

## **NORTH EAST INDIAN POETRY: THE 'ART OF WITNESS' ECHOING THE 'VOICE OF THE VOICELESS'**

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### **Abstract:**

The North East Indian poetry and the overall literature is comparatively a new literature in respect to the mainstream Indian poetry and the overall literature. The poetry from this region characterizes with the genuine and pragmatic depiction of the events and happenings that play a deciding factor of the region's power and politics. They represent the common peoples' weal and woes, wish and worth only to give voice to their choice and ploys thereby becoming the poetry from this region as poetry of witness or the 'art of witness'. The masters of such poetry are none but a group of young promising poets-writers who by choice or circumstances take the charge and responsibly of the entire north east region to unfold the untold in verse forms only to make the peripheral and long neglected zone to the limelight of the mainstream and beyond. These poets make possible of the conglomeration between the poetry of witness with the poetry of greatness. They achieve both by virtue of their practical and pragmatic depiction in verse becoming the voice of the voiceless of the situation of real conflicts and concretes. This paper endeavors to add more voice by focusing on such poetry of some select poets from this zone.

**Keywords:** North East India, art of witness, mainstream, conglomeration, pragmatic.

India's North East literature in English and translations is substantively a new literature which directly deals with the lives and livelihood of the region. The poetry of the poets from this zone reflects as well as refracts the region's history, geography, anthropology, myth, mythology, culture, customs and the region's overall political scenario. It is a newly formed literature with a newly formed group of promising writers emerging out of the demanding ethos and ethics of the region to preserve and reserve the bases and the basics of their luminous pasts and positions so as to light up the present.

The region's literature and literary practices, however, with a distinct difference and divergence from the nation's mainstream literature, have come into count after India's Independence particularly amid the feverish moments of eighties and nineties. Prior to this period, there was a slow rise of localized literary outputs from pre-independence period, albeit mostly in regional languages which were dealing with the chores and folklores, trends and traditions, myths and mythologies of everyday lives. But after Independence the slow rise of panic politics and power procuring related ethnic disturbances combined with the certain

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entanglements with the government in time to time for autonomy or power protection or separatist ideology have generated a kind of tensions within the region that seem to be prevalent all the time in this peripheral zone called North East India. Besides, the continuous inflow of immigrants and outsiders from the mainland as well as from the porous neighboring nation borders has greatly disturbed the region's unique identity and integrity, internal peace and progress. These scattered tensions helped to hatch several other radical rebel ethnic groups which grew more and more all over the region with time and space. In this juncture, the centre's step-motherly and passive response in anticipation of the region's burning issues could not but made the matters messier only to double multiple the troubles.

As a result, there erupt several ethnic clashes and conflicts among the various ethnic rebel groups and with the government demanding separate identities and administrations which ultimately create chaos in the region's administrations and politics resulting the formation of new several states in time to times after much clashes, conflicts and crisis. These changes and challenges impacted greatly on the emerging poets-writers and thinkers of the region that they took pen and papers in counteract and counter commute the existing insurgencies only to seek a way out from the impasse as a part of the conflict resolution. In this situation the onlookers turned poets-writers or the artists of witness of this region can't but depict the whole scenes and scenarios as well as the political turmoil in literature forms which narrates the soil's narratives to express out their concerns and commitments for the region. In this short span of time, it seems to attain a legitimate and powerful voice by articulating their senses and sentiments and focusing on some of the core issues of the region. Hence literature especially poetry becomes the 'art of witness' echoing the 'voice of the voiceless' in the case of India's North East Literature. Manash Pratim Borah in this context writes, "The literature of Northeast India, which was achieved a lot of ascendancy in the last few decades, has not only used violence and socio-political experiences as thematic interest but also fore grounded them as recurring motif." (15).

North East India, the beautiful sister states of India's North Eastern part and the counterpart of rich diversities in multi-ethnic, multilingual, multicultural people likely produce some great and genuine son of the soil poets who by heart and soul dedicated themselves for the upliftment and upholding of their communities irrespectively from periphery to priority. The prominent among them are Mamang Dai, Yamlam Tana, Robin S Ngangom, R K Madhubir, Kynpham S Nongkynrih, Desmond L Kharmawplang, Temsula Ao, Esterine Kire, Mitra Phukan, Dhruva Hazarika, Harekrishna Deka, Mona Jote, Thangjam Ibopishak, Anjum Hasan, Ananya S Guha, Chandrakanta Murasingh, Navakanta Barua, Rajendra Bhandari and many more. They produce great and genuine verse in all forms depicting the truth and turbulence of the region. The long-lasting negligence, negation and deprivation from the centre towards the peripheral north east region and the state sponsored terrorism, militancy, bloodshed and insurgency, counter insurgency make them staunch sensitive and sentimental for the region's traditional past, the present, its history, geography, ecology, the people and the

politics. They are vocal over the issues that tend to violate human rights and righteousness. Their writings thus revolve round all in all with the issues of identities and alienations that they are experiencing in their daily survival.

They are also showing their concerns by raising voices against the misuse of the region's rich natural and cultural discourses, resources and reservoirs. To protect their unique identities and their ancestral heritage from hegemonic and imperialistic invasion, they consistently protest and fight against the system and the situation since pre- and post-independence period with pen and paper to show their love, unity and solidarity for their soil and to stop further exploitation from external ominous forces. To covers and uncovers all the daily nuances and the 'new normal' truths of the region, their literature including poetry automatically undertones the voice of the voiceless and the art of witness. Ngangom in his essay '*Poetry in a Time of Terror*' says:

"I think the task that literature of the Northeast must address is what Albert Camus called the double challenge of truth and liberty. Truth because what can the writer hope to accomplish now except to tell the truth? When the unspeakable is out there, being enacted and quickly consign to oblivion, when cruel things are done but never undone, and when media machines are busy feeding the world one-sided lies, the writer can only tell the truth about what he knows."(427)

Most of the poets indebted to the Shillong Poetry Circle behind their poetry writings as the Circle laid down the platform of free-flow writings for them. Tracing the history of the Shillong Poetry Circle, it is asserted that in the mid-eighty and nineties when the entire north east India was ripping through under the various devastating activities that included violence, secessionism, militancy, unrest and insurgency and autocracy on various internal as well as external issues and the all forms of normal lives and livelihood seemed to be stopped unto the deadlock; at this very tense and terse moments, a handful of young educated poets emerged out as a chronicler of the situation. They garnered a new hope among the panicked masses by voicing their anguish and aspirations and representing as an 'art of witness' of whole scenario that eventually attract attention from the mainstream and beyond. Their fearless and bold depiction of 'eye of witness' of both terror and traditions in their poetry make them a staunch realist and pragmatist that distinctly differs them from the mainstream poets and their writings. Thus, in the 'introduction' from the *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the North-East*, Ngangom and Nongkynrih write:

The Writer from Northeast 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 the gun does not permit him to indulge in verbal wizardry or woolly

aesthetics, but is a constant reminder that he must perform master 'the art of witness'." (xi).

In 1988-89 at the tough times and under the pressing need of the hour, the 'Shillong Poetry Circle' was established by Ngangom and his contemporary Desmond L Kharmawplang, along with like-minded poets and writers who include Kynpham S Nongkynrih, Ananya S Guha and Anjum Hasan. These poets write fluently on the themes and motifs of contemporary burning issues and happenings in and around the entire North East region. They started publishing a little magazine 'Lyric' after two years of the formation of their literary circle. Their sole purpose was to serve as the voice of the voiceless and at the same time, to make awareness to the common people of their rights and legalities and to arouse a sense of unity and fraternity amid ethnic variety and diversity. Now with the formation of another literary group called the North East Writers Forum (NEWF) in 1997 of poets-writers that covers all the poets, writers and critics like an umbrella from different places within the region, serve as a growing and accumulated voice against marginalization of the region and also against the various social evils and injustice mushrooming within the region.

The eight states that constitute the nomenclature of 'North East India' and that are formed with increased population and time's demand since pre independence to post independence period are Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Since the eight states of the region hugely vary from each other in terms of everything from ethnicity to language, from religion to cultural credo except the common 'North East' tag and its rich heritage, it might seem to be an injustice to homogenize the whole region into a single body. Satpathy says describing the Northeast as - " - - - homogeniz (ing) a location where no homogeneity can ever be imagined." (Satpathy, Museindia). However, in spite of multiplicity and heterogeneity, the whole North East zone irrespectively and unanimously seems to be putting forth the message of peace and progress through the restoration and reviving process of their lost cultures and collection of stories which are reflected in their poetry very distinctively and nostalgically as well. Mamang Dai's poetic lines from her poem *The Obscure Place* is worth mentioning in this regard:

The history of our race begins with the place of stories.  
 We do not know if the language we speak  
 Belongs to a written past.  
 Nothing is certain.  
 There are mountains. Oh! There are mountains. (Oxford Anthology 5).

The north east poetry provides an insight into a region that has a different culture zone. The area is full of ethnic people with different identities and accommodations. The poetry of this area reflects the diversity and the poets try to reflect this diversity into their poetry. A sense

of rootedness and rootlessness, the lost culture, myth, identity crisis is always echoing in their poetry. Their poetry collections and anthologies are contributing vast knowledge of the region's vast culture and ethnicity. The poetry more or less reveals their homeland's trends and traditions, past and present, myth and legends. Their life revolves round with the story of the myths, legends and folklores from generation to generation. They seem to be telling of "ancestors from the shadowy past, from mountains steeped in mist and romance, from lands faraway, of snake gods and princess, epic battles and great warriors." (Hazarika xlvi). These all shared values set to create a distinct myth and mythology that collectively reflects in the poetry and other literary works of the peripheral zone bringing the poets and writers to a single united platform. Jayanta Mahapatra writes seeing the unity in diversity of the region,

Undoubtedly it is poetry that unites us. It is the poets who will not keep us away from one another, who will not separate us. This is the strongest feeling one gets when one reads these poems from the very regions of the North-East. (Mahapatra xi)

The contemporary poetry from this peripheral zone altogether echoes a conscious voice of resistance against cultural and imperialistic hegemony in one hand and the collective voice of establishing identity assertion within the region and beyond on the other hand. Thus, the poetry from this region serves manifold and multi-faceted voices. With the words of Debashis Barua, it can be said:

It is an expression of an individual poetic self, and at the same time, it is the saga of the people of the region in general. It presents a vista of images of the mountains, hills, rivers, myths and legends, tradition and culture and multi-ethnic people of the region.... Identity crisis or a sense of alienation is one of the dominant features of contemporary politics in the Northeast. (249).

Further, the drastic changes and rapid transformation of the things that were once part of the history and sociology and interconnected with the peoples of the north east are painfully drawn with vividness to 'the poetry of witness' practised by these poets. The socio-political bitter experiences that are greatly responsible for the changes and that are playing crucial deciding factor of the region's overall fate recorded and expressed in satiric and ironical tones in poetry. Thangjam Ibopishak's poem *I Want to be Killed by an Indian Bullet* best express the tones when the poet narrates the terrorists' visit his home:

I ask: 'In what manner will you kill me? Will you cut me with a knife? Will you shoot me? Will you club me to death?'

'whatever it may be, if you must shoot me please shoot me with a gun made in India. I don't want to die from a foreign bullet. You see, I love India very much.'  
[Anthology(trans) 57]

Again, in Kynpham S Nongkynrih's poem *Sundori*, the same tone and mood resonate.

Beloved Sundori  
 Yesterday one of my people  
 Killed one of your people  
 And one of your people  
 Killed one of my people  
 Today they have both sworn  
 To kill on sight. (Dancing Earth 210)

Robin S Ngangom's poetry delineates with theme of harrowing reality in his poetry which make his poetry to another level of truth and survival. His depiction of situation in verse relates the very images of 'voice of the voiceless' and 'art of witness'. His existential poetry necessitated the preconditioned features of hard end modernist's techniques. In *The First Rain*, he finds that after the holocaust it has become easier to make culture and murder co-exist. He says,

After the holocaust became a touchstone  
 It has become possible to convict a people  
 And make culture and murder coexist. (The Desire of Roots 81)

Here the poet feels banished to the last outpost of a dying empire. He relates poetry as interconnected with the practicality of life struggles smuggled with everything. He further says:

Can poetry be smuggled with guns or drugs?  
 We've drawn our borders with blood.  
 Even to write in our mother tongue  
 We cut opens veins and our tongues  
 Lick parchments with blood.  
 I read my smuggled with Neruda  
 And sometimes listen to the fading fiddles  
 And the mourning voice of my land. (ibid 83)

Another realist Mona Zote goes to the extreme reality in defining poetry in her poem *What Poetry Means to Ernestina in Peril*. She writes the bitter truth in satiric tone about the poetry of his land while holding an imaginary conversation with an imaginary figure, Ernestina.

Poetry must be raw like a side of beef,  
 Should drip blood, remind you of sweat  
 And dusty slaughter and the ephemeral crunch  
 And the sudden bullet to the head. (Oxford Anthology 71).

However, the reality that finds space in North East literature is all pervasive. The troubles and turbulences that resorted unrests and political crisis in the region and that



gradually mars the vast mosaic and myriad nomenclature of the region's rich heritage and heredity vehemently find expression in literature of all types seeking to wipe out the ominous hostility in one hand and to restore and recover all the past halcyon days on the other thereby making the literature of this zone a therapeutic remedies. Observing the condition, Tilottoma Mishra in the "Introduction" from his *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India* Says: "An intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation with 'other' cultures is a recurrent feature of the literatures of the seven north-eastern states."(xiv).

Therefore, along with the recurrent dreadful images of violence and socio-political experiences, the writers from the region very consciously try to weld the whole region into a single thread by presenting the collective concerns and by reminiscing of their past hoary traditions and unique myths in their literary creations. Every line from their poetry or prose undertone the sad declining of their ancestral legacy and legitimacy. They are desperate to go back to their rootedness and hence write impulsively so as to arouse a strong sense of emotion and bonding among the common masses including the radicals for their motherland. Thus, the poetry from India's peripheral zone perfectly serves as the 'voice of the voiceless' and 'the art of witness'

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