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## Editorial Introduction

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### **The Saga of the *A-bri dal-gipa'*: The Ontological Turn in Northeast Studies**

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#### I

Though the territory that is known as the Northeast of India is an ancient region in terms of its civilisation, culture, and history; the emergence of Northeast as a discursive terrain, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon. In that, it has significant linkages with its assertions of resistance against the metanarratives of pan-Indian nationalism. In his seminal essay, "The Margin Strikes Back" (2005), Udayon Misra argued how the Northeast, commonly referred to as the periphery or the margin of the mainland, almost soon after India's independence, had given the first 'jolt' to the metadiscursive idea of 'one nation' (p. 266). It was the tiny territory of Nagaland that had posed the biggest epistemic challenge forcing a paradigmatic shift in re-defining the parameters of the nation-state. This resistance has also shaped one of the primary categories of Northeast—a space of dissension and resistance. As Misra (2005) pointed out, it was the Naga question that had prompted Jayprakash Narayan, as the head of the Naga Peace Mission in 1964, to recognise the legitimacy of the 'small nations' and brought into circulation the idioms like 'self-determination' and the 'urge to preserve' culture and identity (p. 268) into the parlance of political discourses wherein the notion of 'the mainstream' (p. 266) found to have been not essentially central but rather incidental. What Northeast has defied is the singularity of meaning, the essentialist absolutism. This resistance has been one of the embedded cores of the region to deal with the multiplicities of voices inherent to the lay of the land. Notably, on fundamentalism and its growing dominance to assign primacy to the singular immensity of meanings, eminent critic and writer, Pradip Acharya expressed his understanding of the term as 'ruling out doubts', and as a contrast, he said, 'In the Northeast, we celebrate doubt' (2017, p. 3).

In the imaginary of what can be said as the national mainstream, in continuation of the colonial cartographic orientalistation, the Northeast has been largely perceived as a frontier, what Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel (1997) would define as an 'empty area' (p. 213), a vague territory without meaning, historicity and even an agency of its own, a veritable empty signifier. Nevertheless, this region has been one of the primeval territories having its eminent presence since the times of the great Indian epics, a territory with profound historical, literary, and cultural antiquity, and more importantly, a region with its own medieval history when the rest of India mostly had a shared medieval history by being part of the common political empire.

The story of Northeast is quite similar to that of the abiding fable by Amitav Ghosh, *The Living Mountain* (2022). Quite significantly, the book resonates with the geo-cultural history of the Northeast too, for the region has gone through similar crises and turbulences like that of the Elderpeople and the Adepts, the indigenous men and women, of the Great Mountain, the *Mahaparbat*, where they were reduced by the imperialist Anthropois into Varvarois as they were rendered culturally inadequate and subjected to brutal dislocations. But finally, it was the resurgence of the native pedagogy that had redeemed indigenous inhabitants. Northeast too is a metaphoric *Mahaparbat*. A region with almost half of the 450 tribes of India who speak about 200 different indigenous languages (Sharma, 2019, p. 1), it is indeed an *a-bri dal-gipa*, an A-chik phrase for great mountain.

However, the immensity of the region cannot be measured only in terms of its spatial coordinates, rather one has to take into account its vast cultural contexts. From being a *terra exotica*, it has formidably emerged as a *terra significatio*; from being an exotic space of mystery and enigma for the onlookers, it emerged as a territory of discursive significations; instead of just being part of the newspaper footnotes, it has evolved into a powerful domain of literary and cultural discourses. Following the substantial proliferation of its native literature in the English language, reaching out to readers across the world, Northeast has acquired a space of its own. The English language in the Northeast has been provincialized as one of its 'local languages' (Prodhani, 2022), as language has not necessarily affected an alienation in the literary expressions of the region. As Robin S. Ngangom (2018) has said about the English poetry from the Northeast, "Instead of the expected radical break with the near past, Northeast poetry written in English suggests a continuity with the past" (para. 2). However, English is not the only language in which major literary works have been produced in this region. Literature from the region in the other native languages in written form has deeper antiquity going back to the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE and beyond, especially in Assam and Manipur. The region's oral literary tradition is even older. Tilottoma Misra (2016) defined the history of literature of the Northeast as a 'complex literary tradition'. She points out, "This complex literary tradition requires a detailed analysis of the historical process of the emergence of manuscript and printed texts in cultures which were predominantly oral" (p. 46). A comprehensive volume on Northeast literature, therefore, is always challenging, for it must not privilege the written over the oral; it should also include all the eight states that form the Northeast and therefore such a volume, by default, would be polyglossic, which, of course, is one of its biggest strengths.

In this special issue on Northeast literature and culture, papers from various states of the region—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura—address a wide range of genres; from poetry to fiction, from theatre to cinema, from folklore to graphic narratives and so on. Among other innovative critical engagements, the young scholars from the region have made some audacious departures from the dominant center-periphery paradigm and have tried to make epistemic interventions affecting a possible new turn in the critical discourses on the Northeast through their attempts to theorise 'land' as a crucial ontological premise towards evolving an indigenous hermeneutics. From the perennial presence of violence and identity anxieties, the emerging critical discourses have turned to exploring the embedded ecology of the region to come up with fresh critical insights. One of the most potential dimensions of the prospective new direction in the Northeast discourse might well be, what

Fabricant and Postero (2018) called the 'Indigenous Turn' (p. 128) wherein ecology and decoloniality are some of the most crucial influences. This has engendered fresh energy among the young thinkers from the region. The scholars have also engaged to problematise the insider-outsider binaries, a phenomenon that has gained attention in recent times. Though the insider-outsider discourse has quite subtly made certain legitimations to re-orientalise the region as a territory of native xenophobes putting the entire range of obligations on the insiders of the region absolving the outsiders of any such ethical imperatives, the papers here have tried to provide alternative idioms to look at the issue from nuanced critical vantages.

## II

Here is a brief introduction to the papers included in this special issue. Two of the articles in this themed issue looks at the unique tradition of *buranji* as a vernacular history project of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Assam. In the essay, "*Buranji* in Northeast India: A 13<sup>th</sup> Century History Project of Assam", Dwijen Sharma refers to Suryya Kumar Bhuyan's model of vernacular history writing and examines how the *buranjis* constitute a unique form of history that is indigenous and considerably different from the western paradigm of historiography disseminated by the colonial project. Dhurjjati Sarma in his paper "Vernacular Historiography and North-East Literature" specifically looks at the representation of the Kacharis, a formidable cultural community and a powerful political entity, in the historical narrative of the Ahom *buranjis*.

Anjali Daimari in her paper, "Internal Instabilities: Nationalism in the Context of Nagaland" has taken up two seminal novels, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's *Yaruingam* and Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* and attempts to understand the ambivalences in the discourses of Nationalism as 'internal instabilities'. In the context of Nagaland, the author explores the prospects of a 'human solution' to address the Naga question. In their essay, "Travel, Empire and Ethnographic Self-Fashioning of a White Headhunter", Mehdi Hasan Chowdhury and Dipendu Das have taken up Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf's travelogue, *The Naked Nagas*, for a critical re-look on contested affinities among 'travel, empire and ethnographic exercises' and their role in the configuration of colonial Northeast India as a 'frontier'. Shiv Kumar in his paper, "Imagined Ethnography and Cultural Strategies: A Study of *Easterine Kire's Sky is My Father* and *Don't Run, My Love*" looks at how Easterine Kire reinvents folklore of the Nagas and evolves a politically conscious positionality through her fictional narratives. Suganya V. and Padmanabhan B. have taken up stories from the iconic collection of short stories by Temsula Ao, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, to look at the role of storytelling as a means to preserve linkages with the past of the community against the context of transgenerational transmission of trauma.

This issue has included papers that look at the poetry from the Northeast from the perspectives of fresh critical insights. Kshetrimayum Premchandra in his essay, "The Rise of Yawol Poetry in Manipuri Literature" looks at *yawol* poetry of Manipur which is associated with militancy in the state. In the paper, he tries to explain why for a significant number of poets blood and violence keep coming as recurring motifs in their poems. The paper, "Resistance and Ungendering" looks at the emerging feminist voices in the Northeast with special reference to the poems of Monalisa Changkija and Mona Zote wherein Debajyoti Biswas and Pratyusha Pramanik have argued how 'performativity' has been utilised as a discursive tool to counter gendered societies and 'ungendering' the essence of cultural constructs. In the paper, "Yemapoetics: Towards a Theory of

Healing in Indigenous Poetry from Sikkim”, the authors, Swarnim Subba and Namrata Chaturvedi have tried to formulate an indigenous theory of poetry based on the idea of poetry as shamanism what they have described as ‘Yemapoetics’ with reference to the poems of the Limboo community from Sikkim. The paper, co-authored by Austin Okeke, Emeka Aniago, Mary-Isabella Ada Igbokwe and Kenneth C. Ahaiwe, “Monumental Inhumanity beyond Tears: Lamentations of Despoil in Nagaland and Niger Delta Eco-poetics” makes a comparative study of the select poems of Temsula Ao of Nagaland and Tenure Ojaide of Nigeria to underline how both these poets have reflected their anxieties in the growing despoiling of the eco-heritages in their respective locations. The authors, Gourab Chatterjee, Debanjali Roy and Tanmoy Putatunda have taken up the poems of Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, and Esther Syiem in their paper, “From Anonymity to Identity: Orality in Three Women Poets from North-East India” and explore how these poets have utilized native orature as a primary tool to construct an indigenous poetics dismantling the colonial hierarchy that privileges the written over the oral. Gunajeet Mazumdar in his paper, “Topophobia and Indigenous Belonging”, takes up Rajbanshi poetry, one of the peripheral and emerging literary developments of Northeast, and problematises the notion of spatial memory in Rajbanshi poetry taking a recourse to Robert Tally’s concept of Spatial Memory and the decolonial critic Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s theory of land as pedagogy. Analysing the poems of Northeast from a purely linguistic perspective is not quite common. Charanjit Singh and Gurjit Kaur have carried out a linguistic analysis of two of the major poets from Northeast using the tools of Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) techniques in their paper, “Text Formation in the Poetry of Robin S. Ngangom and Mamang Dai”

There are papers that have attempted to explore the possibilities of constructing alternative hermeneutics based on the indigenous cultural discourses. Kimthianvak Vaiphei, in her paper, “Indigenous Ontology In Zo Oral Narratives: A Study of the Zo Indigenous Cosmivision”, explores the indigenous ontology and argues that the Eurocentric critical frameworks, which are often inadequate to interpret and understand the indigenous culture and native epistemology, needs to be replaced with fresh ontologies grounded in indigeneity. Taking the folklore and oral narratives of the Zo tribe of Southern Manipur, the paper attempts at evolving indigenous hermeneutics to herald a possible critical turn in Northeast studies. Zothanchingi Kiangte in the paper “An Identity Born Out of Shared Grief: The Account of *Rambuai* in Contemporary Mizo Literary Texts” takes up three fictions from Mizoram to examine how the memories of *rambuai* evolved the Mizo identity forging the spiritual and the cultural past of the community. Karyir Riba, in her paper “The forest is my wife”: The Ethno-political and Gendered Relationship of Land and the Indigene”, takes up select texts by Easterine Kire and Mamang Dai and argues that ‘Land’ has a personified presence in indigenous literature where there is a merger of land with that of the women self, that nurtures its feminine dimensions of fertility and service. Partha Sarathi Gupta takes an anti-anthropocene approach to study the folk orature of the Bongcher and Chakma communities of Tripura in his paper titled, “Art, Ecology and Affective Encounters: An Ecosophical Study of Folk Tales from Tripura”. Drawing on Guattari’s notion of ‘ecosophy’, he tries to look at how the folk narratives of Northeast have encompassed ecology as one of its intimate affinities. Pronami Bhattacharya takes up the folktales from Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal, Tripura in her paper, “Ecofeminist Consciousness in Select Folktales from Northeast India”, wherein she explores the possibility of constructing indigenous critical perspectives on nature and

ecofeminism. Usham Rojio in his paper, "Performing the Landscape: Orature around Loktak Lake and the Love Story of Khamba Thoibi", explores the relations between landscape and performative traditions around Loktak Lake and Moirang of Manipur with special reference to the epic narrative of Khamba Thoibi. Aritra Gupta in the paper, "Architecture without architects: Eve's dropping into the Reang House's Dialogue with its Environment", looks at the indigenous Reang houses of Tripura and explores the materials and methods of their constructions to explore what the paper has described as vernacular architecture.

Theatre has a vibrant history in the Northeast, however research in this area is not quite adequate yet. Parismita Hazarika and Debarshi Prasad Nath have taken up the plays of two of the major cultural icons of Assam, Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava, to address the issue of Assamese nationalism and the critical parameters with which it has been evolving across various phases of history. Pranjal Sarma Basisth and Gautam Sarmah in their paper, "Kanhailal's 'Theatre of the Earth' as Political Allegory", look at the unique theatre genre developed by Kanhailal which is apparently minimal but thematically potent and prophetic. The paper also discusses how Kanhailal's theatre was influenced by Jerzy Grotowsky's *Poor Theatre*, Badal Sircar's *Third Theatre*, and how Kanhailal, in turn, made his impact on the next generation of theatre directors from the Northeast like Gunakar Dev Goswami and Sukracharya Rabha. Namrata Pathak discusses the poetics of theatre developed by a very promising theatre activist, Sukracharya Rabha (1977-2018) in her paper, "Under the Canopy of Sal Trees". The paper looks at how Sukracharya Rabha, who obtained his theatre training from Kanhailal, evolved a new set of theatre idioms combining ecology, ethnicity, and culture as the syntax of 'minimalist theatre'. Mohammad Rezaul Karim in his paper, "Adaptation of Shakespeare's Plays into Assamese Farce: A Study on Historical Perspective", looks at the Assamese translations and adaptations of Shakespearean comedies and examines the influence of Shakespeare on modern Assamese plays, especially the Assamese comedies.

Sib Sankar Majumder's "Penology in Colonial Times: A Reading of *Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha*", looks at a very unusual text from Assam which is a prison notebook by Robin Kakati, a Gandhian freedom fighter. In the paper, the author analyses the anatomy of incarceration in colonial Assam with reference to Kakati's memoir. Children's literature has drawn major critical attention in recent times, but not so in the context of the Northeast but Himaxee Bordoloi and Rohini Mokashi have taken up a popular Assamese text for children in their paper, "Navakanta Barua's Posthuman Wonderland in *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur*". In the paper, the authors have looked at the celebrated text from the perspective of posthumanism and animality and tried to examine how, through the deployment of nonsense and fantasy, Barua had posed a challenge to the anthropocene paradigm of human centrality. Nizara Hazarika deals with a marginal territory of Assamese literature in her paper, "Transgressive Spatialities: Mapping Identity and Liminality in Contemporary Queer Narratives from Assam". Hazarika argues that the queer narrative in Assam reflects a new direction for the nonheteronormative people towards claiming a distinct positionality against the hegemonic knowledge production determined by the dominance of heteronormative ideologies. Manashi Bora in her paper, "History, Memory and Trauma" takes up the select short stories of Arupa Patanagia Kalita of Assam and draws on the critical aspects of history, postcoloniality, memory, and trauma to examine how the author has problematised and interpreted her encounter with the social upheavals and the banalities of everyday experiences

against those contexts. In her essay, "Anatomy of Peace: Reading *How to Tell Story the Story of an Insurgency*", Avantika Debroy has closely analysed the collection of Assamese short stories to arrive at a deeper understanding of one of the most tumultuous junctures of Assam's political history marked by the rise and the receding of the ULFA insurgency and the deepening of the discourses revolved around the idea of a *swadhin Asom*.

In the context of the Northeast, anxieties arising out of migration, displacement, and relocation of communities in the wake of India's Partition, other forms of migration, and the insider-outsider binaries are some of the crucial issues that have gained critical attention. Suranjana Choudhury in her paper, "Partition and its afterlife", draws upon memory studies to examine how personal memories of 'Partition and its afterlife' shaped the literary imaginations of the displaced Sylhetis in the Barak valley of Assam. Rimi Nath in her paper, "The question of the 'foreigners' in select fictional narratives from Assam", addresses one of the most crucial aspects that has dominated the discourses in the Northeast for quite some time. She has made nuanced arguments by taking literary narratives from the two valleys of Assam—the Barak and the Brahmaputra. Liji Varghese in, "Narrating 'Indias': Liminal Narratives of Northeast and Assertion of Identity", takes up three significant authors from the region—Anjum Hassan, Siddharth Deb and Zoe Lungkumer — and argues that it is imperative to envisage 'Indias' in order to open up and accommodate polyphonic narratives and in this the writings from Northeast can re-construct the idioms in order to re-define the Indian experience. Amanda B. Basaiawmoit and Paonam Sudeep Mangang, in their paper, "The Battle of Belonging: A Study of Contemporary Shillong Poets", deal with the issue of 'belonging' and 'unbelonging' with reference to the select poems of non-tribal poets from Shillong to analyse their negotiation with their adopted spaces and the struggle to gain a sense of belonging.

There has been a significant proliferation of visual and graphic narratives in the context of the Northeast that has generated a great amount of critical attention. Amit Rahul Baishya in his paper, "The Animate Circuit of the Ordinary" attempts, as he says, to unearth the fugitive potentials immanent in the everyday, taking into account the photomontage of *Niam/Faith/Hynñiewtrep* by the Shillong filmmaker, Tarun Bhartiya. Renu Elizabeth Abraham in her paper, "The Politics of Cultural Homogenization and Territorialization" critically analyses the character of Mapui Kawlim as a superhero in *Tinkle's WingStar* series and argues that the representation of Northeast in such mainstream popular comics has erased the ethnic markers of the character as an attempt at 'sanitised representation' of a character from the region affecting the national imagination on cultural ethnicities and diversities. Rolla Das and Abhaya N B in their paper, "Humanising History through Graphic Narratives: Exploring Stories of Home and Displacement from the North-East of India" take up select graphic novels to explore how these works have responded to the heterogeneity of the region to bring forth 'the intersection of the performative of the text and image' in order to create a unique oral poetics of the region.

Cinema is a very important and a significant cultural medium in the Northeast, which is known for several offbeat and cerebral films acclaimed both nationally and internationally. Fariddina Hussain in her paper, "Filming Folktales", looks at the changing relationship between folktales and films in the context of Assamese cinema and analyses Bhaskar Hazarika's *Kothatnadi* as a 'dialectical simulation of images created by the auteur' that turns a grandma's bedtime story into an uncanny horror folktale. Alicia Jacob and Dishari Chattaraj have taken up one of the most

complex Assamese films made in recent times—*Aamis*—by Bhaskar Hazarika in their paper, “Forbidden Cravings”, and they have argued that the film, apparently a dark love story, has dealt with multiple layers of significations turning meat into a metaphor of deeper cultural associations and resistance. Munmi Bora’s essay, “Cultural Differences, Racism and Trauma”, makes a critical analysis of Nicholas Kharkongor’s film, *Axone: A Recipe for Disaster*, to address the issues pertinent to the Northeast experience as an outsider in the mainland. She has also raised questions as to what might be the effective response against prejudices and hostilities—to beat a retreat and resign into the shell or make efforts to find a way out to establish an informed relationship in a space where several cultures can converge and co-exist.

Besides the critical articles, the issue also features special interviews of Mamang Dai, the eminent writer and poet from Arunachal Pradesh and Ratan Thiyam, the eminent theatre Director from Manipur and one of the pioneers of the Theatre of Roots movement in India. In the Book Review section, the reviewers have taken up some of the recent creative and critical works from the Northeast for their perceptive reviews.

There was an overwhelming response to the CFP for the special themed issue of *Rupkatha* on Northeast literature and culture. Out of nearly about five hundred abstracts, only a handful of them was to be shortlisted, which was quite a daunting task by itself. I am particularly thankful to all the eminent academicians and colleagues who have spared their precious time to help shortlist the abstracts and review the papers with very valuable opinions, inputs and suggestions. Thanks to all the contributors and also to the authors who had responded to the CFP but we failed to accommodate them in this issue. What is heartening to see is that Northeast literature and culture as a category has generated academic interest among scholars and researchers not only in the region but also in the other parts of the country. The volume has also got contributions from the US and Africa, which indicates the growing reach of the literary works of the Northeast across boundaries.

That a special volume on Northeast literature has been facilitated by a major literary journal of the country, *Rupkatha*, is a significant intervention for Northeast studies as a discipline to grow. I am grateful to the Chief Editor of the journal, Tirtha Prasad Mukhopadhyay, and the Managing Editor, Tarun Tapas Mukherjee for their trust in me to edit this special issue and for their constant guidance in the process.

Hopefully, this special issue would be able to generate further interest among the readers and scholars leading to more discourses and debates on Northeast literature and culture.

#### **Note:**

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<sup>i</sup> ‘The big mountain’ in A-chik or Garo language. See L.M. Holbrook (1998).



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