

Emerging Literature from North-East India

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The Northeast is often perceived as a homogenous entity but the fact is that it is as diverse as the rest of mainland India be it in terms of culture, tradition, religion, language or history. This diversity is further compounded by the fact that within the region of each of the seven states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, there exists further distinct ethnic groups with their own indigenous lore, dialect, music, cuisine, dress and so on. Many of the smaller groups have overlapped and merged with the passing of time in terms of language and culture while some, of late, have found the need to revive and revitalize their own identities once again, giving rise to numerous political and social turmoil.

An attempt to study the literature of the Northeast reveals the existence of two literary influences which are not necessarily in conflict with one another. One is the influence of what we may call mainstream Indian Literature with which Assam, Manipur and Tripura are associated, though this in no way denotes the absence of local cultural identities reflected in their writings. These are the regions that have had a long history of the influence of Hinduism which got ingrained into the lifestyle, ethos and literature of the people. Assamese and Meitei (Manipur) along with Bodo are the only three languages from the Northeast so far, to have been included in the 8th Schedule of Languages, and therefore have a longer history of literary tradition.¹ The second stems out of what may be called the tribal-Christian literary influence, except perhaps for Arunachal Pradesh whose emerging literature that will be referred to here, does not contain a marked Christian influence like the rest. The literature that this paper will focus on are those that are emerging from this latter influence.

Among the Christian tribals of the Northeast such as the Mizo, Khasis and Nagas to name a few, the tribal past got acculturated with a Christian present. The textualization of their culture through the translation of

the Bible and the ethnographic / anthropological writings of the British about them, served to delink the tribal communities from their existing oratures and oral traditions for a period of time. In terms of literary forms and allusions, the early writings of the tribal communities after gaining literacy, became highly derivative of, and heavily influenced by the Bible, wherein the moral element predominated. Previously unknown concepts such as sin, repentance, forgiveness and salvation as preached by the missionaries, got entrenched into their psyche. Thus, the two external forces of British colonization and the entry of Christianity into the region which took place in different stages throughout the nineteenth century, created and gave an identity to the people of the region that was to have far-reaching consequences.

The gift of literacy and consequent education that the tribals received from the Christian missionaries² was a boon to the extent where it opened a new chapter in their lives, preparing and equipping them for modernization. The unfortunate aspect of it was that this process often ignored and rejected indigenous ethical values, cultural traits and arts of the tribal people. This new world-view thus impacted their lives negatively for more often than not, it eroded their self-confidence and instilled a feeling of inadequacy and inferiority in them by labelling the ancient traditional practices, rites and rituals inherited from their forbears, as primitive and heathen. An example was the prohibition of locally brewed rice-beer as an evil and sinful practice even though it was an integral part of tribal rituals, festival and functions. The image of the primitive and backward tribal generated by the colonial masters through their administrative records and anthropological writings, has stuck ever since. The dispossession of the indigenous identity of the tribals of the region and the imposition of an alien one was initiated by the colonisers, and done so with condescending patronage and 'Christian' benevolence, but the new rulers

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of independent India invented another new identity legitimized under a political-administrative construct by categorizing them in the new constitution as 'Scheduled Tribes'.

This issue of tribal identity requires a brief overview as it impacts the contemporary emerging literature of the region in a significant way. Prior to colonization, the tribal communities appear to have functioned well enough based on a sustainable traditional knowledge system, each with their own administrative set-up either along the lines of chieftainships or village councils. Except for the very remote interiors of the hilly regions, there was movement and interaction of people in trade and commerce, particularly in the regions inhabited by the Khasis and Garos, parts of the Naga Hills nearer to the plains, and of course, Tripura and the Assam Valley. This interaction extended to the Bengal regions as well. The use of Bengali script by the Garos and Khasis prior to their conversion to Christianity, may be cited as an example of the fluidity of inter communal, inter-regional exchange. All this however changed once the British annexed Assam and introduced certain policies such as the Inner Line Regulation of 1873 and declaration of most of the hill areas as "Excluded Areas" under the provision of the Government of India Act of 1935. Such measures though considered 'protectionist' by some, in reality served to cut off the tribal communities from the political and social developments taking place in the rest of the country, thus isolating them while at the same time creating for them an identity other than the one they had always known. Each community with the passing of time thus formulated a certain degree of rigidity in demarcations of their regions and identities, also accentuating the differences between the tribal and non-tribal or 'outsider'. But the post-Independence scenario took the opposite direction by way of introducing policies of development and integration with a view to bringing in social change and modernization of the various tribal groups. But this, as history has shown, brought along with it various attendant complications, chief amongst which was the fear of socio-economic assimilation of a more dominant culture, a concept that is often perceived as a necessary evil of integration and therefore difficult to accept by a minority group. This fear has fed and continues to feed the upsurge of regional identities along social and ethnic lines, causing havoc to the peace and unity of the region till date.

In order to highlight some of the features dealt with in connection with the emerging literature of the tribal-Christian literary tradition of the Northeast, the paper deals with a mixed group of writers selected from the different states, some of whom write in English while

others in their own regional languages. What immediately strikes one on examining the existing literary corpus is the rich and varied output of poetry³ which is at times beautiful and romantic, abstract and intellectual, but which most of the time, is rebellious and angry, cynical and anguished. Carving out a niche for themselves, the scope of Northeast poets include myth, landscape and nature, the tribal folklore and of course, the modern predicament of their people. Sumanyu Satpathy⁴ makes a strong case of the critical neglect that the poets of the Northeast suffer: "Speaking of 'Indian Poetry', one is confronted by the vexed question of what is 'Indian' about it. But, by not bringing into its fold much poetry of value that is being written and published by the diverse ethnic groups in India's north-east serves merely to further estrange the people of the region." He goes on to state that for him "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." That the people of the region have long felt their perceived marginalization, political neglect and exploitation at the hands of the Indian State is no secret and many poems of the region reflect this.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, a well-known Khasi poet and nativist, is a strong advocate of his race, religion and ethnic identity. He engages Khasi folk tradition and lore for purposes of reviving and harking back to his own roots. His is a voice that blatantly articulates identity politics such as those seen in the lines below

— 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. (Only Strange Flowers have
come to Bloom).

One of Meghalaya's noted poets Desmond Kharmawphlang makes no effort to hide the guilt he feels towards the neglect of his tribal roots and he too strives to reconnect through the use of folk traditions in his poetry. In "Letter from Pahambir", he responds to the village chief's query of his reasons for visiting the remote village, thus:

"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."

—
 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.

Some of Desmond's poems are self-critical, ironic and introspective, and reflect the ambivalence that he felt towards his own privileged educational background :

My burdensome English learning
 Assails me, and the tomb it has become
 Laughs and cackles without end

—
 Hiding under the dark cloaks of
 My alien patrons, I was taught to be ashamed
 Of my own.⁵ (The Conquest)

This kind of veiled ironic strain directed towards the fruits of religious conversion is often visible in the poetry of the young poet from Mizoram, Mona Zote:

When out of the honeycomb of right
 Church drums busily advertise
 The high percentage of faith (Lilyum)

One can in a way say that Mona Zote's poems make a departure from the other poems of the Northeast. There is a daring and a touch of youthful recklessness in the liberties she takes with her poetic experiments, so much so that her well crafted poems laden with dry wit and irony, often overshadow the thematic content and endanger them with obscurity. The ironic and cynical tone often can be a depressing thing to find in one so young – but then, this is the price she pays for taking on what she perceives to be the hypocrisies of her society. A brief look at one of her more recent poems "Anti-Love poem" may suffice to illustrate her peculiar unique approach. The poet calls it "prose poem, a reaction to traditional love poems"⁶ but it can best be described as poetry of subversion, nonsensical to an extent wherein the lines themselves do not convey a complete meaning but instead convey it outside or beyond the poem, "almost a defensive mode" as the poet puts it, when asked to clarify. She goes on to state that the poem contains a dead-pan humour so should be read in the same spirit for the appropriate effect. A sample verse runs thus :

It is not a poem for the boys lying in the shade of the fig tree,
 bronze objects provocative in their naked idleness; though a
 smile passed between us like an iron flower and they must
 have returned home with blood and leaves on their chests.

Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh has been instrumental in bringing recognition to, and expanding the readership for emerging literatures of the northeast through the exposure that she has received both at home and abroad. Her poetry is said to have an old world quality, romantic and lyrical in essence that abounds in evocative nature imagery. The pantheistic nature of her poems are but natural being a practitioner of Doni-Polo, a traditional belief of the Adi tribe to which she belongs, which upholds the union of life in rocks, rivers, hills, trees and all life which is held sacred. According to Mamang Dai, Doni-Polo (Sun and Moon) are the "physical manifestation of a supreme diety, or what I would interpret as 'world spirit'."⁷ In "Small towns and the River" she says

The river has a soul,
 it knows the immortality of water
 then again in "Sky Song" she writes
 The evening is
 the greatest medicine maker
 testing the symptoms
 of breath and demise,
 without appointment
 writing prescriptions
 In the changing script
 of a cloud's wishbone rib,
 in the expanding body of the sky.

There are some who feel that though she writes great poetry of artistic merit, there is "a painful lack of social concern"⁸ as she steadfastly eschews expressing any political concerns in her poetry. But she has her own reasons for doing so. She says, "When I write I cannot convey images of guns, bloodshed and bullet wounds. Instead I write about the stillness of the land, the changing landscape due to war and the strife—I never use local terms, names, places though sometimes I feel I should but I want my writing to be for everyone. Writing is a technique in concealment. The art of writing changes everything. It functions at two levels – you write about reality but it takes on another colour."⁹

The Legends of Pensam published by Penguin in 2006 brought additional fame to Mamang Dai, this time as a narrator of tales, weaving myths and oral histories of the Adi tribe into a continuous whole while at the same time giving it a contemporary interpretation in the use of a complex narrative form reminiscent of magic-realism. *Pensam* denotes the "in-between" world where anything is possible. Because the Adis believe in co-existence with the spirits of the natural world, their stories are based on a world that is surreal in a way, half-revealed and half-

concealed from the eyes of man. Thus Pensam reaches beyond the confines of realism. There are sudden shifts in the narrative and plot yet the unity of the whole is not lost for the legends contain loosely structured layered narratives built round a family of Adis across several generations. The legends do not romanticise, for they tell of survival in a harsh and demanding terrain, of nature's cruelty and unpredictability, of sinister mystery in the unexplained death of Kalen in the deep forests and inexplicable violence in Kamu's strange fit of "black moments" wherein he hacks his baby daughter. The mythical stories retain a contemporary social relevance in the underlying conflict between tribalism and intrusive modernity, where for instance, a remote hamlet gets a road but the new world that comes with it means upheaval of the old ways. The clever device of linking the tales with the present by the presence of a city-dweller enables the reader to be observer of a strange and alien world, but at the same time a participant who is subjective and accepting of its world.

Mamang's own views best explain the *Legends of Pensam*¹⁰ – "Pensam grew out of travel notes and stories I heard in villages. Much of our history has been written for us so in a way this became a recovery of sorts, of pieces of our history and life in the hills viewed from the inside, by us... About narrative technique – I am always battling with the linear approach. For the same reason I am happiest, or more inspired writing in a weaving past and present motion. Maybe its to do with images. An image becomes fixed and I have to write around / through / round it, there is no other way—This may result in obscurity, blending myth and fiction and engaging in conversation with hills and rivers and spirits—my publishers say 'you have to explain to the reader' but I don't think so. I just want to write and hopefully leave a few clues, lest we forget, about our myths, old belief, etc, that some reader may like to trace and expand and reinterpret all over again at some time."

Literatures that emanate from conflict zones have been around for awhile now. Though given various labels, this category of literature nonetheless conveys the collective anger, suffering and terror of both writer and victim. The heartburn caused by violence, exploitation and abuse are universally shared spaces the world over, and it comes as no surprise that writings from conflict zones is already an established sub-genre in the emerging literature of the Northeast. Kali Tal in her book *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996)¹¹ dwells on what according to her are three distinct traumatic events, the Holocaust, Vietnam War, and sexual abuse of women and children, while Barbara Harlow in her work *Resistance Literature*¹² states her proposal in the preface

as "to investigate a particular category of literature that emerged significantly as part of the organized national liberation struggles and resistance movements in Africa, Latin America and Middle East which may be called resistance literature." Closer home, Tariq Ali had referred to the literature of 'real conflict'¹³ while Robin S. Ngangom, himself a prominent poet from the Northeast, and an exponent of this sub-genre, calls it 'poetry in a time of terror.'¹⁴

Though the debate remains as to whether writers are the conscience keepers of a nation or not, the writer from the Northeast appears to have no choice. The compulsion to respond to the regional challenges of insurgency, state-sponsored terrorism, ethnic cleansing and corruption, is much too strong for most to resist. On this issue, Arundhati Subramaniam writes of Robin Ngangom's poetry "—Ngangom addresses these issues with fierce passion and moral outrage. It is clear that he sees the role of a poet in this ongoing 'reign of terror' as that of witness, chronicler and collective conscience."¹⁵ Referring to some firebrand poets of the Northeast, Rajlakshmi Bhattachayya writes, "They chose to be a chronicler of their social reality and write the poetry of guns and insurgency—they wage a silent protest through the might of their pens. Caught at the crossroads of conflicts – both ethnic and militant – they are the key witnesses of a turbulent history."¹⁶ Barbara Harlow's definition of 'resistance poetry' might well serve to best describe the poetry of the northeast being dealt with here – "Poetry is capable not only of serving as a means for the expression of personal identity or even nationalist sentiment. Poetry, as a part of the cultural institutions and historical existence of a people, is itself an arena of struggle."¹⁷

Robin Ngangom, a Manipuri by birth but settled in Shillong, admits that his poetry has undergone "a change of heart" and should anyone ask him why his poems no longer speak of "breathtaking landscapes, its sinuous dances, its dark-maned women, I can only offer Neruda's answer : Come and see the blood in the streets!"¹⁸ His poetry repeatedly harks to the suffering and atrocities committed by both militants and the army, in his home state. With cutting irony he states in "Homeland I left"

I hear freedom comes there, only
if escorted by armed men

while the dilemma and ambivalence felt is expressed with searing honesty in lines like these from "A Libran Horoscope"

Childhood took place

before your friend worshipped a gun
to become a widowmaker

But his strongest indictment against the cruel “butchers” of women and children is perhaps seen in his poem “Native Land”. Yet it is the tragic loss of his own “tenuous humanity” that strikes a cord in the reader even more, for despite the horrors of radio and newspaper reports, he admits he eventually ceased to think and to care,

I continued to live
as if nothing happened.

Though unspoken, the poet cannot forget, nor forgive himself and therefore internalizes the painful guilt.

That circumstances indeed create a different world is undeniable. Says Nangom of this, “The writer from North East India, consequently 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 a gun does not permit him to indulge in verbal wizardry or woolly aesthetics, but is a constant reminder that he must perforce master the art of witness.”¹⁹ Speaking about the poetry of his counterparts in Manipur and their absorption with ‘the poetry of survival’ and the images of blood and bullets that predominate, he calls attention to the criticism that Manipuri poetry is hemmed in by extreme realism, and admits that there is “a danger of the images—becoming hackneyed,” hence they should strive for a balance between realism and reflection.²⁰

Turning our attention to Nagaland, the voices that predominate are of women poets like Nini Lungalang, Monalisa Changkija and Esterine Iralu. Using the backdrop of Naga myths and legends, they bemoan the passing of the old and the ushering in of the new, the sad fate of a tribal society in transition. Under the category of poems dealing with ‘worlds of hurt’ and trauma, and of the ‘poetry of protest,’ the power of Esterine Iralu’s writing starkly stands out. She candidly admits, “I cannot tell the story of Nagaland and the conflict that has been her lot, in prose. For 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. Therefore, I shall use poems to tell the Naga story.”²¹ In “Kelhoukevira” written in 1982, she writes

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.

The on-off ceasefire between India and Nagaland does not denote the cessation of killing. Factionalism and infighting among rival groups of the Naga army continue to claim many lives today. So it is with a hard and numbed cynical tone that she writes of the brutal gunning down of a member of a rival group, whose killers justify their act in a perverted twist of the Christian faith :

Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition
I’ve got him in my sights
There’s a kid on his right
Clinging to his hand
And there’s a young woman on his left
In her jeans and blue T-shirt, pretty
Must be his wife, lucky bugger,
Damn, they’re going into a shop

There’s way too many people

But what the heck, he’s the enemy
Does it matter if a few get hurt too
When we’ve got our man?
Okay Guy, this is one for all the others
And this one is for Nagaland
Nagaland for Chirst, remember?
Praise the Lord, we’ve eliminated another traitor.
(Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition, 2004)

Temsula Ao who is a poet of long standing and an authority on the oral tradition and cultural practices of the Ao Nagas, presents a powerful, sensitive and evocative collection of stories in *These Hills called Home : Stories from a War Zone*. Her intention is clear in the Preface, “—in these stories I have endeavoured to revisit the lives of those people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and acknowledged—what the stories are trying to say is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms.”²² She finally gives voice to the earlier long silence of pain, revealing to the outside world how half a century of surviving in a war-zone has taken its toll especially on the women who have to bear the maximum brunt from both the establishment as well as the rebel militants. The poignant story of Apenyo in “The Last Song” creates a legend for the people of the village – it being the one she continued to sing even as the soldiers brutally gang raped her. “The Curfew Man” skilfully projects the dilemma and ambivalence of one whose values are compromised in trying times, and who is forced to be an informer due to a cruel twist of fate. These stories and many more, “speak movingly of home,

country, nation, nationality, identity—”²³

As a Mizo I have often reflected on the reasons for our reticence in this area, for there appears to be a marked lack of response in literary forms, to the suffering that Mizoram underwent during the twenty years of MNF (Mizo National Front) underground conflict with the Indian State (1966 – 1986). Borrowing a line from Esterine Iralu, could it be that “In the worst of the war years, the horror has taken us beyond poetry, beyond words into silence; the deep silence of inexpressible pain —”²⁴ Escapism and a studied refusal to write about pain suffered while internalising it in memory is not an uncommon aspect of human psychology. Wendy Singer in the Preface to her book *Creating Histories : Oral Narratives and the Politics of History-Making* (1997) relates an incident in connection with her collection of oral material for the history of the Freedom Movement of India : “Equally troubling has been living by the request made by some of the people who told stories : that I not publish them for a time – perhaps seven years. “By then”, said Kulanand Vaidik, “many of my compatriots, and maybe myself, will be gone. You will keep their memories alive without hurting their abilities to tell the story differently.”²⁵

This anecdote could well apply to some extent, to the Mizo context for there is a strong possibility that there still remains a certain reluctance to delve and portray experiences while the repositories are still alive. Yet the unlocking of memories has begun and this genre of trauma writing will eventually have to address highly sensitive, complex and controversial issues in the years ahead. A recent non-fiction work entitled *Zofate Zinkawngah – (Zalenna Mei a Mit Tur a Ni Lo)* (2006) by R.Zammawia, ex-Defence Minister and Army Chief of the erstwhile MNF underground, provides for the first time, an insider’s version of the inside story of intrigue and power struggle of the underground leadership, considered by many to be a crucial future reference for the rewriting of the history of the movement.

What is interesting though is that creative writing may not have flourished at the height of the underground movement in Mizoram, but passions and emotions found vent in popular songs composed during this period. Mention may briefly be made of two such songs. Laltanpuia in 1966 composed a song called “Sialsuk khaw kan hla” which dwells on the burning of his village Sialsuk and is one of many such songs composed during this period that tell of the miseries of villagers who are driven out overnight from their villages into forced village groupings. The burning down of their beloved homes would then take place before their eyes. The nostalgia and loneliness for one’s lady love during the

hated long curfew hours was resented especially by young people who keenly felt the denial of their freedom. Such sentiments got reflected in songs like “Curfew kara suihlunglen” by K.Rammawia.

Post 1966 -1986 has however begun to witness a crop of fiction works, especially in recent years, thematising the trauma suffered. Reference is made here to two such works written by two stalwarts of Mizo Literature, James Dokhuma (1932 – 2007) and K.C.Lalvunga (1929 – 1994).

James Dokhuma in his novella *Silaimu Ngaiharwm* (1992)²⁶ frames a moving love story in the midst of the insurgency period. This work gives a powerful depiction of the draconian practice of village groupings officially known as “Protected Progressive Village” or PPV, but derisively subverted as “Public Punishment Village” by the victimized Mizo populace. In an oblique reference to Hitler and the Holocaust of World War II, the writer likens such villages to ‘concentration camps.’ K.C.Lalvunga’s novel *Numna Kawngthuamipualh* (1989) is a work that thematises the dilemma of a young Mizo IPS officer ‘at life’s crossroads’ when he discovers that the girl from his village whom he loved and had hoped to make his bride, had been duped by an army officer, taken to, and sold into the flesh trade in the city of Chandigarh. Set during the insurgency period, the book depicts a tribal society in turmoil wherein human values and familial bonds are hard put to the test, and where the drastic turn of events changes their once peaceful lives, making them vulnerable and easy prey to the machinations of the outsider.

Owing to the large number of writings generated by the different insurgency movements of the Northeast, and which draw our attention to the human tragedy, there is the danger of overlooking other worthy writings of the region.²⁷ The sophisticated narrative forms and skilful use of imagery and symbols as literary devices characterise the rich corpus of short stories which surprise and enchant the reader. “Thaballei” is a short story amongst many from Manipur, by Lamabam Viramani that skilfully manipulates times zones of the past and present, dreams and waking hours, to highlight the miseries suffered by the common man in conflict zones. “Thunderbird” by Vanneihluanga from Mizoram philosophizes the personal tragedy of a wheel-chair bound man, who from the nadir of his tragic situation dares to cross the line between the rational and the unknown to find hope again. Other stories like “Death by Apotia” from Esterine Iralu, Nagaland, and “Chhingpuii” by Kaphleia, Mizoram, provide the reader an exploration into the world of old tribal beliefs and traditions in stories that do not exoticise but do not compromise either, the depiction of unique qualities of tribalism. “Civility is all that Counts” by

S.J.Duncan is a hilarious story from Meghalaya that throws up the skilful use of language register and the role that it plays in a multiethnic society. The translator has done a remarkable job whereby he is able to convey the broken Khasi used by an outsider into a smooth transfer of broken English without sacrificing the humour and continuity of the story. These stories are but a few samples of short stories that are rich in variety and depth and which continue to contribute to the growing, emerging literature from the Northeast.

The new literature emerging from the region today are thus products of a transitional process that foregrounds a secular note and a break from the tribal exotica syndrome while not hesitating to draw upon and exploit on old oral traditions from the pre-literate past. These writings contain a sophistication and new leanings in terms of language and style, subject matter and literary forms, often adopting complex narratives forms and thematising the conflict between tradition and change. It may be said that these writers have achieved a creative confluence of sorts between the native and westernised sensibility.²⁸ All this has been brought on by factors both political and cultural. The growing tribe of writers from the region are educated and exposed to other cultures, and many of them reflect the politics of identity in their writings. But this emergence or transition has come at a price. The urge to articulate one's own indigenous identity which involves looking back into, and drawing from one's mnemoculture or culture of memory, while at the same time unable to discard the identity crafted out for them through the processes of colonization and conversion to Christianity, has created a tension and an ambivalence, a cultural anxiety if one may wish to put it so, which has given rise to some truly noteworthy literary articulations in their writings.

The literary mediums that these writers have developed and crafted for themselves have become a means to articulate their voice and cultural rootedness, telling about themselves while at the same time universalising their scope. It can also be seen as a means to prevent appropriation by a more dominant culture. Then again, these writings can also be viewed as the long delayed expressions of spaces and identities earlier silenced and suppressed not so much by the direct impact of colonial powers as by the late access to the written word. There certainly has been no dearth of subject matter as vast repositories of indigenous knowledge systems, folklores, songs and narratives lie embedded in the oral traditions of their pre-literate culture.

This study of the emerging literature of the northeast also brings to the fore the genuine and urgent need for their translations into English and other regional

languages of India, as well as the other way round, for purposes of narrating of our nation and providing encounters with cultures other than ours. When regional literatures are thus given recognition and space as part of the polyphonic voices of the nation, it also becomes an assertion of continued decolonization. "Translation", as K. Sachidanandan has aptly put it, "is also a celebration of difference and a re-inventing of cultural identities."²⁹ Most of the writers referred to in this paper write in English and are translators of known repute. Others works referred to are translated into English while many in the regional languages still remain untranslated, deprived of a wider reading public.

This brief study is but the tip of the proverbial iceberg of writings coming from the Northeast, for each state with its diverse and rich store of traditional lore, and the growth of new talent, will continue to enrich their existing corpus of literary output which will go beyond many borders through translation works. All of this will also go a long way in the breaking down of misplaced notions of the inherited colonial mindset and prejudice, of viewing the literatures from regional languages and dialects of tribal communities as having value only as anthropological and ethnographical writings but incapable of having any literary value or merit.

NOTES

1. Assamese script, formerly known as Kamarupi script, was found in epigraphic records in copperplates of King Bhaskara Varma dating 601 A.D. (Source : *Ancient Assamese Script* (1936) by Sarbeswar Kakati, Gauhati, Assam). The Meiteis of Manipur trace the existence of their script back to the 8th century in the inscriptions found in 10 bronze coins issued by King Khongteckcha (763-773 A.D.)
2. The first two Khasi and Garo converts to Christianity dates 1813 and 1863 respectively, while replacement of the Bengali script that they used, by the Roman script, was in 1841 for the Khasis and the 1890s for the Garos. (Source : *The Language and Literature of Meghalaya*. Hamlet Barch, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1977. pp5-6 and pp 59-60). The first Christian missionary to enter the Naga Hills was Bronson in 1839, while the different Naga dialects were given their Roman script in the gospel translations that took place from 1872 onwards. (Source : "Emergence of an Identity : The Nagas" by Vibha Joshi in *Tribal Identity in India : Extinction or Adaptation* ! ed. Kalyan Kumar Chakravarty, IGRMS, Bhopal, 1996. pp50-51. The Mizo got their Roman script in 1894 from the English missionaries who entered their hills the same year.
3. Most of the poets dealt with in this paper have been published both in India and abroad. Samples of their collective poems is to be found in *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the North-East*. Eds. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin S. Ngangom, North-Eastern Hill University publication, Shillong, 2003.
4. Sumanyu Satpathy in "Locating Cultures", *Muse India*, the literary e-journal at <http://www.museindia.com>

5. Interesting enough, a post-colonial reading of Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest* reveals a similar strain of resentment at the alien tongue, though of course, in a completely different context when he curses Prospero and Miranda in the lines "You taught me language, and my profit on't Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you For learning me your language!" (I-ii, 363-365).
6. This and other quotes from the poet here are views she aired in conversation with me over phone on 15.9.08 and which have been used with her permission.
7. Quoted from an email interview of the poet by Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal, thanalonline vol 2, Issue 4, May 2004, at <http://www.stephengill.ca>
8. Sumanyu Satpathy in "Locating Cultures", *Muse India*, the literary e-journal at <http://www.museindia.com>
9. Mita Kapur, Sunday, April 02, 2006 <http://www.hindu.com>
10. Mamang Dai's views here are quoted from an email she sent me on 16.9.08 and used with her permission.
11. *Worlds of Hurt : Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Kali Tal: Cambridge University Press, USA), 1996.
12. Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (Methuen : London), 1987.
13. As quoted by Sumanyu Satpathy in "Locating Cultures" from Tariq Ali in "Literature and Market Realism", *New Left Review*, No 199, May-June 1993, p 134
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15. Arundhati Subramaniam in <http://india.poetryinternationalweb.org>
16. Rajalakshmi Bhattacharyya in <http://www.telegraphindia.com>
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20. Robin S. Ngangom in "Contemporary Manipuri Poetry", *Muse India*, the literary e-journal at <http://www.museindia.com>
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23. Shantanu Dutta, February 4, 2007 at <http://nagarealm.com>
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25. Wendy Singer, *Creating Histories : Oral Narratives and the Politics of History-Making*. (New Delhi: OUP, 1997)
26. Silaimu Ngaihawm has been translated into English as *The Beloved Bullet*, and is amongst the collection of creative writings from the Northeast published in the volume *Fresh Fictions* (New Delhi: Katha, 2005).
27. All the short stories referred to here are taken from a collection of short stories from the Northeast published in the volume *The Heart of the Matter* (New Delhi: Katha, 2004).
28. Sukrita Paul Kumar in an interview with well-known writer Nirmal Verma, discusses the question of the ability of a writer to locate his own native cultural identity and to what extent, and how does he imbibe the influences of the West – at the cost of his own specifically Indian psyche, in *Conversations on Modernism : With reference to English, Hindi and Urdu Fiction* published by IIAS, Shimla in association with Allied Publications, 1990, p 13
29. K. Sachidanandan, *Indian Literature : Positions and Prepositions* (New Delhi: Pencraft International, New Delhi, 1999), p173