

# INTERACTIVE ARTICLE COVER

## RUPKATHA JOURNAL

ON INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES IN HUMANITIES



ISSN 0975-2935

### About the Journal

<b>Journal DOI</b>	<a href="https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha">https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha</a>
<b>Journal Home</b>	<a href="http://www.rupkatha.com">www.rupkatha.com</a>
<b>Indexed by</b>	<a href="#">Scopus</a> <a href="#">Web of Science: Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI)</a> <a href="#">DOAJ</a>
<b>Journal Metrics</b>	CiteScore 2021: 0.2   SJR 2021: 0.194   SNIP 2021: 0.642   JCI 2020: 0.50

### About the Issue

<b>Themed issue</b>	<b>Volume 4, number 2, 2022 (March-June)   Themed Issue on Literature of Northeast India</b>
<b>Guest Editor</b>	<a href="#">Jyotirmoy Prodhani</a>
<b>Issue DOI</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2">https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2</a>
<b>TOC</b>	<a href="https://rupkatha.com/v14n2.php">https://rupkatha.com/v14n2.php</a>

### About the Article

<b>Title</b>	<b>The Animate Circuit of the Ordinary: The Everyday as Unfolding in Tarun Bhartiya's Niam/Faith/Hynñiewtrep</b>
<b>Author/s</b>	<b>Amit R. Baishya</b>
<b>Affiliation</b>	University of Oklahoma, USA.
<b>Author IDs</b>	<a href="#">0000-0001-5146-5957</a>
<b>Funding</b>	No funding received. Published free of any charge.
<b>DOI</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2.ne04">https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2.ne04</a> <b>Pages:</b> 1-17
<b>Full Text HTML</b>	<a href="https://rupkatha.com/v14n2ne04">https://rupkatha.com/v14n2ne04</a>
<b>Full-text PDF</b>	<a href="https://rupkatha.com/V14/n2/v14n2ne04.pdf">https://rupkatha.com/V14/n2/v14n2ne04.pdf</a>
<b>Article History</b>	<b>First Published: 07 June 2022</b>
<b>Article Impact</b>	<a href="#">Check Dynamic Impact</a>
<b>Copyright</b>	<a href="#">Aesthetics Media Services</a>
<b>Licensing</b>	<a href="#">Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0</a>

This Open Access article is published under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For citation use the DOI. For commercial re-use, please contact [editor@rupkatha.com](mailto:editor@rupkatha.com).

## The Animate Circuit of the Ordinary: The Everyday as Unfolding in Tarun Bhartiya's *Niam/Faith/Hynñiewtrep*

Amit R. Baishya

University of Oklahoma, USA. ORCID Id 0000-0001-5146-5957.

<https://ou.academia.edu/ amitbaishya>. Email: [arbaishya1@ou.edu](mailto:arbaishya1@ou.edu)

---

### Abstract

Drawing on anthropologist Kathleen Stewart's description of the ordinary as an "animate circuit that conducts force and maps connections, routes and disjunctures," this article reads the representations of the fugitive potentials of the quotidian in Shillong-based artist Tarun Bhartiya's photomontage/postcard collection *Niam/Faith/Hynñiewtrep* (2021). Focusing on Bhartiya's utilization of the technique of montage and the poetic juxtaposition of text and images, I consider the pluriversal narratives of pasts, presents and futures in his representations of the ordinary and the quotidian in a frontier/borderland space like Northeast India as a contribution to the nascent field of visual studies and the photographic archive in the region. This essay evaluates the significance of avant-garde visual practices, like those of Bhartiya's, in probing the minutiae of ordinary life and its fugitive and unpredictable potentialities.

**Keywords:** Ordinary, Quotidian, Montage, Frontier/Borderland, Photographs.

The critical discourse on photography in Northeast Indian Studies is in its nascent phases. An exception is Joy L.K. Pachuau and Willem van Schendel's social history of Mizoram, *The Camera as Witness* (2015). Discussing their photographic archive, the authors write that they focus on "everyday, ordinary photographs with no claim to originality, iconoclasm, technical virtuosity or the creative spark" (p. 13). They look at photography as a "vernacular practice" and zoom in on "common genres...family snapshots, identification pictures, and documentary photographs" (p. 15). The images they study are "common and unexceptional" and analyzed in a chronological manner presenting a fascinating developmental story of Mizo modernity. What interests me is the recurrence of terms such as "ordinary," "vernacular," "common," and "unexceptional." While the authors use these terms to distinguish their archive from modernist art historical discourses that privilege the artistic and the avant-garde, a particular theory of the everyday undergirds their work. For them, while the everyday is constituted by forms of unbracketed existence associated with the habitual, the repetitive and the commonplace, photographs also capture moments that illustrate the seepage of modernity into private spaces and the concomitant adjustments and resistances that such descents into the ordinary necessarily entail.

Pachuau and van Schendel are social historians; I am a literary critic. I operate with different inflectional variants of the everyday and the ordinary. My concern is not to describe the common and the unexceptional to plot a chronological history of modernity or to analyze how macro discourses descend into the quotidian. I am interested, rather, in unearthing fugitive potentials immanent in the everyday. Ordinary life, as anthropologist Kathleen Stewart (2007) writes, "draws

its charge from rhythms of flow and arrest" (p. 19). They are "fragments of experience that pull at awareness but rarely come into full frame" (p. 19). Instituting a comparison with a postcard, Stewart continues:

So still, like a postcard...A still life is a static state filled with vibratory motion, or resonance. A quivering in the stability of a category or a trajectory, it gives the ordinary the charge of an unfolding. It is intensity born of a momentary suspension of narrative, or a glitch in the projects we call things like the self, agency, home, a life. Or a simple stopping. (p. 19)

At play here is a different figuration of the everyday and ordinary which is at the core of my analysis of Shillong-based artist and filmmaker Tarun Bhartiya's photomontage of hundred black and white postcards *Niam/Faith/Hynñiewtrep* (henceforth *Niam*, 2021).<sup>i</sup> (Bhartiya's photomontage was recently exhibited in an exhibition in Cardiff in October 2021 and got a fair amount of attention in the Indian press). If "unexceptional" suggests something that is too ready at hand to call attention to itself, Stewart's juxtaposition of "static" with "vibratory," "quivering" with "stability" and things that pull at awareness without coming into the full-frame introduces the question of becoming into the ordinary. The arrested moment, like a still life, a photograph or a postcard, pulsates with movement and intensity, open to both pasts and futures. Taken by itself, a photograph or a postcard may be a momentary suspension in a narrative (or even a simple stopping); but it could also be a multiperspectival opening to multiple pasts and futures. It enables the self to be, to cite Stewart again, a "dreaming scene, if only for a minute" (p. 19).

Such conceptualizations of the everyday and the ordinary refers to the—

...vague constellations of spaces and times *outside* what was organized and institutionalized around work, conformity, and consumerism. It was all the daily habits that were beneath notice, where one remained anonymous. Because it evaded capture and could not be useful, it was seen by some to have a core of revolutionary potential...its dangerous essence was that it was without event, and was both unconcealed and unperceived. (Sterne, 2013, p. 70)

Unfolding gestures towards questions of becoming and alternative potentialities inhering in fleeting, unexceptional moments. These heterotemporalities lurking under the surface make the shimmering surfaces of grand discourses like modernity fissure and fork in multiple, unpredictable pathways. I argue that Bhartiya's arresting photomontage captures these immanent potentialities in the everyday. Indeed, Bhartiya mentions the potentiality of the ephemeral in his ninth epigram which functions as the introduction to the postcard collection: "So how does one locate the signs and meanings of this transformative encounter between Gwalia and Khasia?"<sup>ii</sup> Through biographies? A chronology of events? Through resistance to the majoritarian impulses of the Indian Nation State? Or through the circulation of picture postcards which the Welsh Calvinist-Methodist working-class missionaries were fond of?" Multiple histories plotted multiperspectivally and kaleidoscopically via the ephemeral: it would not be amiss to use this as a tagline to describe *Niam*.

Through a juxtaposition of photographs, both archival and contemporary, and written text (like discontinuous snippets from Uttar Pradesh's notorious anti-conversion law from 2020) on the postcards, Bhartiya's photomontage delves into colonial history, the presence of Christianity in

Meghalaya, the coexistence, oftentimes uneasy, of Christian denominations and nativist groups that resisted conversions like the Seng Khasi, and the steady encroachment of Hindu fundamentalist discourses and movements into the region. Two aspects become fundamental for an analysis of *Niam*. The first is the technique of montage. Montage is a critique of the idea that reality is out there for the camera to capture meticulously or the viewer to perceive passively; instead, it calls for an active stance from the viewer to make meaning. In the process of cutting, reassembling and juxtaposing, montage impels the viewers to institute connections poetically via transversal, nonlinear modalities. Discussing Eisensteinian montage, Laura Marks (2015) writes:

Eisenstein did not trust cinema to produce truth even by observing the world long and patiently, but argued that it must *cut into* the observable world. These ideas inspire filmmakers to elicit those moments of flashing, where an unbidden artifact cuts into the present: that is montage, a skeptical manner of unfolding. Montage should produce contrasts...whose rhythm releases energy that the spectator's body absorbs. (p.e 116)

While Marks is talking about cinematic practice, her invocation of "skeptical manner of unfolding" and the production of contrasts is applicable to an analysis of a multimodal combination like *Niam*. The affective impact of *Niam* emerges from the poetic correspondences between image and image and text and image. Three levels of meaning-making emerge via montage in *Niam*: 1) the nonlinear poetic correspondences between images, 2) the contrast between text and image, and 3) fleeting, immanent possibilities inhering in a single image that unfold transversally across the work when put in combination with others. While the first two levels call for critical capacities of synthesis, the last one necessitates "depth" readings that call for focused contemplation of a singular image.

The second issue is the question of visual style, both at the level of printed word and image. While Bhartiya uses a few archival photographs to delve into colonial history, most of the pictures are images of the contemporary in black and white. As in the Mizo case in *The Camera as Witness*, the archival photographs were primarily taken by missionaries. These photographs, meant primarily for private usage, proselytization or informing audiences elsewhere about missionary activities "reveal the interplay of visions of common humanity and visions of inequality" (Pachau and van Schendel 2015, 2015, p. 12). Thus, Bhartiya's images like "Missionaries with the Khasi Porters" (p. 6) show the stark inequalities between the leisurely walk of formally dressed colonizers and the hard labor undertaken by Khasi porters.



**Figure 1**

Similarly, the picture from 1861 of U Larsing (1838–63) (Figure 1; p. 30),<sup>iii</sup> the Khasi evangelist, dressed in Western attire and standing between the Welsh missionary couple, William and Mary Lewis, shows the insertion of the converted native “son” into the “civilizational” ambit of what Anne McClintock (1994) calls the “national family of man”:

...the family offers a natural figure for sanctioning social hierarchy within a putative organic unity of interests. Second, it offers a natural trope for figuring historical time... The family offered an indispensable metaphoric figure by which hierarchical (and, one might add, often contradictory) social distinctions could be shaped into a single historical genesis narrative. (p. 63)

U Larsing, born in Mawsmat, was taken to the UK as a “trophy” (May, 2012, p. 248) by Rev. Thomas Lewis and his wife, Mary Lewis. He died in Chester in 1863 and was interred there (a picture of his grave in Chester also appears in *Niam* [p. 31]). Native preachers like him had “ambiguous insider/outsider relationships to their own communities as well as to their mission brethren” (May, 2012, p. 232). But this ambiguous status and U Larsing’s mimicry of the colonizers also offered opportunities for agency (Bhabha 1994), an aspect underscored in *Niam* where he appears twice later. The same photograph of U Larsing and the Lewises appears as a faded stamp allied with the following lines from the poem “On Occasion of Seeing the Cassian Native Evangelist U Larsing” in the 1861 edition of the Welsh religious journal *Trysorfa Y Plant*: “Then let him go to Cassia/Imbued with British taste/And turn the skirts of India/From being a moral Waste...” (p. 88). The ghost of the civilizing mission alluded to here is counterpointed with his image (Figure 2, p. 11), where dressed in traditional Khasi attire, U Larsing walks through a forest and gazes slant at the camera.



**Figure 2**

If in the 1861 photograph, the native “son,” the mimic man, is sought to be incorporated into the national family of man, in the latter photograph, the native agentially *nativizes* the world religion. Indeed, Bhartiya alludes to this process of nativization in the fourth, fifth and sixth epigrams that preface his photomontage:

4.

Thomas Jones would manage to baptize nobody.<sup>iv</sup> And translate only a part of the Gospel. They say he taught the locals how to brew alcohol, use a saw, purify lime. And then got involved in defending the Khasis from exploitation by the British East India company. Under pressure, Mission headquarters threw him out of the church and cancelled his missionary license. Attacked and chased by company soldiers out of the Khasi-Jaintia hills, Jones died a lonely death in Calcutta.

5.

The faith which TJ brought would sweep through these hills of North-eastern India, nativizing itself.

But not without indigenous challenges and reworkings. There were many who chose the new book and there were those who kept their ancient faith alive.

6.

I joke. Christianity was a Khasi religion accidentally discovered in Wales.<sup>v</sup> (np)

These archival images that demonstrate glimpses of shared humanity and the agency of the colonized, snapshots of the colonial quotidian and the ethnographic gaze that consolidates the noncoeval positions of colonizers and colonized are juxtaposed with images drawn from contemporary life which shows the afterlives of these tectonic historical changes in the present. These contemporary images can be both “horizontal”—in the sense of “capturing a fluid geography...that constantly negates and transcends matters of a map”—and “vertical”—allowing

"access to an inside, an interior..." (de Boeck and Balaji, 2016, p. 24). Indeed, incorporating a map of the mission field from the 1870s as the third postcard of the collection (p. 4), and then zooming in to smaller, ephemeral details from the past and the present illustrates that *the map does not define the territory* in *Niam*. Correspondingly, the choice to represent contemporary images in stylized black and white plays with light and shadow, illumination and darkness and adds depth to the images. Shooting contemporary images in black and white also reduces the distractions introduced by color while heightening the affective component of the pictures. While colors can direct our gaze somewhere specific, black and white has the potential of enhancing depth of field which can accentuate contemplation. Verticality is also present in the historical palimpsests that structure the contemporary—"different times convert into the space of the now" (de Boeck and Balaji, 2016, p. 25). We will notice some of these palimpsestic overlays and "depth" readings in my analyses of photographs later.

Allied with these images, both archival and contemporary, are the typescripts used in the postcards. Words often emulate ink-stamps or the text used is quite often faded. Consider, for instance, the postcard titled "View of Pandua where the First Khasi was Baptised Khasi Hills Bangla Border (2006)" (p. 7) which is juxtaposed with a fading typescript of the Adityanath government's anti-conversion law. The picture is a pastoral one of a distant landscape shrouded by clouds, recalling the Sanskritized name of Meghalaya—"abode of the clouds." This image, at once romantic and remote, signals the spatial distance of this frontier space from the mainland Indian imagination. It is as if the viewer has to literally pierce through the layer of clouds to gaze at the borderland scene. But the mention of the first baptism with the graffiti-like juxtaposition of faded official typescript shows the steady and violent incursion of national time into "remote" borderland spaces.

The tension between suspension and unfolding, national time and other times, emerges best in still shots of stones. The key to unlocking the potential of this tension lies in one of Bhartiya's (couplets in Hindi translated thus: "Should we undress these graves/From behind the spectacles of knowledge should we read these stones" (2021, p. 76). The lithic invokes both "surface" and "depth" readings.<sup>vi</sup> The interrogations in Bhartiya's couplet play with this interface between surfaces and depths through the deployment of the verbs "undress" and "read." While images of stones abound (monoliths, ruins, structures hewn from stone like gravestones), a contrast between two images again illustrates the rebus-like character of the photomontage. Consider the interplay between image and text in the second postcard from the collection (Figure 3):



**Figure 3**

Ancient stone monoliths like the one in the photograph performed ritualistic and memorial functions. Cecile Mawlong (2020) writes that:

Khasi-Jaintia megaliths are collectively called *mawbynna* or *maw-pynbna* (literally 'stones of proclamation'). These terms suggest that the stone monuments are primarily commemorative in nature, their main function being that of conservation of social memories. As collective referents the monuments played an important role in the maintenance of institutional facts. (pp. 55–6)

Some of these institutional facts include both the commemoration of funerary rituals and keeping alive "significant socio-economic-political events such as setting up of markets, noteworthy or unfamiliar happenings or as in many cases, as memorials in honour of ancestors/ancestresses of a lineage or clan" (p. 56). The text on the postcard in *Niam* that accompanies this image above is the concluding quartet translated by the novelist Bijoya Sawian (2016) from a 1902 publication— "*Ka Jingsneng Tymmen*" (The Teachings of Elders) by U Radhon Singh Berry Kharwanlang. U Radhon Singh is a central figure in the institutionalization of the modern Khasi script, as he made the Roman script disseminated by the Welsh missionaries receptive to the modulations of Khasi speech patterns. He was also a member of the Seng Khasi, a revivalist movement that began in 1899, and a protector of the *Niam Tynrai* (traditional faith).<sup>vii</sup> The quartet is introduced by the title "Conclusion" (mirroring the "Conclusion" of *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen*) and reads: "O! Wondrous Khasi Culture, /Where are you now? /In the people's hearts and souls /Or where you are listened to no more?" Much like Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's epigraph by William Ralph Inge to Chapter 3 of his epic novel *Funeral Nights*—"The future of a country is safe only in the hands of those to

whom her past is dear" (p. 141)—this quartet plays on the dialectic between remembrance and forgetting. But what is being forgotten and what needs to be remembered? In "5 Questions on Khasi Identity" (2016), Wanphrang Diengdoh lauds the Seng Khasi as "the greatest cultural movement the Khasis have ever had" (np), while being simultaneously critical of its claims towards purity and non-contamination by other faiths. Suffice it to add that revivalist movements like the Seng Khasi, while instituting essentialist claims for cultural purity and continuity as a reaction against the steady incursions and violent discontinuities instituted by colonial modernity, also gesture towards elements of a precolonial past that slowly gets forgotten or steadily recedes like a line drawn in sand. The monumental presence of the lithic memorials is an invitation to "listen" to this receding past which is steadily subsumed by the colonial and the national modern.

This injunction to listen to the forgotten past becomes especially important now, as Hindutva discourse makes its own colonizing incursions into the region. Hindutva is a fundamentally monotheistic ideology (Basu 2020). While Hindutva is monotheistic, actual Hindutva proselytizing practices are defined by shape-shifting and flexible positionalities as it tries to draw the divergent cosmologies of "tribal" religions within its fold. Of particular interest here is how Hindutva actors in Northeast India deploy the language of global indigeneity, polytheism and paganism to show connections between indigenous religions in the region and Hinduism. Arkotong Longkumer (2020) writes that a 2005 BJP party document titled "Evolution of the BJP", draws on the works of anthropologists on local and global aspects of indigeneity to argue that:

...paganism relates, crucially, to local gods and ancestors of the land, based on ideas of polytheism...In summing up the basic overlap between paganism and Hinduism, the BJP text says: 'In a sense at the basic level Hinduism is a pagan religion. As Paganism allows for evolution Hinduism too allows for evolution. Since Paganism is the belief in many Gods there is generally no fight over Gods. This is the greatest virtue of Polytheism...Once Hinduism is expressed along these lines, then, it has the potential to relate with other native traditions that are intimately connected to land. (pp. 115–16)

While Hindutva proselytization in Northeast India is still an ongoing and contested process, such sentiments about polytheism are often invoked by Hindutva activists on the field to contest the animosity that monotheistic faiths like Christianity display against "pagan" and animist belief systems. This has also been the Hindutva strategy of attempting to subsume local faith systems like the Seng Khasi within its fold, as Longkumer illustrates with his vignette about "Neil's" ambivalent relationship with the RSS (pp. 37-8).

The reverberations of this image-text combination of the ritualistic monolith at Sohra in *Niam* echo later with the concluding image of the photomontage (Figure 4):



**Figure 4**

The caste Hindu icons inscribed on the *surface* of tribal monoliths are another example of the inscription of nation(alistic) time into “frontierized” space. As mentioned, the attempt to subsume indigenous belief systems into Hindutva worldviews is an ongoing project in the region and this image is a visual representation of that process. Contrast this with Radhon Sing’s injunction to “listen.” Does the monumental stillness of stone enjoin us to listen to other stories and other times enclosed in the *depths* of the deep historical time of lithic material? The conclusion of *Niam* is hinted at the beginning while the actual conclusion may be less of a closure than the stirrings of something ominously unpredictable and open-ended. Photographs may be still, a representation of “embalmed time” (Bazin, 1960, p. 8), just like the lithic petrifies time (Cohen, 2015). But immanent in them is the possibility of unpredictable and multiple unfoldings in the ordinary.

What then of Christianity and its role in Meghalaya and the Northeast region writ large? On the one hand, Christianity is definitely a religion brought by the colonizer; on the other hand, as scholars like Sanjib Baruah (2020) have written, Christianity also functions as a powerful discourse of alternative/oppositional modernity in the region (p. 16). This aspect is clearly mentioned in the seventh, eighth and tenth epigrams that preface *Niam*.

7.

But being a Christian (or for that matter Muslim) in India these days is not a joke. India is being remade. Once celebrated as a great pluralist success of decolonized nation-building, many of its postcolonial benchmarks like secularism and religious freedom are being

quickly reworked, erased, made redundant in an authoritarian imagination of a monochromatic decolonized Hindu India.

State after state legislates laws that criminalize 'foreign' faith.

8.

For the minuscule indigenous population in India's North-eastern hills, where Christianity is the primary mode of its faith community, mainland India seems increasingly a foreign land. A foreign land whose masters can once again hound Rev. Thomas Jones out of their imagination.

...

10.

**Niam/Faith/Hynñiewtrep.** 100 picture post cards. 100 memories. 100 ephemeral ways of thinking about faith, colonialism and history. (np)

While Bhartiya's "ephemeral" method when taken as a whole makes us ponder large questions about "faith, colonialism and history," the role of Christianity as a nativized religion and the ideological and emotional distance between mainland and borderland, transversal readings of text and image also reveals how a world religion enters quotidian lifeworlds. Here's one illustration of a transversal contrast. The nostalgic feel, monumental solidity and aura of old, bound and translated Bibles in an archive in "First Four Bible Translations in Khasi Serampore College Library, Bengal 2018" (Figure 5; p. 27) and "Translated Bibles, Serampore College Bengal (2016)" (p. 89) contrast with the image of cheap, mechanically reproduced religious literature or religious images displayed in "Books for Sale at a Church Meeting Kynshi, Khasi Hills (2016)" (Figure 6; p. 80) and "Madanryting, Shillong (2014)" (p. 100).



Figure 5



**Figure 6**

Walter Benjamin (1969) says that the aura of an artwork is predicated on the unique position it occupies in space and time. The uniqueness of the auratic art object engenders distance and attitudes of awe and veneration. The object assumes a sovereign position. Mechanical reproduction shatters that distance and renders aura unexceptional as multiple copies can be made of that same artwork. The artwork becomes quotidian, easily accessible. Sovereignty is rendered demotic. The nostalgia evoked by the archived, bound Bibles in Serampore and their old-world and vulnerable materiality (bound in leather and resin, tied with twine) can only be experienced in one place at specific times. Contrast this with easily available and distributable mechanically reproduced religious literature and images as in Figure 6—this is one of the myriad ways through which religious discourse is vernacularized, and the aura of the book rendered common and unexceptional.

*Niam* also contrasts various states of *aliveness* and tending towards death, especially in shots of natural landscapes. Consider two images here that allude to activities of extraction in a resource frontier and counterpoint each other. Scholars like Baruah, Bengt Karlsson (2012) and Dolly Kikon (2019) discuss the complexities of discourses on resource extraction like coal, oil and uranium in the region. I would not go into a detailed explication of these complex discourses but will consider the impact of what Kikon calls “carbon fantasies” in the region through a consideration of two photographs. Consider first the denuded landscape in “Presbyterian Church in Coal Country Shallang, Khasi Hills (2015)” (Figure 7; p. 62)



**Figure 7**

The dry, dusty and denuded landscape depicted here is an expression of a form of being towards death. The Presbyterian Church in the small hillock seems to stand like a melancholy sentinel watching over the denuded landscape in the foreground of the image. Bhartiya's montage, however, also facilitates a contemplation of the function of photography as speculative fiction, as the image above echoes uncomfortably with the natural plenitude on offer in "New Church Uranium Country Khasi Hills (2006)" (Figure 8, p. 96). If carbon fantasies and their extractive practices proliferate in the region, we cannot help speculating that the image from 2015 could very well be the future of the image from 2006. The Presbyterian Church is a melancholy sentinel in a dusty landscape; the new thatched church could be a witness to extraction and denudation in the future. This futural projection merges like a palimpsest with the past as Bhartiya splits one of Thomas Jones' pronouncements, culled from Andrew May's book (p. 215), into two prefacing and bookending Figure 8: "'If I kept silent," Thomas Jones wrote in his 1849 manifesto to the Government of India before he was hounded to his death by the British authorities..."I would be a partaker of the sins of their oppressors" (pp. 95–6).<sup>viii</sup>



**Figure 8**

Paradoxically, spaces of death and commemoration could very well be heralds of new life. Roughly towards the middle of the photomontage, we come across a triptych of images of ruins—“Clan Cromlech, Ummat, Khasi-Hills, Assam Border” (2018), “Christian Cemetery, Mawsynram, Khasi Hills (2015)” and “Missionary Graves, Sohra, Khasi Hills (2015)” (pp. 54-6). This triptych merges with a later image titled—“Remnants of an Early Church Shella, Khasi-Bangla Border (2017)” (p. 95)—which incidentally is the image immediately preceding “New Church, Uranium Country, Khasi Hills (2006)” (p. 96), accentuating the palimpsestic nature of the past, present and the future again. In the earlier trifecta of images, the text on the postcards emphasizes the strictures and restrictions on marriage in the UP anti-conversion act, while the first part of Jones’ pronouncements quoted earlier bookends “Remnants of an Early Church...” The draconian incursion of sovereign law into the realm of the private (that of marriage) is counterpointed by Jones’ incomplete assertion “If I stay silent...” In terms of the images, two readings are possible. First image of graves and ruins are signifiers of how the past haunts the present. These images are of “places stained by time” where “time can only be experienced as broken...” (Fisher, 2012, p. 21). The juxtaposition of image and text here is an injunction to act in these chasms opened up by broken time—“If I stay silent...” On the other hand, the proliferation of vegetal life in these pictures remind us of Georg Simmel’s (1959) pronouncement on the duality of the ruin—“The ruin of a building...means that where the work of art is dying, other forces and forms, those of nature, have grown, and that out of what of art still lives in the ruin and what of nature already lives in it, there has emerged a new whole, a characteristic unity” (p. 260). Ruins are a form of “sinking from life but still the settings of life” (Raffles, 2020; p. 148). The sheer luxuriousness of nature endows the images with a strange beauty—out of the putrefaction of death, as Georges Bataille (1985) reminds us, emerges blooms of new life. Death here is not a limit condition, but the very source of life and living. Natural growth and the ruins of human infrastructure create a new whole.

Thus far, I have been talking about the first two levels of meaning-making in Bhartiya's photomontage. What of the third level—the immanent possibilities of the everyday that emerge from the contemplation of an image? I develop this point via a thematic contrast emerging from contrapuntal images of ecstasy with those of sleeping. Achille Mbembe (2003) writes that in ecstatic temporality: "The future, here, can be authentically anticipated, but not in the present. The present itself is but a moment of vision—vision of the freedom not yet come" (p. 39). We notice this temporality in an image titled "Revival Service Shillong (2006)" (Figure 9; p. 24). The believer's face is intense, his eyes shut tight, as he seems to sway to a rhythm that propels him towards the otherness that resides in his self. He is in this place but seems to be transported ecstatically to *another* space and time altogether.



Figure 9

Contrast representations of ecstatic temporality with moments where narratives suspend themselves and glitches in narratives of self or home unfold surreptitiously. A striking moment arises in the postcard titled "Prayers in a New Church, Domkhomen, Khasi Hills (2017)" (Figure 10; p. 17).



Figure 10

While most of the congregation is absorbed in prayer, three boys in the front row sleep, bend low or look away. A young man in the third row seems to have fallen asleep leaning on the wall. This image resonates with an earlier one—"Praying before Baptism Khasi Hills (2015)" (p. 5)—a frontal shot of a group of people on a single bench praying. While everyone else has their necks slightly bent in postures of supplication, a young lady holding a swaddled infant bends her neck slightly to the left. Is she praying or has she nodded off to sleep? Sleep or distraction is a "simple stopping," an irruption in a community project predicated on the seriousness and discipline of prayer. Sleep is also a portal to "layers of unadministered life, life at least partially detached from disciplinary imperatives" (Sterne, 2013, p. 68). If in ecstatic temporality, the self is taken over by an otherness within itself, inadvertent sleep or the detemporalization engendered by daydream or reverie (Bachelard, 1960, p. 116) represents fugitive moments stolen away right under the gaze of projects of pastoral care. A project of religious piety is momentarily suspended, and gets entangled with a host of alternative speculations: What was that young boy gazing at when he stares at the wall? Was the woman dreaming about something in her state that teeters ambiguously between a suspension of attention (the somnolence of prayer) and an inadvertent nodding off to sleep and inattention? These moments captured in an unscripted manner by the camera are instances of "ordinary affect"—what Stewart calls "an animate circuit that conducts force and maps connections, routes and disjunctures" (p. 3). These ephemeral moments illustrate the fugitive element of the quotidian. We can begin plotting alternative pathways to the present during the sudden, unanticipated irruption of such contingent moments.

## Notes

---

<sup>i</sup> *Hynñiewtrep* is a cognate name for different tribes in Meghalaya.

<sup>ii</sup> *Gwalia in Khasia* (1994) is a book written by the Welsh poet, Nigel Jenkins. Kynpham Sing Nongkyrih fictionalizes his encounters with Jenkins in the first chapter of *Funeral Nights* (2021).

<sup>iii</sup> This picture also appears in *May* (p. 232).

<sup>iv</sup> Thomas Jones (1810–49) was a controversial Welsh missionary who worked in Meghalaya and is credited with recording Khasi in Roman script. For an account of his short and troubled life, see Chapters 1-2 and 8-11 of *May* (2012).

<sup>v</sup> This agential nativization of Christianity is also emphasized by Bhartiya in a conversation with Paramita Ghosh (2022): "In the Hinduised notion of faith, conversion is seen as an encounter between ignorant people and powerful missionaries...In the Khasi hills, however, converting to Christianity was a difficult proposition. Converts risked breaking traditional kinship and family ties. But even when they converted, they did not automatically accept the western Christian worldview. They could challenge even the missionaries if they saw that the missionaries did not hold up to the Christian values. Khasis want to be Christians on their own terms."

<sup>vi</sup> For "surface" and "depth" readings of stone, see Williams (2018).

<sup>vii</sup> For more details on Radhon Sing and the context surrounding the publication of *The Teachings of Elders*, see Diengdoh's "Politics of Religion in Khasi-Jaintia Hills" (2016).

<sup>viii</sup> It must be kept in mind though that Jones' 1848 petition listing the grievances of the "Kassias" was not a claim to recognize the coeval status of the colonized. Mays writes: "Jones' petition was not a general ideological plea for native rights under colonialism, but a critique of the specific application of the rule of law" (p. 215).

#### References:

- Bachelard, Gaston. (1960). *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language and the Cosmos*. Trans. Daniel Russell. Beacon Books.
- Baruah, Sanjib. (2020). *In the Name of the Nation: India and its Northeast*. Stanford University Press.
- Basu, Anustup. (2020). *Hindutva as Political Monotheism*. Duke University Press.
- Bataille, Georges (1985). "The Language of Flowers." *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Ed. Allan Stoekl. Trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr. University of Minnesota Press, pp. 10–15.
- Bazin, Andre. (1960). "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." Trans. Hugh Gray. *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Summer 1960), pp. 4–9.
- Benjamin, Walter. (1969). "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Trans. Harry Zohn. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Schocken Books, pp. 166–95.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *The Location of Culture* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Routledge, 1994. pp. 121–31.
- Bhartiya, Tarun. (2021). *Niam/Faith/Hynñiewtrep*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Cohen, Jeffrey J. (2015). *Stone: An Inhuman History*. University of Minnesota Press.
- de Boeck, Filip and Sammy Baloji. (2016). *Suturing the City: Living Together in Congo's Urban Worlds*. Autograph ABP.
- Diengdoh, Wangphrang. (2016). "5 Questions about Khasi Identity." <https://raiot.in/5-questions-about-khasi-identity/>
- . (2016). "Politics of Religion in Khasi-Jaintia Hills." <https://raiot.in/politics-of-religion-in-khasi-jaintia-hills/>
- Fisher, Mark. (2012). "What is Hauntology?" *Film Quarterly*, 66 (1), pp. 16–24.
- Ghosh, Paramita. (2022). "Missionary is not a Popular Word in India. But in the Khasi Hills it Holds a Different Meaning." <https://theprint.in/features/missionary-is-not-a-popular-word-in-india-but-in-the-khasi-hills-it-holds-a-different-meaning/751501/>
- Jenkins, Nigel. (1994). *Gwalia in Khasia: A Visit to the Site, in India, of the Biggest Overseas Venture Ever Sustained by the Welsh*. Gomer.
- Karlsson, Bengt. G. (2011). *Unruly Hills: A Political Ecology of India's Northeast*. Berghahn Books.
- Kharwanlang, Radhon Sing Berry. (2016). *The Teaching of Elders: Ka Jingsneng Tymmen*. T Trans. Bijoya Sawian. VKIC.
- Kikon, Dolly. (2019). *Living with Coal and Oil: Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India*. University of Washington Press.
- Longkumer, Arkotong. (2020). *The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the Northeast*. Stanford University Press.

- 
- Marks, Laura U. (2015). "Monad, Database, Remix: Manners of Unfolding in *The Last Angel of History*." Vol. 6, No. 2, Spring 2015, pp. 112–34.
- Mawlong, Cecile. (2020). "History Etched in Stone: A Study of the Khasi-Jaintia Megalithic Tradition." *The Cultural Heritage of Meghalaya*. Ed. Queenbala Marak and Sarit K. Chaudhury. Routledge, pp. 47–68.
- May, Andrew J. (2012). *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism: The Empire of Clouds in Northeast India*. Manchester University Press.
- Mbembe, J. Achille. (2003). "Necropolitics." Trans. Libby Meintjes. *Public Culture* 15.1, pp. 11–40.
- McClintock, Anne. (1993). "Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family." *Feminist Review*, No. 44, Summer 1993, pp. 61–80.
- Nongkynrih, Kynpham Sing. (2021). *Funeral Nights*. Westland Publications Limited.
- Pachau, Joy L.K. and Willem van Schendel. (2015). *The Camera as Witness: A Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Raffles, Hugh. (2020). *The Book of Unconformities: Speculations on Lost Time*. Pantheon Books.
- Simmel, Georg. (1959). "The Ruin." Georg Simmel: 1858-1918. Ed. K. Wolff. Ohio State University Press, pp. 259–66.
- Sterne, Jonathan. (2013). *24/7*. Verso.
- Stewart, Kathleen. (2007). *Ordinary Affects*. Duke University Press.
- Williams, Daniel. (2018). "Coetzee's Stones: *Dusklands* and the Nonhuman Witness." *Safundi*. <http://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080/17533171.2018.14728> 29.

**Amit Rahul Baishya** is the Director of Graduate Studies and Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Oklahoma, USA. He has recently published his book, *Contemporary Literature from Northeast India: Deathworlds, Terror and Survival* (Routledge). He has also edited, *Postcolonial Animalities* (Routledge)