-cotton flowers/or the blood which I mistook/for flowers". He writes:

Trees moved along, clouds too
with the moon, the about-to-drown orange-sun
in sooty hours, slow;
they boiled down to a single feeling:
and I saw markets, old and new
where they sold, the same things –
Flesh of goats, cows, pigs,
hens or roosters,
ducks
and women
.....
.....
Sometimes, I saw guns too
and brooms, that cleaned blood

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like milk spilled by a cow's hind-legs-kick
from the milkmaid's knee-hold.
The same street, and people
and blood, guns, flesh traded
for money
It all remained the same
like a blood red morning sun
with the newspaper, red
roasted flesh
they still drink tea, brownish red
ginger-flavoured. (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* 30-31)

In a deeply evocative poem, Shimanta Bhattacharyya presents the stunned silences of this trouble-torn region:

After the explosion, the silence blithely
Resurrects itself. There is no report of casualties.
People are so used to being blown down to bits these days:
Prayers shiver down sodden wicks on Diwali.

The silence is a piece of wafer. All huddle around it –
Afraid to eat of it. It isn't strange that deep in the ghettoes
Somebody should prick the ears – above the muezzin's call-
To plumb the sound of the silence.

The sky is rigged with booby traps. Nobody mentions
Death by lightning. Natural occurrences are rare:
In life as much as in death. So long as the silence lasts
There is no cause for panic. (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 49)

Women poets of Northeast India have often represented the condition of women, often the worst sufferers in the crossfire of conflicting power groups and the climate of insurgency haunting the region. Many of these narratives also recount the attempts on the part of the women to cope with and to survive in the face of the intensely volatile and terror ridden climate of the region. Mamang Dai writes:

In the end the universe yields nothing
except a dream of permanence,
Peace is a falsity.
A moment of rest comes after long combat;
from the east the warrior returns
with the blood of peonies.
I am the child who died at the edge of the world,
the distance between end and hope;
the star diagram that fell from the sky,

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the summer that makes men weep;
I am the woman lost in translation
who survives with happiness to carry on. (*Midsummer Survival* 30)

3.2. Myth and folklore

The numerous communities inhabiting Northeast India possess vast and rich treasures of myth and folklore. Collecting, recording and re-telling the folklore of the various communities living in the region was an important enterprise during the colonial era. In the postcolonial period, the educated class amongst these communities has taken upon itself the task of preserving, promoting and propagating folklore and folk customs, which have become important markers of their cultural identities. G.J.V. Prasad explains the significance of a deep attachment and constant references to the traditional past in the poems of Temsula Ao:

> It is interesting to see how her poetry becomes part of her quest to recover and connect with the mythology of the community, to establish continuities with the past, even while she sings of her different emotions and moods, of her personal life, of love, loneliness, ageing and death. The individual finds herself only in her community, which takes her away from her loneliness into its traditional fold, giving her a sense of continuity and purpose. The personal problems fade into the poetry of the community, and this from her very first collection. (xviii)

Most poets from contemporary Northeast India frequently employ this cultural capital in composing their literary works. Temsula Ao speaks of an Ao-Naga belief in her poem "Soul-Bird" according to which when a person dies, the soul transforms into a bird, precisely, a hawk, an insect or caterpillar. The sighting of the hawk soon after a person's death is read as a sign that the transition of the soul is complete and it is its last visit to earth (*Book of Songs* 243):

But grandmother clings
To the new-made barrier
Guarding the fresh mound,
Until her grieving heart
Senses a presence
Hovering in the sky.

She turned her gaze,
Red-rimmed eyes

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Settled on the circling silhouette,
And then with a sudden
Unseemly whoop
She draws me closer
Whispering in my ear,

'See that keening bird in the sky?
That's your mother's soul
Saying her final goodbye, (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 4-5)

Kailash C. Baral comments that, "The past is an integral part of the present where the oral informs the written in that the creative writers redefine ethnic-cultural identities in reprocessing cultural memory [in the Northeast]" ("Articulating" 7). Folklore and folk-life appear as the subject, theme, motif or stylistic element in much of the poetry written in English in Northeast India. This seems to serve several purposes. Firstly, literature becomes a valuable tool for recording the myths and folklore of communities which did not possess traditions of written literature and whose histories remain unrecorded and unretrieved. In the face of this lack of written traditions to fall back upon, poets belonging to indigenous communities of the region fashion their works as a continuation of their oral heritage into written forms of the present. Secondly, the use of myths and folk material lends a sense of 'rootedness' to the literary works in English, which are otherwise riddled with the anxiety of writing in a non-native language and an 'alien' tradition.

The changes in the traditional customs, indigenous religious belief systems and practices and traditional ways of life of the communities inhabiting the region form a major concern in the contemporary poetry written in English. The following lines by Mamang Dai capture the anxiety concerning the loss of cultural heritage:

They have slain the wild cat
and buried the hornbill in her maternal sleep.
The words of strangers have led us
into a mist deeper than the one we left behind,
weeping like the waving grassland
where the bones of our fathers are buried,
surrounded by thoughts of beauty. (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 89)

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3.3. Nature and Landscape

Northeast India is blessed with nature's bounty and breath-taking beauty. The region possesses great physiographical diversity with hills, dales, valleys, ridges and plateaus scattered over its complex terrain. Deep gorges, undulating hills, cloud kissed hilltops, quaint hamlets and valleys veiled in mist lend unmatched beauty to the region's landscape. Adding to its magical beauty, the landscape is dotted with numerous large and little rivers, rushing streams, gushing rapids, gorgeous waterfalls, turquoise lakes and vast wetlands. The mighty Brahmaputra and Barak rivers and their tributaries criss-cross the hills and plains. Bringing the mesmerising landscape to life is its rich treasure of flora and fauna. The Northeast falls under the eastern Himalayan region; it is one of the two bio-diversity hotspots of the country and is known for its rare and exotic varieties of abundant flora and fauna. This land of the one-horned rhino, the wild buffalo and the hornbill bursts into colours when the cherry blossoms, gulmohars, laburnums, jacarandas, orchids, siroi lilies and rhododendrons bloom. It is also a land of lush green vistas that stretch till the horizon. And this beautiful bountiful region is home to numerous ethnic communities with their rich cultures and customs. The verdant and pristine rainforests spread over the hills and plains not only provide unique glimpses of nature's bounties, they are also inseparably connected with the socio-cultural and economic life of the people. Many of the ethnic communities of the Northeast are often termed as 'ecosystem people' owing to their symbiotic relationship with their natural surroundings, upon which they depend for their livelihood.

Given this abundance of natural resources and divinely beautiful landscapes, it is only natural that these make inroads into the lives, culture and custom of the people of the region, as also into the literature produced in the region. The region's landscape has a ubiquitous presence in the literature of Northeast India and the poetry in English written in the region displays a similar engagement with nature. Nature is a living presence in the poetry of Mamang Dai; the very titles of her poems reverberate with references to the beautiful landscape of her home state, Arunachal Pradesh. Her poem "The Voice of the Mountain" makes the mountain speak:

> I am an old man sipping the breeze
> that is forever young.

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In my life I have lived many lives.
My voice is sea waves and mountain peaks,
in the transfer of symbols
I am the chance syllable that orders the world
with history and miracles.
I am the desert and the rain,
The wild bird that sits in the west,
the past that recreates itself
and particles of life that clutch and cling
for thousands of years;
I know, I know these things
as rocks know, burning in the sun's embrace
about clouds, and sudden rain;
as I know a cloud is a cloud is a cloud,
a cloud is this uncertain pulse that sits over my heart. (*Midsummer Survival* 30)

Unlike the dominant urban ethos of the works of the Bombay poets, poetry from the Northeast is replete with mainly rural landscapes. Images of the small town also often enter into the poetry from this region. Dai's "Small Towns and the River" paints a gentle image of her native place, the small town of Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh, which stands by the river Siang that enters Assam as the Brahmaputra.

Small towns always remind me of death.
My hometown lies calmly amidst the trees,
It is always the same,
In the summer or winter
With the dust flying,
Or the wind howling down the gorge (*River Poems* 29)

These poets' engagement with their native land is evocative of the strong rootedness found in the poetry from this region. In the poem "The Conquest", Desmond Kharmawphlang writes:

I never get tired of talking about my
Hometown
In summer the sky is pregnant,
Swollen with unborn rain.
Winter arrives, with a tepid sun
Touching the frozen hills, the dream-
Boats on lakes. (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* 61)

The ethnic communities of the Northeast have been known to co-exist harmoniously with their natural surroundings. Many of their folk tales and myths bear testimony to this

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fact. Nature is endowed with spiritual significance by these communities. Mamang Dai explains how the indigenous communities learnt to respect and live harmoniously with their natural surroundings:

> When we say our people believe that rocks and trees have life, what does it mean?
> In this environment where we live and what we call our land, land of ancestors, we cannot crush the mountains or tear off the green covering saying this is what is getting in the way of development. The life of plants and worms and insects is very enduring. We have ample proof of this. So, we, too, have to endure. Over the centuries this began to happen, side by side. (*Midsummer Survival* 53)

Many communities of Arunachal Pradesh believe man and tiger to have been born as brothers. A similar belief is found among the Ao-Nagas who believe that some individuals possess companion spirits in the form of tigers. Temsula Ao's poem "A Tiger-Woman's Prayer" makes reference to this myth:

> Straddling my troubled spirit
> Since my grandfather's tiger-soul
> Came unbidden to take control
>
> And entangled my woman-self
> In an un-seemly mesh
> Of spirit, human and beast. (*Book of Songs* 249)

However, Northeast India is today facing threats to both its environment as well as the livelihood of its peoples. The degradation of its environment is observed in terms of pollution of the environment, shrinkage of forest cover, demographic expansion, dying of wetlands etc. Drastic climate change is also a major cause of worry for the fragile ecology of the region. A number of species are becoming extinct day by day. Accelerating soil erosion, silt deposition and rising of the river bed levels are caused by changes taking place in the hills. Expansion of *jhum* lands in the hills, decreasing *jhum* cycles and landslides have distorted the landscape of the hills which have started to take on a new unaesthetic and ecologically unfriendly look. Besides, settled agriculture in the valleys, industrial growth, road construction, mining and urbanisation have added to the problem. Water pollution in the region is fallout of its environmental degradation. Many parts of the Northeast, especially hilly regions are also facing water scarcity. In an extremely ironical situation,

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Cherrapunjee, which happens to be the place receiving the highest amount of rainfall in the world[4], is facing extreme scarcity of drinking water and has come to be referred to as "the wettest desert in the world". The poets' engagement with the beautiful landscape of the region also rings with consciousness and concern for such rampant environmental degradation in the region. Mamang Dai's poem "Midday Sun" captures the anxiety over the deteriorating relationship between man and nature:

> Standing in the shade, thinking.
> Maybe I can think better
> in the full sun, standing.
>
> The rhinoceros grunts in pain.
> His feet have given way, running.
> Where is that uninterrupted place
> of rivers and wet grass?
>
> Yesterday half the world was given to us.
> One among the legion of flying, crawling life,
> I remember the glide of the red squirrel,
> the ingenuity of the iguana,
> the desire of coral, polyp, reef;
> mingled with the ebb and flow
> one by one each emblem of time
> lost, petrified, drowned.
>
> What will happen at the end of the long struggle?
> Standing in the sun,
> standing.
> Perhaps the silence of the earth will deepen.
> Each green moment
> falls with the weight of an axe
> on my brow.
> My feet are in the mud,
> my heart, horn, blood
> dragging with the footsteps of the hunter,
> crushed with hyacinth and weeds. (*Midsummer Survival* 67)

4. Plan of the Study

Writing in English from Northeast India is gradually emerging as an interesting and promising body of literature. The poetry in English being written in the region makes for an exciting research area, due to its promise of inherent literary excellence as well as the

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numerous socio-political issues of the region that it seems to mirror. From an analysis of the available literature in the area it is quite apparent that poetry in English written in Northeast India has not received enough attention in terms of a full-length academic study. This work therefore attempts to make a systematic study of the poetry in English produced in contemporary times in the Northeast, with a focus on works of selected poets. Due to the absence of established poets writing in English in the states of Assam and Tripura, the study mainly lays focus on the poetic works of Mamang Dai, Anjum Hasan, Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, Robin Singh Ngangom, Mona Zote and Temsula Ao, representing the hill states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland. However, poems in English written by several other poets from the region, such as Aruni Kashyap, Easterine Kire Iralu, Ibohal Kshetrimayum, Irom Chanu Sharmila, Jobeth Ann Warjri, Monalisa Changkija, Nabanita Kanungo, Nabina Das, Nitoo Das, Shimanta Bhattacharyya, Uddipana Goswami and others have also been taken up for critical study. Besides poetry, literary works in other genres have also been referred to whenever relevant. A comprehensive understanding of the poetry written in English in Northeast India would not be possible without an understanding of the general literary landscape of the region. Therefore, literary works in other languages of the region have also been taken up for discussion during the course of the study whenever relevant.

5. Methodology and Critical Apparatus

In reading poetry in English from the Northeast region of India, it is pertinent to incorporate critical approaches from postcolonial studies, as the proposed study area seems to display characteristics relevant to the postcolonial domain. The Northeast region of India can be said to occupy a position of subalternity vis-à-vis the Indian nation, although so far the region has not been included within the purview of the subaltern studies project. Keeping these aspects in mind, the study draws critical perspectives from postcolonial theory, especially subaltern studies. The literature produced in contemporary Northeast India manifests a strong undercurrent of the trauma, produced at both individual and collective levels, by the almost half a century long climate of conflict and turmoil in the region. This

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study has attempted to unearth the complex workings of trauma in the poetry of Northeast India, which has been facilitated by contemporary studies on the relationship between trauma and literature. Politics in the Northeast region is basically premised upon numerous discourses of nationalisms/sub-nationalisms, and therefore a critical understanding of the concepts of nationalism as well as sub-nationalism would prove fruitful in providing a deeper understanding of the political issues of the region. Therefore, the work is also based upon a critical reading of the rich literature on the concepts of nationalism as well as sub-nationalism. Questions of identity too form a core issue in the politics of the Northeast region, which impact the literature from the region both directly and indirectly. Therefore, an attempt is made to incorporate perspectives from various studies on issues related to identity. Perspectives are also borrowed from eco-critical studies as and when necessary. Gender studies, especially the studies on women in the context of war and terrorism shed light on certain parts of the study. General readings in the spheres of various aspects of the history, politics, economy and anthropology of the Northeast region as well as nearby areas also inform the work with a holistic understanding and multi-disciplinary perspectives, wherever found relevant. Personal interviews with a couple of the poets under study (Desmond Kharmawphlang and Mamang Dai) have also facilitated the work. The interviews have been added as appendages to the thesis.

6. Organisation of Chapters

The thesis has been divided into the following chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: The Poetry and the Setting

Chapter 3: Modern Quests, Ancient Lore: Weaving Folklore into Poetry

Chapter 4: Poetry in a Time of Violence

Chapter 5: Reading the Poetry from a Gendered Perspective

Chapter 6: Conclusion

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The following is a brief discussion of the main arguments of each chapter following the present introductory chapter:

Chapter 2: The Poetry and the Setting

Although this study concerns itself with poetry, specifically, poetry produced in English from Northeast India, at the very outset, a brief survey of the historical and socio-political background has been undertaken in Chapter 2. It is impossible to make an accurate appraisal of the contemporary poetry produced from Northeast India without a thorough knowledge of its peculiar history, geography, social conditions, and political and cultural realities. As it has been pointed out several times, literature in Northeast India is intricately connected to its socio-political milieu. Sumanyu Satpathy has categorically stated that "one cannot hope to understand any of the even better known north-eastern poets, without a reasonably clear understanding of the location, history and mythology of the region" ("Locating"). Moreover, there is a lack of understanding and knowledge, outside the region, of the complex socio-political conditions of the Northeast. Therefore, a discussion of the history and socio-political circumstances of the Northeast region at the very beginning of the study was felt to be crucial. However, it is beyond the scope of this work to undertake an exhaustive and in depth study of the societies and histories of the entire region in all its vastness. The chapter is an attempt to explore the socio-political history of the region and will particularly concern itself with those issues which are found to be relevant to the poetic works taken up for study.

The arrival of the British colonisers along with Christian missionaries in early to mid nineteenth century in the region now known as Northeast India changed the historical and political fortunes of the societies inhabiting this region in catastrophic ways. The cultural and political ruptures that came in the wake of colonisation and the subsequent religious conversion of a major part of the hill populations became the cause of deep cultural trauma in the postcolonial period. The political imbroglio that engulfed the region after the

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withdrawal of the colonisers is often read as after-effect of the socio-political upheaval brought about by colonisation. The unending cycle of insurgencies, militancy, ethnic violence and bloodshed in the region throughout its postcolonial history has intensified the traumatic experiences of its people. This thesis proposes that the poetry produced in contemporary Northeast India, especially the poetry written in English, bears a strong undercurrent of this deep trauma undergone by the people of the region at both individual and collective levels. The section entitled "Literature and Trauma: The Case of Northeast India" is a brief overview of the recent theoretical developments in the field of trauma studies, with an emphasis on the aspects relevant for the poetry written in Northeast India.

Section 2 traces the political history of the region as it unfolded in the postcolonial period.

> On digging history thousands of villages get ravaged
> Under the earth and mingle with the river-water
>
> Some unreal men rise from the water and stare transfixed –
> At the historian and the hero of history
> Standing across from the shadows of the dead
>
> The historian opens up oddities
> Theorises with condensed letters shuffles the past
>
> Learning about it the indigent lot
> Burst into laughter years after and sing:
>
> Cunning lads love naïve lasses
> History loves the dumb
>
> The lyrics make the unreal men applaud and dip into the river
> Immersed under the water they sing:
>
> None can keep count of the current under water
> None can keep count of the rippling of water
>
> And none can close the count of the lies of history (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* 27)

As the poet Jiban Narah has indicated in this witty poem "The Subaltern" written in Asamiya, official historiography has never been able to hold up a faithful picture of the 'true' state of things. The history of India has maintained a steadfast silence and disinterest regarding the Northeastern region. In spite of being an integral part of India, this region has

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come to occupy a culturally, politically and economically subaltern position in the postcolonial national imaginary. Therefore, the region's relationship of subalternity to the Indian nation will be constantly kept within its purview during the course of this study. A subalternist perspective will also be adopted to study the domination of subordinate groups within the Northeast by more powerful groups and the conflicts and resistances resulting from the struggle for power among them.

The atmosphere of terror and violence in the Northeast region in the postcolonial period has brought untold miseries upon the people inhabiting the region. Yet, it becomes pertinent to understand how the women of the region have coped with the violent developments in the region. Section 3 of this chapter briefly examines the various roles played by the women of the Northeast in its volatile socio-political arena.

Section 4 has been devoted to understanding and analysing the various changes that societies in the Northeast have been undergoing in the postcolonial period. It also considers the various responses that these changes have elicited from the peoples of the region. Contemporary politics in Northeast India is founded upon various strands of nationalism and sub-nationalisms. Questions of ethnic, cultural, linguistic and political identity form dominant concerns in the current political atmosphere of the region. Section 5 makes a brief examination of the complex questions of identity politics in contemporary Northeast India.

Section 6 of Chapter 2 considers various issues related to the fragile ecology of the region.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 undertake analyses of the poetry written in English in Northeast India and weigh it against the socio-cultural backdrop discussed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3: Modern Quests, Ancient Lore: Weaving Folklore into Poetry

Chapter 3 takes up an elaborate analysis of the various ways in which questions of identity and cultural preservation have manifested in the poetry written in English in Northeast India. While occasional references have been made to the works of a large number

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of poets and writers from the region, the works of Desmond Kharmawphlang, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao occupy central focus in this chapter. Most of the poets writing in English in the region seem to be working with an implicit ethnographic purpose. The rapid changes in the cultural lives of the various indigenous communities inhabiting the Northeast form a major discourse in contemporary politics in the region. They have become intrinsically connected to questions of cultural identity of population groups in the region in the postcolonial period. These concerns have been found to have a crucial impact on the poetry produced by the writers of the region. Section 1 and Section 2 of this chapter are investigations of the ways in which the poetry from the Northeast has responded to questions of identity formation and sustenance as well as the poets' engagement with issues of cultural change and continuity.

Literature of Northeast India is redolent with references to its beautiful landscape, along with the significant relationship between the various peoples living in the region and their natural surroundings. However, representations of the landscape in the poetry from the region are not free from political and cultural underpinnings. Section 3 of Chapter 3 analyses the ways in which poets of the region have engaged with their natural environment and will try to relate them to questions of culture and identity. The constant engagement of these poets with traditions and past heritage is a manifestation of their nostalgic attachment to an idyllic, tranquil past. But the act of nostalgic recollection has larger political underpinnings as well. Section 4 analyses the deeper political uses and implications of the nostalgic celebrations of a seemingly idyllic, rural past by poets of the Northeast. Section 5 of the chapter has tried to make a connection between consumerist forces, tourism, cultural preservation and literary representations. Questions of cultural identity and its preservation and assertion have generated much violence and conflicts between various groups in the Northeast throughout the postcolonial period. Section 6 takes up an investigation into the ways in which poetry in English has responded to the violence underlying identity movements in the region.

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Chapter 4: Poetry in a Time of Violence

Chapter 4 is an analysis of the ways in which poets of the Northeast have responded to the atmosphere of perpetual violence haunting the region in the postcolonial period. The analysis in this chapter has mainly drawn on the works of Mona Zote, Robin Singh Ngangom and Temsula Ao. However, besides poems written in English, this chapter has also taken up for discussion works by several other poets from the region written in English or in other Indian languages. The chapter begins with an overview of the pre-colonial and colonial history of the region in Sections 1 and 2. The advent of colonialism altered the traditional structures of the societies in Northeast India forever. The arrival of the Second World War towards the close of the War brought about major upheavals among the societies inhabiting the region. Changes in the economy, improvements of infrastructure and exposure of a section of people to Western ideas of nationalism brought a new consciousness to the indigenous communities of the region. The induction of various parts of the region into the newly created nation was not a smooth affair. Since the dawn of Independence, secessionist tendencies started growing among various groups one after the other and many of these secessionist movements have not been resolved till now. The postcolonial period in the Northeast has also been marked by violent conflicts between numerous groups within the region. Poets of the Northeast are often found lamenting these unfortunate historical circumstances of the region.

Beginning with the eighties of the last century, the general atmosphere of the Northeast has become characterised by numerous conflicts and endless violence. Section 3 of this chapter explores how the trauma caused by this atmosphere of perpetual violence and unrest in Northeast India finds expression in the poetry produced in the region throughout this period. Poets and poetry have often been considered inadequate for addressing 'serious' issues such as politics and war. However, there have been numerous arguments throughout history against this view. In the context of contemporary Northeast India especially, poets are seen to have made it their mission to talk about the political realities of the land and to give voice to the sufferings of the people. Poets of the Northeast often assume a prophetic voice while talking about the socio-political realities of the land. At other times, their poetry acts as witness to the miseries undergone by the societies and people. Militancy, rampant

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corruption among political leaders and a general lack of law and order in the region often makes speaking out against injustices and malpractices a risky business. Many poets lament the suppression of people's and poets' voices in these dark times. However, there are others who insist on defying such suppressing forces and reiterate that the voice of truth cannot be stifled forever.

This chapter also examines the recurrent concern in the poetry from the region with the general degradation of values and the brutalisation of the contemporary societies of the Northeast. Most poets seem to turn to irony while talking about the insistent realities of the societies in the region. However, these poets never stop hoping for better days for their people.

Chapter 5: Reading the Poetry from a Gendered Perspective

Chapter 5 is an attempt to understand the literature of the Northeast from a gendered perspective. The primary material for this chapter is works by Anjum Hasan, Mamang Dai, Mona Zote and Temsula Ao. However, works by other women from the region, in English as well as in other languages, have also been referred to. Poems written by male writers from the region have also been taken account of in the course of the chapter. In a prose-poem "Finding that Star", Mamang Dai lists the things she wishes to write about:

> I want to write about small towns; buried hope. Green parks, historic fountains; the nature of love – families, the aura of young children; and women restless as oceans who fight tooth and nail to beat time, composing their hearts in the monsoon heat, waiting for rain. (*Midsummer Survival* 6)

Traditionally, women have been considered incapable of dealing with public and political issues which are marked out as the domain of men. However, feminists have constantly contested this view and called for the broadening of the very definitions of the terms 'public' and 'private'. Women writers of Northeast India like Anjum Hasan and Mamang Dai have been criticised for eschewing political issues in their poems. It is alleged that their poems are not as directly politically engaged as the works of some male poets. Section 1 of this chapter shows that the women poets of this region are just as aware and

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concerned about their socio-political surroundings as their male counterparts. However, their understanding of these issues differs from that of men in significant ways. The relationship between women and the nation has always been fraught with difficulties. This section also examines how women poets of the region have negotiated with the patriarchal biases inherent in the various discourses of nationalism and identity construction in the Northeast.

In popular imagination, the societies of Northeast India are believed to be more egalitarian and liberal in their treatment of women. While this view is not entirely false, societies of this region are also not free of customs and laws that are oppressive and unjust towards women. Section 2 of the chapter looks at the violence faced by the women of the region in the name of customs and traditions and the responses of women poets towards such practices. It also takes into account responses by male poets of the region. Women are often the worst affected during situations of conflict and warfare around the world. Due to the deeply masculinist ideologies upon which war is founded, women are deeply vulnerable in situations of conflict. In Northeast India, women have been bearing the brunt of the nearly half a century long atmosphere of protracted conflict in the region. Section 3 of Chapter 5 looks at the various ways in which women of Northeast India have coped with the volatile situations around them. It also analyses the women poets' perspectives on the political circumstances of the region.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Chapter 6 includes a brief discussion of the main findings of the study and makes suggestions for further research.

Conclusion

Quoting Emmanuel Levinas, Carolyn Forché argues that a poetic work is a document and its art is a use of discourse. She claims that this discourse "deals with objects that are also spoken in the newspapers, posters, memoirs and letters of every passing age" although

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she clarifies that in the case of poetry, "these objects merely furnish a favourable occasion and even serve as pretexts" ("Reading" 20). Emerging out of a region which has been caught in deep political turmoil and endless conflicts, contemporary poetry from Northeast India carries traces of the deep trauma undergone by its peoples and societies. This study attempts to study the poetry produced in English from the region in the context of its socio-political and cultural setting. The primary focus of this work lies in the poetic texts and the study of their social context is in strict subservience to a critical reading of the literary texts. Yet, a preliminary understanding of the peculiar history and politico-cultural milieu of the region is essential to this study. Therefore, the next chapter makes a brief overview of the socio-political history of the region. It also includes a brief discussion on the cultural politics and political ecology of the region.

Notes

[1]The fuzzy nature of the geo-political category 'Northeast India' is reflected in the endless variations in its nomenclature; the region is variously referred to as 'Northeast', 'North-East', 'North East', 'North East India', 'North Eastern India' and so on. For the sake of uniformity, this study will refer to the region as 'Northeast India' or 'the Northeast'.

[2] The term Asamiya is used here and henceforth to refer to the language spoken by the people of Assam as well as the literary tradition in the language. The term Assamese has been used to mean 'relating to Assam' and to refer to the ethnic community inhabiting Assam.

[3] Barua and Bhattacharyya wrote in Asamiya. Their poems are available in the anthology in English translations.

[4] With an average yearly rainfall of 11,777 millimetres (463.7 in), Cherrapunjee is credited as being one of the wettest places on Earth, second only to nearby Mawsynram, Meghalaya, whose average is 11,873 millimetres (467.4 in) and holds the current record for the highest amount of rainfall in the world.

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Chapter 2

The Poetry and the Setting

I don't think writers are sacred, but words are. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones in the right order, you might trudge the world a little or make a poem that children will speak for you when you are dead. – Tom Stoppard (54)

The relationship between literature and society is fraught with an array of varied opinions throughout the history of Western literary criticism. Different schools of criticism work with hypotheses as varied as one that regards literature as a 'reflection' of society; something that 'shapes' society or even as an agent that functions to maintain and stabilise, if not to justify and sanctify, the social order. There are still others who completely reject the relevance of such positions in the reading of a work of literature. However, with the growth of postcolonial thought and criticism, the role of the relationship between literature and society has come to occupy a position of central importance once again. Contemporary literature produced in Northeast India cannot be read in isolation from the highly charged socio-political climate of the region of which it is a product. The explicitly political character of the poetry produced in the region has already been discussed in the preceding chapter. This chapter proposes that the literature produced in contemporary Northeast India manifests a strong undercurrent of the trauma, produced at both individual and collective levels, by the almost half a century long climate of conflict and turmoil in the region. This study attempts to unearth the complex workings of trauma in the poetry of Northeast India. It has been facilitated by contemporary studies on the relationship between trauma and literature. A critical reading of the poetry produced in contemporary Northeast India cannot be complete without situating it within a general understanding of the larger socio-political framework of the region. This chapter attempts a fairly in-depth overview of the social, political and cultural history of the region through perspectives borrowed from essential readings on the region's history, politics, economy and anthropology. Further, the socio-political climate of contemporary Northeast India is intricately connected to its colonial history. Therefore it becomes pertinent to make use of critical approaches from postcolonial studies. Following the work begun in the early 1980s by a group of intellectuals now

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referred to as the 'Subaltern Studies Group', who set out with the objective of promoting "a systematic and informed discussion of subaltern themes in the field of South Asian studies" (Guha, "Preface" 35), subalternist analysis has developed into a widely accepted mode of postcolonial critique spanning many disciplines like sociology, history, anthropology and cultural studies as well as literature. The term "subaltern", drawn from Antonio Gramsci's writings, refers to subordination of groups in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture and was used by the Subaltern Studies Collective to signify the centrality of dominant/dominated relationships in history. Although Northeast India has not so far been included within the purview of the Subaltern Studies project, the region can be safely said to occupy a position of subalternity within the national framework of the country. This subaltern position of the region, which is manifest in its political, cultural and economic subordination vis-à-vis the rest of the nation, continues to be the cause of much disaffection and rebellions against the Indian state by various groups in the region. However, within the societies of the Northeast too, there are groups that occupy a position of dominance while relegating others to the position of subalternity. Much dissatisfaction and conflict has been caused by questions of competing deprivation amongst these groups within the Northeast. Given these circumstances, a subalternist critique of the socio-political situation of the Northeast becomes indispensable. Politics in Northeast India is centered on various discourses of nationalism/sub-nationalism as also questions of divergent identities. This chapter tries to make a general assessment of the socio-political atmosphere of the region through perspectives offered in contemporary critiques of the concepts of nationalism and national identity. An attempt has also been made to probe the complexities of the processes of identity construction and assertion. The chapter devotes a section to an analysis of gender roles in the backdrop of the socio-political turmoil in the region and draws perspectives from essential studies in the area of gender, conflict and women's responses. Ecological threats and degradations add a further tangle to the complex socio-political scenario in the ecologically sensitive Northeast region. A later section attempts a general analysis of the political ecology of contemporary Northeast India.

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1. Literature and Trauma: The Case of Northeast India

Discussing poetry from conflict-torn Northern Ireland, Seamus Heaney had pointed out that "the idea of the poem as having its existence in a realm separate from the discourse of politics does not absolve it or the poet from political status" (164). Heaney's observation would apply to the literatures being produced in most conflict zones of the contemporary world. As literatures produced in the contemporary war-torn Middle East would testify, the political element comes to occupy the foreground in art produced under such extreme situations. The history of Armenian literature is an avid example of how "political destinies can play havoc with a national literature" (Kalfayen 12). The experiences engendered by the prolonged state of war in Iraq has a dominating presence in the contemporary literature produced in the country in the form of depictions of everyday lives during the war, probing into the psychological state of its army, and a widespread engagement with the personal as well as collective trauma generated by war. In fact, in most of the war-affected regions of the Middle East, poetry has turned into an effective political tool. Among Afghans, poetry has become one of the few available means to make sense of their experiences and their identities. The historical, the political and the literary are inextricably intertwined in Palestinian literature as well, where poetry has become a means of voicing resistance. In the aforementioned article, Seamus Heaney also emphasises the "profound relation ... between poetic technique and historical situation" (164). Heaney emphasises at not just content but technique as well which is conditioned by the political circumstances in which a literature is produced. A recurring feature in the poetry produced in war-torn societies of the world is a pervading sense of skepticism which is reflected by the large output of satirical writings emerging from these societies. Thus, substantial bodies of satirical works are found in Palestinian, Afghan and Iraqi literature.

A similar phenomenon is observed in the case of the literature produced in Northeast India as well. The literature of Northeast India is deeply informed by the highly charged contemporary socio-political atmosphere in the region. The unending cycle of unrest and conflict have given rise to a general sense of intense skepticism in the socio-cultural atmosphere of the region, which often finds an echo in poetical works. However, the literature from the Northeast, like the literature produced in other conflict torn societies of

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the world, is also coloured by hope and humour and often embodies the spirit of survival and of holding out against all odds.

Societies and persons caught, engaged or trapped in situations of conflict undergo profoundly traumatic experiences. Modern engagements with the occurrence and 'treatment' of trauma began in mid to late nineteenth century, when it was conceptualised as a disease of the mind triggered by railroad[1] and industrial accidents (Arav 39; Caplan 388-394; Schivelbusch 134-149; Vees-Gulani 14; Weisaeth 40). In the twentieth century, trauma became a central concern in combat psychiatry and came to be characterised as 'shell shock' and later as 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder' or PTSD (Casper and Wertheimer 2; Jones and Wessely). Modern warfare of the twentieth century and the identification and treatment of 'shell shock' during the two world wars are considered crucial in the evolution of psychiatry. Interest in the syndrome largely declined thereafter till the 1980s, when the American Psychiatric Association included PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III), mainly in the context of large numbers of Vietnam War veterans suffering from war-related trauma (Young 5). Since the closing decade of the last century, explorations in "trauma" have taken a different turn and scholars have begun to challenge the dominant psychiatric and clinical approaches to trauma. Recent scholarly interventions encompassing a wide range of disciplines have brought an unprecedented richness into the understanding of "trauma" which have taken it beyond the limits of its earlier biomedical and psychiatric definitions. "Trauma" has now emerged as an important concern within the purview of humanities and social sciences and is conceptualised as a "cultural object", "a product of history and politics, subject to reinterpretation, contestation and intervention" (Casper and Wertheimer 3).

Trauma is significantly present in literary records throughout human history, beginning with the ancient epics and classics to contemporary literatures of the world. Literature has always acted as the site of inscription of traumatic experiences among other things. For most of human history, interpreting trauma can be seen to be the preserve of artists, poets and shamans (Morris 2). Recent developments in critical trauma theories have underlined the intricate relationship between trauma and narrative. Since the time of Freud, the 'talking cure' or narrating the traumatic experience has been considered central to a

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trauma victim's process of recovery. Cathy Caruth, one of the pioneering figures in the field of trauma studies, advanced the theory of 'traumatic amnesia' – the victim's inability to remember a traumatic experience. Caruth goes on to postulate that since imaginative literature makes use of figural rather than literal language, it acts as an effective medium for individual victims as well as victim populations to voice their painful experiences (*Unclaimed Experience*). Caruth's thesis provides an interesting perspective on the pervasive use of literature in Northeast India, as in other conflict-torn areas of the world, as a medium of communicating the traumatic experiences of war and conflict. While these experiences may or may not belong to soldiers or persons directly involved in warfare, these literatures have come to embody the suffering endured by societies trapped within conflict zones.

Recent debates among trauma theorists point towards the problematic nature of such narratives as far as their veracity is concerned. Postmodern literary theory has already dismissed the validity of authorial intention; in keeping with such postmodern tendencies, the work of theorists like Cathy Caruth, van der Kolk and others have laid emphasis on the fundamental 'inaccessibility of trauma' owing to the victims' inability to retrieve memories of traumatic events. Thus, victims' narratives cannot be considered reliable accounts of their lived experiences. In the words of Caruth, "The flashback or traumatic re-enactment conveys...both the truth of an event, and the truth of its incomprehensibility" (*Trauma* 253). However, contending theories of trauma and narrative challenge the view held by Caruth and others, by claiming that there is no empirical evidence to prove that trauma victims suffer from traumatic amnesia. Richard McNally expresses doubts over the claim that traumatic memory cannot be expressed in words. He insists instead, that victims' memory of traumatic events is in fact more enhanced as compared to those of normal events, and "there is no reason to postulate a special mechanism of repression or dissociation to explain why people may not think about disturbing experiences for long periods" (2). He suggests that traumatic memories are memorable as well as speakable; therefore trauma theory should turn its attention to the possibility that trauma narratives might be reliable accounts. Unlike Caruth, he emphasises the need to look not for textual absence but textual overflow, to event descriptions replete with detail. (*Remembering*)

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Despite their differences in perspectives, trauma theorists do agree on the crucial relation between memory and literature. But then, memory is also slippery in nature. The sociologist Maurice Halbwach made a revolutionary contribution to the field of memory studies by positing memory as a collective, social phenomenon than a strictly personal/individual one. Halbwachs showed that collective memory is a socially constructed notion and "Every collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in space and time" (*The Collective* 84). In other words, memory is always subject to active social manipulation and revision. In the light of Halbwach's theory, it would be naive to read the literatures from Northeast India as mere narratives of traumatic experiences of a traumatised people. A more fruitful reading of this body of literatures must take account of the complex workings of diverse, socio-cultural and political forces which shape literary works and other cultural forms in the region.

However, an uncritical application of western theoretical models in studying the literature from Northeast India would be problematic. The cultural trauma model has evoked mixed responses among scholars from the postcolonial world. Many of them are of the view that it is unsuitable for the postcolonial research agenda (Rothberg 225-226). Cathy Caruth had proclaimed that in "a catastrophic age...trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures (*Trauma* 11). Yet western trauma theory, including the works of Caruth has been criticised for its inherent Eurocentric aesthetic. It has concerned itself primarily with European and American history, along with an almost obsessive focus on the Holocaust. Postcolonial scholars allege that dominant modes of theorising within cultural trauma studies are too narrowly event-based and do not accommodate everyday forms of traumatising violence (Rothberg 226; Van Styvendale 203). The chronic psychic suffering of the colonised has been largely neglected in western studies of trauma. Postcolonial critics also claim that western theories lay their focus almost entirely on individual victims; they see a fundamental problem in this individualistic approach and call for a shift to larger social entities, such as cultures and nations.

However, this allegation does not entirely stand true and many trauma theorists have in fact extended the range of trauma studies to include chronic and collective experiences in their works. Arthur Neal extended the application of the trauma model to the experiences of

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an entire community, a phenomenon he has described as 'national trauma' (Neal 4). Neil Smelser has developed the concept of 'cultural trauma', which he defines as

> a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is (a) laden with negative effect, (b) represented as indelible and (c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions. (44)

"Cultural trauma occurs", Jeffrey Alexander explains,

> when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (*Toward* 1)

In the light of a similar understanding of trauma experienced at the collective level, Ron Eyerman has examined the workings of cultural trauma on the formation of an African American identity. He elaborates on the concept of cultural trauma thus:

> As opposed to psychological or physical trauma, which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion. (2)

The sociological understanding of cultural trauma as an "empirical, scientific concept" (Alexander, "Toward" 1) as proposed by these scholars lays emphasis on cultural trauma as an experience that has far reaching effects on a collectivity's consciousness and identity. It contains the threat of an existential crisis for a particular community. Sam Durrant, a postcolonial scholar, states that experiences of collective or cultural trauma "disrupt the "consciousness" of the entire community, destroying the possibility of a common frame of reference and calling into question our sense of being-in-common" (4). As pointed out earlier, Northeast India, as a geo-political entity, owes its origin to British colonisation. Colonial policies gradually transformed the area into a frontier region, which was carried over into postcolonial times as well, and this is one of the crucial underlying factors of the present socio-political and cultural turmoil in the region. The transformations brought about by colonisation and the subsequent processes of state formation in the Northeast, along with continuing socio-political unrest spanning over half a century, have left traumatic effects upon the populations of the region at both the individual and community levels. Drastic

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changes in the traditional customs and ways of life of the indigenous peoples inhabiting Northeast India through colonial contact, state formation processes and religious conversions constitute a crucial concern in postcolonial Northeast India. Charles Chasie points out that contact with colonial modernity "turned Naga society upside down and ushered in profound changes that would leave indelible scars that could never be erased" (2). Tezenlo Thong also claims that "tempering with long-established and deeply rooted customs was apt to be dangerous and was traumatic for the Nagas" (916). The traumatic effect of drastic socio-cultural transformation during the colonial period and its aftermath is true of most societies in Northeast India. This trauma has had far-reaching impacts on the socio-political developments in the region in the postcolonial period. The subsequent chapters analyse the relationship of the contemporary literature written in Northeast India against this socio-cultural backdrop coloured by deep and widespread trauma.

However, the aforementioned sociologists who developed the concept of cultural trauma have proposed a constructivist understanding of how cultural trauma is 'constructed' and circulated within a group (Alexander et al. eds.). They reject the naturalistic understanding of trauma as an event occurring 'naturally' in a society, and expose the mediated nature of the experience of cultural trauma. Eyerman states that national or cultural trauma is not necessarily a direct experience, although it is based in an actual event or a series of events. He expounds that this experience is generally mediated through mass media or other forms of representation and dissemination, which involves a process of selective construction and representation (3). Jeffrey Alexander has underlined the crucial role of 'carrier groups' who function as collective agents and choose to articulate social pain as "a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from and where they want to go" ("Toward" 10). He proclaims that the construction of cultural trauma/s is crucial in the process of the construction of national histories, as they become the sites of solidarity and shared pain[2]. This constructivist sociological understanding of cultural trauma is especially relevant for the current study. The traumatic experiences undergone by the people of this region at the community level must be understood against the backdrop of the complex political atmosphere of Northeast India, which is dominated by multiple ethno-nationalist cross-currents. The literary analysis of works from the Northeast undertaken in

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the following chapters takes cognisance of their complex political underpinnings and eschews reading them as simple testimonies or trauma narratives.

Western trauma theories are also largely inadequate and insufficient for dealing with traumatic experiences of subaltern groups. Although the entire Indian subcontinent was subjected to the traumatic after-effects of colonialism, the experiences of colonialism have not been homogenous across the subcontinent. A postcolonial discourse which takes account of the dominant groups within the Indian nation, and even a discourse claiming to speak for the entire nation, therefore, cannot sufficiently address the traumatic experiences of subaltern groups within the nation, like the peoples of Northeast India. Postcolonial trauma theory has also emphasised the trauma undergone by indigenous populations under the impact of colonisation. Northeast India is home to a large number of indigenous communities whose cultural practices, political institutions, social structures and worldviews differ from one another as well as from the non-indigenous populations. The indigenous societies of the Northeast have undergone traumatic upheavals in the form of drastic changes in their customs and ways of life, mainly since the advent of colonial rule. This traumatic disruption and supplanting of the traditional ways of life is another crucial factor behind the current socio-cultural crises in the region. A later section in this chapter discusses in detail the anxieties caused by the erasure of traditional culture among societies of the Northeast.

A close understanding of the peculiar historical and political developments in the region now known as Northeast India is crucial to understand the trauma undergone by the societies inhabiting this region since the colonial period. The following section is a brief outline of the political history of this region.

2.1. The Birth of a Region: A Brief History of the Genesis of Northeast India

Northeast India, as a geo-political entity, is of rather recent origin. There is much controversy over the validity of the term 'Northeast India' as one signifying a geo-political unit. Many authors like to consider it as nothing more than a directional category invented by British colonisers and carried over to postcolonial times, mainly for administrative convenience. Subir Bhaumik calls the Northeast "a region rooted more in the accident of

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geography than in the shared bonds of history, culture and tradition" (*Troubled* 1). Sanjay Barbora describes it as a "politically convenient shorthand to gloss over complicated historical formations and dense loci of social unrest" ("Under" 15). And yet, one cannot deny certain commonalities, if not homogeneity, among the political, social, cultural and other related issues of the peoples of this region. While keeping these complexities in mind, it would be pertinent here to undertake a brief discussion of the history of the formation of the Northeast as a region.

In spite of frequent claims that the peoples of the Northeast had been leading a rather isolated existence at least until Indian Independence, scholars have found evidences of vibrant trade relations between the peoples of the Northeast region with those of neighbouring areas, which is often claimed to be as extensive as most parts of South, East and Southeast Asia, and even as far as the Middle East and beyond. (Ahmad, *Economy* 95-96; Deka, *The Great Indian* 78-83; Sen, *Buddhism* 174). It is undeniable that there was also considerable amounts of cultural exchange at work between these regions. One must not forget that Northeast India, which lies at the junction between South and Southeast Asia, acted as a highway for human migration throughout history and the process still continues. This has resulted in the region becoming home to many distinct communities who have settled here and it is, today, an area of incredible ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity. However, until the dawn of the colonial period in the region, which is only as late as 1826 CE, the region had limited cultural or political integration with the rest of South Asia. The region had never been a part of any of the trans-Indian empires at any point in history. The kings of the Assam and Surma valleys are said to have successfully defended the region against the Bengal sultans and several Mughal invasions. Local legend has it that the kingdoms of Assam had defended the land against Islamic invaders for as many as seventeen times.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the powerful Ahom kingdom, which had succeeded in uniting most parts of the Brahmaputra valley, was weakened by sustained internecine struggles and political instability. Taking advantage of the waning powers, Burmese forces launched successive attacks on the kingdoms of Assam and Manipur. There were three Burmese invasions of Assam between 1817 and 1826 and the Kingdom of Assam

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(Ahom) came under the control of Burma from 1819 to 1824. The period is remembered with horror in both Assam and Manipur due to the atrocities and bloody killings carried out by Burmese invaders as well as marauders from the hill tribes (Gait 270-275). The population of Assam was reduced by two thirds during this period due to large scale deaths during the civil war and the subsequent kidnappings and killings carried out by the Burmese attackers, which were accompanied by epidemics and widespread migrations (Gait 391; Guha, *Medieval* 171; Misra, *The Periphery* 68-69).

The British administration in India had for some time been looking to expand their territory eastward, mainly for trade reasons. Besides, they faced a long border with the Burmese Empire. They saw this as a prime opportunity to annex the Northeast region which was best suited to act as a natural frontier and a buffer due to its difficult terrain. The Ahoms sought help from the British against the Burmese and the first Anglo-Burmese war broke out in 1824. By 1825 CE, the Burmese were expelled from Assam, Manipur, Cachar and Jaintia kingdoms and a treaty was signed between the Kingdom of Ava and the British East India Company on 24 February 1826 at Yandabo in central Burma. Although the British had been expected to hand over the region to its previous rulers after the war, they assumed immediate indirect rule over the region. Manipur became a princely state under British protectorate. In 1833, upper Assam became a British protectorate under the erstwhile ruler of the Ahom kingdom, Purandhar Singha, and by 1838 the entire Brahmaputra valley was inducted into the British Empire (Guha, *Medieval* 168; Misra, *The Periphery* 70). Gradually, all other kingdoms of the region were annexed by the British – Cachar in 1832, Khasi Hills in 1833, Jaintia Kingdom in 1835, Naga Hills in 1866-1904, Garo Hills in 1872-73 and Lushai Hills in 1898 (Barua 41; Syiemlieh 2).

Another factor which is often cited as a prime motivator for the British colonisation of Assam is the discovery of the tea plant – the *Camellia sinensis* in 1834 by a Scottish officer-explorer. Thereafter, the process of turning vast swathes of forestlands in Assam into tea plantations, a sort of 'colonial garden' (Sharma, *Empire's Garden* 23-116) became an integral part of the colonisation process in the region. S.K. Chaube observes, "The spread of the tea gardens from the middle of the nineteenth century strengthened the case for a 'forward policy' on the hills" (*Hill Politics* 7). Arupjyoti Saikia has drawn attention to the

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crucial role played by the colonial science of geology in shaping the scope of imperialism in early colonial Assam ("Imperialism" 49). Besides tea, the British also discovered huge reserves of oil and coal in the region and began large scale investments for their extraction. By late nineteenth century, coal was being commercially produced in Assam (Bose, *Social History* 60). Amateur geological explorations for oil in the region began from the 1920s. Drilling for oil began by the middle of the nineteenth century. The Assam Railways and Trading Company acquired the license for oil exploration in the region in 1884 and thereafter, the company led commercial initiatives to extract petroleum in Assam (Saikia, "Imperialism" 51). The oil well at Digboi, the oldest in Asia, was established in 1890 (Baruah, "The Refinery" 63; Chadha, *Low Intensity* 227; Saikia, "Imperialism" 51).

Initially, the undivided Assam region, was included as part of the Bengal Presidency. On 6 February 1874, the Assam region was separated from Bengal Presidency and turned into a Chief Commissioner's Province, known as the 'North-East Frontier' non-regulation province ('North-East', because it lay to the North-east of Bengal) with the capital at Shillong (Bhattacharjee, "We are" 53; Phanjoubam, *The Northeast* 33). Asamiya, which had been replaced by Bengali as the official language in 1836, was reinstated alongside Bengali as the official language and the medium of instruction in schools of Assam in 1873 (Misra, *The Periphery* 84). The new Commissionership included the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, Khasi-Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills, Naga Hills, Goalpara and Cachar. Sylhet was inducted as a part of the province in September 1874. (Barua 37-38; Bhattacharjee, *North East* 85-86; Bhaumik, *Troubled* 72-73). The constitution of Assam as the 'Northeast Region' and a frontier province by the British stuck and continued into postcolonial times and it finds continued acceptance in the postcolonial nation state of India.

The coming of the British to Northeast India was accompanied by the arrival of Christian missionaries in the region. They succeeded in converting a large part of the tribal population. Besides conversion, missionaries involved themselves in the social work, such as imparting basic education to the masses and contributing to the languages and literatures of the region. Their interventions brought about unprecedented changes in the areas of women's position, the removal of irrational beliefs and fostering a common space in which the different tribes who were divided by linguistic or geographical differences could come

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together in the Northeast. However, these activities must be understood in the context of the colonial project of imposing an Western culture and value system over the 'uncivilised' colonised to consolidate its power over the colony. Moreover, the introduction of modern education greatly affected the traditional social structures of the indigenous populations of the Northeast, which has led to much anxiety and unrest among societies of the region in the postcolonial period. The matter will be discussed more elaborately in a later section.

Apart from Assam valley, which had some degree of involvement in the Indian freedom struggle, other parts of the region had very little to nothing to do with the freedom struggle and the Indian nationalist activities of the period. As early as 1828, Gomdhar Konwar, an Ahom prince rose up in revolt against the British, who was, however, captured and exiled. Another rebellion by a group of rebels led by three Ahom noblemen Jeuram Dulia Barua, Piyali Barphukan and Dhananjoy Buragohain in 1830 was suppressed by the British and the three leaders were sentenced to death (Acharyya 224). Inspired by the events of the revolt of 1857 in northern India, Maniram Dewan, an Assamese nobleman who had been a trusted associate of the British, drew up a plan to overthrow the British rule and restore Ahom rule in Upper Assam. However, the plot was discovered by the British and Maniram and his allies were arrested. On February 26, 1857, Maniram Dewan, along with a fellow rebel, Piyoli Barua, was publicly hanged at Jorhat jail (Acharyya 225). However, Udayon Misra views these rebellions as isolated attempts to restore the Ahom monarchy in Assam and has reservations about categorising them as popular rebellions against British rule (Misra, *The Periphery* 80). In 1857, three companies of the 34th sepoys at Chittagong rose in mutiny. On 17th September 1861, a group of roughly one thousand peasants, mostly comprising of tribal men, gathered at a village called Phulaguri in Nagaon to protest against oppressive British taxation policies. The British police resorted to the use of force to dispel the crowd and several peasants, along with the Assistant Commissioner of police were killed. A similar peasant revolt took place at Patharughat in the Darrang district, where several protesters lost their lives (Goswami, *Conflict* 189; Misra, *The Periphery* 76-78). By the beginning of the twentieth century, the freedom struggle in the rest of the country spread to the Assam valley. Gandhi's visit to Assam in August 1921 played a significant role in bringing the people of Assam under the fold of the Nationalist movement. There was widespread participation by people of all sections, including students and women, in the

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Non-cooperation movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement (Pathak, *Assam's History* 165-175; Sharma, *Quit India* 65-138). The British also faced limited amounts of resistance from various hill communities, but none of these rebellions can be viewed as organised mass resistance movements against the British.

At the time of Indian Independence, the hill regions which now comprise the states of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland were integral parts of the state of Assam. Subsequently, Nagaland in 1963, Meghalaya in 1972, (constituted into a fully fledged state on 20 Feb, 1987) and Mizoram in 1987 were carved out of Assam. Manipur and Tripura remained as Union Territories of India from 1956 until 1972 when they attained fully-fledged statehood. Arunachal Pradesh became a state in 1987 (Agnihotri, "Constitutional" 62-69). Sikkim joined the Northeastern Council as its youngest member in 2003 (Mishra and Upadhyay 51).

The term 'Northeast' gained common currency after the division of the region into seven different states. The term entered common parlance and the region began to be increasingly imagined as a unit after the creation in 1971 of the North Eastern Council, a nodal agency under the Ministry of the Development of North eastern Region (DoNER), Government of India for the economic and social development of the Northeastern Region. The council consists of the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura.

2.2. Turmoil in Paradise: Regionalism, Sub-Regionalism and Conflict

Northeast India, a land of beautiful landscapes and varied cultures has been a hotbed of unending conflicts and violence throughout the postcolonial period. Various issues have been suggested as the underlying causes of the socio-political turmoil in the region. James C. Scott provides an interesting perspective on the present disturbed conditions in the region. Much of Northeast India, especially the hill regions form a part of what Scott characterises as 'Zomia', one of the largest remaining non-state spaces in the world. What forms the core argument of Scott's thesis is that the populations of Zomia have been actively resisting incorporation into the framework of the classical state, the colonial state and the modern

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nation-state. He claims that much of Zomia has so far, and rather successfully too, resisted the nation-building and state-making processes of the states of which they are a part. And he sees a manifestation of this resistance in the secessionist movements, indigenous rights struggles, millennial rebellions, regionalist agitation and armed opposition to lowland states that presented themselves in the region after the creation of independent states in the post World War II period (*The Art* 19). Elsewhere Scott characterises such "large-scale disruption, riot and spontaneous defiance" as the most potent political recourse of subaltern people (*Two Cheers* 19). Scott's analysis from a rather anarchist perspective or at least one with what he calls an 'anarchist squint' provides a celebratory explanation of the socio-political predicament in Northeast India (*Two Cheers* xii). However, other explanations and analyses abound.

Northeast India has shared a complex and conflicted relationship with the Indian nation and this has led to widespread political unrest in the region and a history of violent conflicts which has spanned the entire period since the independence of India till current times. The roots of the present crisis can be traced back to the colonial period. Colonialism introduced unprecedented ruptures in the political and cultural lives of the peoples of the region, the impact of which has turned out to be catastrophic. The region, most parts of which had very little in common with the history, culture or politics of the rest of India, found itself in a position of subalternity vis-à-vis the postcolonial Indian nation and this has been a major cause of the unrest and dissatisfaction in the region. Moreover, the complex ethnic composition of the region has given rise to conflicts among the different ethnic communities, which are mainly directed at control over resources and political power. Within the region, some groups have assumed the position of dominance, while relegating others to subaltern positions. The following sections will attempt to briefly discuss this complex socio-political scenario of Northeast India.

Scholars point out that most regions of the Northeast, except the Brahmaputra Valley, remained largely unpenetrated by what is commonly known as the "Great Indian Tradition". These hilly and border regions also had little participation in the Indian freedom movement. Jawaharlal Nehru observed in this context,

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> The essence of the struggle for freedom, which meant raising some kind of liberating force in India, did not reach these (tribal) areas, chiefly the frontier areas that are the most important tribal areas. The result is that these frontier areas were not psychologically prepared. In fact, they were prepared the other way by British officers or sometimes by missionaries who were there (qtd. in Datta, *Questions of Identity* 11).

Modern political processes began in these areas only in the post-independence period, which has so far been a turbulent one. Within the first few years after independence, many ethnic communities of erstwhile Greater Assam started displaying separatist tendencies and a number of insurgent movements cropped up among many sections, especially among the hill tribes. However, the roots of these separatist and sub-regional tendencies can be located in the pre-independence period itself. Even prior to independence, strong sub-regional sentiments were visible among the tribal elites of the hilly areas.

During the period just before India's attainment of independence, nationalist activities arose amongst a section of the Nagas. As early as 1929, the Naga Club, an association of representatives from several Naga tribes, submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission expressing their desire to remain under British administration rather than the Indian union (Misra, *The Periphery* 30). Under the leadership of Angami Zapu Phizo (1903-1990) the Naga National Council (NNC), formed in February 1946, initiated a demand for political autonomy and the political union of their ancestral and native groups. The movement led to a series of violent incidents that damaged government and civil infrastructure, attacked government officials and civilians. Retaliation against the insurgents by state forces led to large scale loss of life and property. In 1957, an agreement was reached between Naga leaders and the Indian government, creating a single separate region of the Naga Hills, which became a Union territory directly administered by the Central government with a large degree of autonomy. This was not satisfactory to the groups representing the tribes, however, and violent agitation increased across the state. In July 1960, following discussion between the then Prime Minister Nehru and the leaders of the Naga People's Convention (NPC), a 16-point agreement was arrived at whereby the Government of India recognised the formation of Nagaland as a full-fledged state within the Union of India. The state of Nagaland was formally inaugurated on December 1, 1963 and Kohima was declared as the state capital. However, this did not lead to lasting peace in the region. Nagas claim that in a referendum conducted just before India's independence, the Nagas had voted for

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non-inclusion in the Indian union. Different rebel Naga groups with demands varying from more autonomy to sovereignty continued their protests and this led to a volatile situation in the state and nearby regions with continued violence by the rebel groups as well as retaliatory measures by Indian Armed forces. Moreover inter-factional violence and banditry gave rise to a civil war-like situation in the state which has continued till recent times. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) was formed in 1980, whose avowed aim is to establish a sovereign state, with the proposed name – Nagalim, by unifying all the Naga inhabited areas of Northern Burma and Northeast India. Eight years after its formation, the NSCN split into two factions – the NSCN(K) led by S.S. Khaplang and the NSCN(IM) led by Isac Chishi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah (Chadha, *Low Intensity* 275). Rivalries between the two groups have added to the chaos. During the period since 2005, on an average, 11 civilians and 37 militants[3] have reportedly died annually in Nagaland due to inter-factional as well as rebel activities (South Asia Terrorism Portal).

The Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes of the present state of Meghalaya had their own kingdoms until they came under British administration in the 19th century. Later, the British incorporated the entire region that now forms Meghalaya into Assam by 1835. At the time of Indian independence in 1947, present day Meghalaya constituted two districts of Assam and enjoyed limited autonomy within the state of Assam. A movement for a separate Hill State began in 1950s. After the passing of the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act of 1969, the state of Meghalaya was carved out of Assam on 2 April 1970. In 1971, the Parliament passed the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act, which conferred full statehood on the autonomous state of Meghalaya. Meghalaya attained statehood on 21 January 1972, with a Legislative Assembly of its own. Shillong, which was the capital of undivided Assam, became the capital of Meghalaya and the capital of Assam was shifted to Dispur in Guwahati in 1974 (Joshi 248-260; Sen Gupta 63-86).

The areas now comprising the state of Arunachal Pradesh were administered as the North-East Frontier Tract (NEFT) by the British and then as the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) by the Indian Union in the post independence period. NEFA became a part of the province of Assam in the latter period, but it was directly administered by the President of India through the governor of Assam as its agent. The administrative headquarters were

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located in Shillong. In December 1957, the Tuensang region which now constitutes the four easternmost districts of Nagaland, was separated from NEFA and attached to the Naga Hills district, which was later constituted into the state of Nagaland (Chowdhury 224; Guyot-Réchard 109). On 1 August 1965 the administration of the agency was transferred from the Ministry of External Affairs to the Ministry of Home Affairs (Bose, *History of Arunachal* 240). NEFA became a Union Territory on 21 January 1972. Arunachal Pradesh attained autonomous statehood in the Indian union on 20 February 1987 (Bose, *History of Arunachal* 242-250).

The Kingdom of Manipur was one of the princely states of British India. In mid 1944 Manipur and Naga Hills turned into a battleground of the Second World War. After the war, Manipur regained its autonomy but on 21 September 1949, Maharaja Bodhachandra signed a Treaty of Accession merging the kingdom into India. The merger, however, is disputed by various groups in Manipur as having been completed without consensus and under duress. Manipur became a part of the Republic of India in October, 1949. It was made a Union Territory in 1956 and a fully-fledged State in 1972 (Subramanian 31-33). The accession dispute and different visions for future have led to a 50-year insurgency in the state with different groups seeking independence from India. The state has also turned into an arena for protracted violence between different ethnic groups. Manipur has been declared as a 'Disturbed Area' by the Indian state. Since September 1980, the application of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has been at the heart of concerns about human rights violations in the region, such as arbitrary killings, torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and enforced disappearances.

The Mizo Hills formally became part of British India in 1898 (Nag, *Pied Pipers* 134) and was made a part of the Assam province as the Lushai Hills District, with Aizawl as headquarters. A famine referred to as the 'Mautam famine' (Mautam – Mizo for "Bamboo Death"[4]) broke out in the Mizo Hills area in 1959-60. The Mizos were particularly dissatisfied with the government's inadequate response to the famine. The Mizo National Famine Front, a body formed for famine relief in 1959, later developed into a new political organisation, the Mizo National Front (MNF) under the leadership of Pu Laldenga in 1961. A violent period of protests and armed insurgency followed in the 1960s, with MNF seeking

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independence from India. In 1972, the Mizo Hills were constituted into the Union Territory of Mizoram. Following the Mizoram Peace Accord (1986) between the Government and the MNF, Mizoram was declared a full-fledged state of India in 1987 (Nag, "The Mizo" 141-148; Pachuau, *Being Mizo* 128-130).

The area of modern Tripura was ruled for several centuries by the Tripuri dynasty. The independent Tripuri Kingdom (or Hill Tippera) joined the newly independent India on 15 October 1949. In 1950 it became a Part C state without a legislature. Tripura became a Union Territory, without a legislature, in November 1956 and an elected ministry was installed in July 1963. It attained the status of an autonomous state on 21 January 1972 (Roy, "Tripura in Transition" 308-313). Drastic demographic change and widespread ethnic strife between the Tripuri people and the Bengali speaking population of the state have dominated the political history of the state since its integration into India. According to the census conducted in 1872, the tribal population of the region constituted 63.76 per cent of the total population. Due to large scale migration during Partition, the tribal population in the state was reduced to 37.23 per cent by 1951. By 1961, the total tribal population further decreased to 31 per cent (Subramanian 89-142).

After the withdrawal of the British from the Indian subcontinent, Sikkim remained as a princely state, acting as a buffer between Tibet and the newly formed Indian union. Shortly afterwards, on the basis of the 1950 Indo-Sikkim treaty, Sikkim became an Indian protectorate state, with India taking over the responsibilities of its defence, external affairs and territorial integrity. In 1973, an agitation broke out in Sikkim demanding the abolition of the monarchy. Amidst popular agitation against the Chogyal, in April 1975, the Indian Army took over the city of Gangtok and disarmed the palace guards. Thereafter, a referendum was held on 14 April 1975, in which 97.5 per cent of voters are said to have supported the abolition of the monarchy. However, the merger has been widely criticised as an annexation and India has been accused of exploiting the ethnic divide and rigging the referendum. Nevertheless, on 3 May 1975, Sikkim became the 22nd state of the Indian Union, and the monarchy was abolished (Gupta, "Sikkim" 786-795; Ram, "Sikkim Story" 65-69; Sen, "Sikkim" 350-364). The state of Sikkim was integrated as the eighth member of the North Eastern Council in 2002.

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Thus, within a span of 25 years after independence, the region of undivided Assam underwent a rapid process of balkanisation, which resulted in the formation of three new states. However, the reorganisation process was widely protested in the Brahmaputra Valley. One of the widely cited reasons for the political fragmentation of the Northeast region in the post-colonial period is the lack of inter-mingling between the people of the hills and the plains. The British did not administer the entire Northeast region uniformly. Except the districts of the Brahmaputra valley and the Barak-Surma valley, the hilly areas were administered as 'excluded areas' (Naga Hills District, the Lushai Hills District, the North Cachar subdivision of Cachar district and the North-eastern Frontier Tracts, i.e. Sadiya, Balipara and Lakhimpur tracts) and 'partially excluded areas' (Garo Hills, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the Mikir Hills). The areas solely inhabited by aboriginal populations were designated as 'excluded areas' and areas inhabited by a mixed population of aboriginals and other communities were designated 'partially excluded' (Agnihotri, "Constitutional" 58). The native states of Manipur, Tripura and Khasi Hills remained as British protectorates. In 1873, the Inner Line Regulations (Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873) were implemented in the region, which restricted the entry of foreigners and British subjects into the excluded and partially excluded areas. Restrictions were imposed on trade activities and acquisition of lands beyond what came to be known as the 'inner line'. The British are believed to have adopted this policy mainly to thwart any rivals from establishing commercial ventures in these regions. When the British started drawing the Inner Line near the Himalayan foothills in 1875, their purpose was to bring 'under more stringent control the commercial relations of the British subjects with the Frontier Tribes', to prevent the operation of 'speculators in caoutchouc (unvulcanised rubber) and spread of tea-gardens beyond the fiscal limits of settled areas and to lay down rules for the possession of land and property beyond this line' (Chaube, *Hill Politics* 186). The British are also accused of having deliberately adopted a divide-and-rule policy. They are also suspected of having adopted the policy to enable the Christian missionaries to quietly carry on their proselytising activities among the hill tribes and pre-empt any objections or interventions from the Hindus of the plains (Barua 47). Regardless of the reasons underlying the British policy, due to the administrative variations and movement restrictions among different parts of the Northeast, the hill communities remained isolated from each other, as well as from the people of the

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plains. This bred a sense of alienation and distrust among the hill communities as well as creating a cultural and political distance between the hills and the plains, which are believed to have gradually led to separatist tendencies and political instability in the post-independence period (Barua 56).

2.2.1. Inter-Ethnic Conflicts and the Division of Assam

Most of the ethnic communities of the Northeast possess very small populations. The Asamiya and Bengali linguistic communities have been majority groups in the region, as compared to other ethnic groups. In the years following Independence, both these groups were engaged in a tussle for power in the newly formed undivided Assam province, at the cost of the interests of numerous other tribal communities. While the cultural and political gap between the hills and the plains is said to be one of the causes of the fragmentation of Assam in the post-Independence period, another widely claimed reason is the cultural and political domination and alleged exploitation of the tribal population by the Assamese caste-Hindu elite. In as early as 1947, the Communist Party of India had alleged that the Assamese caste Hindus "the most advanced community of Assam" had "systematically neglected" the tribal interest (Phukon 87). With the arrival of colonial rule, the hill regions, which were and still are inhabited mainly by ethnic tribes, found themselves incorporated into Assam for the first time in history. They found themselves on the fringes of the society and politics under the new order and this led to a gradually brewing sense of alienation and dissatisfaction among the hill tribes, especially among the newly educated tribal elite. The tribes feared the possibility of the swamping of their distinctive cultures by the dominant Hindu culture of the plains. The fear and resistance against the plainsman, which went on to include the Assamese as well as any person from the rest of the country, took on the form of an intense xenophobia, which became the crux of many of the political events in the Northeast in the post-Independence period.

The Assamese elite did accept partial responsibility for the fears and suspicions of the hill people. In 1953, the Jnanpeeth Award winning Assamese writer and journalist

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Birendrakumar Bhattacharyya spoke thus in one of the editorials of the influential Assamese periodical, Ramdhenu:

> Among the events that have taken place since the fifteenth of August, 1947, the unprecedented form of awakening among the tribal people is a significant one...Some fundamental error has been left somewhere; somewhere in our outlook, there is a slip. Identifying that fault is us, the Assamese people's prime duty. (*Ramdhenur* 22)

However, the Assamese elite also blamed the British 'segregationist policies' for creating a divide between the minds of the hill dweller and the plainsman (Misra, *The Periphery* 28). Although their claim is not entirely false, a certain amount of insensitivity and chauvinism on the part of the Assamese and Bengali communities is in fact partly responsible for the insecurity among the hill tribes. Referring to the period between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, Jayeeta Sharma points out how various linguistic and racial claims backed by colonial anthropology were utilised by the ruling elite of the plains to establish their 'modernity', and thereby, superiority, while pushing the burden of 'primitivity' onto 'non-Aryan' indigenous tribals and migrant labourers (*Empire's Garden* 7). The eminent Assamese writer Hiren Gohain bluntly accuses the ruling Assamese caste-Hindu elite of the time of having indulged in unjust and discriminatory policies against the tribal communities of the region in the post-Independence period. He says that the tribal population was doubly cheated – both by the government at the centre and that in the state (*Assam* 174-175).

Thus, an intense sense of xenophobia came into play in the socio-political atmosphere of undivided Assam immediately after Indian independence, which acted as a crucial factor behind much of the initial separatist and sub-regional tendencies among the tribal communities. The tension in the atmosphere only intensified in the following period. Even after the creation of separate states, the fear of non-tribal influx never left the hill communities, although initially such influx was of a negligible kind. The Inner Line Regulations which restrict entry of outsiders and their acquisition of lands in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland and parts of Manipur, have kept such influx in check to a large extent. Recently, various groups in Manipur have been carrying on a heated movement demanding the implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system in the entire state. Similar demands have also been put up by various groups in Meghalaya as well.

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Large scale demographic change has been a bigger reality in the states of Assam and Tripura. In Tripura, migrant Bengali Hindus fleeing religious persecution in adjacent East Bengal (later Bangladesh), mainly during the period between 1947 and 1971, rose to become a majority in the state. In 1875, the tribal folk of the state constituted 63.77 per cent of the total population. The 2001 census of India revealed that Bengalis now represented almost 69 per cent of Tripura's population, while the indigenous population amounted to 31 per cent (Debbarma 406), virtually turning Tripura into a 'refugee state'. This drastic demographic change resulted in large scale land alienation among the tribal population. As the Bengalis soon became culturally and politically dominant in the state, a sense of anger and frustration grew among the tribal youth. They took up armed protest against the administration, which they felt was bent on protecting the Bengali refugees at the cost of the tribals who were gradually turning paupers in their own home. One of the most gruesome incidents in the conflict took place on 8 June 1980, when tribal insurgents massacred 255 (official estimate) Bengali Hindus in Mandai, an obscure village located some 30 kms to the northeast of Agartala (Bhaumik, *Troubled* 212; Paul 86-94). Widespread ethnic riots followed, in which more than 1000 people, mostly Bengalis lost their lives in the state. Thousands of people have lost their lives in the state in insurgency related violence in the last 20 odd years, while several lakhs have been displaced. The rebel groups are also reported to be involved in large scale kidnappings, extortion and arson (Bhaumik, "Tripura" 15). The conflict in Tripura has also taken a communal turn. The National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), believed to be backed by the Baptist Church of Tripura aims to establish a Christian Tripura and it has often targeted Bengali Hindus as well as non-Christian tribals (Paul 269-272).

Arupjyoti Saikia states that the history of peasants in Assam is one of "communalism and migration, a history of Assamese chauvinism, or a history of land conflicts" (Saikia, *A Century* 6). Land loss, drastic demographic change and shifting political power have remained at the heart of regional politics in Assam since pre-Independence times, but it assumed intense and even violent proportions since the middle of the 1970s. Widespread civil strife and several Burmese attacks in the last years of Ahom rule in Assam had left the valley in an extremely depopulated state. Nearly two-thirds of the population in the valley had perished during this period. The total population of Assam was less than a million when the British first came to the valley in the beginning of the nineteenth century (Guha,

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Medieval 171-188). In order to meet labour requirements for the newly established tea industry, the British colonisers had brought in large numbers of labourers into Assam, which mainly comprised of landless Adivasis from Eastern and Central India. As this Adivasi community initially led a secluded existence within the bounds of the tea gardens, their presence in the state, although in large numbers, did not impact the cultural or political atmosphere of the state, at least in the initial years. However the appropriation of vast tracts of forested areas for tea cultivation did alter the picture in the state as far land availability was concerned. Moreover, the British also undertook a policy of settling landless East Bengali migrants in the wasteland areas of Assam to increase revenue. Initially, the Assamese had welcomed the policy. However, by the 1930s, Bengalis became the majority in districts like Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta and the Barak valley. A tussle for the control of the valley ensued between the Bengali and Assamese elites, with the question of official language becoming the main bone of contention between the two.

The sense of alienation among the tribal population in undivided Assam had already intensified in the period immediately following independence. In this period, politics in undivided Assam was centred on the question of installing Asamiya as the official language in the state. During the Partition of India, the Sylhet district which had formed a part of the colonial province of Assam became a part of East Pakistan, on the basis of a referendum. The thickly populated Sylhet district which constituted of mostly Bengali language speakers had constituted almost 30 per cent of the population of pre-partition Assam. With the transfer of Sylhet, the percentage of Asamiya-speakers in the state increased from 30 to 56 per cent, thus turning the Asamiya-speaking population into the majority in the state for the first time in history (Guha, *Planter Raj* 319). In a bid to consolidate their dominance in the region, the Assamese tried to instate the Asamiya language as the official language of Assam and the Assam Official Language Bill was passed on 24th October, 1960. The move generated much resentment and protest among the non-Asamiya speaking populations in the state, especially among the Bengali-speaking people of the Barak valley. Language riots broke out in Barak valley and elsewhere in 1960, after which Bengali was given recognition as the official language of the Barak valley area while Asamiya remained the official language of the rest of the state (Baruah, *India Against* 105; Dutta and Pradhan 180). This was also seen as an oppressive measure by the non-Asamiya speaking tribes in Assam,

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especially those inhabiting the hills. A movement for the creation of a separate hill state was already underway in the state by then. The introduction of the official language bill reinforced the insecurities of the tribal groups and led them to stand up against the hegemonic designs of the Asamiya speaking population. The All Party Hill Leaders' Conference which represented all the major hill tribes, placed the demand for the immediate creation of a separate hill state in November 1960 (Dhar 149-151). After a series of deliberations with the governments at the centre and the state, the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act was passed in 1969 and Meghalaya was created as a semi-autonomous state in the same year. In 1972, the central government passed the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, which led to the creation of the states of Manipur, Tripura and Meghalaya and the union territories of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh.

2.2.2. Unrest and Inter-Ethnic Clashes

The entire Northeast region including the erstwhile state of undivided Assam was reorganised in 1972 to form new states and union territories to meet the demands of various ethnic groups, but the creation of separate states could not ensure lasting peace in the region. Almost all the newly created states have border disputes with Assam, which has often led to outbreaks of violence in the inter-state border regions, involving arson, killings and displacement of communities living in the border regions. The entire Northeast which is home to a huge number of ethnic communities has become a volatile ground of ethnic strife throughout the post-colonial period. This is not to say that conflicts did not take place in the pre-colonial period. But the nature of the conflicts has become too intensified and far too frequent in the period following the arrival of the British on the scene, and even more so in the period following independence from British rule. Sporadic inter-ethnic conflicts have been ravaging the region which has given rise to more insurgent movements that have demanded more autonomy, or more powers of self-rule to counter the hegemony of communities that have traditionally been higher up in the ethnic hierarchy.

The migrant issue in Assam assumed violent proportions in the late 1970s when mass protests led by student unions demanding immediate expulsion of alleged illegal

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Bangladeshi migrants gripped the entire Brahmaputra Valley. The entire period of the agitation, which came to be known as the Assam Movement/Agitation, was marked by sporadic incidents of violence all over the state in which thousands of people lost their lives. However, the incident which is now referred to as the Nellie Massacre was the most horrific. On the morning of February 18, 1983, suspected Lalung or Tiwa villagers massacred some 2000 (estimates vary) men, women and children of East Bengali Muslim origin at Nellie in Nagaon district of Assam (Begum and Hoenig; Kimura 74; Narayan). Election related violence had also broken out in almost every corner of Assam in February 1983, in which at least 7000 people (estimates vary) in total are reported to have died in the state (Goswami, *Along the Red* 162; Kimura 69). In 1983, the Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunals Act (IMDT) was passed by the Indian parliament, which was however, found to be ineffective in the identification and deportation of illegal migrants. The act was repealed by the Supreme Court in 2005. After a series of negotiations, a Memorandum of Settlement, popularly known as the Assam Accord was signed between the leaders of All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) and the Indian government on 15 August, 1985 and the movement came to an end (Sharma Thakur 54).

Myron Weiner has made a close analysis of nativist movements across India including the Assam Agitation. He proposes that middle-class nativist movements against migrants tend to emerge in communities where a nascent educated class aspires to acquire jobs previously held by migrants – in the civil service, teaching positions, clerks, managers and technicians. Weiner points out that local middle class job aspirants often view migrants as a block to opportunities in the face of a lack in the expansion of the employment market (*Sons* 8). His views are partially echoed in other critiques of the Agitation in Assam. Hiren Gohain has blamed the violent anti-immigrant activities of the period on the chauvinism of the caste-Hindu Assamese section. He says that chauvinism has been "the deadly enemy of all radical and genuinely democratic forces in Assam" since independence ("Cudgel" 420). Later, Gohain pointed out in a full length book that the Assamese middle class had distorted the national protest (read Assam Movement) into chauvinist and communal forms and it had oppressed other minorities. And yet, the middle class had found mass support among the rural population who had been struggling under the pressures of land-pauperism, indebtedness and unemployment. Gohain shows that the Assamese peasant class was not

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organised on class lines and it would rather make alliance with the Assamese middle class than with the immigrant peasants. While expressing hope that the Left may be able to overcome these difficulties eventually, Gohain also expressed the fear that the conditions of the time might completely frustrate its aims "unless national forces are recognised and properly guided" (*Assam* 31).

The Assam Agitation left in its trail much dissatisfaction among the tribal communities of Assam and many of them subsequently rose up in revolt with demands varying from autonomy to separate statehood. The most violent among them is the Bodo movement. The history of political consciousness among the Bodos, the largest plains tribal community of Assam, can be traced to the period before independence. The Bodos of Goalpara were among the 27 organisations of Assam which submitted memoranda to the Simon Commission which visited Shillong in 1929. In their memorandum the Bodos opposed the merging of Goalpara district with Bengal and insisted on staying with Assam claiming their close affinity with the culture of Assam and an identity not 'other than Assamese' (Bhattacharjee, *Ethnicity* 75; Chadha, *Low Intensity* 259; Goswami, *Conflict* 73). The Bodo Sahitya Sabha, which came into existence in 1952, took up the issues of Bodo language and script which led to further consolidation of the Bodo identity. The All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) was formed in 1967, which would later play a crucial role in the Bodo movement. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha, along with ABSU and PTCA (Plains Tribal Council of Assam, formed in 1967) launched a movement demanding the introduction of Bodo as the medium of instruction in the secondary stage of school education in Assam. As a result, Bodo was introduced as a medium of instruction in schools at the primary level in 1963 and then at the secondary level in 1968. During 1974-75, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and ABSU launched a movement for the adoption of the Roman script instead of the Assamese script for the Bodo language. Subsequently, the Devanagari script was adopted by the Sabha. Soon after its creation, the PTCA placed a demand for the creation of a union territory called 'Udayachal' in the Bodo dominated areas (Chadha, *Low Intensity* 262-264; George 879-888). The Assam Agitation found large scale support and participation among the tribal communities of Assam, including the Bodos. However, although the student leaders of the Agitation were able to mobilise the plains tribes in the initial phase of the movement, they failed to address the social, cultural and economic issues of these

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communities. Violent clashes had broken out in the Gohpur area of the erstwhile Darrang district between people of the Bodo and Assamese communities during the Assam Agitation, where more than 100 Asamiya speaking people lost their lives (Kimura 75).

The Karbi tribe, which comprises 63.36 % of the total hill tribe population of Assam, has also been engaged in ethno-nationalist movements throughout the post-independence period. The two hill districts of Assam – Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills had been given the option of joining the newly proposed hill state of Meghalaya at the time of state reorganisation in 1972. However, the representative bodies of the communities living in both the districts chose to maintain status quo and remained a part of Assam (Hussain, "Tribal" 1331). However, some of the ultra-nationalist policies of the AGP (Asom Gana Parishad) government which came into power in Assam following the Assam Agitation, created doubt and insecurity among the tribal communities of Assam, including the Karbi and the Dimasa tribes, which inhabit different parts of Karbi Anglong (Karbi Anglong Autonomous District since 1995) and North Cachar Hills district (Dima Hasao Autonomous District since 2010). In 1986, the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) was formed in Karbi Anglong, which mainly comprised of students who had participated in the Assam Agitation but now felt disillusioned by the policies of the caste-Hindu leaders from the valley (Daulagajau 117). Two policies adopted by the Assam Government in particular stirred the hill tribes towards an intensification of the autonomy/statehood demands. The first was the introduction of Asamiya as a compulsory 'Third Language' and secondly the move to make the knowledge of Asamiya mandatory for employment into government services. The tribal communities saw these moves as the caste-Hindu population's designs of imposing their language and culture upon the hill tribes. In the 1980s, the Karbi and Dimasa tribes began agitating for greater autonomy through peaceful agitations led by a faction of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). However, the movement soon turned into violent struggle (Barbora, "Autonomy" 198). Since the turn of the century, many militant groups like the United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), Karbi Longri N.C. Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF), Karbi Peoples' Liberation Tiger (KPLT), Karbi National Volunteers (KNV) and Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) have been engaged in violent movements in the hill districts of Assam with various stated objectives from autonomy to the establishment of separate states (Roy Chaudhury 19-27).

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The immense ethnic diversity of the Northeast has been one of the major reasons for its political instability. The division of Assam into new states was based upon demands for preserving the distinct cultures and identities of the ethnic tribes, who claimed political and economic exploitation by the dominant Hindu groups of the Brahmaputra valley. However, none of the newly carved out states of Northeast India is ethnically compact. Different groups competing for dominance within these states have been engaged in violent conflicts with each other. As Pradip Phanjoubam has noted about the region, "The big fish eats small fish story is told so many times from so many different hierarchies of the society, almost to the point of absurdity" ("Manipur" 285). The hill districts of the state of Manipur are inhabited by a sizeable Naga population and these areas have been included in NSCN's proposed map of Nagalim. Naga militants are active in these areas and have engaged in sporadic attacks against other tribes inhabiting the region, especially the Kukis who form the largest part of the hill tribes of Manipur, after the Nagas (Haokip, "The Kuki-Naga Conflict: Issues" 142-152; Oinam, "Dynamics" 133-136). The Kukis have also been engaged in violent clashes with the Paites, another tribe inhabiting the hills of Manipur. Naga-Kuki and Kuki-Paite feuds in the final decade of the last century have led to nearly 1,700 deaths and loss of property worth millions of rupees. Riots also broke out between Hindu Meiteis and ethnic Manipuri Pangal Muslims in 1993 (Bhaumik, *Troubled* 144).

In 1997-1998, Mizo tribesmen attacked the minority Brus living in the state of Mizoram. In the face of atrocities and persecution, the Brus started fleeing to neighbouring Tripura. More than 50,000 people belonging to the Bru tribe have sought asylum in refugee camps in Tripura. Some of them have slowly started to return to their homes. The Chakmas living in Mizoram have also faced discrimination from the dominant Mizos. Various smaller ethnic groups in Mizoram like the Hmars, the Chakmas, the Brus, the Pawis, the Lais and the Reangs are engaged in insurgent activities demanding autonomy or secession (Nag, "The Mizo" 175-181). There are three autonomous district councils in Mizoram – the Chakma Autonomous District Council, the Lai Autonomous District Council and the Mara Autonomous District Council. While the Brus and Hmars are fighting for the creation of autonomous councils for themselves, the Chakmas, the Lais and the Maras are fighting to combine the territories of the three autonomous districts and form a Union Territory (Bhaumik and Bhattacharya, *Autonomy* 217; Bhaumik, *Troubled* 144-145).

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The Chakma and Hajong populations living in Arunachal Pradesh were settled in the state by the Indian government after they had had to flee former East Bangladesh to escape persecution during the mid 60s. A small number of Tibetan refugees were also settled by the Indian government in Arunachal Pradesh. Various groups representing the native tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have expressed resentment over the settlement of these refugees in the state and strongly oppose granting them permanent citizenship of Arunachal Pradesh (Chakma; Chakraborty, "Chakma and Hajong"; Dutta, "Internally Displaced"; Sebastian).

Bhaumik alleges that the Indian state forces have taken advantage of inter-ethnic rivalries in the Northeast to fight insurgencies. He illustrates this point using the case of Manipur, where a wedge has been driven between the indigenous communities of the hills and the Hinduised Meitei of the plains. In order to contain the Meitei insurgent groups of the valley areas, the armed forces initiated a Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement in 2005 with the hill militants who mainly belong to the Kuki and Zomi communities that have long been dominated by the dominant Meitei. Bhaumik draws attention to constant reports of how these militant groups under SoO are being used to raid hideouts of the valley insurgents (Bhaumik, *Troubled* 112). Uddipana Goswami too alleges the use of traditional ethnic rivalries by the Indian armed forces to fight the more powerful militant groups of the Northeast (Goswami, *Conflict* 7).

Under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, many ethnic communities of the Northeast have been granted autonomous administrative territories[5]. However, studies have shown that these autonomous councils have not been able to bring about any significant development in the regions under their jurisdiction. Critics point out that these struggles for autonomy or 'nations from below' fail to fulfil their professed aims after administrative autonomy has been granted to them. Sanjay K. Roy deconstructs the idea of the 'nations from below' and examines the strategies and tactics which 'nations from below' resort to in the so-called decolonisation movements. Roy alleges that in their quest for freedom, such ethno-national movements, while dealing with other subordinate nationalisms living in worse socio-economic and political conditions, adopt a similar path of colonisation and subjugation as their erstwhile rulers. Roy concludes from a close examination of the end-results of these movements that the movements fail on all main

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missions. The smaller states or autonomous district councils created on ethnic lines (and according to constitutional provisions) so far have not addressed the issues on which the movements were launched. The post-conflict arrangements have failed to arrest the ethnic cleavages, the ever-increasing class differences within the community, or to protect the cultural rights of the tribal groups. The stated objectives of the fight of the 'nation from below' led by ethno-nationalist movements against the coloniser state are generally 'political liberation of the nation', prosperity of the people, and defence of ethnic culture. Roy observes that as it often turns out, especially in the Northeast, states run by the 'nations from below' are, in no way, different from the Indian state in their neglect of the fundamental question of class-inequality. The plight of the wretched continues even after the aimed statehood has been achieved, as the neo-class corner the benefits of the new political arrangements by manipulating the development initiatives in its favour (*Conflicting Nations* 2179-2180). It has often been found that the autonomous councils in the Northeast have failed to uplift the poor masses. There is a lack of grass root level inclusion in the planning process. Instead, the newly-formed rich classes, bureaucrats, rich traders and the educated section appropriate the funds and resources provided for the development of the territory at the cost of the weaker sections and classes. The minority communities living in the region face yet more deprivation and have been often found to face persecution.

Such dismal outcomes are quite ironical as most of the militant organisations in the Northeast fighting for autonomy claim to work with socialist agendas. M.S. Prabhakara points out that the majority of the militant organisations in the Northeast proclaim a socialist ideological base. However he criticises these organisations for their hare-brained ideological bases. Thus, ULFA claims that its ideology is "scientific socialism", while both the factions of the NSCN are guided by "national socialism", a formulation that is incorporated into their very nomenclature. However, Prabhakara claims that even the most superficial acquaintance with the literature of these organisations or the most casual conversation with their activists and ideologues show that they have at best a very innocent and half-baked understanding of terms like "scientific socialism", or "national socialism" (*Separatist Movements* 729).

Many scholars are critical of the protective discrimination and autonomy demanded by, and in many cases granted to, communities in the Northeast, which, they believe have

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led to tension among communities. The creation of new states on ethnic lines led to similar demands by almost every other ethnic community of the Northeast and more often than not, these groups have taken to arms with demands varying from more autonomy to secession from the Indian Union. Bengt G. Karlsson addresses the questions of whether "indigenous politics" can work to empower otherwise excluded, subaltern communities, and if it is, as such, a democratic force worth supporting. He also examines, if on the contrary, such politics is bound to turn into violence, "ethnic cleansing" and destruction of inter-community solidarity (*Indigenous* 11).

Karlsson's claims are not entirely unfounded. The Bodoland area of Assam is a case in point. The Bodos of Assam have been engaged in sporadic violent clashes with other ethnic groups inhabiting the Bodo dominated areas of the state. In 1987, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and the Bodo Peoples Action Committee (BPAC) began their agitation for a separate Bodo state. The Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) founded in 1996, carried out extensive violence in western and central Assam until the militant group surrendered after 7 years with the signing of the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) between the representatives of the militant organisation, the Assam Government and the Government of India in February 2003. Former members of the BLTF and ABSU joined together to form a political party - the Bodo Peoples' Progressive Front. According to the terms of the MoS, the Bodoland Territorial Areas District Council (BTAD or BTC) was formed in 2003 with Hagrama Mohilary, the supremo of the surrendered BLTF sworn in as its Chief Executive Member. The territory under the jurisdiction of the BTC called the Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) was carved out of seven districts of Western and Central Assam (Basumatary, "Quest" 8-15).

However, the MoS was rejected by a part of the Bodos who formed another militant organisation called the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) which demands a sovereign state for the Bodo people. Terrorist activities carried out by the NDFB have led to a large number of civilian deaths in Assam over the past two decades. The NDFB is suspected to have been involved in the October 2008 serial blasts in various places of western Assam including Guwahati, which led to at least 77 deaths and 470 injuries. The BTAD area is inhabited by a number of different communities and the Bodo population in

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certain areas included in the BTAD is not more than 50%. The NDFB has been engaged in systematic ethnic cleansing campaigns, attacking one non-Bodo community after another living in the BTAD area. Since the 90s, Bodo militants have undertaken a series of attacks on the people of the migrant Bengali community living in Western Assam, killing thousands of people of Bengali Muslim background and displacing lakhs of others. In May 2014, suspected NDFB militants torched villages and killed at least 32 Bengali speaking Muslims in Sonitpur and Baksa districts of Assam. Since the mid 1990s, hundreds of people belonging to Santhal, Munda and Oraon tribes who identify themselves as Adivasis have been killed in the BTAD area by suspected NDFB militants and mobs. The Adivasis too have formed their own militant group called the Adivasi Cobra Force. On 23 December 2014, suspected NDFB militants killed over 70 Adivasi people, mostly women and children, in Kokrajhar, Chirang and Sonitpur districts of Assam. According to government estimates, 2,50,000 people, the majority of them Adivasis, have been displaced in Bodo-Adivasi clashes (Bhaumik, *Troubled* 135-136). Besides, the Christian dominated NDFB is also locked in a fierce fratricidal battle with the Hindu dominated BLTF. Inter-factional rivalries within the Bodo groups have also resulted in much violence and many deaths. The NDFB entered into a ceasefire agreement in 2005, which has been extended several times. However, a faction led by I.K. Songbijit has carried on violent activities in western Assam (Basumatary, "Quest" 8-18).

Similar examples can be found in the autonomous council areas of the hill districts of Assam. In 2000, members of the United Peoples Democratic Front, a militant group representing the Karbi tribe attacked Hindi speaking farmers in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. The settlers retaliated by attacking Karbi villages and killing several Karbi farmers. Similar clashes continued to take place through 2001 and 2002 in the hill district (Barbora, "Autonomy" 206; Goswami, "Making" 185). In 2003-2004, violent conflicts broke out between Kuki and Karbi communities inhabiting the district, with large scale loss of life and property on both sides (Barbora, "Autonomy" 206; Kumar, "Karbi-Kuki").

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2.3. Relationships of Conflict with the Indian State

Owing to various cultural as well as political factors, Northeast India has so far occupied a marginal and ancillary position in the national imagination of India which has led to its sharing a tenuous relationship with the Indian state. A general feeling of 'marginalisation' and 'discrimination' by the Indian state grew among the people of Northeast India in the postcolonial period. Numerous rebel groups in the Northeast, whose demands range from increased autonomy to sovereignty, perceive the Indian state as their enemy, and an 'external' 'colonising' agency. A general sense of dissatisfaction and alienation are often perceived to be the causes behind the growing unrest in the region. The political theorist Tom Nairn points towards a relationship between uneven development and assertion of sub-nationalist movements in the frontier areas of a state. He states,

> Real, uneven development has invariably generated an imperialism of the centre over the periphery; one after another, these peripheral areas have been forced into a profoundly ambivalent reaction against their dominance, seeking at once to resist it and to somehow take over its vital forces for their own use. This could only be done by a highly 'idealist' political and ideological mobilisation, by a painful forced march based on their own resources: that is, employing their 'nationality' as a basis. (328).

While Nairn's analysis views the issue from an exclusively political angle, various factors seem to have contributed to the feelings of marginalisation and the accompanying predisposition towards rebellion in Northeast India. Taking the case of Assam, Yasmin Saikia, a historian from the region says that "The personal experiences of poverty coupled with rising public awareness of the disparity in the development of Assam vis-à-vis the rest of India are expressed in a growing public resentment that shapes political agendas and creates a sense of restlessness" (*Assam and India* 10). Public discourse in the region often employs the grievance theory to explain the socio-political crises in the Northeast. Developmental gaps vis-à-vis the rest of the country forms the core of the argument offered by disgruntled groups in the region. Studies have shown that the Northeast region lags behind the rest of the country and suffer from deprivation in many socio-economic indicators. This widespread deprivation in the region has led its people to perceive the Indian state to be an apathetic 'colonising force'.

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Available literature in the area points out that relative deprivation between the central and peripheral regions of the modern state are not isolated phenomena. The discourse of internal colonisation often finds application in studying economic and cultural disparities between the centre and peripheral areas of the modern nation-state. The discourse is applied by Michel Hechter who argues that uneven pace of development over different parts of the national territory create relatively advanced and less advanced groups which is simultaneously followed by an unequal distribution of resources and power between the two. The super ordinate or core group seeks to stabilise and monopolise its advantages through policies aimed at the institutionalisation of the existing stratification system. Thus, it reserves social roles that are commonly held to be of higher status for its members, while members of the less advantaged group/groups are denied access to such roles (Hechter 9). Hechter also makes an observation that national development occurs when the separate cultural identities of the regions begin to lose social significance and become blurred. In this process, the local and regional cultures are gradually replaced by one national culture which cuts across the previous distinctions (Hechter 5). However, Marcus Banks counters this point. He says that "all nationalism, once state control is achieved, actively seeks both to enhance and reify the specifically ethnic identities of deviant others within the nation state, and at the same time to efface the idea of ethnic particularism within the national identity" (Banks 154). In other words, nations tend to be dominated by ethnic groups which deny their ethnic particularities and uphold themselves as the 'norm' or citizens, while highlighting those of others. In the process, the latter are relegated to minority status or get assimilated into the fold of the dominant group. Hechter points out that the disadvantaged group/s might, in time, reactively assert its own culture as equal or superior to that of the core group/s, which, in turn, might lead to its conception of itself as a separate 'nation' and seek to secede (Hechter 10). Northeast India has occupied a culturally marginalised position in the national imagination and this is not entirely unconnected to the developmental lag in the region. The real or perceived hegemony of the 'mainland culture' has bred much discontent among the communities in the region, leading to assertions of distinctive identities, and often, violent rebellions.

Many critics allege that the centre perceives the Northeast region as a liability (Madhab 322). Yasmin Saikia does not mince words while saying that the Indian union

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perceives the Northeast as "a region that is marginally connected to the Indian union, with a dubious loyalty to the Indian nation" (*Assam and India* 4). T.B. Subba quotes from a letter sent by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1950 to emphasise on this attitude towards the Northeast region by the central authorities:

> Our northern or north-eastern approaches consist of Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Darjeeling and the tribal areas of Assam. From the point of view of communications they are weak spots...The contact of these areas with us, is by no mean (sic) close and intimate. The people inhabiting these portions have no established loyalty or devotion to India. Even Darjeeling and Kalimpong areas are not free from pro-Mongoloid prejudices. ("Ethnicity" 44)

Other than a real or perceived sense of alienation and neglect by the Centre which is generally regarded as the chief underlying cause of the dissatisfaction among the people of the Northeast, scholars also cite many other reasons for the same. The relative autonomy provided to the hilly areas during British rule as well as their isolation from the plains is cited as a reason for the political instability in these regions in the post Independence period. Besides, there is also a religious angle to the argument. Due to widespread activities of Christian missionaries in the Northeast, a large part of the population in the region follows Christianity. Nagaland (90% approx.), Mizoram (88% approx.) and Meghalaya (70% approx.) are Christian majority states. Arunachal Pradesh (30.26 %) and Manipur (41.29 %) also have sizeable Christian populations. This religious difference with the largely Hindu majority population of the rest of the country is often cited as a major hindrance in the path to integration of the people of the Northeast with the greater Indian culture. Activities of Christian missionaries are believed to have left impacts upon the non-Christian population of the region as well. Nandana Dutta claims that the very nature of the American Baptist Missionary's intervention (in Assam) "with vernacular education as its basis and "useful knowledge" as its fulcrum, gave to the Assamese a limited modernity, a schizophrenic identity narrative, and a perpetually ambivalent relationship with the rest of India" ("Looking" 142). Brig. (Dr.) S.P. Sinha touches on the alleged involvement of Christian missionary organisations in the Northeast with secessionist militant movements. Drawing parallels between the cases of the Nagas in India, the Karens in Myanmar and the Ambonese in Indonesia, he alleges that all of these minority Christian communities of Asia have displayed secessionist tendencies (*Lost Opportunities* 230). The manifesto of the NSCN(IM) has adopted the motto "Nagaland for Christ" and states that it stands for "faith in God and

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salvation of mankind in Jesus alone, that is Nagaland for Christ". The manifesto also calls on "Real sacrifices of the soldiers of Christ against India and Burma and their goddesses" (Misra, *Periphery* 56). A sizeable number of recruits in the Tribal National Volunteers (TNV) in Tripura are first generation converts into Christianity. The National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) is alleged to be working with Christian fundamentalist aspirations and it reportedly enjoys the patronage of the Baptist Church. Reportedly, its manifesto says that the objective of the organisation is to establish the Kingdom of God and Jesus Christ in Tripura. The organisation has issued notices to tribal communities in the state to convert into Christianity as a whole (Bhaumik, *Troubled* 48). Nagmanlal Halam, the secretary of the Noapara Baptist Church in Tripura was arrested in April 2000 by the CRPF on charges of aiding and abetting militant groups in the state and possessing large quantities of explosives.

The Hindu nationalist groups blame the Christian missionary activities in the Northeast for fostering a lack of attachment to the rest of India. They demand the expelling of Christian missionaries from the Northeast so that the mentality of the people of the region might be ''Indianised'' through the introduction of "Indian education", which will be supervised and controlled by Indian administrators. Yasmin Saikia alleges that this has only added to the troubles. Such views naturally create further insecurity and alienation, especially among the hill states of the Northeast, where the majority of people are Christians (*Assam and India* 4-5).

Moreover, the issue is also believed to have a racial angle in some quarters. Sanjib Baruah makes a serious allegation against the Indian state of its playing a "new politics of race" against the Northeast Region. He says,

> Unlike the distinction between tribal and non-tribal, that is an important part of our vocabulary in discussing the North-east, the racial label has the advantage of including all those who belong to the troubled region, and are perceived as being connected to the troubles. ("A New Politics" 170).

"The visual label of race that transcends the colonial categories of tribal and non-tribal and reaches out to pre-colonial categories such as the *Kirata* people - used to describe the people of the periphery", Baruah fears, "may now give a new lease of life to some old Indian prejudices" ("A New Politics" 171). He lists the factors responsible for the proliferation of low-intensity conflicts in Northeast India as follows: a) the region's particular ecology and

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the history of state formation; b) certain legacies of colonial knowledge; c) the frontier quality of the region and the massive demographic transformations that it has been going through in modern times; and d) the effects of certain peculiarities of postcolonial India's constitutional political order ("Beyond Counter-Insurgency" 6-7). He calls the proliferation of militant activities in the Northeast region a symptom of state failure and argues that

> Northeast India is a much more closely administered area than any other part of the country. Besides, the region has had a long history of counter-insurgency operations and the governmental infrastructure to support it. For militancy to be so pervasive in a region with such a dense network of state institutions and against such odds is striking indeed. ("Gulliver's Troubles" 4178).

He says that to deal with the troubled Northeast region, India has the counter-insurgency strategy, the economic development strategy and even the 'vacuous' nation-building strategy, and yet all attempts by India to deal with the troubled Northeast region has proved a failure. What Baruah recommends is "a thoughtful state-building strategy – one that could link state and society in a way that harmonises the interests, cultural values and aspirations of the peoples of the region with the agendas of the national state" ("Gulliver's Troubles" 4182).

2.3.1. Secessionist Movements

Tom Nairn distinguishes between two types of nationalism – one healthy and the other degenerate. He holds that while the mainspring of nationalism is progressive, the second type, the abusive versions are "regressive and tend towards the encouragement of social and psychological atavism, the exploitation of senseless fears and prejudices and so towards violence" (335). In Northeast India, nationalisms have often followed the latter type. A number of militant organisations in the Northeast have been engaged in fierce battles against the Indian state seeking 'independence' from Indian control and a sovereign status. The various factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), The Mizo National Front (MNF), The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), The National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and several left-oriented organisations in Manipur like the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) have engaged in secessionist movements

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against the Indian Union. The NSCN, the NDFB and the UNLF are still engaged in active armed struggles. However, Lawrence E. Cline doubts the actual strategic threat of many of the insurgent groups in the Northeast. He points out that it is often difficult to distinguish insurgent groups from criminal groups as insurgency has turned into a lucrative business in the Northeast which, more often than not, has the involvement of corrupt local governments as well (128). Moreover, the unending small wars in the region feed a continuous and huge demand for arms. Porous borders and the proximity of the region to the notorious Golden Triangle of Southeast Asia, one of the world's major opium producing regions, has fuelled the growth of a flourishing drug trafficking racket in the Northeast. Thus, a vicious circle has developed in the region between smugglers, arms dealers, drug lords, insurgents as well as lawmakers and lawkeepers. The remoteness from the Indian heartland as well as a generally poor law and order situation have worked to the advantage of the criminal nexus. An added problem is the epidemic presence of HIV/AIDS in the region, which is most acute in the hilly border states, spreading mainly through intravenous drug users and to their partners through infected persons.

Foreign support is also suspected to be playing a crucial role in the proliferation of insurgencies in Northeast India (Bhaumik, *Insurgent Crossfire* 310-319; Bhaumik, "Dealing with War" 79-84; Egreteau 91-146). Northeast India shares a 5,200 kilometres long frontier with Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, which accounts for approximately 98% of its total boundary. These Indian neighbours along with Pakistan have allegedly been taking advantage of the fragile situation in the Northeastern bounds of India to wage proxy wars against the country and disrupt its internal political stability. Reports and evidences abound of links between insurgents of the Northeast and various state and non-state actors in foreign countries which have been providing the rebellions in the region with diverse kinds of aid and assistance like financial and organisational support, weapons, training and operational cooperation as well as sanctuary and space for setting up militant bases. The Indian government claims the existence in Bangladesh of as many as 108 bases belonging to various militant groups from the Northeast. However, Subir Bhaumik is of the view that these Indian claims are too high above the mark. The rebel groups in the Kachin region of northern Burma have also maintained close links with insurgent groups from Nagaland, Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh and have been providing them with training bases

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as well as a safe corridor to training camps in China. (Bhattacharyya, *Rendezvous* 82-86). The rebel organisations of Manipur have been allegedly receiving funding, arms supply and other kinds of assistance from China. The Pakistani intelligence agency ISI is known to be providing assistance and abetment to militant groups of the Northeast. Bhutanese territory has been used by militant groups like the NDFB and ULFA to set up base camps (Bhatt 233-249; Bhaumik, *Troubled* 178; Gopal 21-25).

However, changing diplomatic relationships of these neighbouring countries with India have variously affected the relationship patterns of the militant groups with foreign elements. According to Subir Bhaumik, "insurgent crossfire" – the mutual sponsorship of guerrilla warfare against each other has been the favourite low-cost operative strategy in South Asian statecraft in the period after colonial withdrawal from the region (*Insurgent Crossfire*; *Troubled* 179). It is alleged that the Indian government too continues to aid and abet rebel groups across the border. It is believed to have established diplomatic transactions with the Kachin Independence Army of Myanmar in order to stop them from aiding insurgent groups from the Northeast (Bhattacharyya, *Rendezvous* 237). India is also accused of having provided training and financial aid to the Shanti Bahini of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, as a reaction to which, Bangladesh's military rulers are believed to have begun providing shelter to militant groups from the Northeast (Bhaumik, *Insurgent* 195-244; Gunaratna and Iqbal 219; Hazarika, *Strangers* 279; Lintner 183- 219; Talukdar, *Mautam* 183). Many of these groups are believed to have shut down their camps in Bangladesh following the Awami League's coming to power in the country. 'Operation All Clear', the comprehensive one-month long offensive carried out by the Bhutanese Army in December 2003 succeeded in uprooting the militant bases of the ULFA, NDFB and the KLO from Bhutanese soil to a large extent. After the success of this operation, it is reported that India is showing signs of moving away from the 'insurgent crossfire' model to one of trans-regional assistance in fighting insurgencies in South and Southeast Asia (Bhaumik, *Troubled* 179).

2.3.2. Responses from the State

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Ernest Renan, for whom the nation constituted "a soul, a spiritual principle" (Renan 1882), had called the nation's existence a "daily plebiscite", laying emphasis on a people's will to be a part of a nation. He even went so far as to say that "If doubts are raised along the frontiers, consult the disputed populations. They certainly have a right to express their views on the matter" ("What is a Nation"). Renan gives primary importance to the right to self determination, but it is bound to clash with the right to territorial integrity of a state. In fact, in a number of cases around the world, these contrary entitlements have created tricky standoffs between contending parties and in many of these cases; the United Nations too has failed to produce unanimous and unambiguous resolutions.

In response to the numerous insurgent movements in Northeast India, the Indian state has launched an intensive and prolonged counter-insurgency operation in the region. Sudeep Chakravarti notes that

> While in the case of several 'Mainland' states, regional aspiration was addressed first by creating states along linguistic lines (as recently as the 2000s, Chattisgarh, Uttarakhand and Jharkhand were carved out of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar driven by cries of stifled development), in the Northeast, the demand for identity and development frequently attracted violent government crackdown. When insurgencies developed, counter-force was a natural – and by rights, legitimate – reaction (xx).

The Nagas were the first group in the Northeast to start a secessionist movement. In the beginning, the governments at both the centre and state levels considered the Naga Resistance movement a law and order situation and launched a ruthless counter-insurgency operation in the Naga Hills. As the Naga movement turned more violent in character under the leadership of militant leaders like Angami Zapu Phizo, the Indian government deployed several laws such as the Assam Maintenance of Public Order (Autonomous Districts) Act 1953, the Assam Disturbed Areas Act 1955, Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act 1958 etc, which equipped the security forces with huge amounts of powers to suppress the rebellion. The enactment of these special laws are also believed to have led to large numbers of human rights violations by the security forces in the form of rape, murder, arson, loot, forced disappearances and summary killings (Srikanth and Thomas 358). The Naga Hills Area was constituted into a separate state in 1963 but it could not put an end to the militancy among the Nagas. The Indian government intensified army operations and imposed President's Rule in Nagaland in 1975. A section of the Naga leaders signed the

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Shillong Accord with the Indian government in 1975 which stated that the Naga militants "on their volition, accept, without condition, the Constitution of India" (Misra, *The Periphery* 233). However, the Naga leaders Isaac Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah denounced the Shillong Accord, and termed it a 'betrayal' of the Naga cause. They aligned with S.S. Khaplang and formed the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980. The NSCN began to run a parallel underground government in Nagaland. However, following internal differences, it split into two factions – the NSCN(IM) and NSCN(K) in 1988 (Chadha, *Low Intensity* 275). The Indian government has been carrying on efforts to bring the Naga rebels to the negotiating table. The NSCN(IM) entered into a cease-fire agreement with the Indian government in 1997, which has been extended several times and a promising process of negotiations has been initiated between the two (Chadha, *Low Intensity* 303).

Udayon Misra blames the Nehru government and its short-sightedness for the long drawn conflict in Nagaland. In his opinion, had the Nehru government paid heed to the initial demands of the Naga people and worked out a compromise plan that might have provided them with either the autonomy within the Indian Union that they originally wanted, or some other arrangement favourable to both India and the Nagas, the 50 year long war that has been continuing in the state could have been avoided ("The Margins" 268). A similar view is also offered by Sanjoy Hazarika in *Writing on the Wall*. By the time Nagaland was granted separate statehood, a decade long strife had already left a trail of bitterness among the Nagas, which still persists and underlies their grievances and rebellion against the Indian state. However, Misra also criticises the NSCN (IM) for its aggressive demand for a greater Nagaland that has alienated other insurrectionary groups in the Northeast (*The Periphery* 62).

The peace process in Mizoram is often cited as a success story. Under the leadership of Pu Laldenga, the Mizo National Front declared the Lushai Hills district as 'independent Mizoram' on March 1, 1966. The Assam government reacted by declaring the Mizo district a 'disturbed area' under the provisions of the Assam Disturbed Areas Act 1955. The AFSPA was enforced in the area and the Indian government launched a massive counter-insurgency operation, which is often cited as one of the most vicious of its kind. The tussle between the militants and state forces unleashed an extremely violent phase in the history of the Mizo

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highlands. Mizoram is the only area in India where, after 1947, security forces have used air power in an offensive against militants. The Indian Air Force launched a massive air strike and on the afternoon of 4 March 1966, the city of Aizawl was strafed using machine guns which led to several alleged civilian deaths and reduced the city to ashes. The civilian population fled their homes and took shelter in nearby forests. The government also undertook a system of 'regrouping of villages' in the period between 1967 and 1970 with the objective of isolating village populations from insurgents as well as protecting them from the latter. The 'village regrouping' exercise was based on a similar system adopted by the British against Chinese squatters in Malaya after World War II And by the American Forces in South Vietnam. Over 80 per cent of the village population in the Lushai Hills district were relocated by the Armed forces to 'group centres' along the National Highways. As a result of the forced regrouping system, the Mizo society suffered from long term economic difficulties and trauma, besides a sense of collective distress and resentment. In 1971, the Indian government turned the Lushai Hills district into the Union Territory of Mizoram. After a decade long series of talks, the MNF and the Indian government signed the 'Mizo Accord' on June 30, 1986 which brought an end to the twenty year long insurgency in the state. In accordance with the terms of the agreement, Mizoram was constituted as a fully fledged state in February 1987. Mizoram has remained one of the most peaceful states of the region since. However, the accord solely addressed the concerns of the dominant Mizo community, which led to the marginalisation of other ethnic groups in the state like the Hmars, Chakmas and the Brus, who are now engaged in various armed rebellions in the state (Nag, "A Gigantic Panopticon" 3-16; Nag, "The Mizo" 145-181; Talukdar, *Mautam* 139-218).

According to Subir Bhaumik, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) has faced perhaps "the most ruthless counter-insurgency action ever faced by any rebel group in the Northeast" (*Insurgencies* 121). Successive military operations like Operation Bajrang and Operation Rhino destroyed most of the base areas of the organisation in different parts of Assam during the period 1990-1991. Lt. Gen. (Retd.) S.K. Sinha, who served as the governor of Assam from 1997 to 2003, has claimed that in the face of massive unified commando operations launched during this period, more than one thousand ULFA militants were killed in encounters, three thousand weapons and a large amount of cash was recovered

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and over three thousand three hundred militants surrendered in batches (21). The Indian intelligence also made use of mercenaries and surrendered ULFA members to attack ULFA leaders. Cases of large scale human rights violations are reported to have taken place in Assam during anti-insurgency operations (Debi, "Women and Youth" 141-145; Debi, "Inhuman Attrocities" 147-151; Gogoi and Dutta 168-170; Misra, "Army Killings" 793). During the rule of the Asom Gana Parishad (henceforth AGP) government in Assam, in the period between 1998 and 2001, unidentified gunmen undertook the process of systematically assassinating the family members, friends and allies of ULFA cadres. Although figures vary, since 1998, around 150 people are believed to have fallen victims to these 'secret killings' in Assam (Talukdar et. al.). In December 2003, the Royal Bhutan Army undertook a massive military operation, Operation All Clear, in order to flush out the ULFA and NDFB militants who had established a number of base camps in Bhutan. The operation led to the liquidation of many top leaders of the ULFA and significantly reduced the strength of the rebel group (Bhattacharyya, *Rendezvous* 180). The Assam government has been undertaking continuous efforts to bring the ULFA to the negotiating table. In 2005, a committee consisting of Assamese notables from civil society, local media and pro ULFA political groups called the People's Consultative Group (PCG) was formed which conducted several rounds of talks with central authorities (Bhattacharjee, *Rendezvous* 186). However the talks failed as the ULFA refused to enter into a full ceasefire agreement and it still refuses to compromise on its demand for the sovereignty of Assam.

The Meitei separatist groups in Manipur claim to be working with Leftist ideologies and are allegedly aided and abetted by Maoist and Naxalite groups within the country as well as similar outfits abroad. The United Liberation Front (UNLF) was formed in 1964. Several other militant groups followed in the late seventies to early nineties, such as the Revolutionary Peoples' Front (RPF), People's Liberation Army of Manipur (PLA), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), Kanglei Yaol Kanba Lup (KYKL), along with outfits like the NSCN(IM), NSCN-K, Kuki National Army (KNA), Kuki National Front (KNF), Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA), Kuki Liberation Army (KLA), which are active in the hilly areas of the state (Subramanian 83). Currently, there are at least 26 different militant groups operating in the state of Manipur and the state has been declared a "Disturbed Area" since 1980. Since the

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implementation of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in Manipur in 1980, there have been frequent reports and protests against alleged human rights violations by the Armed Forces in Manipur. On November 2, 2000, 10 civilians waiting at a bus stop in Malom in Manipur were allegedly shot dead by Assam Rifles cadres. (Lintner 136). The incident, which came to be known as the Malom Massacre sparked large scale protests in Manipur. Irom Sharmila Chanu, a Manipuri activist, has been on an ongoing hunger strike since 2 Novemer 2000, demanding the withdrawal of the AFSPA from Manipur. In July 2004, a Manipuri woman named Thangjam Manorama Devi was allegedly raped and killed after being picked up by the Assam Rifles on suspicions of alleged links with the PLA. The incident was protested by a group of elderly Manipuri women who stripped naked in front of the Assam Rifles headquarters at Kangla Fort in Imphal, holding banners that read "Indian Army, Rape Us" (Subramanian 76). In the wake of such mass protests and widespread condemnation, the Indian government set up a review committee under the former Supreme Court judge Jeevan Reddy which recommended the repealing of the AFSPA in its report submitted on June 6, 2005. However, the recommendation has not been implemented by the Indian government due to its opposition by the Armed Forces. In 2013, a high level judicial enquiry headed by the retired Supreme Court judge, Santosh Hegde was constituted to probe six encounter deaths in Manipur. The enquiry pronounced the victims to be innocent and suggested making the AFSPA act more humane and the Armed Forces more accountable. It has also recommended regular reviewing of the Act in order to assess the necessity of its continued implementation in a particular area (Phanjoubam, *The Northeast* 61).

There has been much criticism among the international community against the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which has been in force in Northeast India since over 50 years. The British government in India had enforced the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Ordinance on August 15, 1942 to maintain law and order during the Quit India Movement. Similar ordinances were issued by the Indian government in 1947 to control Partition related violence. In September 1958, the Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act was imposed on the Naga Hills as a measure against the growing Naga insurgency. The Act confers upon any commissioned officer, warrant officer, non-commissioned officer, or any other person of equivalent rank in the armed forces the power to shoot, kill and arrest a suspect without a warrant. It also enables them to enter and

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search without a warrant or destroy premises suspected of harboring or sheltering rebels. Section 6 of the Act provides immunity to Armed Forces personnel against arrest or prosecution for anything done or suspected to have been done in the discharge of official duties (Subramanian 71-72). After the creation of the states of Manipur, Meghalaya and Tripura with the passing of the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act in 1971, the Act was amended to cover the states of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura and the Union Territories of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. With the creation of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh as fully fledged states in 1987, the Act was further revised to cover these states as well. Until recently, the Act has been in force in the states of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur (except the Imphal Municipal Area), Tripura (40 police stations), the Tirap and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh and a 20 km belt in the states with a common border with Assam (Chadha, *Armed Forces* 11). In March 2015, the Government of India extended the AFSPA to all districts of Arunachal Pradesh. However, the order was revoked in May and currently the Act is in force in nine police stations of the state bordering Assam. In May 2015, nearly 18 years after its enforcement in the state, the AFSPA was withdrawn in Tripura by its state government. Apart from Northeast India, the AFSPA has also been in force in Jammu and Kashmir since July 6, 1990, after the Indian Parliament passed the Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act in September 1990. Earlier, the Act had also been implemented in Punjab and the Union Territory of Chandigarh under the Armed Forces (Punjab and Chandigarh) Special Powers Act of 1983.

Arvind Narrain points out that the use of fatal force by the Indian state on its citizens has its roots in colonial policy, which continue to be practiced by the postcolonial state. He finds links between the use of fatal force by the state and control over and management of political expression in India (Narrain 146). In spite of continuous mass protests, court appeals and review committees, the draconian AFSPA has not been reviewed or repealed.

Michael Hechter points out that war is glorified only when it takes place between nation states. On the other hand, "civil wars, or conflicts defined, by at least some participants, as taking place between members of the same nation, are tragic occasions which are quickly put out of mind, and rarely glorified" (Hechter 3). Namrata Goswami

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locates the Indian state's response to armed ethnic conflicts in the Northeast within three conceptual parameters:

1. Limited and proportionate use of force.
2. Use of dialogue and negotiations.
3. Structural changes. ("Armed Ethnic" 11)

She points out that in spite of more than 60 years of experience in the area, the Indian army views counter-insurgency as secondary to its primary duty of defending the country from external threats. This has led to the lack of serious attempts at doctrinal innovations on the part of the Indian Army as far as its counter-insurgency strategies are concerned. According to her, the routine training undergone by a counter-insurgency operative within the Indian Army is unable to satisfactorily attune him to doctrinal aspects related to activating a "trust and nurture" atmosphere among the population in the area of operation. She holds these policy drawbacks responsible for the many excesses committed by anti-insurgency forces in the Northeast. The peace process has proved particularly successful in the state of Mizoram, but she points out that imprudent steps taken by the Indian forces during its counter-insurgency missions, such as the forced grouping of Mizo villages have led to deep seated resentment among the Mizo population against the Indian nation ("India's Counter-Insurgency" 72).

While an odd commentator might occasionally, and with much caution, call the AFSPA "a need of the hour", most authors argue that the anti-insurgency measures adopted by the Indian state have aggravated the sense of alienation in the region and pushed it towards further unrest. Uddipana Goswami argues that the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 (AFSPA) forms the core of the Indian Government's relationship with the Northeast region. She argues that the act is only a symptom of a larger malaise characterised by alienation, militarisation, and a dangerous counter-insurgency strategy ("Armed in Northeast" 1). Bethany Lacina emphasises on the importance of the reformation of the police and judiciary in the Northeast and argues that it is the rule of law that should be prioritised in policy formulations for the region (340).

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3. Women in Time of Violence

3.1. The Traditional Setting

Traditionally, the women of Northeast India have enjoyed a relatively higher degree of freedom and respect in their societies as compared to their counterparts in the rest of the country. Literature on the area often shows the strong roles women of the Northeast have played in the social, political, cultural and economic arenas of the region. The women of Manipur are especially remarkable for their active engagement with the socio-political issues of their societies throughout history. Manipuri women have also played a strong role in the economic arena of the state. In pre-colonial Manipur, women's groups are said to have enjoyed the power of appealing for clemency from the king in particular cases. During the colonial period, women controlled the food supplies and the markets and acted as a dominant economic force in Manipur. The two *Nupi Lan* or 'Women's War's by Meitei women bear evidence to the crucial position held by women in the sphere of economic as well as political decision making in Manipur. The first *Nupi Lan* of 1904 began as protest by women traders of Kwairamband market in Imphal against the *Lallup* system, a ruling of the then British political agent that forced the Meitei men to rebuild colonial officers' bungalows destroyed in suspected arson. In spite of severe resistance measures by the colonial administration, the women protesters eventually forced the rulers to withdraw the burdensome *Lallup* system. The second *Nupi Lan* began in 1939 with agitations by Meitei women, many of whom regularly traded in rice and other household goods at the main market in Imphal. The movement began as a protest against the unjust and exploitative export of rice produced in the princely kingdom of Manipur by Marwari traders in the face of an impending acute shortage of rice within the state. In the initial stages of the protest, and in the demonstrations that continued sporadically for the best part of a year, the bulk of the protesters were women. The 'women's war' had succeeded in opening up to public debate issues which had previously been the concern only of the small emergent political elite, namely the incompetence, nepotism and corruption of the rule of Maharajah Chura

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Chand and the need for wide constitutional reforms (Parratt and Parratt 916; Subramanian 34-38; Yambem 327-331).

Most of the societies in the Northeast, except the Khasis, Garos and Jaintias of Meghalaya, are patriarchal. Naga society is primarily patriarchal and Naga women's place in society varies from tribe to tribe according to the particular traditions they follow. Thus, Angami women enjoy a powerful position in the domestic sphere, but they are allowed little say in clan meetings. Ao women, on the other hand, wield more power in the public space. Sema women are said to have sometimes accompanied men to the battlefield as and when such need did arise. During inter-village feuds, Naga women at times acted as mediators for peace. There existed a tradition among Tangkhul Naga women of acting as *pukhreila*s at the time of war: a person who assists the injured, calls and participates in peace missions between warring tribes (Kannabirān and Menon 109; Samom 234). In the Khasi society of Meghalaya, which traditionally follows a matrilineal structure, authority, title, inheritance, residence after marriage and succession are traced through the female line. Khasi women have traditionally played an active role in the resolution of political crises in their society. In the hills of Manipur, Gaidinlieu, a Naga woman became the leader of a resistance movement among a section of the Naga tribes, comprising the Rongmei, Liangmei and Zeme Nagas. Variously referred to as the Heraka or Zeliangrong Movement, it was aimed at forging unity among Naga tribes and resisting British rule. Gaidinlieu, who was sentenced to life imprisonment by the British, became the first Naga to be recognised as a freedom fighter by the Indian Nationalist Movement. Jawaharlal Nehru began to refer to her as 'Rani'. However, rather than its role in the freedom struggle, the Heraka movement is now seen more as a clash between the new social and religious order and the older traditions among hill populations (Lintner 61; Thomas, "Sending Out" 428-431).

3.2. The Contemporary Scenario

In contemporary times as well, women in the Northeast are known for their active and crucial roles in the socio-economic and political spheres of the region. Their activities acquire particular significance against the backdrop of the socio-cultural turbulence in the

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region. Studies point out that in the last two centuries, women and children have made up close to 80% of refugees and the internally displaced around the world[6]. Women generally become the worst victims in conflict situations, and they have to bear the brunt of coping with the effects of conflict, whether in the form of feeding and caring for families that have lost all assets and income, rebuilding homes that have been destroyed, or building up a home and a new life in an alien place in the case of refugees and the displaced.

Paula Banerjee discusses how ideological constructions of the state are weighed against women who remain on the borders of democracy. Yet, in moments of conflict, at times, they assume centrality, when in areas of civil conflict men withdraw from civic life for compulsions of war and self-defence. In such a situation, the public sphere retreats into the private and women come to form civil societies. They assume roles that are completely new to them and confront and negotiate with the massive power of the state machinery in their everyday lives (*Borders* 138). Women's groups in the Northeast have been actively engaged in efforts to resolve the political crises in the region. The Naga Mother`s Association (NMA) is one of the most prominent of these groups. It was founded on February 14, 1984, with its head office located in Kohima. Initially, it began as a mothers` group aimed at dealing with social problems, mainly alcohol and drug abuse and AIDS. Since the beginning of its inception, the NMA has been working towards promoting peace in the Naga Society. In October 1994, the NMA formed a Peace Team with the motto of "Shed No More Blood" and initiated dialogues between the state government and the militant groups. The NMA is quoted to have condemned the bloodshed and killings in the state both by the state forces as well as rebel groups. Their preamble states that "Naga mother of Nagaland shall express the need of conscientising citizens towards more responsible living and human development through the voluntary organisation of the Naga Mothers` Association". In a pamphlet released on 25th May 1995 the representatives of NMA wrote that "the way in which our society is being run, whether by the over-ground government or the underground government, has become simply intolerable" (Banerjee, "The Naga Women's" 139). Once the ceasefire agreement had been negotiated between the Indian government and the NSCN(IM), the NMA was at the forefront of strengthening the process. The NMA works with the consciousness that one of the root causes of the conflict in contemporary Naga society is its chronic underdevelopment. The organisation is actively

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involved in various developmental issues in the Naga society like providing aid to children suffering from malnutrition and AIDS patients. They have also been fighting against the menacing problems of drug abuse and alcoholism in the state. It was partly due to their persistent efforts that Nagaland was declared a dry state. They have been carrying on their fight even in the face of constant threats by drug peddlers.

Manipuri women have played active roles in the contemporary socio-political spheres in the state and their activities and endeavours have often drawn international attention. Lucy T.V. Zehol states that from ancient times, the people of Manipur have been using two methods of protest – i) Non-violent or peaceful protest, and ii) Violent Protest. The writer says that it is the Manipuri women who have always taken recourse to the peaceful method and the men have adopted the second one as they consider the former to be below their dignity. It has been a constant practice among the Manipuris to first send a women's delegate to report a grievance to the king (Zehol 67-70). Women in contemporary Manipur have been victims of numerous acts of human rights violations by Indian security personnel. The Meira Paibi (Meitei for 'women bearing flaming torches'), an organisation of women in Manipur began in 1979 after a period of particularly vicious abuse of power by the Indian army forces occupying Manipur, which included several cases of rape and indiscriminate arrest and violence. The Meira Paibi has taken out strong and sustained protest programmes against such acts. It is a voluntary grass-roots vigilante women's movement organised in each locality, which has had some success in protecting citizens' basic rights. The organisation first began in the 1970s as a prohibition movement or *nishabandh* against rising alcohol and drug abuse in the society. Since the 1980s, rising cases of military excess led the women of the Meira Paibi to engage in protests against human rights violations by state forces in Manipur. The members of the Meira Paibi may still be seen patrolling the streets and lanes in Manipur at night with flaming torches, ready to protect those whom the security forces seek to abuse or detain. Several individual Manipuri women have also been making impacts in the social and political arenas. The activist Irom Sharmila Chanu, who has come to be fondly called the "Iron Lady of Manipur" or "Mengoubi" (Meitei for "the fair one"), has been on a fast unto death since November 2000, demanding the repeal of the draconian AFSPA from the state of Manipur. Binalakshmi Nepram, a writer-activist from Manipur is the founder member of the Control Arms Foundation of India. She launched the Manipuri

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Women Gun Survivor Network in 2007. She is an active member of International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) and Cluster Munitions Coalition. She has represented Indian civil society in various internationally held disarmament meetings. In 2004, Nepram was awarded a Ploughshares fellowship to work on small arms mitigation in the Indo-Myanmar region. In 2006, she was awarded the Dalai Lama Foundation's Women in Security Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP) Scholar of Peace Fellowship Award and completed a pioneering work on women and micro-disarmament issues.

Ananya Vajpeyi proposes 'resentment' as an alternative political practice for people in the Northeast. She counts the protest by a group of Manipuri women against army atrocities by demonstrating naked in front of the army headquarters in Kangla, Imphal on 15 July, 2004 an instance of such political practice. Under the banner of the AFSPA, citizens of the Northeast are rendered completely vulnerable, and may be searched, arrested, detained, interrogated, imprisoned, or killed at any time by any member of the armed forces. Vajpeyi points out how

> the protest of the women of Manipur on 15 July picks up on the reality of what it means to be reduced to bare life, and makes the naked body an icon of citizenship that has been stripped of rights and is left exposed to the depredations of sovereign power. The naked body is the perfect icon of this political condition of rightlessness and exposure (40).

Urvashi Butaliya described the Manipuri women's protest in terms of the women using the naked bodies as 'weapons' ("The Body"). Butaliya views the naked protest by the women as an act of protest against the commodification of women's bodies. However, she condemns the posting of pictures of the naked protesting women on newspaper pages and TV screens by the national media as a sign of their insensitivity and complicity in the same commodifying culture.

The women of Assam too have a long history of active participation in the socio-political affairs of the society. It was as early as 1915 when Mahila Samitis were formed in Assam, with the aim of the cultural economic and educational empowerment of women and children. Chandraprabha Saikiani, a Padma Shri awardee and a writer, social reformer and freedom fighter from Assam founded the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti in 1926. Besides dealing with issues like child marriage, widow remarriage and women's education, the

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organisation joined the independence movement. In fact, women from Assam participated in the Freedom Movement in large numbers and many women lost their lives as well. In the post Independence period too, women in Assam have been actively involved in peace initiatives both at the group as well as individual level. The Jnanpith Award winning Assamese writer Mamoni Raisom Goswami played a crucial role in initiating talks between the United Liberation Front of Assam and the Indian government and worked as a mediator and member of the Peoples' Consultative Group (PCG), a citizen's group constituted by the ULFA for initiating talks with the Indian government. Women's organisations in the state like the Kasturba Gandhi Memorial Trust, Anchalik Mahila Samiti and Sajagata Samiti have also been involved at different levels of peace initiatives in Assam. The All Assam Lekhika Samarooh and the All Assam Lekhika Sanstha are women writers' organisations, which, though primarily literary in their agenda, engage in general issues concerning women in the state as well (Mahanta, "Women's Movement" 43-45). The All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation and the Bodo Women's Justice Forum have also been working towards conflict resolution and other humanitarian missions among the Bodo community of Assam.

Women in Mizoram have formed an organisation called the All Mizoram Women's Federation or AMWF (Hmeiche Insuihkhawm Pawl) with the stated objective "to contribute our share by uniting our efforts towards the accomplishment of the great task of social reconstruction" (Nag, "Her Masters'" 241). Khasi women in Meghalaya have also been engaged in various activities in the socio-political spheres in the state. There are many women's organisations carrying out voluntary work in the state such as the Tura Mothers' Union, Ka Synjuk Kynthei, Ka Synjuk Ki Kynthei Riewlum or the Tribal Women Welfare and Development Association of Meghalaya, Ka Seng Longkmei Laitumkhrah, Ka Seng Kynthei Nongrim Hills, Ka Lympung Ki Seng Kynthei (Joshi 288-289). These organisations are actively engaged in dealing with social, economic and to some extent, political issues in Meghalaya. The Tura Mothers' Association, one of the oldest of these organisations, has worked towards bringing peace to the disturbed Garo Hills region of the state. They openly voice their condemnation of militant activities in the region (Lyngdoh, "Women's Movements" 83-84).

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The women of the Northeast, who have traditionally been strong and active agents in the socio-political fields in their societies, have also been the victims of violence perpetrated by both insurgent elements as well as state agencies. Many studies have tried to examine the situation of the women in Northeast India in the face of the violent atmosphere of the region. According to Binalakshmi Nepram, rape in conflict situations or under repressive regimes serves a strategic function and acts as a tool for achieving specific military or political objectives (17). Indu Agnihotri and Vina Mazumdar have made a study of the nature of violence against women and the responses of the women's movement in India to violence. fundamentalism and the debate on economic role and processes. They draw attention to the political violence in the form of rape and other atrocities committed against women and others in Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Tripura, Punjab or Kashmir by the armed or para-military forces, which are often sought to be condoned by the administration under cover of action taken to put down subversive activities. The writers find in this a reflection of a cynical societal response to transgression by women of conventional gendered norms of social behaviour, which in turn are defined along lines of caste and status. They claim that this applies to the increasing social acceptance of violence against women in the country (1872).

Paula Banerjee and Ishita Dey have made a study of how women play multiple roles in conflict. They show that women can both be the aggressor and the victim, but in both capacities they are always unequal to men and this inequality can bring forth unusual alliances. They draw attention to the fact that women do not accept their situation of vulnerability passively and have innovatively created alliances at times with the Indian state and at other times with the rebel movements to create a space in which they can be heard, and that can be considered as their own space of empowerment (4).

Samir Kumar Das views motherhood as one of the few modes of women's politics available in the Northeast region of India for women to articulate and engage in democratic resistance ("Ethnicity" 54). The writer analyses how the pain and anxieties of individual mothers about their children, who have suffered during conflicts in the region, translate into organised forms of collective resistance, which often also cut across ethnic, communal and national lines ("Ethnicity" 64-75). The Naga Mothers' association is a remarkable instance

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of a women's organisation that employs the language of motherhood and care to deal with social and political issues. Ritu Menon points out that the Naga Mothers' Association is the first group in India, and perhaps the first in South Asia, to employ the language and symbolism of motherhood as its organising and mobilising bases (Kannabiran and Menon 110). Samir Kumar Das has also highlighted the dyadic nature of the relationship between maternal care and the politics of resistance and explores the possibility of care becoming a mode of democratic resistance ("Ethnicity" 54). When set against the backdrop of a region torn by inter-communal strife and inter-ethnic rivalries, the women's organisations of the Northeast are seen to rise above these differences and work for peace among feuding communities. As Rita Manchanda and Antonia Potter Prentice have pointed out, women have won a merited reputation for bridging the divides of sectarianism and political orthodoxy to come together and organise for peace. The explanation they provide is that men can stick to their other labels (eg. communist, Marxist, revolutionary, reactionary, warrior etc.), as through them they can assess power, resources and energy. On the other hand, women are seen to organise in the way marginalised people do – "their lack of status forces them to seek common ground and shared positions, even with plenty of disagreement and some unresolved issues along the way" (Manchanda and Prentice 3-4). Women's groups in Nagaland have continuously worked to reduce inter-factional conflicts and facilitate communication. The Watsu Mungdung and the Tangkhul Shanao Long (TSL), which operates both in Nagaland and Manipur, have been working along with other Naga organisations to reduce the violence and brutalisation of the Naga society. The Naga Women's Union in Manipur has been working towards resolving the Kuki-Naga conflict in the state. The Naga Women's Union of Manipur, through joint efforts with members of the NMA, have been making attempts at reconciling feuding militant groups and bringing an end to factional killings.

However, not all women's groups in the Northeast can claim absolute inclusiveness and unbroken solidarity with other groups. In Manipur, which is plagued by layers of ethnic divisions and conflicts, valley organisations, such as the Meira Paibi are accused of being partial to the causes of Meitei women only and of remaining silence on cases of abuse among women of the hill tribes by state forces as well as valley-based militants. Accusations have also surfaced regarding differences across Meira Paibis representing different villages

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(Laishram 99). Meira Paibi members have also been accused of carrying out moral policing in the society (Subramanian 64). Women's groups in Assam too have advocated regressive moral codes regarding the dress and behaviour of women on several occasions.

3.3. Patriarchy and Its Shackles

Although it is commonly assumed that the women of the Northeast enjoy greater freedom and mobility compared to women in the rest of the country, social prejudices against women are not entirely absent in the region and their participation in the political arena is quite limited. Sajal Nag draws attention to the fact that women's participation in the region is limited to the civic sphere, and there is very little representation of women in actual political processes. In spite of the active role played by Naga women's groups, in the initiation of peace negotiations, none of these organisations or any female representatives were included in the talks between NSCN(IM) and the central government. Nag points out the poor representation of women in the assemblies of all the states in the Northeast. Even at the village council level, which is structured in accordance with traditional community norms, women's participation is largely restricted. All the Naga militant groups have provisions for a women's wing and they have large numbers of women members. However, here too, the status quo is maintained and the women are relegated to a secondary position compared to male cadres. The patriarchal domination of women and their exclusion from politics and decision making processes is a reality in the Northeast. He points out that the Assam Agitation owed a large part of its success and appeal to the large scale participation of women in it. And yet, women leaders of the movement were deprived of participation in the AGP government that grew out of the Assam Movement leadership. The political leadership in all the Northeastern states are sharply opposed to the idea of reservation of seats for women ("Her Masters'" 216-226).

It is not only in the modern political set up that women of the Northeast are allowed limited participation. In spite of the generally egalitarian image of the tribal societies of the Northeast, these societies too are based upon largely patriarchal principles. Women are not allowed participation in any of the traditional village councils. This is true of the matrilineal societies of Meghalaya as well. The traditional customs related to marriage and property transfer are also hugely unfavourable to women. Women are not allowed to inherit the

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father's or husband's property among most of the tribal societies in the Northeast[7]. In Nagaland, the question of women's right to inherit ancestral property is a heated debate. The Naga journalist Charles Chasie rationalises the Naga custom of denying women rights of inheritance:

> Suppose ancestral properties were bequeathed to a woman who married outside the village, even outside the tribe, and she in turn, bequeaths these properties to her children, what would happen? The day these children come to claim their mother's legacies, inter-village and inter-tribe feuds would begin, chaos would result" (Chasie 260-261).

Chasie's views are representative of the attitude of most Nagas on the matter. Most of the tribes oppose any gender-related reforms in their societies claiming that it would alter their traditions. Women in these societies generally do not own land although they play a large part in agriculture and are often believed to in fact carry out a larger portion and the heavier parts in the agricultural work. The societies of the Northeast are largely free of many oppressive customs like dowry, bride burning, *purdah* etc found in the rest of the country. However, recent studies have shown that incidents of dowry seeking and dowry related violence are on the rise, especially among the non-tribal communities of Assam. Incidents of domestic violence are not all too infrequent in the region. Owing to patriarchal social norms, women are relegated to a subordinate position within and beyond the family. Thus, they are found to receive unequal access to healthcare, education and income when compared to their male counterparts.

Sexual violence against women is also found to be on the rise in the Northeast. The long running low-intensity conflict situation in the region is believed to be a major reason behind this rise in sexual violence against women in the region. A climate of prolonged armed conflict and unrest often gives rise to an aggressive 'macho' culture, which manifests itself in further limitations upon the movements of women as well as acts of violence against them. This situation is further complicated in the Northeast due to the state's inability to provide security to the women of the region. In fact, more often than not, the state itself has turned into a perpetrator of violence, which is evident in the large number of cases of women suffering abuse in the hands of security forces in the region. Women have become easy targets of violence at the time of inter-ethnic conflicts as well. The alarming spread of an AIDS epidemic in the Northeast has added to the woes of the women in the Northeast.

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45.36 % of the number of HIV positive cases in Manipur in the year 2001 was reported to be women. The stigmatisation and discrimination against HIV positive patients is found to be higher in the case of women than men (North East Network). Witch-hunting, a practice which is on the rise among some communities of Assam, has led to mental and physical torture, and in an alarmingly large number of cases, murder of men and women suspected to be 'witches'.

Women of the Northeast have also faced violence outside the region. They are often perceived in the rest of the country as either 'exotic' or 'immoral'. Such perceptions are believed to be responsible for the large number of cases of sexual abuse directed against women from Northeast India, especially in the Indian metros, to which an increasingly large number of people from the region have been migrating in recent years in search of better education and employment opportunities.

4. Cultural Changes

Northeast India, which is home to more than 220 ethnic groups and an equal number of languages, is a confluence of a variety of cultures and peoples. However, the traditional customs, ways of life and cultural practices of these peoples are undergoing drastic changes stemming from various factors. Popular views as well as the available literature on this area point out religious conversions, modern education and exposure to the modern world and lifestyle as the major causes of these changes.

The arrival of missionary education among the hill tribes since the mid nineteenth century brought about significant developments in the areas of women's position, removal of irrational beliefs and fostering a common space in which the different tribes who were divided by linguistic or geographical differences could come together. However, the spread of missionary education is believed to have altered traditional social structures and led to enculturation among the indigenous population. Many aspects of the cultural elements became curtailed due to missionary interventions, which were done away with or remodelled to suit the convenience of the missionaries and their goals (Sitlhou 81).

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Besides missionaries, state interventions have also resulted in profound changes in the social and cultural customs among the tribal populations. As early as the middle of the last century, Verrier Elwin had commented in this context,

> the suppression of head-hunting, which was closely inter-related with many aspects of Naga culture, will mean an inevitable decay in certain types of dance, personal ornamentation and tattooing, wood-carving and funerary ceremonial (*A Philosophy* 90).

Elwin, an otherwise ardent defender of a sensitive approach towards tribal cultures, too proclaimed that "there are more important things than 'culture'" and the doing way of 'head-hunting' has brought the tribes the 'greatest gift' of peace (ibid).

Charles Chasie's "Nagaland in Transition" studies the changes in the culture and traditional way of life of the Naga people in the colonial and postcolonial periods. He observes that the advent of the British, and exposure of the Nagas to the outside world, turned Naga society upside down and ushered in profound changes that would leave indelible scars that could never be erased. It did build up a sense of belonging among the otherwise diverse tribes and sowed the seeds of a common Naga identity, but at the same time, the carving up of Naga territory laid the foundations for future complications. The cumulative impact of these new changes was that while the world of the Naga grew and his mental horizons expanded, the Nagas also became confused and began to suffer an identity crisis which they had never known before. He says, "Naga society has frequently found itself overtaken by the current of events; that changes have come too suddenly and too fast, without the opportunity to digest and assimilate them. This also means that the process of choice has been affected" (4-5).

Tezenlo Thong also makes a study of the cultural changes in Naga society and culture due to contact with the western world in the colonial and postcolonial periods. He concludes from his study that the supplanting of the long evolved Naga cultural systems with Western cultural values and practices and the consequent penchant for mimicking the West have misplaced Naga society to a place where Nagas are competent in neither traditional skills nor in Western knowledge for the ordering of their life. Consequently, the contemporary Nagas lack in what Piotr Sztompka calls 'civilizational competence', which he has defined as 'a complex set of rules, norms and values, habits and reflexes, codes and matrixes,

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blueprints and templates' required 'for participation in modern civilization' (917). Talking in the context of the Mizos, Margaret Ch. Zama states that the Mizo identity is undergoing an intense phase of introspection. There is an increasing nostalgia about a much romanticised past of a brave and honourable Mizo people, guided by principles of *tlawmngaihna*, the Mizo code of honour and conduct. On the other hand, there is an increasing criticism of the progressive and 'enlightened' Christian society, which is believed to have destroyed the traditional pre-Christian ways of the Mizo ("Globalization" 10).

Thus, Christian proselytisation is often accused of being one of the main agents of what is now perceived to be harmful change among the ethnic groups of the region. There is a growing tendency to resist the onslaught of Christian religion, especially its effects upon the traditions and customs of communities. In many cases, there have been attempts among many groups to return to the pre-Christian ways and revive indigenous cultures and religions. In Meghalaya, there have been instances of people reconverting from Christianity to the traditional Khasi religion and organising to propagate its doctrines in the society in general. Alarmed by the growing Christian population, in Arunachal Pradesh too, a new trend has developed to preserve and revive traditional religions and customs. The Donyi Polo Movement, which seeks to repopularise and revive the worship of Donyi Polo, the traditional deities of the Tani people of the state, is one among a number of similar revivalist endeavours.

There have been efforts on the part of the Christian Church as well to adept itself to the traditional customs of the indigenous communities among which they work. In Mizoram, it was the Welsh Christian Missionaries who initiated the creation of the Young Mizo Association (YMA), the largest voluntary organisation in Mizoram, with the preservation of traditional Mizo culture and value system as part of its agenda. Christian Missionaries have also made crucial contributions towards preserving and developing the languages and cultures of many communities in the Northeast. They developed scripts and took steps to standardise languages like Khasi, Garo and Mizo, which did not have a script of their own. In Assam, it was the American Baptist Missionary who set up the first printing press in Sibsagar in 1836, which ushered in a new era in the history of Assamese language and literature, as it led to the evolution of the modern Asamiya language. During the mid

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nineteenth century, the British administration had introduced Bengali as the official language and the medium of instruction in schools in Assam. Along with the Assamese intellectuals of the period, the American Missionaries also strongly rallied in favour of reinstating the Asamiya language as the official language of Assam (Rao, "Politics of Tensions" 592-594; Talukdar, *Assam* 41-44). Jayeeta Sharma points out, "the shift to literacy was itself mediated through the missionaries and their message of Christian 'improvement'" (Sharma, "Missionaries" 273). In fact, colonial modernity and missionary interventions were instrumental in shaping fresh self-perceptions among communities inhabiting the region. By developing their mother-tongues, missionaries nurtured the 'identities' of the tribes they came into contact with. In a way, the steps taken by Evangelists towards the standardisation and development of the languages of these communities laid the foundations of what Benedict Anderson would term 'print-capitalism', which gave a new fixity to language, and in the words of Anderson, helped to build "that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation" (44). Throughout the postcolonial period, language would become a crucial and contentious rallying point in nationalistic struggles and inter-community conflicts in the region.

Although the dominating discourse stresses on the gradual loss of indigenous traditions, there are yet others who claim that the loss of folk traditions in the Northeast has been minimal or none at all. Esther Syiem argues that "The oral nature of Khasi society has never completely broken down even in the face of the cultural and religious invasions that brought with them the power of the written script" ("Social Identity" 130). Although the folk tradition seems invisible, she states, it continues to live on in a liminal state, as a 'pre-text' or 'sub-text' of society and continues to exert pressure for its dissemination, assimilation and re-visitation in contemporary society and cultural forms. She writes, "it continues to aerate the channels of communication with a community's inner sense of self. It fulfils the criterion for its continued existence in providing a multilateral scaffold for the constructs of the racial imagination ("Social Identity" 132). Speaking in the context of the contemporary Angami Naga marriage customs, Kedilezo Kikhi states that the incursion of Christianity in Naga culture has led to changes as well as interesting continuities. She comments, "No doubt, Christianity has initiated a process of far reaching social and cultural change among

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the group, but Naga Christianity is typically Naga in character ("Changes and Continuity" 268).

However, it must be remembered in this debate that much before the advent of Christianity, a large part of the ethnic populations in the Northeast had come under the influence of other major religions like Hinduism and Buddhism as well, which can be said to have caused as much de-tribalisation as Christianity has done. Interactions with the cultures of the various tribes of the region have also enriched and shaped the 'Great traditions' of these major religions in turn. Tribal identity has never been a static identity in the past and a process of continuous evolution is inevitable. However, it is not entirely untrue that like all postcolonial societies, the sudden imposition of modernity from above on the tribes of the Northeast during the colonial period has led to upheavals among the communities in the region. T.K. Oommen divides the different approaches adopted by sociologists and anthropologists on the question of the 'assimilation' of tribal cultures. While the 'assimilationist' view prescribes that tribal populations should adapt to the 'high culture' of upper caste Hindus, the 'isolationist' view advocated by people like Verrier Elwin, suggests that tribal societies should be left alone. The third approach, which Oommen calls the 'acculturationist' view, recommends selective mutual borrowing of cultural elements between tribal and non-tribal societies (9). The Constitution of India provides for ancient tribal traditions to evolve at their own pace. The only areas where interference is believed to be essential are rituals and customs which conflict with the basic rights of people such as health and hygiene, drinking water, education, employment, food and shelter and status of women and children. Article 371 A of the Constitution provides special protection to Naga customary religion, laws and procedure. The British had largely adopted an isolationist policy towards the hill populations of Northeast India. The continuation of systems such as "Inner Line" introduced in colonial times has kept most of the hill populations segregated from their surrounding cultures. In spite of such elaborate measures aimed at preserving tribal culture, most tribal societies of the Northeast have undergone drastic changes since colonial times.

The advent of colonisation brought about immense and irreversible upheavals in the cultures of various peoples across the Indian subcontinent. This is true of countless

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colonised societies across the globe. However, the experience of cultural turmoil under the impact of colonial intrusion varies among different societies of the world. India has never been a homogenous unit in itself and the experiences and effects of colonisation have been different across different regions and communities in the country. The political, geographical and cultural peculiarities of the region which has come to be called Northeast India led to a very singular experience of colonial rule and its after-effects in this region. Functionalist theorists of collective social behaviour argue that drastic change leads to political violence and revolutions. Chalmers Johnson believes a changing society to be a necessary, though not a sufficient cause of revolution and political violence (62). He says,

> When sources of change do impinge on a social system, one of two circumstances will result: either homeostatic changes will keep the system in equilibrium, or the pressure will exceed the homeostatic capacity of the system, thereby producing value-environmental dissynchronization and system disequilibrium. The cause of disequilibrium is the failure of homeostatic mechanisms to work – that is to say, the pressure has been so sudden, intense, or unprecedented that it has incapacitated the routine institutional procedures and arrangements of system for self maintenance. (73)

The complex dynamics of colonisation, history, identity, power, knowledge and representation in Northeast India have given rise to a situation which varies in many ways from the rest of the country. While this aspect and its relationship to the literature of the region will be scrutinised in more detail in a later chapter, the following is a brief analysis of the question of identity politics in the region.

5. Indigenous Cultures and Identity Politics

Max Weber had held that 'primordial phenomena' like ethnicity and nationalism would decrease in importance and eventually vanish as a result of modernisation, industrialisation and individualism. However, this never came about. On the contrary, ethnicity, nationalism and similar forms of identity politics grew in political importance in the world throughout the twentieth century, particularly since World War II (Eriksen 2). In fact, Weber's proclamation stands based upon limited assumptions, for contemporary studies on nationalism reveal an intricate relationship between early capitalism, industrialisation, political individualism and the birth and consolidation of nationalism in

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Western Europe, which subsequently spread to the post-colonies through modernisation. Myron Weiner has argued instead, that the modernisation process nurtures the growth of ethnic identification and ethnic cohesion (*Sons* 3).

Since Independence, the Northeast region has turned into a hotbed of violent ethnic assertions and conflicts between its numerous ethnic groups. Yet, until the advent of the British, there existed long established systems of political, economic and cultural co-operation among the various peoples of the region. Bérénice Guyot-Réchard describes the process of movement and interaction among various ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups in the Eastern Himalayan region in the pre-colonial period as being based on complex logics, which are starkly different from modern day frameworks of sovereignty and 'international relations'. She, however, warns against any romanticising of such interactions, for there also existed much conflict, tensions, competition, prejudices as well as 'civilising' missions (11). The definitions of group identities in pre-colonial times were relatively fuzzy. There are many recorded instances of tribes assimilating into the fold of larger groups and this has been found to be a quite common occurrence. Thus, the Kawlni, Chawngte and Fanai tribes merged into the Lushai tribe in the early nineteenth century. The Lushais themselves entered the larger Mizo identity around 1900. Again, in the early twentieth century, the Zeme, Liangme and the Rongmei tribes merged to form the new ethnic group – the Zeliangrong. Such instances of ethnic assimilations and conversions have been taking place till current times. Thus, a Garo village on the Assam-Meghalaya border 'converted' to a Karbi identity not so long ago (Ramirez, "Ethnic" 281-293). Another pertinent example is the case of the Ahom community living in Assam and adjoining areas. The Ahoms migrated from Mong Mao in the Yunnan province of China to Brahmaputra valley in circa 1220 CE. The Ahoms subsequently established a kingdom in eastern Assam in 1228 CE and ruled most parts of Brahmaputra Valley for the next 600 years until the British annexation of Assam in 1828. The long period of Ahom rule is largely held responsible for the political and cultural consolidation of the Brahmaputra valley. Right from the beginning, the Ahoms are believed to have displayed a high tendency towards cultural assimilation. As they settled down in Assam valley, the Ahoms are believed to have practised exogamy to a large extent, which strengthened its relationships with other communities of the area. Along with forming political alliances with other groups, people from other communities were given

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administrative positions and gradually many ethnic groups in the region like the Borahi, Moran, Chutiya and Naga communities were inducted into the Ahom fold, in a process often referred to as 'Ahomisation'. This significantly altered the social structure and cultural practices of the Ahoms. Towards the middle of the fifteenth century, Hindu religious customs were gradually adopted by the Ahoms, beginning with the royal clans and by the commoners subsequently, although traditional religious customs were not discarded altogether. Around the same period, the Ahoms also adopted the Asamiya language in the court as well as among the masses. These instances illustrate the accommodative and open-ended nature of group identities in the region in pre-colonial times.

Theoretical critics of identity politics claim that identities are social constructions and not natural entities (Alcoff and Mohanty 3). They underline the fact that identity formation is a process shaped by political economic and cultural forces and they mutually constitute one another in distinctive and dynamic ways (Sánchez 35). Ethnic self-consciousness and identity assertion in contemporary Northeast India has led to sharp definitions of group identity and membership. Yet, many of these groups only came into being as units only after their interaction with these 'outsiders'. An interesting example is the case of the Nagas. The Nagas claim to be a nation and have been engaged in a fierce struggle for sovereignty and self rule since Independence. But the several tribes that constitute the Naga group lived largely in isolation and mortal enmity until colonial and evangelist interventions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In their pre-colonial setting, loyalties and sense of belonging did not extend beyond one's family, the 'khel', clan or village cluster. The very concept of a 'tribe' did not exist until the introduction of new administrative structures and value systems by missionaries and British colonisers in the nineteenth century (Lintner 47). In spite of living in a rather compact area, the village clusters spoke mutually unintelligible languages and there is still considerable variety of dialects within the language of each Naga tribe. The origin and meaning of the term 'Naga' is obscure and it has been noted that at the time of the arrival of British colonisers and American missionaries, they did not have a common name to refer to themselves. Tribal designations like Angami, Ao, Sema, Rengma, Lotha, Konyak and Tangkhul came into being in the wake of missionary contact (Lintner 52). This phenomenon is common throughout most of Northeast India and most of the group names in the region are exonyms. It is not just the names but the attribution of distinguishing

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characteristics of the various groups also owes much to the gaze of 'outsiders'. Colonial observers have pointed out the difficulty of finding solidarity or commonalities between population groups which are generally perceived to make up a tribal community or nation (Hodson 80-81). J.H. Hutton had commented that, "it is exceedingly difficult to pronounce a test by which a Naga tribe can be distinguished from other Assam and Burma tribes which are not Nagas" (Hutton, "Introduction" xvi). Yet, most of these groups from the Northeast are engaged in efforts to assert and also refashion their distinctive cultural identities in the postcolonial period. These activities have become deeply connected to the politics of identity that has dominated the political and cultural landscape of the region throughout the post-Independence period. They are also closely related to the struggle between communities for the control of resources and privileges.

5.1. Culture, Identity and Literature

Tom Nairn claims that all nationalism is both healthy and morbid. "Both progress and regress are inscribed in its genetic code from the start" (335). Thus, it resembles the old two-faced Roman god Janus, the god of beginnings and transitions, who stood above gateways with one face looking forward and one backwards. Nationalism is standing over the passage to modernity, "As humankind is forced through its strait doorway, it must look desperately back into the past, to gather strength, wherever it can be found, for the ordeal of development" (76). In other words, primitivist and atavistic tendencies are intrinsic parts of nationalism and nationality formation. With an ever growing sense of cultural consciousness among the peoples of Northeast India in the post-colonial period, questions of cultural distinctiveness and its preservation have become the central rallying points of the identity politics in the region. In keeping with this general trend, the writers of the region too display a zeal for the recording and preservation of folklore and folk traditions. The project of writing in the Northeast, in this way becomes an essential part of the project/s of cultural nationalism manifest in the region. John Hutchinson points out that it is two groups that play the most prominent roles in cultural nationalist movements – humanist intellectuals, which comprises chiefly of historical scholars and artists, and a secular intelligentsia. However, he attributes a more crucial role to the artist-as-intellectual in the task of the construction and

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sustenance of the cultural nationalist imagination. He says, "...if it is through the historian one learns of the national destiny, the paradigmatic figure of the national community is the artist" (15). The role being played by contemporary writers of the Northeast is not entirely different from that described by Hutchinson. Hutchinson points out that the 'myth-making' intellectuals undertake a process of recovering a history of the nation through all its triumphs and disasters, and these histories typically form "a set of repetitive 'mythic' patterns, containing a migration story, a founding myth, a golden age of cultural splendour, a period of inner decay and a promise of regeneration (14).

An ethnographic purpose often runs as an undercurrent in the works produced by contemporary writers of the Northeast. According to Regina Bendix "The most powerful modern political movement, nationalism, builds on the essentialist notions inherent in authenticity, and folklore in the guise of native cultural discovery and rediscovery has continually served nationalist movements since the Romantic era" (*In Search of* 7). While efforts undertaken by contemporary writers from the region have produced rich bodies of literature, their literary endeavours must be understood against the backdrop of the identity politics pervading the region.

Identity politics does provide marginalised groups with political agency which is crucial in securing emancipation. Rosaura Sánchez points out the crucial role that a critical politics of identity can play in political organising and challenging hegemonic discourses (33). However, in contemporary Northeast India, the process of organising under cultural denominations has created rifts and unending hostilities between various groups. Political critics point out that politics of identity tends to destroy social harmony and creates distrust of those outside the group (Alcoff and Mohanty 3). Their statement holds true for Northeast India where the lack of critical vision among groups practising identity politics has turned it into a seething ground of clannish feuds and political instability.

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6. Ecological Concerns

The Northeast region is known for its rich ecological diversity, pristine rain forests, temperate climate and natural beauty and bounty. At the confluence of the Indo-Malayan, Indo-Chinese and Indian biological realms, the Northeast region possesses a unique profusion of habitats, which feature diverse biota with high levels of endemism. The region's lowland and montane moist to wet tropical evergreen forests are considered to be the northernmost limit of true tropical rainforests in the world. Along with the west coast of India, the Northeast region has some of the Indian sub-continent's last remaining rain forests which support diverse flora and fauna and several crop species. It is recognised as a biodiversity hotspot due to its species richness and high level of endemism. However, in recent times, the region is facing huge threats in the form of environmental degradation. Jhimli Bhattacharjee has conducted a study of the nature and causes of environmental degradation in Northeast India. Adopting a Marxist approach, Bhattacharjee points out the annexation of the region by the British Empire as the crucial point in the ecological history of the region which gradually led to the degradation of its ecological set up. She finds a perpetuation of the same policies in the post independence period by the independent government of India, which, according to her, have led to further deterioration of the situation (44-46).

The Northeast is known not only for its rich natural resources and beauty, but also for its unique land use patterns, agricultural practices and traditional knowledge base. Environmentalists working in the region often point out the crucial role played in ecological conservation by many of the ethnic communities in the Northeast who are sometimes described as 'ecosystem people' because of the symbiotic relationship they share with nature and their dependence on its bounty for their livelihood. Traditionally, the communities inhabiting the region manage the environmental resources through systems of agriculture, soil conservation, fertility management, irrigation management, livestock management and forest management, which they have tested, implemented, evaluated, modified and developed over centuries.

Various ethnic groups of Northeast India have preserved and protected several forest areas and even individual trees or animals due to their traditional belief and respect for

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nature. Many such forest patches, which are known as 'sacred groves', are located in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Meghalaya. The importance of sacred groves in the conservation of biological diversity has been well recognised. According to several reports there is a concentration of rare, endemic and endangered species in these sacred groves.

Community-based natural resource management in northeast India has a long history. S.C. Rai concludes that traditional ecological knowledge systems and institutions could serve as entry points into the sustainable utilisation and management of natural resources. This could be achieved through the exploration of the cultural practices of the local people and integrating useful aspects into the modern natural resource management expertise. With rapidly depleting biodiversity in the developing tropic regions, there is a greater utilization today than ever before of the value of respecting the "sacred" as a tool towards better conservation of natural resources. (248). Tiplut Nongbri has demonstrated, taking the example of the traditional beliefs and practices of the Khasis of Meghalaya, that these beliefs and associated practices have great functional value. She draws attention to the local reverence for parts of nature like the sacred groves and such trees and natural objects that they consider sacred. She holds such beliefs to be hugely responsible for a sustained relationship between man and nature in the Northeast that has preserved both for centuries. However, she also reminds about the sad fact of the disruption of this harmonious relationship in recent times, which is under threat from external factors such as Christianity, modern concepts of development and the market economy ("Culture and Biodiversity" 1-21). However, an uncritical assumption that the traditional practices of the indigenous peoples are always already the most ecologically sustainable may be quite misguided. Amita Baviskar who has written extensively on the issues related to the Sardar Sarovar Project on the Narmada points out that

> the present theoretical treatment of adivasis reifies "the grassroots", and is an idealisation of people's actual life, a representation that is vulnerable to refutation. Their low impact use of nature was probably as much adventitious as it may have been deliberate...it becomes hard to say whether their 'traditions' can be uncritically extolled as epitomising sustainability, and what potential they hold as an ideal in the present, vastly changed context (241).

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A number of hydroelectricity projects that are undergoing construction or are planned to be constructed on a number of rivers in the lower Himalayan region of Northeast India are believed to pose huge threats to the ecology of the Northeast and adjoining regions, especially those lying downstream. Environmental activists, local media, civil society groups and the people of the region are engaged in wide scale protests against what they claim to be the short sightedness of the government towards possible environmental impacts and displacement of indigenous communities due to the construction of these dams. The protesters have been demanding more power for local bodies and communities in the decision-making processes.

Government officials now project the Northeast as India's future power house. A policy document of the state government of Assam proclaims that the state could be "floating" on "hydro-dollars", as oil-producing west Asian countries presumably do on "petro-dollars", if its hydropower potential is harnessed fully (Baruah, "Whose River" 45). The expectation of the state's politicians that the state could make windfall gains from hydropower has facilitated New Delhi's drive to put hydropower development on the eastern Himalayan rivers on a fast track (Baruah, "Whose River" 41). The available literature on this area points out the possible severe and long term threats to the environment due to the construction of large dams in the eastern Himalayan region in the form of biodiversity loss, submerging of lands and forest cover, ecological imbalances including increasing seismic risks as well as displacement of people and the loss of traditional livelihoods of local communities. Sanjib Baruah points out what he sees as great unevenness in the distribution of potential gains and losses – and of vulnerability to risks after the construction of these exclusively hydropower dams, which he takes to account for a serious legitimacy deficit in India's ambitious hydropower development plans in the region ("Whose River" 42). The botanists Ranjit Dutta and Sarada Kanta Sarma show through a study that the 2000 MW Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Power Project, undergoing construction on the Subansiri river at the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border poses a real threat to the freshwater biodiversity of the downstream of Subansiri river basin by the regulation of the river through diversion, impoundment and reducing water discharge to the downstream (2953-2957). The Tipaimukh dam, proposed to be constructed on the river Barak at Tipaimukh, Manipur which happens to be a junction between the states of Assam, Manipur and Mizoram, is

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facing large scale controversies within the Northeast as well protests by civil society groups, media as well the opposition in neighbouring Bangladesh, which stands to be greatly impacted by the construction of the dam.

Many recent studies on environmental issues connect economic deprivation, migratory behaviour and ethno-linguistic clashes to be connected in varying degrees with environmental degradation. Scholars argue that developing countries of the world are more prone to such conflicts. Homer-Dixon and Jessica Blitt have argued that environmental change, population growth, and unequal social distribution of resources are the sources of environmental scarcity and these are the principal causes of many ongoing conflicts in developing countries (2). They point out that environmental scarcity produced as a result of these environmental changes lead to five types of social effects: constrained agricultural output, constrained economic production, migration, social segmentation and disrupted institutions, which in turn produce or exacerbate conflict among groups (10). Due to various types of environmental threats, the Northeast region is experiencing what Duncan McDuie-Ra calls environmental insecurity. He highlights the high level of environmental insecurity in Meghalaya arising out of rampant degradation in the form of changes in land ownership and usage, deforestation, changes in swidden agriculture and most importantly, mining. However, he points out the hypocrisy and opportunism involved in the politicisation of certain types of insecurities and the neglect of others, which he takes to be an indication of the highly complex relationships of environmental issues with economic and identity issues. He contrasts the instrumentalist approach which considers environmental insecurity as a catalyst for other forms of insecurity, especially violent conflicts between states or communities, with the constructivist approach which argues that the causes of environmental degradation are socially constructed by different actors and when successfully framed, they become issues of political and social significance ("Civil Society" 82-83).

These theses holds true in the case of Northeast India where environmental degradation, resource depletion and resultant displacement of populations have had a direct bearing on group clashes within the region.

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7. Conclusion

The constitution of Northeast India as a geo-political unit and a frontier region began with the advent of British colonialism into the region. Colonial administration led to catastrophic changes in the cultural practices, political arrangements, social structures and environmental balance of the region. The anxieties generated by these sudden changes have haunted the region throughout its postcolonial history. In fact, these anxieties are the very foundations upon which the Northeast region was constructed and by which it continues to be defined. Almost every corner of the Northeast has been directly or otherwise caught up in intense political conflicts in the period since independence. The societies of the region have been marked by the deep trauma they have undergone as a result of the endless political unrest, the manifestations of which can be seen in their literature and other contemporary cultural forms. Theodor Adorno argues that the social interpretation of lyric poetry "must discover how the entirety of a society, conceived as an internally contradictory unity, is manifested in the work of art, in what way the work of art remains subject to society and in what way it transcends it ("On Lyric Poetry" 38-39). However, he also warns that the knowledge of the society outside must be discovered through complete submission to the text and "nothing that is not in the works, not part of their own form, can legitimate a determination of what their substance...represents in social terms ("On Lyric Poetry" 39). Due to the complex socio-political context in which contemporary poetry from Northeast India is written and within which it is sought to be understood, a discussion of the socio-political history of the region in the very beginning of this study was felt to be crucial. After the exhaustive engagement in this chapter with the socio-political history of the region, the following chapters will analyse the poetry written in English from Northeast India against this larger socio-political backdrop.

Notes

[1] The condition came to be known as 'Railroad Spine'.

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[2] Indeed the sharing of pain holds great significance for the strengthening of a national community. Even Ernest Renan had marked out "suffering together" as a potent unifying force in the forging of national identities. In his words, "periods of mourning are worth more to national memory than triumphs because they impose duties and require a common effort" ("What is a Nation").

[3] South Asia Terrorism Portal. "India Fatalities 1994-2015"

[4] *Mautam* is a cyclic ecological phenomenon that occurs every 48 years in the Northeastern Indian states of Mizoram and Manipur, which are thirty percent covered by wild bamboo forests. One of its stages involves a rat boom, which in turn creates a widespread famine in those areas.

[5] 1. Bodoland Territorial Area District
2. Karbi Anglong Autonomous District
3. Dima Hasao Autonomous District

[6] "Internal Displacement: Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2006". Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Norwegian Refugee Council. p 6.

[7] The only exception to this rule is the Dimasa Kachari tribe. In a family belonging to this tribe, property is divided into three groups – male property, female property and common property. The male property is inherited by the sons equally and the female property is inherited by the daughters in equal amounts. In the absence of a male heir, the male property goes to the father's nearest male relative and in the absence of a female heir, the female property would pass on to the mother's nearest female relative. (NEN Report 20)

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Chapter 3

Modern Quests, Ancient Lore: Weaving Folklore into Poetry

We live in territories forever ancient and new,
And as we speak in changing languages
I, also, leave my spear leaning by the tree
And try to make a sign.

--from "The Voice of the Mountain" by Mamang Dai (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* 3)

The literature of Northeast India, like the region itself, is marked by immense differences and variety. And yet, one cannot deny the presence of certain shared features among the literatures of this region and one of these features is the display of a strong sense of 'rootedness' in local cultures. The poet Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih talks about the sense of rootedness which is visible everywhere in the poetry of the Northeast today. "The 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 "the very different regions" ("Hard-edged Modernism" 41). A manifestation of this sense of rootedness among the writers of the Northeast is found in their frequent use of myth and folklore as an inspiration and a component in their works. This chapter is an attempt to study the use of folklore of various ethnic communities by the poets against the backdrop of the larger contemporary social, cultural and political atmosphere of the region.

Northeast India is home to a large number of diverse ethnic groups and the literature emerging from this region carries within it aspects and elements of the cultures of these people. Most of the indigenous peoples of the Northeast do not have traditions of written literature, but they possess rich treasures of myths, folktales and other forms of oral heritage. The writers writing in the region are frequently seen to exploit these rich reserves of myths and folklore and weave them into their contemporary works. Robin S. Ngangom finds it quite natural for poets of Northeast India to engage with folk traditions and oral literature in their poetry. In spite of having inherited a rich cultural and literary tradition as a Manipuri[1],

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he admits that it is the oral culture of the Khasi community that has inspired his poetry: "It is natural for someone from the Northeast of India to exploit the folk traditions he grew up with, to write of the hills when he is living in the hills. It is Shillong, which has moved me into this kind of poetry, Shillong with its gentle hills, the Khasis with their rich oral literature" ("Poetry in the Time" 170). Of course, sometimes the poems are difficult to follow for readers who are not familiar with these folk narratives and providing footnotes becomes almost indispensable. Although these writers do not have a written literary tradition to fall back upon, their works become a continuation of the oral traditions from their native cultures, as the oral past flows into the written present through their works. This lends uniqueness to the contemporary written literature from this region in the way it emerges out of these oral traditions.

The use of folk materials in their literary compositions by modern writers is not an unusual practice. Julia Kristeva has conceived the literary word as "an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context (36). The 'trace text' in a large number of modern literary texts quite often belongs to the realm of folklore. Kevin Paul Smith has illustrated that the history of popular literature, from Shakespeare to Shrek is thick with fairytales. A pervasive engagement with fairytales and other folk materials has become especially prominent in the fiction produced since the closing quarter of the last century. Alluding to this body of literary works as well as films produced during the said period, Smith contends that the fairytale has been used intertextually for postmodern ends (1). A.S. Byatt has also noted that novels in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have frequently incorporated forms and elements from myths and fairytales (130). She recounts that contemporary writers like Salman Rushdie and Angela Carter acknowledge their indebtedness more to tales than novels (124). The fascination and use of folklore materials in postmodernist fictional works, however, differs slightly from the weaving of folklore elements in contemporary literary works from the Northeast. In the former, the use of folklore forms part of a conscious metafictional strategy, while in the case of contemporary literary works from the Northeast, the significance is not limited to its stylising value. For a proper appraisal of the preoccupation of the contemporary writers of the Northeast with folklore, their works must be studied with an

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understanding of the larger socio-political context in the region. This chapter will attempt to understand the contemporary poetry from the Northeast, especially the poetry written in English against the backdrop of contemporary issues of identity politics which have critical political as well as cultural import in the Northeast region.

1. Ethnography and a Mythopoetic Vision

Most postcolonial societies of the world are seen to use literature and other representational devices for a revival of their cultural specificities and identities. As Sukalpa Bhattacharjee points out, literary intervention has been a dominant mode of postcolonial recovery in Northeast India ("Understanding" 6). She points out that in the face of systematic violence inflicted on their own languages and cultures by colonialism, many postcolonial writers have advocated a complete return to the use of indigenous languages and literary forms. Many others, however, have recommended and taken to the use of the language of the coloniser by appropriating and re-informing it to suit the experiences of the postcolonial subject. The strategy is endorsed by Indian writers writing in English, such as Salman Rushdie who has pointed out: "those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it – assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers" (64). This phenomenon is gradually gaining ground in Northeast India as well where a growing body of writers is adopting the English language to represent the traditions and experiences of their communities.

Kailash C. Baral observes two interconnected features in emerging literatures from the Northeast – colonial legacy in the form of ethnographies and the ethnocentric imaginary, which he finds to be the driving force behind contemporary writing. "These two factors", he writes, "intersect colonial identity, construction and resistances to it" ("Articulating" 7). He says that in the absence of authentic written histories of most of the communities in the region, the writers have taken upon themselves the task of acting as cultural historians. Baral sees in their works materials for scripting alternative histories for these peoples. The lack of

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a written culture is another major driving factor behind the dominant ethnographic element in the literature from the Northeast. Parag M. Sarma points out that amongst the different ethnic communities of the region, the written is an extension and continuation from the oral tradition, and in the works of authors from Northeast India the oral and the written are often found to straddle the same narrative space (38). Most of the communities of the region in the pre-colonial times were oral societies, where verbal expressive behaviour like folk songs, myths and tales tried to harmonise the community within its environmental and cultural ecology. Tracing the etymology of the oral/written dichotomy, it would be appropriate to mention that the 'written' and 'oral' cultural denominations, in the wake of European colonialism, had been identified with the 'civilised' and 'less-civilised' or 'primitive' societies respectively. This dichotomy was further engendered by colonial anthropology, which conveyed and reinforced the impression that oral cultures were culturally inferior to written cultures. Classical anthropology perceived the oral to be archaic, 'traditional' and something of the past, as opposed to the literate, which is considered 'modern'. However, more recent anthropological studies have focussed on the simultaneous and collaborative existence of both the oral and the written in cultures across the world. In the Northeast too, the oral persists and is concomitant with the 'written' and authors like Ao and Dai, in their works fall back on their apparently intangible heritage to inform their creative writings (Sarma, "Towards" 38). Responding to a question whether the *Legends of Pensam* is "an attempt to record a disappearing tradition in the face of modernity" Mamang Dai replies –

> In a way, yes. Ours is an oral tradition, you know. I was trying to meet people and collect and record these oral narratives. You know, the small histories which were getting lost and when you talk to people even small things can trigger these memories off. (Sarma, "Towards" 43)

1.1. Folklore, Ethnography and Romantic Nationalism

Often writers writing in English in the Northeast seem to be working with a strong ethnographic purpose, perhaps perceiving the need to document and record in the absence of written histories. It will be useful at this point to have a look at the beginnings of folkloristics as a field of study. The field of folklore studies had its beginnings in European

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Romanticism. An avid interest in folklore was a basic characteristic of the romantic nationalist movement in Europe of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Scholar-patriots of the period explored the folklore of their pasts to look for 'models' on which to found the present and the futures of their nations. Johann Gottfried Herder, one of the leading thinkers whose ideas lay the foundations for the Romantic nationalist movement in Germany, propounded the idea that a specific national character was moulded by the peculiar circumstances of its physical environment and historical developments. He believed this national character or national 'soul' to exist in an organic relationship to the nation's environment and history. He went on to claim that the best expression of this 'national soul' or cultural pattern of a people is contained in the nation's folk poetry (Wilson 822-825). He proposed that the folk poetry of a people must be retrieved and preserved which, he believed, would provide models and material upon which a true national literature would grow. It was this supreme value accorded to folk literature during this period that led to the founding of European folklore studies, first in Germany and subsequently in other parts of Europe. The growth of nationalism in most European countries was marked by a zealous interest in the study of and the preservation and propagation of their folk culture. The Grimm brothers, inspired by ideals of nationalism and romanticism of the early nineteenth century, took up the collection of folktales and legends in the hope of salvaging what Alan Dundes has called "something ur-German...something truly Teutonic" (56).

However, folklore studies in the colonies came into being under very different circumstances. Sadhana Naithani proclaims that there is a marked difference between 'colonial folkloristics and European romantic folkloristics ("India" 235). She points out that folkloristic initiatives are visible in India from the middle of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century through colonialist projects, the interest for which was generated and sustained not by the intrinsic poetic or artistic value of the materials, but by the colonial need to 'know' the world of the colonised to further the causes of the Empire (ibid.). However, the gradual growth of nationalism in the postcolonial world too, has been accompanied by a rise in interest among the native populations in antiquity, ancient traditions, folk religion and folklore. A similar trend is to be found in the postcolonial period in Northeast India. The earliest efforts in the field of the study and collection of folklore materials in undivided Assam of the early twentieth century were carried out by pioneers

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like Lakshminath Bezborooah. In the preface to his collection of folktales called *Burhi Air Sadhu*, Bezborooah has termed folktales the "autobiography of the community" (Nath 211). This was a period when a nascent Assamese nationalism was gathering momentum and Bezborooah's work in the field of folklore was couched within the larger nationalistic agenda of establishing and underlining a distinct identity for the Assamese people (Bhattacharjee, "Folklore Studies" 4). According to Christina Bacchilega, translations and adaptations of folklore in postcolonial literatures have been inflected by colonial and anti-colonial struggles and need to be studied accordingly ("Folklore and Literature" 459). An increasing eagerness among the English language writers from the Northeast of engaging with the region's folklore has to be examined in the context of its political significance.

Many of the contemporary writers in English from the Northeast have had the experience of working as folklorists and ethnographers. Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam* is a semi-ethnographic record of myths, tales as well as of day-to-day customs and community practices of the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh. She has also rewritten many Adi oral folktales for children. It is only natural that her ethnographic sensibility informs her verse as well. Her poem "Birthplace" introduces her people as the descendants of "solitude and miracles":

> We are the children of the rain
> of the cloud woman,
> brother to the stone and bat
> in our cradle of bamboo and vine
> in our long houses we slept,
> and when morning came
> we were refreshed
>
> There were no strangers
> in our valley.
> Recognition was instant
> as clan by clan we grew,
> and destiny was simple
> like a green shoot
> following direction
> like the sun and moon.
>
> The first drop of water
> gave birth to man.
> From red sheath
> to green stem

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and the spreading wind:

We descend
from solitude and miracles. (*River Poems* 79)

Like most ethnic communities of the Northeast, the Adi community into which Dai was born had its own set of cosmological beliefs and explanations of universal phenomena. She traces the roots of her community to its tranquil, isolated, uncomplicated past spent in a world where life and nature were viewed not through the modern lenses of logic and reason, but through an awed, reverent acknowledgement of mystery and miracle. Dai paints a similar picture of her birthplace through lyrical prose in *Legends of Pensam*:

> I was born in the mountains...The years circled us as if in a dream. Very few strangers crossed our paths. Every evening we sat on the bamboo veranda, my clan sisters and brothers and I, and gazed at the stars whose names we made up according to their configurations. The root of light was the plough, I remember. Or was it the lady who competed with the gods to weave a tapestry?...Back then, the village heaved with life, and I expected a great welling up of revelations, a web of magic through which we would step lightly like glittering spirits crowned with speech and thought. The years stretched before us like a singing forest; we were always poised to spread wings and float through the cool bamboo". (4)

The poet and writer Temsula Ao has also worked as a folklorist; she compiled the myths, folktales, folklore, rituals, laws, customs and belief system of the Ao-Nagas which was published in 1999 as *The Ao-Naga Oral Traditions*. The poems in her published collection *Songs from the Other Life* are based upon folktales, beliefs and customs of the Ao-Naga community. She speaks of the origin myth of the Ao-Nagas in her poem "The Stone People from Lungterok":

STONE-PEOPLE,
The worshippers
Of unknown. Unseen
Spirits
Of trees and forests,
Of stones and rivers,
Believers of soul
And its varied forms,
Its sojourn here
And passage across the water
Into the hereafter.

STONE-PEOPLE,
Savage and sage

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Who sprang out of LUNGTEROK,
Was the birth adult when the stone broke?
Or are the STONE-PEOPLE yet to come of age? (*Songs that Try* 50)

Ao has provided an explanation of the origin myth in her book *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*. According to the myth, the first Ao ancestors, precisely six men and women, burst out of six stones at a place called Lung terok. 'Lung' in the Ao language signifies stone, and 'terok' means six (83).

The poet Desmond Kharmawphlang, who teaches in the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies, Northeastern Hill University, is an active folklorist. He has remarked that "There is a strange and often paradoxical co-existence of the folk and the westernised, patches of rain-forests and streets choked with cars, ancestral values and corruption of the most visible kind [in Northeast India]" ("The Paradigm"). He believes that the contemporary milieu of the Northeast is charged with the haunting resonance of the past as well as the immediacy of the present and this presents to the folklorist a unique phenomenon for study and the virtually inexhaustible stock of folklore material, verbal and non-verbal, becomes critical. The myths, folk tales, beliefs and rituals of the communities of Kharmawphlang's home state Meghalaya, as well as his experiences as a folklorist form an intricate part of his poetry. His poem "Tyrchiang" is a telling example:

Coils of mythology, dough of clay,
the pact made with gods
on mud,
waters of the Sung Valley
shaping the lust and laughter
of these potters.

Stories twine and untwine as
spirals of wet earth are kneaded,
shaped and rolled.

Myths construct themselves
like the birthing of these urns
and vessels, deft hands
printing the metaphors of substance.

Tyrchiang, the wind among your
pines shames me with its
simplicity, I whose roots draw
deep from books to prop up

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my tribal bones. (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 144-145)

The poem "Last Night I Dreamed", describes his fantastic dream of being born as a folktale, a proverb and a riddle of the Khasi Hills:

Last night I dreamed that I
was a sperm swimming in the
womb of folklore.

I was born an idea and
delivered into a naked nation.
Mating with the elements
I was raised on speeding clouds
skywards, to be forged in fire.

Rains bore me to earth
and I crawled on all fours
scribbling ragged mythology
on the subsoil of time.

I entered the food chain and
became one with the sohtung leaf
to be consumed by the
eri worm.
I wintered in its silken cocoon
and a season later,
was spun into thread
on whistling looms:

I became a folktale.

Deft fingers plucked me
and, as I exited the tale,
grafted my flesh on the tongue
of experience:

I became a proverb.

I went from place to place
but always came back to you,
searching the corner of your lips
for clever words to trade:

I became a riddle.

In another lifetime, I would dream
of becoming a sperm in
the womb of poetry. (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 145-146)

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Abrahams has observed that the common approach in the study of the relationship between folklore and literature has been that of folklore-in-literature. He states that this approach mainly serves to gloss over, "using one's folkloric knowledge to illuminate content or formal features of a work of art" (82). However, the integration of folklore and written literature is not that simple. Scholars have frequently pointed out fundamental differences between folklore and literature. De Caro and Jordan have drawn up a list of essential differences between the two modes of communicative media: "written language vs. oral (and even non-verbal); silent reading by a 'public' vs. hearing/watching a performance; fixed, printed text vs. a shifting, unwritten one; a physical text vs. memory; a rather complex infrastructure of editors, publishers, and booksellers vs. a simple one of a few people in contact with each other" (qtd. in Bacchilega, "Folklore and Literature" 453). European scholars drew attention in the 1970s to the performative rather than textual characteristics of folklore (Bacchilega, "Folklore and Literature" 449). Jakobson and Bogatyrev were especially vocal about the distinction between folklore and literature. They aligned folklore with langue and claim that literature is oriented towards parole (10).

Despite the differences between oral folkloric traditions and modern literature, poets from the Northeast have managed to bring the two together to some extent by frequently adopting the stylistic features of folk literature in composing their works. In one of her interviews, Mamang Dai has talked about the influence of the choric, musical and mystical essence of Adi language and folklore in her works:

> The Adi language is said to be euphonious. Endings change all the time to make the spoken word musical. Maybe this has crept into the way I write...I am uncomfortable if a sentence doesn't 'sound' right. I don't know if this can be drawn as a parallel with Arunachal cultural narratives that are chanted along with a chorus of singers who repeat certain lines for emphasis and rhythm. There's also the tribal narrative technique that is a public performance. The audience is carried forward by the music and chanting and I feel like this sometimes – maybe the syntax is open, but the focus is movement, an upsurge of feeling and the language of song; never mind the chronological order etc, belief, or disbelief, magic or science. Things happen, and there is no need for explanation. ("The Phenomenal")

Scholars have identified elements of style as well as structure commonly found in folklore, which include opening and closure, repetition, dialogue, "two on the scene",

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contrast, "law of three", linearity of the plot, importance of the first and the last position, the emphasis on the protagonist (Bendix and Galit 58). A frequent use of these stylistic features can be seen in the works of Mamang Dai. The economical use of language and descriptions is evident in her poems. The following lines from "River Poems" is an example:

> The sun brands the eastern mountains.
> The flash of summer revealed
> intricate nature,
> divinity in trees:
> A river of stars
> rising above foot soldiers
> was our armour,
> an army of words inscribed
> on the vast shield of love. (*River Poems* 13)

Dai makes frequent use of the repetition of words and phrases; it is seen in "Song of the Dancers":

> Yesterday, yesterday the world began
> in captive voice chanting sky and earth (*River Poems* 19)

Again,

> in lullabies, in lullabies you were saved! (*River Poems* 20)

We find it again in "Ties":

> Exorcised,
> Blameless,
> Returning
> Returning,
> We murmur in our sleep. (*River Poems* 15)

She also makes frequent use of direct speech, a feature commonly found in folktales, which contributes in the intensification of the dramatic quality in many of her poems:

> The tiger runs swiftly from my father's house
> Calling my name.
> Brother! Man brother!
> Have mercy for our destiny!
>
> The long dream strikes from the past.
> Too late I answer. (*River Poems* 50)

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The frequent use of direct speech is also found in Temsula Ao's poems, especially those in her collection entitled *Songs from the Other Life*. Her poem "When a Stone Wept" makes use of the Ao-Naga creation myth in which the Ao ancestors are believed to have been 'born' out of large stones, which also 'give birth' to smaller stones which roll away to procreate further. Ao often resorts to the active speech in narrating the Ao-Naga myth in her poem:

> The sun smiled on her tears and said,
> 'I can tell you where they are
> But you must be prepared
> To pay the price I stipulate'.
> 'Yes, grandfather, yes', said the stone-mother
> 'Take me to them and
> I will give you anything you ask
> Help me find my little children'.
>
> Commanding her to lie still
> He burnt into her with all his night
> While the rest of the earth
> Lay in the un-scheduled night.
>
> Reminding her of his promise
> He hissed into her face saying
> 'Your pain is my payment
> It will lead you to your children'. (*Book of Songs* 274)

1.2. Identity and Cultural Preservation

Indigenous communities consider the passing on of tales and traditions crucial to their very survival as a community. In her poem "Tapu", Mamang Dai depicts the urgency and alertness among the indigenous population of knowing their culture and passing it on:

> Mark the sword.
> Mark the sound.
> What are the words we will tell
> Our sons and daughters? (*River Poems* 42)

Temsula Ao's poem "The Old Story-teller" elucidates the importance that the ethnic communities attach to the transmission and preservation of their oral literature. Ao believes her work as a writer-storyteller to be nothing short of a "racial responsibility". She writes.

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Grandfather constantly warned
That forgetting the stories
Would be catastrophic
We could lose our history,
Territory, and most certainly
Our intrinsic identity.

So I told stories
As my racial responsibility
To instil in the young
The art of perpetuating
Existential history and essential tradition
To be passed on to the next generation. (*Book of Songs* 241)

Anjum Hasan alludes to the storytelling and oral traditions of the hill peoples in her poem "My Folks":

We speak in stories:
raconteurs, mimics, chroniclers all,
with vast memories and no name-plates. (*Street on the Hill* 17)

The storytelling traditions of the ethnic communities in the Northeast generally continued through tales passed on from one generation to another. They were generally kept alive, as among most communities of the world, through older generations narrating these folk tales to children. Mamang Dai refers to this tradition among the Adis in her poem "Missing Link":

I will remember then the fading voices
of deaf women framing the root of light
in the first stories to the children of the tribe. (*River Poems* 11)

Aruni Kashyap, a young poet from Assam talks about the tradition of grandparents narrating folk tales to children under open skies and "honeyed moons" in his poem "Me". Ibohal Kshetrimayum, a Manipuri poet fondly muses about his grandfather's habit of flavouring "fairytales with myths and fantasies while translating epics/ for listeners who thought originals were less exciting" ("My Grandfather a Fabulist"). His poem also points to the presence of numerous alternative versions of the Hindu epics among the ethnic communities of the Northeast, many of which exist in oral form:

Unbosoming a memory of a fabler
without skoal is like ignoring the umbels

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in a fatsia covered stonewall in my backyard
which always remains visibly unnoticed to onlookers.
But the pride I wear when I remember him and
his fables of love, enmity, tragedy, joy and dreams
that no mask can imitate is like a mural
in water colour skulking from prurient pissers.
So, hear me my friends when I retell the stories
of my grandfather who flavoured fairytales
with myths and fantasies while translating epics
for listeners who thought originals were less exciting. (ibid.)

Although the propagation of cultural heritage has been a traditional practice among the ethnic communities of the Northeast, the postcolonial period has ushered in a new consciousness of their ethnic identities and an urgency for the preservation and recording of the indigenous traditions and folklore. B.P. Singh, in a paper published in 1987, had commented that "Over the centuries, the ethnic cauldron of Northeast India has been kept boiling by the contradictory forces of assimilation and preservation of ethnic identity" (259). The situation has not quite changed more than two decades since. In the post-independence period, an increasing trend has been seen among the ethnic communities of the Northeast to assert their distinctive cultures and traditions. Patricia Mukhim draws attention to this trend –

> there is an abiding interest among the tribes to go back to the past and reconnect with their roots. Surprisingly, this is the aspiration of the educated tribal elite, and has a very strong political connotation which betrays their desire for appropriating more powers from informal sources within the system. This new political elite never tire of going back to history and tradition when it suits them. And all of them base their arguments on historical records. (183)

Contemporary studies on collective identity formation and propagation variously adopt a synchronic as well as a diachronic approach to analyse and explain the complex processes involved in the formation of group identities. One group of theorists, which has been described as 'primordialists', tries to define group identity as being contingent on naturally given, objective criteria such as common ancestry and common biological characteristics, shared language, religion, customs or environmental influences. On the other hand, others who employ an 'instrumentalist' or 'constructivist' approach emphasise that the formation of group identities is facilitated by political choice. They argue that the primordialist approach is insufficient to understand how group identities are formed and so it

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is imperative to examine "the constitution of ethnic groups and the nature of the boundaries between them" (Barth 9). Thus, the latter group allows a degree of dynamism to group identities and underscores the need to understand them in their political and historical context. The peculiar historical trajectory of the region now known as Northeast India is intrinsically connected to the contemporary politico-cultural circumstances in the region. An analysis of these historical conundrums could shed some light in understanding the complex workings of the pervasive identity consciousness in the Northeast.

2. Colonisation and Change

One of the crucial moments in the history of the region which is believed to have set the wheels of change rolling in the Northeast is British colonisation. The advent of the British colonial administration into the region now described as Northeast India brought about unprecedented and irreversible changes in the socio-political set up of the societies in the region. Colonisation has had devastating effects on indigenous populations around the world. European colonialism in Asia, Africa, America and Oceania are believed to have led "either to the domination and exploitation of native peoples or to genocide, both physical and cultural" (Castles et. al. 86). It is accused of having "distorted, disfigured and destroyed" the cultures of the colonised peoples, "often even their indigenous knowledge systems and literatures" (Bhattacharjee, "Understanding" 3).

In Northeast India, the experience of colonisation was of a peculiar kind and it left a long lasting impact upon the region. Sukalpa Bhattacharjee observes that under the impact of British colonialism, the indigenous communities of Northeast India "have suffered from a unique form of cultural dispossession which alienated them from their roots and landed them in a crisis at the spiritual and cultural level" ("Understanding" 1). The poet Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih rues the changes brought to his native Khasi Hills by the arrival of colonial rule. He uses the metaphor of pears, brought to the Khasi Hills during the time of David Scott, the first British 'conquistador' of the region, that now seem to dominate the landscape in the place of indigenous plants and flowers, to make a cryptic reference to the loss of native cultures following colonial intervention:

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Since David Scott, they have come
a long way, these pears, supplanting
the natives everywhere.
.....
Like them we shed our old ways
and having shed them we find
no spring to bring the flowers back.
.....
Like flowers, only strangers
and strange ways have come
to bloom in this land. (*The Yearning of Seeds* 6-7)

The region was a late addition to the British Indian colony; it was only in the nineteenth century, as late as 1826 AD, that the British extended its administrative control, first over the Brahmaputra valley and gradually over the entire area now referred to as Northeast India. New administrative divisions introduced by the colonial government upset the political structures that had developed in the region over centuries. As discussed in Chapter II, the colonisers introduced what is now referred to as the 'line system', creating administrative divisions between the hills and the plains. According to the Bengal East Frontier Regulation I of 1873, two distinct zones were demarcated in the region: the area of the inner line, or the hill areas; and the plains area, which was to be administered directly. The British adopted a minimal interference policy as far as the administration of the hill areas was concerned. Their stated reasons were the preservation of the socio-cultural structures of the tribal societies inhabiting the hill regions. In the words of Edward Gait, the inhabitants of the hills were not yet "suited for elaborate legal rules" but needed to be "governed in a simpler and more personal manner" (315-16). Others, however, see this as yet another instance of the infamous 'divide-and-rule' policy of the British. Irrespective of the veracity of such allegations, the lack of a uniform administrative structure did create a political divide between the hills and the plains, which gradually led to a cultural gap between the two which played a significant role in the eventual divisions among communities in the region. Virginius Xaxa points out that "the relationship between tribes and non-tribes has been described as one of mutual co-existence rather than of subjugation and domination at least until the advent of British rule" ("Transformation of Tribes" 3592). Although most of the tribes inhabiting the region existed as politically autonomous units before the advent of the British, there were systems of mutual interaction and co-habitation

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in the form of cultural and economic transactions, and even occasional political co-operation. The segregationist policies of the British disrupted these age old relationships between the tribes of the hills and the plains, generating mistrust between the people inhabiting the two areas. Biswas and Suklabaidya have commented that in time, it has produced "a form of exclusivism" (18). In the course of narrating a Khasi legend, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih talks about the close economic relations that existed in the pre-Partition days between the people of the Khasi Hills and those of the adjoining plains of Sylhet:

> It was from Cherra,
> that iron, limestone and the oranges,
> went to Sylhet and its swarming huts,
> carried by strong men on foot. (*Moments* 35)

With the growth of socio-political consciousness among the peoples of the region, the hill communities came to posit the plains communities as the 'other' against which they sought to define their identities. A similar attitude came to rule among the plains communities, who began to view the hill tribes as the constitutive other in the conceptions of their self identities. The animosity has continued into the postcolonial times, a reflection of which is often found in literary works from the region. The following lines by Nongkynrih contain an echo of this tendency among the hill-dwellers of positing the plainsman as the other:

> ...ours is a culture of love
> and the free will.
> We are not of the plains
> who submit like an ass
> and marry like a business deal. (*Moments* 34)

2.1. Religious Conversions and Shifting Values

The arrival of the British colonisers ushered in a new era among the indigenous peoples of Northeast India in ways more than one. One of the major agents of change that accompanied colonisation was the arrival of Christian missionaries. Archaeological evidence proves the presence of Buddhism in the region from around the Third to Fourth

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Century AD[2]. Tribal communities were also influenced by Hinduism; although Hinduism could not make much of an impact in the hills, most tribal groups in the plains started following Hindu rituals while partly retaining their animist practices at the same time. However, the conversion of the hill peoples into Christianity often stands out as the most prominent case of mass conversion in the region due to its more recent nature. Besides, these conversions took place over a very short span of time. An excellent illustration is the case of Mizoram where within the span of a century, almost the entire population converted into Christianity (with roughly eighty percent of the population following Christianity, Mizoram is one of the few states in India with a Christian majority). The process also resulted in a fundamental transformation in the Mizo society. Unlike the other states of the Northeast, the Church is closely intertwined with state affairs in Mizoram (Bhatia 169) and the Christian religion has become an integral part of the Mizo identity (Pachuau, *Being Mizo* 137). Christianity reached the Naga Hills in the early decades of the nineteenth century and today Nagaland is another Indian state with a Christian majority; precisely 87.93% of the total population of the state follows Christianity (Census 2011). Various studies reveal that the advent of Christianity along with modern education and culture has led to loss of traditional cultures among the indigenous population of the Northeast. Social scientists have described the process of interaction between indigenous Naga culture and the gospel as one of superimposition of the new religion rather than of negotiation or dialogue (Bendangjungshi 106). It has been observed that under the impact of Christian culture among the Nagas, traditional festivals have come to be replaced by Christmas celebrations, folk songs and dances by Christian hymns and traditional art work and handicrafts by readymade industrial products (Bendangjungshi 133). Such abrupt changes are believed to have led to traumatic and destabilising effects over these indigenous societies.

The traditional customs, social structure, religious and political institutions and ways of life of the ethnic communities of the Northeast have been undergoing drastic changes in the postcolonial period. This is another factor which has led to a fervent attempt among the ethnic groups of the region to record and, if possible, revive their folk traditions and customs. Christianisation, modern education and exposure to the modern world and lifestyle during the colonial period are the most commonly quoted factors that are believed to have brought abrupt changes into the lives of tribal folk in Northeast India. These forces are

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acknowledged to have brought in positive changes as well, like modern education, women's empowerment, removal of practices such as head hunting, building solidarity among different tribes and increasing general awareness among communities regarding their rights and privileges. However, on the downside, these forces also caused enculturation among the tribes which is believed to have led them into identity crises in the postcolonial period. It is believed that the crisis of identity among the ethnic tribes of the region is the result of the current socio-political and cultural crisis that the Northeast has been undergoing in the post-Independence period. The Northeastern poets' almost obsessive engagement with myths, folktales and tribal customs embodies nostalgia for these fast fading traditions. Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih talks about the changing times in his poem "Ren":

'Mother', he had said,
'listen to the river,
as long as it roars
you will know that I live'.
It was too faraway
From the year dot
What he had said.
Times have changed
the sound of our lives
dwindles into different tongues
and everyday tongues
lap up our sound. (*The Yearning of Seeds* 18-19)

In a tone of intense despair, Nongkynrih laments the changes sweeping the hills of Shillong:

I stand alone and feel the tremors yet again,
for a voice from the withering tribes faraway,
whispers in my ears –
there's no preserving deity,
no wondrous walls for palisades,
no passe-partout for escape-routes. (*Moments* 49)

Desmond Kharmawphlang expresses his exasperation with the changing fortunes of the hills of Meghalaya in the hands of migrant groups and alien cultures throughout its history:

Long ago, the men went beyond the
Surma
To trade, to bring home women
To nurture their seed

Later came the British

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With gifts of bullets, blood-money
And religion
A steady conquest to the sound of
Guns began

Quite suddenly, the British left.
.....
But in the wavering walk of time
There came those from the sweltering
Plains,
From everywhere. (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* 62)

The erosion of indigenous cultures is also seen as a threat to the very existence of these communities as distinct groups. The fear has also led to a general sense of anxiety and fervent aggressive attempts to preserve and protect the traditional cultures, which have not infrequently resulted in violent eruptions. Writing in the context of the threat faced by the indigenous tribes of Tripura, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih sardonically describes the devious and oppressive ways through which indigenous communities are pushed to the brink of extinction:

.....I learnt
That the most effective way of silencing races
Was to smother them with ones' mother tongue.
Let them fester with great wounds,
Hate, struggle and rage: they would simply be dumb.

Supplant their customs, reduce their palaces
Into lowly assembly houses and tourist destinations.
Herd them to the mainstream, drown them there. (*The Yearning of Seeds* 57)

It must be noted here that tribal identity had never been a static entity at any point in history. Yet, it must be admitted that the sudden imposition of modernity from above during the colonial period had an unsettling effect among the ethnic communities of the region which had been previously leading largely independent existences.

In the face of transformations introduced through proselytisation, an increasing trend is being seen among the indigenous communities to restore the indigenous religious practices. The revival of cults like Donyi-Polo[3], Seng Khasi[4] or the celebration of Gangngai

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by Rongmei Nagas stands as a resistance to such processes of Hinduisation or Christianisation (Biswas and Suklabaidya 102). One of Nongkynrih's poems is entitled "Hiraeth", which is a Welsh[5] term that roughly translates as longing, nostalgia, wistfulness or even the yearning for the Wales of the past. The concluding lines of the poem embody anguish and regret for the changes sweeping the hills of Shillong, including the gradual waning of the indigenous Khasi faith which has been outmoded by the arrival of Christianity and modernity:

> Strange sounds are crowding this town.
> Like the rooster[6], I too, seem
> To have become obsolete (*The Yearning of Seeds* 30)

In some cases, the urgency to preserve and restore indigenous culture and religion has also become entwined with nationalistic aspirations. John Thomas points out the interesting co-existence of the missionary version of Naga history with the nationalist version which always seeks to reclaim and glorify a pre-colonial past. Naga Nationalist leaders like Isak Chisi Swu, who is one of the founders of the banned Naga militant outfit: the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the current leader of one of its factions the NSCN(IM), has taken keen interest in compiling oral tales of the Nagas, which the Nagas fashion as a 'history' proving the 'uniqueness' of their culture (Thomas, "Missionaries" 15). Desmond Kharmawphlang has written about the use of folklore in his native state Meghalaya for purposes of political propaganda ("The Phawar" 94). In a poem entitled "They", Kharmawphlang narrates the story of an old folklorist who is abducted by underground militants and taken to the forest where he is made to provide them "tutorials in the jungle", to "lecture on the magic of myths/to make blood sing about unity":

> They came for him one evening,
> packed his bag and even carried it to the jeep parked
> on the roadside, near the dry public water tap where oil containers line up,
> marking space in a spaceless locality.
> They offered him cigarettes calling him uncle as the jeep
> sped away from the city in the throes of a dusk he was
> not to see, as he told me, for some time.
> The moon was already stripping off his gossamer robe ready
> for his bath.
> They plunged into the orchestra of night insects and followed

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the moon as he swam the length of his misty pool.
They rested at dawn,
waiting for the fifty-four year old frame of their captive to revive.
It was not easy with gout beginning to torch flames in my friend's joints.
They called him teacher and urged him to lecture on the magic of myths
to make blood sing about unity.
We are one, they said, and
our common history is inscribed in memory of stone.
My friend did his share of tutorials in the jungles
but he confessed that the practicals
were too exciting for his old bones.
When the month was over, they half carried him through the bamboo jungles.
He woke up by the side of
his gate.
The water tap was still dry, and the oil containers
still jostled for space on ground where
no space can be seen. ("They")

However, culture has always been a dynamic entity and community identities have never been static at any point in history. Poets of the Northeast also display a mature, albeit sorrowful, acceptance of the inevitability of change. Time, change and memory appear as recurrent motifs in the poetry of Mamang Dai. She talks about the inevitability of change when she says, "With the confidence of things impermanent/ We stood under the tall trees and loved the shining land" (*River Poems* 62). She accepts the impermanence of things as she says:

Why did we think ritual gods would survive
deathless in memory
in trees and stones and the sleep of babies;
Now, when we close our eyes
And cease to believe, god dies. (*River Poems* 16)

She constantly reminds her reader of the inescapable impermanence of things:

With the confidence of things impermanent
We stood under the tall trees and loved the shining land.
.....
All the rest is myth and mystery.
Papers and script, seed and soil.
Inevitably the earth alters and shifts,
Every moment has its cracks,
Its whisper of doubt

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.....
Time breathes tracks on the cheetah's face
Sad, with failed endurance. (*River Poems* 62)

The poets place much value on the power of memory as the only panacea available to man against change:

Dear brother, we live in our memory
In the memory of the world:
Stoking that memory with fondness
Is all that we can do.
We can do no more,
We can do no less. (Nongkynrih, *The Yearning of Seeds* 109)

Yet, they also acknowledge the dubious nature of memory. Dai considers memory as the only possible way of holding on to these "fading possessions", but she also reminds of the unreliability of memory:

Remember, because nothing is ended
but it is changed
And memory is a changing shape
showing with these fading possessions
in lands beyond the great ocean
that all is changed but not ended." (*River Poems* 12)

2.2. Colonial Anthropology and Indigenous Culture

The advent of the British colonisers into the Northeast region ushered in a new era in the history of the region. While the colonial institution with all its paraphernalia exerted a wide-ranging irrevocable impact upon the socio-political structure of the different communities in the region, the crucial influence of colonial anthropology on the process through which communities in the region came to perceive themselves and each other holds crucial significance in the current study. Modern anthropology emerged in close conjunction with European expansion and the colonisation of the non-western world. Anthropological scholarship was utilised by the colonisers to advance their interests in manipulating and controlling the world of the native and in organising relationships between westerners and non-westerners. Thus, anthropologists directly or indirectly and consciously or unconsciously became complicit in the colonising project (Lewis 582).

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Cultural anthropologists of the colonial period developed and propagated a narrative of cultural progress where indigenous cultures were posited at the 'primitive' and 'infantile' end while the cultures of the colonisers were placed at the pinnacle of the 'advanced' and 'sophisticated' end on the scale of cultural development and civilisational superiority. The English anthropologist Edward Tylor (1832-1917) held up the educated world of Europe and America as a cultural standard against which the rest of mankind was to be assessed in terms of their closeness to 'savage' or 'cultured' life (*Primitive Culture Vol I* 23). He had enlisted the following as the principal criteria of this classification: the absence or presence, high or low development of the industrial arts, especially metal-working, manufacture of implements and vessels, agriculture, architecture etc, the extent of scientific knowledge, the definiteness of moral principles, the condition of religious belief and ceremony, the degree of social and political organisation and so forth (*Primitive Culture Vol I* 23-24). He thus arranges the following 'races' on the pre-mentioned scale: Australian, Tahitian, Aztec, Chinese, Italian (*Primitive Culture Vol I* 24). While he allows a degree of moral standards to the 'savage' and 'barbaric' 'races', he firmly states that those were far "looser and weaker" than those of the Western societies (*Primitive Culture Vol I* 27). Later on, Freud went on to endorse the same narrative by equating the psychic life of 'savages' and 'half-savages' to that of the neurotic (*Totem and Taboo*).

The Christian preachers, who arrived in the Assam Province (read Northeast) towards the middle of the nineteenth century, promoted a similar attitude in the hills which quickly became the dominant attitude among the common people; anything that was western began to be viewed as 'angelic' and anything that belonged to or originated in indigenous culture came to be condemned as 'evil' (Bendangjungshi 107). Tezenlo Thong stresses that in fact Christianity and the project of 'civilising' the 'savage' went hand in hand. He points out how the Naga Hills were referred to by the early missionaries as 'the wilds of barbarism' and the Naga people as 'those savage wilds'. (898). Initially, there was much resistance among the tribal populations against the spread of the new religion. New converts were treated by the tribal societies as social outcastes. However, as the influence of Christianity among these communities became stronger, the new identity created by the spread of the new religion led to a conscious as well as unconscious sense of dependency and inferiority complex among the Naga population (Bendangjungshi 109). Studying Christianity among

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the Nagas, John Thomas has observed that the missionaries succeeded in naturalising a particular discourse about the history of the Nagas, which follows a progression from a 'savage', 'barbaric' and head-hunting pre-missionary past of the Nagas to a more 'civilised', 'tolerant' and soul-hunting age ushered in by the 'benevolent' missionaries ("Missionaries" 1).

Arguably colonialism is one of the most violent agents of change among the colonised peoples of the world. Bacchilega illustrates with the example of the *Thousand and One Nights* how colonial appropriation and translation of folklore has led to the naturalisation of gender and ethnic stereotypes and contributed to consolidating exoticising fantasies, which in turn helped to promote the cause of the colonisers ("Folklore and Literature" 457). The irreversible impact upon the cultures of the colonised people has been effected by colonialist policies of systematic erasures of these cultures as well as their selective representation. Postcolonial scholars have pointed out that the 'culture' of the colonised people is not the origin of these kinds of representations, but rather their 'product' (Bacchilega, *Legendary Hawaii* 2-3).

Besides missionaries, British officials posted in various parts of the region during the colonial years also produced accounts of the location, customs and manners of the peoples of the Northeast. The colonial officials were encouraged to record their experiences and interactions with the local population and their diaries and anecdotes, besides several anthropological monographs produced in the colonial period became the basis of stereotypical and disparaging beliefs about these people.

Under the influence of such condescending attitudes towards the indigenous cultural practices promoted by modern education, British administrators, evangelists and other 'advanced' groups from other parts of the country, the newly educated section of the tribal population began to look down upon the 'savage' customs of their tribal past. A sense of shame at their 'primitive' roots made them want to erase their tribal origins and deride their 'lesser civilised' tribesmen who had not yet received the light of 'enlightenment'. J. P. Mills, the district commissioner in the Naga Hills (1914-1948) and author of several monographs on the Naga tribes, wrote in 1926:

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What care the well-oiled youths of the Impur Mission Training School for the foolish traditions of their ignorant heathen forbears? To bury the past is the tendency of the semi-educated generation which is growing up". (quoted in Thomas, "Missionaries" 3)

However, towards the beginning of the twentieth century, as a new consciousness started to grow among the tribal folk, they stopped taking the reforms and value systems propagated by the Church and Western education at their word. They slowly began to take pride in their traditional cultures and started to make attempts at restoring and/or preserving them. In the poem "Letter from Pahambir" by Desmond Kharmawphlang, we see the manifestation of this changed attitude among the educated tribals of the Northeast. The speaker puts into words his deep regret at having been misled for too long by a "wisdom of falsehood" and a sense of 'shame' that had kept him from the wealth of his heritage:

'We come', I plead, 'to learn, not to teach.
We come with longing, we are the
forgetful generation, our hearts tapping
a rhythm spawned in shame, a shame
that splits our present from our past.
We have suckled for so long
On a wisdom of falsehood – we are ourselves
our own worst enemies.' (Ngangom and Nongkynriheds eds 148)

The speaker, evidently a persona of the poet himself, is visiting an old storyteller named U Di. He regrets the sense of shame and disdain towards his tribal past bred in the 'forgetful generation' he belonged to, through modern education and Christian teachings. He seeks now to atone and return to the wealth of his heritage and as he listens to the stories of the old man, he is reminded once again of his 'betrayal' of his community:

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. (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 149-150)

This 'shame' that Kharmawphlang refers to is a product of colonial ethnology that largely adopted an ethnocentric approach while studying the cultures of the colonised world and labelled them as 'primitive', in opposition to the colonised Europeans' culture as 'civilised' and 'enlightened'. A sense of contempt for the Church as an evil intruder and a misleading institution is expressed in the same poem when the speaker says:

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We have left the church far behind,
glowing strangely in pallid
arrogance, through the dust kicked up
by our passing. (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 148)

2.3. Advent of Modernity and Political Consciousness

The advent of colonial modernity brought great upheavals into the societies of Northeast India. Pre-modern social and political institutions became quickly eroded or obsolete and the indigenous man was suddenly faced with the complex ways of red tape and political democracy. The spread of education and the growth of a nascent Western educated middle class led to the emergence of new kinds of cultural and political consciousness among the communities of the region. However, the association of the 'advent' of modernity with the arrival of colonisation is problematic. Postcolonial thought argues against the popular assumption that modernity has spread from Western centres of economic and political power to other parts of the world (Kaviraj, "Modernity and Politics" 138). It is true that modernity has led to colossal changes in social practices especially in the fields of political power, economic production, education, science and religion in the non-Western world. But it would be simplistic to assume that pre-modern ways of being were infantile or inferior or that institutions and structures introduced through colonial modernity were inscribed on a *tabula rasa*[7].

2.3.1. Identity Formation

Identities, whether personal or collective, are always already political (Harris et al. eds. 6). During the postcolonial period, a new wave of identity consciousness swept over the Northeast region in previously unprecedented ways. In the words of Apurba Barua, "The movements of various communities to assert and protect their, what is commonly called, 'ethnic' identity, are the most significant aspects of the socio-political reality of India's Northeast" (qtd. in Dutta, *Questions of Identity* 144). Scholars point out that with the advent of the colonial state, a process of the official documentation and state certification of various collective identities and their public circulation got underway in this region which led to a

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compartmentalisation of different groups in the society into water-tight and rigidly defined categories (Anderson 184; Kertzer and Arel; Scott, *Seeing Like* 77-81; Sharma, *Empire's Garden* 206).

Benedict Anderson has identified the census, the map and the museum as the late colonial state's instruments in consolidating a "totalizing classificatory grid" (184). Before the emergence of the modern state, such identities embodied greater fluidity. But with the rise of the modern state, there developed an urgent tendency among its elite to classify and enumerate populations, thereby assigning strict boundaries to previously fluid social categories. What is yet more crucial here is that such documentation and classification processes often resort to manipulation and distortion of social realities to create and sustain social categories in accordance with the purposes of the state. Kertzer and Arel have observed, "Census does much more than simply reflect social reality; rather, it plays a key role in the construction of that reality" (2). James Scott points out that such categorisation provides the state with a panoptic vision, "Maps, censuses, cadastral lists, and standard units of measurement represent techniques for grasping a large and complex reality" and "reduce an infinite array of detail to a set of categories that will facilitate summary descriptions, comparisons and aggregation" (*Seeing Like* 77). He calls it a "utopian, immanent and continually frustrated goal of the modern state" to "reduce the chaotic, disorderly, constantly changing social reality beneath it to something more closely resembling the administrative grid of its observations" (*Seeing Like* 81-82). Anderson believes it was the map and the census that shaped the grammar which in due course made possible the creation of categories such as 'Burma' and 'Burmese', 'Indonesia' and 'Indonesians' (185).

Although the dominating discourse claims that most ethnic groups in the Northeast lived mostly in isolation from each other until the pre-colonial period, other scholars have sought a different approach on the matter. Manjeet Baruah raises objection to the claim by colonial and even some postcolonial scholars like Sanjib Baruah, who argue that the region comprises of different groups of communities who have maintained mutual isolation and constant hostilities among themselves. Manjeet Baruah objects to the fact that these scholars appear to emphasise the need of an external factor (the colonial state in the case of colonial commentators like Wadell, and the postcolonial Indian state in the case of Sanjib Baruah) to

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negotiate and stabilise the differences among the communities in the region. He argues that the approach adopted by these scholars overlooks the dialectical nature of the socio-spatial relations that he considers to have been central to the reproduction of both differences and shared domains among the communities in this region (*Frontier Cultures* 5-6).

It is often pointed out that before the advent of the British, there existed a high degree of cultural and economic interactions among the peoples of Northeast India, along with much biological admixture, which led to a high amount of fluidity in group identities. However, ethnic self-consciousness and assertion have become increasingly visible in the Northeast in recent years. This has manifested itself in various activities – like ethnic revival and the defining of group identities into strict compartments. It has brought in its wake increasing perceptions as well as often aggressive assertion of who constitute 'insiders' and who are 'outsiders'[8]. One cannot look at these phenomena in complete isolation from the identity politics and the politics of representation which have a crucial presence in the socio-cultural domain of the region. Often ethnicity emerges as a basis for collective action when there are clear advantages attached to that identity. In the Northeast, violent assertions of ethnic identities have also often led to large flow of funds and other political advantages. As Margaret Ch. Zama points out, ethnic groups' emphasis on the preservation of tradition and culture often gives birth to the emergence of power elites or groups with vested interest in resurgence and revivalism. "Interest in culture becomes often vicarious, gratuitous, a part of the search for the new dynamics of acquiring and sustaining political power and status" ("Globalisation" 11).

It is quite pertinent to see the region's poets' returning to myths, folklore and tribal traditions in their works in the light of this larger backdrop of identity politics in the region. In an attempt to preserve their cultural identity, ethnic communities of the Northeast often end up constructing strict definitions of who qualifies to be a member of a particular community. Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih tries to outline the 'identification marks' of a Khasi, albeit in an ironic tone:

> A Khasi is a man, who once a year,
> sports a muka-mulberry turban,
> aneri shawl and is seen en grandetenue
> at *Weiking* or *Pomblang*.

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Who once a year, speaks of these great festivals
and the teachings of his great ancestors.
Who once a year, says
'to Know Man-to Know God,
to Know Maternal-Paternal Relations,
to Earn Righteousness' is our faith.
But this, only once a year. (*The Yearning of Seeds* 77)

A real or perceived threat of the eroding of indigenous cultures has led to an intense sense of parochialism and fear of the other among the peoples of the Northeast. Sukalpa Bhattacharjee points out that in the Northeast a self-recovery of the indigenous people through their representational agencies also involved a recovery of their cultural specificities not only in relation to the colonisers but also with reference to other indigenous cultures with which they were clubbed ("Understanding" 4). The strict compartmentalisation of group identities has led to increased differentiation of who comprise the 'in-group' and who qualifies as an 'outsider'. The fear and hatred of the 'outsider' is a looming presence in the works of some poets from the region. Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih's "The Influx" voices this fear of being swamped by 'outsiders':

And so they come
these desperate men
from mountains and plains
like little drops of rain

and when these hills can hold no more
so shall other lands and races
lose to their earth-consuming craze. (*The Yearning of Seeds* 13)

3. Poetry, Identity and the Geography of Culture

Social identity cannot develop in a vacuum; it is always relational and contextual. Anthropologists have noted that often group identities develop in the backdrop of particular landscapes which have been invested with the memories and values of a particular community. The term 'landscape' was introduced into the English language in the late sixteenth century as a technical term in painting. By the eighteenth century, the word came to assume its current meaning: a piece of rural scenery came to be called 'landscape'

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because of its likeness to a landscape painting and its 'picturesque' quality (Hirsch and O'Hanlon 2). The origin of the word in painting is still significant; the painter would always endow the painting of a piece of scenery with his personal impressions and perspectives. Thus, the word landscape refers not simply to natural scenery as it objectively exists in the world, but that bestowed with human perceptions and values. However, till the mid-1980s, landscape was treated as a 'purely natural' entity, to which humans were considered external. Since the last decade of the past century, scholars have largely adopted the constructivist approach which recognises human life and the landscape as being mutually constitutive (O'Keeffe 3-4).

Paul Claval asserts that landscape serves as an important medium through which the construction of identity and the politicisation of space are interrogated (90). Analysing discourses on landscape in eighteenth-century England, Tim Fulford argues that these discourses have complex and conflicting ideological and political functions which correspond to the changing constructions of and relationships between poetic, critical, natural, and political power in Europe of the period, which, in turn, were instrumental in shaping a sense of national identity (1). Fulford's analysis illuminates how through landscape-gardening, painting and descriptions of prose writers as well as poets, "views of the landscape owned by gentlemen become representations of the legitimacy of their power and the benefits it brought the nation" (3). This inherently political nature of natural descriptions among eighteenth century writers, poets or painters eta l. is not an isolated phenomenon. Drawing on examples like Philip Sydney and Milton, Fulford reminds that topographical poetry and landscape representations in general have always been embedded in a political and nationalist context (3).

This section will study the work produced by poets writing in English in Northeast India in a similar context and try to locate and analyse the workings of contemporary political concerns in the representations of landscape in their poetry. Discussing the central relationship between community identity and territory, Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern state that a "sense of place and embeddedness within local, mythical and ritual landscape" serves as a "peg on which people hang memories, construct meanings from events and establish ritual and religious arenas of action" (3). They also explain that

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"folktales, myths, oral histories, ballads, ritual incantations and ordinary stories of daily life all invoke in real or imagined detail the spatial positioning of a community of people" (ibid.). An analysis of the poetry in English[9] produced in Northeast India reveals how the peculiar landscape of the region enters its language, imagery and themes. The cultures of Northeast India are believed to be characterised by an intimate and harmonious relationship between nature and humans. Mamang Dai paints a word picture of this intimate relationship:

> Without speech
> we practiced a craft,
> leaving imprints on sky walls
> taking the seasons
> coding the trailing mist,
> in silent messages
> across the vast landscape. (*River Poems* 13)

In her prose-poem "Other Lives", she illustrates how hill communities have learnt to co-exist with nature in a "state of kinship" and brotherhood:

> The land is a being just like us. We live the weather, share food, rice, water, salt. We go to war, kill each other with our weapons and are killed by a drowning river or an avalanche of rocks. It is a bond both cruel and kind; like brothers claiming territory. Since both are equal to the other it is a state of mutual regard, a state of kinship. This accounts for our numerous rituals that in turn are regarded as enlightened, civilized (sic) or barbaric from a contemporary view point. (*Midsummer Survival* 44)

These poets' engagement with the landscape of the region is couched within the values attached to the land in the form of cultural memories. Mamang Dai describes how the land stands as an everyday record and reminder of memories for the people: "Full of memories the land rises/ to meet us at dawn" (*River Poems* 13).

Hirsch and O'Hanlon state that landscape can become a vehicle for many themes such as attachment to land, conflicts over land, the use of images of the past in the social construction of identities and variant views of history, development and change (10). Often, group identities among indigenous populations become intrinsically connected to a particular landscape, through perceptions of and values attached to it. Indigenous peoples all over the globe display a profound relationship with their land, territory or resources. They attach a cultural, social, spiritual and political significance to the land, owing to which their relationship to a particular territory or land area becomes a major marker of their identity

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and distinctiveness. Speaking in the context of indigenous peoples of Australia, Howard Morphy discusses the relationship between landscape and aboriginal conceptions of the world (186). Their landscape assumes the character of what has been termed a 'totemic landscape', one that is laden with totemic sites which bear aboriginal conceptions of creation, spiritual power and world order. This landscape, then, becomes a codification of history itself and as a connecting link between the present and the ancestral past. Morphy describes the significance acquired by land in indigenous culture:

> The land, taken as a whole, was the land over which ancestral beings hunted and gathered, and every aspect of the landscape can be thought to have connotations of the ancestral beings, the scents, sounds and flavours of the land today are the scents, sounds and flavours that they too experienced (188).

Poetry in English from the Northeast is replete with evidence of the intimate association of the people of the region with their natural environment. Mamang Dai's poem "Tapu" illustrates the tradition among the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, to which the poet herself belongs, of ritually marking a piece of land as consecrated territory:

> Here we have marked the land
> with upright branches and stones,
> and consecrated territory
> with song, and the leap of the warrior
> returning triumphant. (*River Poems* 42)

Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih's "A Day in Cherrapunjee" is a series of five poems set in the landscape of the Sohra area in the East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya. Nongkynrih, a native of the region, has produced the poems as eulogies for the magnificent landscape of Sohra. However the landscape is also presented in the poems as the sites of multiple Khasi legends and ancient tales. The following lines from "A Day in Cherapunjee: II" is an example:

> They have told me
> how the evil Thlen was killed
> *in this very spot*
> by the wisdom of our forefathers,
> who poured red-hot iron bars
> into his feasting belly.
> .....
> *These very stones were then*

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the mortars to pestle the spices.
these very waters
.....
were the sacred broth
that everyone must sip.

.....

Here is the story
that haunts the place,
here are the rocks
that carry still
vague imprints of the beast
and articles of that feast – (*Moments* 25)
(italics mine)

The reference is to the Khasi legend of an enormous serpent-monster (Thlen) which was supposedly captured and slain by Khasi ancestors at the very spot which is the current location of the Dainthlen Falls in Sohra, Meghalaya. Nongkynrih describes the landscape of the area as the very arena where this piece of Khasi 'history' was played out, thus establishing the vital connection of the landscape to Khasi history and culture and thereby to the Khasi identity.

Stewart and Strathern point out the importance of naming in the process through which landscapes gain meaning. Place names become records of human experiences that have occurred in an area over time and in time, they go on to provide a kind of "archaeology of meanings" and records of the place's history as well as environmental features that may have disappeared over time (6). Along with bringing out the Sohra landscape's relationship with Khasi mythology, Nongkynrih's poems highlight the legends from which locations in the region acquired their names. Thus, his "A Day in Cherrapunjee: IV" describes how the legend of Sngi Thiang (Khasi for 'Sweet Sun'), a bereaved Khasi woman believed to have taken her life at the spot, lent its name to the waterfalls at Mawsmai:

And these are the Mawsmai falls
Whose name Sngi Thiang gave
With her death. (*Moments* 32)

Anthropologists also describe landscape as a cultural process (Hirsch and O'Hanlon 5). It acquires the character of a process because of its inherently dynamic nature and its

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ability to reflect change and be a part of change (Stewart and Strathern 4). Scholars have illustrated how social groups and landscapes are mutually constitutive; each is shaped and influenced by the other. Human activity and social processes effect changes on the environment while the environmental changes impact social processes in turn (Soovälli-Sepping et al. eds. 2). In the process of displaying a keen engagement with the landscape of Arunachal Pradesh, Mamang Dai's poems are also testimony to an awareness of the impermanence of the landscape and the mutability of the world and cultures. She puts this poignant awareness into fine words:

> All the rest is myth and mystery.
> Papers and script, seed and soil.
> Inevitably, the earth alters and shifts,
> every moment has its cracks,
> its whisper of doubt" (*River Poems* 62)

However, the deep attachment to landscape and territory among indigenous peoples is not just a trope in the poetry from the Northeast, it also forms a core issue in the contemporary politics in the region. A more pronounced form of territoriality has become a prominent part of identity assertions by indigenous communities of Northeast India in the postcolonial period. This tendency owes its roots, in part, to colonial policy; the administrative segregation of the hill areas of the then Assam province into 'excluded', 'partially excluded' or 'backward tracts' fed into a feeling of territorial exclusivity over time, which is largely responsible for the settler-indigenous conflicts and ethnic violence among 'autochthonous communities' in contemporary Northeast India. Defining the concept of the 'Homeland', Richard Nostrand states that

> 'The concept of a 'homeland', although abstract and elusive, has at least three basic elements: a people, a place and identity with place. The people must have lived in a place long enough to have adjusted to its natural environment and to have left their impress in the form of a cultural landscape. And from their interactions with the natural and cultural totality of the place they must have developed an identity with the land – emotional feelings of attachment, desire to possess, even compulsions to defend" (214).

As explained by Paul Claval, ancient societies, including the traditional indigenous societies of Northeast India in the pre-modern period, were oral societies where cultural transmission took place through interpersonal interactions. In such societies, time was structured in a

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simple way and history did not stretch beyond the limits of the time span covered by the memories of its living members. Questions regarding their origin or existence in the world, and those concerning the cosmology or environmental phenomena were explained through myths. However, Claval points out, as archival memory came to displace the oral form of memory from its position of significance, landscapes, of the past as well as the present, turned into potential forms of heritage. Thus, preserving and preventing the transformation of these landscapes became crucial to the safeguarding of their identities (86-90).

As with most indigenous peoples around the world, for indigenous communities of the Northeast, the territory they traditionally inhabit and believe to have inhabited since times immemorial is invested with cultural, political, economic and spiritual significance. In a poem entitled "My Name is U Lei Shyllong", Desmond Kharmawphlang describes the central significance of Shillong Peak in Khasi culture; it is regarded as the 'natural Guardian of Khasi Land' (Karlsson, *Unruly Hills* 1). The poem ends with a lament for the erosion of reverence for ancient beliefs among the current generation. Kharmawphalng also makes a reference to the rampant destruction of the natural bounty of the Khasi Hills, which was once held sacred and watched over by the guardian god of the Khasis, U Lei Shyllong.

> My name is U Lei Shyllong,
> Lord Protector of this land
>
> Time spun stories and flew
> away with dreams, and
> I, sentinel and god,
> feel a huge betrayal,
> nursing my grief on
> this mountain top.
>
> Men no longer call me
> these days and without
> Shame or consideration,
> Strip me bare of my
> Green raiments; voluble men
> speaking words that ooze
> fat when burnt
> but chokes in the throat
> when eaten, have
> even sold bits of me.
> And now I stand
> guard, with a monstrosity

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planted deep in me
to watch over this land
like a single evil eye.

I stand now a
forgotten testament
in a fleeting world,
where only the swirling
clouds and weeping
trees are real to me. (*Here* 5-6)

Bengt G. Karlsson expresses his puzzlement over how the once revered Shillong Peak which was covered by a sacred grove has now been completely stripped of its vegetation but for a single standing tree (*Unruly Hills* 2). Even as they actively engage with the landscape of the region, the works of the poets writing in English in Northeast India ring with a ubiquitous awareness and concern for such ecological threats being faced by the region.

And all across the land they are singing
The big trees have fallen, breaking our dreams. (Dai, *River Poems* 61)

Mamang Dai warns of the severe consequences of thoughtless destruction of nature and the crucial importance of the environment for the survival of human beings:

Be careful how you cut that tree.
A dizzy blow can change the sunlight,
alter the snaking path of a breeze;
kill the ground with unexpected poison-heat,
these things are unpredictable.

In the frontier days of love and conquest
these trees grew wild.
They are priests, gods of a pre-human age
carrying a knotted stick;
every posture, angle,
arrangement of limb and eye
a pathway of time;
unfurling destruction, and returning life
in the inherited tattoo of a green leaf.

.....

Be careful how you cut that tree.
It is the same tree that watches the hunter
alone on the hard earth, laying his traps.
Ancient stairway to heaven.

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send him a fierce bird with a wing-span of the sky.

When the evening star is sinking
the tree on the hill watches over everything. (*Midsummer Survival* 64)

Any change to the environment will in turn affect the lives of the peoples inhabiting the region and their ways of life and cultural identities will be altered and threatened. The anxiety generated by this threat to their cultural existence finds expression in the contemporary literature produced in the region. A gradual disintegration of the harmonious relationship between man and nature is a concern in Mamang Dai's poem "Rivers":

Once you sprang clean
washing boulders,
clearing streams.
A quiver of arrows
braced your motion,
now the light changes,
in new terrain
will you remember
the golden chain
that linked us
in a dream? (*River Poems* 65)

Nongkynrih's poems constantly express a subtle frustration at the changing landscape of the Khasi Hills:

The wind rules the land,
Howling like a maniac,
For where are the trees
To temper its wild laughter
Into romantic wooing? (*Moments* 22)

His works embody a nostalgic mourning for the unspoiled landscape of the past that he recalls from the days of his childhood and youth when he was growing up in the Sohra region:

And this is Cherra,
With shreds of the beautiful past,
But going bald all the time. (*Moments* 23)

A similar lament is to be found in the poem "Lament for Earth" by Temsula Ao:

Alas for this earth
Thus ravaged

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Stripped of her lushness
And her sap
Her countenance
Furrowed and damaged
Like a fading beauty
Touched by age
Her substance
Exposed and crumbling
To the first touch
Of the rain and wind
And flaking away
To silt into the ocean
And sand into the desert,
Leaving her
Old and decrepit
Before her time. (*Book of Songs* 44)

While this topic will be more elaborately discussed in Chapter 5, a cursory consideration of Ao's conception of nature as a violated woman is pertinent here. Ao's creative writings, particularly her short stories have closely engaged with the sufferings of and violence inflicted on women in the Naga Hills and in the Northeast in general, in the backdrop of the cultural and political turmoil of the region. Noël Sturgeon argues that "the ideologies that authorise injustices based on gender, race and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment" (23). By personifying nature as a violated woman in the poem, Ao makes a connection between the violence suffered by women and the violence inflicted on nature.

One of the popular contemporary discourses among environmental anthropologists centres on the belief that indigenous societies possess and practice ecologically sustainable ways of existing in nature. By contrasting them with the ecologically insensitive and hazardous cultures of modern industrial society, indigenous cultures are held up as the environmentally benign model and are often attributed such titles like 'eco-people' and 'custodians of nature'. Poets of Northeast India often write with an awareness of the symbiotic relationship between human and nature among the indigenous cultures of the region. The engagement of these poets with nature is similar to that found in English Romantic poetry, where nature is at once an object, as well as an immanent animating principle.

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Mamang Dai's poem "Man and Brother" is a striking record of the deep rooted respect and harmony maintained by the Adi tribal tradition in co-existing with their natural environment. The poem is based upon the belief among the Adis as well as many other communities in Arunachal Pradesh that man and tiger are blood brothers. Therefore, killing a tiger is considered equivalent to killing a man. Thus, the decision to kill a man-eater and the selection of the hunter who is entrusted with the responsibility of finding and killing the tiger entails elaborate rituals and even grieving. Dai's poem is the monologue of a man who has been selected to kill a man-eater; he is caught in a moral dilemma between tradition, duty and compassion for the brother, the tiger:

> Green intoxication
> fading swiftly to darkness.
> Alone I wait, wearing my amulet,
> waiting where I can hear best
> instructions from my ancestors.
>
> .....
> Ah! Death is a red flower
> breaking over my heart.
>
> Grieving, my village will be grieving.
> for five days they will honour restraint
> then search the night again
> for compensation.
>
> Run swiftly then
> my brother, Oh! My brother!
> Have mercy for our destiny! (*River Poems* 50-51)

However, anthropological thought since the eighties of the last century has started to question the validity of the claim that indigenous or pre-industrial cultures were absolutely environmentally benign. Kay Milton declares that primitive ecological wisdom is a myth, not only in the anthropological sense of the term, but in its general sense as well (351). Revisionist anthropologists have shown through empirical studies that indigenous cultures too contain practices which have harmful effects on the environment. They criticise the tendency to romanticise and to attribute a kind of 'ecological nobility' to indigenous peoples. There are frequent references to be found in the poetic works by writers in

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Northeast India of indigenous populations being involved in environmentally harmful practices. Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, while lamenting the ecological degradation of the Sohra landscape, blames it on the selfish and unsustainable activities of the locals. In "A Day in Cherrapunjee: I", he points out the harm caused to the land by the local people through swidden cultivation:

> I can see old trees like old men
> die off every winter.
> Young ones are put to the flame,
> or are not bothered to be born. (*Moments* 22).

Elsewhere he accuses the "foolish people" of the hills for destroying the ecology of the region through their mining and *jhum*ming activities:

> The barren hills
> that bear the pockmarks
> of miners and a foolish people
> that burn and cut at will,
> look as unremarkable
> as half-naked little brats. (*Moments* 24)

Milton has commented that valorising some cultures as more natural than others is a damaging custom; it only reinforces systems of hierarchy and discrimination (352). However, he also points out that such discourses do serve to provide support for political arguments that seek to resist uncontrolled industrialism and secure the rights of indigenous and marginalised communities (351). Vibha Arora remarks in this context that while essentialisms connected with tribal identities are sought to be discredited by postcolonial anthropologists and historians, the peoples marked as 'indigenous peoples' themselves are seen to be increasingly appropriating the essentialist descriptions of themselves as 'primitive', 'shy innocent and other-worldly', 'nature-worshippers', 'indigenous', 'hunters and gatherers' and 'politically marginalised groups', and this they have been doing with a specific political agenda. Arora calls attention to the fact that these peoples have been trying to appropriate this essentialist discourse in order to secure public and international support in their resource-related struggles over water, forests and fields along with other benefits such as obtaining seats in legislature, jobs and seats in educational institutes ("Assertive Identities" 261-271). She illustrates her point by reflecting that claims by indigenous groups

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of an organic link between their cosmologies, cultures and territories with the environment became fore grounded in India during many resource-related struggles in the 1980s and 1990s ("Assertive Identities" 213). However, Brosius emphasises on the need to make a distinction between romantic and strategic essentialisms and points out that if this discourse whereby indigenous communities are held up as ecologically benevolent is completely invalidated, it would make anthropologists politically compromised (280-281). One, however, must not lose sight of the provisional nature of the discourse and employ it with caution.

4. Myths of Originality and the Politics of Nostalgia

In the face of the social, political and cultural turmoil in the region in contemporary times, poets of Northeast India often seem to be engaged in something that amounts to romantic escapism by clinging on to an idyllic past where tribal society is imagined to have existed in a state of perfect bliss and harmony. This nostalgic longing for the past has led to an atmosphere of cultural primitivism where the past is believed to hold out the only panacea for the troubles of the present. Robin Singh Ngangom and Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih believe that one reason why the poets of the region tend to keep returning to their myths and folklore is because they "see their people, often themselves included, losing their way completely in the midst of the unsettling cultural changes of the times, [and] there is born a desire in them to interpret the mythic past flourishing in timeless villages and repossess this as high culture" (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. xiii). In many poems of the Khasi poet Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, myths, legends and folk rituals often become the medium and backdrop against which the present is scrutinised and valued. His poem "The Ancient Rocks of Cherra" makes use of a Khasi legend about a giant serpent that is believed to have roamed the wilderness of Sohra to underscore the devouring poverty and wretchedness of the countryside of Sohra, the place where he was born:

> This land is old, too old
> and withered, for life to be easy.
>
> Poverty eats into the hills and squeezes
> a living from stones and caterpillars

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gathered for out-of-town drunks
each market day.

Where the serpent's death throes
cut deep wounds into the land
lie deep gorges like fiendish mouths
yawning for desperate victims.

There is nothing remarkable here
only this incredible barrenness.

Men and trees have left their habitats
to a crude and lowly breed like brush,
but the sight of dark-grey rocks like sages
spells home to me. (*The Yearning of Seed* 84)

However, it would be naive to view these poets' engagement with folk traditions as simple innocent nostalgia for the past. Nostalgia and uses of the past in works of literature and art has its own politics too. The act of nostalgic yearning for the past is often viewed with suspicion and disapproval as it is considered a prerogative of the privileged and the dominant groups of the society. The "recreation of an idyllic rural memory is an option open only to the elite" (Einstein 38). With the development of Enlightenment thought, the view of history as a narrative of progress towards an improved state became increasingly dominant in the world of European thought. Both Kant and Hegel argued against the predominant understanding in earlier European thought of history as a gradual degeneration from an original state of perfection or a 'golden age' that existed in the past. Thus, with the propagation of Enlightenment ideas, nostalgia or yearning for the past began to be dismissed as unfounded and undesirable. Later on, Marx attached a political import to the act of nostalgic yearning. For Marx, history embodied not only a moving forward towards greater individual freedom and scientific development, but also towards a more just society (Natali 13). Thus, with the spread of Marxist thought in nineteenth century Europe, excessive attachment to the past or display of nostalgia came to acquire a suspicious position due to an assumed or real association with the desire to preserve privilege and thereby obstruct social justice. In the context of the literary uses of nostalgia, borrowing a similar viewpoint, Frank Einstein, in studying the uses and influence of nostalgia in Appalachian poetry of the 1980s, points out that nostalgia produces an inauthentic version of history by creating a past that

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never was. He observes that the dominant culture can safely choose to be nostalgic as it has very little effect on the present. Having thus rendered the past ideologically harmless, the dominant group can then market it in the form of festivals, craft revival, television serials, movies, summer homes and tourism. Einstein proclaims that a poetry that adopts such nostalgia colludes with the dominant culture by providing legitimacy to such romanticising of the past (38).

A nostalgic look back at the past is also a feature of the pastoral text (Gifford, "Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral" 10). Most poets writing in English in Northeast India combine a nostalgic yearning for the past with a lament for degrading nature and changing landscapes and fading traditions. Nongkynrih's poem "Such My Pleasures Used to be" embodies each of these features; he is fondly recalling his childhood adventures in Sohra and simultaneously describing the hunting customs of his people, while also inserting nostalgic images of the 'unspoilt' Sohra hillside.

> But we plodded on
> To Cherra's far away forests,
> Where giant oaks stood proud
> Like soldiers of the Reich.
> Where in serene little pools,
> Bathed with the first rosy rays,
> A medley of melodies greeted us.
> Where colourful crowds of birds
> Soulfully sang, danced and hopped,
> Took their ritual baths
> And played and pruned in the Sun.
>
> There we laid our traps,
> Our rubber tree bird-lime.
> Over the cheerful ponds and around
> We laid them,
> And soon we caught chicks and birds,
> Birds with chicks,
> While laughing and patting each other
> With each new catch,
> We fleeced them all of life, all colours.
>
> Such my pleasures used to be, (*Moments* 42)

Terry Gifford points out that the pastoral is "essentially a discourse of retreat" which seeks to either escape from the complexities of the city, the court, the present, 'our manners' or

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explore them (*Pastoral* 46). He also points out that there are two key contrasts that characterise the pastoral tradition: the first is spatial, the distinction between town which is considered frenetic, corrupt, impersonal and the country which stands for peace and abundance. The other is temporal: the distinction between the past as 'idyllic' and the present as 'fallen' (*Pastoral* 39). In much of the work by poets from the Northeast, there is an implicit tendency to contrast the apparently idyllic life of the country/tradition/nature/the past with modernity/urban life/the present. Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih is often found to express a longing for the 'pure' 'tranquil' life of the country with the 'filth' of the city. In the poem "An Evening by the Source of the Umkhrah River", he first paints a picture of the tranquil picturesque landscape of the Umkhrah River and the hills surrounding it.H e ends the poem with a cryptic comparison with the landscape of the city "where life itself wallows in the filth" (*The Yearning of Seeds* 17).

Guha and Martinez-Alier expose the class dynamics underlying environmental movements. They call environmental conservation a 'luxury' available only to the privileged classes:

> when everyone turns environmental, prosperity has truly arrived. Greenness is the ultimate luxury of the consumer society...It is no accident that the main support for ecological policies comes from the rich countries and from the comfortable rich and middle classes. The poor, multiplying and under-employed, wanted more 'development', not less. (xiv-xv)

This reminds one of the Marxist-oriented thought which views landscape as inherently social-cultural in its production (O'Keeffe 4). Vladimir Propp describes how even folklore as a category has underlying socio-economic implications. He has delineated the distinction between folklore in a capitalist society as against a socialist society. He explains that in a class society,

> folklore is the output of all strata of the population except the ruling one: the latter's verbal art belongs to literature. Folklore is, first and foremost, the art of the oppressed classes, both peasants and workers, but also of the intermediate strata that gravitates towards the lower social classes. One can speak with some reservations of lower middle folklore, but never of the folklore of the aristocracy. (Propp 5)

Raymond Williams reflects that the relations between the country and the city are "not only of ideas and experiences, but of rent and interest, of situation and power; a wider system" (7). As these theorists imply, the idealisation of country life also entails the idealisation of its

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social and economic relations. In glorifying an image of country life or the cultural past, poets of the Northeast often tend to elide over the economic realities of the countryside or the ancestral past.

5. Tourism, Authenticity and the Performance of Culture

More often than not, anthropological work among the tribes of the Northeast has been seen to produce exoticised versions of the cultures of these peoples. This owes much to an inherent tendency among anthropologists, especially in the colonial period, to romanticise the cultures of the colonial other. Diane Lewis points out that "many anthropologists go to the field looking for a kind of utopia, a place where they hope to find things sorely lacking in the West. In condemning civilisation and in looking for alternatives to it they develop a highly romanticised view of non-Western people (584). Such romanticising does not, however, remain limited to anthropologists or other external agents. Communities eventually accept and become complicit in promoting romanticised images of themselves, and these become in due course of time, sacrosanct bases for the conceptions of their group identities. Besides, these romanticised images carry much market value as they are useful in facilitating the growth of a market for cultural tourism. The poet Robin Singh Ngangom mocks the fashioning and promotion of the peoples of this region as exotic species to attract tourists and curious minds:

> we live as a Babel of colourful tribes
> selling indigenous culture
> in these worlds you discover
> in Encyclopaedia Britannica
> and tourist brochures (*Time's Crossroads* 41)

The crucial role played by market forces in fuelling a tendency to exoticise the Northeast cannot be denied. Northeast India is generally represented as a land of exotic peoples from a pure and unspoiled hill country in tourism campaigns and travel media as well as in geographic and ethnographic descriptions both by central and regional agencies. Often, the cultures and peoples of the Northeast region are museumised into reductionist

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stereotypes. These peoples are transformed into de-historicised reified entities for cultural consumption. This is often achieved through constantly organised fairs, festivals and tourism brochures displaying cultures of the Northeast, under the aegis of both state and non-state agencies. Reinfeld points out that such festivals and artefacts manage to preserve only a shell of the culture, while the intangible heritage that endows meaning to these artefacts gets gradually lost and replaced by the global consumerist culture (4). While such events and exhibitions put up visual and performative representations of the Northeast, Nandana Dutta claims that such `performances` of the exotic are the only way of preserving endangered and dying forms and practices among many indigenous groups of the region (*Questions of Identity* xxvi).

Melanie K. Smith points out that cultural tourism is no less politicised than culture itself (12). She goes on to state that "In the postmodern world of global cultural consumption, culture has become a commodity to be packaged and sold much like any other" (11). She draws attention to the subjection of groups within a society to the gaze of the tourist and the ramifications such exposure can have on group identities in the form of the fossilisation and romanticisation of the culture (13). Lanfant points out that "tourism, particularly `cultural tourism`, is often considered by international organisations as a pedagogic instrument allowing new identities to emerge – identities corresponding to the new plural-ethnic or plural-state configurations which are forming" (4). Groups in society often tend to construct their identities on the basis of their images projected by the gaze of the outsider. This holds especially true in the case of groups in the Northeast. Most of the present-day group identities in this region have been conceptualised and consolidated in the postcolonial period, and contacts with the colonial other has acted as crucial influences in the process of identity formation. Moreover, these new-fangled identities are rooted in narrow definitions of group membership and cultural boundaries and this aspect is reinforced by the fossilisation of these cultures through current trends of cultural tourism. Such fossilisation undermines the dynamic nature of culture and cultural identities, which in the long run leads to the ossification of these identities. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett points out that tourism converts "a neighbourhood, village or region...for all intents and purposes [into] a living museum in situ" (54). Jim Butcher suggests that once culture becomes objectified in

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this way, "It can become a part of heritage of the past, preserved for the sensibilities of the tourist, rather than being made and remade in the context of social change" (93).

Robin Singh Ngangom talks about a common trend among the people in the Northeast to promote the alluring 'noble savage' image to attract cultural tourists, while refusing to talk about the countless troubles haunting the region.

> We all claim to be brave simple and honest
> in the brochures for tourists.
> We are a persevering people: even after we die
> our bleached bones will pick and scar
> passersby on the highways. (*Words and the Silence* 20-21)

The poet is cynical of the projection of a romanticised image of his people, the Manipuris; his experiences of contemporary Manipuri society have turned him into a bitter pessimist. He has seen enough of the rampant erosion of values and the sense of honour in contemporary Manipuri society to observe that the idealisation of such a society is not justified.

However, an engagement with the processes through which market forces come to exert their influence on identity formation and assertion among communities leads us to ponder whether the literature emerging out of these communities is also not affected by similar forces. The frequent engagement of the writers of this region with folk culture is not an entirely innocent exercise. Commodification of cultural capital takes place not just in the tourist industry but in the domain of other cultural productions as well. The fascination for the seemingly exotic that lures tourists lures readers just as well. In fact, literature and tourism are not two completely unrelated domains. Literature has been consumed, produced, re-produced, commoditised and distributed for tourism purposes in the form of what is now known as 'literary tourism' (Robinson and Andersen eds. 2). The practice of visiting places associated with literary works that began in the eighteenth century has led to the growth and subsequent consolidation of a large commercially successful industry that caters to tourists seeking to visit these places. The material conditions which impact the production and publication of literature are subject to the dynamics of similar market forces. Steven Connor reminds that the business of fiction publishing is increasingly a matter of matching product to consumer (16). One cannot deny a substantial impact of consumer demand on the

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glimpses of the 'exotic' that contemporary literary works from the Northeast frequently seem to provide.

6. Identity Assertion and Violence

The process of identity assertion in the Northeast frequently assumes violent means. Ethnic politics and assertion of ethnic identities has led to much violence and unrest in the Northeast in the postcolonial period. After the Independence of India, the hill regions of the Northeast suddenly found themselves incorporated into the state of undivided Assam, thus losing the autonomy and freedom they had enjoyed in pre-colonial times. In the face of much violent protest, the state of undivided Assam was reorganised in 1972 and the region split to form the seven states of the present. The hill communities and later on the plains tribes too, complained of political and cultural exploitation and domination by the Assamese and Bengali Hindu groups of the plains. Even after the creation of separate states however, the suspicion of the plainsman amongst those living in the hills did not disappear. Moreover, different ethnic groups in the Northeast have been engaged in violent conflicts and many groups have even engaged in programmes of ethnic cleansing at various points in time.

Attempts to define and assert group identities are related to the larger issues of power politics in the Northeast and they often take aggressive and violent turns. While being consciously or unconsciously engaged with the project of the restoration and preservation of folk materials of the region through their works, most poets of the Northeast are wary of the violence lying at the heart of the politics centred on issues of identity. The increasing prevalence of aggressive modes of asserting and demanding recognition of separate identities by communities in the region has led to endless conflicts and much bloodshed in the Northeast in the period since independence. Nongkynrih captures the fear and tense anxiety in the atmosphere at the time of an inter-communal strife breaking out in a neighbourhood:

> Squash covers the gardens,
> Barricaded gardens of suspicious men.
> With a green camouflage.
> As the illusory quiet
> Conceals a communal strife.

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There is danger in the streets
And the law, belatedly solicitous,
Has ordered us off the roads. (*Moments* 47)

In his characteristic style, Robin Singh Ngangom does not mince words while bluntly pointing out the violence and hypocrisy inherent in the process of asserting and performing of community identities in the region:

Patriotism is honouring martyrs
who died in confusion,
patriotism is declaring we should
preserve native customs and 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 are brothers
and secretly depriving my brother,
patriotism is playing the music of guns
to the child in the womb. (Jenkins 36)

While many poets view their engagement with their tribal past in their works as an attempt at recording, preserving or retrieving the past, most of it amounts only to a nostalgic looking back or hanging on to fast fading traditions. At one level, it can be seen as an attempt to record the oral culture of these communities in the written form, which itself embodies an inherent fear that their cultures which have sustained themselves in the oral form for centuries, are facing extinction in the face of socio-cultural changes under the impact of modern influences. But a mere recording of traditions will not help to sustain them; as long as they do not become part of the living tradition, it will suffice no purpose other than a museumisation of these cultures. A complete reclamation of these traditions would not be feasible anyway, for they would not fit into the current context. In spite of an underlying desire for cultural continuity, many of the writers do display a subtle awareness of the impossibility of recovering lost traditions, or of resisting change. Interestingly, this, albeit sorrowful, acceptance of the inevitability of change is more visible in the works of women poets from the region; the male poets seem to have relatively more difficulty in reconciling to the changes in their societies. The women poets are found to be more mindful

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of the costs involved in processes of resistance or assertion of ethnic identities. Jobeth Ann Warjri, a poet belonging to the Khasi tribe, talks of the violence involved in the process of ethnic assertion in her home city, Shillong:

> My city
> teeters over rain-spattered earth,
> discovering its past in spurts of protests.
> They tremor and march through your afternoons
> Like short-lived earthquakes, resurrected daily.
> Resting in the hollow of
> A valley's palm, it ambles to a future
> carried in the languid rhythm of
> rivers that feed it.
> You are lured into its song –
> the minor key of blackened deeds sinking
> in its flood. ("Tonight I Think")

She points out how this violence is often brushed under the carpet as communities give in to the propaganda of ethnic politics. In her poem "Blood of Other Days", Temsula Ao too talks about the violence involved in acts of ethnic assertion in contemporary Nagaland. In an ironic tone, she equates the violence of the present with the constant warfare and head-hunting traditions that existed among the Nagas in the past:

> In the by-gone days of the other life
> Before the advent of the WORD
> Spilling the blood of foes
> Was the honour-code.
>
> Head-takers became acclaimed
> Tribal heroes, earning the merit
> To wear special clothes and ornaments
> And live in grand houses.
>
> .....
>
> In the reawakened songs and stories
> A new breed of cultural heroes
> Articulate a different discourse
> And re-designate new enemies
>
> Demanding reinstatement
> Of customary identity
> And restoration of ancestral ground
> As a belligerent post-script to recent history.

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In the agony of the re-birth
Our hills and valleys reverberate
With death-dealing shrieks of familiar arms
As the throw-back generation resurrects
The Blood of Other Days (*Book of Songs* 296-298)

While this issue will be discussed further in Chapter 5, it must be mentioned here in this context that a number of women's groups in the Northeast have been actively engaged in peace-making processes in the region.

However, it is not conflict and division alone that the poets write about. Nongkynrih's "Sundori" is a paean to the love and harmony that survives the hate among communities:

Beloved Sundori,
Yesterday one of my people
Killed one of your people
And one of your people
Killed one of one of my people.
Today they have both sworn
To kill on sight.
But this is neither you nor I,
Shall we meet by the Umkhrah River
And empty this madness
Into its angry summer floods?
I send this message
Through a fearful night breeze,
Please leave your window open. (*The Yearning of Seeds* 12)

7. Conclusion

The creative process is never free from political underpinnings. The engagement of the poets with folklore and oral literary heritage is deeply entwined with the complex political dynamics within which the cultures and traditions of the peoples of Northeast India are currently lodged. Since folkloristics had its beginnings as an offshoot of the romantic nationalist project in Europe of the eighteenth century, the pioneer folklorists projected folklore as 'authentic' 'pure' relic from the past. However, later scholars have challenged such conceptions. The noted folklorist Alan Dundes emphasised that folklore is not something of the past, but is being continually created anew in contemporary life (53-54).

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He has claimed that folklore is "autobiographical ethnography", "a people's own description of themselves" (55). In other words, folklore must be read as an attempt by a people to fashion a self-image for themselves. Dundes points out that even distortions and selective highlighting or downplaying of information about themselves in the folkloric self-image of a people is evidence of the values in that society (ibid.). Dundes' argument can be extended to claim that the self-image projected by a people through its folklore is not an innocent exercise, but subject to various forces that underlie the social dynamics of the particular group of people at a certain point of time.

Temsula Ao has claimed that explorations into indigenous traditions through creative literature serve to look at these cultures with "fresh insight and greater appreciation" (*The Ao-Naga* vii). Her ethnographic projects are infused with insights by the writer as a modern individual, and a political being. The engagement of the poets of the Northeast with the folklore of their communities, amounts to a similar revisitation and refashioning of their cultural pasts and such revisitations have to be read not just as innocent records of the past. Such documentation transforms into an intervention where writers act as political beings inhabiting a particular social and political landscape. Christina Bacchilega claims that the retelling of a narrative or the staging of a ritual act is an opportunity for an individual or a group of people to 'take control', to engage with the past and simultaneously affect the course of the future (*Legendary Hawaii* 2). She further points out that the act of "taking control" is reflective of the power dynamics – "political, institutional, social, economic, gendered that is inescapably at stake in the uses we make of both tradition and performance" (ibid.). The study undertaken in this chapter has shown that a close analysis of the poetical works can offer insights into the complex political dynamics underlying the cultures and traditions of the peoples of Northeast India. A critical examination of the literature written in English in Northeast India is incomplete without an attempt to understand it against the backdrop of the region's history and its contemporary political and cultural atmosphere. In other words, a reading of the literature of the region and an understanding of its history and politics are mutually enriching. However, the purpose of this study is not to show that poetry, in any way, is complicit with politics or policies of the state. Salman Rushdie had pointed out, "Writers and politicians are natural rivals. Both groups try to make the world in their own image; they fight for the same territory" (14). This analysis merely proposes that

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poetry, or literature is general, exists not in a vacuum but in an organic relationship to the socio-political climate within which it develops. The distinctly political nature of the poetry written in English in Northeast India helps to make this relationship more pronounced.

Notes

[1]The Manipuri people inhabiting the plains of Manipur are a largely Vaishnavite community and possess a long and rich literary and cultural traditions.

[2] The Monpas and Sherdukpens of Arunachal Pradesh follow Mahayana Buddhism and the Khamtis and Singphos living in the South-east part of the state follow Hinayana Buddhism. The Chakmas and Mog people of Tripura are followers of Theravada Buddhism. Many small ethnic groups in Assam like the Khamti, Khamyang, Aitong, Phakial and Turung are followers of Buddhism.

[3] Indigenous animistic faith followed by some tribes in Arunachal Pradesh.

[4] A religious socio-cultural organisation of the Khasi people which seeks to promote the indigenous Khasi religion.

[5] Khasi culture has shared a more than a century old relationship with Welsh culture which began through missionary contact. This relationship is still continuing through literary and cultural interactions and exchanges.

[6] The Rooster is the symbol and emblem of the Seng Khasi organisation.

[7] Colonial rule and spread of western education led to the emergence of a new kind of political awareness and the formation of modern political institutions and organisations in the colonies. Benedict Anderson argues that modern political processes in the non-Western world, especially the newly formed nation-states that grew up in the colonies in the post-War period were emulations of the American and European experiences, "because Americans and Europeans had lived through complex historical experiences which were now everywhere modularly imagined" (113). Anderson states that this nationalist consciousness in the colonies was created through the crucial participation of the bilingual native intelligentsia, whose vanguard role, he claims, "derived from their bilingual literacy, or rather literacy and bilingualism" and from their access "through the European language-of-state, to modern Western culture in the broadest sense, and in particular, to the models of nationalism, nation-ness, and nation-state produced elsewhere in the course of the nineteenth century" (116).

Postcolonial critics have strongly criticised Anderson's reduction of anti-colonial nationalism into a 'derivative discourse' (Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*) and a "Calibanistic model of revolt which is dependent upon the coloniser's gift of language/ideas" (Loomba 158). Directing a fierce criticism at Anderson's claim, Partha Chatterjee puts up a poignant question: "If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain 'modular' forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine?" (*The Nation and* 5). He counters Anderson's thesis by illustrating that anti-colonial nationalism divides the world of social institutions and practice into two domains – the material and the spiritual: the spiritual domain, he says, is an 'inner' domain, bearing the 'essential' marks of cultural identity (*The Nation and* 6). It is in the domain of the 'spiritual', where nationalism takes

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shape as a cultural construct and enables the colonised to assert her autonomy. In his words, "nationalism declares the domain of the spiritual its sovereign territory and refuses to allow the colonial power to intervene in that domain" (ibid.). According to him, it is in this domain that the nation as an imagined community is brought into being (ibid.).

In the light of this argument, it would be preposterous to construe societies under colonialism in Northeast India as "perpetual consumers of modernity" (Chatterjee, *The Nation and* 5). While exposure to colonial modernity and western thought and education led communities of the region to form modern political affiliations and nationalist tendencies in the postcolonial period, there was a simultaneous attempt to fashion these national and group identities on the basis of cultural distinctiveness.

[8] The terms used for referring to an outsider among many of these communities carry derogatory undertones and have become loaded with much anxiety, eg. *dkhar* (Khasi), *Vai* (Mizo), *Miglun* (Adi), *Bidekhi* (Asamiya).

[9] This feature is to be found in the region's literatures written in languages other than English as well.

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Chapter 4

Poetry in a Time of Violence

In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing
About the dark times.

- Bertolt Brecht (*Poems 1913-1956* 320)

Nature's darling child and a hub of vibrant and rich cultures, Northeast India is a region torn by violence and unrest. Kritibas Chakraborty a poet from Tripura who writes in Bengali sums up the tragedy of this land in the translation quoted below:

> Even in darkness your face shines
> Like a full moon,
> Tell me what can I dream for you?
> When you are in slumber the sky descends
> On the top of the blue mosquito net
> I sprinkle twinkling stars in the sky under the net.
> Throughout the night
> The stars caress you in colours.
> The cosmic tune comes from beyond the boundless sky.
> Look mother, look!
>
> Since long I could not sleep, only my eyelids are closed
> Out of fear I cannot open my eyes, tell me what should I do!
> If I crave something, only the stormy-fire.
> If I move out, only the heat of the path!
> I will never know
> How long you will burn, Northeast horizon! (Nongkynrih and Ngangom eds. 246-247)

The Lithuanian poet Oscar Milosz had proclaimed in the early twentieth century that "poetry has always followed, fully aware of its terrible responsibilities, the mysterious movements of the great soul of the people" (Milosz, *The Witness* 25). In the intensely disturbed political climate of the Northeast, this 'terrible responsibility' of poetry and poets acquires graver significance. This chapter is an attempt to study how contemporary poets of the Northeast region have responded to the turbulent socio-political developments in the Northeast. Although this work is particularly concerned with the poetry written in English in Northeast

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India, a thorough analysis of the entire body of poetry would not be complete without understanding it in the context of the broader literary and poetical scenario of the region. Therefore, this chapter will, whenever necessary, take account of poetical works from the region written in other languages as well[1].

Taking the example of Nagaland, Monalisa Changkija, a journalist and poet, traces the beginning of the history of conflict among the Nagas from the times of their migration into the present territories. While most legends and origin myths among the Naga tribes make references to a history of migration, no clear information can be found about their place of origin. Historical opinion suggests that they entered their current region from Southeast Asia (Lintner 44; Shakespear, *History of Upper Assam* 195-197). Changkija theorises that it was some sort of conflict that must have forced the Nagas to migrate from their original home and it is her belief that they have "carried the conflicts with [them]" (*Cogitating* 20). Changkija is trying to find a connection and continuity between conflicts in the remote past and those in contemporary times in Naga society.

Yet, there is hardly any society in any part of the world which can claim a complete freedom from conflict and violence in its history. Scholars from various fields have often reflected if violence is intrinsic to human nature and a constituting element of human society. Rene Girard's concepts of 'mimetic desire' and 'scapegoating' are reflections on the presence of violence at the core of human social dynamics since ancient times (*I See Satan*). Violence has had overt as well as an implicit presence in works of literature around the world throughout history. Larry Ray has pointed out that many of the epic stories from antiquity are tales of rape, jealousy, fratricide and torture and it is telling that the event in the Bible that comes next after the Fall is Cain's murder of his brother Abel (2). Other scholars, especially sociologists have mostly founded their studies on the assumed existence of a peaceful society as the norm and they tend to view violence as an aberration, a phenomenon that is endemic and extrinsic to an otherwise peaceful social order (ibid.). But Ray disagrees with this approach and argues that "violence is not 'without' – it is embedded in the social fabric in manifold ways" (3). He postulates that this fact was known to epic writers and storytellers and their understanding gets reflected in such classical works like the Greek epics, the Bible, the works of Shakespeare and those of Dostoevsky (ibid.). While it is

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difficult to ascertain whether violence is or is not an intrinsic part of human society, it may be useful here to undertake a cursory glance at the early history of societies in Northeast India.

1. Pre-Independence Times

Although reliable material that sheds light on the earliest history of the peoples of Northeast India is scanty, the little that is available often point towards a history marked by violent conflicts. Most accounts produced by early British officers posted in the region make references to a "reign of terror" and "a long history of crisis and anxiety" (Elwin, *A Philosophy* 90) endured by the people of the hilly areas for generations. They provide gruesome accounts of widespread headhunting traditions and frequent raids and attacks on neighbouring villages. Writing a few years after Independence, Verrier Elwin describes the social conditions of the people of NEFA in the following manner:

> ...throughout the area, until very recently, life was disturbed and precarious; in Tirap head-hunting was the order of the day and human sacrifice was not unknown; ferocious inter-village conflicts, kidnapping raids, cruel imprisonments and executions marred the peace of Lohit, Siang and Subansiri; a form of head-hunting among the Mishmis, of head-hunting among the Daflas has been recorded. Women and children could not go abroad without an escort and the mists of fear hung heavily above the workers in the fields. (*A Philosophy* 91).

A. Hamilton describes the Eastern Naga tribes in the following terms: "Bitter feuds, complete disregard of the sanctity of human life, and the habit of raiding settled villages on their borders in search of slaves or heads, illustrated the fiercer side of their character" (140). He quotes G.H. Damant, the British deputy commissioner posted in the Naga Hills, who was shot dead by Naga tribesmen in 1879: "Every tribe, almost every village, is at war with its neighbour and no Naga of these parts dare leave the territory of his tribe without the probability that his life will be the penalty" (146). Hamilton also describes the frequent attacks carried out by tribes from the Abor Hills on the plainsmen living in adjacent areas. Most of these colonial accounts employ an Orientalist perspective and should not be accepted uncritically; however more contemporary works also recount and investigate the confrontations between feuding tribes and villages in early colonial times. Sajal Nag provides accounts of raids conducted by tribal men from the Lushai Hills on the villages

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lying in the foothills. Nag states that raids of this kind by the hill-men, which often entailed plunder, kidnapping and head-hunting in the foothill areas were a part of tribal life. However, he points out that the newly arrived colonial administration of the area was quick to label these acts as 'barbaric, inhumane and primitive', while for the tribes they stood for nothing more than a way of life (*Pied Piper* 59).

Poets of this region have also written about the head-hunting days of the past. Temsula Ao's poem "Trophies" is a monologue by a Naga woman, which embodies a criticism from a woman's perspective of the head-hunting traditions that existed among Naga tribesmen in ancient times:

It is one of those crazy nights yet again;
The air is rent by blood-curdling yells
Of the warriors come home
With enemy heads which will hang
From the skull-tree in the village field.

The heads will sway gently
With unseeing eyes, and hair
Matted by their own blood.
And standing below them
The warriors will hurl insults
At the gory trophies and caper wildly
Shrieking with the madness of new wine

But the merry-making will only worsen
The fatigue of warfare, overcoming
The weary, blood-caked warriors;
They will soon shuffle about, too weary
To sing and dance and will collapse
In ungainly heaps in drunken stupor,
And at first cock-crow
Will stumble unsteadily home. (*Book of Songs* 284)

The disapproval embodied in the woman's voice in the poem towards head-hunting customs contrasts the views put forward by L.W. Shakespear in the early twentieth century. He had observed that the chief motivation among Naga men for taking heads was to find favour among women. He writes, "All Nagas are head-hunters, their women being the chief incentive to this pursuit, as girls will not look on men with favour who have not taken heads or been in raids...even of late years it has occurred that women have induced men desiring their favours to go across the border and take a head (*History of Upper Assam* 198-199).

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Robin Singh Ngangom makes a reference to the ancient head-hunting traditions in his poem "To the Blind, the Deaf":

> One day arrogant they waged war.
> Losing they won and brought heads of enemies
> Washed blood-stained swords in virgin waters. (*Time's Crossroads* 59).

Ngangom is rather harsh on the history of his people when he says with much bitterness in another poem "The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom":

> Our past, we believe, is pristine
> Even as we reaped heads and took slaves.
> When we re-write make-believe history
> With malicious intent,
> Memory burns on a short fuse. (Jenkins 33)

The condescending accounts of the hill tribes produced by colonial writers were part of the Orientalist project of 'Other-ing' the native, that embodies "a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different world" (Said 12). This discourse is also complicit with the colonialist project of legitimising the presence of the coloniser in the colony. This becomes evident in the propensity among colonial writers to rue the narrow divisions and lack of solidarity among the populations of the hills. Hamilton writes that while intense feuds between each village and its neighbours were quite common, bitter rivalries existed between clans and *khels* within the same village. He describes them as "an exogamous group of brethren by blood at war with the rest of the world" (142). Although he acknowledges the existence of a fair amount of healthy communication between allied villages, Hamilton holds the hostile relationships among the Nagas responsible for the lack of social intercourse among the Naga tribes. He even goes on to blame the linguistic differences among the Naga tribes and sub-tribes for their lack of friendly relationships. J.H. Hutton too has recorded similar observations about the Naga tribes he has studied. He talks about the lack of peace among different clans within the same Angami village. He says that "In war, even though the village were united, the jealousy and suspicion of one clan for another would invariably be a source of weakness, in peace the village would from time to time break out into riot, while it is incessantly troubled by internal bickering" (*The Angami* 109). Describing the tribes

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inhabiting the Assam province in 1901, L.A. Wadell comments that the tribes led isolated existences and had been engaged in blood-thirsty feuds, head-hunting and murderous raids on their more defenseless neighbours. He goes to the extent of comparing some of the tribes to "that extremely barbarous type which is associated with savage South Africa" (1). Having thus established the lack of accord and harmony among the hill populations in the region, most of these accounts go on to claim that the advent of British administration succeeded in bringing about peace and tranquility into the hilly parts of the Northeast. Joy Pachuau quotes an editorial piece in *Mizo leh Vai* written in 1926, which contrasts the pre-colonial and colonial situation in the Lushai Hills area. The Mizo editor, described by Pachuau as a '*sawrkar* enthusiast', lauds the colonial administration for bringing about peace and unity in the hills. He says,

> In those [pre-colonial] days, all chiefs lived according to their own will; they fought with other chiefs in order to grab the land of other clans or in order to be famous, so that people would say, "so and so chief killed an enemy, took captives"; brothers would thus kill brothers, kin would kill kin...Now, should we regret that we can no longer fight wars, take captives or have village festivals for taking heads? Not at all! Now, people from all lands have become *tualkhat* (fellow-villagers), we have become brothers and it is easier for us to have compassion for one another...and therefore from the time of our ancestors we are much more *thawveng* ('carefree')...the government has according to what it considers sufficient created boundaries for us. (*Being Mizo* 123)

However, postcolonial authors challenge this view. Udayon Misra claims that the British occupation of the Naga Hills was primarily motivated by the need to keep off raids on the plains areas and therefore, they looked to administer the hill areas on a minimum budget ("India's Northeast" 113). Many reports by colonial writers themselves provide evidence on the matter. Verrier Elwin has clearly stated that the British Government widely followed a policy of leaving the tribes of the NEFA region (currently Arunachal Pradesh) alone. According to him, they adopted this policy in part because of the difficulty and low returns of running an administration in the hilly areas, partly in order to protect the tribes from political influences and also because of the sincere belief within much of the administration that leaving them to their natural ways was in their best interests (*A Philosophy* 1). L.A. Wadell writes that owing to the 'hostile' nature of the tribes and the difficult terrain, the British government chose to mostly leave them and their country alone, "except for an occasional expedition and the establishment of a few military outposts, to

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punish a particular tribe for raiding or massacring British subjects" (2). Edward G while describing the relations of the British with the hill tribes of the province, provides ample evidence to support Misra's claim. Gait's book illustrates the British attitude of minimum interference in the affairs of the tribes inhabiting the hills unless they disturbed the peace in the neighbouring plains. Gait states that it had never been their policy to meddle with the domestic feuds of the Nagas, although they had knowledge of their internal skirmishes (432).

Manjeet Baruah raises objection to the claim by colonial and even some postcolonial scholars like Sanjib Baruah, who argue that the region comprises of different groups of communities who have been maintaining mutual isolation and constant hostilities among themselves. Both the scholars appear to emphasise the need of an external factor (the colonial state in the case of colonial commentators like Wadell, and the postcolonial Indian state in the case of Sanjib Baruah) to negotiate and stabilise the differences among the communities in the region. However, Manjeet Baruah argues that the approach adopted by these scholars overlooks the dialectical nature of the socio-spatial relations that he considers to have been central to the reproduction of both differences and shared domains among the communities in this region (*Frontier Cultures* 5-6).

In the absence of written histories, the tribes of Northeast India have been appropriated for descriptions and representations by writers from the outside world, mostly colonial officers and explorers with attitudes ranging from condescension, benevolent patronising to romantic exoticising. Often contemporary writers of this region are seen to be engaged in attempts to negotiate with these representations and produce counter-narratives with an insiders' close understanding. An interesting contrast is to be found between two different narrations of the events which led up to the death of Noel Williamson, the Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya and Dr. Gregorson, a doctor posted in the Tinsukia region along with most of the accompanying sepoys and coolies at Komsing Village in the Abor Hills region, in March 1911. The region now lies in the West Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. The massacre led to a punitive expedition, which came to be known as the Abor Hills Expedition which thereafter brought the region under direct British administration. The first account of the "most treacherous and gruesome murder" and the

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expedition that followed is provided by A. Hamilton. While he provides a very detailed account of the entire event, and includes accounts provided by witnesses and survivors, he largely puts the blame on the "spirit of most wanton aggression" of the Abor men (52). A description of the unfortunate incident is also provided by Mamang Dai in *Legends of Pensam*, only her account present the events that unfolded in Komsing village from the perspective of the tribesmen. She recounts the numerous stories in circulation among the villagers, each of which attributes the tragedy to a different cause. Unlike the colonial writer, she does not lay the blame on anyone, but reflects that "Everything is conjecture" (48). The Komsing region of Arunachal Pradesh still lacks basic communication facilities today. The people of the region still rely on a rickety hanging bridge to cross the river Siang. Dai makes a reference to the simple understanding of an Adi village headman who believes that it is perhaps because of the massacre that the area is still deprived of a proper road (48). A group of Adi dancers narrate the incident and at the end the village headman challenges the perception that they are a 'wild' and 'bloodthirsty' people:

> "They think we are a village of horror, but it is not true! The leaves of the orange trees glisten. The hills are radiant with the light of the sun. The laughing children tramp to school down the same steps of stony earth that the soldiers marched up. These days many visitors are finding their way here and you can hear their voices asking the way, the curious migluns shielding their eyes and asking for help to enter the maze of stories that the miri remembers and restores to life…We are not a village of shame" (56).

Mamang Dai's novel *Black Hill* is a remarkable example of a similar intervention that offers an imaginative portrayal of the rather mysterious disappearance of two French priests in the Mishmi Hills region of today's Arunachal Pradesh in 1854 and the subsequent capture and execution of a Mishmi man suspected of having murdered them. L.W. Shakespear has categorically documented that the two priests were murdered by the Mishmi man for "motives of plunder" (*History of Upper Assam* 144). Mamang Dai says in the afterword to her novel: "Perhaps nothing is as it seems and everything can be explained the other way round: that lives are ended, but a story – never" (*Black Hill* 294). She lays out the preamble of her story thus:

> I have books in front of me. They tell me things about this land, and a priest who walked across these hills carrying a cross and a sextant. They tell me what he saw and thought, but these are words fixed on yellowed paper. There is another story from an unwritten past

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> hidden beyond the mountain wall. I journey for many days to find it...A closed book is opening. Someone is speaking to me from the past and the words are clear as day: a man, a woman, and a priest. This is their story. (ix-x)

She builds upon the sketchy reports of the incident in her narrative and tries to visualise the circumstances that could have led up to the death of the priests and the involvement of the Mishmi man Kajinsha who came to be suspected of murdering them. In the course of tracing the life of Gimur, an Adi woman who marries Kajinsha and the way their paths become entangled with those of the two priests, the novel lays out a nuanced understanding of the complex arrangements that the various peoples inhabiting the region and its surroundings had worked out for co-existence. The novel also weaves in the various political forces which had begun to impinge upon the land and its inhabitants which would soon change its fortunes forever. It portrays the struggles of the hill tribes to resist attempts by the 'miglun's – the British to extend their control over the hill areas.

However, many colonial accounts also contain departures from the common tendency to label the tribal cultures as 'savage'. John Shakespear clarifies that contrary to popular perceptions, the Lushai people are not 'head-hunters'. He admits that raids among clans and on neighbouring populations were frequent but these raids were not aimed at procuring heads, but for loot and slaves. J.H. Hutton refuses to differentiate between the 'head-hunting' practices of the Nagas and hunting for game among others, including the British. He argues that head-hunting of different kinds is prevalent everywhere and as an honest probe would reveal, the ultimate reason for head-hunting is "some deep-rooted and innate characteristic of human nature" (Shakespear. *The Lushei Kuki* 157). He proclaims that most Britishers are head-hunters and "the distinction between the pursuit of man and the pursuit of animals is one of degree rather than kind" (ibid.).

Nevertheless, the various accounts underline the fact that the pre-independence societies of Northeast India cannot be said to have lived in peace. Yet, the conditions of the pre-Independence past are vastly different from those obtained in the aftermath of Independence in the region. British colonisation decidedly altered the socio-political foundations in the region which left in its wake a trail of unending unrest and crisis. The following sections examine poetry from Northeast India in the light of its psychosocial setting in the period around and after Independence.

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1.1. World War II

While the arrival of the British colonisers forever altered the course of history for the peoples of the Northeast, yet another momentous event that had its roots in the imperialist ambitions of a world that was distant and alien to them would leave an indelible impact on the futures of the people in this region. In the period from 1942 to 1944, this region would become what has remained the least investigated but a very crucial arena of the World War II, as it became a part of its China-Burma-India War theatre. This region which is often seen as a land corridor between South and Southeast Asia, has, for thousands of years, served as a conduit for human migrations and cultural exchange and interactions. The immense cultural diversity existing in the region bears testimony to its significance as a vibrant thoroughfare for the movement of people, trading activities and cultural traffic. However, the advent of the colonial state transformed the character of the area from a crossroads into a frontier, which would go on to have far reaching impact upon its political fortunes in the postcolonial period. If the British colonisers initiated the process of constituting the area as a frontier region in the nineteenth century, the arrival of the World War II only served to further consolidate its frontier character.

In a now widely forgotten episode, the region had turned into a war theatre of strategic importance during World War II as it became a crucial supply route and communication line for the allied forces. It also acted as a point of departure for any British land offensive into the Japanese occupied territory of Burma. Supply depots and Air Force Stations were established at various places in the Brahmaputra Valley and hill regions. The entire period was marked by large scale movement of troops and refugees into the region as well as rapid infrastructural improvements to facilitate war efforts. Literary works from the region often provide accounts and references to the memories and experiences of the Great War[2]. After the Japanese occupation of Burma, the Allied Forces lost access to the Burma Road which was being used to provide aid to the Chinese fighting the Japanese under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek. This forced the Allies to airlift the supplies from airfields in Assam to Kunming in China over what came to be known as the 'Hump': the tricky stretch of ragged mountains that lie between the plains of Assam and China (Katoch; Raghavan).

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Besides occupying crucial significance in the course of the War, the events and battles that took place in the Assam province were to have serious immediate as well as long term effects on the land and people of the region. The first great impact of the war was the arrival of huge numbers of refugees, comprising lakhs of Indian immigrants fleeing Burma in the face of Japanese invasion. Once the sea routes were closed, Manipur and Assam remained the only entry points into India for the fleeing population. The overland exodus of Indians was undertaken through three routes – via the Arakan to Chittagong, through the Chindwin valley to Manipur and through the Hukawng Valley to Ledo in Assam. The number of people who undertook the overland trek is roughly estimated between 400,000 and 450,000 (Tinker 2). The arduous journey through the hilly terrain in the absence of food, medical aid or basic amenities and worsened by the onset of the monsoons, took a heavy toll on the fleeing population. A huge number perished in the course of the trek, from starvation, disease, fatigue, air raids, occasional attacks and looting by local populations in Burma or simply under the strain of the journey. The death toll is claimed to be as high as 100,000 (ibid.).

By the middle of 1942, thousands of refugees started pouring into the hills of Manipur and the present-day Nagaland through the Tamu-Moreh Road onto refugee camps at Imphal and the railhead at Dimapur. Hundreds of Europeans and about 10,000 Indians also took the route through the Hukawng Valley and the Pangsau Pass to Ledo in Assam, although figures are not available for the exact number who made it to Ledo. The arrival of this huge starving, diseased and exhausted population brought in an unprecedented period of turmoil into the quiet hills. Some 190,000 refugees poured into Imphal in the first half of 1942 and a large camp was set up around the Imphal Main or Koirengei Airfield (Katoch 13). The refugee camps at Imphal provided little facilities in the form of shelter, food or medical aid (Tinker 11). The administration was more occupied with providing for the retreating troops, administrators and other European evacuees from Burma. Thus the onus of providing food and shelter to the Indian refugees fell on the local villagers and they carried out their task with much compassion, kindness and hospitality (Thomas, *Evangelising* 96). But the sudden influx of refugees, together with the already existing large numbers of troops and other personnel, and in the face of the havoc created by the first bombing raids by Japanese forces, quickly led to the exhaustion of food supplies in the Naga Hills. The

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resulting famine was accompanied by the breakout of epidemics and thousands of Naga villagers perished (Thomas, *Evangelising* 97).

Close on the heels of this massive exodus came the war preparations by the Allied Forces. In preparations for an offensive against Japan as well as to defend against a possible Japanese invasion, the Assam province was flooded with armed troops, personnel and technology from different parts of the world – the UK, USA, Nepal, East and West Africa, Burma, Australia, New Zealand, China, and India (ibid.). The building of lines of communication and air bases required the employment of large numbers of local people. Local manpower was also necessary to feed, clean and perform other small menial duties in the military camps. Infrastructure works and other war related requirements created new kinds of jobs and economic opportunities for the local population. Not only labourers but local contractors, suppliers and overseers were much in demand. Such involvement in the war not only affected the economy of the region, but also brought the people into contact with the wider world and acquainted them, for the first time, with modern warfare. In *Legends of Pensam*, the tribal folk's simple understanding of the War taking place in the easternmost parts of the region is described by Mamang Dai in the following terms:

> It was the time of war in all the world. Such a war had happened once before, but it had not brought many miglun[3] soldiers to the Siang Valley. Now, they seemed to be everywhere, for they were fighting the Japans further to the east, where Hoxo's and Rakut's fathers had gone (90).

Then in March 1944, the Axis forces arrived in the region. Around 100,000 soldiers, including troops of the INA, accompanied by a huge supply of livestock and service animals entered the Chin Hills, Naga Hills and the Manipur region (ibid.). The ensuing clash between the enemy forces, known as the battle of Kohima and Imphal, lasted for over two months from mid-March to May. Heavy fighting and frequent air bombings of the villages led to large numbers of civilian deaths among Nagas, as well as the destruction of entire villages, along with their granaries, houses and other immovable properties (Thomas, *Evangelising* 98). Much of the destruction remains largely undocumented. From May 1942 to May 1944, a total of 17 air raids on the Imphal valley are recorded, which resulted in 170 civilian deaths and more injuries (Katoch 14-15). Moreover, the Axis forces set up camps in

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the villages and they resorted to large scale exploitation of the local population for food and labour resources; beatings, rape and torture of the villagers became quite widespread (Khan 247). Memories of the encounters of the hill tribes with Japanese forces have found imaginative recounting in the vernacular literature of the region. Birendrakumar Bhattacharyya's Akademy Award winning novel *Iyaruingam*[4] (Asamiya, translated into English as *Love in the Time of Insurgency*), set in a Tangkhul Naga village shows the Japanese invasion as a part of its backdrop. The horrors of the devastating War that raged in this quiet region are also recounted by poets writing in English. Robin Singh Ngangom records the memories of the War in the Imphal region:

> red-ruined bricks, forgotten rivers and
> neglected freedom fighters of World War II
> bring to mind
>
> .....
>
> my departed grandmother
> told of
> bomb-hollowed walls and Japanese guerrillas
> who vanished at the blink of an eyelid and
> negroes from the allied forces
> who once nearly molested an aunt.
>
> when the bombs fell
> my people ran in panic
> across hill slopes and rice-fields.
> many perished.
>
> only the war was not our war.
> our race will not perish. (*Words and Silence* 12)

The death and destruction caused by the War lives on in the memory of the people in the region. Besides civilian casualties, the people bore witness to large numbers of soldiers that fell on both sides. Around 4000 Allied soldiers and between 5000-7000 soldiers of the Axis forces are believed to have died in the battle of Kohima. According to some estimates, on the Japanese side, 30,000 were killed and the Allies suffered some 16,000 casualties (Katoch 2-3). Many war cemeteries scattered over the entire Northeast region today bear testimony to the human losses caused by the war. One of the largest of these cemeteries lies at the heart of Kohima city, constructed on the very hill on the Kohima Ridge, where, what

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came to be known as the 'battle of the tennis court' took place. The cemetery, maintained by Commonwealth War Graves Association, has 1,420 graves of Commonwealth soldiers, besides memorials to 917 Hindu and Sikh soldiers who were cremated here. An epitaph inscribed on a memorial that stands at the center of the cemetery reads as follows: "When you go home tell them of us and say for your tomorrow we gave our today". In one of her poems, titled "The Epitaph", Temsula Ao lambastes the rather sentimental message of the epitaph and condemns the tradition of valorising war:

The smooth-skinned stone digresses
Does not talk of blood and tears
But of some tomorrows and todays.

Maudlin lines
To mark the end of lives
Dragged over thousands of miles
By an empire's relentless run.

The neat little uniform
Marble slabs
Cannot tell you why
They lie
Stuck on an alien hill-side
Inhabited by untamed tribes.
They cannot explain
Why their todays
Vanished in vain.

So do not go away
Thinking of glory.
Think of the wasted tomorrows
Buried beneath the stone slabs
And empty words
To jaded tourists.

Go home then
And write an epitaph
To end all epitaphs,
Mindless mayhem. (Nongkynrih and Ngangom eds. 209-210)

While the War brought in many new shocks and surprises to the people of this region, they have never stopped marveling at the large number of soldiers and personnel from distant corners of the world who poured into this remote and difficult corner of the world only to die in heaps in the name of an insane war. Robin Singh Ngangom has an elegy for

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the Welsh soldier and War poet Alum Lewis, who allegedly took his own life in the Goppe Pass in the Arakan Hills of Burma, where he was posted during the Second World War.

You came across an aerial panorama
Of impenetrable jungles,
Across malarial swamps
And turbulent rivers
To these far-flung hills.
Only to fall like a flower
From its tired stalk,
A blossom bursting
Into a crimson puzzle of bullets.

Far from your foggy streets,
No far away, promising Welsh,
From the flower your people found
On lofty heights.
On March 5, 1944 the Goppe Pass
In the hostile Arakan hills
Would not let you pass. (*Words and Silence* 46)

Like Ao, Ngangom deplores the loss of thousands of young lives from myriad parts of the world in this region during the War.

Early death chisels
Only words of regret on a tombstone.
In a war you scarcely understand
You only joined hands against
A European monster as a poet would. (ibid.)

Apart from the mayhem and destruction brought about by the events of the World War in the Northeast region, another crucial significance of the war is the exposure it provided to the peoples of the region to a world they had so far been unaware of. Historians agree that the assistance and aid provided by the local people of this region was crucial to the Allied Forces' success in resisting the Japanese advance (Bayly and Harper 83; Khan 248; Thomas, *Evangelising* 99). This contact with the outside world had a significant impact upon the processes of identity formation among the peoples of the region. A large number of men from the Manipur and Naga Hills, roughly 4000, comprising of Nagas and Kukis, were recruited into their labour Corps by the British and sent to France during World War I (Elwin, *Nagaland* 26; Thomas, *Evangelising* 26). Also, a number of Kuki men had fought in

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World War II as part of the Indian National Army (INA) (Khan 244). More than 150 Kuki INA veterans have received pensions from the Indian Government (Ghosh 155).

Their journey to France and the experiences on the war front opened up a world of experiences for these hill men. They changed the ways in which they understood themselves in relation to the world and they brought back this new understanding to their communities back home (Thomas, *Evangelising* 76). Charles Chasie believes that the sudden exposure of the Nagas to the war economy before they could have learnt anything about money economy is responsible for much of the corruption and social crises in contemporary Naga society (256). Rishang, the protagonist in *Love in the Time of Insurgency* says, "Yes, the war has changed the face of our land. Remember how it was, vulnerable to attack, till the British turned it into a huge military camp with airfields and... No, our lives will never be the same again." (27-28). John Thomas notes that the experiences of World War II brought home to the Nagas a realisation of their vulnerability and susceptibility to 'trans-national' forces and actors from an outside world, like the Burmese-Indian refugees, the Japanese, British or Indian soldiers or the colonial authority. Moreover, the improved communication facilities created by the wartime infrastructure boost resulted in greater mobility and in the wider contact of a newly educated class of people among the hill communities with the people of the plains. Gradually, a consciousness of the various national liberation movements taking place in different parts of Asia and Africa crept in, which led them to reflect on the course of their own political futures in a new way. John Thomas states that "The war has made them resolute not to let their lands be run over and their history be held at ransom by others yet again" (Thomas, *Evangelising* 101). He believes this moment to be the crucial point at which the Nagas began to consider the idea of independence (ibid.). The seeds of secessionist thoughts of the Naga rebel leader Angami Zapu Phizo are often believed to have taken root during his experiences as a soldier in the INA during the War. It is also significant that the separatist war among the Nagas was begun with weapons left behind by the Japanese and Allied Forces during the War.

The experiences of the War had no less influence on the art and culture of the region. Robin Singh Ngangom states that the trauma of the War brought about significant changes

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in the social and political life of Manipur. He says that the beginnings of modern Manipuri poetry can be traced back to the ravages of the Great War ("Contemporary Manipuri" 297).

2. Moment of Independence

Hardly was the chaos of the World War over when the political fate of the people of Northeast India took a new turn. Close on the heels of the War arrived another pivotal event: the declaration of Indian independence and the creation of the Indian republic. It was a stormy time in the Northeastern corner of the country. Ngangom talks about the war and the birth of the new nation in one breath:

> only the war was not our war.
> our race will not perish.
> we have learnt pleasure
> in lieu of a barbaric past.
> at cockcrow one morning we found
> ourselves belonging to a nation. (*Words and the Silence* 12)

Monalisa Changkija vehemently questions the inclusion of her people into the Indian nation, and particularly, the nature of this inclusion, in her poem "Of a People Unanswered":

> Brushing aside all arguments
> You made us part of the Nation
> only acknowledging our existence
> in hyperbole and rhetoric
> with reference to the 'Special Status'
> immuring us in a 'Category'
> to be preserved and promoted
> for anthropological studies
> within shaven hills and rare orchids
> in pursuance of your "tryst with destiny".
> You do not mention that to you we are
> a market for your bourgeoisie and
> important for your defense strategy. (*Monsoon Mourning* 32)

The accession of the various areas and territories of Northeast India into the newly formed Indian Union was rife with disputes and controversies. Except Assam, where the inclusion into the Indian Union was mostly seamless, most of the tribal areas were not enthusiastic about joining India. The most vehement opposition came from the Naga Hills.

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The Naga tribes were apprehensive about their future in the face of the withdrawal of the British from the subcontinent. The Naga National Council (henceforth NNC) succeeded in bringing together all the Naga tribes under one organization for the first time. The NNC led by Angami Zapu Phizo, made a petition to Lord Mountbatten stating that the Indian Government should act as a guardian power over the Nagas for 10 years, after which the Nagas would determine the course of their future (Misra, *India's Northeast* 100). An NNC delegation led by Phizo also met Mahatma Gandhi in July 1947 and Gandhi assured them that under no circumstances would the Nagas be forced to join the Indian Union against their will. However, Nehru refused to agree to the demands of the Nagas and appealed to them to join the Indian Union with promises of local autonomy and other wide ranging safeguards (Thomas, *Evangelising* 107-108). Eventually, the Naga Hills was inducted into the Indian Union as a part of the state of undivided Assam.

After the first phase of mergers was complete, there were only eight states left, which were yet to join the Indian federation: Kashmir, Hyderabad, Benaras, Tripura, Cooch-Behar, Khasi Hills, Mysore and Manipur. In the case of the princely state of Manipur, various groups were considering different options for the political future of the state. While the Congress was vehemently in favour of the abolition of the monarchy and accession to the Indian Republic, one group was inclined towards becoming a part of Burma. A third group preferred the creation of a separate province comprising of the hilly regions of Cachar, Tripura, Manipur and Lushai Hills (Chishti 137). However, Sri Prakasa, the then Governor of Assam (16 February 1949 – 27 May 1950), was determined to make Manipur a part of the Indian dominion. He met the king of Manipur, Maharaja Bodha Chandra Singh at Shillong and pressurised him to sign the Instrument of Accession. Although some of the provisions in the document of accession were disagreeable to him, finally the Maharaja gave in and Manipur merged with the Indian Union on September 21, 1949 as a Part C state. It would later become a centrally administered union territory in 1956 (Chishti 149; Subramanian).

Faced with the Partition of the country, the tiny princely state of Tripura was left with no choice but to accede to India. Many groups at the time, with the support of the Muslim League, were trying to merge Tripura with the newly created East Pakistan. In the face of these circumstances, the Regent Maharani Devi, ruling on behalf of the minor King Kirit

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Bikram Kishore Dev Karma, quickly signed the agreement of merger and Tripura acceded to the Indian Union on 15 October, 1949 (Bhaumik, "Tripura" 79).

Various options were being considered and debated in the Lushai Hills area (currently the state of Mizoram) as well. The leadership of the Mizo Union, a powerful political organisation of the Mizos formed in 1946, was in favour of merging with India. The Union was a vehement critic of the oppression of chiefs and upheld the cause of the abolition of chieftainship in the Lushai Hills. They were attracted by the commitment shown by the Indian National Congress towards the abolition of such medieval institutions like chieftainship and landlordism. However, the powerful chiefs were resistant towards the proposal of joining the Indian Union for the same reason. They formed a group called the United Mizo Freedom Organisation and lobbied for the independence and sovereignty for the Mizo people. A dissenting section within the Mizo Union even lobbied for joining the Mizo dominated areas of Burma and forming a province in Burma. Different positions were also held on the question of whether the Lushai Hills should become a part of the province of Assam, or be directly administered by the Indian government. (Nag, *Pied Pipers* 225-231). Eventually, the pro-India group prevailed over the rest and the Mizo Hills were merged into the Indian Union on 15 August, 1947.

Meanwhile, much uncertainty was created over the political future of the entire Northeast region by the grouping scheme of the British Cabinet Mission of 1946. The province of Assam was proposed to be included in the Muslim majority groups by the Cabinet Mission. The plan gave rise to mass protests in Assam and the Assam Congress submitted a memorandum opposing the grouping scheme. A rather apathetic attitude on the part of the central Congress leadership went on to create a rift between the Assam Congress and the All India Congress Committee (Misra, *India's Northeast* 12-17). Later on, the grouping plan was dropped and the sub-continent was divided into two countries through Partition. The Assam province remained a part of India, except the Sylhet district, which chose to merge with East Pakistan through a referendum.

Besides, the British were also putting together various plans for the political future of the Northeast region in the event of British withdrawal, especially for its hilly regions. One such plan was to establish a crown colony in the region. Sir Robert N. Reid, the Governor of

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Assam (1937-1942), who had laid out the details of this plan in his pamphlet entitled "A Note on the Future of the Present Excluded, Partially Excluded and Tribal Areas of Assam" (1941), recommended that the future of the Excluded, Partially Excluded and Tribal Areas of Assam Province should be left to the British Parliament, and it definitely must not be left to Indian political leaders, "with neither knowledge, interest nor feeling for these areas" (Syiemlieh 66). His opinion was shared by the anthropologist Dr. J.H. Hutton, Political Officer and Deputy Commissioner in Assam and later the Census Commissioner of India (1929-1933) who recommended the creation of a North-East Province or Agency which would comprise the entire tract of hills from the Lushai land on the south to the Balipara Frontier Tract on the north, including the Chittagong Hills region, the Naga and Chin areas of Burma and the Shan states (Syiemlieh 69).

The plan never came into effect but freedom from British rule and the simultaneous merger into the Indian Union was largely a fraught affair in the Northeast region. It left behind unresolved issues which would lead to a trail of much anger, unrest and violent conflicts in the region in the following period.

3. The Post-Independence Era and Poetry in English

The post-Independence era ushered in a period of great turmoil in Northeast India. The period after Independence is not a monolithic chunk of time, but it was marked by a series of complex developments in the region and the postcolonial experience varies across different parts of the Northeast. However, composing poetry in English is a rather recent phenomenon in Northeast India and most of the poets discussed in this chapter began publishing their work from the late eighties of the last century. Although many of the conflicts in the region have longer histories, they have intensified in terms of scale and number since the eighties. The works of the poets from this region are informed by their immediate political surroundings, although they never lose sight of the historical trajectories of the societies to which they belong.

The political and social upsets that had taken place in the period immediately preceding Independence culminated in intense political instability in the region in the period

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following Independence. Different groups took to armed rebellion against the state, mainly due to dissatisfaction with the Indian union. This beautiful region of undulating hills and valleys erupted into large-scale violence and bloodshed even as the Indian state responded with harsh anti-insurgency measures. The situation was worsened by the simultaneous breakout of numerous conflicts, many of them violent, between ethnic and linguistic communities inhabiting the region. The distrust, bloodshed and mayhem was accompanied by the gradual collapse of social and political institutions as society became infested by rampant corruption, criminalisation of society and politics and all-round failure of the law and order structure. In these utterly desperate circumstances that came to devour this fateful Northeastern region of the country in the postcolonial period divesting it of its peace forever, the poets of the region have taken upon themselves to voice the countless untold miseries of the land and its people through their poetry. The following sections will examine the various ways in which these poets have responded to the severe climate of strife surrounding them and their societies.

3.1. The Poet and Society

The question of what role poetry serves in society is an ancient one and various people have offered defenses of poetry throughout history which try to prove its value. But the very fact that the worth and function of poetry needs to be defended and defined time and again indicates that perhaps the initial question has still not found a complete resolution. The dispute seems to be centred not so much on the aesthetic function of poetry, but on the putative social function that has seemed to require steady vindication. Rainer Maria Rilke had once raised questions about the value and worth of poetry: "Art is superfluous, can art heal wounds, can it take away the bitterness of death? It does not assuage despair, it does not feed the hungry or clothe the shivering" (Reiss 83). Robin Ngangom has similar doubts about his beloved craft:

> What they don't need is poetry.
> These gnarled men and wrinkled women
> Who work on slopes,
> Swaying in the rain like knotted,
> Weather-beaten pines, breathing

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Mountain air, these weavers and herdsmen.

What matters if I can't explain to them
The nuance of an ode or a ghazal,
The iron and flint of a Mayakovsky
Or a Guillén, how do I impress upon them
Their miserable plight
When all they want to do
Is smoke and chatter away time.
When he hears poetry
The peasant will lean on his hoe
In exasperation while his fields lie fallow,
The hunter will return empty-handed with
A sad poem, and if the goatherd listens
To poetry's demented cadences
His goats will not give milk. (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* 41)

He then goes on to outline the poetic ambitions he had set out with, but he feels he has failed as a poet:

Let me explain.

Like the great poets
Pardoned by time
I wanted to gather words
From arrows knocked in a turquoise sky.
I wanted to catch words in my embroidered bag,
Rainy words spattered, thrown about
By the March wind, I wanted to collect
Pebbly words from riverbeds, smooth,
Geometrical consonants of primary colours.
I wanted to unearth roots and herbs
And compound a word-salve, I wanted
To forge words on an anvil.
I wanted to be a wordsmith.

The sweeper wakes up the morning without irony.
I want him to burn my anxieties and not
Sweep them under the mat as I used to.
I want the carpenter
To fashion me a word-chair
To sit me down and calm me,
I want him to nail me down a poem.
The carpenter has learnt his trade and cannot
Waste hours chiseling and planning couplets.
I wanted the mason to lay
The cornerstones of living for me.
The mason awaits cargoes of sand and bricks

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On the shores of the afternoon and doesn't need
Silken rhetoric or spice adjectives.

All I wanted was to sing
With the mystical sparrows,
But only a murder of crows
Nest in my throat at dawn.
I wanted to harvest words
Which grow on their own, words
Which die without tawdry funerals;
Of creepers and vines, stars and stone,
Wisdom and folly, flowers and moss. (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* 41-42)

Nabanita Kanungo expresses her similar doubts regarding the relevance of poetry in a long poem:

It is always a lame bid for poetry
to try and be relevant to its times.
There is always the stale smell of smoke in the air,
and a storm cloud rising in the horizon
will return a generation in cinders, rob the sky of hope.
This is how the scab on memory peels off again
And I cover my face as something unspoken in the news
blows the ashes of my metaphors towards me in a kiss.

It's a stupid groveling, wishing to speak,
say I felt this or that, that I still feel, that no one cares;
why must poetry writhe across those meaningless shores again
to fulfil its futile tenacity? (*A Relevant Poem*)

As she continues with her poem, Kanungo even communicates her doubts about the dubious roles of the critic and the academician:

And there will be a theorist in some meet
who will seize the point of absurdity that does not let wounds heal,
or an analyst who cheats it of simple hurts
which gave it a taste of things sadder than loneliness,
like love for instance or hope or even this history
that an indifferent god moves as an old pawn
across war's chess-board.

But here I am, in my picturesque city of streets and cars
trying to write about a Gaza, a Jerusalem,
a Baghdad, a Delhi; and in the same useless vein,
I will write of the fist of rice sinking slowly
into the clamour about hike in petrol prices,
the woods surrendering to composed manoeuvres of profit;
or the steady march of an industry

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which sows bullets into the heart of a child's atlas and reaps bombs.
I will write how I want to apprehend that instinct
which calmly drives a rod into a woman's womb
or a bottle into a child's, and has the nerve to laugh
from behind the tattered law of a country;
I will also warn a blind democracy
not to try to find someone different
in the same hooded chill
which climbs all the way up every five years
to its throne by the defeated steps of my spine;
and somewhere an old stupidity will enter my attempt
to understand a city I cannot call my home
although our births are bound by the same borders of guilt.
But these are not the co-ordinates which will help me locate this silence.

Perhaps it's that poverty of my soul which plays out this despair
in a war that never ended with those fake agreements
the world did not pretend to fulfil as it lulled me with new dawns.

Outside, there are flashes in the darkening horizon;
a soft rain begins to fall on July's torn breast
hardly drenching the earth with the plot of fake peace
and far off, there are those hills which refuse to
soothe my eyes with the amateur country of my dreams.
A mad wind presses my arms across my chest
bracing me for an answer that is falling somewhere at this moment
in hundreds of bullet-ridden bodies of children
who always stood on the wrong side of wars.
And something quietly tells me
that I mustn't try to find myself
in this world with a silly reason that lets me go,
emptied of myself - a reason like this poem
which is afraid of the sense it tries to make of a time
or place where it was always possible
that parents should exchange the severed heads
of their enemy's children at the borders of a myth,
where there are seasons to strip history naked
on the streets again and smear its battered face
with the dark ease of bloodshed. (*A Relevant Poem*)

Theodor Adorno had called the poem "a philosophical sundial telling the time of history" (*On Lyric Poetry* 46). He insisted that any work of art, even lyric poetry, which is generally assumed to be extremely individualistic and subjective in nature, manifests "the entirety of a society, conceived as an internally contradictory unity" (*On Lyric Poetry* 39). Yet, traditionally poetry is often criticised as having little or no political function. C.M.

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Bowra discusses this general view that poetry has very little to do with politics, and states that "even if we extend politics to cover a whole range of public events, it stands in an awkward relation to poetry, that its incursions are usually unsuccessful and often deplorable, and that its influence defiles an otherwise pure art" (1).

Robin Ngangom is perhaps addressing the same ancient argument in the sardonic concluding lines of his poem "To Alun Lewis, Soldier, Poet" where he pays homage to the Welsh war poet Alun Lewis:

> Being a poet I salute you brother.
> They still say poets will not fight. (*Words and the Silence* 46)

In fact, Lewis himself is also recorded to have struggled to integrate his lives as a soldier and as a poet. He had communicated his struggles in this regard in a letter to Robert Graves:

> It is easy to write prose in India, there is so much to satirise or hate or shrug one's shoulders at. But poetry is harder to command, mainly I think because everything is somehow remorseless here, arid, pellucid and incurable. (Pikoulis 146)

Ngangom's choice in paying homage to Lewis and not the other war poets like Wifred Owen or Sigfried Sassoon is strategic. Firstly, the former fought and wrote during World War II, which had a direct impact on the hills of Northeast India. Moreover, at the time of his death, Lewis was posted in the Arakan Hills of Burma, a region that is both spatially and culturally close to the hills of Northeast India. Ngangom is also playing on the connection between Lewis' Welsh identity and the cultural links between the Welsh people and the people of the Khasi Hills, which lies not far from the place where Lewis met his death. He makes a reference to this connection when he says:

> no far away, promising Welsh
> from the flower your people found
> on lofty heights. (*Words and the Silence* 46)

Poetry is not only conceived to inhabit a space that is dissociated from politics, the argument is extended to deny poetry any relevance in the world of warfare or violent conflicts. Abundant evidence exists in the history of literature across the world of soldiers, mourners, victims and prophets taking recourse to poetry to communicate their experiences or impressions of war. C.M. Bowra has illustrated that public themes have been common in

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poetry across time and culture. And yet, detractors apply the imagery of gender stereotypes and associate the subtle, delicate energy of poetry with 'femininity' and contrast it with the fierce, violent and thereby 'masculine' world of warfare (Winn 2). Advocates of this argument consider poetry to be most suitable for peacetime activity, and unnecessary for war, which requires more 'pragmatic' kinds of knowledge (Winn 9).

The ancient argument whether poetry has any significance beyond the aesthetic becomes even more relevant in the context of the contemporary socio-political atmosphere of the Northeast. Talking in the context of the English language novel written in India, Meenakshi Bharat underlines how the practical invasion of the contemporary world by terrorism has made it inevitable for intellectuals and non-intellectuals from creative and other fields to engage with the subject of terrorism (*Troubled Testimonies* 2). While the dominant belief has held that great art has been produced in periods of tranquility, in the current century, creativity has found roots in the unorthodox sites of violence and terrorism. This has been found to be true in the case of the Indian sub-continent, where terrorist violence has become increasingly frequent. Bharat focuses on the "inscribed, radical, interpretative, imaginative and meaningful treatment of 'current' events" (*Troubled Testimonies* 4) in Indian fiction written in English and sees in their engagement fresh modes of addressing questions of nationhood, citizenship and allegiance to beliefs and the "possibilities of the location of a new cultural model for understanding the nation" (*Troubled Testimonies* 5).

Bertholt Brecht had proclaimed that the poet cannot escape his eternal responsibility of "singing of the dark times":

> They won't say: when the walnut tree shook in the wind
> But: when the house-painter crushed the workers.
> They won't say: when the child skimmed a flat stone across the rapids
> But: when the great wars were being prepared for.
> .....
> However, they won't say: the times were dark
> Rather: why were their poets silent? (274)

Contemporary poetry written in Northeast India is believed to derive its distinctiveness from its tendency to be overtly politically engaged in theme and content. This embodies a departure from the central tradition of Indian poetry in English which has mostly steered

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clear of the political. Robin Ngangom professes to believe "in the poetry of 'feeling' which can be shared, as opposed to mere cerebral, intellectual poetry which is inaccessible, and which leaves the reader outside the poet's insulated world" ("Poetry in the Time" 169). This difference from the poetry written in the rest of the country is perhaps induced by the peculiar socio-political situation and the distinctive historical fortunes the Northeast region has been through. The politically charged climate of the region throughout the postcolonial period has infused the literature produced in the region in this period with a singularly political character. Mamang Dai argues: "Yes, there is writing about guns and bullets and death and betrayal. It can hardly be otherwise, when we are confronted with changes that bring such terror and anguish" (Sen, "Preface" ix). The contemporary poetry in this region is self-consciously written inside of history, of politics and responds to the socio-political events in the region. Robin Ngangom admits to having extended the limits of his poetry beyond the ivory tower to subsume insistent realities. He explains: "If anyone should ask now why my poems do not speak of my land's breathtaking landscapes; its sinuous dances, its dark-maned women, I can only think of Neruda's answer: "Come and see the blood in the streets!" ("Poetry in the Time" 171). He believes that in these harrowing times in the region, words should 'catch fire':

Now words should catch fire,
winds of discontent rend the earth.
Or dying little by little
in our hearts
we will all become
glorified fauna.

.....

While our boys and girls
take to the hills,
eat birds' eggs and roots.
fugitives in malarial jungles!
While at home our emaciated flower-children,
wear the essence of poppies in their heads,
seven times purified
the eaters of fresh lives infest,
thrive and are legion.

Now words should strike flint
Winds of iron go crying over the land. (*Words and the Silence* 58)

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Ibohal Kshetrimayum believes in the strength and endurance of poetry over violence:

> You can kill the poet but not the poem,
> For what is written remains written.
> The poet must die if the poem should live,
> And if you want to stop the revolution,
> The poet must be silenced.
> For his words might raise a storm, and
> In hearts and veins, blood will stir.
> Where are your soldiers? Summon a firing squad.
> The poet must be shot to save your army.
> But do not put a wall behind him,
> For his blood will splatter graffiti on it,
> And before you could wipe, you'll fall in love with poetry.
> The poet will breathe again; his babbling
> Will be heard in the roiling streams of your hills and
> Valleys, and you will be enslaved. (*It no Longer Rains* 71)

Theodor Adorno proclaimed that the universality of the lyric poem's substance is social in nature. He has stated, "Only one who hears the voice of humankind in the poem's solitude can understand what the poem is saying" ("On Lyric Poetry" 38). Preeti Gill states that the new literature of the Northeast region, mostly in English, has "sprung from the staccato cry of machine guns" and reflects the changes sweeping across the landscape (Gill, "Narratives"). However, although it deals in political concerns, the character of the poetry from the Northeast is not didactic. As the following section will show, it is rather the poetry of memory and testimony.

3.2. Terror and the Poet

> Go, give them the news
>
> tell them the water is waist deep now
> they have to leave the boats alone
> the graveyards are to be dug up tomorrow
> that should tell them all
>
> Go, get the news across
>
> take a lamp with you as you go
> all lamps may have burnt out there

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no oil may be, for the wicks which stand
all these belong to when the evening deepens

Go, get the news across

don't you tell them though
that the men are all lost
that with the roads
the courtyards too are lost
don't tell them of the firing at Kokrajhar
or of the homes and fields mortgaged

Go, tell them the news

know his walk well before you confide
hear his voice
measure his shadow if you can
with these ten, these ten fingers

Go, get the news across

inform the police before you leave
rehearse before the mirror
what all you would say
give your address before you leave
so that town-folk get to know of you (Nongkynrih and Ngangom eds. 60-61)

This poem by the Assamese poet Sameer Tanti which has been translated from Asamiya carries an apocalyptic voice declaring ominous times for society. In a recent interview, Tanti, a renowned poet in Asamiya with several published volumes, quoted Oscar Milosz who had pronounced that "Poetry must be aware of its terrible responsibilities, for it is not a purely individual game and it gives shape to the aspiration of the great soul of the people" (*The Witness* 26). Tanti believes the poet's role in the society to be a responsible task, of "giving voice to all those unsaid things of [his] society" (Tanti, "Point Blank"). In turbulent times such as the one in postcolonial Northeast India, perhaps the responsibilities of the poet and poetry become graver, more vital and they become even more valuable.

The prophetic proportion assumed by the voice in Tanti's poem is unmistakable. The belief that poets and prophets have something in common goes back to antiquity. The Latin speakers used the common term 'vate' to refer to both poets and prophets. Some of the greatest poets in the Western literary canon like Dante, Milton and Blake have viewed and

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presented themselves and their works as endowed with prophetic gifts or divinely inspired speech (Kugel ed. 1). Kugel calls these poets the inheritors of the ancient tradition of associating poetry and prophecy that existed through the Middle Ages in Christian Europe and Muslim Spain and the East to ancient Greece and biblical Israel (ibid.). Pollard establishes both the poet and the prophet as seers (328); he pronounces that both the poet and the prophet have been reformers before reformations and they have very often been able to anticipate the thoughts and events of subsequent ages (329). Throughout history, often poets have made prophetic proclamations. Yeats had famously portended the approach of a catastrophic future for humankind in "The Second Coming".

Wilfred Owen had declared: "All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful." (192). Among the poetic works produced in the Northeast in the contemporary period, a prophetic voice is often discernible, especially in the social poetry or the poetry that addresses and responds to social and political issues. Robin Singh Ngangom writes, "though I've never remotely imagined myself as any conscience-keeper, I've often tried to speak of my people, the terrible things happening in Manipur" ("Poetry in the Time" 169-170). He broods over the fate of his native land in his poem "Imphal":

> There is something sadly inevitable
> about this land, something inescapable,
> like a beast which stalks its own death,
> like an ominous prophecy
> of men clad in red going to war
> like an arrow when released
> seeks the man who strung the bow. (*Time's Crossroads* 63-64)

He talks in foreboding tones about the impending future of the hills of Meghalaya:

> Here where only rhododendrons
> and cherries are meant to bloom
> arms will flower in their place.
>
> When the strangers arrived
> they carried no guns, spears or swords;
> they are not fighting men
> for they speak only with flowers,
> these patient burrowers who wanted them
> to go on dancing and singing and
> change them into gypsies in their own land.

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But arms will be planted now
for their sustenance.
Roused by their treacherous chiefs,
the false men and women
ashamed of their true names
the sleeping warriors of memory will awaken.
For this their poets
refuse to write of their great waterfalls
but of a hundred arrows
they speak with eagerness.

As the poem continues, he does not put the blame only on external forces, but reminds that the people themselves are also equally guilty:

We are all guilty
like men all over the earth,
we know why poverty
had walked the countryside naked,
we have seen hunger flowering
from bamboos in the villages.
We wanted peace for ourselves
by stealing the peace
of these gentle hills.

Who cares to know about their dreams?
Who has learnt the language of this land?
Who can tell me its myths?
I'm saddened to know nothing of this land.

I came looking for love
and found only willows weeping here. (Ngangom 1994, 51-52)

The poets of Northeast India have often taken up the role of prophets, albeit on a secular level. Ngangom quotes Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn who had proclaimed: "Literature that is not the breath of contemporary society, that dares not transmit the pains and fears of that society, that does not warn in time against threatening moral and social dangers – such literature does not deserve the name of literature; it is only a façade" ("Poetry in the Time" 172-173). Czeslaw Milosz dismisses poetry "which does not save/Nations or people" (*The Witness* 74). However, the poets of the Northeast do not have any pretensions about 'saving' the Nation; they are conscious of living and working in an age riddled with philosophical skepticism and the repudiation of absolutes. Salman Rushdie has proclaimed, "Writers are

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no longer sages, dispensing the wisdom of the centuries" (12). The poets of Northeast India do not claim absolute wisdom; their vision is fragmentary and punctured with doubts. The ambivalence in his muddled and shaky vision is captured in the concluding part of Tanti's poem:

> Is it true really?
> Could be false
> may not be
> then it's a fact
> yes, yes, it is
>
> Go, give them the news.
>
> it's true
> it could
> that's right, it may not (Nongkynrih and Ngangom eds. 61)

Ngangom acknowledges that "literature cannot bring about a moral revolution by telling us what we must do" ("Poetry in the Time" 173). Yumlembam Ibomcha, a Manipuri poet who writes in Meiteilon replies to a query by Ngangom about the role of poetry in the contemporary political atmosphere of Manipur and says that poetry that integrates firsthand experiences is indeed capable of showing the way to a better life. However, if the aim of poetry is solely to play a social role, he says, "the effort will not only fail to become poetry but also end up as unappetizing propaganda". He believes that a poem is a work of art; its social function is only secondary (Ngangom, "Ibomcha").

3.3. The Poet as Witness

However, the poet in the Northeast is not just a seer, at times he is also a witness. Much of the poetry written by contemporary authors in the Northeast would qualify as what Carolyn Forché has described as "the poetry of witness" (Forché *Against*; Forché and Wu). Forché borrows the term from Czeslaw Milosz and traces its roots to the literature of the *Shoah*. Aligning this "poetry of witness" with the act of "owning of one's infinite responsibility for the other one" (Forché and Wu 26), she defines it as a "readerly encounter

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with the literature of that-which-happened", and describes its mode as "evidentiary rather than representational – as evidentiary, in fact, as spilled blood" (Forché and Wu 21). She believes that the writer-artist's relation with words compels her to testify (Forché and Wu 1). Forché claims that the witness of the poem is not a kind of recounting or a mimetic narrative and neither a political confessionalism; quoting Derrida, she says that "it bears witness…in the manner of an ethical or political act" (Forché and Wu 20). Her book[5] *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* (1993) is a volume of poems by 140 poets from around the world who bear testimony to the extremities of war, exile and oppression encountered by them and their communities. Duncan Wu argues that although the concept of witness in poetry is usually used in the context of the twentieth century, acts of providing witness through literature can also be found elsewhere (Wu 2). Carolyn Forché highlights that most prominent writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries beyond the English speaking world have endured extreme experiences and their traumatic journeys inform their poems written in the aftermath. She defines 'aftermath' as "a temporary debris field, where historical remains are strewn (of large events as well as those peripheral or lost); where that-which-happened remains present, including the consciousness in which such events arose" (Forché and Wu 19). Faced with the violent realities of his land, the poet of the Northeast region often finds himself a hapless spectator. However, as Ngangom states, "poets also have to write about here and now. And writing about it lends a sense of immediacy and vividness to their poetry. I call this the poetry of witness" ("Poetry in the Time" 172).

Consider for instance the following poem:

> from the highway there are views of
> lifeless mountain streams which rejuvenate
> neither animals nor men;
> weed-invaded derelict doors and walls.
> and lean hungry sons of the widowed soil:
> but earth and sky deceptively at peace.
>
> in the valley of indolent days
> and endless festive season of wolves reigned, and
> neighbours were murderously envious of each other
> then one day the quiet staccato
> bringing the message of death
> almost changed it all. (*Words and the Silence* 17)

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Again,

People were killed in a lawless firing
and the streets today observe
hour long silence for the departed.

We will look at the vigilant houses,
the windows closed to the street and the hedges,
the wary shuttered shops, the haunted marketplace,
the blue skies and the pines will come alive
and a photograph of some war-torn country
surfaces wearily from the street. (*Words and the Silence* 66)

The poets' words often become elegies for halcyon days of the past. Ngangom laments: "That well-meaning world is no longer recognizable now; the sacred landmarks have disappeared long since" ("Poetry in the Time" 168). Ibohal Kshetrimayum can sense the changing times in the changing landscape and the gradually disappearing indigenous species and ways of living in Manipur:

What shall I leave behind
for my grandchildren, a bedtime story
of poisoned love of a vanishing tribe,
whose people no longer live on rice
but on bullets carved with names
of their unborn children?

I won't be surprised
to find a frozen teardrop of my mother
with a grain of our rice hidden in it
beside a bullet with my name on it.

Rife with hostility,
roots dare not grow in the caking mud, and
we no longer see startled catfish
and lazy earthworms when we walk
through young rice fields.

Perhaps we should plant guns in our fields,
and hopefully bullets will become rice and
we'll die without bleeding, a nobler way
to end the history,
for we too will cease to exist, like our rice, and
we needn't knead a *chengphu* or knit a *meruk*,
for no sty will hurt our eyes any longer. (*It no Longer Rains like Before* 43-44)

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The conflict-torn atmosphere of Northeast India bears resemblance to recent experiences in Sri Lanka which went through a turbulent period of ethnic conflicts and civil war. Like many of his contemporaries, the Sri Lankan poet R. Cheran's poems are set against the backdrop of the harrowing experiences of violence on the island nation. Cheran's poetry is often set against a landscape that was once idyllic but now devastated. Similar images of the landscape are found in contemporary poems from the Northeast. Ibohal Kshetrimayum uses the metaphor of the famous rains of the Northeast[6] to contrast the present times in his land with its lost, idyllic past:

My mother puts on her royal attire
to do the rain dance of a princess,
but her feet are barren,
for it no longer rains like before.

Years ago, I watched mother dance,
her fingers plucking moon petals
and dropping them on my sleepy eyelids
while I laughed in pleasure
on iridescent nights in a land of dreams.

We could hear father reciting faraway verses
in his bedroom; his words stepped out
to the porch and joined mother
in her dance with the moon.

Today, I stop mother in her attempt to dance
under a dark sky of gunpowder smoke
and in the company of drunk shadows
of dry mango trees wafting in wild winds,
and she gives up quietly.

An explosion shatters the silence,
and mother wriggles her feet,
her heels grinding the burning earth.
She looks at me with wet eyes and says,
'Son, it thunders, let me dance', and
I see only raindrops in her eyes.

But it no longer rains like before
in the land where mother lives. (*It no Longer Rains* 78-79)

The poets stand witness to the general atmosphere of terror that haunts their homeland. Monalisa Changkija underlines the difficulty of voicing opinion on the Northeast

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through public media. She believes that in such circumstances, poetry acts as a useful medium for articulating one's anger and protest (*Weapons of Words* 141). Ngangom remembers himself as a "soft boy with a fondness for epics" who chose to hide in a corner while his rowdy friends were hatching plans to 'conquer' a neighbouring territory. In a sardonic tone he contemplates that perhaps he should have followed the trails of violence in his native land more closely:

> I should have been there
> To keep track of hidden paths
> That lead to the jungle,
> The mazes that weave the heroic lore.
> I should have monitored the boys shot down
> And counted the soldiers
> They ambushed.
> I should have been there
> In a deserted hamlet in Ukhrul
> When every able-bodied male
> Fled to the nearest jungle
> And only naked children
> Were left playing
> With stolid old women. (*Time's Crossroads* 65)

Theodor Adorno had famously proclaimed in 1949 that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (*Prisms* 34). However, he later revised his statement to admit that "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream" (*Negative Dialectics* 362). Contemporary poetry from Northeast India is also an expression of the trauma undergone by the population of the region since the colonial period in the form of social and cultural upheavals, rampant militancy and anti-insurgency measures undertaken by the state. Margaret Zama states that "Writers particularly from the states of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur have been vocal and productive in literary representations of resistance, trauma and suffering, and continue to be so, caught as they are even in present times, in the crossfire of violence due to communal and ethnic strife, militancy and underground armed movements" (Zama, "Locating Trauma" 66). Robin Ngangom's poems capture the trauma undergone by the people of Manipur in the face of the perpetual struggle between insurgents and state forces. The following lines are an example:

> For we have to learn cunning afresh
> soon before the devious ones mutilate

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our names carved on monoliths.
Time ran out in Oinam, in Ukhrul,
for they who give us global culture
brought reconcentrados from South America
and watched impassively the smoking houses,
prodded with clubs the bruised vagina,
the shocked testis.
We found ourselves impotent
in the face of this humiliation.

.....

When we scream and our throats only rasp
we will spit wanton civilization in the eye.
Today as East meets West in the hills
our blind arterial roots grope
under the earth.
We become our own perpetrator,
victims of our own dark deeds.

.....

While you fight for a selfless cause
and make a fugitive of your life
you also burn the flower of youth
with the pious fire in your veins.
But our families have been herded
and from loved ones severed.
Our fields lie fallow
and now our young and old
spread their maimed hands
for the intractable belly,
the naked skin. (*Time's Crossroads* 48-50)

The threat of ethnic violence is a reality that many communities of the region live with everyday. Anjum Hasan puts into words the vulnerability of a family from the 'plains' living in the hills of Shillong:

Families like ours from the plains who think *plains*
is a naked howling word, a treeless gravelly word.
We could get killed – casually – and all our reading
(fat books, fragile wisdom squeezed from intersections
of English and feeling, encounters on the page
that shaped, quickened, instigated) would come to nothing.
We could get hurt and it wouldn't be
the meaningful suffering of a Chaim Potok character,
no, no blow equal to a sentence of history.

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but just someone taking graffiti literally,
someone who thinks of giving and receiving pain
in ways far too primal for literature's kind of cunning. (*Street on the Hill* 24)

The poet of the Northeast is witness to the land being run over by mindless violence. Robin Singh Ngangom says that singing about "moonlight on hills/of lotuses in the lakes, of the misty rain, of legendary lovers and bardic rivers, or of endless rice-fields" is not possible for the poet here anymore; for "The heart is a toy/broken a long time ago". (*Words and the Silence* 69-70). The trauma of living amidst the cruelty and violence in the region permeates the vision of the Northeastern poet. This stark vision looms large in the grim and forbidding landscape of the poem in the following poem by the Assamese poet Harekrishna Deka:

On the bare forked branches
The full moon stands crucified

As in a picture.

The ridges of the house gleam
Like skulls in the moonlight.
Do they come or do they go?
Do their heels kick up dust or red ants?

All at once I hear the chorus of hurrahs.
In the open sky
The bullets whiz with glee like a flight of birds.

I feel I am my own slave. Only their bayonets
Pick up their days all clammy with blood. (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 95)

Easterine Kire Iralu, a Naga writer stated in an article that "the story of Nagaland is the story of the Naga soul on a long, lonely journey of pain, loss and bereavement, a silent holocaust in which words seldom were enough to carry the burden of being born a Naga" ("The Conflict in Nagaland"). Although Iralu is the author of a number of fictional works, she confesses that it is poetry that proves more suitable in narrating the story of Nagaland. She believes it is poetic experience that can best capture the angst of the conflict, although she has misgivings that "poetry is dying in us, even as the spirit of man, flickering like a candle, is blown out again and again" (ibid.). Iralu's poems capture the anguish and resilience of the deeply traumatised Naga society:

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There are gunshots deep in the night.
There is blood on the streets still.
But in our hearts is a dull deadness.
Words fail to define despair.
Silences have usurped speech.
We're waiting for silence to scream.
So that the guns may be silenced and fear obliterated.
A nation has been waiting fifty-seven years to be born.
The exodus is not over.
This is not the destiny of the Naga people.
What we have now is not what we want.
They have killed our dreams.
But our dreams stubbornly refuse to die.
We dream of the liberation of Truth.
Perhaps, someday. (ibid.)

The tiny state of Tripura, which has become a burning ground of insurgent violence and communal conflicts, harbours deeply traumatised societies. Although not much poetry in English has been produced in the state, poets writing in Bengali, Chakma and Kokborok voice the misery and agony of the deeply traumatised people of the region. Niranjan Chakma describes the strife-torn land in the following terms:

Grass leaves here
Clad in pungency of gunpowder;
Lies the spiritless body of a gang raped
Hill woman on the lobby of a Jhum Tong.
.....Hither and tither
Dirty tricks of gunpowder traders everywhere.
Terror grips you often,
Conscience takes the other way then. (Nongkynrih and Ngangom eds. 239)

Contemporary explorations in the field of trauma largely base themselves upon the Holocaust of the Second World War. But postcolonial critics have raised objections about the exclusive focus laid on the Holocaust by trauma theorists and insist that traumatic events from the postcolonial world also be taken into account. Many writers and poets from the Northeast have in fact employed the term 'holocaust' to refer to the violence taking place in various parts of the region. Kalyanbrata Chakraborty who writes in Bengali, paints a word picture of the strife ridden days in his land and terms the carnage of the modest innocent folk a "holocaust":

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A village is burning at midnight
the population of the entire locality flees
helter-skelter and into the jungles.
Lest the child cries out, the mother shuts its mouth
with an iron fist. In Baro Surma
people are not keeping dogs these days.

Can one still escape? The household boys
have become dreadful killers.
They fire indiscriminately even inside shelter homes
and run away. People die like insects in the holocaust.

After a long day's work of pushing carts
Sarbajoy, Kusum, Gopinath are asleep
with tender feet of babies pressing their chests,
.....
These are small people, born slaves, eternal slaves.
How can they hold someone else's freedom in their grip?

Some grey hair stick there on the door panel
some paddy is spilled from an overturned container. (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 82-83)

As experiences in Northeast India and elsewhere reveal, militancy curbs people's right to ask questions. Tarun Bhartiya talks about "a full quota of dos and don'ts" outlined by the revolutionary groups in the Northeast, which communities they proclaim to be fighting for have to follow (415). Almost every part of the Northeast has been witness to militants targeting, threatening and at many times eliminating voices of dissent or protest among the people. Harekrishna Deka draws up the details of the vision of "freedom" as defined, promised and sought after by the rebels:

You'll come with us. We will take you by the hand.
Don't look at the road. We will cover your eyes.
We will build the road for you. And we will tie up your hands.
We will take you to the freedom ground. And uncover your eyes.
Take you to the freedom ground. And untie your hands.
Don't make a racket. We will give you new tables to memorize.
We will give you a new alphabet. Don't make a racket.
We will take you to the freedom ground. We will give you a clear sky.
Freedom showers will welcome you there. Freedom breeze will fan you.
Don't cry in hunger. We will give you sweetmeats of water.
Don't look at the bare boughs. We will give you coloured glasses to see.
We will take you to the freedom ground and tell you to sing our song.
We will make you a new mask and teach you a new gait.
You will come with us. You will smile our smile.

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You will dance our dance. You will cry our tears. (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 97-98)

It is the gun toting men who get to decide the destiny of the people. The message is clear: the people are not to ask questions about their goals or methods. They are being warned: they do not get to choose, but have to acquiesce quietly. They will be led to the "freedom ground" with hands tied and eyes blindfolded. Shimanta Bhattacharya, a poet based in Shillong who writes in English, poignantly captures the price one has to pay in the region for "seeing too much". However, he insists that all the threats and persecutions cannot shut their eyes or curb their voices:

The sun comes feeling for their eyes with pointed daggers
The moon comes feeling for their eyes with banderillas
The wind comes feeling for their eyes with grasping fingers
They cannot shut their eyes; they cannot shut their eyes
Last night they fished out a corpse from a pond
Its mouth was wide open. The eyes protruding like ping-pong balls
They say he cried a lot. Others say he died of seeing too much
Now he tastes death in his mouth and death stares through his eyes
The rain claws at the green skulls of violent memories
The air is moist with blood spewing from ransacked towns
A vulture slakes its thirst at fetid pools of submerged bones
In the distance clouds gather like poisonous mushrooms
The rice withdraws into the earth. A swathe of smoke
Covers the eyes of those who have come
To cremate their dead. Somewhere a girl tries to sing
But the song sticks in her throat like a knife

They want to shut their eyes, they cannot
They cannot shut their eyes in spite of the daggers
They cannot shut their eyes in spite of their knives
They cannot shut their eyes in spite of the guns
That seek out their pithless hearts with long fiery tongues (Ngangom and Nongkynriheds eds. 48)

Ngangom too reminds about the impossibility of silencing voices of protest:

They can stop us but not our thoughts
From coming out into the streets.
They can shoot us but cannot kill the air
Which carries our voices. (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* 45)

Many of Ibohal Kshetrimayum's poems too display a similar vision of his native land, where a poet faces dangers by asking questions, but asks them nevertheless:

A land where guns are no longer fired in anger

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but in deceitful dreams.
A land where people starve for a peaceful recipe
till they are no longer hungry.
A land where hypocrites trade divinity
with symbolic rituals.
A land where obituaries and condolences
cost a lifetime's earnings.
A land where a gang of dropouts burnt a library,
demanding a script.
A land where illiterate grandparents shed spiritual tears
over the illicit affair of a god and his concubine.
A land where mongrels and swine debate upon
the wisdom to rule or serve.
A land where vision takes a back seat
and the cart pleads for progress to the reluctant horse.
A land where the sick politician prescribes antidotes to the sedated,
like the seasoned harlot who moans like a virgin.
A land where a poet wonders aloud,
though it's against the grain to ask:
'Who caused the Ripples?' (*It no Longer Rains* 55)

Monalisa Changkija's poem "Not be Dead" is dedicated to the memory of her fellow journalist Chalie Kevichusa, who fell victim to the bullets of assassins:

If tomorrow
My body
Is riddled
With bullets,
I shall not be dead.
Nor will I
Be defeated and silenced.
The event
Would only mean
The capitulation
Of those who cannot think
Beyond the AK-47.
The event would only mean
The recognition
Of the impact
Of my words
Over those who elect.
Unlike them who
Pull the trigger
I am not
For hire,
All my words
Are for free.
So, if tomorrow

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My body
Is riddled with bullets,
I shall not be dead.
Nor defeated
Or silenced. (*Weapons of Words* 19-20)

But then, there are also others who have been forced by the suffocating atmosphere to resort to writing about 'safe' things: writing about political realities is way too risky. Thangjam Ibopishak, a poet who writes in Manipuri, explains in an ironic tone, why in spite of an uninspiring dismal climate around him, he has realised he must stick to writing poems about "flowers":

Now, in this country
One cannot speak aloud,
One cannot think in the open.
Hence poem,
Like a flower I sport with you.
Before my eyes, incident upon incident,
Awesome, heaving events,
Walking, yet sleeping,
Eyes open, but dreaming,
Standing, yet having nightmares:
In dreams, and in reality
Only fearsome, shivery instances.
So around me, closing eyes,
Palms on ears,
Moulding the heart to a mere clay object,
I write poems about flowers.

Now, in this land
One should only think of flowers,
Dream about flowers,
For my little baby, my wife,
For my job,
To protect myself from harm. ("Poetry in a Time" 427-428)

3.3.1. Poetic Text and Historical Reality

Although poets of the Northeast write about the realities plaguing the region and base their works on their lived experiences, they do not make truth claims about their works. They do not claim to stand in the place of historians or performing a photographic or

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mimetic exercise. As discussed in Chapter II, traumatic experiences are rendered irretrievable by the amnesia accompanying trauma. Carolyn Forché too has warned that a reading of the poetry of witness must not look for its truth value, but its efficacy lies in its 'evidentiary nature'. She says, "here language is a life-form, marked by human experience, and is also itself material evidence of that-which-occurred (Forché and Wu 25). Thomas Vogler has pointed out that most critics of what is now called the "poetry of witness" have been seen to confer a simplistic connection between the literary text and historical reality (189), although, some critics dwell on the predicament of "testamentary aporia"[7], and acknowledge that "what has been witnessed cannot be made whole and integrated into an authoritative telling" (Felman and Laub 171). Vogler states, however, that the poets themselves are generally more conscious of the problems involved in the process of bearing witness than their critics who quickly appropriate their accounts as testimony to the 'truth'. Vogler underscores the fact that many poets have openly acknowledged "the impossibility of authenticating authorial subjectivity within the poetic text itself" (192). While writing the preface to her collection of short stories, *These Hills Called Home*, Temsula Ao shows her awareness of the unreliable nature of memory when she says, "Memory is a tricky thing: it picks and chooses what to preserve and what to discard" (ix). She declares that her stories carry no pretension of standing as "historical facts", and neither do they claim to operate as condemnation, justice or justification of the unfortunate events that came to pass in her land. She says that on the contrary, her stories attempt to embody the message that "in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured in human terms. For the victims the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life – their humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves the survivors scarred in both mind and soul" (x).

Although an intricate relationship exists between history and literature, they are not identical. By virtue of its own inner principles as aesthetic exercise, literature transforms a raw idea into a structured narrative. Through literary intervention, "raw truth" acquires new meanings that exceed the 'reality' of the historical event. But perhaps this is the desired objective of poets writing in Northeast India – to employ imaginative free-play and subjective reflection on the troubling realities of the region and attain an understanding that fails to get captured in official accounts and newspaper pages.

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3.4. Poetry, Terror and Society

The vital connection between trauma and narrative has already been discussed in Chapter 2. Narrativising a traumatic experience is believed to produce a cathartic effect. Monalisa Changkija expresses hope that her poems "would epitomize the fears, the hopes, the disgust, the shame and so many other human emotions that constantly churn in the hearts of those who live in societies beset with conflict" (*Weapons of Words* i). Amidst the turbulent climate of the region, in the tussles between communities and in the crossfire between militants and the state along with clashes between rival factions, the one who stands to lose the most is the common man. Many a times, the poet in the Northeast takes up the task of speaking for and venting the troubles and trauma undergone by the common people of the region. Naorem Bidyasagar, who writes in Manipuri, captures the tragedy of the common man caught in the violent times:

> Spending nights in this land of hills
> Each of us ordinary citizens
> Is a target today
> Of blind bullets
> Bursting like flame from two directions
> In this darkness.
> For all of us ordinary people bereft of light
> Our fate like that of a dead moon
> Is hanging precariously
> Near the chamber of the barrels of guns.
> .....
> Like the earth's blue surface
> All of us ordinary folk today
> Have to bear with eyes tightly closed
> Clenching our teeth.
> To the lips of freedom, thirsty only for blood
> Without sacrificing a handful of blood.
> In which century and new history
> Has a fresh page been opened?
> ..... (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 63-64)

Nini Lungalang, a poet from Nagaland, narrates the ordeal of a simple village woman whose routine chores are bluntly interrupted by a shooting incident. Life is hard at any rate for the simple village woman in the hills; her days are filled with everyday struggles to acquire the minimum necessities of life, to survive. But this picture of a familiar world of quotidian

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struggles too is punctured by spectacles of violence to which she remains a bewildered, powerless spectator:

It's my turn at the water point:
The trickle is slower today
Each day, slower,
One day, it may stop;
And my field has withered,
Rusted-dry in the staring sun,
The crevices filling with dust.
.....
I saw a young man gunned down
As I shopped in the market place.
Two thick thuds and then he fell,
And thrashed a bit, on his face.
That's all. He sprawled in the staring sun.
(They whirled away in a cloud of dust
In a smart white van.)
His blood laid the dust
In a scarlet little shower,
Scarlet little flowers.
In the staring sun, the little flowers
Will burn and turn to rust. (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 166-167)

Decades of violence and militancy has led to a general brutalisation of the societies in Northeast India, which have come to be marked by the decay of values, rampant corruption, crumbling of social and political institutions, insensitivity and what Ngangom has called the "banality of corruption and the banality of terror" ("Poetry in the Time" 171). Discussing the Assam Movement, Nandana Dutta calls attention to the fact that the rhetoric of violence that gained an upper hand during the movement in the Brahmaputra valley scarred and altered the societies inhabiting the region forever. She points out that prolonged violence inevitably leads to the scarring of the society's psyche, which eventually manifests itself in the violence being confined not just to the insurgent or the militant turned terrorist, but also "in modes of behavior, in relationships, in business practices and new value systems" (*Questions of Identity* 61). She states that in the case of Assam, the violent period during the Assam Agitation led to the spiraling of "a three-decade-long period of people against people, of the easy turn to different forms of violence, of insurgencies turning into terrorism, of a "casual laid-back society" slipping into a culture of crime and impunity, of violence

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practiced by different arms of the state, especially the police and the frequently-called-out-army, and the subtle but insidious violence of the administration" (*Questions of Identity* 83). While Dutta's focus is mainly on the societies in the Brahmaputra Valley, her argument holds true for most of the societies beset by political violence in the Northeast. It is not just the violent methods of the extremists, but state interventions have also failed to address the situation in a sensitive manner. The impunity and unaccountability with which state forces, along with all other actors, have been carrying out illicit and violent activities in the entire region has added to the process of the gradual decay of values in these societies. It is this aspect of the societies that emerge as the major concern of the poets writing in the region.

The anxiety over the brutalisation and degeneration of the society is most evident in the case of the poets from Manipur. Robin Singh Ngangom describes his home state as "just another corrupt and disillusioned state" ("Contemporary Manipuri" 297). He states that the beginnings of modernism in Manipuri poetry came as a response to shared areas of experience in the Manipuri society like "the loss of traditional values in human affairs, the tyranny of those who wield economic and political power, rootlessness, dispossession, fragmentation of home and family, urbanization, and, interestingly, the disturbing consequence of the struggles of those who cherish freedom in a perceived neo-colonial regime, and the misgivings of those who felt that they were losing their identity and culture" ("Contemporary Manipuri" 298). Ngangom finds in the new poetry from Manipur continuous probings into "the social condition and the fractured psyche" of modern day Manipur. Ngangom himself talks of contemporary Manipur in extremely dystopian terms:

> Lost lost in the tightening noose of riches
> not grass but dust and glass sprout
> from their senseless feet.
>
> Thus having mastered the language of barter and theft,
> my people cannot be happy.
> How can they if they cannot
> fornicate, nor dance,
> nor sing with the innocence
> of their abandoned roots?
> How can they smile from the pits
> of their stomach
> when their mornings set from
> a stifling, envious window

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and pilfered walls are inlaid with
malignant ears?

Seeded in their recumbent words
gold, gaudy stones, motor-cars,
houses, shops ripen and fall
from their shoulders, chests and thighs
like grapes and oranges out of season.

This is the kind of pleasure
they took two generations to prepare,
after parceling their sons and
daughters
away to cities, beyond wide rivers,
perched on mountains,
beside indifferent oceans,
to be their eyes and ears

They came riding the trains of night
with knives sheathed in their hearts,
fire in their menacing hands,
to manipulate figures of loot
at their pen points.
They came with unkind words,
sly uncommon leers,
to make huge bonfires
of their ancestral granaries,
to make the ground reel under their weight,
to rob the poor to denudation.

Two generations they seethed for this:
to close the eyes of their hearts as surely
as we close the eyes of the dead. (*Words and the Silence* 26-27)

Ngangom's voice is one of intense despair, pessimism and disgust. Although he has been living and working in Shillong for a long time, his native land Manipur never ceases to haunt the world of his poems. He discloses: "Everywhere I go/ I carry my homeland with me" (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* 46). He laments how things have developed in his native land in his absence:

When you leave your native land
messianic young men betray principles,
and there's no fire in their eyes.
in the streets the students shout themselves
hoarse for newly-arrived patriots. The
right and left have become synonymous,

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and citizens garland only the thieves.
the man of god merely chants the
sanctimonious burlesque of prayers,
while the poor remain cold and naked
the preacher is warm and fed. When
you do not return dead waters breed
reptiles in our minds, gunfire reverberates
in the hills, and bullets sprout from
windows instead of geraniums. When you
do not return after the bloodthirsty purges,
flies swarm around limp flags. The barbwire
of the day encloses us as we enter the era
of the assassin. (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 199)

Ngangom states that in the face of the desperate circumstances prevailing in their land, modern poets of Manipur "became more inward-looking and consequently, tried to adapt the world to themselves by adopting ironic and 'alienated' stances" ("Contemporary Manipuri" 298). The following poem by Ngangom sums up the process through which the Manipuri poet gradually moved towards a benumbed cold stance:

First came the scream of the dying
in a bad dream, then the radio report,
and a newspaper: six shot dead, twenty-five
houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied
behind their backs inside a church.
As the days crumbled, and the victors
and their victims grew in number,
I hardened inside my thickening hide,
until I lost my tenuous humanity.
I ceased thinking
of abandoned children inside blazing huts
still waiting for their parents.
If they remembered their grandmother's tales
of many winter hearths at the hour
of sleeping death, I didn't want to know,
if they ever learnt the magic of letters.
And the women heavy with seed,
their soft bodies mown down
like grain stalk during their lyric harvests;
if they wore wildflowers in their hair
while they waited for their men,
I didn't care anymore.
I burnt my truth with them,
And buried uneasy manhood with them.
I did mutter, on some far-off day:
There are limits, but when the day

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absolved the butchers, I continued to live
as if nothing happened. (*The Desire of Root* 424)

Mona Zote has an unconventional take on the issue of violence in her native land. In her poem "Rez", she describes the culture of violence and societal atrophy in her immediate society in Mizoram, but her tone is unapologetic and unmoralising:

A boy and his gun: that's an image will do
to sum up our times
to define the red lakes
and razor blade hills of our mind. Out here *this place never changes, never will*
we will keep choosing grey salt, bad roads,
some thin yellow flowers to grieve, *alcohol over friendship…*
cash for peace, God's grin of despair. If you think *I'm* starting to regret
sticking around and kicking at the tombstones
(if not pulling out the AK-47)
remember the water lilies will bind you back.

Trench coat todesengel bringing *meaning to life thru death*, thru
an intimate if facile study of pain
and those other *mental stuff* like drawing
pictures of war
people getting shot
houses pulled down
heads shorn
traditional law custom *kultur*
junkies runners bootleggers scum scum
We too have spent our brutal spring *exacerbated*
by a long tradition of self-enforced isolation,
continued into a cold-blooded summer (I feel nothing, I fear nothing)
we said *it wasn't intentional*
and the grasshopper susurrus of our blood tells us *how you feel almost an ability to be worse than what you are*
(Perhaps this explains why today in the middle of my room a black hole soundlessly spins.)
(Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 314-315)

Zote's matter-of-fact, nearly obdurate tone that almost borders on the sadomasochistic is a device that veils a sense of bitter irony. The same ironic tone runs through a shorter poem by Zote, "Gunrunning":

I will leave words too and be
A gunrunner, keep a boy to thrash
When he's lazy or stupid or because
I feel like it.
Give up cigarettes, take up

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Opium instead…because, you know,
It sends us dreams.
I'm packing my things.
The sun can't be much brighter there
Than here…but…anyway.

We all like to feel so special. (Nongkynrih and Ngangom eds. 203)

3.5. Turning to Irony

In the face of the harrowing realities of their surroundings, irony and satire have become frequently used devices in poetry from Northeast India, especially when dealing with political subject matters. It has acted for them as a potent rhetorical outlet for the unspoken and the unspeakable. Carl Dennis observes, "Irony has proven a time-honoured technique for dealing with political issues in a way that avoids easy pieties and solemnities" (93). He points out that the device is particularly popular with modern day poets who prefer to avoid presenting themselves as "unimpeachable moral authorities" (72). Irony is most frequently used by poets from Manipur. Ngangom underlines that Manipuri poets of the modernist era have adopted a poetics that is defined by skepticism, irony, satire and detachment ("Contemporary Manipuri" 298). Most of Ngangom's own poetry is characterised by deep irony and scathing satire. In his poem "Imphal", he exposes the sordid reality of his native land and declares sardonically, "This is the ancestral land of the Meiteis":

I
Nothing has changed in this land.
the boys with earrings
enter hairdressing saloons
and set their hair with dirty combs;
the maimed women with meager leaves
in the bazaars imploring pity,
the men lording over them;
and the girls ubiquitous:
spying from balconies,
on display with renovated faces
in streets, in colleges,
girls content as beauty queens;
and the boys proud
to drive their father's cars.

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But outdoing them all
the drug-fiends,
with bodies alive
and hearts dead.

This is the ancestral land
of the Meiteis.
A lottery of souls is held here every day.
Sons, daughters,
with strength of elephants
your land is on fire.

.....
The minister is my shepherd:
I shall not want.
Yes, though I walk
Through the valley
Of the shadow of Aids
I will fear no man. (*Time's Crossroads* 62-63)

Yumlembam Ibomcha who writes in Manipuri speaks of his people with a biting sense of self derision:

We are triumphant soldiers
on hilltops, below hills, in the sky, in rivers
amongst the tall buildings of cities.
.....

New roads and old roads get tangled at night like strayed children
at the attitude of heartless doctors delinquent men wander
on former roads again and again.

Skilful actors, with a laugh and gaping mouths, hoist the flag of victory
many new roads like snakes that got lost, like frayed bobbins
with new words question each other. (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 120-121)

In an extremely ironic poem, "Play of the Absurd", Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih lampoons the absurd, treacherous world of modern day politics around the world, be it Soviet Russia or the Khasi Hills:

Out of the ruins of a fallen revolution
Putin redeemed ancient glories.
He launched his fleet of scrap-metal
Battleships into the Barents Sea
And hundreds of scapegoat archetypes
Sank to the sea-bed, cocooned

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In a derelict submarine tomb.

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. Their motto:
"To dream the impossible dream,
to fight the unbeatable foe,
to bear with unbearable sorrow,
to run where the brave dare not go..."

The truth is, a wise man said, "mysterious,
Elusive, always to be conquered." We have
Neither fleet, nor troops nor armory –
Tell us O, Valient Ones! What terror
Had stalked the dark spaces of your
Sunken dungeon? What agony, my compatriots,
Had gorged upon your gouged nipples, plucked nails,
Lacerated thighs, mutilated organs and pulverized balls?
Lay before us the many-sidedness of your truth.
O, poor deluded youths! May God bless you
With His divine betel nuts. (Nongkynrih and Ngangom eds. 161-163)

Curiously, a large number of militants and ex-militants from Northeast India have also been producing an interesting body of poems and novels. Literary practice is frequent especially among the militants of Assam, who mostly write in Asamiya. Rakhee Kalita has examined three Asamiya literary texts to explore how the Assamese society has engaged with the insurgents in the state. Her paper brings out the ambivalence and unease in the Assamese mind on how to name, or more importantly, define the way of these rebels, who are seen both as necessary and problematic in the shaping of Assam's destiny in the larger national space ("Writing Terror" 104). Talking in the context of fictional works by surrendered militants from Assam, Amit R. Baishya claims that their works introduce two new themes into the oeuvre of Assamese literature: "these fictions situate themselves within while simultaneously deconstructing the hill-valley (*pahar-bhaiyam*) distinction, which remains a potent spatial-cultural imaginary in the Assamese ecumene; second, they are crucially concerned with the questions and aporias of witnessing degraded forms of life and corporeality in necro-worlds and relating to them ethically" ("Dismembered Lives" 162). A few poems by Megan Kachari, a captured leader of the militant group ULFA, have been translated and published in English through the efforts of Indira Goswami, the noted

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Assamese writer. Goswami had been deeply involved in the process of peace negotiations between the ULFA and the state. Pankaj Thakur, an Assamese writer-translator, notes in the preface to the collection of Kachari's poems:

> Megan Kachari stands out with distinction because of his portrayal of sharp and subtle satire and fresh insights into his life-world. His poems serve to bring out the harsh but true realities of life when man becomes an alien in his own place. Some of his poems invoke images of silent sufferings of individuals caught in crossfire, with suspended existence, where identity gets stifled and breath forcefully taken away. (v)

Most of Kachari's poems make use of dark and foreboding images. The poem "Soon as Night Descends" paints a picture of the contemporary times in sinister ironic terms:

> Soon as night descends, all gods fall asleep,
> Don't you murder silence yelling for them
> Instead let's join hands and dig in a grave
> For all the gods. Let's again declare a war,
> Like people raving mad with the dark night.
>
> Where money alone can get you cheap
> Hamlets, towns, meadows, the lone woods,
> Or wherever you will, you can spend
> An obscene infinity, mouths glued to
> The ripening breasts of young maidens,
> Where you buy the flesh of cloistered virgins.
> What price is there in such foul times
> For your truth, what value for your wailings?
>
> Better instead, come let's trudge down this forbidden path
> And meet in the proscribed fields,
> And witness from these fields alone
> The steadily stilling body of the nigh,
> Let's witness instead the festive sun
> Coursing down the heart of dawn.
>
> Soon as night descends, all gods fall asleep. (3)

Perhaps no other poet writing in English in this region is as preoccupied as Robin Ngangom in engaging with the political chaos in the Northeast. It is the core concern in his poetry and his poetic responses to the plight of his land range from lament, deep anguish, utter despair, disgust, defiance and indifference; all reactions, at times appearing within a single poem. These are the dominant reactions in the general body of poetry produced in

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English as well as in other languages in the Northeast in the face of the political troubles of the region.

4. Conclusion

Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel *Felanee* (Asamiya) tells the story of group of people uprooted by a series of political and ethnic conflicts in western Assam during the late 70s and 80s of the last century. The characters, mostly women of the working class, undergo continuous hardships brought on by endless ethnic clashes, but the narrative beautifully highlights how they learn to survive nevertheless. The novel ends with an image of the women talking about *kanhi ban*, a kind of sturdy reed that grows on the river bank. The women discuss how the reeds always find a way of growing back:

> "If this lot rots then come back and cut some more."
> "You can't finish the ocean of reeds, can you?"
> "The seeds have wings, remember?"
> "They come floating in the river."
> "They fly."
> "When they hit barren soil they germinate." (312)

Yasmin Saikia and Amit R. Baishya invoke this powerful final image from the novel – that of the *kanhi* grass to talk about the immense resilience shown by societies in the Northeast in the face of decades of terror and violence that has brought about such turmoil into the lives of its people. They write:

> Home can never be destroyed, but like a phoenix rising from the ashes of ruin, like the *kanhi* grass that is cut away only to grow back, in Northeast India, the communities of people and histories they have created defy the destruction of violence – internal and governmental. They make us think and affirm that violence can never be total, it cannot erase the human capacity of renewal to build positive human relationships and sustainable communities (14)

As the case of *Felanee* shows, in spite of the deeply disturbing circumstances, writers of the Northeast also speak of the need to never lose hope, to endure and hold out against all odds. A glint of hope, albeit faint, is embodied in the following words by Ngangom:

> suffering must reach new heights
> for a new beginning. (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* 47)

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Notes

[1] The translations referred to in the course of the work are available in the following volumes –

- Misra, Tilottama, ed. *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from Northeast India-Volume II: Poetry and Essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.

- Ngangom, Robin Singh, and Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, eds. *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from the Northeast*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2009. Print.

- Nongkynrih, Kynpham Sing, and Robin Singh Ngangom, eds. *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*. Shillong: North-Eastern Hill University, 2003. Print.

[2] Notable works that have used the World War II as the constant or partial backdrop to the narrative are *Iyaruingam* by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya (1960; Asamiya), *Jangam* by DebendranathAcharyya (1982; Asamiya), *The Grasshopper's Run* by Siddhartha Sarma (2011; English)

[3] *Miglun* – Adi for stranger or outsider

[4] An English translation of the novel has been published as *Love in the Time of Insurgency* (Katha 2005). The translation has been carried out by the author himself.

[5] Forché's project also resulted in the production of a documentary film "Poetry of Witness" in 2015 directed by Billy Tooma and Anthony Cirilo. It presents the lives of six contemporary poets who have survived war, violence and oppression and have produced poetic testimonies of their experiences – Carolyn Forsché, Saghi Ghahraman, Fady Joudah, Claudia Serea, Mario Susko and Bruce Weigl.

[6] Northeast India is one of the regions receiving the highest amount of rainfall on the planet.

[7] In her work, Cathy Caruth had drawn upon the contemporary psychiatric theory of what had been termed 'traumatic amnesia'. According to her, in the aftermath of a traumatic event, a victim undergoes a condition of being unable to recall the event or its experience and even when the memory returns, the victim is unable to express it in verbal terms.

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Chapter 5

Reading the Poetry from a Gendered Perspective

I am the lover and the loved.
home and wanderer, she who splits
firewood and she who knocks, a stranger
in the storm, two women, eye to eye
measuring each other's spirit, each other's
limitless desire,
a whole new poetry beginning here. !

- From "Transcendental Etude" by Adrienne Rich (*What is Found There* 76)

1. Women for Poetry, Poetry for Women

They are talking about hunger,
They are saying there is an unquenchable fire
burning in our hearts.
My love, what shall I do?
I am thinking how I may lose you
to war, and big issues
more important than me.

.....
.....

They are talking about a place
where rice flows on the streets,
about a place where there is gold
in the leaves of tress.
They are talking about displacement,
when the opium poppy was growing
dizzy in the sun
happy, in a state of believing –

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. (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* 5)

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The investigation undertaken in the preceding chapters has revealed the various ways in which contemporary poetry from Northeast India has engaged with the deep socio-political and cultural turmoil that has engulfed the entire region in the postcolonial period. Yet, it would be fruitful at this point to examine how the woman in the Northeast has experienced and negotiated with the complex upheavals and events taking place, both around as well as within herself. Many poets in history, such as Virginia Woolf and Samuel Coleridge, have stressed upon the androgynous character of the artistic imagination and on the need for an artist to aspire for psychological androgyny (Gill, *Women's Poetry* 18-20). However, feminist critics have expressed their reservations regarding the practicability of this utopian state. In the words of Elaine Showalter, "The concept of true androgyny – full balance and command of an emotional range that includes male and female elements – is attractive, although I suspect that like all utopian ideals androgyny lacks zest and energy" (*A Literature* 216). Jo Gill has pointed out that the androgynous approach obliterates the relevance of questions of gender dynamics in the production and reception of poetry. She admits that it is poetry that should be privileged over gender, but also insists that gender is relevant and it is impossible to evade sexual difference for it is completely embedded in language (*Women's Poetry* 19).

The extract quoted above from the poem "The Sorrow of Women" by Mamang Dai, ends with the futility of all social and political projects that are not sensitive to the struggles of women. This chapter is an analysis undertaken with this underlying belief in the relevance of a gendered perspective in understanding the literatures emerging out of contemporary Northeast India. It offers an examination of the relationships between gender and poetry, and gender and politics especially in the context of Northeast India. It challenges conventional definitions of the 'political' and the 'personal' and illustrates how in the case of the Northeast, the personal and the everyday are always deeply political by examining the poetry written in the region from a gendered viewpoint. It also investigates the fraught relationship shared by women with the nation and offers a study of how women poets writing in the region have negotiated with this complex relationship. Despite the popular image of the region as one where women enjoy a higher status at home and in society, the women of this region also have to encounter various social prejudices, unjust customs and gender violence on a daily basis. A section in the chapter discusses the various ways in

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which women writers of the region have responded to the gender violence faced by the women of the Northeast within the home front. It also considers the attitude of male writers towards gender violence against women. The miseries of the women in this region have been further aggravated by the protracted political mayhem that has come to haunt their homes and streets. It is the women who have been at the receiving end of the resulting socio-political imbroglio continuing since several decades now. Yet, women have not just been passive victims; often they have also directly participated in or been complicit with the various agents perpetrating violence in the region. Besides, women of the region have also played significant roles as peace activists both at the individual level as well as by organising themselves into women's groups. Women around the world and throughout history have been the worst sufferers of war violence but they have also made an impact by playing various roles in different capacities. The chapter will probe the ways in which contemporary poetry written in the region has responded to the violence suffered by women as a result of political conflicts and also to the strong resistance put up by these women in times of both conflict and peace.

Malsawmi Jacob, a poet and novelist from Mizoram proclaims and explains her preference for words as the medium in the poem "Power of Words":

> I'll go for words.
> Words are my forte.
>
> Words stab and jab,
> Heal, hurt,
> Mask, unmask,
> Paint pictures.
>
> Words
> Create. ("Power of Words")

Pradipta Borgohain notes that gender can provide a "useful frame within which to study the strides made by Northeast writers and the directions in which it may be moving" (191). His observation is occasioned by the fact that a large number of authors producing works in English from Northeast India are women and their works almost always employ a gendered approach to understanding and presenting the socio-political milieu of the region. The literary interventions of these women in the intensely volatile social and political climate of

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the region also make for an interesting case study in the subversion of the traditionally held belief that literature produced by women belongs to the realm of the private, intimate, personal and domestic spheres. Literature written by women is considered generally unsuitable for dealing with the public and the political domains, which are considered areas exclusively reserved for men. Feminist critics have denounced this claim that seeks to stereotype literature by women and they underline the fact that definitions of the private and the public may vary with place, time and context. The slogan "the personal is the political" was adopted by Indian feminists for the first time during the 70s and 80s of the last century in the context of fighting against issues of dowry deaths in the country. These cases were disregarded by the state and civil rights organisations of the time as the state was not the "perpetrator" in these crimes. It is in this context that feminist activists employed the slogan to draw attention to the fallacious distinction made between public and private domains as far as domestic violence was concerned (Kannabiran and Menon 14-15). However, the slogan has an added relevance in the Northeast, for in fact, the very distinctions between the personal and the political dissolve in the Northeast, where the private world of every man, woman and child is deeply enmeshed in the political imbroglio haunting the region in the postcolonial period. In her poem "Personal/Political", Uddipana Goswami declares how 'political' events are intensely personal for someone in the Northeast:

> To me it is personal
> That there are bomb blasts in my city everyday
> That it is a gamble of five minutes
> To decide whether my father lives or dies
> His limbs torn from his body
> His skin burnt, his flesh roasted.
>
> To me it is personal
> That a five minute delay saves my father's life
> But those who were five minutes early
> Had to die, their limbs torn off
> Their skin burnt, their flesh roasted.
>
> To me it is personal
> That people I knew were killed
>
> To me it is personal
> That people I didn't know were killed
>
> Yes, to me it is personal

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That people who claim to be the keepers
Of my nation, my people and the revolution
Killed them all. (*We Called* 51)

In fact the invasion of one's private space forms a dominant trope in the literature of this region, especially in the literature written by women. It is not possible to talk about the life of the ordinary woman from the region in isolation from the political developments that surround her. As discussed earlier, Prasanta Das has alleged that poets like Robin Singh Ngangom and Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih are ignored by many recent anthologies because of the overtly political character of their poetry. Das then goes on to argue that the anthologies have accommodated two poets, both women, from the Northeast – Anjum Hasan and Mamang Dai, only because "they do not address political issues directly in the way that Ngangom, Kharmawphlang and Kynpham do" ("Waiting" 9). What this statement reveals is that Das and perhaps even Thayil have succumbed to narrow and male-oriented conceptions of the terms 'political' and 'personal'. Feminist critics argue for an expansion of the traditional definition of the term 'politics' to include informal politics and the dynamics of everyday life (Lena Krook and Childs eds. 3). Many of them conceptualise politics as the manifestation of power dynamics at all levels of social life, including within the sphere of the family (Butler; Foucault). Adrienne Rich calls for a broader application of the category 'political':

The moment when a feeling enters the body –
is political. This touch is political.

By which I mean, that politics is the effort to find ways of humanely dealing with each other – as groups or as individuals – politics being simply process, the breaking down of barriers of oppression, traditions, culture, ignorance, fear, self-protectiveness. (*What is Found* 24)

The following section will illustrate how talking about personal experiences and everyday lives subsumes political realities of the land in the poetry by women of the Northeast.

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1.1. Negotiating With the Everyday

Does the day break
with the sound of guns?
No,
it breaks with the cry
of that bird
which nibbles through
the night's darkness
very slowly. (Dharwadker and Ramanujan eds. 121)

Life in Northeast India is not just about blood, violence and unrest; as the Assamese poet Nirmalprabha Bordoloi had pointed out in the poem "Dawn" quoted above, daybreak is announced by the chirrup of birds too. However, the notoriety that the region has gained over the decades through newspaper reports of chronic violence and political turmoil has eclipsed the fact that people in the region lead normal lives. The everyday lives of the people in the region, their laughter, hopes and dreams are obliterated in the image popularised in the national imaginary as a deeply disturbed region. The proliferation of this negative image is a product of an almost exclusive and sensationalist gaze of the mass media on the volatile aspects of the region. Preeti Gill elaborates on this aspect:

> There is a lack of knowledge about the ground realities of people's lives and what is actually happening in many parts of the Northeast. Often the only access to information is through press reports, and the media focuses on special issues that are often picked up because of their political nature. So you read of bomb blasts in Guwahati or Nagaland, or of counter insurgency measures in Assam or Manipur and so on but not stories about real people, real life situations on the ground, the day to day struggles of people, the issues that engage them. Also, and very importantly, this has further strengthened and cemented the borders and the distances that exist between people of the Northeast and the so called "mainland" (*The Peripheral* 5-6).

Apart from mass media, the creative literature produced from and on the region too, often tries to cash in on this sensationalist image, which only leads to a further affirmation of the negative image attached to the region. Mamang Dai rues the non-existence of her people beyond news reports of violence:

> If there is no death the news is silent.
> If there is only silence, we should be disturbed (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* 6)

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Yasmin Saikia and Amit R. Baishya point out that scholarly works on Northeast India have also failed to surpass "the trap of an assumed stereotypical representation of the people and place: in violence, exceptionality and security, in short, fear" (5). The poems by the women poets of the Northeast often act as reminders of the forgotten everyday lives of the people of the region. Anjum Hasan's poems carry out this task especially well. Her poems string together evocative images of the circadian flow of life around her:

> This town is darkened by the hours
> of those who return home
> after silent days spent in the library
> to Van Morrison held in by clear windows
> in rooms made invisible by habit,
> to afternoons that hasten into night
> and are wiped out by forests of rain,
> to dripping taps and fridge food and yesterday's paper
> beyond which pear trees wait for their white flowers.
> We are the sum of our ordinary days:
> we feel boredom like rage but without
> its bright burning pleasure; (*Street on the Hill* 20)

Mamang Dai's "Jingles" paints an image of an evening in Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh:

> The slow sun of Itanagar hangs over the town.
> The summer breeds cicadas,
> in a trance the evening descends
> like mad castanets drowning the iron land
>
> *Come dancing, says the radio.*
> *There, a pine tree cloud hangs over the moon* (*River Poems* 40)

The poems listed under the section "Time of my Childhood" in Anjum Hasan's *Street on the Hill* along with many other of her poems record Hasan's experiences while growing up in Shillong. In her poems, which are often written in a rather somnambulistic tone approaching narcotic numbness, characteristic of the confessionalist school, Hasan narrates life in Shillong through the eyes of her younger self:

> This is us. Given to staring and rich in pretence,
> waiting for our turn at the swing with scarred knees
> and cold noses, plotting the stories we want to live in
> like stepping into those big high heels and suddenly
> seeing the image – *woman*.
>
> Was it the shame of having to wear cotton prints

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with purple hearts, family quarrels, myopia, misshapen
noses, that made us invent those games, refuges:
a hieroglyph of twigs or curtains coaxed into saris?

Or Dark Room. Switching off lights, folding ourselves
into leftover spaces, watching the night spread its cloth
over sofas and vases, hearts knocking against the quiet,
like pestle on mortar, at this dangerous new city in the heart
of a house whose adults move in other rooms, speak
in tired vowels, practice deceit without our kind of art. (*Street on the Hill* 9)

Confessionalist poetry has often been criticised of being solipsistic and Hasan's use of the confessional style in her poetry is frequently misunderstood as a sign of its political irrelevance. However, the assumption that American confessional poetry of the 1950s was apolitical and self-indulgent has been proved to be based upon a limited understanding of the socio-political circumstances within which this style of poetry came into being and prominence. In fact, the engagement of the confessional mode of poetry with the intensely private is often read as the product of an extreme sensibility caught in a public nightmare (Hallberg 140). Sylvia Plath refused to see personal experience as a "kind of shut-box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience" but as something which is "generally relevant to such things as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on" (Wagner-Martin ed. 198). It has been pointed out that confessional poetry is not without political significance. This significance is embodied not so much in references to political events within the poems but in the relevance of the personal suffering to the historical spectacle of Europe during World War II and the suffocating American experience during the Cold War years. (Hallberg 140). Anjum Hasan's poetry is often similarly sought to be dismissed as politically irrelevant but her lyrical style is just as evocative of the socio-political conundrums around her as the more overtly 'political' poetry of Ngangom and others.

Meenakshi Bharat has called attention to the fact that childhood and the child have always carried a rich significance in Indian fiction. She shows that Indian women writers have sought to highlight gender issues through the particular choice of the girl child in many fictional works ("Gender and Beyond" 158). The poetic recounting of childhood observations by Anjum Hasan through a girl child's eyes does not accommodate the scope for elaborate descriptions that the medium of the novel provides. Although her poems,

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unlike most Indian novels in English, do not display much engagement with questions of gender inequality, yet it is significant that the child in Anjum Hasan's poems is a gendered entity. Her poem "Coming of Age in a Convent School" is a candid account of a young adult's puzzled early moments of stumbling onto the mysteries of sexuality:

> Sister Monica shows us a film in the library
> about an American teenager whom everybody bullies
> because he's still a virgin.
> The point of the film is that he's a winner nevertheless,
> and can't be cowed down.
>
> Next year Prisca will have a baby
> but this year she giggles and squirms like everyone else,
> and when the girl I sit with stains her overall,
> I'm so utterly envious.
> I long to be part of this sisterhood.
> .....
>
> This is the year I realise that there are only,
> only women in the entire school building
> and am astonished at the thought. (*Street on the Hill* 12)

Most recent criticism denounces the practice of assuming a direct and non-problematic correlation between the experience of the poet and the 'I' in the poem (Gilmore; Gill and Waters eds.). Although Hasan here is presenting the world through the uncritical gaze of her child-self, it would be a mistake to read it as the naïve perspective of a child. Through her seminal interventions in the study of children's literature, Jacqueline Rose has unearthed the complex position of the child subject in children's literature. Demolishing the myth that children's literature reflects the desires, interests or characteristics of children, Rose illustrates that children's literature is actually the projection of adult fantasies. She proclaims that children's fiction is in fact marked by the conspicuous absence of the child for what it really contains is a projected image of adult conceptions of an ideal childhood. She claims, "If children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp" (2). Although Hasan's poems would not qualify as "children's literature", her use of the child figure in a number of poems begs a more intricate analysis in the light of Rose's theory. Meenakshi Bharat has also pointed out that the frequent use of the tropes of

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the child and childhood in modern Indian fiction has strategic importance: they act as "the means of dealing with issues that are central to the Indian novelist's concerns" (ibid.). It should be noted that the child observer in Hasan's poems has been put together by an adult author for an adult readership. The poems not only illuminate the immediate world of the child, but also describe the adult world in its vicinity. Thus, even as she begins to discover the fascinating secrets of sexuality around her, the child Hasan in the poem "Neighbourhood" is becoming faintly aware of the latent political tension in her immediate surroundings in Shillong:

> On the narrow steps leading
> to our gate, the pakoriwallah from Bihar is often found
> kissing an anonymous woman at night.
>
> Amazing act. My parents switch off the sitting-room
> lights whenever this happens. The car beams show
> them up – one unbroken secret silhouette.
>
> The steps invite other actions. The local fakir some-
> times lies there, coloured like a ditch, and passers-by
> might climb to have a better look at the orange trees.
>
> But this is different. The soft-spoken pakoriwallah
> smelling of his pakoris, his half hour island of
> defiant passion on the steps of somebody's house,
>
> while around him everyday: the brash freeloaders,
> the kick in the groin, the familiar words of abuse
> spoken in an unfamiliar language. (*Street on the Hill* 14)

Thus, in spite of the seemingly tame, romantic undertone in her poems, Hasan does not overlook the political realities of the world around her. Her poems may miss the directness of poets like Ngangom and Nongkynrih in describing the political turmoil of the region, but the world of her poems is not insulated from the political realities of the land. Even while describing the ennui and dullness of the small town existence in Shillong in her poem "Small Town", she is aware of the violence lurking under the surface of this apparent stillness:

> The man who runs the sports goods store
> that also sells old unopened books and

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board games in faded boxes, sits with his
tattooed arms folded in the sun.
He drinks a lot of beer and doesn't ask
stupid questions. His friends loiter
around small music shops all morning,
in slippers, with their shirt-tails out.

.....

When a man is killed in the afternoon,
knifed and left to die with his face down
in a drain, the tattooed fellow has an opinion.
But he shuts his door and sleeps on a wooden
plank behind the counter that smells of cigarettes
and stale tea, till rain cools the streets. All the
furthest sounds of the city wake him up slowly,
till he hears the rain on his own window
and thinks of the dirty water running below
the dead man's face.

In the evening when the rain lets up for a bit
his friends might return and joke about it.
He switches on the lights at five. People drift in
with damp trouser-cuffs and notice the Chinese
dragons on his arms. They talk and again the cool
air outlines each noisy car and softened tree.
It's Saturday. He rests his elbows on the cracked
glass counter and watches a girl across the street
scrubbing a couple of neat stone steps till they
gleam in the clear blue evening. (*Street on the Hill* 28)

Prasanta Das has alleged that Mamang Dai's "tendency to exoticise Arunachal Pradesh makes it seem to exist in a mythic time warp" ("Waiting" 9). Yet, women writers of the Northeast are aware of their historicity. Despite the romantic label associated with her, Mamang Dai's poems carry an awareness of the social and political developments around her.

Yesterday the women hid their faces.
They forbade their children to speak.
Yesterday we gave shelter to men
who climbed over our hills
for glory of a homeland they said –
those who know what knowing is.
And now the sleeping houses, the men and the villages
have turned to stone. (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* 6)

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Her prose-poem "Counting Day" engages directly with the disturbing plight of electoral politics in her home state:

> The evening is bright with fireworks. The winners are celebrating. A cavalcade of cars is tearing through the town, red lights flashing. The other side of town is shut down. The losers are on the rampage. Someone says, "perhaps there are bundles of money lying about on the roads."
>
> The dialogue of money, threat and inducement. Why should politics always be corrupt, lazy, expedient?
>
> We look at each other, feeling our spirits sinking. 72% voter turnout. Either way, whoever, whatever...Another 5 years! I feel like Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment, except that he had greater hope. (*Midsummer Survival* 37)

The calm setting of the usual and the everyday in the poems by Hasan and Dai is always fringed by the volatile socio-political forces. This can be read as a statement on the precariousness of private lives in contemporary Northeast. The intrusion of the violent public space into the private is a grim reality in the region and the anxiety produced by this intrusion finds voice in its literature and art. The Assamese poet Harekrishna Deka's poem "Dawning" simultaneously employs a picture of the innocent merrymaking of a group of village girls by the river while conveying in foreboding tones a nervous anxiety about the perils lurking around the corner, waiting to tear this joyous picture apart:

> The crows are cawing
> From the abandoned barracks
>
> In the waiting water of the river
> The night recedes into distances
>
> Are the soldiers hiding
> Under the broken wooden bridge
>
> The highland maids coming for a dip
> Would not know
>
> The yellow mustard quivered
> As the sun glowed on their fair breasts
>
> The soiled dark night
> Climbs back to the top of the barracks
>
> The highland maids shaking with laughter
> Do not know that yet

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After dipping in blood the nightlong
How ruddy the morning sky would be. (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 94-95)

Critics have also claimed that Hasan and Dai do not address political issues as directly as their male counterparts do (Das, "Waiting"; Satpathy, "Locating"). While their claim may not be entirely unfounded, the wariness found in the works of most of the women poets from the Northeast towards political issues has a much deeper significance. Virginia Woolf had famously proclaimed in *Three Guineas*: "in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world" (129). Her statement was triggered by the fact of women's problematic relationship to the nation, which includes a fair amount of exclusion from notions of citizenship, which she explains thus:

> "Our country", she will say, "throughout the greater part of its history has treated me as a slave; it has denied me education or any share in its possessions. 'Our' country still ceases to be mine if I marry a foreigner. 'Our' country denies me the means of protecting myself, forces me to pay others a very large sum annually to protect me, and is so little able, even so, to protect me that Air Raid precautions are written on the wall. Therefore if you insist upon fighting to protect me, or 'our' country, let it be understood, soberly and rationally between us, that you are fighting to gratify a sex instinct which I cannot share; to procure benefits which I have not shared and probably will not share..." (128-129)

Nationalist ideologies that emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were founded upon gendered notions of identity performance. Emphasising the gendered and sexist foundations of the nation, Tamar Mayer states that "control over access to the benefits of belonging to the nation is virtually always gendered" and that "through control over reproduction, the authority to define the nation lies mainly with men" (2). Feminist critiques of nationalism have exposed the marginal position occupied by women in the imagination and performance of the nation. Within the imagined space of the nation, women find themselves always already in a position of alterity, "female sexuality manifests itself as a further vehicle of becoming the other, deviating from the a-sexual, or male, norm of an identity model" (Gökberk 33). Talking in the context of the postcolonial Indian nation, Sangeeta Ray argues that the female "native" body is the non liminal site of otherness that has made possible the realisation of the imagined community (8). Contemporary politics in Northeast India mainly centres on a complex web of countless strands of nationalisms and

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counter nationalisms. Taking into account this difficult relationship of women with the nation, it is only natural that women writers of the Northeast do not display the kind of unreserved uninhibition regarding matters relating to contemporary politics of the region shown by their male counterparts. Nitoo Das, an Assamese woman who writes in English retells the myth associated with the Nohkalikai Falls in Cherrapunjee, Meghalaya from the perspective of the woman in the tale:

> When they come
> to witness my screams over the cliffs,
> imprison me in their stories,
> I know they wonder:
> How could she do it, how
> could she not have known?
> But my daughter
> when alive
> never looked like meat
> and I could not recognise her.
>
> Did she think of me
> when her father cut her throat, remove
> her hair, marinate her in turmeric?
> Did her body—
> her small arms, the curve
> of her calves, her smile—
> splutter in the fat with the spices?
>
> She exploded
> out of me and exploded into me
> with all my waters—
> my spit, my tears.
> Her chewed bones.
>
> She consumed me too. Sucked
> my love and milk. She made me
> bigger and smaller at will.
>
> I sit in my corner
> by the edge of the water
> and curse all who look down on me
> and judge what they cannot see. ("Nohkalikai II")

According to the legend from Khasi folklore, a woman named Nohkalikai, who was tricked by her second husband into eating the flesh of her own daughter committed suicide at the very spot where the waterfall is now located. The fall has derived its name from this popular

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legend. Myths like the one associated with the Nohkalikai Falls hold crucial significance for ethnic nationalities as they are upheld as the markers of an authentic past. By turning this narrative on its head and insisting on allowing it alternative perspectives, Nitoo Das's poem offers a mode of resistance to the appropriation in nationalist narratives of the woman's body and subjectivity, like in the case of the myth of Nohkalikai.

Her marginalised position as a woman is further intensified in the case of Hasan by her position as an ethnic 'outsider' in Shillong, where she grew up and where many of her poems are set. Hasan's poems as well as her fiction carry an awareness of the violence inherent in the identity politics that pervades the region and the marginality that it assigns to her and others. Contemporary politics in the Northeast is also centred on questions of ethnic identities and territorial rights. As Chapter 3 has shown, poetic engagements with the landscape of the Northeast are inextricably bound to the dynamics of identity politics, as space and territory are foundational to ethnic identities in the region. However, women writers have always found themselves in a difficult relationship to the notions of spaces, places, territories and regions as ethnic or national identity markers; as Dowson and Entwistle have demonstrated, a heterogeneous community of many women poets in Britain grapple with "an often productively uncertain sense of home" (197). This ambiguity regarding the notion of 'home' as a definite territory is a reality for all migrant writers. Dowson and Entwistle have added, however, that for expatriate writers, their experience of territorial, social and linguistic alienation often proves to be rather enriching. And for women writers, their gendered position leads to a deepening of this experience of estrangement and cultural dislocation but women writers have often successfully exploited the creative opportunities inherent therein (197). Anjum Hasan's poem "Home?" captures her longing for that evanescent entity that is the 'home':

> Once I knew exactly where on the wall
> the sun would lie in warm yellow diamonds
> at 4 o' clock but now, I'm suspended, waiting
> in airports, in Guwahati where accents
> remind me of steep roads, in Patna where
> I hear my grandparents' lost tongue,
> words like kewaar, like jaara, words
> I haven't heard for ten years, twelve?
>
> And when I return, that room will be a museum

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of the past, where things that once were loved
and washed and underlined, have been replaced
by things that just remind: this prolix poem is actually
a black cardigan with two buttons missing, a third
coming loose, this biscuit tin here merely stands in
for the boredom of days picked fishbone clean
by Shillong's unhurried winters. (*Street on the Hill* 34)

A similar concern about a displaced sense of belonging runs through most poems by Nabanita Kanungo, a poet based in Shillong, whose ancestors had arrived in Shillong as Partition refugees from the plains of adjacent Sylhet. Her anxieties stemming from the shifting character of the entity called 'home' are embodied in a poem, also entitled "Home?" which comes across as more of a question and a doubting than a certitude and affirmation:

> What is it now? This house? This game of Oranges and Lemons, and its sounds being swallowed by distant cities? This house that has no alternative but in memory. For, we went in, under those arched hands, escaping borders and their horror, escaping persistent questions and shame, escaping the casual local slangs. What is this house but a tent a man had once built, a tent that now flutters in the storm of our future? This house of prosaic gardens and light, our childhood's and our father's. this house built with memory and burning lines of foreheads.
>
> Now, oranges and lemons are sold for a penny, we are not school-girls anymore and aren't so many. The grass is still green and the rose is red and we all seem to be asking it to remember us till we are dead.
>
> There are haunted houses and there are houses that haunt. ("Home?")

As the question mark in the titles of both poems signifies, the home is a quest and uncertainty for both Hasan and Kanungo. In "A Jarring Note/Kanungo in the Hills", Kanungo writes with poignant awareness of the hatred and alienation directed at people like her, whose existence as 'outsiders in the hills' has turned their identities into a mere 'contradiction':

> We dealt with matters of land,
> my grandfather had said.
> Ones who kept its records,
> measured it, fixed its price.
> We knew the kanoon.
> I was taught to lick my name's deep sound
> festering in these hills before I was born.
> And for a child misplaced on earth,
> I took with ease the candour
> of how a certain ache didn't fit
> here or anywhere else:

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I grew into the fabled tree of my own blood
In tacit questions, raised eyebrows,
Grudging smiles,
everything that seemed to shout
that unjustifiable nature of being
an outsider in the hills;
until I stopped wondering
whether with all the kathas and bighas
they had worked out, my forefathers would have ever gauged
the incredible metaphor
land was to become for me –
a dream I must measure
with another dream,
a file of identity proofs gone quiet weeping
in childish longings to belong
this vast terrain of irony,
where silence is the only kanoon,
and the price of which is that terrible contradiction
that walks the earth
in my name. ("A Jarring Note")

But it is not just the migrant writer who is constantly faced with a sense of alienation at 'home'. Ivekovic and Mostov have described the "precariousness of a woman's place in the home/nation" (14). They state that women are considered to belong to the community/nation as property but they never occupy a position within it as political, autonomous subjects, "they are a symbol of the purity of the nation, but always vulnerable to contamination; they embody the homeland, but are always a potential stranger" (12-14). Both within the traditional as well as modern set ups, women of the Northeast have occupied a fairly marginal role in the sphere of political decision-making. The patriarchal clan among the Nagas, for example, traces its ancestry through its male members only and therefore only men are traditionally permitted the right to represent the clan or community in any social capacity (Aier 306). It is perhaps this rather limited sense of entitlement to speak on behalf of a community and this position of estrangement within the home/community that is partly responsible for the disinclination among most women poets from the Northeast to engage with political issues with the kind of zeal seen among the men. However, this position of liminality bestows on the women a vantage point from which they can critique the excesses of nationalism and identity politics. Mamang Dai's works carry an awareness of the necessity of restraint in forming too much attachment with one's traditions. This awareness is conveyed by the motifs of the inevitability of change, the transience of traditions and the

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uncertain nature of truth embodied by the recurrent use of the symbol of the wheel throughout her poems.

> The words of strangers have led us into a mist
> deeper than the one we left behind
> weeping, like the waving grassland
> where the bones of our fathers are buried
> surrounded by thoughts of beauty.
>
> There are mountains. Oh! There are mountains.
> We climbed every slope. We slept by the river.
> But do not speak of victory yet! (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* 6)

2. Violence within Traditions

Women in Northeast India are generally believed to enjoy greater freedom and mobility compared to their counterparts in the rest of the country. Yet, given the dismal condition of Indian women in general, a comparative evaluation of the socio-economic status of the women in the Northeast region undermines the various ills plaguing the womenfolk of the Northeast. Women of the Northeast do enjoy higher status and respect within society, when compared to the women in the rest of the country and many oppressive practices such as dowry and *sati* are largely absent among the tribal as well as non-tribal societies of the region. Yet, ground realities show that women in the Northeast are victims of various unjust and oppressive practices. In fact, the popular label associated with the Northeast regarding the advanced status of their women has proved harmful for these women in the long run. A tendency to make frequent comparisons with the status of the women in the rest of the country has also fuelled a self-congratulatory attitude among the societies in the Northeast. Various empirical studies conducted among women in various parts of the region have tried to identify and understand the problems specific to the womenfolk. In one such report prepared by the North East Network (NEN), an organisation actively working for the promotion of women's rights in the region, the researchers have found that this misleading perception has even hindered the establishment of violence intervention cells in areas of on-going conflict in the region, as it is believed that women do not face violence in this region and therefore do not need any assistance (Trivedi 242).

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Temsula Ao writes about a Naga political leader presenting, in her words, "a glossed-over view about the status of women in Naga society", who, she reports, asserted that "Naga women's lot in society was comparatively better than their counterparts in many other societies in the country and the implied innuendo was that they should be content with their allotted space in society" ("Benevolent" 101). Ao describes the position of women in Naga society as one of "benevolent subordination" ("Benevolent"). The self-styled Naga nationalist discourse claims equality and high status among its women. This discourse was even employed by Neiphiu Rio, the former chief minister of Nagaland to prevent the establishment of a women's rights commission in the state (Manchanda, *Making War* 162).

Feminists all over the world have considered the patriarchal social structure as the fundamental cause of the subjugation and oppression of women. They believe in the theory that the earliest human societies were matrifocal and matriarchal but the tradition declined with the rise of patriarchal supremacy around 3000 BCE. However, the earliest proponents of this theory were not feminist campaigners but a number of European and American anthropologists, all men, in the nineteenth century. An interest in the matriarchal beginnings of human society coincided with the development of anthropology as a scientific discipline. The theory of matriarchal prehistory was propounded simultaneously but independently in the second part of the nineteenth century by Johann Jakob Bachoven, John Fergusson McLennan and Lewis Henry Morgan. Later on, Engels based his theory of the origin of private property and the beginnings of the development of a complex class structure on the matriarchal theses propounded by Bachoven and Morgan. Engels proclaimed that "The overthrow of mother-right was the world historical defeat of the female sex. The man seized the reins of the home also, the woman is degraded, enslaved, the slave of the man's lust, a mere instrument for breeding children" (48). He adds, "The first division of labour is that between man and woman for child-bearing" and "the first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in individual marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male" (54). Engel's analysis is valuable in terms of exposing the origins of the oppression of women in the patriarchal family structure. However, he makes sweeping generalisations about the nature of patriarchy or matriarchy across societies of the world. His treatise fails to take note of the vast nuances among both patriarchal and matriarchal societies found around

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the world. Women scholars have offered strong critiques of the matriarchate thesis and have exposed its weak foundations and unconvincing arguments (Eller, "Sons"; Eller, *Gentlemen*). Cynthia Eller has pointed out the variations in the exact nature of the prehistoric woman-centred societies described by these thinkers. In fact, the implications of the term 'matriarchy' are still quite vague and it has not yet acquired a concrete definition. 'Matriarchy' has been used to variously mean 'rule by women', 'absence of patriarchy', 'rule of the mother', 'gender equal culture' and at times it has also been used interchangeably with matriliny and matrilocality.

It is due to the vagueness of the term and its associations with early human societies that most indigenous cultures of the world are believed to be traditionally matriarchal or at least egalitarian in terms of gender relations. Many indigenous societies of the Americas and Pacific islands claim to have followed matrilineal traditions. Certain indigenous communities in the Northeast, especially those in the hill state of Meghalaya, follow matrilineal structures. Many other communities from Northeast India are also believed to have been matriarchal or at least matrilineal at some point in their distant past. The various indigenous communities of the Northeast region possess and perpetuate their own traditional sets of laws and customs at the community level. The Indian constitution provides these communities space to continue their traditional systems of governance, including traditional systems of land rights. However, in most cases, these traditional laws have proven sexist and unjust towards women. Feminist thinkers engaging with the rights of indigenous women have consistently drawn attention to the fact that while indigenous societies have a right and need to preserve and promote their traditional culture, an uncritical acceptance of received customs can prove detrimental to the interests of women. Emma LaRocque reminds women of the need to be circumspect in the recall of tradition, for not all traditions are empowering for women. She warns against the dangers of assuming that even the aboriginal societies, which were structured and operated along matriarchal lines, were egalitarian or that they prevented the oppression of women in the hands of men (14). Although these thinkers speak largely in the context of the indigenous societies of the settler countries, indigenous women of the Northeast too face similar problems while negotiating with traditional customs. These women are often trapped between the dilemma of challenging unjust customs and the need to preserve their traditions. Yet, as LaRocque reminds the native women, it is in their hands

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to "change, create, and embrace "traditions" consistent with contemporary and international human rights standards" (14). Talking in the context of Khasi culture, Maranatha Wahlang points out that no cultural tradition is perfect. She warns: "A tradition that is non-democratic and patriarchal is not one to boast about, even if some aspects of it are better than traditions of other communities in India. Our people's destiny shall turn on the decisions we take now. We have a responsibility towards ourselves to make the traditional constitutions just and equal" ("Are Khasi").

The harm caused by misleading and generalised views on societies is apparent in the case of the matrilineal communities of the Garos, Jaintias and Khasis of Meghalaya[1]. Interestingly, Wahlang has described the Khasi society as 'patriarchal'. NEN workers have observed that a false presumption of the emancipated status of the women in the matrilineal societies of Meghalaya has become so immanent that the ground realities of the subjugated state of these women is ignored and the fact that they too need special measures for ensuring their rights is often overlooked (Trivedi 242-243). Studies have shown that a mere matrilineal structure has not been successful in ensuring gender equality among the Garo, Jaintia and Khasi tribes of the state. It needs to be noted that these societies are not matriarchal, but they only practise a form of matriliny and matrilocality. They follow the principle of ultimo geniture by which the youngest daughter becomes the heiress. However, she is only a custodian of the family property and does not have the ultimate authority over its use or disposal. It is the maternal uncle who is the true authority in the family of his sister and the ultimate control over the family property and other matters lies in the hands of the maternal uncles. However, the structure has evolved over time and even before the arrival of the British, the Khasi matrilineal structure had begun to lose its rigour (Lyngdoh, "The Khasi" 37). The influences brought in by modernity and Christianity during the colonial period and thereafter have caused the traditions to dwindle further. Although the matrilineal structure does provide a position of respect and greater mobility to women in Meghalaya, it has not been able to alter the overall gender division of labour and women are still viewed as mothers with the responsibility of childcare and men as the authority over women and children (Trivedi 245). Cases of rape and domestic abuse are not uncommon in the state. Anjum Hasan's "The Pregnant Woman" portrays a day in the life of a soon to-be single mother in Shillong:

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She feels the sun on the back of her neck
on blue September mornings
when trucks raise the dust.
In the afternoon, rain washes the street
and later the sky is washed too.
There's no returning, neither
any going away – with a baby inside her
she feels the truth of that.
It soothes her to watch the traffic and the clouds
and know how distant everything is. She isn't ill
but in the night her child lies awake inside her.
That's like being ill. Not knowing
what your body is thinking.

The other girls who watch her go,
shining and tender under her umbrella,
fear she might trip on the pavement
and burst open and still not cry.
But she must be crying all the time.
Or waking up before dawn and
going slowly through the rooms,
waiting to be sick.

She's alone in this
and doesn't want to talk much.
In winter the street will look different.
Everything will be quieter, harder
and the gutters choked with orange peels.
Her breasts ache already, thinking of that
immense winter.

Earlier there was a man and it was different.
They would make accidents happen
to each other's bodies, even on the street.
Now she's alone and doesn't care.
She doesn't want to know if the boys,
the really young ones, are staring hard
at the whiteness of her face
in the clouded evening.

But the salesmen still look at her.
They always look, the salesmen. (*Street on the Hill* 26)

The women poets of the Northeast engage in their works with the daily injustices and hardships faced by the women of various communities of the Northeast in the hands of oppressive social conditions. Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam* is a lyrical record of the

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lives of the people of the Adi community in Meghalaya. It portrays the daily lives, myths, customs and simple stories of love, hurt and hope of the people of this community. But among other things, the book is also a testimony of the harsh lives led by the women of the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh. All the women described in Dai's book, from the shaman to the mothers, wives and daughters are presented as very strong figures, who have carried on with bravery in the face of the cruel realities of life. Yet, life is hard and often unrewarding for these tribal women of the hills. Adi women, like most women among the hill communities of the Northeast, carry out various domestic and agricultural tasks, which include collecting water, firewood, roots, vegetables and tubes for daily needs and consumption by the family. Women also play a major part in the agricultural activities and contribute with nearly 70-75 per cent of the labour (Rao, *Tribal Women* 2-3). *Legends of Pensam* captures the hard lives of the women of the hills as they battle its merciless climate and terrain:

> They have been in the forest all morning, cutting wood, cracking dry bamboo and piling stray branches seasoned by sun and rain into sacks to be carried back to the village. This is a daily necessity. The work is hard, but scouring the forest the women could at least stop, stretch, talk to each other. Now the unforgiving hill permits no speech. Every muscle, every trembling cell of the body is concentrated on the effort to tackle the gradient. One step after another they move, silent, with no other thought than to reach the top where they will tear the heavy baskets off their backs for a while and wait, bent and panting, for their bursting hearts to quieten, slowly, slowly, before tackling the last gradient to the village gate.
>
> Arsi thought she would never be able to lift her head again. Her shoulder muscles would remain fixed forever in a stoop, her hands clutching at the belt of cane bruising her head and strapping her down. She could not turn around; so tautly held were head, jawbone, ligaments and veins, that her neck might snap if she tried. She almost wept with the strain.
>
> 'Hai! Why? Why do we have to kill ourselves like this? Is this a life? Is this all there is? How can it be!'
>
> A dry, stinging pain rose in her throat and spread to the roof of her mouth. Sweat dripped down her face and she felt she was losing her vision. But she would not stop, not yet, and rose blindly, climbing, forcing energy and will to obey out of long habit and practice.....
>
> Once, Arsi had tried to make a flower garden, but she had struck rock everywhere. Chicken feathers and some dry mud flew up as she struggled and scraped, trying different spots, but there was no soil and no moisture.
>
> 'Is this a place to live?' she had asked. 'Why did our forefathers choose this place? Surely we are outcasts dumped in this bone and knuckle part of the world!'
>
> 'What can one say to that!' Mamo Dumi had replied. 'This is our world.' (73-74)

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Apart from *Legends of Pensam*, other literary works from Arunachal Pradesh also contain accounts of women becoming victims of customary practices among the local communities. Lummer Dai (1940-2002) was another writer and journalist from the Adi community of the state. Dai wrote in Asamiya. His novel *Koinar Mulyo* (Bride Price, 1978) narrates the brave and fierce resistance put up by a young Adi girl against the customs of child marriage and bride price which were prevalent among the community.

Although the traditions may somewhat vary across different Naga tribes, Naga society is generally patrilineal and patriarchal. The Naga communities have been allowed to practise and propagate their traditional customary legal systems at the community level. However, these laws have been found to be limiting and unjust from the perspective of the Naga women. Naga women play very important roles in the domestic sphere and in agricultural activities and they are accorded much respect in domestic matters. However, Naga women cannot inherit property and are excluded from participation and decision-making in the social, religious, political and cultural spheres of the society (Changkija, "The Naga" 72). Cases of sexual and domestic violence against women are also not uncommon in contemporary Naga society. The Naga journalist Monalisa Changkija's anthology of poems *Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain* is a record of her reflections "on abused and battered women, on domestic violence and on women's ability to rise above the "second class citizenry" (introduction). She proclaims:

> A battered wife
> is a living testimony
> of man's inability
> and fear of inferiority,
> well-concealed by a
> mask of "masculinity"
> in a patriarchal society. (*Weapon* 8)

It is not just the women poets who draw attention to the injustices meted out to women in the society. Male poets of the region have not been silent on issues concerning the oppression of the female sex. Desmond Kharmawphlang voices his inability to understand the reason behind the quiet endurance of endless injustices by Indian women:

> I do not know what you're trying to say.
> You are hidden, yet sometimes

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bigger than the world. You are
nowhere, lost in endless centuries
of man's pride, man's wars,
but still you are soft
in the habitation of his flesh.

I confess, I don't know you. You're
elusive, a hair'-breadth
away from the litany of living,
lugubrious, sad.

I have seen you sold
on the streets, in lanes and
by lanes where shadows do combat
in slow motion, in whispered sins;
then again, with infinite poise,
you carry the dream further,
pumping passion, killing, with smiles,
some thousand men in a matinee show.

I have seen you dancing along
Bombay's Marine Drive
whooping uncontrollably
in a marriage procession, your ample bosom
delectable. Then again, I see it
mauled by a grunting savage
on a cold railway platform far east – the scavenger crows cawing, flying away. (Jenkins 27-28)

He is surprised at her continued tolerance of abuse and injustice inflicted on her by her family and society and wonders if she ever dreams:

have seen you prostrate before
angry gods and angrier men – do you
crave beatings so? Ah, girl,
child, woman, skilful performer
in an uncertain world, who are you
to open and close at will
the frontiers of reasoning? That man
had written you off
in a blazing orgy of flames in your
kitchen, and an entire university
rested on holiday. Yet you pour
your man's liquor every evening
and smile when he boasts
or rises to urinate jerkily. You endure
his baldness, his paunch.

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Your past flew away
with the seasons. didn't it. and your
learning sits ugly, predator-like,
to haunt you in nightmares
of a resembled marriage, unresolved,
after all the mustard and jasmine
had grown tasteless.

Your hands are adept at making
dung balls for fuel, and the child
rocks easy in them. Your name
is carried across the country to
champion barren lands and hovels.
Do you understand the magic medicine
of two children in a lifetime?

I have seen you cry
over a slain husband, son or
brother. Will you flay your
skin grimly and mutely stand
to contend with ghosts and errors?

That's suffering for you!

See that man? He has made
a hasty bundle of your life.
You were kind, caring,
you were pliant and you
smiled, still, as he burst beastlike
and stupidly drooled.

Yesterday, painters were
slashing you like boys armed
with fun and colours, while poets
wildly fingered your flighty substance,
gloating in secret. What does it
matter if a man a long time ago
called you a two-bit whore?
You merely smile
your incredible smile.

Girl-child-woman, tell me,
do you dream? (Jenkins 28-29)

However, Kharmawphlang's poem is limited to an exposition of the plight of women from 'mainland India' alone. He fails to take account of such abuses faced by women in his own region.

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In his usual ironic style, Robin Ngangom describes the typical weekend of a family in his poem "Weekend":

The man comes home drunk late on Saturday night
ascends the steps, the floorboards creak.
He bangs at the door, shouting at the woman.
Bleary-eyed the woman opens the door.
Inside, the man picks up an argument with the woman.
He says the woman doesn't love him.
He says she treats him very badly and deliberately.
The woman replies.
The man starts berating, then beating the woman,
rather slowly not violently.
AS if he's scrubbing a costly vase,
afraid to break her.
The woman bawls in the still, humid night.
The children start crying loudly too,
"Our mummy is dead, she is done for!"
The man can control himself no longer.
His face goes all green.
He vomits noisily all over the place.
He starts crying too.
Suddenly the man rushes out in the humid night.
He says he will never come home again.
The woman rushes after him.
Somewhere from the main road she drags him back.
The woman cleans up.
After a while all is silence.
The man is heard snoring loudly later.
Another Saturday falls from the calendar.

In the morning the man teases the woman in the bed.
The woman, not angrily, but rather pleasantly says,
"Please stop this, not in front of the children."
They share a smoke. After a while the woman
gets up. She goes to the kitchen and sings
a popular film song.
But has forgotten the lyrics.
So she makes up her own meaningless lines.
She starts cooking with the children.
The man belches loudly after lunch.
In the afternoon the man goes out,
the woman goes with him, their arms linked.
They are dressed in their Sunday best.
The children are left playing in the yard.
They want sweets on Sunday.

This weekend is spent. (*Words and Silence* 34-35)

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Unlike Kharmawphlang, Ngangom makes no attempt to hide the dirty linen but exposes domestic abuse as an everyday reality in the Northeast.

The misogyny and hypocrisies inherent in religions and traditions form the subject matter of Ibohal Kshetrimayum's poem "Durga":

> The adorations ended on another rainy day, and
> drowning idols left the drunken devotees
> in venting devotion with their faint chanting.
>
> 'Stone the bitch', they shouted.
> Bottles and stones were cast at a woman lying dead-still
> behind a tree.
> I tiptoed above the wild heads,
> saw her bloodless face, and I murmured, 'Durga'.
>
> I once knew her, a woman who dreamed of becoming a goddess,
> and she was always a goddess
> whenever we armed cold nights together.
>
> An altar boy behind me cursed and threw a stone
> clouting her dead-on on the forehead, and
> I heard a moan leaving her lips.
>
> The last time I saw her
> was in a madhouse, but she left it and
> I had been walking the streets, singing strange songs,
> I was told.
>
> On that religious day, she committed a blasphemy:
> stealing a sari from a sinking idol and
> wrapping it around her denuded body and dancing like a goddess.
>
> I saw the blood, and she cried, 'Mother'.
> I abhorred the idols and the dirty river,
> bit my cowardly lips, and walked away from the scene.
>
> I looked back at an idol and remembered:
> the goddess was actually born in a mound on the courtyard of a whore! (*It no Longer* 57-58)

However, women of the Northeast have not always silently accepted oppressive traditions and conventional gender roles. Temsula Ao reminds that history has sufficient examples of daunting women who have challenged traditional expectations of her role as a woman and broken the barriers placed by patriarchal society:

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Nature fashioned her thus.
To bear the burden
To hold the seed
And feed
Every other need
But hers.

Time perpetuated her assignment
And custom prevailed
Even when she cried and wailed
In protest.

Man beguiled her
Into submission
Thus establishing
Timeless dominion
While he forayed and strayed.

Religion sanctified
Dogma petrified
The convenient mould
Of mother, lover
And beast of burden.

But woman,
Thus fashioned
Thus oppressed
Beguiled and betrayed,
Sometimes rebelled
To break the mould
And shake off the hold
That nature devised
And man improvised.

So woman begat
Such deviates
To spurn man
And custom:
Boadicea and Godiva
Clytemnestra and Cleopatra
Medea and Borgia
And etcetera... (*Book of Songs* 17-18)

The examples drawn by Ao of historical personalities around the world are individual success stories of women who have defied the shackles of tradition and patriarchy. Such examples abound in the history of the Indian subcontinent as well, in spite of the fact that

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the status of women in this region is among the lowest in the world. In her poem "Kitchen", Anjum Hasan uses the metaphor of the kitchen to signify the limited space that has been traditionally allotted as a woman's domain and in which she has traditionally remained confined. At one level, the very changelessness and limitation of the kitchen might seem to make it a space that provides a sense of sanctuary and comfort. But the speaker in the poem chooses to rather reject the space of the kitchen which stands for her resolve to move beyond the confines of tradition:

> Colour and pain, lime juice on wounds,
> hard black nouns hiding like prosaic ants
> beneath every upturned cup.
>
> The kitchen is my grandmother's crinkled skin
> on my fingers and one hungry voice in my ear.
> Its yesterdays smell like its tomorrows and
> that frightens so many women: those who are
> old with the sameness of it, like the salt jar,
> like the ancient frying-pan; those who are young,
> like a mint leaf or a bursting tomato.
>
> From my kitchen I can see another woman
> working in hers, cocooned in the yellow light
> of distance that makes her appear happy and loved.
> I forget the onion's sting, water's scalding pain
> on nights when it rains and I see her moving silhouette
> among many reflections of steel and talking children.
>
> The kitchen is comfort, a picture to touch,
> a place of perpetual evening. It is a temple
> of the naming word, the word that never
> betrays, but never changes.
>
> *To stay where you are, to measure and chop,*
> *to never harbour false hopes.*
> *To fashion life into a thing eaten, worked,*
> *slept away, to meet despair with tea,*
> *to be like your mother.*
>
> My kitchen will not hold me, will not
> teach me the good in repetition.
> I will be a doubting woman
> with an unreasonable love
> for shining adjectives. (*Street on the Hill* 36)

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3. Violence at the Threshold

In an interview conducted by the celebrated writer, M.K. Binodini from Manipur, Yenkhom Ongbi Hemabati, a Manipuri woman recounts her experiences at the time of World War II. She describes the horror, suffering and hardships faced by soldiers on both sides, as well as by refugees, but most of all, by the people of Manipur during a massive devastating war which they hardly understood and in which they had no direct part to play. Rumours anticipating the arrival of Japanese troops in Manipur had already started making rounds months before the battle actually took place. A prophecy based upon an obscure account from the *Puranas* had come into circulation among the paranoid people of the Imphal valley, that the flight of eighteen white egrets across the sky of Manipur would signal the arrival of the war. Hemabati recounts that the prophecy did come true; although in a peculiarly terrifying way. On May 10, 1944, when the Imphal valley was bombed by Japanese war planes, many locals counted that there were eighteen planes in total ("The Flight").

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's novel *Love in the Time of Insurgency* narrates the hardships faced by the local Naga women caught in the cross fires of World War II, a war fought by alien forces on their land. Like Hemabati, who experienced the terror of the War first hand, the fictional character Sharengla in Bhattacharyya's novel cannot comprehend the enormity of the War, but both these women feel for the people on both sides of the war. Hemabati remembers feeling sad for the plight of the vanquished Japanese soldiers: "It had seemed that the war had intensified somewhere else in the state and the Japanese were not faring well. I felt sorry for them. My husband was right, neither the Japanese nor the English were our enemies" (Binodini 314). In Bhattacharyya's novel, Sharengla, a Tangkhul Naga woman from the hills of Manipur, is 'abducted' by a Japanese soldier but she continues to live with him and has also conceived a baby when the War ends and the soldier Ishewara goes away with the retreating army only to be killed a day later. The novel then records how Sharengla, who is despised by the society for having lost her 'chastity', nevertheless survives and lives a brave life. Although Hemabati's account is one of witness and Sharengla's that of fiction, the stories of these two women from Manipur, one from the plains and the other from the hills, represent the experiences they underwent as women

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when their homeland turned into a battlefield during the Second World War. Sharengla comments in the course of the novel, "You have to be a woman to realize what war means" (Bhattacharyya 32). Both stories depict the women not only as victims of the masculinist, gendered apparatus of war, but they also emerge as survivors and as social actors who exercise their agency. These stories set the tone for this section which will examine women of the Northeast in their roles as victims or actors in various capacities within the deeply volatile contemporary political climate of the region.

Mona Zote tries to figure out what poetry should mean to the woman in the hills of Aizawl:

> What should poetry mean to a woman in the hills
> as she sits one long sloping summer evening
> in Patria, Aizawl, her head crammed with contrary winds,
> pistolling the clever stars that seem to say:
> Ignoring the problem will not make it go away.
> .....
> *...Poetry must be raw like a side of beef.*
> *should drip blood, remind you of sweat*
> *and dusty slaughter and the epidermal crunch*
> *and the sudden bullet to the head.*
>
> *...I like a land where babies*
> *are ripped out of their graves, where the church*
> *leads to practical results like illegitimate children and bad marriages*
> *quite out of proportion to the current population, and your neighbour*
> *is kidnapped by demons and the young wither without complaint*
>
> *and pious women know the sexual ecstasy of dance and peace is kept*
> *by short men with a Bible and five big knuckles on their righteous hands.*
> *Religion has made drunks of us all. The old goat bleats.*
> *We are killing ourselves. I like an incestuous land.* Stars, be silent.
> Let Ernestina speak. (Ngangom and Nongkynrih eds. 318-319)

Zote proclaims that poetry can only be unapologetically raw and earthy for a woman in the hills of Aizawl, because of the peculiar cultural, political and geographical situation she finds herself in. This situation applies to the lives of most other women of contemporary Northeast and poets of the region have responded to their predicament in various ways.

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3.1. Women, Conflict and Poetry

Many recent scholars emphasise the fact that women are disproportionately affected by almost every aspect of war and have "significant, distinctive and heart-wrenching" effects on women (Sjoberg and Via eds. 10). Women form a large part of the casualties before, during and after wars: they are the targets of rape and forced pregnancies and they compose the majority of the people displaced by war (ibid.). In Northeast India, which has been reeling under prolonged insurgent activities carried out by a number of militant groups as well as violent conflicts between different ethnic groups (or rather militant organisations claiming to represent particular ethnic communities), the sufferings of the ordinary people have been phenomenal. Sanjoy Hazarika reiterates a point sought to be emphasised by many recent scholars studying the situation of women in conflict situations: women are the most vulnerable group from either side in situations of conflict or potential conflict ("In Times of" 54-64). He illustrates the relevance of this statement in the context of the Northeast by holding up two cases from the region as examples, the alleged rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama Devi by the Assam Rifles in Manipur and the killing of over a thousand men, women, children, infants and the elderly in a pogrom now known as the Nellie Massacre. The latter incident took place in the Nellie region in central Assam on the morning of February 18, 1983, in which roughly 1700 persons (estimates vary) of the Bengali speaking Muslim community were slaughtered by suspected Tiwa tribesman. Tilottama Misra points out the strange silence of the writer community on the Nellie incident. She surmises that perhaps it is the extreme brutality of the incident that has led to this silence; the representation of a traumatic event is often delayed by traumatised persons as a reaction to a traumatic event ("Women Writing" 250). While the traumatic impact of the Nellie incident on the psyche of the people of the region could be a valid explanation for the silence of creative writers regarding the incident, the uncertainties and fear created by the complex political climate in the region in the past three decades is also greatly responsible for the lack of willingness to discuss this gruesome incident in any form. Preeti Gill cites analysts who explain that war and conflict can have devastating effects on social and cultural forms and it can take such a society a long time to come to terms with the events around it. But she also stresses on the importance of letting memories and experiences of horror find right

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expression. She believes that this is where the crucial role of documentation and writing begins ("Women in the Time" 225). Uddipana Goswami is one poet from the region who has attempted to speak the unspeakable, by focusing on the Nellie incident in her poem "If Nellie Was the Name of a Woman". In her poem, Goswami visualises Nellie as a woman:

> If Nellie was the name of a woman
> She would be running down the grey road
> In a red and green sari
>
> If Nellie was the name of a woman
> Her red and green sari
> Would be spattered in blood
>
> If Nellie was the name of a woman
> She could not cry out
> Because you cut off her tongue
>
> If Nellie was the name of a woman
> You would still have her blood
> On your hands ("If Nellie")

In her memoir entitled *Along the Red River*, Sabita Goswami, a veteran journalist from Assam has narrated her experiences as a woman living through the turbulent days of the Assam Agitation and its aftermath in Assam. Along with tracing her personal biography, her memoir has presented a brutally honest account of her first hand experiences, gathered as a journalist, of the Agitation years and the political developments in the Northeast in its wake. She has recounted the sporadic incidents of violence that broke out all over Assam during this period, in which thousands of people lost their lives; her narrative includes the gruesome Nellie incident as well. This account of Goswami's personal life assumes the form of a critique of a piece of the region's history as well, for as the book shows, the socio-political developments around her deeply impacted her life and profession as well. Goswami comments in her memoir, "the events [around me] are the characters of my life, not the people therein" (xii). Goswami's story is a further demonstration of the fact that the personal and the political have an inseparable existence for the woman in the Northeast.

In the context of talking about the post-terrorist novel in India, Meenakshi Bharat highlights the fact that the production of Indian novels dealing with terror is dominated by male writers. She draws attention to the fact that except references to terror and violence in

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the short stories of a few Indian women writers, no Indian woman has yet attempted to produce a full-fledged novel with primary and sole focus on the theme of terror (*Troubled Testimonies* 134). However, Bharat sadly failed to take account of the countless narratives by women writers from the Northeast, including several novels, which have terror and conflict as their primary focus or backdrop. Easterine Kire Iralu from Nagaland and Malsawmi Jacob from Mizoram, among others, have produced powerful novels in English based upon the terror and violence in the contemporary societies inhabiting their respective states. Besides novels, women writers from the Northeast have engaged with issues of conflict and political violence in all their intricacies, in poems, short stories, memoirs and different works of non-fiction as well. The case of the Nellie incident illustrates that once again, it is women writers and scholars who seem to have taken up the responsibility of grappling with dark episodes in the long history of political conflicts in Northeast India. Several works in Asamiya are also based upon or make references to the violence and riots of the Assam Agitation period[2]. Several of these works have been produced by women writers.

However, not all male writers from the region have been silent on the issue of the Nellie incident. Ananya Guha has employed powerful words and images to capture the horror of the massacre and the shallow political rhetoric in its aftermath:

I saw Ajatasatru
slay Bimbisara
as history repeated itself.
Frantic
the tired, parched earth
bled red-stained tears,
there must have been a fatal
crack somewhere;
and they all ran amuck to drink
to their victory.
Who was it that won
that day,
was it you or I,
or was it Delhi or Guwahati?
When bodies of men
women and pot-bellied children
were flashed across the national
press?
This was Bharatmata,

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India of my unreckoning fantasies
Satyameva Jayate, and Upanishadic
seerage.
A single truth was sacrificed
even as the winter's sun had hardly
set in.
The only truths which remained
were the screeching newspaper
headlines
and the magazines gloating ex-
ultingly
and Arun Shourie finding fault
with a Machiavellian Central Gov-
ernment
forgetting other Machiavellis
many of them ground to dust
perhaps.

Yes, I saw Ajatasatru slay
Bimbisara that day
as history revealed itself
in one sporadic, dirty vision. (*What Else is Alive* 38-39)

While numberless women, along with men and children have lost their lives in political conflicts in the Northeast, the dead are often survived by near ones and dependents, whose lives then turn into tales of sorrow and hardship. Frequent clashes and killings have resulted in a large number of cases in the Northeast where the household is run by women, who have lost the breadwinner of the family in the form of husbands, brothers or sons. These women survivors are faced with the daunting task of running a family, often functioning as a single parent without any support or aid from the state or society and in circumstances made extremely complex by the presence of financial shortage, emotional trauma and at times even societal rejection. Employing images from the Assamese festival of Bihu, Nabina Das's "A Song for the Bihu-Waisted-Sister" movingly describes the plight of the woman left behind by her militant lover:

Sister, it's the day you know the earth's rising
To touch your waist your wants your wasted smile
But where do you go my danseuse
When the orchids bloom and cows bathe at dawn?
That serpentine hair has seen nights that sighed
For your lover who's gone to the camps of fatigue

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Wearing boot-trotting wilderness in his heart.
Sister, show me your wrist band of silver, oh danseuse
Show me the moon-hung-pendant of the libidinous neck
Show me that move, strike those breasts out of sadness, do.
Sister, it's the day the paddy is washed before offering
Something about the Flame trees tells us birds are still home
But it's also the news of someone missing
The brass plate of sesame candies courting ants
Another day at the post office (they know you now).
Oh sister, your arrow-shoot of eyes, your betel-leaf face --
Tell me, who'll come taste your love your lilt
Your innocent lust? (*Blue Vessel* 46)

Uddipana Goswami's poem "Love Letter" evokes a touching portrait of a young Assamese woman who has lost her lover to insurgency:

One day, *senāi*
I would like to be terrified by thunder
Instead of remembering gunshots outside my house
And make conversations in my head
About how best to describe my terror to you when I met you
So you would hold me and tell me it's all right...

I do not want to remember your corpse on the highway
And think of white *xewāli* and red *jobā*
As metaphors for a shroud and the blood seeping through.
Do you remember how eagerly we used to wait
Fr every new issue of *Prāntik* and *Goriyaxi*
Hoping my poems would appear in one?
Well, I would love to write poems again,
About flowers as flowers
And how maybe I should hate them
Because they are so beautiful they make me cry.
But poetry also has a way of dying in police encounters.

.....

"My country needs me, *senāi*", you told me
And I loaned you out. But what is the country, *kalijā*,
Without you and me in it, drowning in love
Beside the water of our Bhogdoi
Dreaming of a future, of happiness, of prosperity?
Without your mother setting up the loom for me
Smiling her sly smile that knew all and hid nothing?
My *tāmul*-chewing father looking down at his *gāmosā*
Sighing that this Bihu again his daughter will not weave for him.

.....

Maybe every mind is its own country

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And my country was not yours.

I did see your country closely,
Through the barrel of the gun you brought home last year
And hoped fervently it would liberate our future.
"How could I", you asked me
"Build our home on the ruins of many?"
I agreed though I could not see
How further lacerations would solve anything.
And now, even our past is dead
And what little we had to hold on to.
The kuli's song every spring used to be arousing
Now all it arouses is an intense desire to shoot it down
Silly bird singing blithely when there's only death all around!
(Why is it that shooting and guns are all I can think of, *hoi*?)

I'll row up the Bhogdoi and call out to you
From the heart of old river Luit –
The day you come back. Don't forget to tell me
Ahead of time. (*We Called* 45-47)

Goswami's poem echoes a popular older poem in Asamiya, "Mamatar Sithi" written by the Assamese poet and politician, Hem Barua (1915-1977). The Asamiya poem, which was in turn influenced by Ezra Pound's "The River Merchant's Wife", was written in the form of a letter from a widow addressed to her non-present husband. Goswami has inserted the last lines from Barua's poem in her rendition which, however, has changed the backdrop to contemporary insurgency-haunted Assam. The use of this popular Assamese poem in the form of a contemporary rendition highlights the pathos in the tragic fate of the countless widows of violence in the Northeast and the dramatic change in the image and context of widowhood in the Assamese imagination.

Women living in conflict-torn areas are also extremely vulnerable to sexual violence. The issue of crimes against women like rape and forced prostitution during wars has never received sufficient international attention in history and most military histories have sought to either dismiss or legitimise them (Copelon 193). The shocking magnitude and brutality of the mass rapes of women in the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides in the mid-90s generated worldwide attention on the issue of the prevalence of sexual abuse of women by men in all wars throughout history (Cockburn, *From Where* 212). Feminist scholars have exposed a direct connection between the prevalence of sexual violence against women in war and the

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inherently masculinist and misogynist logic of nationalism and warfare. They point out that nationalism is founded upon the notion of the nation as an essentially feminine entity and the woman's body becomes the site of the inscription of the nation's 'honour'. As the women's bodies become the signifiers of the nation, they also become the arenas where violent struggles between communities, regions, nations and countries are played out (Murthy and Verma eds. xi). War becomes a continuation of this gendered discourse, as warfare becomes a struggle to defend the 'honour' of the woman-as-nation (Murthy and Verma eds. xi; Sjoberg and Via eds. 5). Probing into a possible history of the psychological foundations of rape among humans, Susan Brownmiller has proclaimed that from prehistoric times, rape has played a critical function in acting as "a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (15). She proposes that man's discovery that his genitalia could be used as a weapon to intimidate and subjugate the female form was one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times, along with the use of fire and the first crude axe (14-15). She extends her characterisation of rape as a conscious weapon for perpetuating fear and control by connecting it to the pervasiveness of rape in war and militant violence throughout human history:

> It has been argued that when killing is viewed as not only permissible but heroic behaviour sanctioned by one's government or cause, the distinction between taking a human life and other forms of impermissible violence gets lost, and rape becomes an unfortunate but inevitable by-product of the necessary game called war. Women, by its reasoning, are simply regrettable victims – incidental, unavoidable casualties – like civilian victims of bombing, lumped together with children, homes, personal belongings, a church, a dike, a water buffalo, or next year's crop...War provides men with the perfect psychologic backdrop to give vent to their contempt for women. The very maleness of the military – the brute power of weaponry exclusive to their hands, the spiritual bonding of men at arms, the manly discipline of orders given and orders obeyed, the simple logic of the hierarchical command – confirms for men what they long suspect, that women are peripheral, irrelevant to the world that counts, passive spectators to the action in the central ring. (32)

Brownmiller's work has been foundational in much of the scholarship which seeks to examine the connections between rape, masculinity and militarism (Reardon 39; Kelly 47). Rape in war has been found to provide two functions: firstly, to prove a soldier's 'loyalty' to the nation by raping a woman from the enemy group, and secondly, of attacking the enemy through its women.

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Nabanita Kanungo's poem "Her Thighs Still Smell of Milk" poignantly brings out the violence inflicted on women's bodies during ethnic and communal conflicts:

Her thighs still smell of milk
and her bosom, of blood.
Why do I want to dredge the music
out of her fluids?
Now when she has seeped down
the stony cracks of my story
with a limp map half-flying
from a shock-stiffened hand,
waiting for the last ceremonial rite
my memory can afford.

For when they killed her at the border
a child was still tugging at her nipple. (*A Map* 26-27)

The pervasive atmosphere of armed conflicts in the Northeast in the post-Independence period has resulted in large numbers of incidents of sexual violation perpetrated against the women of the region, especially by the state forces employed in the region to fight insurgency. Cases of molestation of women by state forces during search operations have been widely reported in the region, mainly from Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. In response to the protest discussed earlier by a number of elderly Manipuri women on July 15 in Imphal, Monalisa Changkija, a poet and journalist from Nagaland expressed her solidarity with the protesting women of Manipur: "We've been stripped of all human dignity and the clothes we cover ourselves with have become superfluous to our reality" (Changkija et al. 292). *Zorami* by Malsawmi Jacob, the first novel in English from Mizoram, is the story of a Mizo woman who is raped by Indian Army personnel during the Mizo insurgency. Aruni Kashyap has frequently portrayed the sexual abuse of women in Assam by the Armed Forces in his fiction as well as poetry. His poem "The First Promise" contains a series of horrific images of the rape of women in the region:

Many Assamese mothers cry
No.
Not for a new Sunrise
which floats in the horizon
on the cradle formed by the two hills.
The birds migrate away
The hills are lonely

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They never come back.
.....
A raped daughter
cries inside my heart.
She was born, inside the tuition room.

An incarcerated Subhrata
cries inside Kunhi Bhavan
you were born there.

Subhrata, don't blame your mother.
Seven women from Bosumotary's house
were stripped of their virginity;
they wore caps and paguries
and went back.

Patgiri's wife was carried back home
Her mekhela left in the backyard
lying
like a jilted garden.
Flies have a feast
The white pat-silk is stained with blood.
She was seven months pregnant. ("The First")

His poem "Fake Boots" evokes similarly horrifying pictures of the violence inflicted on women in the region by counter insurgency forces:

Actually, stamping our feet

should have only awakened her,
but surprisingly, her motionless, senseless body made us run around
look for water, seniors and women
as if the fifty year old lady was in labour.
So more feet stamped while they sprinted anxiously
for women, water and a pair of open eyes.
We found her lying under the bed, a machete
clutched in her hands, drawn with love
towards her breast, as if to fight the whole world
of alien Hindi words, stamping feet and a camp
of green-men near the river where women no more
bathed, after many women were stripped,
even before they shed their second skins.

who didn't blush only before the morning sun.

She must have thought,

she would be one of them now

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who were peeled to be enjoyed by many;
For hours since, she dared to speak silently to walls,

cicadas, four puppies huddled around a milk-heavy bitch,

maybe she thought, she would be one of those
who came back with crushed testicles to wail for nights
like hernia patients, while their wives burned
forever on beds fearing opinions and wobbling tongues,
though there was nothing as such to crush in her.

But perhaps only squeeze, though they were dry.

And hung like weaver-birds' nests
from coconut branches in loamy soils. ("Fake Boots")

3.1.2. Violence by Insurgents

So far, it is generally the state forces which have been accused of crimes against women in the Northeast; the insurgent organisations have mostly maintained a scrupulous image in this regard. However, this picture has been changing in recent years. Atrocities against women by militant groups, especially during ethnic clashes and riots, have frequently begun to surface in the past few years. The symbolic positioning of women in national and ethnic identity makes them more vulnerable to the use of rape and forced pregnancies during armed conflicts (McKie and Yuill 51). Women become targeted victims of sexual abuse in group conflicts due to their central status in the national imaginary, due to their reproductive roles and as symbols of purity, for "Only pure and modest women can reproduce the pure nation, without purity in biological reproduction the nation clearly cannot survive" (Mayer ed. 7).

Sanjoy Hazarika points out how rape and human rights violations have become the choice method of inflicting control over a smaller group by a major ethnic group during Naga-Kuki ethnic clashes ("In Times" 62). Sexual abuse of women by militants along with trafficking, forced participation in pornography, rape and other crimes against women have come to be frequently reported from the state of Tripura (Paul 203-212). In a poem written

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originally in Kokborok, Kalyanbrata Chakrabarty, a poet from Tripura draws a disturbing picture of a tribal girl from the state who has been brutally tortured and murdered:

> A girl from the hills, Manirung Reang, is now naked,
> Hanging from the top most branch of a tree. The ferocity
> Of the civilised interprets the spell of gloom and silence,
> In dense Ampura forests, only the wind whispers.
>
> Manirung has neither parents nor loved ones. The chieftain
> Of the hamlet is blind and infirm, among witnesses in the woods
> Are the winds and birds.
>
> Disshevelled head with teeth cutting across
> pulled out tongue, Manirung is loosely hanging from the top most
> Branch, shivering slightly at times.
>
> She had nothing to eat for the last few days, the gun-toting
> Belligerants who picked her up had earlier smeared their
> Bodies with their mother's blood.
>
> They could hardly feel the fever, the human pulse.
> Of death, there is none, everyone has fled the hill slum.
>
> Manirung had no address as such,
> Civilisation, is it at all possible?
> Yes, everything is possible these days.
>
> The focus from the divine court is now slipping away
> On the fashion parades, the parts of a woman's mutilated body,
> Leaves of small plants, the woods are silent
> With the wind and the birds.
>
> Men avoid travelling to jungles for fear of being decomposed.
> Only Manirung goes. It can be a compulsion for us too,
> How long shall we escape? (Nongkynrih and Ngangom eds. 243-244)

3.2. Trauma and Gender

Endless cycles of violence and unrest throughout postcolonial history have turned societies of Northeast India into deeply traumatised collectivities. All sections of these societies, irrespective of age and gender, have undergone trauma at various levels. Yet, the experience of trauma entails gendered nuances. Throughout the history of western medical practices, psychological ailments have been diagnosed and conceptualised through a

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gendered lens. Since ancient times, the psychological disorder, broadly categorised as 'hysteria' was considered an ailment suffered exclusively by women, and was believed to be connected to female sexuality. Although Freud's contributions in the twentieth century shed light on the occurrence of hysterical disorders among men as well, the understanding of the condition as a "feminine disorder or a disturbance of femininity" (Showalter, *Hysteria* 286) continued well into the century. Elaine Showalter points out how hysteria in men was always considered a shameful 'effeminate' disorder and the male hysteric was often considered 'unmanly', 'womanish' or 'homosexual', "as if the feminine component within masculinity were itself a symptom or disease" (*Hysteria* 289). Symptoms similar to those of hysteria patients appeared among soldiers during the First World War. But the medical establishment refused to acknowledge these symptoms as those of hysteria and instead the term 'shell-shock' was coined to describe the condition among the soldiers. Yet, the understanding of shell-shock in the early twentieth century too was largely based on gendered notions of masculinity and femininity, for men who suffered from shell-shock were simply considered 'unmanly' (Harris 290-291; Joseph 70; Showalter, *Hysteria* 322).

While contemporary explorations in the field of trauma challenge such biases in psychological theory and practice, traumatic experiences may often vary across gender. Both men and women face violence during conflicts, but women undergo specific forms of violence targeted mainly at their sexuality. The sexual violence directed at women during group conflicts has already been discussed in the previous section. The trauma undergone by women victims of such violence is of a specific character. The postcolonial history of South Asia is marked by traumatic events in which large numbers of women have been victims of violence. The Partition holocaust saw the rape, mutilation and abduction of thousands of women. Yet the episode has been conspicuous by its long absence from public discourse. It is only recently that attempts to excavate narratives recounting the horrors of Partition experiences have gained ground. These projects have so far been largely dominated by feminist endeavours which have tried to understand the gendered nature of the Partition experience. Partition narratives are also largely studied as witness accounts of the lived experiences of its victims. Partition narratives by women are thus marked by a double layer of unspeakability: on the one hand their experiences are rendered unspeakable through traumatic amnesia and on the other hand, they become unspeakable as the stories of their

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violation become cases of personal and national dishonour. However, the silence of the victims of violence need not necessarily always be read as an erasure or absence. While their silence may be imposed from without – by patriarchal and nationalist forces seeking to produce sanitised versions of national history, their silence may also at times be a deliberately chosen strategy. Parvinder Mehta explores the possibility of looking at silence as a presence, "as a yet unuttered discourse that has been denied or delayed narrative space within available paradigms" (38).

Writers from Northeast India are faced with the challenge of negotiating with both forms of unspeakability while producing testimonial accounts of the trauma undergone by women of the region. A third layer of silence is added to the experiences of these women by the underrepresentation of the traumatic stories from the region. Scholarly and literary engagements with the Partition have largely limited themselves to the experiences on the western frontier and the Bengal region to some extent. Willem van Schendel draws attention to the almost exclusive focus on the Punjab region and stereotyped assumptions of the Partition experience in the eastern provinces in the scholarship on Partition (28). The partition of Assam and the creation of Northeast India with a border which is much longer than either Punjab or Bengal have been largely ignored in Partition scholarship. Although the experience of Partition was markedly different in the Northeast, the region continues to be shaped by cultural, political and economic legacies of Partition. Babyrani Yumnam argues that Partition was a crucial moment in the postcolonial state-making process which sealed the fate of the Northeast region as the "loci of geographical, political and economic marginality" (158). Mass displacement of populations during Partition unsettled the demographic composition in the region, which became the major factor underlying much of the political conflict in the Northeast in the following period. Sanjib Baruah states that in Assam, the meaning of Partition has been slowly unfolding over decades through a tortuous process ("Partition and the Politics").

Anindita Dasgupta describes how the legacy of the past continues to weigh upon the lives of third generation children of refugees from Sylhet born in Northeast India (21). Partition trauma appears as a lingering preoccupation in the poems by Nabanita Kanungo,

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whose ancestors came to Northeast India from the Sylhet region to escape Partition violence. She writes:

> You shall be all the poems I chance upon
> my mildewed file of poetry,
> every ache I cultivate
> in the plagued plains of our past,
> our battles and pacts with the sky.
>
> I have grown so bitter remembering you
> they say I was born old.
> But I know I was born dead,
> perhaps blind
> or you have walked so far away
> I cannot trace you in the forlorn map.
>
> And on this side of the denial
> I wonder whether the same moon shines on our tears,
> when the severed soul of our country
> rises like a ghost in my dreams,
> or when I see my fugitive ancestors
> falling on their knees on an imagined shore.
>
> A part of me, that's still your daughter
> makes an impossible wish:
> Surma, flow backwards one day
> and undo all of this. (*A Map* 38-39)

Her poems poignantly communicate the trauma experienced specifically by women victims of Partition:

> I was born in my father's difficult birth:
> Habiganj was where he kicked himself to life,
> as the mid-wife stifled his mother's cries
> so that the rioters wouldn't hear.
>
> I was born underneath the feet of a woman
> who saw her son being hacked alive
> before she was hanged naked to a palaash tree,
> and then burnt. (*A Map* 1)

It is not just the past but the challenges of surviving and belonging as migrants in the often hostile adopted home that constantly run as an undercurrent in most of Kanungo's poems:

> I was there in that time, in pelted stones
> and the earthen eyes that froze, oozing dreams,

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the pots that bubbled with aid,
camps where life was bought with the last gold.

Still later, I was born in a hill
where the landscape offered alms;
the refuge of delusion.
I was the red-soil where faces fell
and feet stumbled at the gain of memory,
each day, each moment.

I was born in lost businesses,
and talents that grew legs to run away
into the ever-distant markets of favour.
I was born in this need to re-figure everything one has
on geography's leathery skin, history's long tongue.

And all the time, there was a difference
of being born in the throes of being up-rooted,
like the event of a wild beast
being transferred to a sanctuary and then a zoo.
But the sameness of it is an insanity killing slowly,
an acceptance that bids me want to be born again
in a snake-hole or a rabbit's burrow. (*A Map* 1-2)

The question of citizenship has remained a fraught issue in the lives of the people displaced by Partition in the Northeast. They continue to be labelled 'refugees' in spite of having lived in the region for generations. Kanungo's poem "Refugee Colony" brings out the challenges of living as 'refugees' in the region:

If it hadn't been the thorn in our memories,
we would have bled elsewhere.
But that would be the same locale;
shame lying flat on the streets,
stealthy houses dying to disappear,
the mocking community hall,
the passive god in an apologetic temple. (*A Map* 42)

Dasgupta further states that although Indian Sylhetis gradually reconciled to their changed circumstances and new 'home's, yet Sylhet continues to figure as a symbol of loss and a place of longing in their imagined identity. Their identity as a community has assumed a fragmented and ambiguous character. Dasgupta writes, "many little Sylhets, standing uncertainly between a real or imagined identity, were recreated in different parts of north-east India over time (20). Ananya Shankar Guha, another poet based in Shillong talks of his

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tenuous connection to Mymensingh in Bangladesh, which had erupted into mass riots during Partition:

> My mother was born in Mymensingh
> She speaks of it
> with the desolateness of a pauper
> Sagacity of a saint
>
> Primeval wisdom Mymensingh
> Hindus and Muslims Mymensingh
> Hindus versus Muslims Mymensingh
>
> Navigates in my blood, Mymensingh
> Mother says "the smell of the good earth
> is the same everywhere"
>
> Ugly, squalid Mymensingh
> Where on the eve of partition
> Terrified hindus and muslims gouged each other's eyes
> Spat at one another, astonished at this deceit
> Bloodlust
> Mother we remain astonished till today
>
> My dirty, straggling roots Mymensingh
> I'll never dig them out
> but let them remain growing like cacti
> in the opal shores of history
>
> That long unwritten poem, Mymensingh
> The hammerings of the heart, Mymensingh (*Poems* 29)

Yet the post-Independence experiences of the people of Northeast India, including its Partition refugees, has been no less violent. Partition left behind a trail of unresolved issues in the region which is responsible for much of the political instability in the Northeast throughout the postcolonial period. Incidents of violence and unrest have come to pervade the psyche of the traumatised people of the region in such a way that they have become a part of their everyday language. Kanungo paradoxically employs images and metaphors of a bomb explosion in "At Guwahati, Fearing a Bomb-blast", which is basically a love poem, and yet it does not sound all that absurd at all:

> The day's frantic horse and its wagon of stars.
> The stampede of seasons on my eyes,
> the abusive wake, the walk.

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Here, I wait,
unable to buy fresh excuses from the market.

The bomb that does not explode is my heart
and memory is dense with shrapnel.
I see my own smithereens
on the pavement,
my cowardice barely escapes
this unidentified bag of the universe.

Here, to walk the armed roads,
under assassin fly-overs;
at Ganeshguri poetry seems stupid,
at Pan Bazar, meaning is meaningless.

The hair's breadth
is craving your touch by menacing towers,
the incense of your skin
in my body's vulnerable ghetto,
your iridescent smile
drowning the khaki-patrolled fear for seconds. (*A Map* 58)

Insurgent activities and their violent reprisals by the state have brought enormous hardships to many communities of the region. The violent struggle raging in their homeland since more than half a century has left the Nagas a deeply scarred people. Easterine Iralu frequently captures the trauma undergone by the Naga people in her works. She highlights the sufferings undergone by Naga women in her poems:

They brought in their dead by night
Their proud warriors, their mighty warriors
The brave beloved of the gods
To rest under troubled skies
And battle-scarred lands
That some portion of a vanquished field
May forever remain Nagaland, forever Nagaland.

The golden fields, they lay unreaped
As blood freely flowed
And mingled with the rains
And stained the virgin soil
Like a thousand scarlet sunsets
Back of the blue, blue hills.

Their hearts too grieved to heed the harvest
Maidens ceased song and mourned the brave ones
And blindly followed a broken people

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Who turned their backs
And slowly walked away
From a burning village, a burning village.

And there were some in foreign lands
Who still spoke of Kelhoukevira[3]
While her fields lay barren and desecrated
Her songs sacrificed to the wind
Her warriors to the Great Spirit
They trampled her silent hills
And squeezed the life out of her
And washed their guilt in her blood. ("The Conflict")

Malsawmi Jacob's works are motivated by the need to provide an outlet for the hardships and traumatic experiences of the Mizo people. As Jacob puts the pain of the traumatised Mizo people into words, she imagines the land of the Mizos as a woman named 'Zorami'. Zorami also stands for every woman caught in conflict situations:

Epitaph
of a thousand dead
a thousand living-dead
and dreams dead

river of tears
flowing full to the brim

sad bard who sings
of ignoble deeds
turbid wars, sunken ships
lost treasures never found
though lives were lost in the searching
and a new dawn that never breaks

soul in torment
whose sighs and cries do not cease
wandering ghost in the night
in search of a resting place

shadow of a might-have-been
fiaratui[4] once clean and clear
trampled, muddied

I am.

Am I

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waiting for another thim zing`?

The darkness at skull hill
covers all. ("Zorami")

3.3. Women, Conflict and Agency

It would be wrong to assume that women in the Northeast have only played the role of helpless passive victims in the complex political environment of the region. Feminist scholars have warned against simplified definitions of the terms 'victim' and 'perpetrator' and of the stereotyping of women as eternal passive 'victims' and men as 'aggressors' of political violence, which denies women 'agency' and their voice as 'actors' with the capacity to process and cope with social experiences (Moser and Clark eds. 4; Poloni-Staudinger and Ortbals 2). Although they have historically been considered peripheral to the war process, women have always played different roles in various capacities during war, either as pacifists and peace activists, as war supporters or providers of logistical support in war, as soldiers, or as members of rebel or terrorist groups.

Women in the Northeast are known for their active and valuable roles in the political arena throughout history. Apart from many examples of legendary figures who have played significant parts in history, women of the region have also had a long history of organised activities in the political arena. The Nupi Lan movement among Manipuri women and the Heraka movement among the Zeliangrong Nagas led by Rani Gaidinliu are counted as resistance movements led by women against unjust colonial policies. In Assam, women, mostly those from urban centres, began organising themselves into Mahila Samitis or women's associations as early as the first two decades of the twentieth century (Medhi 18; Trivedi 8). However, these early organisations of the colonial period mostly functioned along nationalist lines. In the post-Independence period, various women's groups throughout the Northeast have emerged to take up important roles as peace activists. Frequent cases of "custodial rape" by police and armed forces have become an important organising focus in India and Pakistan (Kelly 55). Women's groups in the Northeast have put up strong resistances against the human rights violations of women as well as men by state forces in

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the region. The case of the Manipuri Mothers' nude protest at Imphal against the alleged rape and murder of T. Manorama Devi in July 2004 has already been discussed. It was also discussed in Chapter II how several women's groups in the Northeast have chosen to employ the banner of motherhood to protest against the pervading violence in various parts of the region and to negotiate for lasting peace. The employment of the essentialist tropes of motherhood and women as 'nurturers and care givers' by peace activists is often seen by many to be problematic. However, many others feel that employing these tropes is not necessarily essentialist and from a pragmatic and rational point of view, "it reflects an important aspect of most women's lived experience, it can unify women, can be a source of authority and a powerful tool for resistance" (Cockburn, *From Where* 210). Women have similarly organised themselves under the banner of motherhood in various conflict-torn regions of South Asia, like the Tamil women of Sri Lanka, women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh and women in Kashmir (Butaliya, *Speaking Peace*). The suffering of women as bereaved mothers of the casualties of violence has acted as a powerful motif in the region's public imagination as well. Ratan Thiyam, a celebrated playwright from Manipur has dedicated to the mothers of Manipur his adaptation of "Kurukshetragi Peerang", a play based upon an episode from the Mahabharata which presents the anguish of bereaved mothers at the end of the war of Kurukshetra at the death of their sons (Singh, "Kurukshetragi").

An analogy from the war of Kurukshetra has also been employed to describe the poems written by Irom Chanu Sharmila, a civil rights activist from Manipur who undertook a 16 year-long fast (4 November 2000 to 9 August 2016) demanding the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) from Manipur and other states of the Northeast. Laifungbam Debabrata Roy compares her poems to the sermon delivered by Krishna for Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra ("Introduction"). As seen in the previous chapter, Nirmalprabha Bordoloi insists that a day really begins only with the sound of birds and not with the report of guns. But in contemporary Northeast, the comforting sound of birds has come to be replaced by the cries of suffering women and children. Irom Sharmila, who spent most of her days during her hunger strike in prison, describes in her poem "unbind me" the unhappy sounds she finds herself surrounded by in her prison cell. The prison cell in her poem also acts as a metaphor for the entire Northeast region. Sharmila voices her desire and

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resolve to continue working for bringing about peace in her homeland and beyond. She hopes to herself become a bird that will fly to every corner of the earth and sing of peace and humanity:

in this sinister prison cell
myriad voices cascade
no, not the garrulous chatter of birds
nor the crescendo of merry laughter
never a sweet song of lullaby

but the wailing of mothers
their children ripped from their breasts
women separated from their men
the widow's lament of despair
drawn by hands clad in olive green

i see a flaming ball
a terrible face of holocaust following
kindled by the spectacle of knowledge
in the path of experiment

.....

like a light which illuminates darkness
let me plant the immortal tree
sow the seed of ambrosia
like a bird

let me wing to earth's every corner
to reach the proximity
where meets the living with the dead
and sing the carol of humanity

unbind me
remove this chain of thorns
let me not deflect my course
do not fault me
this is the only desire
of a caged bird (*Fragrance*)

Sharmila speaks about the woes of mothers in her poem "mother will be ragged no more", but she speaks rather of a mother who laments having lost her son to immoral and unscrupulous ways:

I wanted you to walk tall among many

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straining my every limb to raise you
as best as I could, as many good mothers would
today I find that you have
surrendered yourself to
superficialities and cheap gimmicks
you drown, my child, in maya-
no time for you, contemplation with head bowed
regard even my breast's milk
as ominous and immaterial
what shallow thought
made you a running dog?
.....
what made you a killer?
why rob someone of his vehicle?
what gain you by torching an effigy?
for a scrap of land you cannot take with you
why fight like a brute?
is this your calling, my child?
a mother's heart to shatter (*Fragrance*)

Sharmila's poem employs a vein similar to that found in most poems by Robin Singh Ngangom in exposing and lamenting the moral degeneration of the contemporary generation of Manipur. While Ngangom resorts to a deeply ironic style in talking about the ills of contemporary Manipuri society, Sharmila focuses on the tragedy of mothers who have to see their own sons mired in unscrupulous ways.

Scholars have pointed out the limitation of analysing war processes without taking account of the role of women as supporters and perpetrators of intra-personal and inter-group violence (Kelly, "Wars"). Women often support, collude with or acquiesce to the use of violence by taking up membership in military and insurgent groups and in fact, the number of women members is state military forces as well as rebel organisations has been on the increase (Sjoberg and Via 5). It would be wrong to view the role of women of the Northeast as only peace activists, for numerous women of this region have participated as members in various political organisations and rebel groups as well. However, even within militant organisations, which are again structured mainly along patriarchal lines, women's roles as members remain marginal and subservient to traditional gender norms. Studies conducted on the women members of militant organisations of the Northeast reveal their subordinate roles within the organisation and their exclusion from leadership and decision making, both during and after the termination of their membership (Dutta and Goswami

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Vernal eds.; Kalita Moral, "Living and Partly"; Kalita Moral, "The Woman Rebel"). This phenomenon is not limited to rebel groups in the Northeast alone; feminist scholars have highlighted that women in rebel groups around the world, including radical/left insurgent organisations have to operate within gendered terrains of meaning. Some point out that all liberation movements in history have sold out women after achieving victory. Although the nature of the conflict varies among different regions of the world, almost all post-conflict societies are seen to have slipped back into the gendered public-private divide and women are relegated to the confines of the domestic world and denied equal political participation. This has been found to be true in the case of the Assam Agitation, where women were pushed to the margins after the end of the movement in spite of their large scale participation in the course of the movement. In Mizoram, women who had participated and supported the autonomy movement led by the Mizo National Front got a raw deal after the signing of the peace accord. The accord did not extend any rehabilitation measures to women cadres of the militant group. Nor did it address the issue of the rehabilitation of women victims of the conflict (Nag, "The Mizo" 146, 170). All the hill states of the Northeast have had poor electoral presence of women. All the chief ministers of the Northeast have simultaneously demanded that their states be exempted from the Indian Women's Reservation Bill providing for 33 per cent reservation for women. While some of them have come up with arguments like "our women are not interested in politics", others insist that the reservation would lead to loss of customary traditions and violates Article 371 A (Manchanda and Bose 155-157). In January-February 2017, violent protests broke out all over the state of Nagaland against the state government's attempts to enforce 33 per cent reservation for women in local body elections, provided by the Indian constitution. T.R. Zeliang, the then Chief Minister of Nagaland was forced to resign in the face of the violent protests. The all-male Naga tribal bodies were opposed to the move, stating that it would infringe upon Naga traditions and customary laws, which prohibit the participation of women in the social and political arena. It must also be noted in this context that the state legislature of Nagaland has not had a single woman member till date. As a matter of fact, this is a dominant pattern in the political history of Northeast India. In spite of their active roles in the political arena of the region, women and women's groups have generally always been kept out of the major decision-making processes.

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3.4. Solidarity and Difference

Although women in the Northeast have organised themselves under different banners with various social and political agendas, it is wrong to club them into a single homogenous group. Northeast India is a region containing extremely high amounts of diversity in terms of ethnicity, class and religion among its people. Scholars of gender and ethnicity have shown that women's movements are always an integral part of ethno-national movements and it is naïve to expect women leaders to pursue an autonomous agenda as women (Manchanda and Bose 162-164). Anjum Hasan reveals her poignant awareness of the differences among women of this region, here a difference in terms of class, in her poem "Families":

> So families like ours steeped in recollection and
> private wit, in shopping bags, records, curtains, letters,
> our *things* – in lieu of, to fill in, give weight to.
>
> And then the *thingless* families who nevertheless
> move solid through the suburban air:
> the straw-haired children who build
> their make-belief home in a disused jeep trailer,
> the bare-footed woman who pulls clothes
> from the line and goes inside quickly
> when the clouds come down.
>
> Maybe at night the woman's mouth softens when
> she sees the children asleep, their dusty legs
> entangled with each other's on the narrow bed.
> Maybe she just sits like that for a long time
> in the one-bed empty house, not thinking of much
> though the frogs start up a harsh croaking
> from the ditches, and drunkards pass by in pairs,
> explaining things to each other on the wet road. (*Street on the Hill* 24)

Nabanita Kanungo's poem "Kaali" which portrays a middle class woman's fascination with a girl from the streets carries a similar awareness of the worlds separated by differences of class. However, the poem does not view the urchin girl with pity or disdain; rather, she is treated with much awe and admiration for her wild, carefree energy and boundless freedoms. By being called Kaali, the homeless girl has been equated here with the

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Indian goddess Kali, the dark-skinned, semi-naked, forbidding and awe-inspiring figure, who is often interpreted as symbolic of the immense and fierce powers of woman as nature.

Kaali says she is a 'naughty' girl.
All orphans who are school dropouts are naughty.
She complains she is dark-skinned and lonely and hence 'bad'.
Kaali scavenges remainders of the good that is divided everyday in my world—

People, roads, dustbins and a temple.
I cannot condescend when it comes to her.
My hands practically itch to slap her at times,
Bathe and scrub the life out of that clay-packed body,
wash off that ink she smears on with arrogant delight,
braid her hair, clothe her, rub cream on those chapped cheeks...
but no. I am to be merely an afternoon that she occupies with
fantastic stories of battles she led and won,
of demons she killed that never were,

.....
Kaali. Goblet of nectar, pot of poison, bad and friendless,
has made me bad and friendless too.
I dare not ask her to be my child
although formally, we do share lies.
I know she is not of my world and I, not of hers.

Kaali returns.
One night, tongue sticking out in embarrassed acceptance
of an offer I had made the same afternoon.
She allows me to bathe her once
and adopts me forever. (*A Map* 9-10)

Like Kanungo's "Kaali", other poems by these women writers also ring with belief in the possibility of overcoming differences. Anjum Hasan shows how women manage to nevertheless find different ways to bond, even in the oddest of places like a beauty parlour in a small town:

Neither in convents sealed off from the world
by oak doors and starched white veils,
nor in maternity wards made obtuse by pain and waiting:
neither in the back-benches of classrooms
where girls exchange the hot, whispered secrets of sex,
nor in the ladies rooms of railway stations
with their air of enforced sorority,
but here in this small salon where the sunlit dust
enhances the drowsy hum of distant traffic,

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where jealousy, men and untruthful mirrors
are denied entrance,
is genuine sisterhood established.

.....

A good place to grow old in:
the radio crackling in the corner,
the whores coming in with red nails
on Saturday morning, and later:
school teachers, mothers with young sons
who take in everything with the detachment of artists,
sales-girls, girls with hungry eyes... (*Street on the Hill* 27)

Feminist thinkers have however expressed their concern with the disabling effects of an excessive focus on difference. They point out that while a celebration of multiplicity and difference is indispensable and it does bring about richness into feminist analyses of culture, in its extreme, it becomes a hindrance to women's ability to organise and speak for each other within nations and across the world (Parpart and Marchand eds. 6-19). Talking in the context of communities of women in Assam, Nandana Dutta has highlighted that the idea of women's communities signifies their empowerment through working/being together and organising themselves into groups. She says that the act of organising themselves into communities lies at the other end of a scale where women exist in society,

> in various states of isolation – whether through direct oppression or through deification – as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters...which envelop and constrain a woman's self-realization as a woman, and through the weight of traditional roles and expectations, contain her, making it difficult to emerge out of their shadow or sidestep them" (*Communities* 3).

Various women's groups in the Northeast have continuously strived to reach across to women beyond ethnic and administrative boundaries. In the face of the disturbed socio-political climate of the region, it becomes especially imperative for the women of the region to organise themselves and reach across social and political divides. Irom Sharmila appeals to women to get together and stand up against oppression and strive towards achieving honour and dignity for themselves:

come
walk across these fields to me
come

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dream your destiny as birthright
a high seat awaits you here
to honour unrecognised strength
inherited thro' your birthplace

look sister
look around you
trees heavy with fruit
how tall they stand in the sun's
searing heat
rooted strong in the land of their birth
we, like the trees must
from our roots take our hearts
let's go tell our plaints
this land unmoved that gives us succour
never will allow her dishonour

the scorching sun
daunts us not from our work
the power of your sorrow-filled body
can crush mountain and metropolis (*Fragrance*)

3.5. Women and 'Peace'

Most feminist scholars refuse to see gender violence in war as fundamentally different from that in other contexts. They refuse to accept what they consider to be artificially constructed boundaries between 'war' and 'not war' and ask the question if 'peace' is at all possible in patriarchy (Reardon 37; Sjoberg and Via 7). Many feminists prescribe an approach towards war and gender violence as a continuum than a discreet event (Cuomo 32; Moser 36). From the perspective of women in the Northeast as well as women elsewhere, 'peace' often appears to be an illusion. Violence against women often increases in post-conflict societies and this has been evidenced in Northern Ireland, South Africa and Bosnia (McKie and Yuill 51). Violence against women in the Northeast has not been found to end with the signing of 'peace accords' or 'ceasefire' agreements. On the contrary, experiences of gender violence are often found to have intensified in post-conflict societies in the region. Women from all religious communities in Kashmir too have reported a sharp rise in the levels of domestic violence in the last two decades. Urvashi Butaliya questions the nature of the 'peace' that the women of Kashmir should work towards or look forward

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to. She asks, "For women for whom levels of violence have escalated sharply, what will a return to 'normalcy' mean: the status quo 'then' (i.e. pre-conflict) or the status quo 'now' (i.e. during conflict)? Will 'peace' mean only the end of conflict 'outside' so to speak, or can women expect peace to extend within the four walls of the home as well?" (*Speaking Peace*). Scholars define militarism as "the extension of war-related, war preparatory and war-based meanings and activities outside of "war proper" and into social and political life more generally" (Sjoberg and Via 7). The growing incidence of crimes against women and crimes in general in the Northeast is often attributed to the militarisation of the societies in general, in the wake of more than half a century old protracted conflicts in various parts of this region.

4. Conclusion

Be it in the domestic sphere or the public, women have always been at the receiving end of endless injustices. But as the stories from Northeast India show, women have also found various ways of moving beyond victimhood and taking charge of their personal and social circumstances. Above all, women have always been survivors and this is what Uddipana Goswami's poem "Tejimolā Forever" seeks to convey. The poem makes use of a popular Assamese folktale, where the heroine, Tejimolā, undergoes serial hardships at the hands of a cruel stepmother, yet she finds ways of surviving each time, either in the form of a creeper, a fruit or a flower:

I am a survivor, I am.
Didn't that stepmother of mine
Try a thousand and one ways to kill me?
And didn't I survive still?

Māhiāi, māhiāi, muk nāmāribā...[6]
What a pathetic creature I was!
Crying and cringing, letting her grind me in the mortar
And throw me away in the backyard.
Only I grew back as a creeper.
She cut me and threw me in a ditch
I started blooming.
She tried to drown me
I became a lotus.

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I knew *pitāi* would come back soon.
I'd then tell him about his wicked wife.
I sang out as his boat went by:
Don't reach out, don't pluck me
O you strange boatman
Māhiāi ground me in my silk clothes
I am Tejimolā really.

Pitāi of course chased away his wife
And brought me back to shape
And got me married
To Dhonpur who loves me.

But having been a creeper,
A flowering plant and a lotus,
I did not want to be a wife.
But nobody asked me.
So I left when it got to me.
They searched of course
But I'd learnt to disguise well
And they gave up.

Now I live and die
A plant, a creeper,
A vine, a flower,
I live and die,
Tejimolā forever. (*We Called* 30-31)

Oppressive traditions, a restive political atmosphere and the general backwardness of the region in terms of modern infrastructure have rendered life hard for the woman in Northeast India. Yet these women have refused to remain mute spectators of their circumstances and continue to fight for a better future for themselves and their society. That the voices of the women from the Northeast are a force to be reckoned with is proven by the strong strides made by the women from the region in the field of writings in English. Western critics since the 1970s and 1980s have debunked the relevance of the author in literary criticism. However, feminist scholars and postcolonial critics emphasise that the socio-political circumstances of the author is crucial in understanding works produced by writers belonging to marginal or subaltern groups. Temsula Ao, one of the established writers in English from Northeast India, recounts the hurdles and struggles she had to encounter in her life as a woman in her memoir *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody*

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Rags. She narrates how her writerly exercises often became her refuge in the journey of life. Ao's story is a reminder of the everyday struggles of the woman in the Northeast. but it also demonstrates how the women writers of the region have succeeded in turning their experiences into literature of rich and mature expression.

Notes

[1] Dissatisfied with the matrilineal set up, Khasi men have started demanding for reformation of the Khasi society into a patrilineal structure (Syiem, *Khasi Matrilineal* 108-109). Bijoya Sawian's novel *Shadow Men* has portrayed the complex social ferment among a section of the Khasi youth against matrilineal structures.

[2] Some notable works in this area are *Pura Gaont Pohila Bohag* (The First day of *Bohag* in the Scorched Village) by Syed Abdul Malik, *Ei Homoy Hei Homoy* (This Hour That Hour) by Rita Chaudhury and *Felani* (The Thrown Away One) by Arupa Patangia Kalita.

[3] Angami word meaning a "land where life is good".

[4] Mizo mythical stream of the purest, sweetest water.

[5] A time of total darkness in Mizo myth, when drastic transformations, such as a corpse becoming a constellation
in the sky, is believed to have taken place.

[6] "Step-mom, step-mom, pray do not kill me".

[7] father.

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Chapter 6

Conclusion

Northeast India is a region that has remained little known and largely misunderstood in the rest of this country. In popular imagination, the region has come to be perceived as a land of violent conflicts and 'half-savage' people and cultures. Robin Singh Ngangom's poem "Bad Places" sums up the process through which a locality in his native state Manipur ends up being labeled a "bad place". His description is relevant to most places in Northeast India and even the region in its entirety.

> Sometimes, through no fault of its own, a neighbourhood picks up a bad reputation. If you happen to visit it on a singularly uneventful day, you will find it roofed with a blue sky, and dark-green pines and bamboo stooping to kiss its dusty road. And although it's true that love was made in all its wintry houses and its dead have been buried in its unruffled graveyard, you would never guess how it earned such a vague hatred from outsiders. Perhaps, one night, acting on a tip-off, a party of nervous paramilitary men shot a couple of teenage militants to rags at the gate of one of its unfortunate houses. What is truly ironic is the fact that the revolutionaries do not hail from this neighbourhood, they merely happened to be there during an ill-timed party. It is also entirely possible that a few men and women desperate to find witches and warlocks in an increasingly faithless age, forged themselves into medieval instruments and burnt down a house which looked a little eerie in moonlight and killed a strange old man and his wife.
>
> It has been called names – a hideout, for instance – they say the scars on its walls are bullet marks really. You would be advised not to court its women because the area grows dangerous after sunset. But such neighbourhoods continue to grow as if nurtured by misgiving. (Nongkynrih and Ngangom eds. 151-152)

This study was undertaken with an understanding that given the deeply troubled socio-political conditions in Northeast India, a systematic study of its literature would be most timely. Since the late eighties of the last century, a promising body of literary works in English has been growing in the Northeast, and since the turn of the century, it has become a flourishing field. A close analysis of the poetic works in English undertaken in this study reveal that they are deeply influenced by and are responsive to the complex socio-political atmosphere of the Northeast region in the postcolonial period, which is a feature that mark

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them out from the largely urban, inward-looking character of the poetry written in English in the rest of the country. This study has tried to shed light on some aspects of this by and large unexplored body of work.

Talking in the context of the poetry written by the South African activist and poet Dennis Brutus, who was actively involved in the anti-apartheid movement, Aisha Karim and Lee Sustar comment that in contemporary Third World literature, the act of literary creation itself is a political act (12). They place Brutus in "that tradition of contemporary Third World writers whose writings have consciously grappled with the inescapably political nature of such literature" (ibid.). The poetry written in English in Northeast India grows out of a similarly politically charged climate and has attempted to capture the complex socio-political situation of the region. These poems have emerged out of a fund of feelings and become an expression of the hurt and anguish of the deeply traumatised societies of the contemporary Northeast. Duncan Wu cites Paul Celan to argue that although the initial response of the imagination to the extremes of experience is silence, it is poetry which is best suited to the task of articulating such experiences, as it possesses the ability to "accommodate the sublime, the ineffable, that of which we cannot speak" (3). Poetry from Northeast India grows out of a turbulent politico-cultural context and has become a potent medium of voicing anger and protest by a people caught in endless cycles of violence for more than half a century. This body of poetry is remarkable for its conspicuous rootedness in the rich folk traditions of the region. In this way, it becomes a continuation of the folk literary traditions, while also marking significant departures at the same time. It takes the form of informed reinventions and as Mamang Dai remarks, these retellings have become perhaps even more beautiful and poetic[1]. The deep trauma undergone by these societies has led to the creation of something beautiful. Perhaps this is an evidence of the strength and endurance of these ancient societies of the Northeast, which is captured in Sudeep Chakravarti's description: "Broken, but not entirely dispirited; corrupted but fiercely hopeful; so not-India, and yet, tied to its future" (xxv).

It is these deep connections of poetry in English from Northeast India to a region and its politics and culture, which motivated this research undertaking. Northeast India possesses many vibrant literary traditions in several other languages. Many of these traditions are

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several centuries old and continue to produce rich works which are equally remarkable for their skillful engagement with their immediate socio-political environs. Yet, works written in English seem to be based on a broader 'pan-Northeast' outlook, which is in contrast to the literatures in the other languages, which usually embody concerns which are specific to the language community and particular localities within the Northeast. It is not the purpose of this work to dismiss the relevance of literary works in the other languages as parochial. But, writings in English, in spite of coming out of different corners of the Northeast, do address shared concerns and this provides a unique opportunity to understand the region and its politics from a wider perspective. Moreover, these works have been able to represent many groups which did not previously possess traditions of written literatures in their languages.

The peculiar history and political conditions of the region known as Northeast India also owes much to its peculiar geographical setting. The entire region is roughly divided into hills and plains, with marked cultural differences between the populations inhabiting the hills and those in the plains. Yet, it is often forgotten that the entire region is one geographical unit and the hills and the valleys exist in a symbiotic relationship to each other. In pre-colonial times, there existed vibrant cultural, political and commercial relations between populations inhabiting the hills and those from the plains (Baruah, *India Against* 30-34; Baruah, *Frontier Cultures* 15-20). Migration of people from the hills to the plains and vice-versa was also not uncommon. However, these systems of interaction and movement between the peoples of the hills and plains were abruptly interrupted with the arrival of British colonisers, who segregated the hills from the plains for administrative convenience. The political isolation of the hills from the plains under colonial administrative policy wedged a political and cultural distance between them. The isolationist policies of the British and a continuation of similar administrative strategies in the postcolonial period have created a sharp divide between the people of the hills and plains at cultural and political levels, leading to mistrust and violent conflicts between communities (Baruah, *India Against* 29). Nevertheless, due to the peculiar historical developments in the region, the political and cultural conditions of the hills differ considerably from those of the plains today. Although the work has tried to take account of the works by most poets from the Northeast who write in English, it has laid special focus on the works of poets hailing mainly from the hill states of the region, particularly – Anjum Hasan, Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang, Kynpham

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Singh Nongkynrih, Mamang Dai, Mona Zote, Robin Singh Ngangom and Temsula Ao, who represent the hill states of Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur[2] and Nagaland respectively. Poems by several other poets from the region, including Aruni Kashyap, Easterine Kire Iralu, Ibohal Kshetrimayum, Irom Chanu Sharmila, Jobeth Ann Warjri, Nabanita Kanungo, Nabina Das, Nitoo Das, Shimanta Bhattacharyya, Uddipana Goswami and many others have also enriched the discussion.

This chapter attempts to lay out the general observations and deductions emerging from the foregoing study. The first section of this chapter contains a summarisation of the main findings of the chapters of the thesis. The second and final section discusses the scope of the work and posits suggestions for further research in the area.

I

Chapter 2 has undertaken a brief survey of the social, political and historical background of Northeast India. It was felt that it is crucial to understand the poetry written in the region against this background. The study has found that the contemporary literature of Northeast India carries a deep undercurrent of trauma. As result of a prolonged climate of violence and unrest, the different populations inhabiting Northeast India have been deeply scarred at the individual and collective levels. Besides, the societies of the region have suffered deep cultural trauma under the impact of the cultural and historical ruptures brought about by colonialism and modernity. The poetry produced in the region in the postcolonial period betrays the presence of this deep trauma within these societies at different levels.

The arrival of British colonial forces in 1826 AD in the region east of Bengal, which is now known as Northeast India, was a crucial moment in the history of this region. Until the arrival of the British, the region had been a prosperous and busy conduit of trade and cultural interactions amongst the different regions lying contiguously around it. Colonial administrators, who first called this region the 'North East Frontier', constituted it into a frontier area. This put an end to the trade and cultural ties with adjoining lands and contacts with their peoples and cultures, which had so far been vital to its economic and social

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sustenance. Colonisation also unsettled the established social and political structures within the region and left a legacy of crisis and unrest, the impact of which continues till today. Most parts of the region underwent difficult processes of integration into the newly formed Indian union. Weak and fraught relationships with the Indian nation soon resulted in much dissatisfaction among the populations and a number of rebel groups emerged in various parts of the region with demands of autonomy, statehood or outright secession. Rebel movements that first emerged in the Naga Hills soon spread to various other parts of the region. The entire Northeast has since turned into a volatile zone of violent struggles between armed groups and state forces, as well as bloody internecine fights. The unrest also took an inter-ethnic turn and struggles aimed at securing political and economic justice for various ethnic groups launched the entire region into a state of disarray. Several organisations claiming to represent different ethnic groups have been engaged in armed movements. Violent attacks carried out by armed groups and civilian populations as well retaliatory measures by state forces have resulted in huge losses of life and property. State responses to insurgent activities in the region have been under the scanner and the Indian state is accused of insensitive and inefficient handling of the situation and of having caused further deterioration of the political situation in the region.

In this immanent atmosphere of chaos and instability, it is pertinent to consider the effects of continued strife on the condition of the women of the region. Chapter 2 has made a brief overview of the various roles played by women in different parts of the region in the social, political and economic spheres. Although patriarchal forces are not entirely absent among the societies in the region, the women of the Northeast are part of long traditions of strong and active participation in political and economic affairs of their communities. Women exercise their agency in various capacities within the current political atmosphere of the Northeast at both the individual and collective levels, and have succeeded in making an impact and gaining attention to the issues faced by the region locally as well as internationally.

The advent of colonisation in the Assam Valley in the beginning of the eighteenth century and its subsequent expansion to the rest of the Northeast came as a rude shock to the cultural traditions and the ways of life of the numerous peoples inhabiting the region.

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Administrative reforms and restructurings introduced by the colonisers destroyed the established socio-political structures of the region. The introduction of colonial modernity altered and led to the gradual decay of traditional customs, worldviews and value systems. The process was assisted by the proselytising activities of Christian missionaries, who arrived close on the heels of the British administrators. Large scale conversions carried out by missionaries, along with various activities undertaken by them with the aim of social and cultural reform, led to the gradual loss of traditional customs and practices among the ethnic populations inhabiting the region. The crisis of identity which has resulted from the loss of traditions in the postcolonial period has become the cause of cultural anxiety among the people of the region. This crisis is considered a crucial factor underlying the instability of the region in the period following Independence. The erosion of indigenous cultural practices and a consequent threat, real or imagined, to cultural identities has become a central point in the volatile political atmosphere of the Northeast today. Most ethnic groups of the region have become increasingly conscious of a need to preserve and promote their distinctive cultural identities. This has resulted in attempts to segregate group identities in sharply defined terms and to aggressively mark out 'insiders' from the 'outsiders'. Violent assertions of cultural identities and a tussle for political and economic privileges between communities have resulted in cycles of violent clashes with large scale loss of life and property. In general, a political culture centred on questions of identity has created rifts and distrust between communities and added to the unstable political environment of the region.

Chapter 2 has also explored the general concerns related to the political ecology of the Northeast. This ecologically rich region today faces environmental degradation and a threat to its ecology. The review of literature on this area shows that ecologically harmful policies introduced by the colonial regime continue to be perpetuated by the postcolonial state as well. Economic exploitation of natural resources, poorly planned hydroelectric projects as well as some traditional agricultural practices are believed to be major threats to the fragile ecology of the region. Although the view is contested by many scholars, indigenous peoples around the world are believed to traditionally possess environment-friendly and ecologically sustainable systems of cultural practices. The numerous indigenous groups inhabiting the Northeast are often called 'ecosystem people' due to their traditions of harmonious co-existence with nature. Yet, in the contemporary political and economic set

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up, the entire region faces huge threats of environmental degradation and this is often considered another cause of the socio-political instability in the region.

The investigation undertaken in Chapter 2 reveals that contemporary poetry from Northeast India is intricately connected to questions of identity and cultural preservation. Chapter 3 has attempted a detailed examination of the strong sense of 'rootedness' or attempts to achieve the same, which is seen to run implicitly through most of the poetical works. The effects of the cultural trauma experienced by communities of the region under the impact of colonisation, religious conversions and the advent of modernity discussed in Chapter 2 are visible in the kind of poetry produced by contemporary poets. Sukalpa Bhattacharjee points out that under the impact of colonisation, tribal communities of the Northeast underwent a kind of cultural dispossession, "which alienated them from their roots and landed them to [sic] a crisis at the spiritual and cultural level ("Understanding" 1). Proselytisation and reform activities undertaken by Christian missionaries who arrived almost simultaneously with the colonisers further aided the process of cultural transformation. Bhattacharjee has also highlighted the fact that "along with its apparatus of domination at the social, economic and political spheres cultural representation of the natives by the colonizer became another form of domination which influenced the self-image of the natives" ("Understanding" 2). Colonial officers, explorers, missionaries and colonial policy outlook in general introduced into the region the colonial anthropologist discourse which posited non-Western cultures at various stages of 'infantility', 'barbarism' and 'savagery'. The new converts and newly educated sections of the tribal communities soon internalised this attitude of their Western administrators, which was also widely accepted and used by the non-tribal officers in the colonial administration. Thus, indigenous men and women exposed to the new attitude began to experience a kind of inferiority complex and shame at their 'primitive' customs and started to look down upon their more 'backward' brethren. However, the gradual spread of education and the subsequent growth of tribal elites with modern political awareness led to a gradual attitudinal change in indigenous groups. They now began to take pride in their ancient customs and steps began to be taken at personal and organised levels to restore, preserve and promote their traditions. Such exercises soon became crucial to the assertion and definition of group identities which

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turned into the central rallying point in the broader political climate of the region in the postcolonial period.

These issues of identity politics have crucial relevance in the poetry written in English in contemporary Northeast India. A strong ethnographic purpose runs through much of this body of work. Several poets have in fact had the experience of working as folklorists and ethnographers. Most of the indigenous communities of the Northeast do not have traditions of written literatures and they did not have scripts until the arrival of Christian missionaries[3]. In the postcolonial period, the writers of the Northeast appear to have taken upon themselves the task of documenting the mythologies, legends, and traditional ways of life and customs of the indigenous peoples of the region by weaving them into their poetical works. They also often adopt the stylistic features of the largely performative folkloric traditions in their poetical compositions.

Representations of the peculiar landscape of the region by the poets writing in English are redolent of this cultural and political backdrop fraught with questions of culture and identity. Tim Fulford has explained how topographical poetry and landscape representations in literature have never been without political and nationalist ideological influences and agendas. The landscape representations by poets of the Northeast are laden with values attached to the land in the form of cultural memories. Land as a cultural signifier and a site of history has always borne crucial ontological significance for human beings. This attachment to land and a particular territory becomes particularly significant in the case of indigenous communities. In Northeast India, disputes and violent clashes over claims of first right over land and territories constitute core issues in its contemporary political atmosphere. Poets of Northeast India frequently express the anxiety generated by the threat of environmental degradation and the destruction of the pristine landscape of the region, which would affect the traditional ways of life and cultural identities of the indigenous communities. They seek to hang on to an idyllic tribal past or a rural life of perfect bliss and harmony, but such representations ignore economic realities of rural societies of the past as well as those of the present.

Literary exercises by the poets of the Northeast are deeply entwined with the anxiety for cultural preservation and assertion prevalent in the region in the postcolonial period. Yet,

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most of these poets also display awareness of the violence embedded within questions of identity politics in the region. Cultural nationalist ideologies which have divided societies of the region in the postcolonial period into hostile xenophobic camps have resulted in endless conflicts, bloodshed and general unrest. Most poets express their wariness of the violence which has been inextricably bound up in the process of identity assertion in the region.

The issue of the ubiquitous presence of violence in the region has been taken up for a more elaborate analysis in Chapter 5, which sheds light on the striking presence of violence in the form of images, or a lingering preoccupation in the contemporary poetry from Northeast India, especially in the poetry written in English. The immanent atmosphere of endless conflicts continuing in the region throughout the postcolonial period has a looming presence in the collective psyche of the people in this region, which finds poignant manifestation in the works of its contemporary poets. A quick survey of the earliest history of the peoples inhabiting Northeast India revealed a lack of reliable historical records. The only available records are colonial accounts compiled mainly by European officers and explorers. These accounts, generally presented from a colonialist perspective, portray the pre-colonial societies of this region as constantly engaged in violent feuds between clans and village communities. Practices of head-hunting, raiding and slave taking are recorded to have been widely prevalent, especially among the hill societies. However, postcolonial scholars contest the condescending views put forth in colonial accounts. Contemporary writers from Northeast India like Mamang Dai are often engage in attempts to produce counter-narratives to colonialist accounts through sensitive retellings of episodes from their colonial history.

Although the pre-colonial societies of the region lived in an atmosphere of constant feuding and warfare, the advent of British colonialism launched the Northeast into an unprecedented era of turmoil. While the new administration and missionary activities altered the political, economic and social structures in the region forever, the Second World War had a colossal impact on the Northeast in the mid 1940s; the region turned into a crucial but largely forgotten war theatre during the years it lasted. The experiences of the War exposed many of the hill communities of the region to modern notions of nationalism and triggered off in them the necessity of taking stock of their communal destinies. The War was also a

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landmark event from which the beginnings of modernist tendencies in the literary traditions of the region can be traced. The formation of independent India, which arrived close on the heels of the receding War proved another pivotal event that would change the course of history in the region forever. Most parts of the region had a rough passage of initiation into the new nation, which would have far-reaching consequences on their future relationships with the nation. Many contemporary poets question the casual induction of the region into the newly formed Indian union.

In the post-Independence period Northeast India developed into a breeding ground of endless conflict and unrest. Secessionist and inter-group conflicts and state retaliations turned it into a virtual war-zone. Since ancient times, the suitability of poetry for talking about warfare and politics has been subjected to perpetual debate. Even Plato had banished poets from his ideal state. However, poets and scholars throughout the centuries have also argued that poetry has the supreme responsibility and capacity to communicate the realities of society and its affairs, including violence, war and politics. Meenakshi Bharat has pointed out that postcolonial Indian literature in particular cannot ignore the importance of engaging with violent politics in the face of a history marked by constant incidents of terrorist violence. Poets of Northeast India do not shy away from talking about the political realities of contemporary Northeast India. In fact, violence is one of the dominant preoccupations of contemporary literature produced in the region. Confronted with the politically charged climate of the region, it is impossible for these writers to ignore the socio-political realities around them. Often these poets write about the turbulent political atmosphere with an apocalyptic or prophetic voice. However, they do not write with any pretensions of doling out absolute wisdom. Contemporary poetry from the Northeast is also the "poetry of witness". It acts as witness to a land run over by sordid traumatic political events. The poets stand witness to the pervading atmosphere of terror in the region. Speaking about or against violent acts in the region is a risky task, and people, including the poets are forced to turn a blind eye and quietly follow the diktats of gun-toting men and power-holders. Some poets deplore the compulsion on writers to skirt round contentious issues and stick to writing only about 'safe' things. Others, however, assert the impossibility of shutting out voices of protest among poets or among the common men. The poets of the region often speak up on

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behalf of and for the common man. They also portray the rampant decay of values in societies in general caused by the long periods of mindless violence and lawlessness.

The degeneration of human values is a constant obsession in the poetry of Robin Singh Ngangom. Ngangom often takes recourse to the use of irony as a device to expose the pervasive delinquency and anarchy in contemporary Manipuri society. Besides Ngangom, poets from all corners of the Northeast use irony to represent the depravity into which these societies scarred by prolonged violence have slipped. However, while irony, skepticism and satire dominate the mood of the works of these poets, they also ring with hope for better days ahead.

Chapter 4 attempts an elaborate analysis of the ways poets from the Northeast have responded to the turbulent political climate of the region. But in most conflict situations around the world, it has been generally observed that women become targets of severe and specific forms of violence. Unlike male victims, it is the sexuality of women that becomes fore grounded during and after situations of conflict, which renders them vulnerable to sexual violence. It becomes necessary, in this context, to understand the complex socio-political conditions of the Northeast from a gendered perspective. Chapter 5 has made a gendered analysis of the poetry written in English in Northeast India. It is observed that a large number of the poets writing in English in the region are women and they have afforded powerful gendered voices in understanding the current socio-political conditions in the region.

Traditionally, politics and public affairs have always been considered a domain exclusively reserved for men, in which women have been allowed little participation or have been relegated to a marginal position. Literature written by women has been often considered incapable of handling political subject matters and it is popularly considered suitable at best for representing a world of private and domestic concerns. This view has been contested by feminist critics who also seek to debunk the traditional classifications of the 'personal' and the 'political'. In contemporary Northeast India, the boundaries between the political and the private often collapse and the private world becomes infused with and mired in the politics of the land. In fact, the intrusion of political violence into the sacred space of the private lives of people is a recurring concern in contemporary poetry of the

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region. While Northeast India is imagined as a space of endless political strife and general unrest, the people of the region live normal everyday lives too, a fact which is often overlooked in sensational media reports. The unfolding of everyday lives of the people living in small towns and quiet hamlets of the region has found evocative portrayals in the works of the women poets of the region. They often employ autobiographical experiences in portraying the nature of everyday existence in the Northeast. However, their poems carry awareness of the political turbulence around them even as they talk about deeply 'personal' experiences; these women poets never lose sight of their historicity. This acts as a reminder of the precariousness of private lives in the Northeast.

The relationship between women and the nation is always fundamentally fraught with difficulties. Nationalist ideology thrives upon and propagates gendered notions of performance and has proved oppressive towards women. Nationalist discourse reduces women to their reproductive role, which in turn turns their bodies into symbols of 'national honour', for a violation of their bodies automatically becomes the violation of the 'purity' of the nation. This symbolic value renders women's bodies vulnerable to patriarchal control within the nation and acts of sexual violence during group conflicts. Contemporary politics in Northeast India is dominated by discourses of nationalism and sub-nationalism. An awareness of the oppressive tendencies inherent within these discourses often inhibits women poets from engaging with political matters with the kind of enthusiasm shown by men. Even when they do handle political subjects, they do so with a hint of skepticism and measured distance. A preoccupation with the space of the home has a dominant presence in the poetry written by the women of the region. But their musings also carry a consciousness of the ephemeral, slippery nature of the cherished space of the home. This stands in sharp contrast to the confident conceptualisation and assertion of the 'homeland' in the works of most male poets from the region.

Women of the Northeast are believed and projected to enjoy high status and greater mobility in the society when compared to their counterparts in the rest of India or South Asia in general. This fact is not entirely untrue; yet, many issues concerning the lives of women in the region still require attention. The status of the women of Northeast India is found to be quite high when compared with the sordid state of women in most of South

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Asia. However, societies of the Northeast often fail to recognise and accept the various ills plaguing the lives of the women in the region, which still need to be addressed. There is also a common assumption that indigenous societies are more egalitarian in terms of gender status. However, indigenous women of Northeast India face many unjust traditional restrictions and women writers of the region are quite vocal about the oppressive traditions within their communities. Besides women poets, male poets also voice their concern against the unjust treatment of women in their societies.

Apart from oppressive social customs, the larger menace faced by women of the Northeast is intense violence resulting from the complex political mayhem in the region. Studies have shown that war and political violence have disproportionate effects on men and women. A large number of civilian casualties in Northeast India in militant violence and ethnic clashes are women. Numberless women have lost their loved ones as well as bread-winners of the family. Besides, women living in conflict torn areas are extremely vulnerable to sexual violence and a large number of women of the region have become victims of rape and molestation in the hands of state forces in the name of fighting insurgency. Rapes of women have also taken place during ethnic riots. The plight of such women forms an important concern in creative works by both men and women writers in the region.

As scholars have pointed out, women of the Northeast are not just passive victims of violence; they have been engaged in various roles ranging from that of activists and political representatives to soldiers and rebels. They have made a mark through their active roles in the socio-political arena of the region at both the individual and organised levels.

However, as post-feminist tendencies have revealed, it is erroneous to imagine all women as a homogenous category. The population of Northeast India is characterised by various ethnic, linguistic, political and economic divisions and the women poets of the region express their awareness and respect for the differences among the women of the region. Yet, they also simultaneously talk about the potential among women to surpass all barriers and bond and collaborate in solidarity as women.

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II

Although other literary genres in English from Northeast India have been discussed occasionally in the course of the study, this work has closely focused on a study of the poetry written in English and in English translations. It would not have been within the scope of this thesis to examine all the genres of literature with justice. Thorough analyses of literary works in English from the region in other genres would make for engaging research areas. Northeast India is also home to more than a few rich literary traditions in languages other than English. Some of these traditions date back to several centuries, while many others are rather recent in origin. Written traditions in many of the languages of the region draw upon the rich folk literary traditions possessed by communities of the region. A study of the ancient as well as emergent writing traditions from the region would make for an intriguing research area. Research into the folk literary traditions, in both the oral and written forms would also prove interesting and relevant fields of study.

Literature has always been believed to have immense powers of uniting peoples and cultures. Ananya S. Guha objects to the fact that much of the discussion today in the literature of Northeast India has focused on violence as a thematic interest. He points out that the literature of Northeast India which has gained ascendancy in the last three decades has attracted much interest among Indian publishers and academicians due to "this 'new' ontology and cult of violence" ("Violence and Literature"). He points out that beginning with a trend in the social sciences in the 80s when almost all discourses on Northeast India veered to ethnicity and violence, it gradually led to mainstream publishing houses capitalising on such current trends, publishing manuscripts as a spinoff of seminars and conferences. He believes that literary exchanges and interactions are capable of acting as reconciliatory steps between the conflicting cultures of the region. However, he regrets that none of the discussions in the numerous seminars and conferences held on the area drew attention to the cultural interactions in the literature and poetry from the region. Guha commends the attempt that has been made by Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham S. Nongkynrih in bringing out a collection of Northeast Indian poems. The collection was published by Penguin India and includes poems in languages such as Kokborok and those by writers from the little represented tea tribes of Tripura and Bengali poets living in Northeast

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India. Guha calls the anthology "an intrepid voice of the 'community' of poets irrespective of their ethnic communities" ("Violence and Literature"). Elsewhere, Guha notes,

> A political solution to violence is a long and difficult process, but there may be an aesthetic solution, however temporary its nature may be. This effort could bring about a literary tension, and generate in its wake a felt experience, something which can be universally comprehended. Contemporary north-east Indian poetry is exactly a realisation of this experience. ("Violence to What End")

Guha puts his faith in the power of literature to work as panacea. The fact that literature has been able to bring together writers from diverse parts of this conflict-torn region is testimony to Guha's argument. Literary endeavours in English have further succeeded in forging a community of writers and readers in the region, surpassing the bounds of language, culture and political ideologies. Sumanyu Satpathy had proclaimed that "the cauldron of cultural and political effervescence and resurgence that north-east is, is better understood through a greater attention to its poets and writers, than to its often corruptible leaders" ("Locating Cultures"). This work hopes that a carefully conducted literary understanding can perhaps pave the way for a better and more sensitive appreciation of the peculiar history, culture and political condition of the Northeast and initiate the process for building a much needed atmosphere of peace and positive growth in the region.

Notes

[1] Personal interview conducted with Mamang Dai. (Appendix II)

[2] The state of Manipur is composed of both hills and plains. Although initially hailing from Imphal, Manipur, Robin Singh Ngangom has been working and living in Shillong since decades.

[3] Most of the tribal languages were standardised and provided alphabets and scripts under the efforts of Christian missionaries.

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Appendix I

A Conversation with Desmond Kharmawphlang

Sir, you are today an established name in the world of poetry in English from Northeast India. Could you briefly walk me through your poetic journey?

Well, I started writing poetry in...college. In fact, I started in school, you know...writing in the school magazine and so on. And I was very much influenced...you see. I grew up in a very small place in Assam, you might not know this. It's a very small place: I don't know if you have heard of this place even, it's called Ghilamara.

In which part of Assam is it located, exactly?

It's in Lakhimpur district. My father was working...my father belonged to the Assam Civil Service. I mean, he's Khasi. But, you know, [it was] undivided Assam then ...he was the sub-collector or some such thing, I am not very sure now. But he was posted in that very remote place in Assam. It's very close to Dhakuwakhana, you know, very close to Arunachal Pradesh. So, there was this beautiful river called Subansiri. So, I grew up there, in that very remote place. And, and many of the images which actually recur, in fact, the small book which is going to be translated into French, it's actually called *The Ghilamara Graph*, it's all about my experiences as a boy then. So, my first impressions were created there, in that small place. And I started writing about the experiences, started writing about the people whom I met, the kindness which I received from people, especially from this boy who used to be our cook. His name is Umesh Chetia. I practically grew up in his lap.

How long did you live in Assam?

Close to two years. Then, I could even speak a little bit [of Assamese], you know. Now of course I forgot. I still manage, but I've mostly forgotten. But, anyway, growing up there provided me with the first, it was because I was growing up, I suppose, because I was able to register the colours of the landscape...you know, watching the sunset...images

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which are still very very graphic in my mind, you know, like wild ducks that used to fly across the paddy fields, and so on. These were my first experiences, and I started writing about these things. Some stuff got published in school magazines, and so on. But then I seriously took up writing when I was in college. Then, we had a loosely formed group which was called the Shillong Poetry Society. And we realized that we were actually placed and positioned in a very significant time and a very significant cultural space. Because we were all...many of us were multilingual...I speak, of course, in addition to my own, I speak four other languages. So, but then, we were also consciously writing both in our mother tongue as well as in the English language. And we were conscious about this cultural space that was being created by being brought up in Shillong. So, and we had in this group, a motley crowd of Bengalis, we had Manipuri, Meitei, we also had Assamese, if I'm not mistaken. So, we were all part of this group. But Bengali was a very strong influence, not as a language, but then the kind of cultural epistemologies that percolated, had all actually come from our Bengali friends, who have been born here and have also grown up here...And there was this very strong encounter with Bengali poets, like Tagore, for instance. So, I mean, we were reading Tagore in school, we were reading Tagore in college. And, at that time we brought out a journal, which we called *Lyric*. I think we managed to bring out four to five editions of *Lyric*, before we folded up. And, it became quite prestigious, in the sense that it attracted also artists and poets from different parts of the world. We, in fact, had an issue of *Lyric*, which was exclusively sponsored by the Welsh Arts Council and we had many Welsh poets figured in it. We were very specific in naming this journal *Lyric* because while we were pursuing our graduation and post graduation, we were inundated by the kind of poetry that has come to us from the Western canonical paradigms, you know, of Eliots and Spender and all these guys, and some of us, especially those associated with *Lyric*, we were not very comfortable with that stuff. I mean we truly admire these guys as great artists, as wordsmiths and so on. But then, we found that they were too detached, and then we found ourselves surrounded by this environment that is essentially Northeast, which has this huge cultural capital of folklore, of legends...Because especially me, I came from that background...my grandmother was not literate. She had come from her ancestral village in order to make a life for herself and her daughter, my mother. She had only one daughter. And therefore, she brought the entire milieu of the village to the city and that is something that she instilled in

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me and my two sisters, her grandchildren. We were not allowed to speak the standardised Khasi which is used in everyday conversation. She insisted that we speak the village dialect till the day she died. which we still use at home, as a mark of respect for her. So I don't speak the standardised Cherrapunjee Khasi which is very very sweet. We speak the village dialect which is very rough.

Which part of Meghalaya is your family from?

We have originally come from Mylliem, which is not very far from the city, but it still has that aura of being isolated and we still have the ceremonial stones and the ancestral property and things like that intact. So, coming back to *Lyric*, we decided that it was time that we provide the opportunity, especially to younger poets. And the first edition of *Lyric* came out as a small pamphlet, which we freely distributed. And we also used occasions and we used venues to the best advantage, by going to these places and distributing. And we also, then, had the energy to have at least readings every month, poetry readings, something which we have not been successfully doing now, in retaining that culture, although we do try. But then, the first break really came when *The Telegraph Colour Magazine* started noticing, started publishing some of our stuff. Many of the Shillong poets first got published in *The Telegraph Colour Magazine*. And then we started getting noticed by Sahitya Akademy and many other institutions.

It has been variously suggested that literature and folklore hold an intimate relationship, while there are also others who claim that literature and folklore are but rival siblings. Apart from being a poet, you are an active folklorist. Do you try to integrate your literary practices and your work in the field of cultural studies? How far is your literary work informed by your experiences as a folklorist and vice-versa?

It's both ways, it's something like DCF, the Direction of Culture Flow. The flow of ideas, the flow of notions and the flow of inspiration work both ways. Most of my poems have derived their inspiration and energy from the work I do as a folklorist. In fact, my first few attempts at trying to recapture the folk imagination was to actually render into poetic forms some of the old folktales and legends. But then, as I got deeper into folklore and after

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we were visiting villages and really getting involved in these villages, almost by sleeping with the experiences in these villages, they became so close to me that I've somehow integrated these experiences in my poetic articulations. Even when I talk about contemporary Shillong, city life, the politics and things like that, I never fail, to perhaps juxtapose those emotions with experiences which I have, or have had in the remote areas. So, you will find that there are very strong elements of the rural in my work.

Until recent times, poetical works from the Northeast were not included in the canon of Anglo-Indian poetry. Would you describe poetry in English from Northeast India as an integral part of Indian Writing in English? What do you see as its similarities and departures from the canonical body of Indian Writing in English?

I don't know whether it's really material to talk about Northeast poetry as a category by itself because poetry is poetry. I mean, the term Northeast is a geopolitical construct. It had served as a very effective tool of colonial administration, at one point of time. It still is useful as a geo-political construct of the Indian state in terms of administration and so on. But this clubbing and promoting this idea, this perception of the Northeast as a homogenous entity is really false. I mean, it's not true. You know, you are from Assam. You know the staggering diversity that we have, but then, all of this is being lumped up, lumped together, and being presented as something which is homogenous. And sadly, this has also happened in literature. It's as if we never had creative energies here, but we've produced many works of literature...in Assam you have seen examples, because you have a history of literacy that dates back to a very ancient period. Similarly, in Manipur and in Tripura. But of course, among the oral societies in the Northeast, literacy has come very recently. But that does not actually deny the fact that we also have had our own creative energies. So, well, Northeastern poetry...or rather the kind of stuff that we are doing....especially in the English language got noticed only in the eighties. And perhaps this has also become complicit with the idea of bringing the region into the mainstream, it's complicit with that project. But the fact that it has happened is good, is well taken by all of us, because once again we are being provided with this opportunity to present ourselves in whatever manner...some say that we are different...but then, this difference also has to be qualified by certain things. The fact that the stuff which is being written here has gained acceptability,

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and in some cases, has gained phenomenal acceptability...you should look at the works of Robin Singh Ngangom and so on, and you find that the acceptance of his work and some others has been quite phenomenal... and this perhaps goes to show that we have new things to talk about, new things to share, we have new things to present. Because again, maybe it also has to do with this perception about the Northeast as a very different entity, socio-culturally...politically also. But I believe that Northeast will still continue to play a very important role, especially in IWE.

The term Northeast India fails to take into account the distinctiveness of the multiplicity of identities within the region, many of which are also in conflict with each other. Literature from Northeast India is a problematic category as well that tends to homogenise the diversity and vitality of the various literary traditions existing in the region. In spite of its rather recent origin and the fact of being connected by a common language, creative works in English from this region cannot escape being marked by this huge diversity of identities and traditions. What, according to you, are the similarities and differences between the literatures in English produced from various regions of Northeast India? Do you see writers from different regions/states bringing in traits of their distinctive cultural backgrounds into their works written in English?

One thing which I, personally, cannot help noticing is the almost symbiotic relationship shared with nature...the evocation of nature is very strong...if you look at Hiren Bhattacharyya's poetry from Assam, or Thangjam Ibopishak Singh from Manipur or Yumlam Tana from Arunachal Pradesh. This almost obsession in portraying nature and relating to metaphors which are connected with the environment is very strong. There's also a poet from Assam who is not, I suppose, as well known as the rest – Prem Narayan Nath – I am a great admirer of his, because I see the stark depiction of nature in his lines, and this being done in very small pithy sentences, which is remarkable, which is very startling, but then it's very similar to the Khasi folk tradition, poetic tradition of the *phawar*, everything is so stark, everything is so naked. But everything is so glaring and it's right there and you can't miss it. And it's done in a very economical manner, something very astounding. I don't know whether he is really...I don't think he is 'tribal', but then he evokes that picture.

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And this, I suppose, has come from the fact that he was born in Raha, he grew up in Raha, lives in Raha, something like that.

The validity and merit of the exercise of canon-formation in literature and other arts has been under the scanner since the middle of the last century. What, according to you, is the significance of canonisation for a work of literature? What can or cannot canonisation do for a work of literature?

I suppose, subconsciously, all of us, we desire some form of recognition. Subconsciously. I don't know if there's a poet who will deny this fact in a very honest and a very truthful manner. But then, it doesn't have to be the end. It's important to be recognised…because when you write you not only chronicle your own self, it's not only that you are talking to yourself, but you are also addressing people. So, I think poetry is the most profound means of communication, and in order to communicate, you have to have people to understand you, to accept you, at some level. If you look at poetry as communication, then recognition is important, in whatever form.

Does this recognition open up new avenues, give the poets more exposure?

Well, I think, good work, good poetry will speak for itself. I've seen some phenomenal poets in my lifetime, but because they refused to, for whatever reason, they refused to continue writing, they simply vanished; they have chosen to do other things. But good poetry…would get the attention it deserves.

Robin Ngangom and Kynpham Nongkynrih have stated that the contemporary poet from the Northeast has to often undertake the risk of acting as witness to the agonising political violence rampant in this region, albeit without sensationalising it. They claim that it is its politically engaged character that distinguishes the poetry written in English from Northeast India vis-à-vis that written by their counterparts in the rest of the country. Do you agree with the view that poetry from Northeast India is overtly political? What, in your opinion, is poetry's role in contemporary times, especially in the context of Northeast India?

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Ah, well, I suppose we have to take this discourse of politics in a very generous manner. Politics is people, and poetry is also about people. So, I don't know what exactly you mean when you say that why is it that it's overtly political and so on, but if issues and well, there are issues that need to be addressed, then if you talk about these issues, certainly we become, you know, you create politics, we become political. But anything that has to do with people, is always political. I mean, not political in the AGP sense, or in the Congress sense, BJP sense, [laughs] but when it involves people, I think …you cannot avoid it.

Auden had expressed his fears that poetry makes nothing happen. What role can poetry can serve in the intense political situation of contemporary Northeast India; what purpose can literature serve?

Ah, I have this belief and conviction that literature provides you that opportunity to be sensitive to things. This is something I religiously believe in. I mean, after having read Marcel Proust, after having read Dostoevsky, can you not become a much more humane person? Can you not become a much more sensitive person? After having read Keats…if you can truly appreciate the work of Tolstoy, then definitely you are ready to become a much more sensitive person. That's my answer. In literature, there's no space for hatred, there's no space for intolerance. Tolstoy has taught us that, Dostoevsky has taught us that, Milton has taught us that, Shakespeare has taught us that.

Do you see any distinctive elements in the poetry from Northeast India in terms of style and technique?

Hm, that's a tough one because…but, yes, from my readings of poetry that I have encountered from Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and so on, the mythic metaphors I have come across, the dramatisation of the mythic metaphors is something which cannot be missed. It's as if you're watching a play that's unfolding before your eyes and the stage is being…this proliferation of mythic images and metaphors and so on. Although they may relate to many current events and so on, but there is still that feeling that you're actually…you feel immersed in this miasma of mythic metaphors, as I said, and it's

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inescapable. It's something which you don't notice in poems that come from other parts or other regions.

Could you tell me about your future plans and projects as a writer?

There's this work which is being planned as a trilingual edition. it will be a book of Khasi, English and French poems. We're working on this project at the moment and it will be published in France and edited by a professor from Sorbonne University. There's also an upcoming anthology which is being compiled by Mark Bender, professor in Chinese and Chair of the Department of East Asian Languages and Literature at Ohio State University. It is a collection featuring poets from North East India, South West China, Myanmar, Tibet and Mongolia. I have written the introduction and I have also helped with the selection of poets from the Northeast.

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Appendix II

A Conversation with Mamang Dai

Could you tell me how your journey as a writer began?

How I started my writing career? (Laughs) I can say it started at so many different points, but I think I was always interested in, you know, poetry, rhymes, literature... taking it back to school days, reading books; I was a great reader. And because we were in school in Shillong, all this was obviously in the English language. I suppose we just absorbed it at the time, all the books we shared in school from romantic novels to comics and crime fiction. I am a great keeper of notes, I like to jot down everything, and with the first publication of *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land*, that's when you became more, I don't know if you say, 'professional writer', but you became, you know, a published author, then you start looking to writing complete stories and not just notes that are hidden away in old notebooks, though the notes are the original reminders of what you felt and set out to write in the first place.

So it was not poems that you published first, but non-fiction?

It was...non-fiction, yes. *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* came out first (2003). But *River Poems*, some of the poems were published in the journals of the Northeast Writers' Forum, *Chandrabhaga*, and in the Sahitya Akademi journal - *Indian Literature*.

That was before Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land?

Yes, that was before.

Was writing in English a conscious choice?

No, but it was the only language one could use, you know, write in, think in, speak. Boarding school in those days was English orientated, you might say, with compulsory

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reading material – geography, literature, language being geared towards English literature, European geography, that kind of thing. So it just became automatic that, you know, you started writing in English, because you were thinking in English.

But, do you think the English language holds special significance in the Northeast given its extreme linguistic heterogeneity and lack of written traditions in most of the languages?

In the Northeast...I think because this was a pocket of missionary schooling, even taking Darjeeling, Sikkim area...and Welsh, Irish Brothers, American Baptists, they were all here, in a very strong presence. And that kind of built up this foundation of English language writers. We have very big names from Arunachal Pradesh, also writing in Asamiya, because, earlier during the time of NEFA days, it was...Asamiya was the medium of instruction. My parents studied in Asamiya (medium) schools, they read and write Asamiya. So, that is there. Another thing is that for most of us our mother tongue is a non-script language. In many of the places I have travelled people have remarked that I had no identifiable accent in spoken English, like one can maybe identify, say for example, a Japanese, Brazilian or Russian accent. I think this is because we didn't study in the mother tongue. We only spoke it when we returned home during school vacations. Fortunately I never lost my mother tongue even though I didn't speak it for many years, and I was in places where nobody would even know about Adi, my mother tongue. It's only now, coming back, that you realise the importance of knowing your mother tongue, because you are understanding things you didn't know about before. It's another phase, another chapter has opened.

My next question is related to something you just mentioned about writers from Arunachal Pradesh who used to write in Asamiya. Many writers from Arunachal Pradesh before you have produced excellent and large bodies of work in the Asamiya language. We have Lummer Dai and Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, who are eminent writers and have produced a large number of books in Asamiya. But the later generations seem to have lost the eagerness to write in Asamiya. Why do you think this has happened?

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Because, it's not there in schools anymore. Asamiya was *lingua franca* once upon a time, even broken Asamiya. Some people really spoke it well, say Mr. Thongchi writes in Asamiya, or my late uncle Mr. Lummer Dai. I think the biggest influence has been satellite TV and Bollywood, you know, so the younger generation is speaking Hindi. Hindi is the preferred language over Asamiya – its Hindi and English. English, because even people writing in the vernacular have said they wish they wrote in English, you know, because you can reach a wider audience. But now I believe it is OK to just continue in the vernacular. What we need will be to translate, because not everybody can just pick up and write in English. And why should they? For me, ok, I write in English. I like the language; I feel perfectly happy in it – in the sense that it's adequate. But that's another matter.

Most of the hill tribes from Northeast India did not have written literatures or well documented histories until recently. It was colonial ethnographers who first recorded the cultures and lives of these people. Most of these colonial accounts employ condescending attitudes while describing the hill tribes. In both ***Legends of Pensam*** *and* ***Black Hill****, I found you trying to counter the colonialist viewpoint in describing the hill people. Both retell historical incidents of colonial expeditions and narrate the untold side of the story. They are sensitive representations of their cultures, customs and beliefs from an insider's point of view. Could you tell us more about the role of writers from the Northeast in contesting previously held prejudiced views about the peoples of the region?*

Definitely. You know, writers, one can say we are not human rights activists, our social responsibility is something else; we cannot change things … something that's already there, through political means. That is another matter. But I think in your writing – after all, writing is about communication and you are trying to illuminate something or give it new life. Never mind that reports of early ethnographers might have been prejudiced. They were strangers in a strange land, let's say. They didn't know everything, sometimes they misunderstood. Maybe the interpreters also played around a little bit, who knows (laughs). I know of funny interpreter cases where they said, "Don't worry. Just nod your heads and say 'yes'" and the sahib would be saying something and the interpreter would say, "Look, look, even his spittle is very learned". And they were making their own internal jokes. So that part people don't know and you can bring it out in stories. Now there is no war, rulers or ruled

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and it's a level playing field. So I think you have to create that space where people can look at each other with fresh eyes. And that is what writers should do, I think. After all human destiny is the same; it is what links us together – all our ups and downs. The insider point of view is important because you are getting primary sources. You're talking to people who still remember what happened. You'll always find that there is someone who remembers, from generation to generation. You think something is forgotten...'Oh, it happened such a long time ago and those people died two hundred years ago....' but there is someone who remembers, who knows some facts which are totally unexpected and have never been recorded. So, all those things can be brought out, not to antagonise or to provoke something all over again, but just because it should be told.

In your works, as in the works of many other writers from the Northeast, there is a constant attempt to weave folk elements into modern literary works. Do you see them, particularly your own writings, as continuations of the folk literary tradition, or do you think the modern writings form a different tradition altogether?

I think it's a different tradition, a different genre we are working with. I also cannot define it. But I often tell my friends and people who are well versed in the oral ballads that are chanted in ritual language, which not many of us can understand anymore...I tell them I think I'm reinventing and who knows, maybe I am making it more poetic and beautiful in my imagination... And they say "It's OK, OK". So we also go through different translations. Our stories were never written...but the stories are fascinating to me. This is my new journey, you know, the return kind of thing. And I am in constant touch with the different people I am writing about, even though they may never read what I have written (laughs). The first book that came out, *The Hidden Land*, I took all the trouble to carry it up to my ancestral village, because there are some pictures of people there, in the *ponung* dances, from the NEFA days that I had used from the archives of the Department of Information and Public Relations. They looked at it...there's no light, they looked at it by torchlight. I said, 'See, see, here is so and so's father; do you remember? Everyone crowded around and then the book was finally placed on the rack above the fireplace, you know, it's black and you can't see anything. But I felt my obligation was done. So that kind of obligation I feel I have to keep and I keep in touch because you are not entitled to just take things and translate left

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and right and throw it out into the world, you know, it has to be...at least the form, if there is a ritual, context and content, that has to be shown also, with some courtesy... That is what I feel. And, um, there was another thing that you were pointing out?

Yes, about whether it's a continuation of the same tradition.

Yes, I find myths...the oral tradition, is like a blueprint. The stories can take any shape. I think that the exciting part of this tradition is that it lends itself to interpretation. You start from there, that's how you get your ideas. You know that at the heart of every narrative there is a myth and a myth is also the source of different narratives. So this aspect of the oral tradition is akin to a journey. I don't know where it will lead. But you try to gather all the stories around you even though you are not using it as the folk story that is chanted or what my grandmother had told me. But it is having a new relevance in my contemporary scenario providing strength or some lesson, and it becomes like a little text in my head.

There have been accusations that many major anthologies of Indian poetry in English produced in the recent past have ignored poets from the Northeast because of the overtly political concerns contained in their poetry. It has also been alleged that works of a few writers like you and Anjum Hasan have been included in these anthologies because they do not address political issues, or at least not as directly as some male poets from the region do. To quote Sumanyu Satpathy, "She often reminds one of many of the bureaucrat-turned poets, who in their pro-establishment security write great poetry of artistic merit, but with a painful lack of social concern...Desmond evokes the same sense of nostalgia but his emotion is more politically charged and historically conscious than Mamang Dai's"[1]. Would you like to respond?

What can I say about that...It's just the way I write, you know. OK, people say "you don't write about politics or insurgency", ... I say it hasn't happened yet, that way, you know. At the moment it's not the reality I'm dealing with. That's all I can say.

Would you like to add anything?

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No not really, I mean he feels like that, it's perfectly all right. It gives me food for thought also.

Perhaps the next question will help you address this question in a way. Most women writers from the Northeast are often seen to display a certain restraint while addressing political issues. Do you think women have a different understanding of socio-political issues? Do you believe women writers from Northeast India have the ability to critique excesses of nationalist and identity politics?

Oh, I am sure they have the ability. There are women who speak out about political issues like Patricia Mukhim and Jarjum Ete; and more women who are actively engaged in politics. Once upon a time I was quite immersed in state politics and was closely following the insurgency problem. We were very involved during particular government period. So maybe that's why it doesn't come out in my poetry, because poetry... I don't want to write about insurgency and bloodshed because I haven't actually lived in the insurgency affected areas. It was policy issues we were dealing with. And we were very vocal and really trying to push things through. Maybe it fell back; we haven't been able to resolve the militancy or even cases of corruption and things like that. But poetry writing...I think most of it is more based on...at least the idea of making connections, you know. I don't know how I'd put it...of creating a space for more understanding and hope, not just...to...kind of claim something with our grievances all the time, but claim that it can be done in another way.

It's not like you do not talk about politics at all in your poems. I have come across several poems by you, for example, this one poem in Midsummer Survival Lyrics, where you are talking about the elections in Arunachal, in the Pasighat area in particular. So there you are very directly talking about the political situation, about the corruption involved in election processes.

Well, it comes through the characters, you know, let them speak. I know politicians, so you can create political characters. But even (in) *Stupid Cupid*, there is a couple from Tirap who come to Delhi and help me. They (the young wife) speak out about insurgency in the district. So there's quite a lot of that. As a journalist also we covered quite a lot of

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stories on the situation in Tirap-Changlang, about how hushed it has become, it's become so quiet...because everyone has submitted. It is a sign of total surrender. So those sorts of things we were trying to fight against.

You have an article "Arunachal Pradesh-The Insurgency Scene" about the political situation in Arunachal Pradesh.

I was writing for a journal of the Institute of Conflict Resolutions (now Conflict Management & *The South Asia Intelligence Review*) of the South Asia Terrorism Portal published by late K.P.S Gill and edited by Dr. Ajai Sahni.

Do you have an article there?

Yes, I had a paper there. Arunachal was touted as 'the island of peace' in the Northeast and the article was to break 'The Myth of Tranquillity'. In fact we broke the untold story of the spill-over insurgency from Nagaland and how things were shaping up in Tirap-Changlang. And these were first-hand stories. People were saying it was the first time they were hearing about it. This was also expressed during a peace conference in Guwahati when I spoke about the terms of the ceasefire agreement between the Centre and the militant groups and how the cadres were not observing the terms of the cease-fire. Instead they were moving into camps in Arunachal, and they were armed. The government – bureaucrats, engineers, officers, everyone was paying up to an extortion racket. In fact a 'tax' is cut directly at source from government salaries. At one point it was funny, they were trying to give salary in coins in lieu of notes, so that extortion...you couldn't carry it away. Now insurgency related reports seem to be less. Nobody is talking much about it anymore, like it's become part of the scenario.

There's a general view that women of the Northeast enjoy greater social status and mobility compared to the women in the rest of the country. Can you shed some light on the status of women in Arunachal Pradesh?

Status...actually, I think Arunachal...if I can cite as an example the turmoil in Nagaland over the reservation for women in urban local bodies...and the Facebook posts of

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friends about it, I think in Arunachal men have been quite amenable to change in the urban centers. Women do a lot of business...most of the entrepreneurs, all new businesses have been initiated by women, sometimes run by the wives of politicians, but also by talented women with the business acumen to invest in the new wealth around. In Arunachal we have had women in parliament and as legislators and cabinet ministers. In the rural areas there is still quite a happy balance between men and women. Yes, there are tough customary practices upheld by patriachal laws like child marriage, and there used to be a practice of putting a heavy piece of wood around a woman's legs...you know, like leg irons, so that she couldn't leave her husband or run away if she was unhappy, or if he had taken many more wives. But now men also are saying that should not be done anymore. There are legal aid organisations, youth forums and womens' groups fighting against social evils, so at least there is an attempt to put things into place, so that women can go there if they need advice or counsel, which is an important thing, because often the parents don't like to take a daughter back if her husband has left her, or if it's a bad marriage.

Because I was thinking, both Lummer Dai and Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi address questions of certain cultural practices which are unjust towards women, which used to be prevalent among some of the tribes. Even you have a chapter in ***The Legends of Pensam****, "Daughters of the Village", which addresses such issues. So, I was thinking in these lines, whether all traditional customs are really as egalitarian in terms of gender, as they are projected to be.*

Not all. I think in the villages and even in the cities, and not only in Arunachal, Nagaland, or Assam, but everywhere people have their problems. You can say this is a woman's problem...if she's deserted, widowed, or she's not economically independent, and she cannot inherit property, that kind of thing. But as such discrimination against a woman and infant foeticide because of gender is not there in Arunachal. Most parents want to put their daughters to school, even in the rural areas. Today everyone admits that girls do better in studies, given the opportunity; and women are standing up to challenge traditional laws. Of course earlier, (in) agricultural societies you needed many hands in the field and daughters were expected to stay at home and help. But sons were also pressed into work in the fields; no one imagined going to school or leaving the community. But customary laws vary from tribe to tribe.

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Most writers of the Northeast seen to weave in elements from their folklore in their literary works. This feature is found in your works as well. But much of the folk literature is available in the oral form and they are meant to be performed. How have you dealt with this performative aspect of folk literature while integrating it with modern written works?

In *Legends of Pensam* there is a sequence: "travel the road", that was written like a performance, you know, where they are singing and then you see, oh now he's climbed the hill...and then the villagers are meeting...that's the village of Komsing. So, I imagined that as a performance. And that was the only way to put it into the book. Of course my editor was saying, "What is this, you can't make it like this..." but I felt it had to be that way...the man is running, running to bring news, and there is chanting and the sound of hands clapping, and that is like a *ponung* dance. That is what is happening. So I wanted to tell it like that. And that stone, which the people carried up later, the memorial stone to mark the grave of the British officer, it got stolen the other day, you know.

Stolen!

Yes! (laughs) I said, "Who stole it?" They said "Eh! Someone must have thrown it into the river". I mean, you know, our people...the villagers with their quirky sense of humour. I said, "Why, but that was, you know, a part of our history!" They said, "We don't know who took it and when". Because when I saw it, it looked well kept in a beautiful spot, with orange trees and a little litter of leaves, you know. I don't know, someone just picked it up and threw it away. Maybe someone got angry, suddenly after all these years... 'Why should we have this grave here!" I don't know.

Given the current propensity among contemporary writers to emulate folk literary forms, why is there not enough enthusiasm to produce works in performative genres, such as plays?

Oh yes, it would be great to do a play. I keep talking about it with documentary film maker, Moji Riba, you must have heard of him. He's very well known. Once we discussed *Legends of Pensam*. I said, I don't know, how will you put it in a play? But one could think about that, you know. And I think people are trying now, but it's also gone the other way, because today there are musicians doing the traditonal shaman chanting but with fusion

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music. It's become very popular. I believe there was a performance during the Brahmaputra Literary Festival. So, I suppose it'll happen, a lot of things will come. But for performance...folk tradition, actually it can be written, because we have particular shamans who can recite...during festivals, he's a particular type of shaman. Another one will do the actual ritual, stories of creation, the birth of man. Others are the healers (type), and there are those who call the spirits and can call back the soul when it leaves the body. So there are different categories of shamans. I haven't done exact translations. I was thinking, I should get down to that. But bits and pieces are coming out, like little clues, you know. I'm not a research scholar, but I want to leave little clues, mainly because of the beauty of it, the beauty of this form of literature. So that creeps into my work, I think.

How great do you think is the role of a woman writer in contemporary times, in addressing the conditions of women and the society in general?

I think, well, I was just about to say, "Oh! It's very great..." But you have to think about it, because I know...writers, journalists, film people, or anyone who goes out, gets noticed for one reason or another, can become quite iconic to young people. So, there you have that little bit of social responsibility. When I wrote *Pensam*, I was quite happy writing it and doing it, then Penguin was publishing it. OK, we had a book launch in Delhi. Mark Tully had released it and people saw it in the papers you know. They were quite annoyed with me. They said, "It should have been released in Pasighat, we are the people of Pensam!" I said, "OK, it's coming. We're going to do a release in Itanagar also". But I had not anticipated that kind of response, you know. I thought nobody would be interested. In Itanagar I thought - I'll just put it out like this and send out invitation cards, let's see what happens. So we had a release here and everyone turned up and they were really happy that 'pensam', the Adi word, was in print. So, then I thought, OK, these are the people I'm writing about, and you have to, you are really a bit obliged, you know, that kind of thing. So I think women can play a great role, like Temsula Ao, and they are very iconic figures. Easterine Kire is bringing out such a lot about Naga women, and Naga men...but I think for us, even the men should be included, you know, it's not just about women only. Tribal men...young men in our remote villages, they're also in need of help and attention. I feel. So, that is our role, I think, to create space for discourse and representation for everyone.

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Notes

[1] (Satpathy, "Locating")

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