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The Battle of Belonging: A Study of Contemporary Shillong Poets

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Abstract:

The British colonialisation, the partition of India during independence, growing urbanization and increased human mobility led to the growth of migrant settlers belonging to a number of cultural, racial, ethnic and religious groups in the state of Meghalaya, particularly Shillong which is the state's capital. These factors contributed to the transformation of the city into a multi-cultural centre. However, contradicting this development was the increased desire of the indigenous tribals of the state to exclude and otherise the non-tribal settlers by way of promoting the 'sons of the soil' policy. Though in the recent decades, statistics depicts (2011 census) more out-migration with a decreased share of the non-tribal to the state's population, yet a perceived notion of increased in-migration was fed by the indigenous tribal belonging both to pressure groups and political parties leading to issues of insider-outsider the concept of belonging and un-belonging. Sigmund Freud and Abraham Maslow were the early psychologists who recognized that humans strive to belong. However, it was Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary's seminal work "The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation" that contributed to the theoretical understanding of belonging. Belongingness in today's multicultural society has become all the more relevant wherein the questions of belonging and un-belonging and the complex politics of belonging are issues that confront us. This in turn has led to 'belonging' emerging as a subject of interest and interrogation across multiple disciplines. The un-belonging felt by the people of the Northeast which results from their being 'othered' by their fellow Indian citizens of mainland India has been well documented but there is also a need to study how the same is reversed and how it is enacted and experienced in the context of the Northeast. This paper intends to analyse the select works of contemporary Shillong poets to depict how this otherisation and battle for belonging is enacted and experienced by the non-tribal settlers living in Shillong. In doing so, an attempt will be made to trace the complex working of the politics of belonging and how it manifests itself in present day Shillong.

Keywords: Shillong, Contemporary Shillong Poets, Otherisation, Belonging, Un-belonging.

Introduction:

In recent years, scholars working in the area of Northeast India have taken an interest in questions concerning identity, wherein the politics of identity has revealed aspects of inter-group relationships that are complex, yet necessary for a better understanding of human relations. A facet of inter-group relations is the othering which has led to the creation of binaries of 'us and them', 'majority and minority'. This is evident in the identity studies in Northeast where much

discussion has taken place on how the people from this region have always been marginalised for, they belong to the periphery and as such are otherised by their fellow citizens of mainland India who impose on them a 'Northeast identity' calling them 'chinky' and looking at them differently as if they don't belong (Haokip, 2012, 2020). However, this politics of othering in the states of Northeast is reversed wherein the non-native settlers of the region are othered and this is also true in the context of Meghalaya¹. This paper attempts to analyze the experiences of othering as reflected in the works of the Shillong poets and note how the politics of belonging is enacted and experienced by them. The voicing out of the Shillong poets is not only an assertion of identity but also a battle for belonging, for man as a social animal desires close social connections which implies the need for belonging.

Theoretical framework

A.H. Maslow (1943) had formulated the theory of human motivation, where according to hierarchy of needs depicted through a pyramid, belongingness lies at the centre of the pyramid as part of the social needs. However, the groundwork towards understanding belonging as a theory was laid by Baumeister and Leary (1995). According to them, this need to belong is rooted in the evolutionary theory wherein man as a social animal depended on close social connections which implied the need of belonging to a group for survival. This need to belong or belongingness, involves more than simply being acquainted with other people rather it is centred on the emotional need to affiliate and be accepted by members of a group.

Therefore, belongingness as argued by Youkhana (2015) is "a rather new theoretical term", (p.12) one which has become all the more relevant in today's multicultural society¹ wherein the questions of belonging and un-belonging are issues that confront us. Hence, the processes, practices, and theories of belonging have become a subject of interest and interrogation across disciplines (Halse, 2018). According to Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013) belonging is, "an emotionally charged, ever-dynamic social location- that is: a position in social structure, experienced through identification, embeddedness, connectedness and attachments" (pp. 4-5).

Further, when we look at how individuals join or are accepted into groups, we realize that such groups or social bonds of belonging are formed when there are commonalities between the two. This implies that the concept of belonging is related to concepts such as identity and affiliation. According to Pfaff-Czarnecka (2011), "identity caters to dichotomous characterisation of the social" (p. 4) and this identity politics influences one's sense of belonging. Nira Yuval-Davis (2004, 2006) another noted scholar of belonging when focussing on how different social groups interact, tries to understand and differentiate between how people belong and the politics of belonging that arise thereof. About belonging she writes:

[b]elonging is not just about membership, rights, and duties [...] Nor can it be reduced to identities and identifications, which are about individual and collective narratives of self and other, presentation and labelling, myths of origin and destiny. Belonging is a deep emotional need of people. (Yuval-Davis, 2004, p. 215)

This notion of the politics of belonging as explained by Yuval-Davis (2010, 2011) reveals that belonging whether at the level of the individual or the collective is never free of the dynamics of

power. This was why Walton and Cohen (2007) in their experimental study of belonging stated that stigmatized groups face issues of social belonging.

Shillong: A background

Before we attempt to trace the sense of belonging as reflected in the works of the contemporary Shillong poets let us look at the historical background of Shillong which will provide an insight into the complex dynamics of identity construction and its representation in contemporary Shillong. This background will reveal that identity plays an important role in the politics of othering and belonging.

Meghalaya is home to three major tribes namely the Khasis, Jaintias, and Garos and other minor indigenous tribes like the Dalus, Rabhas, Hajongs, Koches, Bodos, etc. The British colonization and the missionary zeal to redeem the hill people consequently led to Shillong turning into a multi-cultural centre. The partition of India, urbanization and increased regional mobility saw the growth of migrant settlers belonging to a number of cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities in Shillong. These migrant settlers which are a minority, comprised of two categories – the non-tribal¹ such as the Bengalis, Nepalis, Marwaris, Punjabis, etc., (who are locally referred to as 'dkhar') and the non-native tribal communities such as the Nagas, Mizos etc. The inter group relations in this multicultural society of Shillong have led to assumption of the identity of 'us' and 'them' that point to the asymmetrical power relations.

The indigenous tribal's desire and struggle for regional autonomy led to the creation of Meghalaya as a separate state in 1972 and thereafter, there has been a pursuit of the 'son of the soil' policy by the state government and the eruption of ethnic conflicts (Myrboh, 2018). Even after statehood, the native tribal belonging to pressure groups and political parties continued to fan the perception of increased in-migration. Consequently, attempts were made to adopt measures to protect the native tribal communities' identity, resources and interests. In this process the minority non-tribal settlers of the state were otherised. This othering though inextricably linked to ethnicity, it became more aggressive as the native tribal became wary of the effects of settler colonialism.

Depiction of Othering and Belonging in Shillong Poetry

In light of the above background, Shillong poets who are engulfed on the issue of othering are divided into binary positions- those who perceive the non-tribal as others and those who express their pain as a result of this process. The above classification is intentionally done not only to show how the imposed identity of an insider or outsider affects one's sense of belonging, but more importantly to understand what factors determine whether one is to be termed as insider or outsider.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih one of the stalwarts of Northeast poetry, belonging to the majority Khasi tribe in his poem "Only Strange Flowers have Come to Bloom" mirrors the thoughts and feelings of the Khasi people who view the influx of outsiders as a threat to their identity and culture. In this poem he states:

"In the park I saw
Those strange flowers again
That I have seen bossing around
[...]
Like flowers, only strangers
And strange ways have come
To bloom in this land" (Nongkynrih, 2011, pp. 6-7).

In this poem, the poet uses the metaphor of 'strange flowers' that have come to bloom in "his land" to represent the outsiders, particularly the non-tribal who the tribal community view as different. Further, in this poem these strange flowers are described as 'blooming' and 'bossing around' thereby revealing the poet and his peoples' bitterness against these outsiders who they feel have invaded the personal place or land (Sankhyan and Sigroha, 2020). This bitter expression of Nongkynrih also reveals that the native tribal perceives the transgressing non-tribal settler as a threat—one with whom they would have to compete for scarce resources. B. P. Singh claims:

[...] the large-scale migration of population from outside the region [...] and the total dependence of people on the land and the State's apparatus for a livelihood [...] the local population feel(s) outnumbered and swamped by people of different cultural origins. (Singh, 1996, p. 192)

Singh (1996) further adds that the failure of the various sections of the settler population to adapt to the local language, customs and traditions further widened the gap between the outsider and insider promoting exclusion of sorts.

Iadalang Pynrope (2013), another Shillong poet in her poem "They said long ago" , juxtaposes the past with the present. She states:

"They said long ago, let us settle and do business here.
Warm, hospitable people and
Endless avenues to lead to prosperity
Today, they say apprehensive stares have replaced the smiles
And they claim to have diagnosed the disease
Fear Psychosis alas! " (Pynrope, 2013, p.61)

In these lines she refers to the settler migrants or the non-tribal who in the past came to these hills to do business finding the native tribal "warm and hospitable" for they smiled at them. Today, however this same non-tribal feels otherised by the native tribal which is evident in the fact that "*apprehensive stares have replaced the smiles*" (Pynrope, 2013, p. 61). Here the change in this attitude can perhaps be attributed to the change in the condition of the non-tribal settler who now is prosperous. This changed condition of the non-tribal is viewed with suspicion by the native tribal eventually leading to the anxieties that in turn promoted otherisation of the non-tribal settlers. Mukhim (2013) states that this "fear psychosis that non-tribals would walk away with our

land, our jobs and our women” was promoted by a few politicians to acquire political power. Bakshi (2018) on the other hand explains using the “karma philosophy” linking it with “cause and effect” (Bakshi, 2018, p.146). Relating to old stories that he has heard of non-tribal settlers—how they took advantage of the simplicity and naiveté of the native tribal while the ‘others’ behaved like the brown sahib— he explains the cause and the resultant changed attitude in the following lines, “Somewhere this must hurt in the collective conscious of the local people. What is happening today is perhaps some form of historical revenge” (Bakshi, 2018, p.146).

Pyngrope in this same poem justifies the stance of the native tribal by pointing out:

“But wouldn’t you suffer from this same malady
 If you also belonged to a people who comprise
 A grain of rice
 In a bagful of India
 A grain that could simply slither away
 And be forgotten
 Because they did not know it existed in the first place” (Pyngrope, p. 62).

The lines by Pyngrope, asks the non-tribal to look from the perspective of a small ethnic national minority to understand the basis of this ‘fear’ one which Mukhim (2005) explains stating:

Pitted against a people with a five thousand year old civilisation and a more advanced culture makes the Northerner a wee bit wary, lest he be taken for a ride by the more enterprising, intelligent, wise and progressive ‘Indian’ from the mainstream. Their fears are not altogether misplaced. (Mukhim, p.181)

Pyngrope also refers to mainland India’s ignorance of the Northeast, a fact that Mukhim (2005) corroborates that many a times our state, our people and our tribes “[...] is Greek to many Indians” (p.180). In fact, this ignorance is one of the causal factors that have propagated the othering of the Northeast tribal in mainland India, making them feel that they can be easily forgotten.

Paul Lyngdoh, a poet from Shillong, in his poem “To Whom it May Concern” points out how the non-tribal community considers the ethnic struggle and conflict to be without a cause and how they regard it to be a violation of human rights. While doing so, Lyngdoh, however, questions the non-tribal community if they would voice out against the otherisation of the tribal by the mainlanders, who he states are referred to as “chinkis”, “immigrants” and “wild tribals”. He argues that such name-calling also goes against the concept of human dignity and is a violation of human rights. Further, while calling the non-tribal ‘my friend’ he urges them to look at the circumstances from the perspective of the ‘otherised tribal’:

“But wait, my friend.
 We will break bread with you, for sure,
 but only when you
 can truly accept that we haven’t descended from tree tops

to be in your midst,
stop insisting on passports when we identify ourselves
or leering at our womenfolk just because
they look so unlike your daughters and your wives" (Lyngdoh, p. 56)

The above lines depict that the othering and unbelonging that is experienced by the non-tribal settler in Shillong, will and can end on the condition that mainland India treats the tribal community as their equals, their own Indian brothers and sisters.

Deeply entangled in the question of identity and belongingness, the Shillong poets have not only addressed this issue of insider and outsider but have also noted the rift between these two communities. Almond Syiem's "79 to Corona" is a poem that was written during the Corona lockdown when, despite restrictions on movement, it saw the migrant exodus from the cities. In this poem the poet points out how the imposed insider-outsider identity led to violent conflicts ultimately forcing the non-tribal families to leave Shillong to relocate elsewhere leaving behind their homes and their businesses. Perhaps the choice of the title "'79 to Corona" is also intentional for the poet wanted to point out the year, 1979, which marks the beginning of the first major riot in Shillong that resulted from the division imposed between insider-outsider identities. The second part of the title perhaps is reflective of how the same condition is prevalent even in the present century. In this poem, Syiem refers to a particular year, perhaps 1987, that saw schools locked up due to the imposed curfew. Describing the times he writes:

"[...] I learnt the vocabulary
of hate and placed my preadolescent signature
on a certificate that declared my neighbour
and friend Abhijit, his family, had become
our enemy. So, we grew up drinking xenophobic
wine and transitioned seasons in communal stupor,
bullying Bengalis, questioning our Indianness.

[...]

Those were the days we walked perpetually
stoned on the marijuana of blaming settlers
for all our problems, washed our parched throats
with the scotch of ethnocentric justification
to prevent our extinction" (Almond Syiem, 2020)

These lines which depict the reality of those times sadly reflect the discourse during those turbulent years. It was one difference, though built around some of those stereotypes it was directed externally to the Indian state but internally to the larger and smaller cultural, linguistic, ethnic, religious, racial communities who had settled here. These lines also point out that the

identity of an outsider is determined and stamped by the eyes of the beholder, who in this case belongs to the majority or the insider group. One can also note in the lines above, the Khasi community's desire to affirm and protect its native tribal and insider identity- one expressed by the idea propagated during those times: '*Khasi by blood, Indian by accident*' (Prakash, 2007, p. 1728). In this poem, Syiem's reference to 'xenophobic wine' is pertinent for he acknowledges what Sen calls "the xenophobic persecution" of the non-tribal settlers "that ran over two decades particularly from 1979 all the way to the late '90s". (Sen, 2018, p.107) Almond Syiem writes:

"While curiously blind
To our own decadence, excusing our politicians
For their predictable theatre of well-rehearsed lies
And serpent-tongued promises" (Almond Syiem, 2020)

In the poem Syiem goes on to portray the realization that had dawned on the Khasis, that this was all part of the dirty game of politics played by politicians who theatrically presented 'well-rehearsed lies' and fed 'serpent-tongued promises' to the gullible native tribal to fuel the 'sons of the soil' movement while they themselves ironically "shook their contaminated hands/ with the merchants of agricultural death, who told/ them to look the other way" (Syiem, 2020) thereby turning into businessmen with vested interests. This realization that dawned on a few of the native tribals is evidently reflected in an article published in the local daily where Mukhim (2013) states, "The politicization of ethnicity has been a vote-getting strategy for many since 1979. All the bloodshed and violence of that era can be traced to the desire of a few politicians to acquire political power by stressing on differences and creating fear psychosis that the non-tribal will walk away with all our land, our jobs and our women."

Although the ethnic conflicts of 1979 and 1987 lessened in intensity and normalcy was almost restored, these incidents had their aftermaths. Community relations in general became polluted with an air of suspicion and hatred towards the other. The out migration of the non-tribal community transformed Shillong but this did not necessarily lead to the recession of the 'sons of the soil' movement. Rather, the movement continued in the name of anti-foreigner agitations (Bhattacharjee, 2020). On the positive side what we can note from the works of the above tribal poets there is the growth of dialogue by native tribal writers, artists and intellectuals on aspects of insider-outsider dichotomy.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are poets like Ananya Guha, Nabanita Kanungo, Purabi Bhattacharya who as second and third generation non-tribal settlers have grown and have lived in Shillong, thereby identifying it as their home. These poets in their works portray how their otherised identity imposed on them by the tribal has impacted their sense of belonging. Ananya Guha in his collection of 85 poems aptly titled "I am not a Silent Poet" shows how he silently scripts the experience of pain and protest as he voices out on issues of discrimination, injustice, death/killing and the loss of humanity. He beautifully captures the politics of otherisation that prevails in India and afflicts society in his poem "Them and Us" (20019.p.26). In this poem, he seems to suggest that the destructive divisive forces which are propagated in society all around have made a life of love, peace and harmony seemingly impossible. Further, in this same collection in his epilogue, he includes his '*Five Hill*' poems where he specifically refers to Shillong —the hills

which he calls home. In his untitled fifth poem, he depicts his love and concern for the people and the city. This concern and love are evident in the lines where he states:

“I’d rather die
 than see these
 hills decapitated
 they are cutting down forests
 suppose they behead these
 hills with their neat chop
 whom will I look up” (Guha, 2019, p. 108)

These lines reflect the destruction of nature committed in the name of progress and development. In fact, this concern that he has for the place he calls home shows not only his love for the people but also his concern for the society which is afflicted by individuals with vested interests who will do anything for profit. Further, in this intense love that the poet feels, one can also note a certain unease that reflects these changing times, for in this same poem he states:

“When a child, mother said
 these are not dogs barking
 but hyenas or wolves
 as Laitumkhrah, somnambulist
 walked steadily in my carping dreams” (Guha, 2019, p. 108)

These lines depict how the nights of Laitumkhrah—one of the localities of Shillong in which the poet resides—has changed. As a frightened child his mother would tell him that the howls he hears in the stillness of the night are not those of dogs but of hyenas or wolves perhaps symbolically referring to the vested few, who fuelled the ideas of insider-outsider for their own profit. These vested few preyed on the sentiments of the gullible tribal, thereby changing the discourse of identity and belonging in Shillong. The reference to the years to come metaphorically represented here as *'dreams'*, reveals the poet's feeling that the insiders will be critical of his identity as an outsider or non-tribal and question his belonging.

It is no wonder that Guha in the untitled third hill poem, voices out his plight of unbelonging indirectly wherein he writes:

“my mind sinks into horizons
 of a hill town which I ask
 to love,
 Me.” (Guha, 2019, p. 106)

This expression of Guha is what Satpathy (1999) notes as one which “springs from his dual allegiance...one of insider as outsider” (p.20) one representative of those non-tribal who call these hills home and as such crave to be loved, to belong, to be accepted and not otherised.

Nabanita Kanungo in her collection, *A Map of Ruins* (2014) delves deep into a sense of displacement and belonging, one which she felt in Shillong, the place where she was born and grew up in. In her poem "The Missing Tooth", she draws a parallel between the experiences of an uprooted native non-tribal of Shillong to the uprooting of a tooth which she describes as painful. She states:

"There were reasons for which we had it painfully uprooted
And now the gap of the missing tooth
Is an embarrassing memory in the mouth" (Kanungo, 2014, p.5)

These lines perhaps refer to an experience she had faced in 2008, when she lost her job as teacher in a college in Shillong on ethnic grounds propagated through the state reservation policy. This particular event of otherisation or being called the outsider made her feel uprooted and created a sense of un-belonging though she had always regarded her birth place Shillong as her home. In fact, the incident singularly changed the way she had experienced and understood place, identity, and belongingness. She, like the tooth uprooted herself from Shillong yet her nostalgia and the paradox of loss is clearly evident in the lines below as she seeks to belong.

"But the tongue is a child,
Habitually searching for a world
Where it is not," (Kanungo, 2014, p.5)

In dealing and negotiating with this sense of un-belonging, memory plays a very important role. Hence in another poem "It is not about what I want to take with me when I leave the city of my birth" as she describes her leaving Shillong 'the city of her birth', she carries with her bitter-sweet memories that help her negotiate this sense of loss and un-belonging as she expresses:

"I will carry this helpless bridge
[...]
and each time, from anywhere in the world
one is enabled to sniff the way back
to a meaning called home" (Kanungo, 2014, p.70)

In the above poems, we may note that for Kanungo memory is all she has, and using this memory she feebly asserts her love and belonging to her home town Shillong though society treats her as an outsider.

Purabi Bhattacharya has two collections of poems *Call Me* and *Sands of Column* published by Writers' Workshop. In one of her poems "You say, Let them be" she refers to the 2020 incident of non-tribal boys being assaulted at Lawsohtun, a locality in Shillong. In this poem, the incident makes her lament and notes:

"How distant we have grown. How possibilities
Of good days are finally coming to an end.

Like I often hear my mother

Wording out: "Kali yuga, time to wrap up" (Bhattacharya, 2021)

These lines depict how the feelings of otherisation that resulted in ethnic conflicts have in the present day widened the rift between the insider and the outsider. As a scarred third generation non-tribal who has left Shillong but still regards it as her home, Bhattacharya painfully regrets that the 'good days' of living in harmony are a distant dream. She further goes on to describe how the otherisation takes place and what determines the imposition of the tag of an outsider and writes:

"they'd call us out for our religion

Our taste buds, our wear and the tears we shed" (Bhattacharya, 2021)

In this poem, Bhattacharya bravely questions society, particularly the Khasi society which has remained a silent witness to this conflict and states:

"I know you'll still then say "let them be."/ and smile." (Bhattacharya, 2021)

In yet another poem, "Canopy of Underaged Cloud", Bhattacharya again refers to the abode of the clouds, Meghalaya, and in particular Shillong. In this poem, she refers to Christmas which sadly reminds her of her birthplace and her home—Shillong. However, these memories are painful ones, for she recollects:

"The pain of

Becoming homeless, of being an unwelcome prowler

The pain of

Losing a land, of becoming few empty digits" (Bhattacharya, 2021)

This is the pain of unbelonging, of being the 'other', the 'dkhar', the excluded and the lesser human. Again, she points out the bitter truth that the treatment meted out to the 'other' is never addressed. This is evident in the lines:

"....The hills

preoccupied with war talks. There'll be massacre again

They say, but who cares" (Bhattacharya, 2021)

Bhattacharya who identifies herself as a Shillong poet is a strong voice, one who questions the silence of the non-tribal and the tribal community. While depicting her love for Shillong, her birthplace which she regards as her home, she also articulates on the insider-outsider issue to depict how the imposed outsider identity has denied her a sense of belonging.

The works of the above non-tribal poets reveal that the opposition towards otherisation is more pronounced in the poems of the young non-tribal poets. The complex question raised by them on whether they as second and third generation settlers should still be termed as outsiders and be made to feel that they do not belong. It is pertinent to note here that the works of the young non-tribal poets reflect their love for Shillong and their efforts to integrate certain elements of local culture in their works. The first eight poems of Bhattacharya's 2015 collection titled "*Call Me*", subtitled "Home" are expressive of her love for Shillong and the nostalgia for this land which she

considers home. In the poem "Silence (Home-III)", Bhattacharya mentions the "mythical serpent" (Bhattacharya, 2015, p. 19) which reveals her knowledge of the Khasi folklore of '*U Thler*²'. On the other hand Kanungo, in the poem "Shillong-Shillong" describes the strange inter-community friendships which she calls "Strange Shillong-Shillong combinations" and compares it to the "*sohphlang and nei lieh came*³". (Kanungo, 2014, p. 55) This reference is perhaps reflective of the personal experience of Kanungo one that indicates that she has formed deep bonds with the people despite the unkind history Shillong is in the end all about those little places of kinship and love. In the collection "A Map of Ruins" (2014), Kanungo has made use of Khasi words like "*biskot*⁵, *rynsar*⁶, *kong*⁷, *soh phlang*, *nei lieh*, *kthung*⁸, *soh baingon dieng*⁹" which not only render musicality to her poems but also depict how she has tried to assimilate the local language using it—while speaking and writing— so as to belong . However, understanding the language or learning to speak is not enough to be considered an insider or to belong. Samrat (2018), as a second-generation non-tribal settler reaffirms this stating that "In Shillong, in those years ... the line of belonging and not belonging had been decided... by the accident of birth." (Samrat Choudhury, 2018, p. 153). Therefore, these poets have through their works depicted their crisis of location and have attempted to negotiate with the oscillating sense of belonging and unbelonging. It may also be highlighted here that the non-tribal settler poets in portraying the plight of the non-tribal as victims of otherisation choose not just to describe the pain of unbelonging but also to exemplify the imperative to voice out, rather than opting, what Samrat (2018) terms as, "the silence of the repeatedly oppressed" (Samrat, 2018, p. 158).

Otherisation by the tribal has its' own historic-political significance. The tribal of Meghalaya view otherisation of the non-tribal settler and the subsequent question of belonging as a means that has helped prevent the emergence of settler colonialism, land alienation and subjugation because of the unequal power relationship with the more advanced settler community. Further, in this context, the fate of the native tribal of Tripura may be cited as an example where today they feel that have been subordinated politically, economically and culturally by the settler community (Hazarika, 1994, p.123). As such in the larger context of India, the otherisation by the dominant majority over the small minority represents the struggle for dominance and power, one experienced by the Northeast tribal. Therefore, otherisation has different connotations for the native tribal and non-tribal settler.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, it can be stated that the dichotomy between otherisation and belongingness is a political and social reality in Meghalaya in general, and the city of Shillong in particular. The Shillong poets, as artists, have welded passion in their words to mirror contemporary society for they believe that the art of writing is a subversive act. The poets have each shared their views on the insider-outsider issue and this voicing out is essential for informed dialogue and mutual understanding. This view is reiterated by Hazarika (2018) who states that the insider-outsider syndrome "is about accountability...equality and the need to assert" (Hazarika, 2018 p, 186).

Otherisation and belongingness are complex issues especially in the context of relationships between the native tribal and settler communities of Meghalaya. While otherisation as perceived by the tribal of Meghalaya is important to preserve their identity, resources and interests, the non-tribal settlers feel that as residents, they have been severed from their claim to belong. However, it may be noted that this otherisation of the settler community by the natives is not prevalent only in Meghalaya but in other states of Northeast India as well.

Thus, this question of insider-outsider in Meghalaya has to be understood in the context of the larger picture of the process of otherisation of the Northeast India by the so-called custodians of Indian nationhood and Indian nationalism. This is evident in the observation made by Baruah (2020, p. 13) where he states that "There is ample expression in contemporary Indian popular culture of the Northeast as a place of danger located outside the effective boundaries of the nation". Ethnic communities of Northeast India in the popular Indian mind is "imagined as an internal other" (Baruah, 2020, p.12). The relationship between the mainland Indians and the people of North East India as evident from the above can be viewed as that of the superior mainland and the inferior Northeast, with the superior power positioning itself as the manager and the latter treated as the managed. It is in this context, that otherisation and belongingness of the non-native settlers in Northeast India takes place. Therefore, to resolve the issue of otherisation in Northeast India particularly Meghalaya, it is pertinent for the relatively more empowered communities to be more accommodating and adopt an inclusive approach towards the tribal communities of the region. It is also important as Hazarika (1994, p. 128) states for Meghalaya's ethnic communities, especially those who live in Shillong "to learn how to live with each other". This need for harmony becomes all the more important since conflicts that fuel questions of belonging, otherisation, and nationality perhaps when promoted and assisted by external forces "poses as much a danger to the state's stability as does the threat of an armed insurrection" (Hazarika, 1994, p. 128), one that can divide the nation.

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¹The population of non-tribal communities in Meghalaya, according to 2011 census, was 13.85 per cent of the total population. The population of the non-native tribal communities, according to 2011 census was approximately 8 percent of the total population of Meghalaya.

²*U Thlen* is a reference to the popular story in Khasi folklore of the mythical serpent or giant snake.

³*Sohphlang* is a pale white edible root which is eaten with a dark paste of *nei lieh* a local sesame. This combination of sweet and savoury is strange and one which the poet compares to the Shillong inter community bonds

⁴ *biskot* is the Khasi name for Squash

⁵ *rynsan* is the Khasi word that refers to the bamboo support that the climbers grow on.

⁶ *kong* is the local word for a Khasi lady.

⁷ *ktung* is the khasi name for fermented fish

⁸ *soh baingon dieng* is a Khasi name for tree tomato

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