

Weaving a Common Thread: North-East Indian Literature and Culture, as reflected in Select Poems

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Abstract

North-East India's unique cultural and historical experience makes it distinct from the Indian mainland. As an epitome of unity in diversity, it binds together the culturally, the historically and the geographically different states and cultural identities through the legacy of shared colonial experience. This paper aims to bridge a common link among the literature written in different states, and the individual cultural strains, and place it under the unified heading – North-East literature and culture. For this purpose the common concerns expressed in the Literature of the North-East will be evaluated through the study of some select poems written by acclaimed writers belonging to different states and ethnicity.

Keywords: Change; Colonial legacy; Culture ethnicity; Identity.

Introduction

The term North-East signifies collectively the seven states- Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya located in the north eastern part of India which is connected to the mainland through a narrow stretch of land called the Chhilliguri corridor. In 2003, the North Eastern Council included Sikkim as the eighth State of the North-East. Although held together under an umbrella term the states have different and unique historical legacy, cultural heritage, geography, social structure, and ethnic identity. In spite of the distinctive aspects, the North-East, at present, shares some common problems as well as aspirations. "Problems of migration, insurgency, cultural and linguistic nationalism have been a part of the region's everyday life" and "Separatism versus integration (with mainstream India), westernization versus regional

identity," (Nayar 6) are common concern for decades. Therefore, it creates a space for homogenized study of the literature of the entire North-Eastern region of India by overlooking the variance in folklores, language, food, attire, rituals, beliefs and customs.

The advent of the British into North East after the Yandaboo treaty in 1826 brought changes in administration, territorial boundaries, religion, socio-economic and education systems in varying degrees across the region. For the first time the region was forcefully yoked together under one administration beginning the legacy of colonial influence. Missionaries followed the British and remodelled the education system, introduced western thoughts, ideals and standards and influenced social and spiritual practices through dissemination of Christian ideals. "Undeniably, Christianity has been seen as one of the major causes of the social changes in North- East region." (Chettri 63) Change came to the practices established by the ages of continuous toil of the forefathers. Scientific outlook accompanying western education created doubt about the myths, legends and beliefs and practices that arose from this space. As an inaugurator of modernisation Colonialism brought a positive change with negative undercurrents. Here begins the chase for development and a gradual detachment from the roots which at present make the conscious observers anxious. From antiquity the people "practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with natural world." (The Legends xi) So, nature is integral to their age old wisdom, spiritual beliefs, folk practices, festivals and everyday life. However, the "consumer culture" brought by "rampant industrialization and urbanization" is "gradually turning the once eco-friendly tribes into modern consumerist societies and having corrosive effects on the indigenous cultures." (Sankyan and Sigroha 47).

The common fear of cultural disintegration and obscurity through assimilation with dominant cultural influences startles the tribes and communities inhabiting the North-Eastern part of India. This tension in folk culture has become the common but dominant trait of each cultural strain in the North-East. Once a peaceful and an isolated land of rich scenic beauty, now abounds in painful discord and chaos because of the disastrous transformation caused by the social, the political and the cultural tension introduced by the colonial legacy. The literature of the North-East writers encapsulates the very essence of the turbulence in the land of mesmerizing natural beauty and local rich culture. This study is an attempt to detect the various common strains in North-East Literature through the analysis of some select poems by writer's native to different States like

Mamang Dai (Arunachal Pradesh), Aruni Kashyap (Assam), Malsawmy Jacob (Mizoram), and Robin S. Ngangom (Manipur), Temsula Ao (Nagaland), Desmond Kharmawphlang (Meghalaya) and Chandrakanta Mursingh (Tripura).

North-East Poetry - Unified despite Diversity in Past Historical and Cultural Experience

Nature, the nurturer of life and culture is an indispensable part of North East India. Since time immemorial people have survived by drawing sustenance from the world of nature. Regardless of variance in local culture, nature as a theme frequently echoes in the poems of North East India. The myths, folklores, rites, customs, livelihood etc are modelled on the interaction between man and nature. It is integrated with the very identity of the people. Aruni Kashyap's poem "Where the sun rises" merges the Assamese identity with the mighty river Brahmaputra, the life line of Assam. In the lines: "A redder river weeps, not for you/ But for peace and a natural sun rise," (Kashyap), the personified river voices the yearning of a devastated population, for a violence free peaceful and thriving Assam, through its tears. The Brahmaputra narrates the stories of battles, the rise and the fall of kingdoms, conquests and fearsome defence, victories and defeats in the history of Assam. As "the mirror of the rising sun" it witnessed another significant event - 'insurgency'. It has the audacity to become the mirror to evaluate any socio-cultural and political unfolding. Indeed, nature is the testimony to the entire course of the formation of Assamese Identity.

The eminence of nature as a part of life creates a sense of trust, assurance and safety as in the mother's womb. Therefore, nature is perceived as life and it is inevitably mirrored in the frequent reference to nature as symbols and images of life and longevity. In Mamang Dai's poem "Small Towns and the River":

The river has a soul.
It knows, stretching past the town,
from the first drop of rain to dry earth
and mist on the mountaintops,
the river knows
the immortality of water. ("Small Towns and the River"),

the water's eternal flow grants deathlessness to the river. It has the experi-

ence of witnessing the different phases of water's journey from a rain drop to mist. The river takes the persona of a wise experienced immortal perceiving the different phases of the journey of a culture from its beginning, through the thriving period to its fag end and then nothingness. The river as Nature saw and ensured the existence and durability of the culture and as an immortal it will live through its destruction. Nature's lap nourished a primitive creature to be the contemporary person boasting the wonders of civilization by providing means and resources. Chandrakanta Murasingh's poem – "The Stone Speaks in the Forest", presents the struggle for survival in the heart of nature. It is the supreme force that observes and sustains life selflessly, only retaliating when it is invaded, for self-protection. He writes:

A man with a broken heart came today
 Accompanied by his lady love
 Sprayed dreams and tears on the stone
 And went away rowing upstream.
 They will build their home in the deep forest.
 ("The Stone Speaks in the Forest")

Nature is the realm of solace, acceptance and survival and has been providing endurance to humankind since time immemorial. The stone as nature witnesses the agony of the "man with a broken heart" and also inspires fresh dreams. In the poem Nature is a healer that gives hope, a home, a new life and sustenance to the escaping couple, in its heart. This couple is a miniature representation of the entire humankind sucking their life force, out of Nature's bosom. The significance of Nature's benevolence and presence in human life was acknowledged by the bygone generations by worshipping its dynamics as divine. Temsula Ao recollects about the disposed practice of Nature worship, after the acceptance of Christianity, in the poem, "Blood of Other Days":

Before the advent of the WORD...
 We believed that our gods lived
 In the various forms of nature
 Whom we worshipped
 With unquestioning faith. ("Blood of...")

Nature's eminence as a life giver, uncontrollable superior existence and a source of terror and awe, established its different elements and phe-

nomena, in the ancient minds as marvellous fragments of divine presence transcending human understanding and ability to control. It became the embodiment of God claiming unquestionable faith. Change in belief reduced the veneration for nature, reducing it to a resource to be exploited without considering the resultant crisis.

In sheer contrast to the representation of nature as life; progress, as change appears to be decadent, sowing chaos and a sense of loss emanating from the erosion of established tradition and culture. At present sacrifice of green cover in the name of development is a common scene. Rapid industrialization and urbanization have caused over exploitation and misuse of nature. It has turned the existing man-nature harmony into a relationship of abuse governed by selfish motives. Nature and the modern town is a binary that pulls in opposite directions. In the context of North-East India connectivity to nature provides cultural affirmation whereas a modern town indicates change and discontinuation of traditional life style and practices. Dai writes:

Small towns always remind me of death.
My hometown lies calmly amidst the trees,
It is always the same,
in summer or winter ("Small Towns and the River")

The ominous calmness of the stagnant and monotonous small town is a symbol of the advent of progress accompanied by environmental changes from lush green of nature to growing concrete. The imminent commercialisation of tradition accompanying modernity will give a death blow to the ethnic rites, roles and practices by reducing nature's pre-eminence in the existence and survival of the common folk, thereby crumbling the pillars of the entire culture and life style. Malsawmy Jacob's "Old Kite" sings a similar strain. Dwindling dominance of nature is represented by the tired, battered winged old kite. City replaced jungle, tall buildings replaced trees. After the strenuous struggle in changed habitat it is about to rest. The struggle of the old kite reminds of the old traditions at risk of extinction for their inability to exist among new beliefs, practices and aspirations.

The poet asks -"Does he regret age-diminished strength like I do?" (Old Kite) The diminished strength of Nature and the established tradition signify change and dissolution of the old practices and assimilation of the remnants of the long-standing practices into novel, but alien ways of existence. In highlighting the change lies hidden a voice calling forth the

folks to preserve the swiftly disappearing ethnic identity. The poems link the fear of environmental imbalance to the pillage of modernisation, commercialisation and urbanisation. Empowered with technology man's conquest and harness of nature creates ecological imbalance. Nature harshly retaliates against man's atrocities causing calamities like landslide, flood, drought etc, leading to death and destruction. This increasing man-nature conflict is replicated in the poetry to develop an eco-consciousness. In a metaphorical delineation of this tale, in Murasingh's "The Stone Speaks in the Forest", Nature is represented as a stone in the forest taking a defensive and self-protective stance to protect itself against the ravages of over extraction faced by the forest, for commercial purpose. The poet writes:

Hachukrai drags his bamboo raft
 There is a market downstream, on a sandy islet.
 Wondering, who will respond now,
 The stone speaks in the forest
 Bow and arrow in hand. ("The Stone...")

The villager stacks nature's produce to sell it on a market. The poems connect the concern over environmental instability to the intrusion of modernization and urbanization. Intoxication for progress makes people blind to their indispensable coexistent status with nature and they forget their duty to protect it. Finding itself exposed, abandoned and unprotected, nature gives up the benign motherly form and becomes an indomitable force armed as a fierce warrior to protect itself. The poem remarks on the changing significance of nature in the modern context. Nature is just the source of wealth and people forget that the dynamics of man-nature relationship is a founding component of culture, and the change would create a predicament in the consistency of the cultural foundation. The poet attacks the insensitivity of the ambitious in consciously ignoring the truth of nature's degradation. Blinded by the prospects of individualistic gains they are blind to the disturbing images unravelled before their eyes.

The changes wall the flow of cultural heritage and practices into the techno centric modern times. Globalisation defies tradition through cultural homogenization. So, it endangers durability of local culture on the face of absorption of distinct cultures into a Europeanized culture. Robin S. Ngangom, a nostalgic poet overwhelmed by changes in the surroundings recalls the lost traditional life and the practices that once governed their ethnic identity. The lines:

My native soil was created from tiny sparks
that clung to grandmother's earthen pot
which conjured savoury dishes
I've been looking for
all my life in vain. ("My Invented Land")

The poet laments the loss of the folk identity. Food, being a marker of unique folk identity binds people to their ethnic roots. In his incessant but unsuccessful attempt to taste the traditional delicacies cooked in an earthen pot created from the magic laced native soil, is hidden the poet's desire to revisit the simplistic nature dependent lifestyle unsoiled by the influence of modernity. While glorifying the past rituals and the lifestyle the poet criticizes the contemporary trend of hybridization and the people's contribution in letting the age-old possessions die. From this sense of loss arises the identity crisis and the fear of obscurity. The regret for the loss of ethnic identity and the sense of failure to protect it rings in Jacob's poem "Identity":

We're rich in tales and legends
stored in our collective-conscious
but have little written history
since the only manuscript we had
on leather scroll, was kept unguarded
And stolen away.

This is an anxiety ridden voice anticipating the loss of the roots that have been nurturing, upholding and contextualising the cultural and the social amity. Through the reminiscence of the "tales and legends stored in" the "collective-conscious" the poem urges the readers to come forth and restore and revive the roots, because an identity without roots is borrowed and superficial. The scanty history writing practice in the North-East except that of the Ahom and Manipuri kings, rendered history forgotten, what is left is a borrowed colonial perspective that saw the simple nature centred people as crude therefore qualifying to be re-aligned according to western ideals. Temsula Ao writes:

Then came a tribe of strangers
Into our primordial territories
Armed with only a Book and
Promises of a land called Heaven.

Declaring that our Trees and Mountains
Rocks and Rivers were no Gods
And that our songs and stories
Nothing but tedious primitive nonsense." ("Blood of...")

The missionaries failed to recognise the cultural essence of the interlinked existence of nature and man. Belittling the eco-centric faith and the age old tradition and wisdom, they wrecked the very foundation of the existence of the natives. There began the journey of development that led people to recklessly neglect their roots and history. The People forgot their responsibility to preserve their ethnic identity and severed their roots. Ao laments:

We listened in confusion
To the new stories and too soon
Allowed our knowledge of the other days
To be trivialised into taboo

We no longer dared to sing
Our old songs in worship
To familiar spirits of the land
Or in praise to our legendary heroes...

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

We stifled our natural articulations
Turned away from our ancestral gods
And abandoned accustomed rituals
Beguiled by the promise of a new heaven.

We borrowed their minds,
Aped their manners,
Adopted their gods
And became perfect mimics. ("Blood of...")

These lines brim with self-criticism and anger at the natives for letting the culture erode under the infiltration of foreign culture that began with the religious cultural influence of the missionaries. The poem traces the route of metamorphosis of Naga society under the influence of the dominant colonisers. Dissolution of ethnic elements in search for the better led to the loss of the fundamental elements of the native identity. The poets encourage the readers to analyse the two contrasting pictures resulting from the breach between the past and the present by juxtaposing the glorious past with the present. The poem captures degeneration and destruction along with a tired poet struggling against the tide to guard the collapsing tradition. In the hunt for familiar memories among drastic changes the poet is working against the corrosive addiction for change, to remind the people of the necessity to defend and rehabilitate the age old traditions to patch up the tattered unified identity that will bond them with their cherished land. She lays clues for curing the malady named deconstructed identity. The poem points out subtly that to secure the perpetuation of cultural authenticity, binding people together by embracing the tradition, myths, legends and the legacy of forefathers is necessary.

This change is an unbearable sight of dismantled life. It has transformed the most beautiful landscapes into fractures, suffering and tension. North-Eastern states plunged into social and political changes accompanying the legacy of colonialism. The quest for preserving the ethnic identity led to insurgencies. The violence created in the struggle between the insurgents and the anti-insurgent attempts worsened the condition. Aruni Kashyap says:

And if there was blood in nineteen-forty
seven, there is still,
the Luit has become redder, only that's the
difference.

He painfully observes the decadence and mourns the wounds of the land and the worsened condition. The present has become more horrible than the past. When they wish to uphold their separate identity, they get anarchy, death, atrocities and shattered dreams of a secure home. In the strife

between warring factions the innocents become victims of torture and bloodbath:

Someone has died in extremist shooting.
Somebody's son has died in the crossfire
Between police and insurgents. (Murasingh, "Slumber")

This change has a sinister undertone. Death, fear, uncertainty, pain and blood have become the reality of the new "invented land" of Ngangom:

My home is a gun
pressed against both temples ("My Invented Land")

His home is fearsome, harmful and volatile as a gun that can end a life in a fraction of a second, with just the pull of the trigger. A pointed gun can arrest movement, similarly the voice in the poem is trapped in the land by its desire to belong, and its fear of being uprooted from the native land inherited from the toils of the foregone generations. The voice is triggered by dual fear-fear of extinction in the ongoing violence and the fear of displacement. It is suffering from the dilemma of existence. The cost of existence is either blood or displacement:

a knock on a night that has not ended
a torch lit long after the theft
a sonnet about body counts
undoubtedly raped
definitely abandoned
in a tryst with destiny." (Ngangom, "My Invented Land")

Anarchy rules these lines. The serene home morphs into a scathed warzone where existence and safety is uncertain. The ongoing violence weakened the aspirations for solace. Hence, everything is left to destiny to manipulate for better or worse. The lines brim with pain radiating out of violence on the human body as well as on the embodiment of the native cultural heritage. The raped and abandoned bodies have double significance. Beyond the literal meaning the raped and abandoned bodies signify the culture that is exploited, mishandled, modified and forgotten. What was once a place of scenic beauty abounding in natural splendor now echoes with fear and doom. This horror filled images are the price of the desire to belong to a home that has become a living terror. The wounded land is the mirror of the bruises of the culture:

When guns sounded in our land

Bombs shouted

Fire screamed

Cicadas stopped singing

Homes went in flame

Hearths were razed

The sacred profaned

Music fell silent

Laughter turned to shrieks

Dreams to nightmare

Wild wolves prowled fear stalked every street

Songs curdled

Frozen by night. (Jacob, "The Songster's Lament")

Through these lines Jacob paints a soulless land. In the reign of blazing guns and fire "Cicadas" are silenced, i.e. nature is harmed; "Homes" And "Hearths" demolished – the sense of belongingness, and source of warmth, love, nourishment and co-dependent collective life is lost; painful "shrieks" overpower "Laughter"; "Dreams" become invalid in a hopeless reality; And "Wild wolves" – predators in fear, course through the land running down prey while creating a kill and win scene; the experience has become too disturbing to be recollected, expressed and recorded in collective consciousness.

The desire for continued existence surpassing all misfortunes arises from an optimistic note mildly burning amidst anarchy. A wish to rebuild the disfigured Identity and establish harmony rings in the poetry of North-East India. The acceptance of the mistakes and hope amidst despondency is evident in the poems. Dai's poem "Small Towns and the River" hints at metamorphosis into a new hybrid identity, to be the only way to pace forward. The lines: "In small towns by the river/ we all want to walk with the gods.", portray the concept of afterlife with God. The very instance of desiring afterlife in "the small towns by the river" depicts the poet's desire for continuous existence of the pantheistic culture, by adopting the changes brought by modernity. Here, the image of God also signifies the

dominant modern culture that has devoured the existing tradition.

Thus, it makes the coexistence of tradition and modernity necessary to keep pace with the race of time. Juxtaposition of the myth of afterlife and small town hints at the necessity of the unification of the legacy of mythical memories and the rationality of consumer society, for the harmonious coexistence of tradition and modernity. The poems bear witness to the desire to wake up from the nightmare of violence torn times, to a new morning bringing forth hope and prosperity, like a brightly rising sun. Kashyap highlights the wish for a better dawn when:

A redder river,
Yearns for redness from the sun floating
between clouds,
Not in a green flag.

He places together the bright red sun tearing the veil of clouds with the flag of an insurgent group depicting red sun in a green background. In doing so, the highly contrasting pictures of sad days, hollowed by violence and brutality, the thriving days, overwhelmed by peace and joy, are put together. Following the violence created by insurgency and anti-insurgent attempts, there is a desire for better days, beyond the period of bloodshed, separation and unrest in Assam. He becomes the medium for declaring that wish. The poets are hopeful in their endeavour to reclaim identity through literary expression. The foundation of identity is embodied by markers like shared past experiences, traditional practices, beliefs and unified aspirations. These are weakened in the mayhem created by violence, hybrid modern culture and individualistic commercial lifestyle, governed by individual progressive goals. The poets are creating a space where the unified identity can be preserved through linking the past glory and the present misery.

In the poem, "Blood of...", Ao chronicles in detail the entire course of change. The poem narrates the entire story from the preaching of the missionaries of a new faith, declaration of nature worship and their wisdom as "primitive nonsense", letting the intruders build their perspectives, replacement of the "old ways" through adoption of new ideas, "manners", religion and language, resurfacing of old "songs" and "insight" to the "new breed of cultural heroes...Demanding reinstatement/Of customary identity" causing a violent rebirth tainted by blood and pain. While lamenting the loss the poet captures trinkets of reality and records the past with the present anxious experiences. It gives a sense of continuity

to their narrative therefore letting the individual identity bind with the soil and the culture. So, it has become the platform that ensures continuity of unified existence by mirroring common roots and emotions when the unifying factors disintegrate in the real world.

Through the narration of common existence and reclamation of bonds in the literary platform, the poet seeks to attain identity and its endurance. The poem ensures that the native identity validated by indigenous modes of beliefs and behaviour remains strong and intact. The identity fundamental to the inception, continuation and survival of the unified existence is still breathing in spite of the intrusion of the missionaries condemning and amending the nature based lifestyle, faith and folk elements. The lines:

But a mere century of negation
Proved inadequate to erases
The imprints of intrinsic identities
Stamped on minds since time began (Ao, "Blood of..."),

declare that the identities are engraved too deep into their existence to be disposed of easily. The realisation of the corroding effect of modernity, the development of and the change in the indigenous cultural identity make people curious about their myths since it is the meeting ground of imagination and reality from where literature, spirituality, practices and native identity emerge. Desmond Kharmawphlang's poem "They" captures such an instance:

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.

Both Kharmawphlang and Ao sing an optimistic note as a ray of hope when the indigenous cultural identity is almost on the verge of being wiped out.

Conclusion

The above analysis establishes North-East literature as a narrative of transformation arising out of change brought by colonial legacy. It contains a

nostalgic voice that laments the lost traditional life and clings to the tales and legends of antiquity in a dire attempt to hold on to the slipping ethnic identity. The regret of inability to protect the capsizing ethnic identity conveys an aura of anxiety in the selected poems. In fear of imminent obscurity and loss of roots because of assimilating and dissolving traits of globalisation, urbanization and commercialization of culture the writers call forth the readers to preserve and restore the fleeting cultural heritage and practices, while keeping pace with the technology centric modern developments. The anguish, the suffering and the despair of the cultural sphere are also a reality of the collective socio-political experience. Dismantled life caused by insurgency related violence is mourned in the poems as the wounds of the land. These wounds are caused by a more sinister strand of the same waves of change that brought forth the modern developments. However, in the poems an optimistic voice prevails, that hopes for better days of harmony, peace and a strong cultural identity in future. A hybrid identity blooming out of the unification of modern advancements and ethnic roots, contextualizes cultural identity in the present.

Situating cultural identity in contemporary context is considered necessary to keep pace with the race of time while maintaining a strong sense of belongingness. Nature is also a part of this tale of demolition and loss. The poems celebrate nature as a persona engulfing the conscious desires of the devastated multitude. It is the tapestry that records their socio-cultural history and bears testimony to the origin and perpetuation of their culture and native identity. Loss of co-existence with nature and its abuse is considered fatal to the prevalent cultural practices. Therefore, the literature of the North-East links loss, uncertainty, disorder and identity crisis in the once thriving land with its transition from a site of happiness to anarchy caused by the advent of changes. It places in the very centre of tension in folk culture, the deconstruction of established modes of life and culture brought by the shift in perspectives, crafted under the sway of colonial legacy and recent global trends of development. It laments the lost integrity of culture and nature and ethnic roots, and longs for its restoration and revival by being a conscious voice striving to create awareness.

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