

Insurgency, Peace and Quest for Identity: A Study of Contemporary Writing in English from India's Northeast

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A splendid archive of some rare species of flora and fauna, multi-ethnic people with their varied tradition and culture, and of a rich biodiversity, the Northeast India comprises eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. This region, with its hills, rivers, valleys, people, myths, legends, rites and rituals is blessed with a unique ecology.

Poetry in English from Northeast as a discourse of self-expression took shape casually in the eighties and nineties of the last century. The writers, especially the poets, writing in English from this region at present are the first generation of writers. They have attained a legitimized as well as a powerful voice by articulating their senses and sentiments and by focusing on some core issues of the region.

Identity crisis, a sense of alienation are some of the dominant features of contemporary politics in the Northeast. Racial autonomy, cultural and linguistic conflicts, the problem of insurgency have been ravaging the region. All these find artistic expression in the works of the writers writing in English from this region. There is a conscious urge, in their works, of going back to their roots and it is used as a means of asserting an identity of their own.

More than half a century of bloodshed has marked the history of the Naga people. Their struggle for an independent Nagaland and their continuing search for identity provide the backdrop of quite a number of literary works in English from this state. Dr. Temsula Ao, a novelist, short-story writer, poetess, and a professor in English is one of the representative contemporary Naga writers. Her short story collection *These Hills Called Home* is the saga of the ordinary people in an atmosphere of violence and bloodshed. Here she talks about children, old men and women, housewives, militants, and a young woman who is raped, the nasty side of the so-called counter - insurgency operations that are going on in Northeast India. Dr. Ao believes that in such a war zone "There are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms." (ibidem X). Monalisa Changkija, another notable poetess from that state seems to be confused of the so called progress and development of her land as repeatedly shouted by a number of agencies while the basic amenities of the common people are not fulfilled. The following lines from her poem "Of People Unanswered" has a hint of the agony of the people of Northeast India in general:

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You tell me we are advancing rapidly / into the 21st century / and never fail to mention that you brought / progress to our tribes. But I wonder why you remain silent / when I say we are hungry. (Changkija 2003)

Monalisa is very much critical of the militant also who wants to dictate terms at gun point:

Don't waste your time laying down dictats/and guidelines/on how to conduct my life/on matters personal and political/you may not know/for you do not know/beyond the AK-47. (Changkija 2003)

Here is the voice of the peace-loving common people who want an end to the gun culture in the name of an armed revolution, a revolution which has somehow got re-written into one of disappointment and disillusionment as it has seemed to become the very thing it sought to overcome.

Assam also has been experiencing an atmosphere of terror, violence and insurgency for the last three decades. Literature in English from Assam has multi-faceted reflection of these issues. Mitra Phukan's novel *"A Collector's Wife"* is a touching story of all these turbulent years in Assam's history. She speaks of the students' agitation of 1970's and 1980's and the gradual development towards a full blown insurgency. She also speaks of the threat and the sense of insecurity among the local people posed by the illegal migration from across the border, one of the major issues in Assam's contemporary politics.

Sanjoy Hazarika, the journalist associated with quite a number of reputed international newspapers, delves deep into the problem of insurgency in Northeast India in his book *"Strangers of the Mist"*. He looks into the problem from the historical perspective, analyzes its causes and forwards his views. The objectivity of his study of the problem unfolds some issues which have been left in the dark. Apart from being a geographical entity, the Northeast has also an entity in the psychological level. It remains in the mindset. A not-so-friendly attitude from the central Government, right from the partition of India, has aggravated this 'othering' of the region. This has been largely responsible in creating a sense of insecurity and alienation among the people of Northeast from the 'mainstream' which has added fuel to the fire of insurgency in the land. Hazarika's book is a story of neglect, apathy, subversiveness and the social inequilibrium. Mr. Hazarika thought provokingly opines: "..... ULFA appears to be fading away although the core issues behind its growth remains unresolved. Since these factors remain untouched, a revival of the cycle of militancy cannot be ruled out" (Hazarika 1994: 236). This comment bears significance especially at this point in time when talks with ULFA is the buzzing word in every corner.

An urge of going back to the roots is seen in the works of the writers in English from Arunachal Pradesh. Mamang Dai, who resigned her position as an IAS officer to become a full time journalist is a writer and a poetess of national repute. She deals elaborately with nature in her poetry. Her poetry reveals life in Arunachal Pradesh, its natural beauty, tradition and culture of different tribes and so on. She believes that their rich heritage and maintenance of that can save the tribal communities from the humdrum of modernization and urbanization under the burden of which their age-old faith and identity seem to be gradually fading away. Yumlam Tana, another poet from Arunachal Pradesh also voices such sentiments in his poetry. A search for identity is one of his dominant themes.

Robin S. Ngangon, R.K. Madhubir, R.K. Bhuhonsana are some of the leading poets of Manipur, who, with a powerful poetic voice, have made their presence felt in the scenario of Indian poetry in English. A quest for identity, exploring through the tradition of his native community, is a dominant feature of Robin's poetry. The myths and legends of Manipur, Mizoram and

Meghalaya are some of his recurring themes. He is haunted by the ugly face of insurgency and wants those good old days of peace and tranquility come back. He says in his anthology of poems *"Words and the Silence"*:

*I hear a wicked war is now waged / on our soil and gory bodies / dragged
unceremoniously / through our rice-fields. The newly rich are ruling our homes. I hear that freedom
comes there, only/if escorted by armed men. (Ngangom 1998:10-11)*

Ratan Thiyam of Manipur, who is one of Asia's most composite theatre personalities and formerly Director of the National School of Drama, re-invents in his plays, the Manipuri tradition, culture, folklore and music by bestowing upon them a contemporary meaning. In his dramatic treatment these become the metaphor of the life in turmoil of the present world in general and in his homeland Manipur in particular. He asserts his identity as a Manipuri, as an Indian and at the same time, as a citizen of the world. In one of his interviews with Kavita Nagpal and Geeti Sen, he says that even sitting in Manipur he thinks about Indo-Pak relationship, about the Gaza Strip, about Israel, Palestine, Afghanistan or about a bomb blast in Bali. This attitude reiterates the fact that sticking to one's native tradition does not deter him/her from being a citizen of the world.

Speaking on the importance of tradition, Thiyam says in that interview, *"it is by the use of tradition that you try to drive away the evil factors."* (Sen: 230).

The poets and writers from Meghalaya also have been dealing with the myths, legends, folklores and rich tradition of their land in their works. In the works of the writers like D.L. Kharmawphalang, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Dr. Ananya S. Guha, Anjum Hasan and Paul Lyngdoh the natural beauty of Meghalaya is explored to the deepest extent. Significantly, there has been a conscious use of the ecology of their land as a means of asserting an identity. Therefore, they believe that the ecological degradation by deforestation or uranium mining, which is being done in Meghalaya, is a threat not only to the environment alone but also to their very identity. How nature is exploited for some futile purposes can be marked in the following lines by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih on the occasion of the then Prime Minister of India I.K. Gujral's visit to Meghalaya. The underlying note of irony may also be an interpretation of the psyche of the Northeast:

*When Prime Minister Gujral/planned a visit to the city / bamboos sprang
up from pavements / like a welcoming committee
Only the bamboos watched in silence/too used to the antics of men.
(Sen 2003 : 159)*

The desire of going back to the roots is also common in the works of the writers like Mona Zote and H. Ramdinthari of Mizoram, Rajendra Bhandari of Sikkim and Bhaskar Roy Barman, Sefali Debbarma, Niranjana Chakma etc. of Tripura. All of them explore through their tradition and culture, and their works of art employ their rich tradition as a means of attaining a self-identity. Bhaskar Roy Barman speaks of his beautiful native land Tripura and also about the local tribal people who have been driven out by the refugees of Bangladesh. Niranjana Chakma is hopeful that someday the local people would arise and would demand their rights with a united voice:

*But, someday / Their unspoken words / will be uttered boldly / when all their voices / will simultaneously
turn / into an overwhelming rage / against their enemies. (Sen 2003: 2004)*

This can also be seen as a collective voice of the people of the Northeast who have been experiencing, from the time of Partition itself, a sense of exploitation, neglect and alienation, who have a feeling, and which has been gradually growing deeper and deeper, that the 'centre is too far from the 'periphery'.

In an interview with Sanjoy Hazarika and Geeti Sen, Indira Goswami, the Jnanpeth Award winner litterateur from Assam, popularly known as Mamoni Raichom Goswami, while speaking of

the reasons why the people of this part of India feel neglected, refers to the bias ever in writing history:

In (NCERT) books prescribed for history. I have grown up reading about the Richard the Lion Heart, the Vijaynagar Kingdom, the Kalinga War, the French Revolution, the downfall of the Mughal Empire. All on British history and Indian history — but there is nothing about Assam or the 600- year- old Ahom rule, the same dynasty ruling a huge state for 600 years. Even a major uprising like the revolution of common people against the Ahom monarchy where, it is said, one lakh people died in the “Moamoria Revolution” is not mentioned. ‘.’ (Sen : 295.)

The same can be said also about U. Tirot Sing, the Khasi martyr who fought against the British aggressors for the freedom of his native land and died for that cause. But he also fails to find a place in “Indian” History. Apart from apathy in the political level all these have contributed in increasing the gap between the centre and the margin. Interestingly, in some of the literary works, insurgency is seen as an answer to all these apathy and depravation. Nongthombam Kunjamohan Singh’s *“Ine Leipaklei”* is the interesting tale of the transformation of a simple, meek lady into a rebel conditioned by the forces in an unequal society. (Zama: 2004).

For decades, the Northeast have been experiencing violence in its ugliest form. Bombings, kidnappings, extortion, insurgency and counter-insurgency operations have become a regular part of news from this region. But the common people of the land, irrespective of caste, creed and community want an end to all these. They want peace coming back to this beautiful land. This craving for peace also has a reflection in the literature of this part.

But what kind of peace people of this part want? This issue definitely bears significance. As Sanjay Hazarika puts it, “peace with honour, peace with justice, peace with dignity.” (Sen-294-95). Peace apparently means absence of war. But war always does not necessarily mean fighting with arms. It can also be in the mental as well as in the psychological level. A person from Nagaland or Mizoram, while checking into a hotel in Delhi is asked to show his/her passport at the reception counter because of the physical features **S/he** shares with the people of China, Japan or Thailand. The experiences of the students from ‘Northeast India, studying in Delhi or Mumbai are, most of the times humiliating. The girls are often referred to as ‘Chinki’ because of the shape of their eyes and the high cheek bones, and the boys as ‘Chapta’ because of their flat nose. A Naga student resided in Pune once commented that he became “half Naga and half Indian” after coming to Pune, while he was “a complete Indian” before. (Baruah 2006: 169). Another student: from Manipur said about his experiences in Mumbai that he was treated as a foreigner” and when he told that he was from Manipur, people asked where this place was and whether it was really in India. In order to avoid those kind of embarrassing situations he started saying that he was from Thailand, because “it was more convenient” (Baruah 2006:169).

Are these not wars? Definitely yes! These are also brutal, nasty, ugly wars that left a scar in the mind or in the psyche. The people of this part of the country unusually find themselves in situation where they have to confront with such wars in their day--to-day affairs with the mainland. While talking about peace in Northeast India, apart from bringing an end to the insurgency and counter - insurgency operations, these wars must also be kept in mind. In a meeting in Mumbai, a minister of Arunachal Pradesh said with all his agony and pain, that in a vast country like India a few Indian people may even look Chinese, Japanese or Thais and the rest of the people should accept this fact. He invited people from other parts of India to Arunachal Pradesh to see how they would be greeted with ‘Jai Hind’ **by** the local people of this northeastern state bordering China. (iBaruah 2006:175).

The minister here is voicing the sentiment of the people of Northeast in general. They are as much Indian as any other Indian and they are not in an enemy territory conspiring against the Indian state. The sooner the Indian state realizes this, the better for the entire nation. Contemporary writing in English from India’s Northeast is also a celebration of this spirit.

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