

Voices in English Poetry from North-East India: Robin S Ngangom's "The Strange Affair of Robin S Ngangom"

Dr. Dipen Bezbaruah

*Assistant Professor, Department of English
Pub Kamrup College
Baihata Chariali, Kamrup, Assam*

Abstract:

Though English poetry from North-East India is not a different branch of Indian poetry in English, there are certain factors that naturally calls for considering English poetry from this region a bit differently. These are – psychological remoteness of this region from the rest of India, socio-cultural diversities pervading every nook and corner of the region and the late entry of the poets into the field of writing poetry in English. But despite that many poets of this part of India have shown their ingenuity in this field comparable with those from mainland India. Most of the poets from the region are basically concerned with local issues, rather than bigger issues. In them is found a dominant voice for unequivocally asserting the identity of North-Eastern people by establishing or re-establishing the exquisite history, culture and folklore in the national and global stage to reduce the gap between the people of this region and those from the rest of the country. Since the beginning of the post-independence era the region has been the hotspot of many controversial and contentious issues concerning immigration, and demand for separate land leading to conflict, agitation, rise of separatist outfits, bloodshed and killing of innocent lives. The poetry from this region, be it written in English or in any other languages, realistically deal with all these issues. This paper will focus briefly on some of the central tendencies deep-rooted in the poetry from North-East India written in or translated to English giving special emphasis on Robin S Ngangom's "The Strange Affair...".

Keywords: conflict, dominant tendencies, English poetry from North-East India, identity, voices.

I. INTRODUCTION

The North-Eastern Region of India, which comprises of eight states - Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, is connected through a narrow strip, called 'Chicken's Neck', with mainland India and this connection makes the region a bit detached from the rest of India. The region, however, is widely known for its diversity which is noticeable in its unique culture, history, geography, ethnicity and language. It is because of these diversities as well as disjunctive location, the region is both distinct from and adherent to the pan-Indian socio-cultural and socio-political set-up and literary tendencies. The linguistic and cultural multiplicity of the region has corroborated the birth of literatures written in diverse languages. The trend of writing poetry in English, in fact, is not much older in this region if compared with that of the mainland India where modern Indian poetry in English emerged as a dominant voice from the beginning of postcolonial era after the end of the Second World War. Just as the hegemonic thoughts of a section of British poets and critics, who wanted the poets to be 'well educated, middle class and part of or aware of the modern westernized culture of the cities, universities and professional classes' (King 1), discouraged Indians to write poetry in English, it was the same discourse that acted as an impediment in the birth of poets from the region. In the absence of a Nissim Ezekiel, who answered 'to those who claimed that Indians could not write authentic poetry in English in which they had been educated was to write poetry as good as that of the British, American and Irish poets' (1), the North-East India had to wait for many years after the independence of India to see poets who have genuine dexterity in writing poetry in English. However, the beginning may be late, but many of these poets have proved their deftness as poets and a few of them, such as Robin S Ngangom (b.1959), are comparable with the best of the poets who have placed their lasting footmarks to enrich Indian poetry in English.

A Manipuri by birth, Ngangom started his poetic career with the publication of his first volume of verse, *Words and the Silence*, in 1988. After that he has published *Time's Crossroads* (1994) and *The Desire of Roots* (2006). He, along with Kynpham Sing Nongkynirh, edited the anthology of poetry, entitled *Dancing Earth* which was published in 2009 by Penguin India. His essay, "Poetry in a Time of Terror" appeared in *The Other Side of*

Terror: An Anthology of Writings on Terrorism in South Asia published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi (2009). In 1999 he was honoured with a prestigious Katha Award for translation. This paper will make a brief discussion on dominant tendencies entrenched in English poetry from the region giving special emphasis on Robin S Ngangom's "The Strange Affair of Robin S Ngangom".

II. VOICES IN ENGLISH POETRY FROM NORTH-EAST INDIA

English poetry from the North-East India is basically reflective of the socio-political and socio-cultural aspects that loom large in all the states of the region. Hence, some of the dominant themes found in the poetry from this region are identity crisis, ethnicity, violence, insurgency, marginalisation and conflict. However, it will be wrong to say that the poets from the North-East India are concerned only with those themes which are connected more or less only with those aspects that express the region as troubled and conflict prone. Certainly a good many writings from the region are based on 'bloodshed and killings' (Dai 2-7), but the poets of the region are also concerned with other aspects such as environment, ecology, myth, history, folklore and traditional values. It should be noted that until 1963 all the states of North-East region were within the boundary of Assam. As the demand for separate statehood went on rising, Assam got divided into seven separate states. However, the problems of different tribes still remained unresolved and this led to the rise of militancy in most of the states which naturally invited enforcement of stringent laws, such as Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act, 1958 (AFSPA) and deployment of armed forces leading the states into deep humanitarian crisis, human rights violation and socio-political as well as socio-cultural instabilities. In Manipur much of the human sufferings and loss of life can be attributed to the imposition of Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act, 1958 (AFSPA) (Das). Manipuri poet Thangjam Ibopishak Singh's "I Want to be killed by an Indian Bullet" (translated by Robin Ngangom) avowedly narrates the dichotomy of perceptions which prevail 'among the elder and the new generation' (Pradhani). As expressed in the poem it is expressive of his love for India and his desire to be identified as an Indian.

'... if you shoot me please shoot me
with a gun made in
India. I don't want to die from a foreign bullet. You see, I love India
very much.' (Singh, lines 48-51)

Mizo poet and novelist Malsawmi Jacob unequivocally writes in her poem "These Hills" how insurgency destroyed the peace of the region and how the symphony produced by the objects of nature have been silenced at the sound of gunshots.

'Come night
Doors shut to bar
Shots that shatter
Silence often
Straining green hills
Red.' (Jacob, lines 10-15)

Khasi poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynirh's "When the Prime Minister Visits Shillong the Bamboos Watch in Silence" is expressive of the distrust between nation and state as well as the gap between national ideology and ideology or belief of a clan. The poem is satirical in tone.

'When Prime Minister Gujral
planned a visit to the city
bamboos sprang up from the pavements
like a welcoming committee.
But when he came, he was
only the strident sounds
like warnings in war-time bombings.
The bamboo poets watched in silence
He came with two objectives
A mission for peace and progress...' (Nongkynirh, lines 1-10)

The poets of the region are unequivocal in their love and concern for the land and its inhabitants. Hence, history, myth and folklore are some of the aspects which find frequent expression in the prominent poets, such as Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Robin S Ngangom, Desmond Kharmawplang and Kynpham Sing Nongkynirh. In Mamang Dai's *River Poems* the poet shows her love for and association with the objects of nature, such as trees, mountains, hills, clouds, river, seasons, mist, rain, landscape etc., blending history and myth associated with her

land (Dai, River Poems). Her communion with nature finds avowed expression in her poem "Small Towns and the River".

'The river has a soul
It knows, stretching past the town,
From the first drop of rain to dry earth
And mist on the mountaintops
The river knows
The immortality of water' (Dai, lines 17-22)

Most of the poets from Tripura write in indigenous languages, such as Kokborok, Chakma, Bengali and Manipuri languages. In the anthology of poetry, called *Dancing Earth* published under the editorship of Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham S. Nongkynrih, poems written by nine poets from the state was published. They are - Chandra Kanta Murasingh, Kalyan Brata Chakraborty, Nanda Kumar Debbarma, Swapan Sengupta, Shefali Debbarma, Niranjana Chakma, Yogmaya Chakma, Ganghini Sorokkhaibam and Sudhanwa Tripura. Some of the dominant concerns embedded in the poems from Tripura are the poets' engagement with the themes of displacement, dislocation and marginalisation. Following is an excerpt from Niranjana Chakma's poem "Words will be Uttered Boldly" (Chakma 240).

'Their words
Are yet unspoken,

Because their voices
Are strangled by
The ponderous and
Stiffening woe,

'Because they are displaced
From their homeland
By the intruders
Their dew wet
Courtyard inundated
With tears...' (lines 1-12)

There are many poets who are critical of the youths' resorting to terrorism as a way of bringing change to the society. These poets expose the futility and meaninglessness of terrorism as a means for any social change in a positive direction. Hence, Niranjana Chakma writes in one of his poems in the following way:

'Hither and thither
Dirty tricks of gunpowder traders everywhere.
Terror grips you often,
Conscience takes the other way then.

Is that all?
Now terrorism is a cheap commodity
Perhaps cheaper than child's toy.' (Chakma, lines 9-15)

The beginning of modern poetry in Assam dates back to the 1st half of the 20th century and since then Assam has produced a long list of eminent Assamese poets, such as Chandrakumar Agarwala (1867-1938), Jyoti Prasad Agarwala (1903-1951), Ganesh Gogoi (1907-1938), Deva Kanta Barua (1914-1996) Maheswar Neog (1915-1995), Hem Baruah (1919-51), Bhabananda Datta (1919-51), Amulya Baruah (1922-46), Navakanta Baruah (1926-2002), Ajit Barua (1926-2015), Hiren Bhattacharya (1932-2012), Nilmoni Phukan (b. 1933) and many more. All these poets wrote poetry in Assamese language and in the absence of extensive translation activity most of their works have been limited to the readers who have proficiency in Assamese language. Most of the Assamese poets are similar to those of the pan Indian and Western poets so far as the poetic impulses and thematic concerns are taken into account. Love for man and nature, patriotism and nationalism are some of the dominant poetic concerns in Assamese poetry. Since the beginning of the 21st a good number of young poets have written poetry to bring about social changes by ending the atmosphere of bloodshed and killing caused due to insurgency. These poets write poetry advocating peace and progress. A few young poets, like Aruni Kashyap, have also attained fame. Recipient of Charles Wallace India Trust Scholarship (2009) for creative writing and an assistant editor of the academic journal, called *Yaatra: the Journal of Assamese Literature and Culture* (Krishnaswamy),

Kashyap writes basically in English language. Following is an excerpt from Kashyap's poem "Where the Sun Rises".

Flesh will be food and food will be flesh
 'Flesh and food.
 Nobody will cook for you,
 Nor me. Flesh and food are the same now,

A redder river weeps, not for you,
 But for peace and a natural sun rise,
 Yearns for redness from the sun floating between clouds,
 Not in a green flag.' (Kashyap, lines 43-49)

III. THE STRANGE AFFAIR OF ROBIN S NGANGOM

Ngangom's "The Strange Affair..." (31-36) is one of his longest poems. It describes a visit to his native place, Manipur, which was ravaged in the conflict between Indian armed forces and the insurgents. Though the poem is autobiographical in nature, in him is found the capability of transforming his personal experiences in a conflict-ravaged land to the generalised experiences of people belonging to many parts of North-East India. It is a critique on how the powerless has to remain subdued and succumb to the wishes of the powerful even if that dispossesses them from their rights and freedom. The poem is divided into four parts. The first part of the poem (lines 1-61) is a description of how the 'pristine' native land of his boyhood have been turned into 'murderous' in the present with pervading hunger, distrust and destruction. The second part of the poem (lines 62-105) gives a description of how the Indian armed forces through their 'appliances of death and destruction' brought havoc to his native land making the whole concept of freedom and independence into a farce. The third part of the poem (lines 106-51) deals with his to all the youths to cherish the new faith abandoning 'ideological horror' and remain ethically obliged to their identity. In the fourth part of the poem (lines, 152-98) he describes pessimistically the darkness that the 'coarse theatre of time' has inflicted on him and the people of his native land creating a sense of hopelessness and imprisonment which usually prevail in a war-ravaged region.

In the very first stanza of the poem, there is a mention of the phrase 'wheel of fire' (3), which gives the hint of a turmoil so intense and powerful that it has the capacity to destroy or engulf everything. Metaphorically, the phrase is indicative of bloodshed and horror that have encircled the poet and the people of his state, in particular, and all the people of the North East India, in general. The poet is reminiscent of how the Kingdom of Manipur turned into a princely state (Deryck O. Lodrick) in the British rule and how it eventually got transformed into a full-fledged state of India in 1972. The expression '...misplacing/ a bronze bell/ somewhere sometime' (4-6) is suggestive of the political transition of the land which is instrumental in bringing changes in cultural, social and economic life. Such feelings get unfolded in the poem when he says that he left behind 'many untended hearths' (7) and a glimpse into the past awakens him of the changes that has loomed in him. These changes have pulled him to such an extent that he feels the pain of being alienated from the past making him envious of and enchanted to the days in his childhood. The poet believes that though they possess a 'pristine' (49) past, their present is full of persistent paradoxicalities, hatred and suspicion. The poet discovers how his neighbours now has fallen in acute hunger with 'begging bowls in hand' (36-37). He implores people to shun, erase, 'slash and burn' (42) the traces of hatred, malignity and suspicion that divide the community and weaken the power to write their 'murderous history' (45) – a phrase that connotes the socio-political turmoil, stories of hungry people, bloodshed, killings and rape that have engulfed his land. The poet is cynical of the youths' celebrating Christmas without dispossessing hate and fear, and without abandoning the idea of violence.

The poet feels that their conflict with the nation have become so costly that it has turned the land into a state in which freedom has become a farce and words like rape, extortion, confessions, embezzlement, vendetta, sales, marriages have become usual in everyday newspapers. This conflict has left many women with scars on their body and mind transforming love relationship overshadowed with stigma and a sense of guilt. Hence, with a heavy heart he points his canon to describe the extent to which the men and women of his land have had to bear the brunt of the conflict:

'When I turn with a heavy heart
 towards my burning land,
 the hills, woman, scream your name.
 Soldiers with black scarves
 Like mime artists
 Turn them in seconds into shrouds.' (lines 70-75)

The poet is very much critical of the soldiers belonging to the Indian armed forces for turning his 'fabled land' into a hellhole and the leaving it filled with memories of how deadly weapons were used to crush the insurgents resulting in death, destruction and devastation.

'...trucks carrying
the appliances of death and devastation,
for the eager rescuer in his armoured car,
for the first visitor to the fabled homeland,
the graves of youth who died in turmoil
are the only milestones of the city.' (lines 76-81)

The poet implores the new generation to merge with the nation, for any attempt to overpower the mighty army of the nation will prove to be very costly for the state. Here he warns the new generation how the fast-rising capitalistic and materialistic world have brought uncertainty to their land. He reflects upon how even common day to day items, like oil, lentils and food for babies have become uncertain because of social, political and economic instabilities. With a more accentuation he articulates that things like fire, water and air are fast becoming commodities. Hence, he appeals to all the youths not to lose 'uprightness' and not to abandon the trail of a life with honour, dignity and decency at the same time remaining patriotic by 'mourning' their 'merger with the nation' (132) and 'honouring martyrs who died in confusion' (33-34). He implores them to remain respectful to and express solidarity with their native culture, folklore and literature.

In the last part of the poem the poet gives yet again a gloomy picture of how he has been destined to live in his prison-like motherland amidst an all-pervasive atmosphere of pain and loss where festival of light is a distant past and even if he wants to flee from the homeland, he cannot because he is in love with his motherland. He laments his existence in such a world and so he writes:

'The festival of lights
happened during childhood
Today, I'm again with widows
who cannot light lamps anymore.' (lines 173-76)

Thus, Ngangom's "The Strange Affair..." may be a subjective expression of how the people of Manipur has suffered due to the conflict between his state and the nation, but it is also a document for having a peep into their life before and after the conflict erupted. It reminds us of William Butler Yeats' poem "Easter 1916" where the poet while criticising the foolishness of the Irish rebels in their fight for independence against the mighty British soldiers also admires their bravery, patriotism and sacrifice. The greatness of Ngangom's poem is its unique way of its detachment from the 'art for art's sake' literature by engaging itself in a more meaningful purpose of reforming or directing the society through its incorporation of the burning social concerns, such as dislodgement, dispossession, otherness and estrangement.

IV. CONCLUSION

Though much of English poetry from the North-East India is reflective of the pristine beauties the region, ecological concerns, history and folklore, it is at times concerned with identity and existential issues as well as its psychological distance from the mainland India. The English poetry from this region voices sturdily for discovery or rediscovery of identity and liberation from such thoughts that widens the psychological gap between people of North Eastern region and those from the mainland India. Issues such as dispossession, dislocation, insurgency, economic backwardness, distrust between nation and state, patriotism, horrors of military operations and sexual abuses are predominantly as well as avowedly voiced in the poetry of North-East India in a realistic manner to bring about peace and progress. In this respect, Ngangom's "The Strange Affair..." will ever remain as a great poem for using the power of poetry to express and expose the past, present and future of the Manipuri people encompassing the burning issues that engulfed his state in the conflict between the state and the nation.

REFERENCES

- [1] Chakma, Niranjana. "Words will be Uttered Boldly." *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from NorthEast*. Ed. Robin S Ngangom Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. Trans. Rita Chakma. NEHU Publications, 2003, p. 240.
- [2] —. "When Debate has no Room." *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from NorthEast*. Ed. Robin S Ngangom Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. Trans. Rita Chakma. NEHU Publications, 2003, p.239.
- [3] Dai, Mamang. "On Creation Myths and Oral narratives." *Where the Sun Rises When Shadows Fall: The North-east*. Ed. Geeti Sen. New Delhi: OUP, 2006, pp. 2-7.
- [4] —. *River Poems*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2013.
- [5] Das, Prasanta. "Waiting to be Taken Onboard: the Poetry of Robin Ngangom, Desmond Kharmawplang, and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih." (n.d.). www.academia.edu/2467910/. Accessed 20 April 2020
- [6] Deryck O. Lodrick, Barbara A. Standley. *Manipur*. 04 June 2019. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.. www.britannica.com/place/Manipur. Accessed 24 April 2020.
- [7] Jacob, Malaswami. "These Hills". *Mizo Writings in English*. 12 March 2008. mizowritinginenglish.com. Accessed 30 April 2020.
- [8] Kashyap, Aruni. "Where the Sun Rises". 9 June 1984. www.poemist.com/aruni-kashyap. Accessed 2 May 2020.
- [9] King, Bruce. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- [10] Krishnaswamy, Murali N. "Talking of Assam...". *The Hindu*, 27 March 2010. www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/Talking-of-Assam. Accessed 23 April 2020.
- [11] Ngangom, Robin S. "The Strange Affair of Robin S Ngangom." *Kavya Bharati* 8 (1996), pp. 31-36.
- [12] Nongkynrih, Kynpham Sing. "When the Prime Minister Visits Shillong the Bamboos Watch in Silence." *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*. Ed. Robin S Ngangom Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. NEHU, 2003, pp.156-164.
- [13] Pradhani, Jyotirmoy. "Poetry from India's North-East: The Contemporary Voices". *Nezine*, 20 September 2015. www.nezine.com/info/RnBSZHdhWE43elpFRHZQTUpiTzBTZz09/poetry-from-india%E2%80%99s-north-east:-the-contemporary-voice.html. Accessed 22 April 2020.
- [14] Singh, Thangjam Ibopishak. "I Want to be killed by an Indian Bullet". 2003. www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poem/6316/. Accessed 3 May 2020