

Creative Reflections from India's Northeast

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"As it (poetry) comes into its own play, may the rich sense of community fostered by our culture enrich other communities in the global world which we are unavoidably part of now."

-Easterine Kire

In the Introduction, Malsawmi Jacob and Jaydeep Sarangi, the editors of Prose Writings from North East India draw the reader's attention to the formidable challenge of defining India's Northeast. It can only indicate, as they say, "a geographical location and not a homogeneity of the people" (p.vii) Tracing the diversity of the region in terms of script, language, literature (both in its oral and written form) and culture which are themselves rooted in their diverse histories, Jacob and Sarangi seek to give the reader a "festival of ideas and impressions."

While acknowledging that the collection is "not as representative" as they would have wished (pxi) the editors say that "it does contain a wide variety of subject and styles" that offer "a good sampling of the region's prose." (p.xi).

True to what is claimed in the Introduction, the anthology presents an eclectic collection/selection of prose writings. It includes some unforgettable short stories, an excerpt from a forthcoming novel, some works of literary criticism, academic essays, interesting descriptions and investigation into the social functions of oral cultures and even explorations into what would once be considered mundane, but subjects of very serious research today - food and clothing.

Organized into eight alphabetically arranged sections corresponding to the eight states of Northeast India, this anthology brings together writings never published elsewhere by well acclaimed and much loved writers, as well as those who have embarked on this journey in more recent times.

Unlike hitherto published Anthologies in English from the region which contained literatures in different languages of the Northeast in translation, this one consists entirely of works in the English language. Yet, the reader is never allowed to forget that the engagement with the English language is at once fraught and exciting. While Kynpham Sing Nonkynrih's Ap rues the "patchwork macaronic" (p.88) use of English/Khalish by the Khasis in an excerpt from Not

Khalish, But Khasi and English, Baruk Jacob weaves Khasi and Mizo words into the fabric of his delightful story 'Chhumleivak' where the eponymous protagonist - cloud on the ground - is brought to extraordinary life by the author.

That the English orthography had to be stretched to accommodate the sounds of the languages from the North East is graphically demonstrated by Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh in 'The Adi A: Bang'. And can one find an English equivalent to the "puan" or the "bhot jalokia"?

The strength of the Anthology lies in its harnessing the resources of English language



to bring indigeneous epistemology and social reality of the Northeast to an English readership. Mamang Dai draws our attention to the knowledge system underlying rituals and practices and the importance of the oral tradition "through which the unwritten past is emerging as the basis for writing the modern history of the state." (p. 5) Easterine Kire from Nagaland looks at the institution of the "Morung" that facilitated the passing down of knowledge and wisdom from one generation to the next through a poem - which was a song - which was a story. The poem-song told stories about every aspect of life; it conveyed the dreams and fears of the tribe and sustained them.

Equally powerful is the attempt to articulate an alternative history of the region. Anasuya A Paul's 'The Question of being India's Northeast'

touches on the subject of "superimposing the idea of nationalism in the project of uniting the people of the region with the country (India) as a singular political entity against British Colonialism" as an "inadvertent blunder" which seriously impacted India's Northeast with destructive consequences. (p. 8) Vishu Rita Krocha's 'The Son of the Village: Gaon Bura' brings the reader to the heartwrenching reality of institutional violence perpetrated on the people in what was called a 'disturbed area'.

Food and clothing are not only the most basic of human needs but are also important markers of the social, cultural and psychic identity of a person. Mitra Phukan's 'The Cuisine of Assam' uses food to throw light on the Assamese identity and Cherrie L Chhangte's 'Weaving Culture: A Brief Note on the Puan of the Mizos' represents the Puan as an embodiment of the social and intellectual history of the Mizos and a record of the Mizos interaction with their environment and with other people down the ages.

If "art is a reflection of the everyday preoccupation of the people" (Chhangte, p.92), Zualteii Poonte's 'The Anatomy of a Big Black Rainstorm on a Mountain' is a unique piece of art. Ananya S Guha attempts to show the creative journeys of writers and poets around Shillong.

The woman's question finds a prominent place in the anthology. Malsawmi Jacob engages the reader with the lives and works of five powerful women poets of pre-literate Mizo society. These were women who firmly held on to their own agency and also became agents of change. Their words, as the poet Darpawngi would say, "Will not fade away," though "much disparaged" they may have been. (p. 110). The academic essay 'Incorporating Gender: Bodies, Binaries and Modes of Challenge

in the Literature of the Northeast' and Dr. Bhaskar Roy Barman's 'Kanika by Anangomohini Devi' lend support to the awareness and challenge of gendered spaces in the writings from Northeast India.

'Evolution of the Manipuri Culture and Literature' by Jodha Chandra Sanasam, is a scholarly work on the subject. 'Theatre of the North East India: An

state of Manipur. The Northeast is not only a map of states; it is a territory that has witnessed the arbitrary creation of shadow lines separating tribes that once lived together. The inclusion of non-Manipuri writers would have facilitated greater understanding of this much misunderstood region.

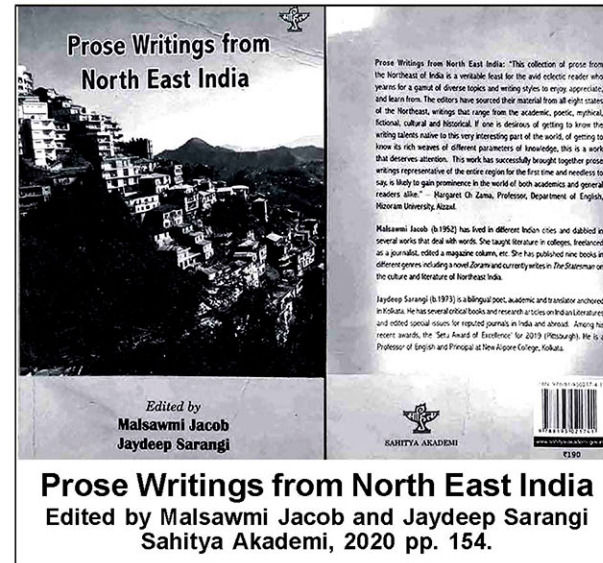
What was missing in several

possibilities in creative writing from Sikkim. Though writers from Sikkim have received much critical acclaim in the country as well as in the world, finding them in anthologies in writings from Northeast is a rare departure. Underlying the elegant and composed style of Pem Choden's 'Passing Time' are the dangers posed by the subterranean forces unleashed by the "stranger" of development. It tries to capture the landscape and the experiences of the people as they sit on the cusp between the bucolic past and the modern present. Sentences in the Nepali language find their way into the narrative demonstrating the author's desire to represent the diverse linguistic landscape.

Tashi Chopel's ironic awareness in his treatment of the unenviable tragic-comic predicament of Anum Adek who becomes a beneficiary of a government house allotment scheme is poignant indeed. The story, 'A House for Anum Adek,' written by Chopel who has also carved a niche for himself as a poet to be reckoned with would strike a chord with many a reader at being shown the complexities of life in a welfare state.

Malsawmi Jacob and Jaydeep Sarangi, writers of great sensitivity and great standing themselves, deserve accolades for this anthology. Since what an anthology leaves out is as significant as what it includes, this collection is both "representative and unrepresentative" which indicates that there is still so much for us as readers to discover in the vast terrain of writing from Northeast India to enable us to revive in our own lives the lost art of living.

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overview' by Dr. M Priyobrata Singh gestures at the radical potential of theatre for social change. The engagement with theatre from states other than Sikkim. Lying to the west of the 'chicken neck', Sikkim is not contiguous with the other states of the Northeast. It was added as the eighth state of Northeast India in 2003. It is also different because of its relatively peaceful history in comparison to the other states, according to the scholar Veio Pou. The Northeast has also been seen as an "idea constantly in the making" (K C Baral). Sikkim's inclusion in the anthology could attest to that idea.

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