



## Original research

# “Provincialising English”: Northeast India as an Ethnopolitan Space

Jyotirmoy Prodhani<sup>1</sup> & Dwijen Sharma<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Professor, Department of English, North-Eastern Hill University [NEHU], Shillong, Meghalaya, India.

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of English, North-Eastern Hill University [NEHU], Tura Campus, Meghalaya, India.

### Abstract

Obiajunwa Wali predicted in the early 1960s that African literature could only emerge in African languages. However, in the late 1980s, African literature in English emerged as a new canon. Even the debate between Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Chinua Achebe over the use of the English language tilted in favour of Achebe. In this context, Simon Gikandi (2014) has argued how English has been ‘provincialised’ in Africa. In India’s Northeast too, there is a similar dichotomy of positions regarding the status of English. The paper examines the position of the English language in the Northeast, where it is not just a means of communication but is essentially a major social and literary capital, spawning what is mostly referred to as the ‘Northeast discourse’. It also looks at how and why the Anglophone literature of the region has evolved into a distinctive legacy and even a canon. Taking both literary and critical texts, the paper attempts to understand the role of Anglophone literature in shaping the distinctive identity and the literary landscape of the multi-ethnic and pluralistic literature of Northeast India.

**Keywords:** Provincializing English, ethnopolitanism, Anglophone literature, Northeast discourse, identity

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author/s declared no conflicts of interest.

**Funding:** No funding was received for this research.

**Article History:** Received: 05 July 2025. Revised: 22 January 2026. Accepted: 28 January 2026. First published: 30 January 2026.

**Copyright:** © 2026 by the author/s.

**License:** License Aesthetix Media Services, India. Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Published by:** [Aesthetix Media Services, India](#)

**Citation:** Prodhani, J. & Sharma, D. (2025). “Provincialising English”: Northeast India as an Ethnopolitan Space. *Rupkatha Journal*, 18(1). <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v18n1.01>



## 1. Introduction

Northeast Literature of India has an inbuilt paradox. It is one of the literary traditions of India, yet it has made itself quite different from what is generally known as Indian literature because the lifeworld and landscapes, mythologies and memories, anxieties and precarities of existence depicted in this literature carry distinctive dimensions. When authors from the upper castes primarily characterise the literary space in the rest of India, the demography of eminent authors from the Northeast is mostly tribal and women from diverse ethnic identities, belonging to various towns, villages and the hills. Further, unlike the other regional literatures of India, English is one of the major languages of Northeast literature. Thus, the paper seeks to address three key issues in this literature. Firstly, how to define Northeast Literature, especially its Anglophone Literature; secondly, how to put in perspective the multiethnic character of this literature; and thirdly, how to evaluate the status of English in the context of the Northeast literature.

Northeast literature has been variously described depending upon the theoretical or historical vantage one takes. One obvious nomenclature is 'Literature from the Northeast'; the other is 'Northeast Literature'. Since Northeast literature generally refers to literature from the region written in English, it is also defined as 'Northeast Indian Anglophone Literature' (NIAL).<sup>1</sup> The paper argues that though literature from the region has a long history, with Assam and Manipur having even a very long tradition of written literature, it is the Anglophone literature movement that began in the late 80s of the twentieth century that is the key literary phenomenon that has facilitated the Northeast to emerge as a collective literary identity of the region.

The paper also argues that Anglophone Literature from the Northeast is abidingly 'ethnopolitan' in nature as it has opened up fresh possibilities of meaningful inter-ethnic proximities and interactions through narrative intimacies and expositions. And significantly, in terms of the English language, which is one of the common languages in day-to-day life in the region, and which is not a language of the elite but of the ordinary masses, has been provincialized as an effective vehicle to carry the orature and lore of the communities, their mythic universe, agonies and anger, and, in the process, the language enters a terrain defined by unique spatial and experiential realities.

The third segment explores how Northeast literature has provincialised the English language. From a postcolonial viewpoint, the use of English by native authors remains a contentious issue. Temsula Ao (2014), one of the pioneers of Anglophone literature from the region, made a notable observation regarding the use of English as a literary medium by several Northeast writers. She described the utilisation of English by these authors as of "great significance" (136) and argued that this has enabled the region's works to become accessible to readers not only within the country but also internationally. In response to critics among traditionalists who "look askance at the native writings in English, calling it the language of the colonisers" (136), she referred to the comments of Salman Rushdie.

English is the most powerful medium of communication in the world; should we not then rejoice at these artists' mastery of it, and their growing influence? To criticize writers for their success at their "breaking out" is more than parochialism. (qtd. in Ao, 2014, p. 136).

Ao preferred to call the Anglophone literature from the Northeast as the 'New Literature' with definite sets of features that form its distinctive character and identity. She writes:

*New Literature from the North-East* is not about existential angst per se, though it is to a great extent, about a sense of loss of the people's cultural past and the attempt at recovering the essence of that past. They are therefore writing about themselves and their roots. If they are writing about their identity; it is more in the nature of introspection rather than one of confrontation with the dominant one. (2014, pp. 137-138, *emphasis ours*)

This shared aspect of commonality has informed and shaped a quintessential dimension of the Anglophone Literature of the Northeast, which can be termed 'ethnopolitan'. Through this literature not only the rest of India became aware of its 'frontier' as a space with its own voice and narratives, it also facilitated an inward-exploration, and also self-introspection as the communities of the region itself came closer to each other in a more informed way than it was before as the English writings from the Northeast have facilitated a horizontal ethnic proximity across state boundaries leading to deeper mutual discovery and understanding.

Drawing an analogy between Native American Literature and Northeast literature, Temsula Ao (2014) points out that Native Americans evolved a literature rooted in firm ground. Referring to Geary Hobson, who pointed out that the Native American people were accustomed to remembering their histories, and their way of life through intricate time-proven processes of storytelling, Northeastern too, argued Ao, drew "extensively on their cultural roots to articulate their perceptions about themselves in an environment where, more often than not, they find themselves marginalized on the side of orality against the 'written'" (p. 126). Ao proposed to define the emerging writings from the Northeast as the 'New Literature in English'. She wrote, "Can we not then, like in the context of contemporary Native American writings, call this the *New Literature in English of our times?*" (p. 137, *emphasis ours*). Thus, in the writings of Temsula Ao, mythology and political disquiet of Nagaland emerge as the abiding themes. Similarly, in Esther Syiem, it is the Khasi orality and folklore; in Robin Singh Ngagom, it is the nostalgia and memories for a troubled home in Manipur as well as the ambivalence about the address of one's own; in Mamang Dai, on the other hand, folklore and oral historiography of Arunachal Pradesh are the major thematic constituents that shaped their literary enunciations. Such diverse components, notably, form the composite morphology of the ethnopolitan syntax of the Northeast writings in English, which has, as we argue, effectively provincialised and decolonised the English language.

## **2. Problematizing the term Northeast**

The geopolitical term Northeast, as it gained greater currency in the popular discourses of politics and culture, has evolved more into a complex politico-cultural metaphor than a simple spatial category. Regarding the term Northeast, Sanjib Baruah (2021) writes, "Northeast India is a postcolonial coinage that took root in the 1970s. Unlike informal or vernacular names like North India or South India...Northeast India is an officially organised and named region" (p. 1). He pointed out how "an incipient Northeastern identity coming into existence in recent years" (ibid). In the context of India's national imagination, the region has largely remained an opaque and mystic territory. However, the region has gained relative visibility through the term Northeast,

though the term is sometimes used as a blanket category for a homogenised space, overlooking its inherent diversity and cultural pluriversality. In terms of the literature of Northeast, the vernacular literature of the region has rarely crossed state boundaries despite translations, barring a few exceptions. Nevertheless, the term Northeast as a collective identity can establish a larger spatial sense for itself. Similar to how broader categories like Commonwealth Literature and later Postcolonial literature drew attention to their respective regions—namely Africa, the Caribbean, South Asia, and others—South Asian literature highlighted works from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and so forth; Northeast, as an onomastic category, has provided a shared and equitable space for marginal literary traditions such as Naga literature, Mizo literature, Arunachali literature, Sikkimese literature, and others, enabling them to emerge as part of a common literary collective rooted in shared struggles and aspirations despite diversities. This geo-specific term has contributed to promoting and elevating the region not only as a geopolitical space but also as a unique cultural, literary, and intellectual landscape. Thus, despite the term 'Northeast' being contested, it continues to serve as a formidable counter-discursive trope.

K.C. Baral (2013) highlights that the very nomenclature of the Northeast is subject to debate, even if it is often accepted as a given in geopolitical discussions. According to him, the Northeast is a "constantly evolving category", a "land of paradoxes" with multiple semantic layers where diverse peoples and cultures coexist, a place that "means many things to many people" (pp. 5-6). Parag Mani Sarma (2013) also described the Northeast as an extremely heterogeneous region; hence, the term 'Northeast' seems to be a misnomer, potentially implying a 'homogeneous entity'. However, he argued that, despite being a "coinage of convenience", the term 'Northeast' aids in fostering the idea of a multi-ethnic mosaic (p. 37). Notably, Mara Matta (2017), a scholar from the University of Rome specialising in the Northeast, supported the use of the term 'Northeast' to classify the region's 'heterogeneous corpus of literature' as a 'functional working definition'. Nevertheless, the literature from the region has clearly developed with a unique set of features that constitute its own poetics, where the "oral and the written" often "overlap" (Sarma, p. 43).

Northeast literature, according to Baral, has 'plural signification' as it draws from both classical Indian literature and English literary traditions at times. However, he places the emerging literary tradition of the Northeast, in both the vernacular and English, beyond the binary of the 'desi-marg'; instead, he regards it as 'postethnic' because contemporary writings from the Northeast "aspire towards a vision beyond the narrow ethnic groove and (it) represents a shared history," where the reprocessing of 'cultural memory' prioritises the intensity of feelings over the 'labour of technique and craft' (p. 3).

Margaret Zama defines Northeast literature in general as the 'emerging literature.' She observes:

'emerging' does not necessarily denote only the new but also refers to the fact that though more new writings in English and the vernacular are indeed being generated from the region, so also is the emergence of previous and existing works in the form of translations, thereby making such works accessible for the first time to the rest of the world. (2013, p. xi)

### 3. Ethnopolitan Ethos and Transethnic Poetics of Northeast Literature

Sanjib Baruah defined the political demography of the Northeast as 'ethnonational' (2021). The paper argues that the literary demographics of the Northeast are 'ethnopolitan'. While attempting to formulate the concept of ethnopolitanism in Northeast literature, the paper draws on Amatoritsero Ede's notion of Afropolitan literature and Gerard Delanty's concept of 'critical cosmopolitanism'. It locates Northeast literature within the ethnopolitan matrix and contends that, since Northeast India is racially and culturally closer to Southeast Asia than to South Asia, the Anglophone literature from the region deserves a distinctive space of its own rather than simply being grouped with South Asian literature, especially considering its peripheral status within the political map of the region — where it is often given little or no recognition at all. Similarly, it would be limiting to consider the Anglophone literature from the region as part of global Anglophone literature if it merely remains a linguistic rebranding of what has previously been known as Postcolonial and even South Asian Literature.

Orality and memory are not only defining elements of the region's literature, but they also play a crucial role in shaping its historical narratives. The sense of self and its ancient origins are not solely derived from written texts; they can also be inherited through oral memory and lore. One example of this is the praise song of Hakchang village near Mongkunyu in Nagaland, the mythic birthplace of the Chang clan.

My villagers like tiger cubs climbing a mountain,

My villagers like wild boars climbing a mountain slope. (Kire, 2019, p. 41)

Similarly, Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* is a radical departure from the usual narrative of historical fiction to tell the story of Gimur and Kajinsha against the backdrop of the arrival of the French pastor, Father Nicholas Krick around 1840s. The apparent absence of an archival inventory has opened up new possibilities and audacious opportunities to 'gentrify' the tales of local history, where memory and community lore became key foundations of the narrative of the story to evolve.

Furthermore, Northeast literature is shaped by transethnic poetics of the region. Wong and Hasan (2013) adapted the concept of 'transnational poetics' (p. 5) in South Asian English poetry from Jahan Ramazani's *A Transnational Poetics* (2009). According to Ramazani, "transnational poems are 'lyric' in being compressed, self-aware, and sonically rich (that reflect) Bakhtinian *dialogism*, *heteroglossia* and *hybridization*" (qtd. in Wong and Hasan, p. 9, emphasis ours). Ramazani's and Bakhtin's frameworks can be useful in understanding the transethnic literary ethos of the Northeast. Elements such as ecosophy (Gupta, 2022), Yawol poetry (Kh. Prem Singh, 2022), Yemapoetics (Subba and Chaturvedi, 2022), or Topophrenia (Mazumdar, 2022) have contributed to this transethnic poetics of Northeast literature. Re-inscribing its cultural palimpsest remains an enduring ethical obligation of contemporary writings from the region. A strong sense of ethnic identity, rootedness in native culture, folk and community lore, place narratives, deep-seated political disquiet, subliminal anguish, memory, history, and orality characterise the transethnic aspects of Northeast writings in English. Here, folk history and mnemonic ties to the past, among other factors, form the core of the consciousness in Anglophone works. Regarding Anglophone poetry from the Northeast, Robin S. Ngangom (2018) notes, "Instead of the expected radical break

with the near past, Northeast poetry written in English suggests a continuity with the past" (para. 2). One of his poems exemplifies this.

My native soil was created from tiny sparks  
that clung to grandmother's earthen pot  
which conjured savoury dishes  
I've been looking for  
all my life in vain.

My homeland has no boundaries.  
At cockcrow one day it found itself  
inside a country to its west,

.....  
.....

My home is a gun  
pressed against both temples  
a knock on a night that has not ended  
a torch lit long after the theft  
a sonnet about body counts  
undoubtedly raped  
definitely abandoned  
in a tryst with destiny. ("My Invented Land", 2022, pp. 144-145)

The eight states of the Northeast constitute one of the richest and most diverse regions of the country, home to more than 225 tribes speaking approximately 220 languages (Sharma 2019). Although the region is often orientalist as an ethnocentric territory with an inherent resistance to accommodating the 'other', the Northeast has fundamentally remained a space of ethnopolitan ethos, where English has played a crucial role in fostering inter-ethnic relationships. Anglophone literature has facilitated interethnic proximity and helped develop ethnopolitan values, which were not achievable through the multitude of literary expressions in the region's various mutually incomprehensible languages. This phenomenon can be understood through Gerard Delanty's (2008) concept of 'critical cosmopolitanism'. He describes 'critical cosmopolitanism' as a dialogic and vernacular endeavour. According to him, "Rather than a preoccupation with exclusively universalistic principles, the cosmopolitan turn in the social sciences has tended towards a post-universalistic stance" (2008, p. 218). Critical cosmopolitanism is both dialogic and critical, avoiding the pitfalls of universalism (purely normative advocacy) and relativism (where cosmopolitanism is equated with hybridity and pluralism). The post-universalistic self-understanding of cosmopolitanism can be seen as a process of self-questioning and learning from others (p. 219). Ethnopolitanism can also be regarded as a stance that incorporates a critical ethnic dimension, which has notably evolved through increasing interethnic proximity facilitated by the proliferation of literature in a common tongue. It is characterized by self-questioning and involves self-transformation motivated by informed encounters with others. Kaushik Barua's *Windhorse* can be

viewed as an ethnopolitan narrative, presenting an intense account of the Tibetan tragedy that explores “not only about Tibet but also about the idea of a nation, about home and the collective imagination of a future” (Prodhani, 2019, p. 173). The literature of the Northeast, therefore, offers a lasting vantage point for critical inter-ethnic recognition.

One might be tempted to draw parallels between ‘ethnopolitanism’ in India’s Northeast and ‘Afropolitanism’. Amatoritsero Ede cites Cheryl Sterling, noting that “Afropolitan thinking first arose out of the African diaspora’s subjective reassessment of self in relation to the African continent and still-hostile Western metropolitan locations” (2023, p. 12). Furthermore, Afropolitan narratives “usually focus on themes of migration, translocation, mobility, hybridity, liminality, borderlessness, and cosmopolitanism, as well as belonging, home, exile, and return” (Knudsen and Rahbek, 2017, qtd in Ede, p. 14). Here, one can distinguish a difference between ‘Afropolitanism’ and ‘ethnopolitanism’ in the context of the Northeast. Unlike Afropolitan consciousness, which is mainly associated with migration, translocation, and hybridity, the ethnopolitanism of the Northeast is locally rooted, originating within native spaces. A key feature of ethnopolitanism in this region is that it primarily arises from indigenous locales as a shared awareness; therefore, rather than merely nostalgia for the distant past, it embodies a sense of loss and dislocation. Northeast literature, accordingly, serves as a means of asserting agency and self-representation rooted in its native soil.

#### **4. English vis-à-vis Northeast Literature**

The paper, while discussing the difficulty of framing a heuristic framework without comparison, briefly references African literature and the debate about the use of English in its context. It is worth noting that, at the historic conference held at Makerere University College in Uganda in 1962 to celebrate the emergence of African literature in English, Obiajunwa Wali argued, “Any true African literature must be written in African languages, else,” he explained, “they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, un-creativity and frustration” (qtd. in Gikandi, 2014, p. 9). Simon Gikandi, in his editorial for PMLA, “Provincializing English” (2014), however, points out that Wali’s predictions were proven wrong, as African literature in English emerged as a new canon in the 1980s and was celebrated worldwide as a “major contribution to literatures in English and the English language” (p. 9). In response to Obi Wali’s rejection of English as the “Dead end of African literature” (1963), Chinua Achebe, in his essay “English and the African Writer” (1965), emphasised that English in Nigeria played a significant role not only as an agent of globalisation but also as a potential unifying force by effectively neutralising the looming inter-ethnic tensions described as “dark clouds”. Thus, Achebe argued, English was almost a prerequisite for *Nigerian national literature*, whereas the ‘Ethnic literatures’ of the land might include “Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Effik, Edo Ejaw and so on” (qtd. in Gikandi, pp. 9-10; emphasis ours). However, Achebe highlighted that the African author should “aim at fashioning an English that is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experiences” (ibid).

However, Ngugi famously rejected Achebe’s arguments as “fatalistic logic”. He argued that “the mastery over the English canon would take a generation further and further away from the selves, from one’s own world to the other world” (Ngugi, 1986). But then, Ben Okri, like many others, preferred to write in English and urged African writers to get rid of the “tyranny of the mind” (Okri,

2014). Such an impasse on the question of language in the construction of African literature led Achebe to address the question of what 'African Literature' is.

Like African Literature, Northeast Indian Anglophone literature also engages with the question of 'What is Northeast Literature'. However, the term Northeast Literature generally refers to literature from the Northeast in English, although the term 'Literature from the Northeast' is more comprehensive as it includes both vernacular and English writings from the region. While Africa is a vast continent and Northeastern India is a frontier region of India, in terms of ethno-geographic dimensions, cultural and linguistic diversity, and varied historical experiences, these two regions share certain similarities. This commonality arises from the similarities between Northeast India and Africa, particularly in complex ethnic and political configurations and dissensions; both territories were also largely shaped and unified by what Benedict Anderson would call the 'spectre' of colonial powers. Furthermore, in addition to multiple languages, both territories have strong legacies of orature and rich indigenous storytelling traditions.

However, among the major languages, English is the one that, as Gikandi (2014) points out, "causes the most anxiety among other languages." Despite the anxieties, he asked, "Why do English-only movements thrive in large part?" (p. 7). Significantly, in the Northeast, where literature in English has evolved into a canon, similar concerns have also been raised in recent times following the prominence of the postcolonial argument to denounce English as a means of subjugating the minds and the intellectual competence of the natives.

In the context of the Northeast, one might ask, 'Has English been a form of postcolonial baggage?' 'Has it continued to be an imposed language by the colonisers aimed at epistemic subordination, or is English a marker of a class category of the 'mimicked self'? Noted scholar on Northeast literature, Tilottoma Misra (2011), considers such questions as contested, as she emphasises that some of the most acclaimed writings from the region have been produced in English (p. xvi). As English is provincialised through the processes of, what Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin would call, 'abrogation' and 'appropriation', a "New Literature, rich with indigenous flavour" (Ao, 2007,109) has emerged in the Northeast, which, as Mara Matta pointed out, contributed to "delineate a tentative mapping of the complex reality of indigenous India" (2017).

Significantly, the frequently repeated conjectures about the possible effects of English on the regional languages formed the theme of the National Seminar on "English Literature of North-East India," organised by the Gauhati University Institute of Northeast India Studies. (GUINEIS) on March 27, 2017. The CFP read:

Questions arise at this point regarding this newly assertive literature. The medium of this literature is basically a *foreign language*, which is still limited to the urban aristocratic and middle classes. Are the users of the language familiar with the nuances of the indigenous oral literary traditions? How far can they express these traditions in their writings? ("Concept Note" of GUINES National Seminar 2017, p. 1; emphasis ours)<sup>2</sup>

In his Keynote Address to the seminar, Pradip Acharya argued that the literature in English from the Northeast was a modern literary movement, but this modernity, unlike literature from other parts, especially from Europe, was not 'city-determined' though it might be 'city-friendly' following its accessibility to the readers across metropolises. According to him, 'affection, memory and

community' were the three crucial categories of Northeast literature leading to the formation of 'new subjectivism'. Referring to the authors like Nini Lungalang, Temsula Ao, Janice Pariat, Mamang Dai and others, Acharya explained how these three categories were reflected in their narratives, and pointed out that these writings had drawn on their inheritance, namely the oral traditions, to imaginatively rework the past myths into fresh meanings for the present. Both *Legends of Pensam* by Mamang Dai and *These Hills Called Home* by Temsula Ao, Acharya argued, were based on memories. As in the Assamese novels of Debendra Nath Acharya, *Anyu Yug Anyu Purush*, and Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's *Yaruingam*, the Northeast literature, said Acharya, actually celebrated the past, which continued into the present. He cited Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's collection of haikus, *Time's Barter* (2015), and emphasised how Nongkynrih introduced "a *new subjectivism* by enriching the landscape-based haiku tradition with telling political realities" (p. 46). Contextualising the analysis against the prevalent political narratives, he observed,

We have now in our reality the looming and large presence of fundamentalism. How do I define fundamentalism? I don't define it actually; how do I understand it? I understand fundamentalism as *ruling out doubt*. In the Northeast, we *celebrate doubt* (p. 46, *emphasis ours*).

Baral has pointed out that the writers here invest their "creative energy to rewrite the history of communities" whose fictions can be defined as "place novels" that capture the "ethno-centric imaginary" and the politics of identity; they also address themes such as exile, gender, migration and memory (2013, p. 12). Easterine Kire, from Nagaland, has also employed similar poetics to weave her narratives, drawing on the oral and mythic elements she inherited. Kire's fictions, such as *When the River Sleeps* (2014), *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016), *Don't Run My Love* (2017), and *Spirit Nights* (2022), have been the abiding examples of distinctive narrative generated through what Pradip Acharya, borrowing a term from architecture, would define as the "gentrification" (p. 48) of the language. Gentrification involves the refashioning and redesigning of an extant structure. In terms of language, the gentrification of English has occurred through an 'entanglement' with native elements. About the 'entanglement' of colonial languages with the native aspects, Amal Chatterjee writes "English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and others have become entangled in regions where they were once impositions. They have been adapted, co-opted, and re-imagined into new versions, from more distinct instances like Haitian French, Brazilian Portuguese, Caribbean Englishes, to less distinct ones like Sri Lankan English and Moroccan French" (2022, p. 15). English in the Northeast has also entangled with the linguistic and cultural mores of the ethnic multitudes of the region, generating fresh categories of meaning and significations. In the process, instead of being a repressive linguistic contingency, English has evolved with enabling promises.

Thus, English in the Northeast is an 'entangled' linguistic heritage, but quite paradoxically, it is not necessarily a modernist marker. English literature of the region has, to a significant extent, evolved into an effective project of counter-modernism. Northeast literature has been markedly devoid of anxiety to be on par with metropolitan narratives of global modernism, nor does it aspire legitimacy by being part of the so-called pan-Indian nationalist literary tradition. Rather, it asserts a difference. Northeast literature, in particular, has achieved an identity of its own and sufficient visibility as a powerful literary canon. In the process, the Anglophone literature has also, despite

being written in a global language, been characterised by a unique, native, and indigenous orientation, making it distinct from the usual pan-Indian or nationalist traditions of Indian literature. The Anglophone literature has effectively disrupted the metadiscursive parameters of homogenised nationalism predicated on unipolar linguistic, cultural, and even spiritual orders. Both English and Christianity in the Northeast, therefore, can be seen as expressions of what James Scott would call “oppositional modernity” (qtd. in Baruah, p. 16).

In recent times, Christianity has been picked up by the centrist discourses as the new trope to denounce and discredit the legitimacy of difference in the Northeast as a cultural space. Notably, Sanjib Baruah (2021) writes, “But their (the mainstream majoritarian nationalists in India) discourse of conversion which focuses on the supposed gullibility of poor Indian falling prey to the machinations of foreign missionaries, strains credibility in the context of Christianity in Northeast India” (p.16). Baruah cites James C. Scott who had defined Christianity in the Northeast as “a powerful alternate and to some degree of oppositional modernity” (qtd. in Baruah, p.16). Baruah points out that a significant part of the Northeast is Christian—Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya—where, as in many parts of the world, Christianity is seen as ‘our religion’ rather than a foreign religion (p. 15). L. K. Pachau (2019), while speaking on the history of Christianity in Mizoram writes, “In the case of the Mizos, Christianity did not contradict their traditional concepts, though it did oppose traditional beliefs. Missionary ingenuity, by making the gospel relevant and integrating local leadership into the church hierarchy, greatly contributed to participation and identification with the religion” (p. 313). Longkumer cites Scott who argued that Christianity provided the resources of group identity to reposition them in the “ethnic and national mosaic” (p.19). Therefore, neither English nor Christianity quite maps onto the authenticity-versus-foreign-implantation debate as it exists in African literature and, to some extent, in Indian Writing in English (IWE) as well.

Northeast literature, rather than mimicking metropolitan modernist angst and its concomitant realities, has engaged in a deeper exploration of its native self, characterised by its cultural and social realities, thereby opening up possibilities for reframing the idioms of a counter-modernist, counter-enlightenment paradigm. About the possibilities of a new civilizational order as a counter-Enlightenment project, Walsh writes, “Civilisation has its roots in many layers of soil, only some of which are intellectual or rational. Civilisation’s deepest roots lie in cult and culture, in conditions of trust and mistrust, and in fellow-feeling or strangeness. To discover a new global civilization characterized by peace, we must tap resources which provide the ground for culture, trust and fellow-feeling” (p. 70). Culture, civilizational roots, indigenous spiritual worldviews, and related features are key features that resonate in Northeast literature, giving it a distinctive dimension of its own.

Akin Adesokan (2012), in the context of new African writing, has underscored the complex relationship between English as a ‘global language, neoliberal commodity’ and as ‘cultural capital’. Adesokan refers to Graham Huggan and Sarah Brouillette’s propositions of ‘strategic exoticism’ and ‘authorial self-consciousness’ as a set of formulaic strategies of the postcolonial authors to access the global metropolitan market. He nevertheless argues that the writers negotiate with more complex “perennial political and other emergencies” shaped by the contingencies of their respective races, cultures, or histories (p. 3). Adesokan points out five key elements that form the typology of postcolonial fiction, such as they are mostly written by women, ‘focalization’ from the

perspective of the 'innocent and marginalised protagonists', thematizing of 'emotional consequences of 'familial or public upheavals', and that they are not too long and devoid of linguistic experiments and also, they mostly have happy ending or at least not too grim an ending. According to Adesokan, these authors are also considerably regulated by the corporate publishers and their specific demands, whereby readers are effectively transformed not as an 'audience' but as a 'market' (p. 16). Adesokan's postcolonial typologies provide crucial perspectives to look at Northeast literature. Notably, women authors have a prominent presence in Northeast literature. In fact, the fictions that drew widespread attention of the literary audience are by women authors. Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Mitra Phukan, Easterine Kire are the pioneers of Northeast fiction. However, they did not necessarily gain eminence through the process Adesokan described as 'reverse extraversion,' in which the authors first gain popularity and critical acclaim in the West and then their influence 'radiates backwards' to their historical contexts. Rather, the authors like Temsula Ao or Mamang Dai, became the voices to inaugurate literary communications with their communities in the respective regions. The themes of marginality, political and social upheavals, and the absence of radical linguistic experimentation are among the general features of Northeast literature. Nongkynrih and Ngangom (2003) point out that the writers from the Northeast "living with the menace of the gun" cannot be equated with their counterparts in the mainland as they "cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but must perforce master the art of witness" (p. ix). They are also of moderate length, though the recent novel, *The Funeral Nights* (2021) by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih runs up to more than one thousand pages, which is a major experiment with the generic form of fictional narrative itself, which has been described as the 'unconventional novel about the Khasis' (Verma, 2021). However, at times, the compulsion of the Northeast authors to cater to the demand and expectations of the metropolitan publishers for 'exotic content' cannot be ruled out.

## 5. Northeast Anglophone Literature v/s the IWE

Against the common perception of the region, Northeast had a strong literary tradition both oral and written. There was also a strong tradition of translation from the Sanskrit to the vernaculars, especially in Assam and Manipur, besides having the well-developed tradition of indigenous historiography, like the *Buranjis* and the *Vanshavalis*<sup>3</sup> of Assam, the *Puyas*<sup>4</sup> in Manipur. However, colonial rule transformed and dislocated the historical and cultural space of the Northeast.

As English has become the language of official transactions and higher education in India since the 19th century, its dominance is quite predictable. In its wake, a literary movement called the 'Indian Writing in English' (IWE)<sup>5</sup> emerged. The Sahitya Akademi, a national body of letters, recognised literature written in English as part of Indian literature, and IWE eventually became a part of university syllabi. Thus, English in India has been accepted and recognised as one of the 'Indian languages' to the extent that a demand is pending with the government of India to include Indian English in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution as one of the recognised languages of India.<sup>6</sup> However, one significant feature of the IWE has been that it is largely metropolitan, coming from both India and abroad, mainly the global North, with a distinctive caste and class hierarchy. In IWE, it is rare to find an author from a Dalit or tribal community, or from a non-metropolitan background, with limited representation of authors from the periphery. Northeast literature, on

the other hand, can be termed as a literary movement from the periphery itself. In this context of spatial binary, Tilottoma Misra highlights the peripheral dimension of the Northeast, thus:

Significantly, for mainland India, the region known as the North-East has never had the privilege of being at the centre of epistemic enunciation, except perhaps at some ancient time when Assam was recognised as the centre of occult knowledge associated with tantric worship, magic and astrology, and strangely enough, the imagination of the 'mainland' has even today not outgrown those constructs of the 'mysterious other'. (2011, p. xviii)

In their editorial note to the *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*, (2003), the first major anthology of Northeast literature, K. S. Nongkynrih and R. S. Ngangom perceptively state:

Although a great cultural cauldron, the Northeast of India remains little known and largely misunderstood. The uneasy coexistence of paradoxical worlds such as the folks and the westernized, virgin forests and car-choked streets, ethnic cleanness and the parasites of democracy, ancestral values and flagrant corruption, resurgent nativism and the sensitive outsider's predicament, make the picturesque region absolutely vulnerable to tragedy. (p. ix)

In the wake of India's freedom struggle, the idea of 'one nation' gained eminence, and in the process, certain aspects and spaces were relegated to its margins and peripheries. However, this idea of 'one nation' received, in the words of Udayon Misra (2005), "its first major jolt in the Naga Hills district of undivided Assam" (p. 266). Thus, the Northeast soon evolved into a site of resistance and identity assertion, creating spaces for differential nationalisms. In fact, the resonance of this anxiety forms one of the abiding nuances of the Northeast literature. As Misra states, "The ethnic communities of these hill areas found it difficult to accept the concept of a unicultural nation with one dominant language held together by a strong state" (p. 266). However, the Indian nation-state responded to this discursive challenge by resorting to physical coercions and military repressions. For instance, the Indian Air Force fighter planes had dropped bombs on its own civilians in the hill town of Aizawl on the 5<sup>th</sup> March 1966 to subdue the Mizo resistance led by Laldenga. This incident, as noted by Anand Ranganathan, was "one of the most shameful and tragic" events in modern Indian history (*India Today*, March 5, 2019).

The Northeast literature in the context of Indian Writing in English (IWE) is a relatively recent literary movement. M.K. Naik in his *A History of Indian English Literature* (1981) locates the history of Indian Writings in English as early as 1816 when a Calcutta priest, Baidyanath Mukherjee wrote a letter to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court that "many of leading Hindus were desirous of forming an establishment for the education of their children in a liberal manner, meaning obviously English language" (qtd in Naik, p. 10). English writing in India began much before Macaulay's Minute of 1835.

The Northeast literature as a composite literary identity found its first major enunciation through the publication of *An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* by the NEHU Press of Shillong in 2003, edited by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin S. Ngangom. Tilottoma Misra's two-volume anthology, *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays* (2011) helped the literature from Northeast draw the attention of readers and critics

at the national as well as the global level. The 'Northeast Literature' thus effectively emerged in the early twenty-first century, though literature from the Northeast has a deeper antiquity in the vernacular of the respective states. However, the emerging literature from the Northeast, deeply rooted in its cultural traditions, has emphatically articulated resistive, identitarian counter-narratives to the ethos of pan-Indian nationalist proclivities among their IWE counterparts. Therefore, there was anxiety from both sides to include or get included within that rubric. Notably, entries from the Northeast rarely appear in anthologies of Indian Writings in English, whether poetry or prose. Even in the university syllabi on IWE, hardly any authors from the Northeast would figure. However, the UGC-developed LOCF Model Syllabus, introduced in 2019, includes two poems by Robin Singh Ngangom in the model curriculum for the English Honours programme in Indian universities.<sup>7</sup> Besides this, none of the authors from the Northeast in English or Translation figure in the entire six-semester programme.

Meanwhile, several Anglophone authors from the Northeast have achieved national recognition by winning coveted national literary awards.<sup>8</sup> Notably, most of the significant Anglophone writers from the Northeast are tribal, and a good number of them are women living in remote hill towns and villages. However, like the region's vernacular literature, Northeast literature remains marginal, as it has not yet been figured as part of the mainstream IWE.

To explore the role of English in the Northeast as socio-cultural capital, one needs to take certain historical factors into account. The arrival of the missionaries and the introduction of Christianity in the remote hills brought about unity among the hill tribes and English gave them a language to respond to the world. In this context, missionary schools, particularly the central station schools where students from different tribes and villages studied together, contributed to "the development of new tribal polity and identity" (Sitlhou, 2009, p. 66). As Easterine Kire (2019) writes, the arrival of the Christian missionaries in 1872 and the introduction of Western education by the American Baptist Missions<sup>9</sup> not only improved the living standards and health of the Nagas considerably but also restrained the traditional practices like 'headhunting'. She further refers to three major factors that have had an immense impact on Naga life: World War II in the Naga Hills and Christian conversion combined with Western education, which, according to her, "catapulted the Nagas into the modern world" (p. 212). However, she also underlines the 'debilitating disadvantages' of modernisation in Naga society. Similarly, in Mizo society, Christianity has been closely interwoven with Mizo cultural identity, becoming, as Lalchangkima Pachuau (2002) calls it, an "important foundation of the Mizo's self-understanding" (p. 111). Kynpham Sing Nonkynrih, in his recent work *Funeral Nights* (2021), refers to the history of Western education in the Northeast. He writes, "Formal Western education in Northeast India originated in Sohra (Cherapunjee), where the first schools were established by the Welsh Methodist missionaries a little after 1842" (p. 11).

However, Anglophone literature of the Northeast took time to emerge as a distinct tradition. Apparently, Northeast literature began with the Shillong poets in the 1990s and later evolved into a major literary movement. The poets like Ananya Sankar Guha, Desmond Kharmawphlang, Robin Singh Ngangom, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Irwin Suchiang, among others, got their first major break to publish their poems in the poetry section of the weekly supplement of the *Telegraph* in the 1990s. They were noticed by their editor, Jayanta Mahapatra, for betraying a different set of ethos and idioms in their poems, and for drawing attention to their region, a conflict zone that regularly occupied news space with reports of ethnic militancy and state violence.

Similarly, D. N. Bezbaruah, the editor of the *Sentinel*, created a space in his newspaper in the early 1990s to accommodate Anglophone writers from Assam, such as Mitra Phukan, Dhruva Hazarika, Srutimla Duara, Arup Dutta, and others. The scope provided legitimacy to their chosen language despite initial reservations about the typical debate over English versus the vernacular. This subsequently led to the formation of the North East Writers' Forum (NEWF) in 1997 in Guwahati, exclusively for the writers writing in English from the region, with members from all across the Northeast.<sup>10</sup>

While discussing Northeastern poetry, Jayanta Mahapatra observes that it opens a door to the rest of the country, allowing readers to take a close look at the region. In these poems, according to Mahapatra, "History and time become the subsequent strengths" and "the humane intensity of the poems remains a matter of understanding and ultimate celebrations" despite being written by poets of different ethnicity and ecology (qtd. in Nongkynrih and Ngangom 2003, p. ix). This commonality of the intensity of the writers from the Northeast becomes visible not only to readers outside the region but also to those who belong to this region itself.

The adoption of English as the medium of literary expression has, curiously, established inter-ethnic bonds among communities, ironically, during the highly volatile period the region was facing. The common urges of this creative enterprise echoed in the following lines of Mamang Dai:

One by one we'll recover  
The ornaments of grace. ("The Balm of Time" 10)

Unlike the Anglophone writers in mainland India, known for individual greatness and specific modes of representation, the Northeast writers constitute a collective, a community of writers. Authors from the region complement one another, as they share a common historicity, anxiety, and rhizomes to represent. Regarding this emerging literary movement of the Northeast, Tilottoma Misra (2011) writes that it contained an "intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery" (p. xiii). The reference she makes is particularly directed at the Anglophone poets of the Northeast as she points out, they have "effectively combined the music, rhythm and patterns of their own language and culture with the forceful communicative power of the English language" (p. xvi). One of the poems of Dokboklang Rynthiang of Meghalaya is idiomatically Northeastern, written in a language that typically carries the reek of the native soil:

I am the orchid in the forest of my childhood,  
I am the waterfall on the precipice of my youth,  
I am the fruit tree in the garden of my children,  
I am the tigress of the winter of my life,  
I am the lineage-shield of my descendants.  
I am the tigress, I am the eagle, I am the orchid,  
I am the free land of my forefathers;  
I am Spelity Lyngdoh Langrin. ("I am Spelity Lyngdoh Lingrin", 2021)

Is Northeast literature exotic, which seems so from the outside? To the contrary of such etic interpretation, Northeast literature is not about stylised depiction of distancing exotica, rather the narratives reinvent the communal lived reality as one of its primary premises which itself is

complex and at times primal. Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* or Easterine Kire's *When River Sleeps* are examples of subtle cultural texts. These writers, despite using a Western language are abidingly rooted in their native lay and the lore. Temsula Ao's "Lungterok", the stone associated with the myth of origin of the Ao Nagas, underlines how the oral history is integral to the imagination of the self despite the seemingly 'modern' orientation of the language she has adopted:

LUNGTEROK  
 The six Stones  
 Where the progenitors  
 And forebears  
 Of the stone-people  
 Were Born  
 Out of the womb  
 Of the earth ("Stone-people from Lungterok", 2013, 109)

Deleuze and Guattari, in their essay "What is Minor Literature?" (1983) define minor literature, not as one that is written in a 'minor language', but one that is written in a 'major language'. The three characteristics of minor literature, according to them, are "deterritorialisation of the language", "connection of the individual and the political" and the "collective arrangement of utterance" (pp. 16-17).<sup>11</sup> Northeast literature can also be defined as a 'minor literature' in the sense that it is written in a major language with effective deterritorialisation of the language underlining its overt political stance as well as its collective dimensions. How a literary form is deterritorialised can be explored in the haikus of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. He is the only poet from Northeast to have come across a full book of haiku and senryu about which the Welsh poet Nigel Jenkins writes, "At their best, these haiku— full of rain, clouds, plums and (like the Japanese) cherries, domestic life, city vistas and un clichéd vignettes of the abundant nature for which his land is renowned — richly exemplifying the three defining features which Tony Conran has isolated as the essence of haiku: 'loneliness, tenderness and slenderness'" (p. xxvii). On the language of his haiku, Jenkins writes, "There's a quality of profound attention often minutiae, and a sharpness of observation mediated by down-to-earth, unembellished language" (p. xxvii). While talking about the stark social reality of the region, one of Kynpham's haiku reads:

classless society—  
 professor and mechanics,  
 whisky and grilled pork (77)

Or a take on the ambivalent irony of his own place:

Shillong's hot debate—  
 is it a town? A city?  
 Scotland of the East.

Scotland of the East—  
 roads pockmarked by jumbo pits  
 cars do twist dancing (121)

Jenkins found Kynpham's humour as "never harsh and rarely judgemental" (p. xxvi) and he illustrates:

prostitute's kindness:  
'Come home with me, something is  
better than nothing.' (p. xxvi)

However, unlike the IWE authors, Northeastern writers have been largely treated as a niche rather than as part of the mainstream; therefore, the publication of Northeastern writings is mostly determined by publishing-house policies rather than by their general inclusion lists. Zubaan, which has a mandate to publish women authors, provided a platform for some of the major women authors from the Northeast, and most other significant publications of Northeast literature are by Indian publishing houses such as Speaking Tiger, Rupa, Aleph, Niyogi Books, and Context etc. A few international publishers, such as Penguin and HarperCollins, have published authors from the Northeast, mostly under Indian imprints, resulting in limited global visibility. Moreover, within South Asian literature, the Northeast has remained a marginal literary territory. After all, one of the abiding aspects of Northeast Literature has been its assertion of difference from the mainstream rather than conformity. As echoed in one of the poems of Esther Syiem titled "To the Rest of India from Another Indian":

We have  
no Rama  
no Sita  
no Arjuna  
ours are  
differently named.

No wars were fought on grounds  
in Kurukshetra and Lanka;  
ours were in camouflage  
up the stony tracks of the antelope  
down impossible ravines and  
through impossible jungles. (2017, p. 9)

## 6. Provincialising English as a Decolonial Tool

In the Indian context, *Macaulay's Minutes* (1835) is an oft-quoted document to underline the colonial agenda of utilising language as an apparatus of epistemic subjugation. The document has been used ever since as one of the strongest premises for a substantial edifice of postcolonial arguments. However, in postcolonial India, responses to English have not been merely an urgency to rid the country of an imposed language by the colonisers, but have been sufficiently complex. When there is vociferous rhetoric against the ever-growing influence of English in independent India, the entire exercise is not devoid of the subtle politics of class and caste orientation. Instead of as a means of subjugation, a section of the population found the language as a tool of emancipation.

The history of English in the Northeast has layered facets accompanied by a host of factors unlike other parts of the country. Caste has not been an acute social disorder in the region, though in the Hinduised social spaces like Assam and Manipur, one encounters the presence of this social anomaly in varied dimensions. In the hills of the Northeast, however, the notion of caste is an alien riddle. Notably, when the Dalits found English as a means of breaking the shackles of caste repression,<sup>12</sup> in the Northeast, English became a means of transcending its geographic and political marginality. English, therefore, has significant post-independent political nuances in the region. The language has also become a tool for asserting difference and resisting neocolonial attempts at epistemic subjugation aimed at achieving a mainland-induced national homogeneity. It is the Northeast that has posed a discursive challenge to the idea of India as a configuration of unproblematic, homogenous national identity that the country tried to construct soon after independence. Mrinal Miri, problematises the whole enterprise of 'mainstream India' vis-à-vis the Northeast saying "Whatever the mainstream culture of India is taken to be by those who are persuaded by the adequacy of this metaphor, there are cultures— many of our tribal cultures, for example — which by even a very large stretch of imagination cannot be taken to be either sub streams or tributaries of this culture." Miri further reiterates, "the metaphor of mainstream is a powerful hindrance to the understanding of India" (qtd. in Baruah, p. 180; Miri pp. 3-4). Miri's observations indicate the evolution and legitimisation of epistemologies and alternative ontologies of the Northeast as a counter-discursive option.

Dipesh Chakraborty in his seminal work *Provincializing Europe* (2007) problematised the established centrality of Europe as the universal site of epistemology and history. Even the supposed parameters of modernity and political values outside Europe are primarily seen as vernacular translations of European Enlightenment values. He has argued that the margins have evolved sets of native imperatives, wherein Europe is a decentred epistemic and historical paradigm. Provincialised Europe is a vernacular translation of the European epistemes. Similarly, English, in the context of the Northeast, is a vernacularised linguistic device that is adequately decentred from its imperial origins. English in the region has not only been a means of literary expression but also a tool of resistance. Despite being written in English, Northeast literature is sufficiently vernacular, geoculturally specific, and locally politicised. However, as in IWE, the representation of Northeast Literature is equally marginal or even totally absent in the other literary constellations.

When the term South Asia gained traction, supplanting the earlier term 'Indian Subcontinent', most of the prominent authors were the ones who have been part of the South Asian diaspora to the metropolises of the global North, including Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Mohsin Hamid, Khaled Husseini, Monica Ali, Tahmima Anam, Shyam Selvadurai, Manjushree Thapa, among others. Within this rubric, too, Northeast literature is not a visible entity, as the space is largely occupied by authors who belong to categories of relative advantage defined by their caste and class hierarchies in their respective locations or in diasporic metropolises. When IWE and the rise of South Asia as a literary space are termed postcolonial, Northeast literature can be justifiably described as ethnopolitan.

The South Asian imaginary is predicated on an exclusionary diagram in which the Maldives is included as a constituent of the SAARC bloc, whereas Myanmar is excluded, even though it was historically a part of British India until its independence in 1948. Moreover, Northeast India, in

terms of ethnicity, culture, history, geography, and linguistic proximity, is closer to Southeast Asia than to South Asia. However, with recent onomastic developments such as 'Global Anglophone', Northeast Anglophone literature may claim its place. However, this onomastic rechristening of 'Global Anglophone' might keep an indigenous author from the Northeast at a distance, as it has in earlier rubrics such as the Commonwealth, Postcolonial, or even South Asian identities.

Akshaya Saxena (2022) has argued that Northeastern India seldom figures in Global Anglophone and South Asian literary studies. She has pointed out the 'gendered experience of English' that bears witness to the 'life in a war zone' (p. 127) and has referred to two sites in this context — one political and the other literary. She has cited the iconic Kangla Fort Protest<sup>13</sup> by the naked Meira Paibis (women torchbearers) in Imphal who brandished the banner in blood red, 'Indian Army Rape Us'. Saxena writes, "Their voices sound the contestatory potential of the English language not because the women, as mothers, appeal to some harmonious maternal principle, but because their embodied protest makes visible the coercive logics of a language that secures a state of siege. As they mourn the alleged rape and death of their daughter, the women's voices make the English language 'deeply intimate, and so, deeply political'" (pp. 127-128). She writes, "Their maternal rage and grief offer a pointed contrast to the toxic masculinity of the army and the paternalism of the postcolonial state" (p. 136). Thus, English in the Northeast has been sufficiently instrumentalised as a tool of resistance and decolonial praxis.

With reference to the notion of literary site, Saxena cites two poignant stories by Yumlambam Ibomcha and Temsula Ao that illustrate the brutal dehumanisation by the state apparatuses represented by its Army. The story by Ibomcha, "Nightmare" (1990) describes the precarity of life in Manipur under AFSPA, where the daughter dumbly witnesses the terrible inhumanity as the army man stops her father for a routine check and cuts off his tongue. In Ao's story, "The Last Song" (2005), young Apeyano, the precocious singer, keeps singing as the army men raid the Church, even as she and her mother were raped. The stories characteristically represent the precarity of life, where people are killed or go missing as a routine banality of life. In terms of narrative features, Saxena points out, "The literary language does not restore with an overabundance of dialogues, the literal or figurative voice robbed by dehumanising violence" (p. 140). In the Northeast, English becomes part of what Saxena calls "the vernacular politics of English in postcolonial India" (p. 147). English is rehearsed as a means of articulating vernacular silences across the precarious ethnopolitical spaces of its political realms, what Amit Rahul Baishya described as a zone "not characterised so much by the management and governance of life ... but rather around the preponderance and distribution of death" (p. 2).

## **7. Northeast Literature and the Ambivalence of Global Anglophone**

Nicholas Dirks has pointed out that Norman Brown, a professor of Sanskrit at the University of Pennsylvania, was instrumental in establishing and shaping South Asian area studies between 1926 and 1966. (see Muhammad-Arif, 2014). Notably, Simon Gikandi underlines that 'Global Anglophone' is also 'primarily a North American, more precisely, a United States, phenomenon. He further echoes the views that 'Global Anglophone might as well keep the potent hierarchies of Global South and North unchallenged. He also endorses the anxiety of Amatoritsero Ede (2023), who argues that 'Global Anglophone' is part of "disciplinary onomastics sustained by the American

University system" (p. 3). Within this emergent rubric, an accommodation of Northeast Literature has ambivalent potentialities. For 'Global Anglophone', as with its former version, Commonwealth and Postcolonial, is likely to remain exclusionary and even elite, in which native narratives in their own tongues may continue their perpetual struggle for accommodation.

Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan writes, "South Asian Anglophonists consequently have to mediate between the field imaginaries of area and literary studies, without rendering the literatures in question ... auto-ethnographic testimonies, sociological artefacts or species of native intelligence. We must also work through and against English's hegemony in South Asia" (p. 311). Within this framework of Global Anglophone, Northeast Literature might find this space still elusive. However, as Tharoor proposes, "one way...is to guard (it) *against invoking English* as one," a critical project that includes what Walkowitz describes as "making the Anglophone less than one" and what Saxena offers as the study of plural "*englishes*" (Tharoor, p. 312, *emphasis ours*).

Northeast literature in English can find a potential space within the bloc of Global Anglophone if, rather than merely serving as an onomastic replacement, it emerges with an ideological repositioning that extends beyond the Commonwealth, Postcolonial, and even South Asia to include the Global South as its effective constituency. If Global Anglophone makes a horizontal extension to accommodate the multiplicity of indigenous ethnic voices from the frontiers and also expands towards South East Asia to take within its fold countries like Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and others, which were outside the realms of Commonwealth or Postcolonial, the Northeast literature is likely to find an assured location within that fold.

Significantly, the criteria that Goethe had broached for *Weltliteratur* might as well become relevant in the context of Northeast literature. The range of Goethe's *Weltliteratur* was Europe or neo-European countries. Like Napoleon, Goethe envisaged a 'United States of Europe' (Sontag, 2007) through the circulation of literature and the development of readership of books in translation. But this circulation was not incompatible with national identities. As Susan Sontag in her lecture, "The World as India" points out, "In Goethe's perspective, the dignity and specificity of national languages (intimately tied to the affirmations of nationalism) are entirely compatible with the idea of a world literature, which is a notion of a world readership: reading books in translation" (2007). She points out that "The global spread of English could even be regarded as an essential move toward transforming literature into a truly worldwide system of production and exchange" (2007). In Northeast India, English has significantly contributed to the development of a common literary heritage, as no other language in the region has the reach and 'political correctness' to become the region's standard language. (Though there was a time when Assamese had the potential to emerge as the lingua franca, it failed to make use of that possibility)

The region's relative competence in English, especially in the Hill states, has enabled the authors to control their own literature rather than be entirely dependent on translators' discretion to reach a broader audience. By contrast, in other marginal literatures, such as Dalit literature, an author may not have control over their translation. Thus, as Chandramohan S. (2021) argues, "knowledge of English can illuminate the contours of exclusion" (ibid). The Northeast literature could afford to deflect this predicament of 'exclusion' by taking control of this language through subsequent provincialization. This has also contributed to the gradual transformation of Northeast literature

into a canon with adequate institutional attention. At least, Northeast literature has emerged as a significant area of research across universities, both in India and abroad.

Literature from the Northeast has a significant history, which invariably refers to the region's vernacular literature, with deep historical legacies such as Assamese and Manipuri, two major literary traditions in written form. Similarly, several other languages, such as Khasi, Garo, Mizo, Angami, Tenyidie, Kokborok, Rabha, Bodo, and Koch, have rich oral literary traditions. However, this literature, including Assamese and Manipuri, has limited circulation beyond its state boundaries unless translated into other languages, including English. But following the very significant proliferation of English writings from the Northeast across the states and the ethnic spectrum, the Anglophone literature from the region could effectively emerge as the 'Northeast Literature', transcending the limitations of linguistic and political boundaries, especially in a region that has the highest density of linguistic diversity in the country. Northeast literature is a significant addition to English-language literature in the rest of the country. However, in the context of the region, English is one of its local languages, a colonial language that has effectively been provincialised. Notably, the decentred English in the context of the Northeast has evolved into a formidable tool of decolonial resistance and an instrument for articulating epistemic difference.

#### **Acknowledgement:**

Authors acknowledge the valuable suggestions and inputs by Prof. K. C. Baral of EFLU, Hyderabad (Retd), Prof. Rakhee Kalita Maral of Cotton University, Guwahati and Amit R. Baishya of the University of Oklahoma, US, during the development of this paper.

#### **Notes:**

1. Amit R. Baishya and Rakhee Kalita Maral guest edited a special issue on Northeast India Anglophone Literature (NIAL) for *South Asian Review*, Vol 44, Issue 3-4, 2023.
2. Concept Note of the Gauhati University Institute of North East India Studies (GUINEIS) National Seminar on 'English Literature of North-East India', 25 March 2017 published by the Seminar Coordinator, Pranjal Sarma Bashishtha. (2017, p 1)
3. *Buranjis* were the written chronicles during the Ahom period since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, some of which were written in Tai language and were later translated into Assamese. *Vanshavalis* were mostly promoted by the Koch Kings. *Darang Rajvanshawali* is one of the most significant texts written by Suryakhadi Dvaivagna.
4. The *Puyas* are ancient manuscripts of Manipur written in the ancient Meitei scripts, many of which were destroyed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
5. After independence in 1947, Indian writing in English (IWE) entered a dynamic era with authors like Bhabani Bhattacharya, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Khuswant Singh, Manohar Malgaonkar and others. English poetry in India is associated with Henry L.V. Derozio (1809-1831), followed by Indian authors like Sri Aurobindo, Toru Dutt, Michael Madhusudhan Dutta, Sarojini Naidu *etal*. The publication of Nissim Ezekiel's *A Time to Change* in 1952 and the establishment of P. Lal's Writers Workshop in Calcutta in 1958 were two major events leading to what Naik described as 'New Poetry' (1982/2021 p. 202) Other notable poets that followed were A.K. Rmanujan, Dom Moraes, Adil Jussawalla, Jayanta Mahapatra, K.N. Daruwalla, Kamala Das, Arun Kolatkar and others.

6. English figures among the 38 other languages under consideration to be included in the 8<sup>th</sup> schedule of the Indian Constitution. So far there are 22 languages recognized as the scheduled languages of the country.
7. Learning Outcome-Based Curriculum Framework (LOCF) developed by UGC ((University Grants Commission, a central body for higher education in India) in 2019.
8. Temsula Ao received Padma Shri in 2007, and Sahitya Akademi award in 2013; Mamang Dai received Padma Shri in 2011 and Sahitya Akademi award in 2017; Kaushik Barua received Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar in 2013 for *Windhorse*; Easterine Kire received Sahitya Akademi Bal Puraskar in 2018, Easterine Kire won the Sahitya Akademi in 2024.
9. American Baptist Missionaries were the first to bring a printing press to Assam in 1836. Miles Bronson compiled the first Assamese dictionary in 1867. Brinson, along with Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutter, brought out the first Assamese periodical, *Orunodoi* (1846). They established their first Assamese medium school, against the British policy of that time, in Jeypore, upper Assam in 1839. (see *Namsangor Antkhur* by Soumyadeep Dutta, 2011)
10. Interview of Ananya Sankar Guha (11 June 2021) and Dhruva Hazarika (21 July 2021) with J. Prodhani (unpublished).
11. In his notes on Deleuze and Guattari's essay, Robert Brinkley defines 'deterritorialization' as the "creation and perpetuation of a cultural space, the dissolution of that space and its recreation," to what Deleuze and Guattari would call 'territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization'. (See Brinkley, 29)
12. Chandramohan S., a Dalit poet, in his essay, (2021) argues that the Dalit reformers and activists like B.R. Ambedkar, Savitiri Bai Phule and Kancha Illaiah have strongly argued about the great potential of English for the liberation of Dalits. He described English as a language of emancipation for the Dalits. He argues, that writing in English by a Dalit "challenges existing notions about who can write English poetry in India, affords access to a wider readership and helps create a springboard for anti-caste linguistic and cultural praxis" ("Claiming the English language as a Dalit poet" *Indian Express*, 17 April 2021).  
  
Dalit intellectual, Kancha Illaiah writes, "The Brahminic forces kept the Dalitbahujan illiterate for centuries now they are keeping them illiterate in English language and modern knowledge" ('Foreword' in S.K. Biswas, 2008, p xiii). In an interview, he claims, "Even if 10% of our children (Dalit children) got English education, the intellectual field would have changed." (to Swati Mathur *Times of India* | Feb 15, 2013) <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>
13. On 15 July, 2004 twelve *imas* (mothers in Meitei) carried out a historic protest in front of Kangla Fort (the Assam Rifles Head Quarters) in Imphal against the rape and murder of 32 years old woman, Thangjam Manorama. The Armed Forces (Special Power) Act (AFSPA) since 1958 in Manipur gave the armed forces extraordinary powers to carry out sweeping human rights violations.

### References:

- Acharya, P. (2025). In the Northeast, we celebrate doubt. In J. Prodhani and D. Sharma (Eds.), *Familiar Sensation of Strangeness*. Sahitya Akademi.
- Achebe, C. (1965). English and the African Writer. *Transition* 18 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2935429>

- Adesokan, A. (2012). New African writing and the question of audience. *Research in African literature*. 43(3), 1-20. <http://www.jstor.org/nehulibrary/remotexs.in>
- Anderson, B. (1998). *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World*. Verso.
- Ao, T. (2014). *On Being a Naga*. Heritage Publishing House.
- . (2013). The Epitaph. In K S Nongkynrih & R S Ngangom (Eds.), *An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*. NEHU Press.
- . (2013). *Book of Songs: Collected Poems 1988-2007*. Heritage Publishing House.
- . (2007). Writing Orality. In S Sen and D Kharmawphlang (Eds.), *Orality and Beyond* (pp.99-112). Sahitya Akademi.
- Baishya, A. R. (2019). *Contemporary literature from Northeast India: Deathworlds, terror and survival*. Routledge.
- Baral, K.C. (2013). Articulating Marginality: Emerging Literatures from Northeast India. In Margaret Ch. Zama (Ed.), *Emerging Literatures from Northeast India: The Dynamics of Culture, Society and Identity* (pp. 3-13). Sage.
- Barua, K. (2013). *Wind Horse*. Harper Collins India.
- Baruah, S. (2021). *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast*. Navayana.
- . (2000). India and its Northeast: an interview with Sanjib Baruah. *Borderlines*, August 26. <https://www.borderlinecssaame.org/posts/2020/8/22/baruah>
- . (1997). Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands. *Journal of World History* 8(2), 211-242. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20068594>
- Cederelöf, G. (2013). *Founding an Empire on India's Northeast Frontier 1790-1840: Climate, Commerce, Polity*. OUP
- Chakrabarty, D. (2007). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton UP,
- Chandramohan, S. (2021). Claiming the English language as a Dalit poet. *The Indian Express*, April 17, 2021. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns>
- Chatterjee, A. (2022). A Question of Entanglement: The Transplanting of Colonial Languages. *The Newsletter*, 91, Spring 2022. IAS, Leiden
- Dai, M. (2003). The Balm of Time. In K S Nongkynrih and R S Ngangom (Eds.), *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* (pp.112-118). NEHU Press.
- . (2006). *Legends of Pensam*. Penguin
- . (2014). *The Black Hill*. Aleph.
- Damrosch, D. (2003). What Is World Literature? *World Literature Today*, 77(1), 9-14.
- Delanty, G. (2008). The Cosmopolitan Imagination. *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacional*. 82/83, 217- 230. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40586351>
- Deleuze, G. & Félix Guattari. (1983). What Is a Minor Literature? *Mississippi Review* 11(3), 13-33. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20133921>

- Ede, A. (2023). Area Studies: From "Global Anglophone" to Afropolitan Literature *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 25(5), 657-678.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2022.2161058>
- Gikandi, S. (2014). Editor's Column: Provincializing English. *PMLA* 129(1), 7-17.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24769418>
- . (2023). Of Global Anglophone a Response. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 25(5), 694-698. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2022.2161061>
- Gulick, A. (2015). Helon Habila on African fiction's new 'aesthetic of suffering'. Nov. 10. <https://africannovel2016.wordpress.com/2015/11/10/helon-habila-on-african-fictions-new-aesthetic-of-suffering/>
- Gupta, P. S. (2022). Art, ecology and affective encounters: An ecosophical study of folk tales from Tripura. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 14 (2), 1–9.  
<https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2.06>
- Hazarika, D. (2021). Interview of with J. Prodhani (unpublished)
- Hobson, G. (1979). *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*. University of New Mexico Press.
- Illaiah, K. (2008). Foreword. In S. K. Biswas, *Nine Decades of Marxism in the Land of Brahminism*. Other Books.
- Jain, A. (2022). In defence of English: Blame the Indian education system, not the language. *Scroll.in Jun 05, 2016*.  
<https://scroll.in/article/808852>.
- Kanchan. (2021). Book Review: Kynpham's 'Funeral Nights' Is an Unconventional Novel About the Khasis. *The Wire*, 13 Aug. <https://thewire.in/books/book-review-kynphams-funeral-nights-is-an-unconventional-novel-about-the-khasis>
- Kire, E. (2019). *Walking the Roadless Road: Exploring the Tribes of Nagaland*. Aleph.
- Kshetrimayum Premchandra. (2022). The rise of yawol poetry in Manipuri literature. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 14(2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2.ne05>
- Longkumer, A. (2022). *The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the Northeast*. Navayana.
- Macaulay, T. B. (1835). Minute by the Hon'ble T. B. Macaulay, 2nd February 1835.  
<http://www.columbia.edu>
- Matta, M. (2017). The novel and the North-East: Indigenous narratives in Indian literatures. In Ciocca, R. and Srivastava, N. (Eds.), *Indian Literature and the World* (Pp. 199-221). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mazumdar, G. (2022). Topophobia and indigenous belonging: Spatial memory in Rajbanshi Poetry. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 14(2), 1-11.  
<https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2.ne16>
- Miri, M. (2010). Nation, Diversity and Education. *Man and Society*, 7, 3-4.
- Misra, T. Ed. (2011). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*. OUP.
- Misra, U. (2005). The Margins Strike Back: echoes of sovereignty and the Indian state. *India Centre Quarterly* 32 (2/3), 265-274.
- Mohammad-Arif, Amina. Imaginations and Constructions of South Asia: An Enchanting Abstraction? *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal (SAMAJ)* 10/ 2014.  
<http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/3800>

- Naik, M.K. (1982/2021). *A History of Indian English Literature*. Sahitya Akademi.
- Ngangom, R. S. (2018). Alternative poetry of the Northeast. *Sahapedia*, 13 November. <https://www.sahapedia.org/alternative-poetry-of-the-northeast>
- Ngũgĩ, wa Thiong'o. (1986). *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Currey.
- Nongkynrih, K S, and R S Ngangom. Eds. (2003). *An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*. NEHU Press.
- Nongkynrih, Kynpham S. (2021). *Funeral Nights*. Context.
- Okri, B. (2014). A Mental tyranny is keeping Black writers from greatness. *Guardian*, December 27. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/27/mental-tyranny-black-writers>
- Pachau, L.K. (2019). Why do People Convert?: Understanding Conversions to Christianity in Mizoram. In Neeladri Bhattacharya and L.K. Pachau (Eds.), *Landscape. Culture and Belonging: Writing the History of Northeast India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pachau, L. (2002). *Ethnic Identity and Christianity: A Socio-Historical and Missiological Study of Christianity in Northeast India with Special reference to Mizoram*. Peter Lang.
- Prodhani, J. (2018). Interlinkages and the Cosmopolitan Spaces in the Narratives of India's North East. In Malashri Lal (Ed.), *Cosmopolitan Spaces: Indian Literature and Counterpoints of Modernity* (Pp 185-198). Sahitya Akademi.
- . (2019). Longing for the *Lung-ta*: The Abiding Echo of Tibetan Collapse and the Loss of Home in Kaushik Barua's *Windhorse*. In D. Sharma (Ed.), *Writing from India's North-East: Recovering the Small Voices* ( Pp 159-177). Aadi Books
- Rushdie, S. & Elizabeth West. (1997). *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing (1947-1997)*. Vintage.
- Ryntathi, D. (2021). I am Spelity Lyngdoh Lingrin. *Raiot*, June 6. <https://raiot.in/i-am-splity-lyngdoh-langrin/>
- Sarma, P. M. (2013). Towards an appreciative paradigm for literatures of the Northeast. In Margaret Ch. Zama (Ed.), *Emerging Literatures from Northeast India: Dynamics of Culture, Society and Identity* (Pp. 37-46). Sage.
- Saxena, A. (2022). *Vernacular English: Reading the Anglophone in Postcolonial India*. Princeton University Press.
- Scot, J. C. (2011). *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*. Yale University Press.
- Sharma, D. Ed. (2019). *Writing from India's North-East: Recovering the Small Voices*. Aadi Books.
- Sitlhou, H. (2009). Straying beyond Conquest and Emancipation: Exploring the Faultlines of Missionary Education in North East India. *Indian Anthropologist* 39(1/2), 65- 84. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41920091>
- Sontag, S. (2007). The World as India (The St. Jerome Lecture on Literary Translation in 2002). In P. Dilonardo & Anne Jump (Eds.), *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches*. Macmillan.
- Subba, Swarnim and Namrata Chaturvedi. (2022). Yemapoetics: Towards a theory of healing in indigenous poetry from Sikkim. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 14(2), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2.ne07>

- Syiem, E. (2017). *Many Sides of Many Stories*. Writers Workshop.
- Tharoor, Ragini S. (2018). Introduction: South Asia from Postcolonial to World Anglophone. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 20(3), 309-316, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2018.1446840>
- UGC (2019). *Learning Outcomes based Curriculum Framework (LOCF) for English Literature (B.A. Hons.) Undergraduate Programme 2019*, University Grant Commission, New Delhi. [https://www.ugc.gov.in/pdfnews/7176330\\_Formatted\\_Englishreport\\_Final.pdf?\\_gl=1\\*1xk6daw\\*\\_ga\\*MT E2Mjg2Mjc5NC4xNjc4Mjc5Nzg0\\*\\_ga\\_FGHYECNLXB\\*MTY3ODI4Mjg4My4yLjEuMTY3ODI4NDMwNi4wLjAuMA](https://www.ugc.gov.in/pdfnews/7176330_Formatted_Englishreport_Final.pdf?_gl=1*1xk6daw*_ga*MT E2Mjg2Mjc5NC4xNjc4Mjc5Nzg0*_ga_FGHYECNLXB*MTY3ODI4Mjg4My4yLjEuMTY3ODI4NDMwNi4wLjAuMA)
- Wali, Obiajunwa. (1963). The Dead End of African Literature? *Transition* 10, 13-15. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2934441>
- Walsh, T. G. (1993). Enlightenment, counter-enlightenment, and beyond. *International Social Science Review*, 68(2), 60-71. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41882096>
- Wong, Mitali P. & Syed Khwaja Mainul Hasan. (2004). *The English Language Poetry of South Asians: A critical study*. McFarland & Company Inc.
- Zama, M. Ch. (Ed.). (2013). *Emerging Literatures from Northeast India: Dynamics of Culture, Society and Identity*. Sage.

**Jyotirmoy Prodhani** is an academic, author, editor and translator. He is the author of the book *Creativity and Conflict in the Plays of Sam Shepard*. His other notable publications include *Familiar Sensation of Strangeness* (Co-edited); *Culture Ethnicity and Identity: A Reader* (Co-edited), *Madhupur Bahudur*, (translation), *Birbal the River Nile* (Translated), *This Land This People: Rajbanshi Poems in Translation* (Co-translated). Besides, he has extensively published research papers and translations in various journals and books. He also contributes Op-Ed articles and opinion pieces in Assamese and English for various news dailies and portals. He is a Professor in the Department of English at North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong, India. He can be reached at [rajaprodhani@gmail.com](mailto:rajaprodhani@gmail.com)

**Dwijen Sharma** teaches in the Department of English, North-Eastern Hill University, Tura Campus, Meghalaya, India. His edited books include *Familiar Sensation of Strangeness* (Co-edited), *Indian Fiction in Translation: Issues and Explorations* (2014), and *Writing from India's North-East: Recovering the Small Voices* (2019). He has also published widely in journals, including *Indian Literature*, *Social Change and Development*, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, *Journal of Ethnic Foods*, *Journal of Contemporary Rituals and Traditions*, *Women's Studies International Forum*, among others. He can be reached at [dwijensharma@gmail.com](mailto:dwijensharma@gmail.com)