

Poetry of the North-East – A Thematic Appreciation

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ABSTRACT:

The communities of North –East India have been historically isolated from mainstream India. This article is an attempt to analyse the work of twelve representative poets of these communities and understand their trials, anxieties and concerns. Further, this reveals that culture and tradition are specific but human emotions are eternal and boundary-less.

Key Words- Culture, tradition, nation, identity, violence

Introduction:

Culture and tradition cannot be separated; they are like twins or two sides of the same coin. This provides people with a collective consciousness and for the isolated individual it provides him with an identity, a reference point to which he continuously refers to and it provides him with a sense of belonging along with a feeling of security. As poet R. S. Ngangom who is a Manipuri poet laments in the poem 'When

You Do Not Return '---

When you leave your native hills

Winter is merely a remainder

Of all past winters, of all

The loves we lost . . .¹(p38)

This business of belonging to a community, a society, a nation is most probably the source of all the joy and pain in one's life. This article is based on the reading of twelve representative poets belonging to the five north-eastern states of India and is an attempt to understand the pleasure, trials and tribulations of the people of this area in the post 1950 era.

An identification of the major or dominant thematic trends as reflected in these poems is a prerequisite of such an attempt. The most prominent concern expressed unequivocally in many poems is the feeling of loss and the overwhelming, all pervasive shadow of violence, at times engulfing completely the central ethos of the people of this area. Chandra Kanta Murasingh a prominent poet writing in Kok Borok language reveals a commitment to recording "the agonies of life in contemporary Tripura", a land where "the ugly thud of the boots of both the extremists and the Indian Army"² stands out as a reality. Another trend is the realization that the old, traditional, innocent way of life, so characteristic of this part of India is surely though slowly and steadily being eroded. Poet

Nirmalprabha Bordoloi who “is the greatest poet of her age”³ in her poem ‘Saddest Feelings’ fondly remembers her motherland through the traditional ‘Gamocha’ – “In the smell of the New Gamocha..... I find my mother again.”(p14) After sixty years of independence, India as a country is yet to realize the dreams of its teeming millions. There is a growing sense of disillusionment with the political system and this is the creative catalyst for the compositions of such openly satirical poems like ‘Of A Minister’ and ‘When the Prime Minister Visits Shillong The Bamboos Watch in Silence’. Apart from these there are poems which are an attempt to come to terms with individual dilemmas. The expression of such crisis is generally experienced at the personal level, but these issues are at the subconscious mind of each and every modern man and I would like to term them as issues of existence the Why and What of life uttered in such lines as “Why do we live “ The basic premise of this paper is that although politically and socially the five states of the north east are yet to amalgamate themselves with the rest of India and become a part of mainstream India ,still this process has already started and is proven by the fact that the poets who have composed after 1950 have voiced the concerns of their people but at the same time they have also to some extent taken up issues which are of concern for mainstream India.

Historically and politically the north eastern states were isolated from the rest of India for many years. Even after the first few decades of gaining independence this part of our country was largely untouched by the modern trends of development. Industrialization, economic growth and rapid social changes have transformed the face of urban India and is already making inroads in rural India, the India of the have-nots .The problem of violence shattering the social fabric of the north east is the result of the feeling of being ignored, being left out in the whole process of development. It is quite ironical that the so called political and social movements represented by the various militant outfits are ostensibly fighting for the legitimate rights and independence of the people but their violent activities have hijacked their freedom and peace and additionally have resulted in the loss of tradition and culture of the people. The manifestations of violence are many. The best realistic description of this is in an article by poet Hirendranath Dutta titled ‘The Sea bound Traveller’----

“This sacred place is now a tattered place. Random gun-shot sounds and the fright of hobgoblins have rent this place Here fear has hatched suspicion and hatred. It is no knowing now when anyone might get possessed by evil spirits. At midnight aggressive knockings rain at the doors of panicky householders. Bats, the children of the night fling their shadows on the gloom of men’s minds.” (P11)

It is this all pervasive gloom that one encounters while reading these poems. Virtually all the poets are found echoing this feeling in their poems. The gloom of men’s minds have at times benumbed the senses and they are overcome with sheer frustration, helplessness at the prospect of not being able to resist violence. The frustration of timidly surrendering to the might of negativity weighs down too heavily on these awakened souls, as a result they suffer silently. Thus we have Robin S. Ngangom lamenting that the physical violence all around him has forced him to accept the situation — ‘I hardened inside my thickening hide, Until I lost my tenuous humanity’.(p37)

In the same poem ‘Native Land’ he goes on in the same vein ---- “I ceased thinking,” I didn’t care anymore”, “I burnt my truth with them”. The last lines of the poem -- ““There

are limits”, but when the days absolved the butchers, I continue to live as if nothing happened” express the culmination of the disillusionment with the present condition. A point to note in this connection is that the poem exudes a note of resignation. A poem about ‘abandoned children inside blazing huts’ is alarmingly devoid of any passionate anger. The expression of physical violence in such a quiet and matter-of -fact style is definitely not a coincidence, as if the poet has consciously decided to oppose violence with calm resignation. The silence of hopelessness is as deafening as the boom of bombs; the poet has chosen to express the predicament of a society which is equally stoic in its sense of resignation and gloom. Poet Chandra Kanta Murasingh writing in Kok Borok, the language of the Tripuri people finds the effect of violence in the loss of the natural beauty and landscape of the countryside, I quote from his poem, ‘O, Poor Hachkurai’

“The hen in the forest now

Roams and chucks from noon to dusk.

The haunting madhavi fragrance escapes the rustle of spring air.

It is acrid with the smell of gun-powder.”(p36)

The same feeling is echoed in the following lines from the Manipuri poet Robin S. Ngangom in his poem

‘When You Do Not Return’

“ the fragrance

Of the wild rose is lost, and only

The flowers of the market are on sale. “ (p 38)

Though most of the poems build upon a gloomy picture of life in the picturesque north-eastern states there are some voices which emphatically proclaim hope that ‘--- the blinding light of weapons, Cannot devour the light of these earthen lamps’. (p13)The poem ‘The Earthen Lamps’ narrates the age old Hindu tradition of floating earthen lamps with the flow of the river. Poet Hirendranath Dutta expresses the belief, the unwavering faith that the darkness of violence will not overshadow the light of our ancient civilization

Overtly satirical poems criticizing the political establishment are the consequence of years of violence. Here also the satire is directed towards those who are in power and have the mandate, the authority to make changes but have failed miserably to fulfill the expectations of the people. The criticism is pointed, sometimes the poet has even named the politician, for instance I.K. Gujral in the poem ‘When the Prime Minister Visits Shillong The Bamboos Watch in silence’ This particular poem is criticism of the politicians but at the same time makes fun of their predicament. They may have the trappings of power and try to look important but in reality there is no respect for them in the mind of the people. So—

“Some say he came

homing like a missile

and left flying like an arrow

*Some say he dropped
like a falling star
and was sighted by a few
disgruntled leaders.” (p55)*

The line –“The Bamboos watched in silence”, provides the touch of irony. This, watching in silence’ is again a recurring feature in many poems. Whether the poet is talking about the brutal effects of violence, or lamenting the loss of tradition and culture, each time there is a conscious self-restrain in the expressions, as if the beauty and silence of the fields urge the poets not to shout.. The brutality of the violence around, the rude, unsympathetic attitude of the politicians, surprisingly do not generate anger among the poets rather there is a complete sense of resignation mixed with a timid optimism.

The poem ‘Of A Minister’ by Chandra kanta Murasingh expresses the vacuity in the existence of the ministers. Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih appreciates Murasingh’s poem as “a brilliant example of condemning the nihilism of those in power”⁴ A very poignant description of the minister is provided; we need to reflect how many of our present politicians fit into this description ----

*“The minister has not inside, not outside.
No air, no fertile soil of the sandbank.
There are only words, the call of hundred open roads,
Pulling at the sleeves day and night.” (p33)*

The poem ‘For The Mother’ by S. Bhanumati Devi is a rather long poem where the meaning of Patriotism is being compared with the pre independence and post independence scenario.

*But today, Mother---
Because of narrow sentiments
Indulging in autocracy
Caring nothing for truth
Stained with blood
Your body has become, Mother. (p 60)*

All the poets irrespective of the state to which they belong have voiced their concern at the latest trend where the traditional way of life has lost its importance in the face of the onslaught of modernity. Rapid economic growth and the phenomena of globalization together have urbanized our youth and the traditional way of life, the local ethos is fast disappearing. This lamentation is like a loud chorus and is replete with deep remorse at the loss. Quite symbolically a young Assamese poet Anupama Basumatary has crystallized this feeling in the following lines---

"In the hope of achieving something

Every man is only losing himself".[p 47]

He is no more connected with his native land and so his unique identity is lost forever. The poet considers it to be a betrayal. Abandoning one's culture, one's tradition and adopting the alien culture is the modern trend. The present generation has a shocking similarity in the way they dress, they talk and behave and this has sadly robbed them of the diverse and exciting colors and flavors of their own culture. That culture provides a sense of belonging and imparts identity, but today's youth in an attempt to be modern have disowned their roots. Anupama Basumatary has used the ancient symbol of the holy river Ganges as the eternal provider, the mother who is burdened by the betrayal of her own children----

"O Ganges, What have you there in your womb?

The ship, the boat, the sailor, the fisherman and

The living beings within you?

Are their betrayal too heavy for you?

Just As I sit here on your bank

Burdened with a bleeding heart. " [p47]

Desmond L. Kharmawphlang's (a Khasi poet) poem 'Thaiang Buried Roots' is a beautifully landscaped poem where there is the dominant local imagery like 'rice-wine', and the 'voices of the hills'. Amidst such all round beauty the poet asks---

"... Where are the soft grains of remembrance?

There is no center, and roots sprawl about like fractured time." (p 51)

Two very powerful adjectives –fractured times and sprawled roots encapsulate the very destruction wrought about in modern times. The present generation is busy "disbanding the dreams" of their ancestors and are perpetrating their "own dark deeds". For Manipuri poet S. Bhanumti Devi our motherland our country is sad. We her children have failed her, betrayed her. Independent Mother India is not happy because we have not been able to realize all that we had promised. Not only this, all that was good has been overshadowed by the immense power of the evil. The Law of nature, the ever moving cycle of time has dealt cruel blows to her dreams of a peaceful, better future.

"The time has become very cruel, Mother

The truth you wanted

The love you coveted

They had disappeared, sunk

In the current of time. “ (p59)

A rather depressing survey of approximately fifty poems composed by twelve poets of the north- east has enriched us with the knowledge of the concerns of the people of this part of India.. Let me conclude in an optimistic note as proclaimed by Mamang Dai of Arunachal Pradesh in the poem ‘The Missing Link’

“Remember because

nothing is ended

but it is changed ,

and memory is

a changing shape

showing with these

fading possessions

In lands beyond

The great ocean

That is all changed

But not ended. “ (p65)

I had started reading these poems with a lot of curiosity, as they appeared to belong to a far –off land, to an alien culture. All the poets have remained faithful to their culture and people in writing about local issues, holding a mirror to the people and trying to make them aware. Yet all these dominant themes will find echo in other regional voices as well as mainstream Indian poetry in English. In fact these issues have taken up a pan-Indian characteristic. Violence has become a way of life. Stoic acceptance, subdued anger and courage to move on in spite of temporary setback and personal loss identified the famous Mumbai Spirit after 26/11.

In this globalized world and the era of the virtual world ethnicity is worn like a label on special occasions of Poila Boishakh (Bengali New-year) and Bihu (the harvest festival of Assam). Change is irreversible. Mother India, the proud and largest democracy of the world has witnessed the farcical nature of the political establishment. All the thematic concerns of the poems of the north-east are very much also the concerns of modern India. Regional poetry has the unmistakable stamp of local culture and yet at the center they celebrate the core Indian- ness. This amalgamation of the local at the micro level and of the national at the macro level also extends to the use of language and more so in the use of symbols, images and myths. Since a full-length study on this is not possible here I will restrict myself to few such examples. An interesting peculiarity of these poets is the use

of indigenous and home-grown, culture- specific images and juxtaposing them with urban and what may be termed as globalized images. This close proximity of divergent images and symbols – culture specific and urban is a reflection of the interaction of the local culture with global influences. Also this mirrors the effect of globalization and market economies on our literature.

The use of ‘Gamocha’ as a symbol of nostalgia which reminds one of mother’s love is typical of Assamese culture, where gifting ‘gamocha’, woven at home at a handloom is a tradition reminding one of love and care and which is slowly dying. Similarly an extremely difficult image is the “unfolding the maichu of words “(p 33) in the poem titled quite simply “A Poem”. ‘Maichu’ is a typical dish prepared in the north-eastern region and it involves carefully unwrapping the intricately folded banana leaf to finally expose the food with its strong whiff of heavenly aroma, the equivalent of unwrapping a word covered in the myriad meanings and finally discovering a new connotation, a new meaning. Usage of these types of images can both be a hindrance for an uninitiated reader and at the same time if properly appreciated can open up a whole range of aesthetic pleasure. It will be exciting to explore the impact of the use of such culture- specific symbols on the quality of such poems.

As mentioned earlier along with these culture- specific images most of the poets discussed here have used modern urban symbols and images which perfectly match the themes of these poems. I quote from the poem “Is Someone Inside?” by Rajendra Bhandari—

“I’ve become a wet match-box, I need a sunny morning.

It is total blackout outside.

Shop’s shutters closed like men’s hearts.

The roadside drain roars like human emotions.

My mind, even colder than a wet cloth.” (p21)

“Is Someone Inside” is a poem about the anxieties and vacuity of urban life and such a poem typically is devoid of the beauty of the natural landscape of the region, rather the poem moves in a racy pace using stark, nude, real images of a city. Another poem “A Last Word” by the Yumlemban Ibomcha (Manipuri Poet) is again a poem expressing the dilemma of existence –

“Dreams

And realities

What is the difference in between.

O Life

Drink wine

Smoke ganja

Eat Opium.” (p27)

Conclusion:

To conclude one can confidently say that although the poets of this region are rooted in their culture and voice the issues and concerns of their own people still they have successfully connected with the rest of the nation. Poet ChandraKanta Murasingh has articulated this in his Interview and I quote—"I think the forest with its musical rivulets and swirling leaves has grown quite profusely into my poetry. Besides these, the erosion of human values and traditions caused by modern influences and material development also form recurrent themes in my poetry. I would like to think that I have covered subjects ranging from the lush green jhum fields of remote tribal areas to the sophistication of seminar halls in the University of Calcutta and Dhaka."

Reference:

R. S. Ngangom, Indian Literature no.197:May-June,2000, Vol.XLIV No. 3, New Delhi,Sahitya Akademi

Note: All subsequent quotes from poems are from the above mentioned bi-monthly journal published by Sahitya Akademi

Interview of Chandrakanta Murasingh at Poetry International Web (www.poetryinternationalweb.net/)

Shri Babhen Barua in BipulJyoti's Homepage:Author and Poets

Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, "The Poet as Chronicler: An Overview of Contemporary Poetry in Northeast India, Poetry International Web.

List of Poets covered for this particular Paper :

Hirendranath Dutta

Nirmalprabha Bordoloi

Rajendra Bhandari

Yumlembam Ibomcha

ChandraKanta Murasingh

Robin S. Ngangom

Anupama Basumatary

Desmond L. Kharmawphlang

Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih

S. Bhanumati Devi

Mamang Dai