

The Terrorised Territory of Northeast India: A Study through Poetry

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C. S. Lewis has said, "Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have become." Literature reflects the on-going tendencies of the society in which the writer lives in. No author, however unbiased he/she may be can escape this reality.

The north-eastern part of India is often seen as something exotic and sometimes barbaric too, because of the numerous tribes living here. But the reality is quite different. The people here are similar to those living anywhere in the world, going through similar hardships and way of life. This place is very rich in its culture, traditions, cuisine and literature. And gradually people in the other parts of the world have started to recognise it too.

Literature from Northeast India has gained great popularity in the recent times. Earlier, the literature from this region could not reach a mass population because of several problems like lack of communication, being written in the local languages etc. But now, with the improving technology and translated works people from other parts of India and the world too have got a chance to get its taste. The literature produced from this region expresses whatever the people here are going through.

As we all know, the Northeast India comprises of eight states namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, Mizoram and Sikkim. Popularly, these states are together known as the 'seven sisters and one brother'. God have blessed this region with a bounty of natural beauty. There are many themes in literature which are common to all the states of Northeast. Some of them are – nature, tribal life, the hardships faced by the people here, violence, terrorism etc. Out of the several themes this paper will concentrate on the themes of violence and terrorism as expressed through poetry. To make the task easier we are going to pick a few poems from the basket of the vast number of poems written by poets from Northeast available to us.

Living under violence and terror is not new for the people from this part of India. Whether we take into account the war between the Mughals and Ahoms in the 19th century, the Chinese invasion of the mid- 1900s , the period of Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in the 1970s or the

struggle by different militant and terrorist groups for an independent state; people here have witnessed violence and terror from a very long time. This factor has found its way into the literature too. Many writers have written a great deal about this theme, in both prose and poetry.

The main poems that we take into consideration for this paper are *Story of a Dream* by Yumlumbum Ibomcha and *At Harvest Time* by Hiren Bhattacharya. The first poem is a Manipuri poem, written in English; while *At Harvest Time* is an Assamese poem translated to English by Pradip Acharya. *Story of a Dream* is a contemporary poem whereas *At Harvest Time* was published in 1975. Belonging to different time periods, both the poems are unified by their themes.

Manipur is a state living under the shadow of insurgency and terror even today. Inter-state and intra-state violence is very common in this state. The numerous terrorist and militant groups etc constantly struggle among themselves and also with the government. These have affected the lives of the people of Manipur to a great extent but still they have a hope to live in a peaceful state sometime in the future. Terrorism and violence cannot stop their daily chores. Life must go on. This feeling of terror and an underlying hope is what Ibomcha have sought to express through his poem *Story of a Dream*.

As the title suggests, Ibomcha, in his poem tells us about his dream; a dream which no one in his state dares to dream of. He having such a dream and then expressing it through words for the whole world to know is in itself an act valour.

"Who else would dream
Such a dream?"

[Ibomcha, *Story of a Dream*, lines 1-2]

Through the poem Ibomcha tells us about the gross reality of the state. He takes us through a journey of bloodshed, murder, massacre, tears and eternal pain. Although the government tries to cover up the immenseness of the situation, the poet gives us a real picture in clear words. He tells us what it is actually like to live there in the middle of everything, giving us minute details of the happenings and occurrence. His is a lived experience and hence touches the heart of the reader more deeply. The poem in a way compels the reader too to imagine themselves in such a circumstance

and thus empathise with the residents of Manipur who are actually living under a constant fear of their lives.

*“It is our home, quite dark inside;
On the floor, their entrails spilling,
Bodies of children lay about
Like rats run over by vehicles.”*

[Ibomcha, *Story of a Dream*, lines 5-8]

These given lines give us a very clear picture of the reality. Not even the children are spared. Everyone becomes one and the same in front of the weapons of the miscreants. The word ‘home’ may have dual meanings, one meaning the state of Manipur where all these ordeals are going on, or it may mean the house of the residents itself where forced intrusion for violent activities is not uncommon. The slayers slay anything and everything that comes in their way without showing any mercy. The way the poet speaks makes us feel that such scenes are very common there which really is something to worry about. Although the condition is said to have improved in the interval between when the poem was published and now, reports of the present day encounters between the military and the militant groups are not uncommon.

The poet goes on to tell us about what happens to those who dares to raise their voices against these conflicts or tries to expose the actual situation in front of the world. They are threatened and often silenced forever. The poet thinks that something of the same kind will happen to him too, but this does not stop him from revealing the actual condition in which all his statesmen are living, for the whole world to see.

*“One gun barrel near my cheek,
Another muzzle beside my lips.”*

[Ibomcha, *Story of a Dream*, lines 22-23]

Although Ibomcha speaks in first person, the situation is universal. There are many who want to speak out but are unable to do so because of the fear of their lives or those of their dear ones. Freedom of speech and expression, the fundamental rights given to each Indian is snatched from the people by keeping them constantly at gun points. Although they live in an independent country their lives are not the same.

*“Gun barrels stick out in neat rows
From both the left and right side of the road.
Muzzles of guns –
Even in the nooks and shaded spots
Of fields and meadows.”*

[Ibomcha, *Story of a Dream*, lines 17-21]

As the poet says, it seems like the arms and ammunitions have taken the place of the natural scene and beauty for which all the North-eastern states are well known. They have ruined the natural beauty of the state and even if it survived in some places people seldom notice them because their main concern is to go through their lives unnoticed. They no longer have time or opportunity to praise their surroundings. Even when they look around their eyes seek the hidden people with guns who can finish their lives any instant.

The lives of the people here are not constant, but what is constant is the never leaving shadow of terror and violence in their lives. As the years go by they have also adjusted with the situation and learned to live with it. Although the image that Ibomcha’s words present in front of us is gory it is nonetheless the reality, we cannot afford to ignore this fact.

But this is not the actual dream that the poet has mentioned, starting from the title itself. His dream takes us to a flight in the surreal world. He dreams of peace and calm in Manipur, where people go on with their daily lives with no worries; where they do not have to constantly keep looking behind their backs to save themselves; a place where people will celebrate each day of their lives.

*“Is being shot by a gun as silky as the caress
Of a young woman’s hand!”*

[Ibomcha, *Story of a Dream*, lines 28-29]

“They were shooting relentlessly.

They piled up before me – grapes, almonds, raisins.

It was hilarious!

It was hilarious – the sound of gunfire,

It was the soothing strain of the flute, the sitar, the violin.”

[Ibomcha, *Story of a Dream*, lines 37-41]

Ibomcha romanticises the whole notion of violence in his poem. In his dream he imagines bullet wound to be like the caress of a woman, the bullets to be grapes, almonds or raisins and he compares the sound of gunfire to the calming and soothing music produced by flutes, violins and sitar. This is the surrealist in him talking. We can also state this as an escapist idea of the poet. He is so fed up of the violence and terror all around him that he forces himself to romanticise the very notion of violence itself. And hence he says that no one else will dare to have a dream such as his. He dreams of a violence and terror free Manipur. At the end of the poem he recognises that whatever he has spoken about is a dream but he is not ready to wake up just yet. He wants to keep his hope alive, even if it is just through a dream. He is afraid that once he wakes up his dream will be broken too and he will have to face the heart breaking reality once again.

Another poem to be taken into account in this paper is *At Harvest Time* by Hiren Bhattacharya. This is a poem written during the period of Emergency in 1975 and depicts the paranoia and threat the simple people had to go through. The poem has a political backdrop. As we know, Assam is basically known as an agricultural state so the poet also adopts a peasant personality to speak out about the agonies and trauma that the people went through in the hands of the police and military during the Emergency. The people who are there for the purpose of our protection are the ones who became the face of the devil during this period.

*“There is sadness
Even in the call of the birds
In the serene autumn field
The woman wilted
And stayed rooted”*

[Bhattacharya, *At Harvest Time* Lines 1-5]

Nature is a part and parcel of the lives of the people of Northeast. Because of this the poet uses a natural allegory to speak about the violence and terror the people were living under. For the people engaged with agriculture autumn is a season of joy as it is the harvesting period. But instead of merriment there was a sense of gloom all around in that particular autumn. Even the calls of the birds are not joyous, as if they know about the real situation under which the people were living. They seem to have detected the sadness and fear floating all through and it has affected them too. The women busy with harvesting are transfixed to their spots in fear. The Assamese community as a whole was paralysed and handicapped in the fear of losing their identity.

There is no mention of men working in the paddy fields. I think this is quite a deliberate step taken by the poet as men in those days had to face most of the brute of the Emergency. They were either in jails – without or without being associated with any crimes – or they were put under house arrests. Many men fled from their houses because of the fear of torture in the hands of the police and had to go underground for long stretches of time. The inherent sadness caused by such situations has plagued the whole social and political scenario of Assam.

*“Her man has come out
Jumping jail
The merest clack and a shiver
Runs down the house
Inside the house.”*

[Bhattacharya, *At Harvest Time*, Lines 8-12]

The word ‘her’ here can have two meanings. ‘Her’ may be the state of Assam. And in this case the use of the word ‘man’ may mean the agitating and protesting people of Assam who were raising their voices against the injustice done towards them. Or ‘her’ may mean the simple womenfolk of Assam who lived under a constant worry regarding the welfare of the menfolk. She represents the whole Assamese community.

The people have come out ‘jumping jails’. It means that they are ready to overcome the hurdles and fight for their rights and for justice. The Assamese youth have come out from the jail with a mission to protect the community, but they have to be very careful as darkness and evilness still delves in Assam. After escaping the harshness of the situation they are supposed to live without fear but that is far from happening. They lived under terror for so long that now even the slightest sound makes them shiver to the bones. The ‘clack and shiver’ may also point to the fact that during the emergency the military used to randomly knock at the door of the houses and then carry away the menfolk on suspicion to put them in jail or torture.

The interpretation of the poem *At Harvest Time* can also be made from a socio-political perspective scene in the erstwhile Assamese society. The poem may be a short one, but it is pregnant with meanings and gives us the view of the whole social and political milieu of Assam during Emergency.

There is also mention of the violence of war experienced by the people of Assam in the past in Nabakanta Barua’s poem *Silt*. Originally written in Assamese this poem was translated by Pradip Acharya.

*“... Spring- storms of days past –
Days of the Burmese invasion.
How many dreams fell who keeps count?
On the banks of the Kolong, Kopili, Diyu
Grandfather’s bones.*

[Barua, *Silt*, lines 3-7]

These lines tell us about the horror of the Indo- Burma war, the terror of which is still alive in the memory of the older generation of the people of Assam. It took away the lives of uncountable innocent people; wiping away with it their dreams, hopes and aspirations too. The horror caused by the war violence was immense and left a dent in the lives and memory of those who survived it in its wake.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih is one of the most famous poets writing in English from Northeast of the contemporary times. He hails from Meghalaya and mostly writes on themes related to the state. In his poem *A Day in Sohra*, which basically is a poem on the nature and environment of Cheerapunji there is a mention of ‘fighter planes’. He writes –

*“This is the famed rain,
making a fool of sorry umbrellas
Zooming in like swarms of fighter planes!
Bouncing back metres high to the sky!”*

Here the poet compares the rain of Sohra (also known as Cherrapunji) to the fighter planes. I think the poet compares the damage caused by the hard, fast and continuous rain to that of the fighter planes. When a poem like *A Day in Sohra*, which has a very strong theme of nature and eco-criticism also mentions things like fighter planes we can think about the affects it has left on the minds of the people. We cannot refuse the fact that the people of Northeast are well acquainted with the notion of violence and terror and this has found its way into literature too.

The idea about the internal struggle going within the state is expressed by the poem *Ekalavya of the Long Tarai* by Bijou Kumar Debbarma. He is a poet from the state of Tripura. Through this poem he tells us about the internal struggle for power and dominance that goes on in the state; how the rich and the powerful are ready to do anything to stop the poor and the oppressed from rising up higher in their lives.

*“Ekalavya, you are like Abhimanyu.
There is ‘Chakrabyahu’ around you
To defeat you the Yudhisthras and the Duryodhanas
forget their enmity
and spread for you a death – trap.”*

[Debbarma, *Ekalavya of the Long Tarai*, lines 18-22]

The poet through these lines tells us that even the worst of enemies are ready to reconcile in order to defeat their common enemy. They are only concerned about their own benefits and do not stay away from resorting to violence to get their end of the deal. The burn of all these is suffered by

the unfortunate, marginalised lot who seldom gets a chance to prove themselves even if they possess talents. And if someone tries to find a way overcoming all these harm and destruction awaits them in their way –

*“when you climb atop the Longtarai
tree Arjunas, Duryodhanas and the Dronacharyas
will waylay you
to cut off your thumb.*

Speaking through the mythological characters he talks about the division between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak and tells us how one group is completely on the mercy of the other.

Through the various poems quoted in this paper we at last come to the conclusion that the concept of violence and terror is universal throughout Northeast. It is nothing new for the people residing here. Their lives in a way revolves around it and many of their actions are determined by this notion too. As we have seen the concept of violence and terrorism is found in the poems that are decades old, like *At Harvest Time* and also in the poems of the recent times, like *Story of a Dream*. This proves that violence have been present in Northeast since times immemorial and still continues to exist. But something else that exists parallel to them is the idea of hope. The people here have learned through long- lived experiences to find a little ray of sunshine, their own clouds with silver lining even in the gloomy and darkened atmosphere too and this gives them the courage and spirit to live on. Desmond Tutu has said, “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness” and I believe this is what the people of Northeast have set out to prove.

References

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