

Identity, Politics, and Narratives of Belonging

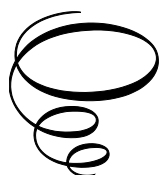
Identity, Politics, and Narratives of Belonging:

*Northeast India in Literature
and Contemporary Discourses*

Edited by

Nilakshi Goswami and Arunima Das

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*For those who reveal Northeast India's hidden symphonies,
so its spirit may dance in the open.*

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FOREWORD

AMARJYOTI CHOUDHURY

FORMER VICE CHANCELLOR, GAUHATI UNIVERSITY

I am delighted to find that a research-based anthology has been planned on the theme of identity, politics, and narratives of belonging in the backdrop of North East Indian literature and contemporary discourse. Issues of identity have led us to new and diverse trends in politics and narratives. All across the globe, we notice its diverse manifestation in our outer and inner worlds. Northeast India, a polyglossic and polycultural melting pot, provides a rare glimpse of a richer understanding of such discourses. So, it is imperative that the related ideas occupy a centre stage of our contemporary thoughts. I congratulate the editors and authors for the choice of this theme for a focused grasp of the overall perspective.

I have noticed that a number of thought-provoking papers have been incorporated in this anthology. It is also heartening to note that there have been enthusiastic contributions in all three sub-sections of the theme. Thus, on the theme of practices that are hallmarks of identity, we have a paper that highlights the megalithic culture of the Lepchas of Sikkim (Chapter 17). There are also structured investigations of thoughts and feelings that led to the evolution of Deodhani dance in honour of the serpent goddess Manasa (Chapter 9) or to that of the Lhasoishi festival of the Bon (Chapter 16) among the Monpa of Dirang. Another paper digs deep into the practices of Lora Rakh that celebrate the expressions of queerness, thus pointing towards heteronormativity in the concerned society (Chapter 11). Similarly, the language of looms (Chapter 14) and more particularly that of Vrindavani Vastra (Chapter 12) or nourishing traditions in food practices (Chapter 13) has also been analysed to understand the intricacies of identity issues.

A paper on Sadri cultivation (Chapter 18) intertwines plantation and politics. Another one looks at the consciousness of political clothing in the Northeast (Chapter 15). Yet another one looks into the inherent power politics of witch-hunting (Chapter 10). In narratives that have developed, a paper delves into the role of translation and how the regional ethos is lost and found in the process (Chapter 1). Similarly, attempts have also been made

to understand the dynamics of gender and violence in the nation-building process with reference to Nagaland (Chapter 4). Studies have been made to go beyond Assamese folklore and proverbs to understand the implications of gender and national identity in Burhi Aair Sadhu (Chapter 5). Attempts have also been made to understand how patriarchal inscriptions have been sought to be erased from women's identities as portrayed in contemporary literature (Chapter 3). Peripheral narratives from the Northeast have also been dipped for deeper meanings (Chapter 2). There has also been an interesting investigation of projection of folklore into modernity's "treacherous beings" (Chapter 6). Ecotales of Khasis leads us face-to-face with the beliefs of that community, celebrating life in harmony with nature (Chapter 7). Finally, efforts have also been made to closely observe the creative heights of folktales and fairy tales so that these can be meaningfully retold in a postmodernist fashion (Chapter 8).

The incisive observations and insights that have been achieved in this set of papers bear both universal and local attributes. Indeed, the streams and sub-streams of identity-based power play and narratives that have emerged in these papers would definitely fuel further research and should lead to future anthologies on contours of interaction, conflict, and ways of resolution in the context of identity issues. I am sure such anthologies would throw brighter lights as to how to grapple with contemporary issues of identity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Northeast India, comprising eight political units, viz., Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Sikkim, and Tripura, is the homeland of a large number of ethnic groups. To the enduring voices of Northeast India, it is your spirit and resilience that have been the essence of this project, making it a testament to beauty and strength. To you, we offer our deepest thanks! Needless to mention, this book is deeply indebted and dedicated to the people of the Northeast region, who arrived in this region at various points in time and through different routes, now inhabiting the hills and plains of the Northeast, contributing to the larger population of this region. We hold them in our thoughts with sincere appreciation—those who are behind the glory of preserving the diverse culture of Northeast India, enriching it with the multilayered dimensions of their identity, and promoting physical artefacts such as art, crafts, dress, ornaments, and musical instruments, as well as intangible elements like language, literature, and culture.

We also wish to express our deep gratitude to the scholars, artists, teachers, activists, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), journalists, and supporters who are working relentlessly for the preservation of the art and craft of this area. We warmly thank all the contributors, whose significant research and insights have greatly enriched this volume. Endless discussions, debates, and collaborations marked the creation of this book between us. The ongoing conversations, filled with passion and persistence, were the bedrock of our vision. It is through these dialogues, providing both theoretical and practical insights into the complex nature of identity, politics, and narratives in northeast India, that this book evolved and took its final shape. Last but not least, Cambridge Scholars Publishing deserves special mention for having accepted the proposal of publishing this volume. We extend our heartfelt thanks to our family, friends, and colleagues for their support throughout the long and arduous process of creating this anthology. Your patience and encouragements were a constant source of strength.

Editors

Nilakshi Goswami and Arunima Das

INTRODUCTION

NILAKSHI GOSWAMI AND ARUNIMA DAS

Identity, Politics, and Narratives of Belonging: Northeast India in Literature and Contemporary Discourses brings together a team of expert collaborators, exploring Northeast India's intricate and multifaceted cultural and literary landscape. Drawing from various disciplines, this study focuses on capturing the vibrant essence of the richly textured social landscape, sacred environment, natural resources, literary terrain, and culinary traditions, among other interrelated aspects, ensuring a comprehensive and insightful exploration of the region's diverse heritage.

Culture is something we are born into, yet it remains elusive to define. It is the framework that shapes each individual from birth, influencing and colouring the quality of their existence. Art, craft, and literature shape and reshape an individual consciously, intelligently, and actively through their interaction with the inherited cultural environment. Man's discovery and embodiment of truth, goodness, and beauty within himself, along with his growing awareness and acquisition of these qualities from the external world, are expressed through religion, philosophy, art, literature, science, and technology. Together, these elements constitute identity and culture. Identity gets established and re-established with the expression of a person's inner, elevated self—what we might call personhood—imbued with the capacity for truth, goodness, and the harmony that we recognise as beauty. Identity emerges from the interplay of technology, economic organisation, social structure, political systems, education, religion, and worldview, all shaped by their interaction with individuals and society. This holds true regardless of whether these aspects are primitive or advanced, simple or highly developed. Northeast India has seen the emergence and development of various ethnic communities over a period of time ranging from the pre-colonial period to the colonial period and up to the present time. Gaining a thorough understanding of northeastern culture requires serious study, analysis, and reflection. Like any other culture, this consists of a network of interconnected ideas—whether conveyed through concepts, myths, symbols, artefacts, value systems, or behavioural patterns—that need to be identified, studied, and enriched. Building on this comprehensive foundation, this

anthology is categorised into three distinctive yet interrelated sections, each providing a critical perspective on Northeast India's complex literary and cultural landscape.

The first part, "Translating Voices: Literary Landscapes and Representations of Northeast India," critically analyses the approaches, challenges, and implications of Northeastern regional literature along with its translation into English, delving into how it influences the preservation, adaptation, and evolution of cultural narratives. Transitioning to the second part, "Gender Dynamics and Community Practices," the anthology shifts its attention to the complexities of gender and community practices. Analysing the issues of gender dynamics, bodily politics, violence, and women's agency, this part explores how these practices and narratives engage with or contest prevailing societal norms, contributing to the ongoing dialogues on the region's diverse customs and community practices. The final part of the anthology "Entangled Identity, Beliefs, and Customs," which focuses intently on identity, beliefs, and customs, provides an in-depth examination of customary practices, regional folklore, and religious beliefs while shedding light on how they shape regional identities and cultural dynamics. This section systematically delves into the interplay between tradition and modernity, investigating how indigenous narratives articulate and mould conceptions of identity, belief systems, and social customs. Through their meticulous portrayal of these multifaceted aspects of the Northeastern region, these sections reveal the reciprocal interplay of regional customs and folklore and their reflections in the evolving cultural discourse of Northeast India. Thus, this anthology, through its tripartite structure, aims to deliver a nuanced perspective on the region's literary, social, and cultural heritage while providing extensive and invaluable insights into its dynamic and transformative narratives.

Part I: Translating Voices: Literary Landscapes and Representations of Northeast India

Part I of this anthology, "Translating Voices: Literary Landscapes and Representations of Northeast India," delves into Northeast India's rich literary heritage, highlighting how the influence of literature alongside the transformative process of translation has not just represented but also redefined its cultural expressions. This section studies literature and its translation as a crucial mechanism of rendering the region's diverse narratives accessible to a global audience. It also provides a comprehensive analysis of the dynamic interplay between literature, translation, and

representation, shedding light on the manner in which Northeast Indian literature negotiates and reimagines cultural and linguistic divides. By thoroughly examining the nuances of these indigenous narratives in translation, this process not only fosters cross-cultural dialogues but also further sustains and thereby preserves cultural norms and identities. The insights reveal the complex role in which translations, in turn, impact the evolution of literary tradition, enhancing the understanding of the region's engagement with global literary and cultural conversations. This part further exposes the inherent paradoxes and conflicts in translating vernacular literature from a polyglot and linguistically rich region into a single and often homogenising language, uncovering the broader ramifications for safeguarding regional literary heritage.

The opening chapter of this part, Chapter 1, "Literature from the Northeast: Lost and Found in Translation" by Shibani Phukan, lays the groundwork by examining how translation facilitates the reach and broader accessibility of Northeast Indian regional literature to a wider and more diverse global audience. Phukan traces the cultural and historical impacts of rendering indigenous literature into English, underscoring how translation serves as both a conduit and a potential barrier to maintaining cultural intricacies. This section then expands, through Jupitara Boro's exploration of gender, folklore, and identity in Chapter 2, "Unveiling the Unseen and Unheard: Peripheral Narratives from North East India," on the manner in which translation and literary exploration serve to foreground marginalised perspectives into greater visibility. Boro's focused analysis of Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* illustrates the transformative role of oral traditions and folklore in safeguarding cultural heritage while challenging dominant narratives and reclaiming misrepresented histories and identities in Northeastern Indian literature. Chapter 3, "Erasing Patriarchal Inscriptions on Women's Identity" by Kamayani Bhatnagar, and Chapter 4, "Violence and Gender in Nation Building: A Terrible Matriarchy" by Swati Baruah, delve into the depiction of female characters in the literary works of the region. Bhatnagar's examination of Arupa Patangia Kalita's works exposes the deep-seated patriarchal barriers that stifle women's identities, while Barua's analysis of Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* unveils gender-based violence embedded into Nagaland's nation-building efforts.

As the anthology unfolds, the focus subtly shifts from the issues concerning gender and translation to the in-depth exploration of regional folklore. Through this transition, indigenous narrative traditions are emphasised to illuminate how these practices bring further clarity on the integrally intertwined concepts of identity and social values. The subsequent chapters,

as they delve into the region's folklore, provide new insights on the way these storytelling practices engage with vital issues like gender, modernity, and ecological sensitivity. Chapter 5, "Beyond Assamese Folklores and Proverbs: Gender, National Identity, and *Burhi Aai'r Sadhu*" by Nilakshi Goswami, interrogates the depiction of women in Assamese folklore, with a focused attention to the stereotyped figure of stepmothers, exploring the broader societal attitudes and their implications on gender dynamics in Assamese society. Chapter 6, "Modernity's Treacherous 'Beings' and the Embrace of Folklore: The Madness of Mama Kyn and the Search for the Golden Mahseer" by Satyendra Singh, analyses Khasi folklore and how it grapples with the tension between tradition and modernity, providing a subversive lens of identity and the nature of reality. Chapter 7, "Eco-tales of the Khasis: Ecological Motifs in Select Khasi Folktales from Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends*," by Darpana Gogoi and Monalisha Medhi, brings to light the ecological awareness reflected in Khasi legends, underscoring the deep environmental and cultural values embedded in these traditional tales. The last chapter of the first part, Chapter 8, "A Cultural and Creative Perspective on the Folklore of Assam and the Changing Narrative in the Contemporary Era" by Yashonama Choudhury, suggests the richness in creativity, blending local myths, legends, and moral lessons in Assamese folktales and imaginative storytelling that reflects the cultural ethos of the region. It further emphasises how often these tales incorporate vibrant characters, supernatural elements, and poetic language, making them both entertaining and educational in postmodern society.

Collectively, these chapters explore the distinctive literary landscape of Northeast India, offering a thorough examination of how literature and translation both interact with and influence the region's varied narratives. Through an in-depth exploration of gender, literature, and folklore, this section uncovers the intricate ways in which Northeast Indian literature simultaneously engages with and challenges cultural conventions. The contributions further offer a nuanced perspective into how traditional narratives intersect with contemporary issues, emphasising how the region's literature, thereby, fosters a dialogue between historical contexts and present-day realities. Part I of this anthology, in turn, not only underscores the significance of the indigenous literature from the region but also situates it within a broader social and cultural framework, highlighting the richness and diversity of Northeast India's literary traditions. By showcasing a rigorous counter-narrative to mainstream perspectives, it celebrates the resilient and dynamic nature of Northeast Indian literature, enriching a deeper appreciation of its cultural and intellectual facets.

Part II: Structure of Gender Dynamics and Community Practices

Part II of this volume is on “Structure of Gender Dynamics and Community Practices” in Northeast India, which deals with the complex nature of gender and community practices in Northeast India. They are shaped by diverse ethnic, cultural, and social factors, reflecting an understanding of the gender dynamics in Northeast India and showing the region’s rich cultural platform, including the matrilineal system, cultural diversity, community-orientated practices, and the impact of modernisation. This part of the volume comprises 3 chapters.

In chapter 9, “Mandap, Manch, Mandir: Manifestation of Serpent Goddess Manasa in Deodhani, a Ritual Dance Form of Assam,” Prerna Pradhan presents a detailed exploration of the subtle interrelation between gender and social practices in Assam, as examined through cultural rituals, legal frameworks, and artistic expressions in the context of a profound tradition dedicated to the serpent goddess Manasa. The paper explores how performative meanings are culturally constructed, concealed, and displayed. It examines how the manifestation of the serpent goddess Manasa in Assam is influenced by gender politics, social conditioning, and religious performativity, questioning whether her divinity is realised in the mandapa, manch, mandir, or elsewhere, with special reference to the Deodhani tradition in Sipajhar. Chapter 10 in “Gender and Witch-Hunting: An Intersectional Analysis among the Rabha Community of Assam” by Shikha Das presents a critical analysis of the Assam Witch Hunting Act of 2015. The paper on this subject provides a deep dive into the practice of witch-hunting within the Rabha community in the Goalpara district of Assam. By examining the narratives around witchcraft through the lenses of gender, class, and community identity, this study focusses on the gendered dimensions of such social practices while also probing the underlying reasons for the persistence of both dominant and marginalised narratives.

Lastly, in chapter 11, “Performing Arts, social media, and other genders: A case study of the Raas Leela (Lora Rakh) festival of Assam as potential folkloric artefacts in Queer Space” by Kaustav Padmapati, we explore the acceptance of queer artistic expressions within Assam’s folk performance traditions, with a focus on the “Raas Leela,” where male performers take on female roles. The analysis highlights the rising popularity of “Lora Rakh” performances, which have gained significant attention on social media. This paper investigates how digital media serves as a crucial platform for queer expression, enabling a comparison with similar performing cultures in other

states. Through these studies, this volume captures the dynamic and evolving landscape of gender and social practices in Assam, offering readers a comprehensive understanding of how traditional and contemporary forces interact to shape cultural identities in the region.

Part III: Entangled Identity, Beliefs and Customs

Culture and identity always evolve over time. Influenced by beliefs, customs, and traditions inherited and passed on through culture and identity, tangible and intangible heritage forms the foundation upon which communities and societies build their sense of self. These include physical cultural attributes such as food, textiles, rituals, ceremonies, and social practices, which are often showcased through festivals and public celebrations that reaffirm communal bonds and cultural values. These powerful expressions of identity, where the past and present converge, allow communities to remember their history while adapting to contemporary realities.

Part III of this book, titled “Entangled Identity, Beliefs, and Customs,” explores through various cultural and historical lenses in the chapters presented. Each chapter reflects the relationship between identity and tradition in different communities of Northeast India, highlighting how customs, beliefs, and artefacts have intertwined to shape and preserve cultural identities in the face of changing times. Chapter 12, “Vrindavani Vastra: Resurgence and Reflections,” by Sangeeta Dutta, addresses a pertinent aspect regarding a piece of textile from Assam that has elevated the identity of the whole region on the global platform. She talks about the historical significance and the socio-cultural and religious connection related to it. Beyond its physical presence, the Vrindavani Vastra is an embodiment of a sense of belonging, emotion, and a revival of the tradition despite the design, weaving, medium, and utility, emphasising the powerful role of intangible cultural heritage. In Chapter 13, “Nourishing Traditions: Folk Beliefs in Food Practices among Karbi Women in Kamrup, Assam,” Tiluttoma Baruah and Shyam B. Choudhury reflect on the relationship between folk beliefs and food practices among the Karbi women residing in the Kamrup district of Assam with reference to the diet and dietary customs during menstruation and pregnancy. Thus, this paper throws light on the nourishing traditions by understanding the intersection between food, culture, and reproductive health in the Karbi indigenous group.

Arunima Das and Antara Kashyap in Chapter 14, “The Language of Looms: The Role of Textiles in Cultural Expression of Assam,” give a panoramic view of Assamese textiles. Assamese textile is an expression of the excellent

artistic crafts of the culture of Assam, with their elaborate designs and descriptions. This talks about the craftsmanship and aesthetic sense in the weaving procedure, which includes rearing, spinning, dyeing, farming the loom, and creating motifs and designs revealing significant artistic sensitivity. This paper takes up all these elements and shows how weaving acts as a medium for the weavers to express their psychological state of mind and imaginations through the designs and motifs since time immemorial. Neebha Machahary in Chapter 15 titled “The Body and Identity Consciousness of Political Clothing” begins with the idea of Northeast India's ethnic groups and their way of preserving their culture and identity through traditional attire, especially during periods of conflict and protest. This legacy continued during the Bodo tribal political movement in Assam, and this paper tries to investigate how cultural dress serves as both a symbol of identity and a means of political expression.

The study also explores the transformation in Bodo culture before and after these movements, drawing on insights from an interview with Akademi Award-winning writer, Dr. Rita Boro. In Chapter 16, “Lhasoishi Festival of the Bon among the Monpa of Dirang,” Tenzin Thekcho discusses a significant cultural and religious event celebrated by the Monpa community of Dirang, namely the Lhasoishi festival. This festival is mainly celebrated among the Bon religion, which predates Buddhism and emphasises the worship of nature and ancestral spirits that serves as an occasion for the Monpa people to honour their deities, seek blessings for prosperity, and reaffirm their cultural identity. The celebration typically involves rituals, prayers, and communal gatherings, reflecting the community's connection to their heritage and the natural world. In Chapter 17, “Sacred Stones: Exploring the Relationship between Traditional Religion and Megalithic Structures among the Lepchas of Sikkim,” Munmun Chutia has observed the connection between the ancient practice of megalithic erection and the traditional religious beliefs of the Lepcha community in Sikkim. This ethnoarchaeological account analyses how the practitioner of megalithic culture manages to preserve and practice the age-old tradition even though the community is intensely influenced by today's uncertain social milieu. Chapter 18, “Not ‘Assam Sadri’: An Introduction to the Plantation Varieties in Barak Valley” by Anujeema Saikia, is a study on the plantation varieties in Assam with a focus on the Brahmaputra Valley, leading to the development of “Assam Sadri,” which overlooks the linguistic diversity in the Barak Valley. This paper explores the multilingual and heterogeneous space of Balisor, a village shaped by post-independence tea labour migration, and examines the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Jhilo-Milo and Bhojpuri-speaking communities. It also challenges the idea of “Assam

Sadri” as a comprehensive linguistic identity in Assam, highlighting Jhilo-Milo as a significant marker of shared identity in the Barak Valley, distinct from traditional creole and pidgin classifications.

In these chapters in Part III, “Entangled Identity, Beliefs, and Customs,” the authors have intensely illustrated how identity is not only a static concept but rather an evolving phenomenon that has continuous interconnection with tradition and cultural practices of a community. These elements form the fabric of a community that provides structure, significance, and continuity. Thus, by preserving and revitalising the cultural aspects, we are not only protecting the history, but it also enriches the cultural landscapes of present and future societies globally.

LIST OF ABSTRACTS

Literature from the Northeast: Lost and Found in Translation

Shibani Phukan

In Translation as Discovery and Other Essays on Indian Literature in English Translation, Sujit Mukherjee suggests the enabling idea of English translations of works in Indian languages working as a link literature for India. Given the context of political, social, and cultural marginalisation the Northeast of India continues to combat, the relevance of Mukherjee's idea cannot be overemphasised. In a chapter titled "Literature from the North-east: Lost and Found in Translation," the focus would be on English translations of literary works from the north-east. Using a cultural materialist theoretical framework, the chapter would begin by locating the beginning of translation activities in the Northeast as a consequence of British colonialism and its resultant impact on the language and literature from the Northeast. In doing so, the chapter would put forth the idea of looking at translations not merely in terms of inter-linguistic translations but, given the rich oral tradition of literature that exists in the Northeast, suggest the enabling perspective of looking at the very act of writing in English as also an act of translation. Further, the chapter would look at emergent and dominant thematic tropes, translation strategies adopted, and if the end result of these translations preserves the polyphonic multilingualism, diversity of ethnicities, cultures, religions, and so on in the process. In conclusion, it would also be worthwhile to analyse if translations into English are able to overcome the paradox inherent in translating into the coloniser's language through a practice of resistant translatorial methods to ensure that translations remain meaningful and retain the subversive, which is a defining aspect of translatorial practices in India.

Keywords: Translation, inter-linguistic, orality, multilinguality, diversity, subversive, cultural-materialism

Unveiling the Unseen and Unheard: Peripheral Narratives from North East India

Jupitara Boro

A land to several ethnic communities, cultures, languages, and customs, each with its own set of mythical tales and oral literatures, writers navigating from North East India endeavours to amplify the traditions and vanished past, that was historically passed down orally. To re-establish their identity, misrepresented history, and rejuvenate the silenced voices, their literary compositions are incorporated with elements of lore, proverbs, mythologies, and folklore distinctive to each community. Notably, each tribe has its own distinct blend of beliefs, customs, and heritage represented in their oral literature, clothes, music, and languages, leaving a deep cultural and historical legacy of Northeast India. As observed, in the magnum opus *The Black Hill*, Mamang Dai vividly portrays the hitherto memories and hidden past of the highlands of Abor and Mishmee in the 1850s, retracing their history and culture. Drawing inspiration from real documented events, it is a work of fiction that took place in the 19th century in Arunachal Pradesh, intertwining two historical occurrences. A French priest who vanished mysteriously and a Mishmee tribal member who was executed for killing the priest. Celebrating oral history and storytelling, *The Black Hill* is an escape into the dynamic landscape of Arunachal Pradesh, a home and a source of great pride for the indigenous communities. A tale of resistance and determination against the migluns attempting to seize their homeland, the tribe's love for their homeland, folklore, animism, rivalry, and gender space is discerned amongst the tribes. Narrating Gimur, a strong female character that challenges societal norms and gives voice to marginalised women, the characters appear to be shaped by a variety of spirits, taboos, supernatural beliefs, and mythologies. In her writing, Dai emphasises the central importance of oral tradition in establishing the nuances of her various literary works. Creating a considerable impact on the social consciousness of the communities in the region, oral traditions serve as a source of inspiration for literate form. To investigate more about tribal history and culture, this paper examines Dai's creative linking of retelling the hidden past with documented history. This paper is an earnest endeavour to delve into the various realms of oral literature and storytelling, exploring writings from Northeast India, with a reflection on Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* interwoven with a gripping work of fiction and historical narratives.

Keywords: Storytelling, oral tradition, inter-tribe unrest, animism, border consciousness, ecology

Erasing Patriarchal Inscriptions on Women's Identity

Kamayani Bhatnagar

Women in Arupa Patangia Kalita's stories have been richly represented. Almost all of her works are focused on how women are victims in multiple ways. The stories can be easily seen as a scathing yet subtle and deep indictment of a society that has prescribed patriarchal structures and where even articulation of their sorrow is denied to women. This paper seeks to examine how gender, caste, and objectification of women's bodies has been represented in the works of Arupa Kalita. In *Doiboiki's Day*, Kalita looks at how a woman's body is seen as 'unclean' from the matrix of caste, class, and gender politics, while *Arunima's Motherland* is a profoundly harrowing account of a woman's horrific experience of witnessing how her home and family are destroyed in the wake of ULFA insurgency ascendancy and everything familiar becomes *unheimlich*. *The Golden Rice of Cursed Fields* looks at how the winds of change disrupt the tribal way of life and make life extremely difficult for the protagonist Mainao. In a very recent work, *Pass Chotalar Kathakata* Kalita looks at how a young girl's attainment of puberty becomes a major signifier of change in her status within the family as her 'body' becomes 'unclean' and is a 'stigma.' This experience of being seen as a 'violation' is something Kalita explores in her exceptionally beautiful and simplistic manner. These stories give us a perspective on understanding and articulating the very complex ways in which society inhibits a woman's identity.

Keywords: Insurgency, violence, caste, class politics

Violence and Gender in Nation Building: *A Terrible Matriarchy*

Swati Baruah

This paper will critically explore the intricacies of gender and violence in the postcolonial world during the process of nation building in Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007). *A Terrible Matriarchy* is set in Nagaland, a state in Northeast India, during the 1970s-80s at the peak of the Naga independence struggle. The voice of young female protagonist Lieno echoes resistance since she has been subjected to violence by the state and domesticity.

Suchitra Vijayan's *Midnight's Borders: A People's History of Modern India* (2021) reports accounts of the erasure of colonial and continued violence in Nagaland. The Naga insurgency is one of the oldest resistances in India. The

people fear being politically controlled by the Indian state and the homogenisation of their culture, losing their history. Through the missionary reports, ethnographic writings, and personal accounts of British officers, history has suppressed the aspects of brutality that imposed Western values in the lives of indigenous ‘backward’ people. The missionaries attempted to homogenise the different communities under the umbrella of Christianity to produce one identical nation under the British Empire (Vijayan, 112). *A Terrible Matriarchy* demonstrates the aftermath of colonial brutality through the conversion of religion, the introduction of western educational systems, and finally, the homogeneity of communities into one nation.

The Naga society in Kire’s *A Terrible Matriarchy* is predominantly Christian; the people have not moved far from their indigenous beliefs and superstitions. The community thrives on gossip about spirits and ghosts in their neighbourhood. Leino is told a story about her great-grandmother, who did not want to be photographed. She feared that her life would be shorted as her soul would be trapped in the frame. Only the thought of being a Christian now comforted her since Christianity forbids these superstitious beliefs. Kire reveals the distrust of the people with the state powers. Kire demonstrates the distance between the people of Nagaland and the foreign Indian country which claims to govern them. It is not only the impact of colonialism that Kire writes about but also the intrusion of the Indian state in the governance of the Naga people. Leino notices her mother throwing away an old photo frame gifted by an “Indian” man. She also has heard stories of the distant land of “India” from her teachers at school.

Therefore, this essay intends to investigate the other side of violence in nation-building. While the men are at the forefront of the freedom struggle, the women bear psychological and physiological violence. Thus, this essay will explore the mundanity of chaos in conflict-ridden areas. It would explore the gendered state violence in close relationship with domestic abuse and how Kire portrays the continued colonial violence in the postcolonial psyche.

Keywords: Nation building, state violence, domestic violence, gender, Christianity, postcolonialism

Beyond Assamese Folklores and Proverbs: Gender, National Identity and *Burhi Aai'r Sadhu*

Nilakshi Goswami

Representation has always been vital to the understanding of literature. However, the stereotyping of females in different genres of representation has rendered them either the epitome of virtues and ideals or has identified them with pejorative terms. Consequently, women have been reduced to passive objects for display and appropriation and, in turn, converted into signifiers of a broader notion of culture, tradition, and nation. This chapter, thereby, examines the trajectory of women represented in some of the selected folklores of Assam, namely, “Tejimola,” “Tula and Teja,” and “The Kite’s Daughter” from the collection *Burhi Aai'r Sadhu* (1911) written by Lakshminath Bezbarua. By analysing different paremiographical works in Assam with specific reference to the language of proverbs, the paper would further analyse gender and power relationships that remain integrally intertwined with the folk tradition.

While Assamese culture and society is known for its rich legacy of oral literature, representation of women, specifically the figure of stepmother remains vital in examining the popularity of folk tales or *sadhukotha*. The typical portrayal of a stepmother, who is usually represented as evil and wicked compared to the benevolent polygamous father, has acquired a cult status over time in Assamese consciousness, which would be interrogated in this research. While the Assamese folk tradition marks a deviation from the grand European tradition of folk literature in terms of gender stylisation and thematic approach, fashioning itself in the form of magic realism, these narratives create their own tradition of conflict and resolution, wherein the semiotics of violence and brutality remain crucial to the analysis of gender. Do these folk narratives and regional proverbs help in subverting the established gender norms? Or do they embolden the existing gender stereotypes in so far as the representations of women are concerned? Do these Assamese folk tales and proverbs manifest the bipolar division of the society entailed by the social construction of gender? Do these narratives have any characteristic role to play in establishing a distinctive sense of Assamese nationalism against the Eurocentric tradition of folk tales?

Keywords: Folklore, proverbs, gender, national identity, culture and tradition

Modernity's Treacherous 'Beings' and the Embrace of Folklore: The Madness of Mama Kyn and the Search for the Golden Mahseer

Satyendra Singh

In a country as diverse as India, defining “Indianness” without giving in to the hegemony of grand narratives has largely remained unattained. Narratives from the history and culture of north India (often called the ‘mainland’) have widely been presented as *Indian* history, literature, reality, and culture. Janice Pariat’s Sahitya Akademi Award-winning debut collection of short stories *Boats on Land* (2012), seeks to rupture this totalising trend by presenting a people’s history of the Khasi region from precolonial to contemporary times. In doing so, while on the one hand it interrogates the myth of the northeast as an ‘exotic extension’ of ‘mainland’ India that has remained untouched by forces of colonialism and modernity (both European and postcolonial); on the other, an *active* presence of Khasi myths and folklore in the stories makes them capable of conceptualising reality, being, and identity in radically subversive ways.

By doing a close-reading of one of the short stories in the collection, “Dream of the Golden Mahseer” which explores the madness of a World War II veteran Mama Kyn, the paper evaluates the phenomenon of madness as a function of *disturbances* set within the interconnected triad of being, temporality and spatiality. The disturbances are traced as emanating from a matrix that is comprised of several *conflicting* forces: of tradition versus modernity, of ‘premodern’s’ faith in the supernatural versus modernity’s ruthless rationality, and most importantly, of a regenerative experience of nature, being, and time in cultures governed by oral folklore versus a self-fragmenting experience of the tyranny of outer time in cultures premised upon modernity’s material culture. In exploring these conflicts in the short story which are presented *not* as binary opposites but as dialectical forces converging into a synthesis in the Khasi subjectivity, the paper aims at understanding identity politics for the ‘modern’ Khasi subject.

A coming-of-age story of the narrator-protagonist Aaron, who grows up in a large, matrilineal, joint family in Shillong, the short story presents *child* Aaron’s fascination with the community’s folkloric explanation of Mama Kyn’s madness: “Lah kem puri” or “he is taken by the water fairies.” This explanation—what modernity would label as ‘superstition’—precipitates attitudes of care and inclusion towards Mama Kyn in the community, unlike modernity’s stigma-inducing explanations of the binary of madness and sanity. By evoking this folkloric explanation of Mama Kyn’s madness, the

short story documents the alternate modernity of the Khasi ‘premodern’ paradigm and makes a case for multiple modernities. However, the short story’s postmodernity cautiously avoids the pitfall of romanticising the world of folklore by giving voice to the individual’s mini-narrative: When Aaron asks Mama Kyn about his disappearances, the latter says that he is on a quest for the elusive golden mahseer. Time passes, and the *adult* Aaron’s subjectivity learns to privilege modernity’s rational temporality over the expansiveness of his folkloric roots. But when confronted with existential dread (his share of disturbances in the triad!), he finds himself revisiting his childhood home (now changed under the growing forces of modernity) and memories of Mama Kyn. What follows is a symbolically profound ending in which the binaries of time, space and being collapse in Aaron’s overflowing Khasi subjectivity, and the elusive golden mahseer becomes the bridge between modernity and ‘premodern.’

Keywords: Khasi folklore, modernity, alternate modernity, multiple modernities, madness, belongingness, alienation, existential dread

Eco-Tales of the Khasis: Ecological Motifs in Select Khasi Folktales from Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih’s *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends*

Darpana Gogoi and Monalisha Medhi

In contemporary times, there is a growing acknowledgement of the significance of indigenous narrative traditions, not merely as a cultural asset but also as a wellspring of ecological and ethical insights. In today’s fast-changing world where everyone is connected globally, it’s crucial to understand and appreciate the importance of storytelling in indigenous communities. This is particularly evident when delving into the rich tapestry of Khasi legends, where the stories remind us that there exists a deeply shared legacy interwoven through stories that have sustained the Khasi community throughout the ages. This paper centers on the analysis of select Khasi folktales as narrated by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih in *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends* (2007). By examining Khasi folktales through the lens of indigenous performances, particularly legends, this paper seeks to shed light on the inherent ecological motifs that are embedded in the narratives. The primary goal is to grasp the transformative influence of cultural performances like folktales and legends in promoting ecological consciousness and sustainable practices within the context of the Khasi community.

Keywords: *Around the Hearth*, ecology, folktales, legends, sacred stories

A Cultural and Creative Perspective on the Folklore of Assam and the Changing Narrative in the Contemporary Era

Yashomana Choudhury

All the cultures in the world have their own set of folktales and fairytales, and traditional Indian cultures have a rich heritage of folklore narratives that present us with a deeper insight into ancient societies. The folklore of a region is responsible for the formation of cultural identities; they are the carriers of culture, social mores, and customs and a general understanding of the society. Traditional literature has strong roots in oral traditions, and when we talk about oral tradition, we think of the storytellers and chroniclers who narrate the tales, poems, and songs in an artistic form, which are then orally passed on from region to region and survive only in memory with no written scripts. This brings in the problem of having many versions of the same tale. Oral literature includes folktales and fairytales and all other subsets of folklore like myths, legends, proverbs, riddles, songs, epic poems, and also historical narratives of that time. The paper will study the relationship between folklore, culture, and narratives and explore the origin of fairytales within the folklore. How do we draw a parallel between folktales and fairytales? Are fairytales a part of Assamese literature? Fairytales are a subset of folktales, and what makes them distinctive is the presence of universal fairytale motifs. The study will also explore the various folktales of Assam and form a comparative narrative on the existence of fairytales in Assamese literature and the literature of the West. Fairytales are reinforced in the history of Western literature (especially Eurocentric literature) and still have a significant influence on contemporary literature and popular culture. As society is constantly evolving, the perpetual changes in the narrative of folk and fairy tales are presented as contemporary re-tellings. The modern-age adaptation incorporates historical and social changes and modern-day values such as gender equality, technological advancements, and ecological consciousness.

Keywords: Cultural identity, Assamese folktales, fairytales and folktales

Mandap, Manch, Mandir: Manifestation of Serpent Goddess Manasa in Deodhani, a Ritual Dance Form of Assam

Prerna Pradhan

This paper focuses on *Deodhani*, a ritual dance form of Assam, located in the North-eastern region of India. *Deodhani* dance (or *Debadhani*, *Doudini*) is a repertoire of ritual worship, poetic narration, and dance performance

glorifying serpent goddess Manasa. Although, initially a non-Hindu goddess, Manasa has come to be gradually included within the folds of the Hindu pantheon of deities. This paper intends to study this dance form in three spaces—the community space called *mandap* (open yard) and *manch* (stage, both rural and urban) performed by *deodhanis* and at Kamakhya *mandir* (temple) performed by *deodhas* during the annual *Deodhani* festival. Practiced in districts of Assam like Darrang and Kamrup, *Deodhani* is usually performed by a group of three to four unmarried women from indigenous communities like Rabha and Bodo during Manasa *puja*, the period between *Sawon* and *Bhado* of the Hindu calendar (August). *Deodhas*, on the other hand, are male dancers who primarily perform at the *Deodhani* festival held at the Guwahati-located Kamakhya temple, embodying several fierce deities like Manasa, *Dus Mahavidyas*, and a few male gods. For this paper, *Deodhani* tradition of Sipajhar in Darrang district is taken for study. The elemental idea of dance form has “metamorphosised” as per the assigned space, spectatorship, and most importantly, the performer’s socially assigned gender. As the dance oscillates between these performative spaces, the overall appearance exhibits a gory display of blood blended with violent movements and gestures, almost bordering on “exhibitionist” (Urban, 2018, 13) tendencies. Conceptualising gendered bodies and ritual embodiment, the paper intends to discourse how performative meanings may often be constructed, concealed and displayed culturally, cultically and choreologically. It proposes to view how the manifestation of Manasa is structurally framed by gender politics, social conditioning, and the performativity of bodies in the religious landscape of Assam, thus posing a crucial question— where does the divinity of Manasa manifest: in the *mandap*, *manch*, *mandir*, or elsewhere?

Keywords: *Deodhani*, *deodha*, Manasa, *manch*, *mandap*; *mandir*, ritual embodiment, gender performativity

Gender and Witch-Hunting: An Intersectional Analysis among the Rabha Community of Assam

Sikha Das

The Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention, and Protection) Act, 2015, was passed to provide an effective measure to protect people accused of being witches from different forms of subordination, torture, and killing. It further discusses the punishment of the accuser and the relief and rehabilitation of the survivors of witch hunting. Between 2008 and 2012, 768 were murdered in India following the accusation of being witches

(National Crime Report Bureau). The North East India Studies mentioned that 65 women were accused as witches in the region of Assam between 2007 and 2012. An NDTV report (2013) states that the government of Assam reported 105 incidents of witch-hunting between 2006 and 2012. This paper attempts to understand the practice of witch-hunting among the Rabha community of the Goalpara district of Assam. Different groups within the community have different narratives regarding the existence of witches and their evil powers. These groups can be divided based on gender, class, age, and differences in community identity. Careful observation of these narratives has highlighted their version of ‘fact’ suitable for their stories. However, all the narratives do not have the same importance. Some narratives are widely ‘accepted’ while others are marginalised. The villagers project the accused as a threat and responsible for a different form of loss in their everyday lives. In this regard, the villagers justify their pattern of accusation and punishment to the ‘practitioner of evil power.’ The narratives of accused women have shared their stories of accusation and different forms of brutal punishments provided by their community members. This paper will first highlight the practice of witch-hunting among the Rabha community of the Goalpara district of Assam. Second, it will try to understand the reason behind the existence of dominant and subordinate narratives. Third, it intends to understand the relationship between gender and the practice of witch-hunting.

Keywords: Witch hunting, gender, intersectionality, othering, deprivation

Performing Arts, Social Media and Other Gender: Case Study of Raas Leela (Lora Rakh) Festival of Assam as Potential Folkloric Artifacts Queer Space

Kaustav Padmapati

There are a number of folk dances and performances in the northeastern Indian state of Assam, e.g., “Bhauna” or “Jatra,” where queer artistic expressions are accepted and celebrated. Since heteronormativity is an accepted norm in Assamese society, these performances, somehow, create a complex web of acceptance and celebration of queerness in rural areas. “Raas Leela,” or “Rakh Lila,” is a major annual festival of Assam introduced by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev as a part of neo-Vaishnavism movement. The festival is being observed on the full moon day in the months of October–November during the autumn season in India. During the festival, the story of Lord Krishna is presented in the form of performing arts. Performances mostly done by the male dancers are