English Writings from Northeast India

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Of Inclusions, Exclusions and Beyond

By

Priyanka Kakoti

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-7307-9
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-7307-9

For
Maa (Menakananda Kakoti)
—the little that I could do for the world that you showed me...

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am thankful to Cambridge Scholars Publishing for accepting my proposal and publishing my book. My sincere gratitude to Adam Rummens, Commissioning Editor, Cambridge Scholars Publishing for sailing me through the publication process in a hassle free manner. I am grateful to him for responding to my mails cordially and addressing my concerns in the best ways possible. I would like to thank Dr Edward Crooks, Orpheus Institute, Ghent for meticulously proofreading the manuscript and his timely correspondence.

I want to sincerely thank my PhD supervisor Dr Mridul Bordoloi, Dibrugarh University for his valuable suggestions and discussions from time to time which helped me shape the arguments that I have tried to put down in my work. I am also indebted to Dr Himadri Lahiri, former Professor, University of Burdwan for offering me useful advice. He not only suggested that I should get my work published but offered his comments on my manuscript and suggested necessary changes that I should make.

I wish to thank my sister Prerona Kakoti for many reasons than one. Thank you to my husband Nasimur Rahman for helping out in the most unexpected ways! Dear daughter Eshael, thank you for supporting in your own innocent ways.

PREFACE

This book is a product of my research. As the title of the book suggests, it looks into the issues raging in Northeast India which have played a significant role in the formation of a body of literature in English from the region. During my research, I came across a number of fictions in English from the Northeast published by various publication houses of national and international repute. These strived to draw the attention of the mainstream readers to fiction writing from the region beyond India's "chicken's neck", a geographical location which has a culture and history of its own and much different from the "imaginings" of the centre.

Northeast India has a vibrant story telling tradition. The subject matter of these stories spanned from minor incidents; sometimes as minor as the appearance of a rare bird or snake to that of historical significance. It is through these stories that knowledge intrinsic to a community, a tribe or even a family was passed from one generation to the other. While writing this, I am reminded of stories around the fire during my childhood which introduced me to some significant

movements in Assam – the Assam movement, the Language movement- the role that some of my family members played in those movements; how they affected the lives of the common people who were struggling for their identity; what was migration like in a borderland like ours and moreover what survival meant in the crossfire between militants on one hand and state agencies on the other. I had got acquainted with these issues through stories of elders long before I read them in books. A few years back, a young man suggested Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home;* which was my first foray into English writings from the Northeast. Ao in the introduction of her book reiterates the necessity of telling stories and recording them in the written form so that the present generation gets acquainted with the Naga struggle and acknowledges the sacrifices made by their fathers and forefathers. She appropriately titles the introduction "Lest We Forget". Soon I was introduced to an emerging body of English fictions from the Northeast which helped me understand the region from myriad perspectives.

During my study, I came across a few non fictional books on the Northeast which focussed on the socio-economic and political scenario of the region. But, there is a dearth of books which concentrate on the English literature from the

Northeast although English is the official language of most of the hill states of the region. This is what led to the concept of getting such a book published which would delve into the English literature emanating from the Indian periphery. Many perceptions and analytics which were otherwise limited by the requirements of a doctoral thesis find expression in this book.

INTRODUCTION

1

The "Northeast" is an umbrella term used for political convenience to group together eight Indian states that lie in the country's Northeastern Region. These are the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur, with the latest entrant being Sikkim. These states are very diverse, to the extent that people of one state do not understand the language spoken in another. There are a number of objections to the usage of the term "Northeast," which tends to homogenise a very heterogeneous region. Although it might seem directional in nature, the term "Northeast" is used to refer to a definite geographical locale. Scholars are of the opinion that by bringing a diverse people under a single umbrella term, we tend to ignore the distinct identity of different ethnic groups in the region. At the same time, there is also the tendency of the Centre to stereotype the periphery and not investigate the distinct problems that have plagued it. In such a scenario, the Centre tends to generalise

such problems without coming up with concrete solutions, which leads to dissatisfaction among diverse ethnic groups. In the academic sphere, the term "Northeast" has different implications for different people. For Sanjib Barua, the Northeast is a land of "durable disorder"; for Subir Bhowmik it is a "troubled periphery." For some the Northeast is an "illusive construct," for some "it is a distinct political ethnic, cultural, and geographical entity" (IIAS, 2012). In the words of Ngaihte (2013):

> It is a region where the people repeatedly challenge the Indian nation building process based on the "one nation theory." In a similar but different language, some consider the NE as a coinage that explains the relation of unequal power and politics between the Centre and the perceived periphery. The resultant outcome is the Centre's indecisiveness in settling the problems of the region. (Ngaihte 14)

Ngaihte also refers to the Look East Policy where the Northeast is (re)conceptualised as transcending present political boundaries. He quotes Samir Kumar Das's words, which give a different dimension to our understanding of the term Northeast:

> The new geographical imagination set off by the new policy thinking envisages a space that apparently refuses to be bound by the present geography of the Northeast as much as it promises to spread across the international borders to the countries of South East Asia through such frontline states Myanmar and Bangladesh. I propose to call this imagined space the extended North East and argue that the way the space is imagined in official circles sets in motion many new imaginaries. . . . The extended North East as being officially imagined now has a mnemonic effect so to say in so far as it offers a significant cue to the alternative modalities of imagining the extended North East. (Ngaihte 2)

The role of the media has also been significant in reinforcing the concept of the Northeast. Most newspapers, such as *The Assam Tribune* and *The Telegraph* have a page titled "North East." While Northeast is a term that has been enforced from outside, the people of the Northeastern region have themselves capitalised on it. It is the heterogeneity of the region which gives it a unique identity.

2

There are various issues such as those of identity, migration, ethnicity, language, homeland, and belonging that are pertinent across the Northeastern region. Speaking about conflicts in independent India, Uddipana Goswami in *Conflict*

and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam (2014) mentions:

> The manner in which the Indian state was put together following the transfer of power from the British rulers in 1947—often through the political arm twisting of historically independent nations and diplomatic manipulations of sovereign princely states—left much room for resentment among the newly subjected peoples thus aligned. (1)

In the words of Goswami, long unaddressed issues such as those of territory demarcation, economic development, power-sharing, and governance widened the gap between the Northeast and the Centre; thereby making the Northeast feel totally alienated and exploited. Largely because of the diversity in the composition of the population and the ethnic aspirations of various communities, there have been various conflicts in the region: "Conflicts between and within communities and against the State have thus become a norm in the postcolonial Northeast" (Goswami 1). Regarding violence, Dutta (2012) quotes Gyanendra Pandey to suggest the relationship between violence and community: "in the history of my society, narratives of particular experiences of violence go towards making the community and the subject of

history" (Dutta xxix). Dutta (2012) mentions that violence in Assam has been a constitutive element of identity. Some acts of violence and reciprocal violence in the region have not been limited to a particular period; as she states: "Once started, such episodes (of violence) have not in fact stopped for thirty years now . . . the violence that I speak about is low scale, sporadically occurring but never stopping, with little surety that it will stop permanently" (Dutta xxiv). The region has steered violence—for example, violence by insurgents and violence during counter-insurgency operations by the army, and to add to all this, violence by groups of insurgents that have surrendered either to protect their self interests or to assert their existence in society. At times, the rehabilitation of some insurgent groups has spawned further violence in the state. As far as conflicts in the region are concerned, most of them have been over ethnic boundaries. While some boundaries have been spatial or territorial, others have been ideological.

As far as Assam is concerned, there was a time when the various communities living in Assam were united against British rule. But this unity did not last long in the postcolonial phase. There were grievances against the Indian state as well as conflicts between various communities in Assam. The

grievances peaked against the Indian state after the formation of Bangladesh in the 1970s, when the Indian state ignored the influx of illegal migrants into Assam. The Assamese people suffered from the fear of a loss of identity and their resentment found expression in the civil disobedience movement popularly known as the Assam Movement in 1979. The Assam Movement lasted until 1985 and ended with the signing of the Assam Accord. It was during the Assam Movement that the United Liberation Front (ULFA) was born. The ULFA remains one of the various armed militant groups with a secessionist agenda. Uddipana Goswami mentions that since the formation of the state of Assam, the Assamese Hindu middle class had assumed a dominant role through "an attitude of cultural superiority and social dominance over the other ethnic groups" (Goswami 5). As cited by Goswami, Bhaumik mentions that when the Indian Union was formed, the Assamese middle class became its political "sub-contractor" in the Northeast. By 1985, the smaller ethnic groups began asserting their distinctive identities and nationalist demands.

As elaborated by Hiren Gohain in "Once More on Ethnicity and the North East" (2008), when the Centre asked "who is an Assamese?" the matter was referred by the then

Chief Minister of Assam to the prestigious Assam Sahitya Sabha, which he says convened a meeting with the other Sahitya Sabhas to arrive at a solution. Gohain mentions:

> When discussions proved intractable the Assam Sahitya Sabha unilaterally made a pronouncement that was once rejected vehemently by the other Sahitya Sabhas. The Assamese were willing enough to accommodate indigenous tribal groups among themselves, but denied the privilege to immigrant Muslims who arrived on the scene roughly one hundred years ago. But the tribals were no longer keen to join the Assamese mainstream; they wished to preserve their separate identity. (Gohain 2)

In the aftermath of Indian independence, different ethnic groups started voicing their concern in the Northeastern Region. In their bid to achieve their ethnic aspirations, these groups began calling for self-determination, which started ranging from demands of autonomy to complete secession from the Indian Union. The Naga Hills district of Assam separated from Assam and became a fully fledged state named Nagaland in 1963. However, hostilities continued as its demand for secession from the Indian Union and the formation of Nagalim, which would include some areas of Assam, Manipur, and Mynmar, is still unfulfilled. After a

bloody upsurge, the Lushai Hill District was separated from Assam and the new state of Mizoram was formed within the Indian Union in 1987. However, statehood has been successful in ushering in peace in Mizoram as compared with Nagaland. There was a demand for autonomy by the United Khasi and Jaintia and Garo Hills districts of Assam and this led to the formation of the state of Meghalaya in 1972. As Parag Moni Sharma, in "Ethnicity, Identity and Cartography: Possession/Dispossession Homecoming/Homelessness in Contemporary Assam" (2011), mentions: "by 1972 Assam was divided into four states: the Hindu majority Assam with a sizeable Muslim population and the Christian Hill states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya" (Sharma 2). But the demand for statehood did not stop there. Most of the "contributing constituents" (Sharma 2011) were not happy with the aftermath of the Assam Accord as they found themselves "out of the corridors of power" (Sharma 2011). With the collaboration of the Bodo Peoples' Action Committee, Upendranath Brahma launched the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) movement for self-determination in 1987. The principal demand of ABSU was for a separate Bodoland state for the Bodos, the largest ethnic group in Assam. In 1995, the Bodoland Territorial Council was

conceded to the Bodo people by the Government of India. The issues facing the Bodo people have been discussed by Uddipana Goswami (2014):

> The immigration, spread and growth of the Assamese started only since the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries during the period of the Ahoms only. They migrated from Konouj. . . . But, surprisingly and cleverly, this artificial Assamese community has captured Assam and its administration and [is] now dominating the once master ruler of Assam—the Kacharis—the Bodos. The outsider Assamese has unjustifiably overthrown the master Kacharis. (Goswami 7)

The Bodo Movement took place in two phases. The second phase was one of militant nativism. There were various instances of ethnic cleansing in 1993, 1996, and 1998. The National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) was formed in 1986 with the aim of a "sovereign" Bodoland; however, it was very much unlike the Bodoland demanded by ABSU and later the BLT (Bodoland Liberation Tigers). The state drew up the second Bodo Accord in 2003, which gave enormous legislative, financial, and executive powers to the Bodo leadership (Goswami 2011, 9) and in 2005, BLT chairman Hagrama Mohilary who had surrendered in Kokrajhar along

with 2,641 BLT cadres returned uncontested to office in elections. On a surface level, this seemed to solve some aspects of the Assamese–Bodo conflict, although there are still instances of resistance from NDFB and NDFB(S). Nevertheless, this has led to further conflict between the Assamese and the Bodos, on one hand, and the Koch Rajbongshi community on the other. The Koch Rajbongshi community is demanding that a separate state, Kamatapur, is carved out of the states of Assam and Bengal. Regarding the demand for statehood, Parag Moni Sharma (2011) remarks:

> Similar statehood demands dot Assam, with the Hill districts of Karbi Anglong demanding a Karbi state for the Karbi ethnic group and the Hill districts of North Cachar Hills demanding a Dimasa state for the Dimasa ethnic group by integrating the Dimasa speaking regions of the Northeast that includes tracts in Nagaland and Southern Assam. Both demands are backed by armed rebel groups, factions of which are now in negotiations, while others carry on with their insurrection. (Sharma 4)

Ethnicity, language, and identity are not mere terms but attain complex affiliations when they are used in the context of Northeast India. The pre-independence historiography of Northeast India shows that ethnic boundaries were not

clearly defined, at least officially, but in the post-independence period, Northeast India has become a cauldron of ethnic struggles. According to Jyotirmoy Prodhani and R. S Thakur in their edited volume *Culture, Ethnicity and Identity: A Reader* (2014), ethnicity can be categorised in two different ways—one that defines ethnicity as a given, ineffable sacred bond, hereditary or historical, that links a community together through cultural commonalities; and another that discusses ethnicity as socially constructed.

Carmen Fought (2001) says that ethnicity is a socially constructed category, but that does not mean it is a hypothetical concept without any basis in reality. Fought quotes Smelser: "The concepts of race and ethnicity are social realities because they are deeply rooted in the consciousness of individuals and groups, and because they are firmly fixed in our society's institutional life" (Fought 3). Fought goes on to mention another important characteristic component of ethnicity—self-identification—and the perceptions and attitudes of "others" in the construction of ethnic identity. Although, it is true that the ethnicity of a person in postmodern society is believed to be what he says, nevertheless, the role played by others in determining the ethnicity of individuals cannot be ignored.

The occupation of a physical space becomes an important component of an ethnic group. An ethnic group in order to keep its ethnicity intact needs an allocated physical space of its own. In the absence of a physical space, an ethnic group faces a threat to its ethnic identity formation and preservation. One of the major reasons for ethnic clashes in the Northeastern region of India is the potential threat to identities of various ethnicities in the region and their desire to occupy a physical space of their own in order to preserve their ethnicities.

Language is an important component of ethnicity, which plays a major role in identity formation. The language that a person speaks places him or her in a particular position in the society. According to Sujata Miri (2014):

> When I ask the question—Who am I? I am asking the question against the backdrop of certain kinds of knowledge that I already possess, that I am a human being, that I am a self reflective and self evaluative creature. I am also aware that my capacity to wield language is a condition of my being such a creature. (Miri 20)

Language ensures one has a place in the community and community identity has a very powerful influence upon the individual. Communities are essentially bound to a particular

place, history, a common culture. Carmen Fought (2001) states:

> One important issue that arises in the construction of ethnicity by minority ethnic groups in the region is that of assimilation versus ethnic pride. Cultural ideologies often pit these two concepts against each other promoting the idea, more or less, that you are either "one of us" or you are "one of them" and language is often seen as a key indicator of individuals positioning with respect to this dichotomy. (Fought 42)

Referring to the heterogeneous composition of society in Assam, Nandana Dutta (2012) writes:

> The presence of many "others" instead of encouraging a society to be more welcoming and more accommodative, seems to make it less so. Identity declarations and identity "crises" are in the sense clearly articulated against the fears of homogeneity as well as against fears of adulteration or mixing, or fears of difference. The mixed form is still an exotic form, pleasurable from a distance as a curiosity, as an artefact on the drawing room wall, but it is unwanted in the intimacies of the same. (Dutta XXV)

Migration and hybridity play a very important role in identity construction and these issues of identity and migration cannot be done away with while studying the region. When we speak

of identity struggles in Assam, the Assam Movement is seen as a watershed, a critical event that marked an important role for the people in making their own identity. Migration and hybridity are important constituents of the notions of identity and the Assam Movement once again throws these questions of migration and hybridity. The significance of the Assam Movement as a watershed is brought out by Dutta (2012) as follows:

> However, it was with the Assam Movement that it appeared as if, for the first time in . . . 20th Century history, the initiative had been seized by the Assamese themselves. It looked like a very special modernity moment, with "self formation" as the fulcrum around which economic, political and cultural issues ranged themselves. It was not a localized, territorially demarcated or limited movement (in the way that an incident within it like the "Nellie" was). Its geographical spread throughout the Brahmaputra valley and among the Assamese residing outside Assam meant that large numbers of people had stakes in it and had views about the issues it raised. (Dutta 4)

As far as the violence wrought by the Assam Movement is concerned, what today seems to be violence was an everyday activity at that time. Much of the violence began with the movement's strategies of protests—protest marches, picketing,

dharnas, and so on. The violence was further accelerated because the agitators aimed to enforce the same view upon the people. This violence was accompanied by an invisible kind of violence—a violence that affected interpersonal relationships not just then but even now. In trying to assert the identity of the Assamese, the Assam Movement tended to ignore the constituent smaller groups. It was a grand narrative with little room for the identity aspirations of smaller constituent groups. Though migration and hybridity seem to be the immediate reasons for the movement, the historical animosity between the Assamese and the Bengalis could have been another strong reason. As an identity movement, the Assam Movement reiterated the relationship between language and identity to some extent.

3

It was British colonialism that brought English to the region and the Christian missionaries played a vital role in setting up English-language schools. The Christian missionaries also took the lead in ushering in print culture in the Northeast. This brought many changes with it. Before the coming of the printing press, a number of Assamese dialects were spoken and there was no notion of a standard Assamese language. A

number of textbooks, books on grammar, and Christian journals were published in local languages. This led to the standardisation of a particular dialect of Assamese spoken in Upper Assam and the marginalisation of other dialects. A standardised Assamese language also facilitated the British because they had fewer problems interacting with a population so diverse that each group spoke not just a different language but also a different dialect of the same language. At the same time, a standardised Assamese language worked well for the Assamese intellectuals who were Calcutta educated. It helped them resist the attempt of the British to homogenise the entire Eastern part of India by advocating that Assamese was a dialect of the Bengali language. Assamese intellectuals with the help of the American Baptist Missionary strongly resisted such a statement, which was an attempt by the British not only to homogenise a region but also to obliterate the identity of the people beyond the "chicken's neck." There was a vibrant oral tradition among many communities of the Northeast, mostly the hill tribes. Unlike in the West, more emphasis was laid on the spoken word than the written one: it was believed that the spoken word was more authentic. Written text was seen with distrust, it was an intrusion of the West into the lives of these

tribes. Even after colonialism, the spoken word continued to reign supreme in some tribal communities of the Northeast. In such a context, the ushering in of print culture along with the installation of English as the official language in many hill states in post-independence times ushered in many changes in how the people perceived their own culture and tradition. Tilottama Misra, in "Speaking, Writing and Coming of the Print Culture in Northeast India" discusses the value of the oral in the Northeast and how contemporary writers need to fuse the written and the oral and of necessity to "write orality" as a means of maintaining their unique culture.

In recent years, there has been a corpus of literature produced in English from the region. Most of the writers in English from the Northeast were educated in English-language schools and prefer to express themselves in English than in their mother tongues. Some writers also hail from communities without a written tradition of their own and so it is English that facilitates their expression. Although writers of regional languages from the region have reservations about writing in English, the skills with which the English writers express their rootedness and intrinsic ways of upholding their culture and tradition and depict the problems that have been vital and peculiar to their communities cannot be denied. At

times, these are better than that of the writers in regional languages. As Tillottama Misra asserts in her introduction to her anthology of fiction, some of the best literature from the region have been produced in acquired languages, including English.

These writers, though belonging to different parts of the region, had gone to English medium schools; however, this does not mean that we should generalise all those writers from this region who have chosen to write in English. As far as the lumping together of diverse states under a homogeneous nomenclature "Northeast" goes, Mitra Phukan comments:

> Is this yet another example of how people living beyond the "chicken's neck" tend to lump the entire region together? How is it that they are not aware of the vast diversity of this region, how is it that they can never imagine that the literature can be talked about in the same breath at all? Even if the language used in both the cases is English, how can a writer living in a land of vast rivers, of Sattras and Borgeets, be lumped with another, whose work is infused with the myths rooted in the rolling, misty hills of his native land? (n.p.)

Phukan questions the role that English plays in this mosaic of the Northeast: "So where and how does English come into this mosaic? Does the English language, used across the