

Biblio:

A R E V I E W O F B O O K S

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Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*

Aveek Sen sees the connections in Jhumpa Lahiri's rich collection of stories

The biography of a small town: Anjum Hasan's *Lunatic in My Head*

Urvashi Butalia hails Ulrike Starke's study of Nawal Kishore Press



Spotlight on Northeast India:

'How many roads must the State build?' asks Lipokmar Dzuwichu

Rakhee Kalita's reading of Anuraag Mahanta's *Owlingor Jui*

Deconstructing the 'exotic' and the 'savage' peoples of the Northeast

Kazimuddin Ahmed's images interrogate the idea of borders

Three books re-visit the horrors of the Nellie massacre

Ashley Tellis analyses the work of women writers from the region

Biblio:

A REVIEW OF BOOKS

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C O N T E N T S

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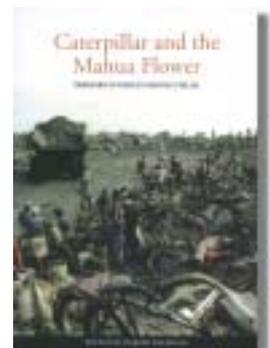
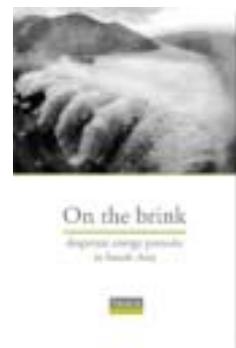
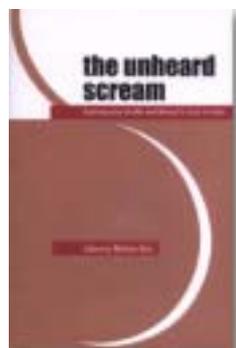
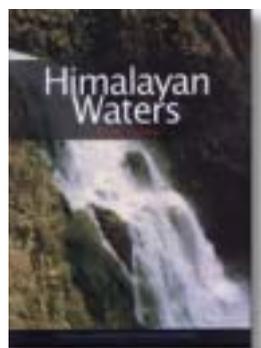
- 5 *The Enchantress of Florence* by Salman Rushdie **Stuti Khanna**
- 6 *Unaccustomed Earth* by Jhumpa Lahiri **Aveek Sen**
- 8 *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga **Anu Kumar**
- 9 *An Empire of Books: The Nawal Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in India* by Ulrike Stark **Urvashi Butalia**
- 10 *Missionary Education and Empire in Late Colonial India, 1860-1920* by Hayden J.A. Bellenoit **Nandini Chatterjee**
- 12 Islamic Reform and Revival in Nineteenth Century India: The Tariqah-i Muhammadiya by Harlan O. Pearson **Arshad Alam**
- 13 *Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite Country* by Sudeep Chakravarty **Pranay Krishna**
- 15 Under the Invisibility Cloak: Re-imagining the 'Northeast'— Introduction to the Special Section on Northeast India **Sanjoy Barbora**
- 16 Readings from No Man's Land. An essay **Rakhee Kalita**
- 19 A People without History: Colonialism and the historical legacy of ethnic classifications. An essay **Yengkhom Jilanangba**
- 21 Borders, *bagaans* and bazaars: Locating the Foothills along the Naga Hills in Northeast India. An essay **Dolly Kikon**
- 24 Transgressing borders: maps of the mind. A photo-essay **Kazimuddin Ahmed**
- 26 The tragedy of Suryya Bhuyan. An essay **Bodhisattva Kar**
- 28 How many roads must the state build?: Revisiting a region's developmental puzzle. An essay **Lipokmar Dzuvi chu**
- 31 *Nellie 1983: A Postmortem Report into the Most Barbaric Massacre of Assam Movement in Nellie on 18 Feb. 1983* by Diganta Sharma; *25 Years On... Nellie still Haunts* by Hemendra Narayan and *Ei Samay, Sei Samay* by Rita Chaudhury **Rajarshi Kalita**
- 32 *The Adventures of Tejimola and Sati Beula* by Parismita Singh **Dhiren Sadokpam**
- 33 Doubly displaced: Theoretical reflections on the terms 'tribe', 'gender' and 'minority' in Northeastern women's writing. An essay **Ashley Tellis**
- 35 *A Terrible Matriarchy* by Easterine Iralu **Sushmita Kashyap**
- 36 *Lunatic in My Head* by Anjum Hasan **Sumana Roy**
- 38 *The Bodos: Emergence and Assertion of an Ethnic Minority* by Sujit Choudhury **Mayur Chetia**

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY KAZIMUDDIN AHMED: A Nocte person being photographed in Nampung, Eastern Arunachal Pradesh, 2008.



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Under the invisibility cloak

Re-imagining the 'Northeast'

SANJAY BARBORA

Directional categories such as 'Northeast India' are often used as politically convenient shorthand to gloss over long and complicated historical formations and dense loci of social unrest.

It is challenging to take on a project that attempts to disaggregate a region that has been politically constructed in homogenising ways and under exceptional circumstances. Ever since its litigious incorporation into the independent republic of India, the region has alternately challenged Indian nation-building processes and pushed constitutional politics to its limits, with violent and tragic consequences. From this violence, history is produced and reproduced in myriad ways to create a milieu that seems both politically charged and intellectually inchoate.

Under such circumstances, it becomes easier to use directional categories (like "Northeast India"), to try and make sense of the disorder, violence, truculence and confusing claims on redressing power relations. It is easier to see the region as an aggregation of different sets of problems that can be offset by less disturbing possibilities that include celebrating ethnic diversity, tourism potential, literary achievements and so on. This attitude is partly responsible for perpetuating the charged politics that emerges from the region, as it fails to plot the manner in which history, memory, politics and culture come together to create the peculiar realities of the various states in the region.

It is easy to render such difficult places invisible in the larger, national public imagination and discourse. This invisibility, in turn, has been naturalised as part of an inheritance from the colonial transfer of power. After all, what is called 'Northeast India' today formed the eastern *frontier* of British India. Frontiers, by definition, are spaces where modern institutions, law, economy indeed society itself, are defined by the degrees of ambiguity that mark them out from other, less peripheral places. Therefore, 19th century forerunners of speculative capital could traipse up and down the Assam-Naga foothills, appropriate land and forests, with the same aplomb that the modern state does with regard to apportioning resources to private interests today. Law, in its essence as a system of regulatory rules, was as dispensable a commodity for the early British planters, as they are today for international funding institutions and public sector hydro-electric and power in India. There is an instrumentality that is built into administering a frontier that makes the production of knowledge a problem in itself. Hence there is a need to re-engage with received notions about politics and history and categories such as 'Northeast India.'

Two related issues serve to drive home this predicament. The first is how the sequentially organised historiography of the region reflects a

disturbing dichotomy between 'civilised' (written and from the valley) and 'savage' (oral and generally from the hills). The second is how this is reproduced in the political vocabulary of tribe, caste, gender, and territory in contemporary times as well. Many of the essays and reviews in this volume of *Biblio* engage with this inherited dichotomy in innovative ways. Read together, they are an effort to weave in the complex political, economic and cultural changes that the region has undergone and to which it continues to be subjected. Instead of recreating the now-predictable 'Northeastern' subject, forever living within the texts written by colonial ethnographers in the 19th and 20th centuries and security experts in the post-colonial period, they question the manner in which this predictability has become normalised and rupture it with the force of historical difference.

The past is always a contentious place. Seamus Heaney called it an abattoir in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1995. That is where 'the Northeast' is situated at present. No other region in the subcontinent prides itself more in having a past that

The past is always a contentious place. Seamus Heaney called it an abattoir in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1995. That is where 'the Northeast' is situated at present. No other region in the subcontinent prides itself more in having a past that cannot be easily appropriated by dominant narratives. Yet, given the easy predisposition, which one slips into with regard to the constraining realm of constitutions and an indifferent national imagination, the local also runs the risk of becoming more romanticised in public discourse

cannot be easily appropriated by dominant narratives. Yet, given the easy predisposition, which one slips into with regard to the constraining realm of constitutions and an indifferent national imagination, the local also runs the risk of becoming more romanticised in public discourse.

The reviews and essays in the current issue are part of an ongoing effort to refashion notions of space and identity with attention to specificity. They indicate the emergence of a critical process of rethinking the manner in which intellectual battles have been staged. They bring new ideas to old prejudices. They are the historical and anthropological equivalents of two symbolic characters that upset a national imagination blocked by security concerns: the irreverent insurgent who does not respect national borders and the resentful native, who is convinced that peace is only a feeling of desolation left behind after the operations of merciless power. However, both do not speak the languages we expect them to speak in these pieces. And that is a new beginning. ■



Signing a pledge for peace at the Pangsau Pass Winter Festival, Nampong, Arunachal Pradesh, January 2008

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A SPECIAL SECTION ON NORTHEAST INDIA IN
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What happened in the jungles of Burma, my brothers?

EASTERINE IRALU

*What happened in the jungles of Burma, my brothers?
what happened to turn brother against brother forever?
Something took place there
in those wild impenetrables
where men's hearts turn impenetrable too
something happened to my brothers
and now that I am older
I know that many, many things happened in the jungles of Burma
not because you told me
but because the things that happened
the seeds that were sowed there
have sprouted and are scattering their evil fruit all over our hills.
In the two boys killed
and buried in a refuse pit
in the young girl they dragged into the woods
to debase so that all she would say afterwards was:
better not to have been born
better to have died than to ever have known that at the hands of your own men.*

*But we must go back, my brothers
and you must tell the truth of what did happen
in the darkness of those jungles
perhaps then, our healing can begin.
I know the stories you felt unfrightened to tell
of the only son who died a hero's death
extracting a promise from you:
if someday Nagaland should become free, don't forget my mother and sisters
And how you brought back to his mother
his body-cloth so she could be buried in it
and there was heard only the sound of mourning
in that village when you brought back his blood-stained body-cloth.*

*I have engraved in my memory the stories
of the man who lay by the road, shot through the legs
"Go on ahead, I'll cover you my friends" he said
"It is an honour to die for Nagaland"
how it hurt you that all you could bring back to his loved ones
was a story.*

*We had so many heroes, my brothers
and you were each of you, a hero
leaving home and loved ones behind
seeking arms in China and Pakistan
fighting to free your homeland
I should have died, you said afterwards
so many of them died, why did I not die?
I know all the stories of the heroic things that happened
deep in the jungles of Burma
But, my brothers, I do not know the stories you did not tell
what else did happen in those deep woods?
All that we knew of it later
for we were in the town and you, in the jungles
was that some things had happened
regrettable, deeply regrettable
but the struggle would still go on.
Forgive the scalpel of my poetry
I know you think the struggle is yours
because you were once out there
on the battlefield with the noteworthy gesture
fist upraised, death-defying, life-denying
that you forget the struggle belongs
to all of us who care.*

*Will you understand
that the question I ask, is asked not in anger
but hopelessness
yet hoping that if we learn to understand
what happened in the forest deeps of Burma
what was the nature of the darkness that seized you
and made you turn your gun on your brother
if we knew that, would we be closer to knowing
where to go from there?*

*Away from dark maze of woods
away from brother-hate
away from the hard knot of fear
that has ever since made you stranger to all.
I still have faith in that
that if we went back into the denseness of Burmese woods
some answer; veiled, complex, nevertheless, an answer
would be waiting couched by an unclean rock*

*by dank water and rotting swamp
and with veiled, malicious eye
tell us
where we first went wrong
when did power became more important than freedom?*

*Our brave, beautiful men, our bright heroes
is this the place where you were shot, one by one
death at the end of a brother's hand
because you would not compromise?
because your true hearts would not acknowledge
the falseness in your brother's heart?
and you came, trusting, unsuspecting
to this cursed place, this stone, this damned wood
only to be killed by the darkness that had overtaken your brother.*

*We curse these woods, blood-sodden and still thirsty for more
we curse these unclean stones, ravenous for our men's souls
we curse the places that swallowed up our brothers' lives.*

*What happened in the jungles of Burma, my brothers?
You only have your version of what happened
we who look back with you
see shadows where you claim were none
gathering shadows
gathering substance
our past pushing its way into our present
shadows mutating into curses
damning us all, all.*

*What did happen in the jungles of Burma, my brothers?
what are those specters that still reach out from these woods
to haunt you till your graves
haunt you so life is turned dry and ashy and worth so little
that you forget that the next life you took
and the next and the next and the next
were worth more than life to us.*

*What did happen in the jungles of Burma, my brothers?
will you kill me too just for asking this question?
Did not the day dawn darkly
on the day that you forgot the war you were fighting
and thought your brother was your enemy
the instant brother began to kill brother
our fight for freedom was desecrated
forever sacrilegied to be our hateful minotaur
unsatiated by the blood of our young everyday.*

*Out of murky swamp
treacherous serpentine shapes
entrapped, confused and finally throttled
my brave brothers in the dark
so far from our love and safety
so far from our love always reaching out to save
we felt it, ah, the futility of love
when it fails to shield
brother from being killed by brother.*

*What happened in the jungles of Burma, my beloved brothers?
what madness broke the bonds of brotherhood and nation?
What madness, tell us, our own
what force so evil it could overcome
all that was noble and humane in you?
We are using words today
not because words are not more powerful than guns
but because we want to rise above guns because all that they do is kill
and we want to rise above killing
let us be done with that.
We will try to understand
we must for it is the only way
we can all stop dying;
we will try not to blame
that way, you will also stop finding
much to blame in us
I know we cannot walk back
hand in hand, not for many years hence
but we can move forward towards the light
that is how forgiveness becomes possible.
Shake off the curse, my brothers
we will not be damned, we will not be damned.*

"It is not down in any map, true places never are..."

— *Moby Dick*

In Herman Melville's celebrated 19th-century novel *Moby Dick*, Ishmael the narrator-voyager journeying into the South Seas makes this wry observation as he describes the faraway island of Kokovoko where his untutored native, the 'savage' Queequeg lives. Some of that contemplative vision of a Melvillean fictional world, seems to return to the reader confronted by stories of lands and peoples not known or imagined. The idea of a mapped world suddenly appears limiting and almost facile and this engagement with a tale that emerges from the depths of a hidden and uncharted territory reiterates the wandering Ishmael's knowledge of light and dark and the ambivalence of knowing itself. The enchanted and often exotic unknown fits generally into the imagination of the traveller whose experiences in alien lands are naturally informed and structured by the myths and models of his own cultural moorings and indoctrination. Despite the easy fulfilment of such expectations, there are large segments of actual contact that disturb the comfortable balance between the known and the unknown and Anuraag Mahanta's *Owlingor Jui* (Harvest Fire) undertakes to negotiate such an encounter.

The novel assists, as it were, in the business of avoiding the mapping of a world submerged by the more eloquent and definitive histories of known peoples and nations. It is no coincidence perhaps that the author too wishes anonymity and writes under a pseudonym. As he remarks in the Preface, in this rush and hurry of the modern world, "who knows about these remote people, and what indeed is the necessity?" The story of these people is the story of history's accidents, of an arbitrary line drawing boundaries across geographically and culturally contiguous lands dismembering the natural and inevitable growth and movement of a community—a consequence of colonial ambitions, political battles and failed bureaucratic strategies. While the topography of this region defies an easy touristic voyage and intimidates the casual traveller, Mahanta takes note of the enchanting allure of his novel's setting and recalls the perilous adventures there of soldiers of World War II, hundreds of whom failed to return from Death Valley—an allusion to the murky jungles of the Indo Myanmar borderlands and an epithet that came to stick.² The storyteller, in this case, Atonu Boruah, a young Assamese rebel, straddles two worlds in his attempt to enter the forbidden land. He is caught in the twin roles of fleeing insurgent from across the borders, unable to return home and thus seeking refuge in a distant unfamiliar place and the friendly civilised visitor from across the border, surveying the ways of a "strange" people—a small community of Naga tribes inhabiting the mountainous terrain called the Patkai Hills between the borders of India and Burma. The ironies of history though are never lost on the author who critiques the term 'No Man's Land' and the modern notion of nation which consigned the region forever to the rubbish heap of international security. As he sets about

Readings from No Man's Land

Anuraag Mahanta's *Owlingor Jui* (Harvest Fire) offers
a compassionate and nuanced view of borderlands
and border people

RAKHEE KALITA

to unlock the riddle of this No Man's Land, Atonu is overwhelmed by the deep and eternal Patkai forests which both glorify and nullify the borders created by man in space and time. There are no roads he can trace from the settlements to sites of 'civilisation': there are only serpentine trails through dense and dangerous tropical jungles, and yet the community that dwells there exists in a state of simple insularity, within a set of ancient laws and with a natural dignity incompre-

destroyed before the Japanese attack (1941) could be stemmed".⁴

Atonu's early impressions of this beleaguered frontier Naga community in Honyat, a tiny picturesque hamlet among rows of hills in the far-flung mountainous tracts of the Indo-Myanmar borders, caught in the spirals of long wars and rugged conflicts, and its consequent estrangement from everything designated as society undergo significant transformation as he too turns from curious traveller to

The classic problem of discourse: "who speaks? who writes? when and to whom..." emerges here once again with the reader trying to figure out how much of the narrative is filtered through Atonu's own interpretive schema or his moral ethical worldview. I am tempted to see Atonu's insurgent background directing his complete support of the idiom of resistance that the native language of Honyat is steeped in. For him it is easy to understand the claims of a "Naga nation", "independence" and "revolution". While there are the visible official discourses severely critiquing the aggression of the Nagas, minor writings like *Owlingor Jui* are obviously competing narratives probably much more nuanced in their realistic accounts of village life and on the ground realities that are backed by a history of six decades of resistance against the Indian State

hensible to the outside world. Tucked away in these mountains, their way of life is as old as the hills.

Nari Rustomji, a former civil servant familiar with these Northeastern borderlands, has voiced his impending fears about the frontier states seeking to secede from the Indian Union. While the apprehensions of Rustomji, who figured prominently among the breed of administrators and bureaucrats that worked closely with the powers at Delhi before and during the Transfer of power in 1947 may not be wholly justifiable, his understanding of how an enchanted frontier may turn into an "imperilled" one deserves careful consideration.³ Rustomji is well acquainted with the aspirations of the tribal people and his instinctive empathy with them despite his bureaucratic status allows him to step out of a circumspect establishment to take a closer look into the life of the frontiersman. "The Naga villager" he holds, "knew nothing of Hitler, Mussolini or Hirohito...yet it was the homes and fields of the Nagas and not of the policymakers in Delhi that were

confidant and sympathetic observer of a people. His unpremeditated function as the ethnographer whose proximity to and participation in the affairs of the inhabitants of this No Man's Land calls for some consideration of the role of the writer in scripting history. Does Atonu see only what he looks for? "Naked Nagas" and "head hunters", for instance?⁵ And is it possible to rely on his story for a deeper insight into the real issues these people necessarily grapple with? Or is he merely an outsider, like many others perhaps before him, competent thus to tell only what he knows, and offer an ethnography or a history that inevitably constitutes "partial truths"?⁶ But as James Clifford reminds us, the ethnographer "makes" and writes a text that poses significant "questions at the boundaries of civilisations, cultures, races, classes..."⁷ and it is only fair that as friend of the villagers Atonu is aggrieved at their misery and seeks answers to questions about the identity of these border people, among many others.

The classic problem of discourse: "who speaks? who writes? when and to whom..." emerges here once again with the reader trying to figure out how much of the narrative is filtered through Atonu's own interpretive schema or his moral ethical worldview. I am tempted to see Atonu's insurgent background directing his complete support of the idiom of resistance that the native language of Honyat is steeped in.⁸ For him it is easy to understand the claims of a "Naga nation", "independence" and "revolution". While there are the visible official discourses severely critiquing the aggression of the Nagas, minor writings like *Owlingor Jui* are obviously competing narratives probably much more nuanced in their realistic accounts of village life and on the ground realities that are backed by a history of six decades of resistance against the Indian State. Angami Zapu Phizo, arguably the founding father of Naga nationalism is like a legend that lives in the lexicon of every Naga inhabitant of these remote lands in Myanmar who believes that he is the rightful claimant to the Naga "homeland", constituted of as many as 7-800,000 people there. In fact, Nagas consider this terrain as their legitimate country and plead for independence while they recognise neither India nor Myanmar's sovereignty over their land.⁹

The Nagas, under the umbrella of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN), the erstwhile Naga National Council (NNC), one of the longest operating insurgent groups in South Asia, have been waging war against the Burmese regime as well as the Indian government. Udayon Misra points out that the Naga movement was not, as perceived by the government machinery, being led by a handful of westernised Naga Christians but was actually very home grown and "drawn from the traditional village councils".¹⁰ Reading *Owlingor Jui*, it is not difficult to understand the truth of this statement. The rumbling of guns in those hills and the harsh grating of mortar shell are no cause for panic for these tribes who have learnt to live by the sound of gunfire. The politics before and after India's independence with regard to the business of incorporating Nagaland into the Indian Union had evidently carved out the peculiar trajectory of Naga nationalism and one that directly affected every Naga whether in India, Myanmar or elsewhere.

Atonu's experiences in Honyat *basti* emboldens him to the native stoicism of living under the threat of armed forces, both Burmese and Indian "occupational forces", who raid villages overnight or shoot at men, women, the old and children alike for apparently no reason. His personal mode of interfacing allows him entry into the life of the village-folk who look up to him as a messiah of sorts for his educated pragmatism and problem solving abilities. It is not surprising that Umli Burha, the village elder and veritable keeper of Honyat's tribal lore finds in him a friend from Assam and seeks his counsel when the Burmese army descends into the village like a marauding beast taking the young and able Laipa into its custody.

If Atonu as insider is compelled to participate in the community's daily life, assemble at the *morung ghor* (the traditional meeting house and seminary where youths are given moral education

and trained in tribal warfare) and feast with the simple folk when a wild boar is slaughtered in the *basti* and take charge in the time of sudden peril, he is also the observer who is torn between his own wild impulse to leave and run from this nowhere land and a saner philanthropic desire to combat the adversities it faces. Despite the obvious anecdotal framework of this account, personal narratives like *Owlingor Jui* are successfully able to mediate the contradictions between engagement demanded in fieldwork and the necessary self-effacement of formal ethnographic description, by “inserting into the ethnographic text the authority of the personal experience”.¹¹

Here, in these interior depths of the Patkai forests, a community closed to the outside world reels slowly under various degrees of economic backwardness and militancy-induced hardship. The writer, Anuraag Mahanta who was witness to the strange life of the 45-odd Konyak Nagas inhabiting the stretch of mountain ridge and the hidden settlements that lie between adjacent hills, recounts how reports of patrolling Burmese soldiers were routinely conveyed by alert village lads of Honyat who perched themselves atop trees and watched the military activities at the border outposts on the mountain slopes below. In what is an amazing manner of adapting to an extraordinary situation in their lives, people in Honyat typically escape to an underground shelter referred to in local parlance as UG, situated at a valley between two hills and about two hours from the village by foot. The author narrates:

The word UG was picked up by these people in the *basti* from the rebels. Whenever there is the possibility of attack from either the Indian or the Burmese army they seek refuge in the UG camp. They also build a couple of huts there for use in an emergency. Sometimes they repair them. Of course each family of the *basti* also has a UG of its own in the forests nearer their homes. In times of strife they transfer their possessions there. (Translation mine)

Life in these hard times has taught even the smallest of children not to question. In the camp, food is mostly boiled yam and Atonu notes how the children learn to eat in silence and without fuss after a long day's walk to the shelter. When he entered this land, his guide, the handsome but reticent Aniyam, had apprised him of his new environment thus:

From now on, you shall only climb up and down these hills. Ascend and descend, climb up as much as you climb down.

The metaphor of climbing seemed to sum up the destinies of these people whose lives stretched long and endlessly like a journey that would not end. Aniyam's simple distinction between the plainspeople and hillfolk like himself seemed so clear to Atonu when he compared the effortless manner of this youthful Naga climbing hill after hill while he tired so easily and stopped for his breath every now and then. The ritual of transporting goods—mainly rice and provisions—in bamboo and wicker baskets slung on the backs of these villagers, and traditionally called '*chakhan*' involving long and arduous uphill treks to distant destinations was a way of life here where cut off from the rest of the world, a people struggled to exist. That they carried *chakhan* dutifully to guerrilla

camps too in far-flung areas several miles from their village was something these simple folk accepted as their lot for the greater cause of freedom and the Naga nation. Thus, their lives were inextricably and seamlessly intertwined with the ways of the rebels in a mutually sustaining manner. While the villagers supplied them food, sometimes clothes, they in turn were assured protection and other kinds of assistance. But Aniyam threw light on other matters as well. His decision to drop out of school and move away from Nagaland's Mon town, two hours away from Honyat, to the Myanmar wilderness traced the story of several Naga people whose lives were dramatically altered by the events that played out in the larger fields of the Naga underground.¹² What is more significant is the recent trend of the NSCN rebels switching allegiances from one camp to another, a phenomenon that is often dictated by claims of territorial and political domination among the two factions, the NSCN (Isak-Muivah) and the NSCN

I do not suggest that the author of *Owlingor Jui* goes about in systematic fashion as he undertakes to 'study' a community or place and mechanically and scientifically record his impressions of them. On the contrary, for Atonu, Honyat is hardly the anthropologist's archive. It is much more, and even his attempts to understand local Naga custom and Konyak myths are deeply imbued in a shared communion with a neighbourly world, notwithstanding the fact of its contested location and geography. There are lessons to be learnt from this tryst with a 'remote people': as Atonu ruminates, perhaps it is redeeming that they have no clue about this other harsher reality of the worlds outside

(Khaplang). Aniyam could now never return to India for he was already a target of the rival group for his loyalty to his leader who had Burmese antecedents. Umlu Burha, on the other hand was a revolutionary who had fought his many battles across the borders, losing an arm in a bloody encounter with the armed forces. In a very broad sense, the story of this village is a microcosm of the Naga way, encapsulating the complex dynamics of the Naga revolution, the ethnically determined structure of the umbrella organisation, the Naga National Council, the birth of NSCN and the consequent splitting of the NSCN into the IM and K groups whose camps are now spread across India and Myanmar.

The author's emotional and shared understanding of the native Naga and his ability to bring back their story from their point of view is where the challenge lies. While returning to the problem of writing peoples and their histories, without making sweeping characterisations and exotic minutiae of their cultures, it may be useful to recall what Clifford Geertz had to say on this:

The concept of person is in fact, an excellent vehicle by means of which to examine this whole question of how to go about poking into another people's turn of mind... The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgement

and action organised into a distinctive whole and set both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of world cultures. Rather than attempting to place the experience of others within the framework of such a conception... understanding them demands setting that conception aside and seeing their own experiences within the framework of their own idea of what selfhood is.¹³

Geertz points to the extremely vital idea of “the native's point of view” in establishing the need for fair representation of people and its subsequent interpretation. By this I do not suggest that the author of *Owlingor Jui* goes about in systematic fashion as he undertakes to ‘study’ a community or place and mechanically and scientifically record his impressions of them. I would on the contrary like to argue that for Atonu, Honyat is hardly

the anthropologist's archive. It is much more, and even his attempts to understand local Naga custom and Konyak myths are deeply imbued in a shared communion with a neighbourly world, notwithstanding the fact of its contested location and geography. There are lessons to be learnt from this tryst with a ‘remote people’: as Atonu ruminates, perhaps it is redeeming that they have no clue about this other harsher reality of the worlds outside. Amon, Laipa's young fiancée, who believes she will marry him despite his gradual wasting away after his torture at the hands of the Army reiterates the author's faith in the characteristic simplicity and innocence of the people of Honyat. What he finds is a natural mechanism of repair and healing that makes them endure their situation despite its difficulties.

Reading this unpretentious story from a frontier No Man's Land, one's vague ideas of borderlands and crossborder realities, demand a reviewing of standard notions of what mainstream narratives and histories are. I argue that writing history calls for a shift in conventional attitudes towards ‘useful’ and usable ‘official’ knowledge, particularly in disseminating information to a wider world. This story may be but a little voice struggling to be heard among the more visible and eloquent popular national narratives on borders and international relations.

As Sanjib Baruah pointedly remarks, the available narrative in this widely

proliferating apparatus is “a tired security discourse”, which more sensitive—perhaps solitary—narratives can aid and replace in order to frame better equipped policies to handle the fragile structures that constitute our cultural borderland.¹⁴ I see *Owlingor Jui* as a compassionate and nuanced view of borderlands and border people, in this case, of a particular community of Konyak Nagas, and anchored as it is in a deeply personal narrative it may well fill those empty spaces that forever surround the strongholds of usable knowledge. ■

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ Anuraag Mahanta, *Owlingor Jui*, Sivasagar: Basu Prakashan. 2007.
- ² Death Valley 1, in the Kachin Hill Tracts, an intractable region in the uplands of Burma, south east of the international borders in Nagaland, has been more recently famous as training camps of and home to several insurgent groups in the northeast, most notably the NSCN and the ULFA, under the aegis of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) a Burmese rebel outfit waging war against the powers at Yangon. See also, Wasbir Hussain, “Insurgency in India's Northeast: Crossborder Links and Strategic Alliances” *Faultlines*. (ed) Ajai Sahni & K.P.S.Gill Vol 17 (Feb 2006) pp105-125
- ³ Nari Rustomji, *Imperilled Frontiers*. Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1983.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p 21.
- ⁵ The description obviously alludes to *Naked Nagas* by C. von Furer-Haimendorf (1939) probably the most eminent of the earliest anthropological work on the Nagas. Though the book is arguably a rich cultural document, its blunt title did enough to feed the idea of the primitive Naga in the popular imagination and resulted in a cliché that sadly has never come unstuck.
- ⁶ See James Clifford “Introduction: Partial Truths” in James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: The University of California Press. 1986, pp 7-8.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p 2.
- ⁸ I regard Atonu, the protagonist, as the authorial persona in this account. The author, Jiban Goswami, in a conversation with the present writer affirmed that Atonu is his “fictitious self” and the third person account clearly indicates a point of view filtered through the author's own experiences in that land.
- ⁹ See, A.S.Shimray, *Let Freedom Ring: The Story of Naga Nationalism*. New Delhi: Promilla & Co. Publishers and World Bibliophile. 2005. p31. The Nagas who are an ethnic minority in Burma feel betrayed by the creation of the Indo Myanmar border leading to the scattering of their communities over different lands. < www.mizzima.com > accessed on 11.01.08. For a deeply personal and humane understanding of the Naga story, see Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*. New Delhi: Penguin. 1994.
- ¹⁰ Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study. 2000, p 44.
- ¹¹ Mary Louise Pratt, “Fieldwork in Common Places” in *Writing Culture* (eds) Clifford and Marcus, pp 27-50.
- ¹² The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN)'s claims for sovereignty drew global attention when it secured membership to the Unrepresented Nations and People's Organisation (UNPO) in 1993. The Naga underground achieved a kind of legitimacy that allowed the resistance to pervade all spheres of life of the Nagas, a trend that continues even today. See *The Periphery Strikes Back*, p56. See also, Nirmal Nibedon, *The Night of the Guerrillas*. New Delhi: Lancer Publishers. 1978.
- ¹³ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge*. London: Fontana Press. 1993, pp 55-70.
- ¹⁴ Sanjib Baruah, *Postfrontier Blues: Towards a New Policy Framework for Northeast India*. *Policy Studies #33* East West Center, Washington. 2007(11).

Within the chaotic political scenario of independent India's Northeast, marred by violence at different registers, history has a close affinity with the politics of nation

making. Narrating *the* past has become fundamental in identifying and propagating the political goals of different visions. Each version of the past is evoked and propagated, often with the threat of violence. Within a milieu of such a forceful reproduction of the past, doubting particular historical events, actions or dissenting against a particular perspective is to invite danger. The burning of the Central Library in Manipur in 2005 best exemplifies the increasing trend of the relationship between political mobilisation based on a particular historical knowledge and the threat of violence in the recent past. This intolerance of dissent produces a simplistic, pragmatic, homogenous and unilinear view of the past. The trope of 'time immemorial' or 'uniqueness' of historical experiences of each community or group, are some examples of a particular vocabulary that one encounters while engaging with this form of history writing. These modes of engaging with history have proved to be handy techniques to flatten out the different facets of collaborations and contestations, coercions and resistance of social formations and historical processes in the past. History has been invoked merely as a legitimising motif for political contingency.

Within such myriad historical and political conflicts, colonialism often serves as a source of these claims and counter-claims. The historical lineage of these categories and classifications through which the communities are constituted can be sourced back to colonialism. The 'warlike', 'savage' frontier of colonialism has become the 'tribal world' of the 'insurgent' Northeast in independent India. From a land of *terra incognita* it has become the land of the exotic and the unknown, a remote region far from the psyche of the 'mainstream' nationalistic imagination. From categories like savage, primitive, hill-tribes it has been changed to Scheduled Tribes in a more legalistic usage. It is quite often the case that colonial records are mobilised to use a particular piece of information whenever it suits a particular political agenda, whereas they are neglected whenever it does not fit into the scheme. This selective choosing of a body of knowledge leaves open various points for interrogation.

1. As Thomas Benjamin argues, the concept of a 'people without history' can be understood in two senses: historiographical and philosophical. In the historiographical sense, a 'people without history' are those who have not been able to produce written chronicles and histories of their own, with a legitimate claim, and are rather written *about*. The philosophical meaning is the assumption that they are "a people of myth, who lack a historical consciousness."¹ Both of these meanings are played out in the ways in which the people on the erstwhile Northeast frontier of the British Indian Empire have been characterised both in the past as well as in the contemporary.

2. One of the major problems,

A people without history

Colonialism and the historical legacy of ethnic classifications

YENGGHOM JILANANGBA

which is said to be an obstacle in the course of history writing in India's Northeast is the lack of historical sources. This lack of traces from the past could be for various reasons. One of the obvious is that many of the communities did not have a culture of written scripts. The anxiety of the historians as a result of this 'lack' of one of the dominant historical material is exemplified in the following terms:

The historical records are available only from the time of British hegemony. . . . So there is no dependable source regarding the early history . . . Therefore, we are forced to fall back on the traditional lore. . . but then these legends vary not only from tribe to tribe but also from group of the same tribe in respect of details. They are absurd at times. . . . Such stories cannot be treated as historical material.²

This 'problem' for the historian is compounded by the fact that history and its authenticity have moved beyond the domain of professional historians. The more powerful engagement with the past, therefore authenticated as history, resides in the form of theatrical plays, public speeches, indoctrination within millenarian groups, newspapers,

discussions on the Internet and so on. If this is a cause of worry and regret for those who harp on the superiority of professional historian's knowledge, one could, perhaps, take comfort from the assurance that quite often, the professional historians are found to be influenced by these forms of knowledge production and circulation. The reliance on this mode of historical knowledge could, perhaps, be linked to the obstacles that historians in the region face with regard to the communities, which did not have a culture of writing.

3. So, an important question would be how does one write a history without any 'historical material'? But before we begin to answer this question it would be important to think of how the written and the oral have been separated. As Michel de Certeau puts it:

The 'oral' is that which does not contribute to progress; reciprocally, the 'scriptural' is that which separates itself out from the magical world of voices and traditions. A frontier (and a front) of Western culture is established by that separation. Thus one can read above the portals of modernity such inscriptions as 'Here, to work is to write', or 'Here, only what is written

The 'warlike', 'savage' frontier of colonialism has become the 'tribal world' of the 'insurgent' Northeast in independent India. From a land of *terra incognita* it has become the land of the exotic and the unknown, a remote region far from the psyche of the 'mainstream' nationalistic imagination. From categories like savage, primitive, hill-tribes it has been changed to Scheduled Tribes in a more legalistic usage



Television cameras capture a Naga person, brought to greet high officials of a major political party visiting Dimapur.

is understood'. Such is the internal law of that which has constituted itself as 'Western'.³

Such an understanding would lead us to critically examine the ways in which colonialism has organised this separation between the oral and the written. In the colonial understanding, there was "no information of any historical value" of the origin of the 'primitives'. It is only through the intervention of the British and 'colonial capital' that these people enter the world of modern civilisation: "Until a very few years ago, little was known of this tribe except by those who suffered from their depredations, and by the officers who undertook the task of pacifying them and changing them into law-abiding subjects."⁴ Since the 'tribes' inhabiting the Northeastern frontier were too 'uncivilised to have preserved anything in the way of historical records,'⁵ their past is buried in obscurity; it stretched into an 'empty timeless prehistory', before the conquest of colonialism. So, the logic proceeds, a study of their past had to follow a 'non-historical' methodology.

Given this conceptualisation of a history-less people it will be important to interrogate the ways in which social classification has been rooted during colonialism. The language of collective identity formation in the Northeast is largely based on the idea of ethnicity. Notwithstanding the enormity of the challenges, the ethnic boundaries are identified to be well demarcated. Infused with a notion of a definite territoriality for each group, the chances of conflict and contestations amongst the groups are heightened by claims to historicity. The demand, on the one hand, for the creation of a geo-political unit of the Nagas, in the name of creating a homeland from the Naga inhabited areas and the resistance against such a move from neighbouring communities based on the idea of territorial integrity, on the other, often take recourse to history. It will be important to look into the colonial discourse of classifications as an entry point to understand the basis and the implications of the exclusive notions through which the ethnic identities are based, making it a favourable ground for animosity and contestations.

4. The onslaught of colonialism was accompanied with a dream of identifying the colonised, constructing a history on the one hand and their physical immobilisation on the other. Within the politics of control and subjugation, defining the groups with a neat boundary becomes crucial. A desire for a well-defined 'subject' group is a means to 'close' the fluidity of multiple and fluid identities. The imageries of the inferiorised Other are legitimised and circulated with the 'scientific' insights, at the same time, older and pre-existing 'native' cultural narratives and 'traditional' practices are mobilised.

The colonial practice of studying the 'tribe' laid a special emphasis on studying the customs, practices, and institutions of the communities. 'Tribe' in the colonial context was defined by its characteristic of being isolated, self-contained 'primitive' race that "remained but little affected by foreign civilisation."⁶ For the officio-ethnographers the different communities are caught in a frozen, changeless time of the past: "There has been little change fortunately from the time of Megasthenes in the Naga Hills."⁷ The concept of 'tribe' was vague, ambiguous, and ill-defined. However, the common understanding prevalent in

colonial officio-ethnographical accounts was that they were concerned with the study on 'tribes'.

Given the close association between colonialism and anthropology, the category 'tribal' and the pejorative notions inherent in it have been considered problematic in academic circles. However, it remains a part of the policy discourse in India through the notification of some groups as Schedule Tribes. Here, the ambiguous feature of the category is brought to the fore since there is no definition of the term; no normative can be taken to define 'tribe'. The 'tribes' are "defined partly by habitat and geographical isolation, but even more on the basis of social, religious, linguistic and cultural distinctiveness—their 'tribal characteristics'. Just where the line between 'tribals' and 'non-tribals' should be drawn has not always been free from doubt."⁸ The common assumption has been that the inhabitants of the frontier, prior to colonialism, have lived a 'tribal' way of life and it continues to be so. For those, which were not directly categorised as 'tribes', it is explained through a process of evolution.

5. It is common in the colonial accounts to point out the differences amongst the 'hill-tribes' despite being lumped in the same category. However, the commonality ascribed to them is in contradistinction to the 'plains people', as Robert Reid puts it, "[The peoples of the Excluded Areas of Assam] differ markedly among themselves, but they have this one characteristic in common, that neither racially, historically, culturally, nor linguistically have they any affinity with the people of the plains."⁹ The customs, language and religion of the 'hill-tribes' are projected as being quite different from those of the plains. Most colonial accounts insist that the inhabitants of the state of Manipur included both "civilised Hindus and barbarous tribes" since the topography of the land "consists of both tangled forest-covered hills and of open cultivated plain."¹⁰ Moreover, it was asserted that the name Manipuri was applicable only to the Hindu dwellers of the plains. As opposed to them, it is argued, the "hillmen, though divided into numerous clans and sections, may be grouped generally into the two great divisions of Naga and Kuki."¹¹

The differentiation between the 'tribes' and 'plains people' could also be based on 'racial' classification. The racial affinity seems to be established by 'observable facts' as A. Campbell claimed that the Lushais are "fairer in complexion than the people of the plains; their features resemble the Malays more than the Tartar-faced people of Munnipore". However, the 'scientific' gave way, often, to subjective personal remarks. It was noted that the voices of the Lushais were "remarkable for extreme softness, and their language for euphonic sweetness, compared with the harsh and guttural dialects of the Tartar races to the north of them."¹² Subjective observations like cleanliness and dwellings, as a result, become important points of classification.

The newly emerging colonised intellectuals of Bengal shared the classification of hill-tribes 'and' plains people through the prism of religion. During the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891, while the pages of newspapers in

Bengal were filled with the debate on the Age of Consent Act, the section on Foreign Politics was occupied with the 'Manipur affair'. A common line would go thus: "If the savage tribes on the north-east frontier combine with the Manipuris, and are led by a worthy commander like Tekendrajit, [sic] there will be little hope of easily subjugating them." Criticising the plan of the British to annex, it goes on to add, "Perhaps the English thought that there was nothing to fear from Tekendrajit's capture in open Durbar and in the presence of hosts of Manipuris. But they should have known better. The Manipuris are Rajputs by blood, and it is not likely that the English do not know Rajput history."¹³ The Manipuris, in their eyes, were different from the 'savages' by their religion in spite of their inhabiting a similar environmental and cultural milieu. But in the eyes of the 'native' Bengali intellectuals, the Manipuris were still 'inferior', civilisationally, to them.

6. The differentiation between the 'plains people' and the 'hill tribes' was not merely in the realm of producing knowledge. They were the basis for colonial rule in the frontier. The inhabitants of the hilly tracts were thought to be "not yet suited for the elaborate legal rules laid down in the procedure codes and in several other enactments of the same class, and they had to be governed in a simpler and more personal manner than those of the more civilised and longer settled districts."¹⁴ Some officials vehemently demanded for a more personalised form of government. The more impersonal, bureaucratic form of governance adopted by the British rule in the later part of the 19th century was thought to be ill-adapted to the requirements of these 'wild savages'. It was argued:

They seem to need a combination of the autocratic and patriarchal—an essentially personal as distinguished from a Departmental Government, . . . [T]hey need an intelligent Chief over them, rather than a department, and one not changed for every little frivolous pretext... From being a set of treacherous and turbulent races, they would become a prolific source from which our Indian army could recruit most valuable and trustworthy material.¹⁵

7. Despite the best efforts to classify the peoples in the frontier within well-demarcated, rigid boundaries, politics of classification failed to achieve its goal. It was lamented that all 'races' had been intermixing continuously and as a result of the indefinite merger of humankind, successful classification was no more possible. The only way to develop a 'type' of a mixed community was to refrain long enough from intermarriage with other communities. In the words of R. Grant Brown:

It is not that there is a uniform type but that there are so many types within the same so-called race (which generally means merely a group of persons talking the same language) that none can be selected as specially belonging to it. The same may be said of cranial measurements. . . . [T]hese are useless for the purpose of classifying stocks . . . The indexes show great extremes, but when a mean is taken of any particular 'race' it is mesocephalic. Where this is not the case it will probably be found

that the number of measurements recorded is not sufficiently numerous for any useful conclusion to be based on them.¹⁶

The Northeast frontier was observed to have a large collection of 'tribes of mixed blood', where it was almost impossible to isolate any one tribe in physical characteristics, language, religion, or customs. The intermixing has been from different groups—from Burma and Malay peninsula from the east, the Mongolian and Tibetan from the north, and the aborigines of India from the west and south. Penal settlement by monarchical structures also added to the 'admixture of foreign blood' even to endogamous clans.

8. Moreover, it was uncertain in the colonial ethnographic knowledge whether categories like Naga and Lushai designated separate 'tribes' or the divisions within one 'tribe'. The difficulty of accurately ascertaining the extent and nature of 'tribal divisions' was not peculiar to one particular case but common to all. As J. P. Mills pointed out, the term 'Konyak' was used to cover a large number of people who could probably be classified as separate 'tribes'. The basis on which it has been used as a generic term is based on the observations that "all sections of the tribe, however, possess certain characteristics which distinguish them from other Nagas".¹⁷ There was no common understanding on the meaning and the use of terms like race, tribe, clan and so on. Moreover, use of these categories did not infer a 'purity of blood' since admixture or hybridity was noticed.

The use of language, dialect, customs and manners as indicators of classification was a complex issue. Similarities in language or dialect do not necessarily mean similarities in customs and manners. It was observed that the Mao and Maram Naga, though very similar in dress and customs, spoke very different dialects. The language of the Lhota Naga differed from its neighbours, whereas in dress and customs resembled each other closely.¹⁸ Moreover, similitude in ecology and material culture, which is regarded to form a common substratum, do not necessarily mean a similarity in social structure. In other words, "virtually identical economic systems can be associated with diametrically opposed types of social organisation."¹⁹

Despite a colonial desire to put the different groups into a neat order of hierarchy in the evolutionary scale of societies, it was an impossible task; "[The Meitei group] presents a wonderful scale ranging from people who are still migratory to people who have written histories five centuries old."²⁰ The Meiteis occupied an ambiguous and problematic position in the colonial civilisational hierarchisation. They were, in the colonial understanding, oscillating "between the wild paganism, unsophisticated manners, and savage customs of their hill cousins, and a desire to be esteemed worthy of the beautiful visionary history which the Indian epics have been so kind as to assign them."²¹ The prevalence of these diverse and distinctiveness groups went against the scheme to put them within well-defined social boundaries in a well-ordered hierarchy of evolutionary scale.

Racial and other forms of classification, introduced and applied in

the colonial period, are used by different groups for political, social, cultural reasons. With a rising trend of 'autoethnography' it seems to have become more *authentic*. Within the myriad historical and political conflicts, colonialism comes to be a reminder of claims and counter-claims. Given the problems of these ethnic classifications, how tenable it is to articulate contemporary politics in terms of tribal or ethnic identity is a question to ponder over for scholars, advocacy groups and administrators alike. Moreover, the contested nature of the colonial knowledge challenges the very basis of using these as unproblematic sources for contemporary political legitimacy.

END NOTES:

¹ Thomas Benjamin, 'A Time of Reconquest: History, the Maya Revival, and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas,' *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 105, No. 2, April 2000, pp. 418 - 420.

² B. B. Ghosh, 'Problems of Writing the History of Nagaland' in J. B. Bhattacharjee, ed., *Studies in the History of North-East India: Essays in honour of Professor H. K. Barpujari*, Shillong: North-Eastern Hills University Publications, 1986, p. 246.

³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of everyday life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, p. 134.

⁴ A. Playfair, *The Garos*, reprint Delhi, Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1998, p.8.

⁵ B. C. Allen, *Report on Census of Assam*, Vol. 1, 1901, p. 2.

⁶ 'Collection of implements etc. required by the trustees of the Indian Museum', Bengal Government, 1871, File Nos. 200-357, Assam State Archives.

⁷ J. H. Hutton, 'Prehistory of Assam', *Man in India*, Vol. VIII, No.4, 1928, p.228.

⁸ Marc Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, Berkeley: University of California, 1984, quoted in Sanjib Baruah, 'Uprooted in the Northeast: The Imbalance of rights, ethnic claims and histories of dispossession,' in http://www.himalmag.com/2003/march/essay_2.html

⁹ Robert Reid, 'The Excluded Areas of Assam,' *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 103, No. ½, Jan.-Feb., 1944, p. 19.

¹⁰ E. W. Dun, *Gazetteer of Manipur*, reprint Delhi: Vivek Publishing Co., 1975, original pub. 1886, p. 13.

¹¹ 'Manipur,' *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography*, New Monthly Series, Vol. 13, No. 5, May, 1891, p. 292.

¹² A. Campbell, 'On the Looshais,' *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 3, 1874, pp. 60 - 61.

¹³ 'Hindu Ranjika', April 8, in *Report on Native Papers in Bengal*, No. 16 of 1891, p. 443.

¹⁴ Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, reprint Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1997, original pub. 1905, p. 316.

¹⁵ S. E. Peal, 'Report on a visit to the Nongyang Lake, on the Burmese Frontier, February, 1879', *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1881, vol. L, reprinted in Verrier, ed., *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*, Madras: Oxford University Press, 1959, pp. 125-6.

¹⁶ R. Grant Brown, 'The Kadus of Burma,' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1920, pp. 1-2.

¹⁷ J. P. Mills, 'Certain Aspects of Naga Culture,' *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 56, 1926, p. 30.

¹⁸ Gertrude M. Godden, 'Naga and Other Frontier Tribes of North-East India,' *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 26, 1897, p. 166.

¹⁹ Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, 'Comparisons between the Mountain Peoples of the Philippines and some Tribes of North-East India,' *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 137, No. 3, Sep., 1971, p. 339.

²⁰ T. C. Hodson, 'The "Genna" amongst the Tribes of Assam,' *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 36, Jan.-Jun., 1906, p. 92.

²¹ Edward Tuite Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1872, p. 48.

Mobility and movement did not cease after colonial legislations restricted travels between the hills and the valley in Northeast India. If we shift our focus from the hill-valley distinction to that of the hill-foothill relation, the interactions between the hills and the foothills might enable us to transform the dominant colonial sensibility of savagery *versus* civilisation or 'wild' spaces and regulated places. Even though the foothill space became invisible within the dominant hill-valley construct of the 19th century, the foothill history, culture and politics in the Naga Hills have played a significant role in constructing the hills as a site for friendship, networks and collaborations. The foothill interpretations of the hills might enable us to reopen "foregone conclusions" about the hill-valley distinctions, which have become naturalised.

The hill-valley distinction in Northeast India exists as a consequence of border-making projects that empires and states undertook in the 19th century. Talking about the hills and the valleys in Southeast Asia, James Scott describes how continuous movement between the hills and the valleys is not only associated with mobility but also emphasizes how such movements change one's identity: in that context, he notes, "... the hill people are becoming valley people all the time, and the valley people become hill people all the time. To make things even more complicated, there are intermediate statuses: people who have one foot, culturally and ecologically speaking, in the hills and another foot in the valley." (Scott 2000, unpublished workshop paper). Saints and scholars have used such metaphors about feet, of course, with varying examples. But such examples generally conveyed a message: the unstable/insecure or volatile position of that status—whether it was placing one foot in the hill and the other in the valley/or for that matter parables about serving two masters: they all carried a lesson about the danger that such positions entailed.

Nilikesh Gogoi and the *baagan* in the foothills

Let me introduce the foothills of the Naga Hills by sharing the story of an inhabitant named Nilikesh Gogoi. A person whose feet rested—referring to James Scott's metaphor—in two spaces, the Naga Hills which merge with the Patkai Range along the Burma border, and the foothills in Upper Assam which stretch down to the Brahmaputra valley on the other side. In February 2007, Nilikesh Gogoi,² was shot dead by personnel of the Central Industrial Security Force stationed along the foothills to protect the tea plantations and the oil installation units as he returned to Gelekey, his hometown in the foothills of Assam from a Naga village in the hills. A clear case of murder at the hands of the State's security apparatus ultimately led to multiple interpretations—a suspicious man, mistaken identity, a trouble maker. The government depicted this murder as an accident rather than a consequence of equipping security agencies with enormous powers in the name of regulating and controlling law and order along the foothills. When inhabitants of the

Borders, *bagaans* and bazaars

Locating the Foothills along the Naga Hills in Northeast India

DOLLY KIKON

foothills argued that the deceased (Nilikesh Gogoi) had lived 42 years of his life in the foothill town and was not a suspicious man, the State produced a second version. It claimed that Nilikesh was shot as he tried to break into the oil installation nearby. The First Information Report (FIR) from the police showed that the site of his murder was quite far from the installations. The final version of the story, from the administration's side, declared that it was a case of mistaken identity, which was attributed to his *moving* around in the area at night.

Why did Nilikesh go the hills and what did he do there? The reasons for his travels to the hills did not emerge in the police investigation. However, he was a coal trader and collaborated on small projects with his friends and colleagues in the hills. He went to the

hills to fetch coal to sell it in the foothill. But inhabitants in the hills and the foothills have always been aware of the violence involved in *moving* between these two spaces. The plantations along the foothills were seen as a primary cause of conflict. Established in the 19th century, the plantations were frequently involved in land disputes with the surrounding villages. Even though the plantations were set up following the discovery of tea along the foothills of the Naga Hills in 1832, laws around land and settlements remained vague or non-existent. In this context, the British administration initiated a series of military actions to barricade the hills and valley and restrict inhabitants from the hills to have access to their cultivable lands along the foothills. These areas were cleared to establish tea plantations. It is around

If we shift our focus from the hill-valley distinction to that of the hill-foothill relation, the interactions between the hills and the foothills might enable us to transform the dominant colonial sensibility of savagery *versus* civilisation or 'wild' spaces and regulated places. Even though the foothill space became invisible within the dominant hill-valley construct of the 19th century, the foothill history, culture and politics in the Naga Hills have played a significant role in constructing the hills as a site for friendship, networks and collaborations

this time that the foothill emerges as a point of contention: although defined as a *valley* space, the plantations continue to expand and encroach territories in the Naga Hills. It appears as if the *valley* had started claiming the hills within its framework. Although the dominant valley discourse tries to swallow the hills and make the foothill invisible, it nevertheless exists as a space. Moving away from characteristics of the hills, which are presented as a non-State space because of its chaotic landscape and non-transparency; or the valley classification where State practices could be implemented and regulated upon its subjects, the foothills exist as a space where the hill-valley demarcation is disrupted. They fall outside the hill-valley colonial binary.

In relation to the hill-valley distinction, James Scott further notes that our perspective changes according to positions we choose. The hills: either as spaces of primitives and savagery or autonomous and mobile space, and the valleys either as spaces where civilisation and modernity thrives or as location of subordination and institutionalisation. In the Northeast Frontiers of India in the 19th century, the British administration played a dominant role in shaping and defining the geography of the region. What constituted the *plains* and the *valleys* or for that matter, where did the *hills* begin were calculated in relation to the tea plantation among other factors, and the laws that were established to protect colonial interests. But this was not always the case. During the reign of the Ahom kingdom in Upper Assam from the 13th century till the early part of the 19th century, the boundary between the hills and the plains were never demarcated rigidly. Instead, diplomatic zones were set up in the foothills as well as in the hills. These diplomatic zones called *khats* were spaces where the hill people and the kingdom in the plains discussed and settled conflicts, and issues about taxation among other things.

The foothills were considered as special zones where inhabitants from the hills and the valley would not attack each other. Specific areas in the foothills were demarcated as social and economic spaces like the bazaars where



KAZIMUDDIN AHMED



Wit and Humour
in Colonial North India
Mushirul Hasan

by Mushirul Hasan

Wit and Humour in Colonial North India: In today's world, cartooning is becoming a contentious issue, unfortunately perceived as a deliberate attempt at demonizing the 'other'. This was not so in late 19th-century colonial India when a fine cartoonist could summarize a welter of perspectives.

The *Avadh Punch*, a weekly from Lucknow, under the stewardship of its formidable editor, Munshi Sajjad Husain, was virtually the first Indian newspaper to publish cartoons as we know them today.

Inspired by, and like the *London Punch* (1841-2002), it became a household name notable for dignity, geniality of satire and good taste. It laid the foundation of the Urdu short story and of literary journalism, and rendered the same service to the Urdu novel as *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* did to the English novel.

By the end of the 19th century, 70 *Punch* papers/magazines had appeared from more than a dozen cities across the nation. Each of them reflected mainly on British rule from the experiences of over 300 million Indians with a long and proud past.

Wit and humour as pacifist tools of devastation constituted an apt response to the situation.

A thought-provoking tome, *Wit and Humour in Colonial North India* also presents a selection of Wilayat Ali Bambooque's writings, and Archibald Constable's commentary on some of the illustrations that appeared in the *Avadh Punch*.

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the population from the hills and the valley could interact and trade. Houses in the foothills *adopted* families from the hills. Such adoptions were gestures of friendship and trust. Usually, traders from the hills would rest with their adopted families after they completed their business transactions in the foothills. Especially during harvest festivals, the foothill houses and the hill people visited each other.³

However, not everything was peaceful and there were conflicts and attacks. Describing a conflict settlement between the hill people and the Ahom kingdom in the valley, Simon Longkumer, a resident of Kangtung village in the Naga Hills narrated a story. When the village was set up in 1822, a group of seven-eight elderly men from the village went to meet the Ahom king in 1825 to settle cases of conflicts that occurred between the inhabitants of his village and the valley dwellers who both used the foothills. The two parties agreed that the foothills would be a zone where there would be no attacks or raids. The bazaar that the Ahom king and the Kantsung village opened still exists today.⁴

When the British tea plantations that were set up in these foothills around the mid-19th century were grafted onto an existing social and political structure that was established between the hills and the valleys, the foothill social spaces like the bazaars were brought within the jurisdiction of the colonial administration and taxed. As the demarcations between the hill districts and the valley took place, two things simultaneously happened in the region: the frontiers were charted either as administered areas or un-administered spaces that existed beyond the control of the Empire, and secondly, the foothills disappeared as a zone of interaction, trade and diplomacy. Instead, the foothills became outposts for the military where hill people were brought down and employed as interpreters or as spies for the military. An 1881 political report about the Naga Hills highlighted that since 1870 resident delegates from different Naga tribes representing their respective tribes were stationed at a foothill post called Samoogooding. The report goes on to describe their duties as follows:

The original object of their appointment was to reconcile existing feuds and to check their recurrence among the Naga Hill tribes, but in the course of time the representatives have come to be regarded more as the escort and intelligence department of the Political Agent, and as interpreters. ...during the previous year the delegates made themselves very useful in the late expedition into the Naga Hills in carrying messages, and bringing information of the whereabouts of the enemy and in many other ways.⁵

Other than administrative and expedition posts, the foothills in other instances became tea plantation estates. In either case, the foothills were demarcated and made part of the valley through legal regulations, which restricted *mobility* and *movement* from the hills.

As India gained its independence in 1947, it inherited this frontier region and continued to regulate the area through colonial laws, security regulations and a colonial bureaucracy.

A frontier region like Northeast India offers immense possibilities to study spaces that continue to exist as zones of contradictions and inherent dilemma for postcolonial nation-states that have to contend with different issues of rights, security and legality following their independence from colonial powers. Under such circumstances, the hill-valley distinction offers interesting insights about existing frontier areas of Southeast Asia or South Asia. As Skaria notes, the hill-valley binary continues to define and shape the larger colonial discourse about savagery *versus* civilisation, primitivism *versus* modernism or how the definition of tribes still depends on their spaces of habitation like the hills and forests (2005: 726-728). Locating the foothills in this rigid existing definition of hill and valley will help us understand a *different* geography where memories, politics and history about the hill and the valley do not fall within the colonial and national framework of the hill-valley distinction.

The foothills along the Naga Hills in Northeast India represent a space where law, identity, and politics have begun to occupy a position of force, violence and State authority. Far from the fluidity and construction of new

the other hand, the flow of population from the hills to the valley usually involved military campaigns carrying captives of hill population down to the valley to secure manpower and surplus production. It is obvious that the movement between the hills and the valleys were both ways. However, it seems as if the movement was either upwards towards the hills or downwards towards the plains. Within such well-defined requirements between the hills and the valley the foothills remain invisible. But this space is *visible* and comes alive in colonial ethnographies, missionary accounts and military expeditions as the last site for re-fuelling, re-strategising expeditions and locating interpreters who understood the hill people's language. For instance, in 1958, Verrier Elwin, the advisor for Tribal Affairs in the North-East Frontier Agency noted that under the British administration, "skeleton" administrative posts were set up in the foothills in order to, "...send out punitive expeditions in reaction to the more serious raids; to impose blockades and establish fortified posts at strategic points..." (Elwin 1958: xvii).

A report in 1866 from Lieutenant Colonel H. Hopkinson, Agent to the Governor General of Bengal describes

Far from the fluidity and construction of new identities that takes place between the hills and the valleys as James Scott suggests, the foothills in Northeast India have become spaces where communities, groups and tribes are forced to mark their identities more rigidly than ever before. Unlike the diverse population that inhabit the foothills—Nagas, Ahoms, Nepali, Bodo, Motok, Moran, and Dimasa to name a few—the State has increasingly begun to view the foothills through a law and order security lens. The border demarcated in the 19th century to separate the Assam Valley from the Naga Hills has witnessed a growing security presence, and the diversity of the foothills are often challenged by existing laws

identities that takes place between the hills and the valleys as James Scott suggests, the foothills in Northeast India have become spaces where communities, groups and tribes are forced to *mark* their identities more rigidly than ever before. Unlike the diverse population that inhabit the foothills—Nagas, Ahoms, Nepali, Bodo, Motok, Moran, and Dimasa to name a few—the State has increasingly begun to view the foothills through a law and order security lens. The laws that regulate the foothills are more terrifying and violent than those operating in the hills or the valleys. The border demarcated in the 19th century to separate the Assam Valley from the Naga Hills has witnessed a growing security presence, and the diversity of the foothills are often challenged by existing laws. How can we begin to understand the foothills within these contexts?

Foothill as a Space

The movement between the hill and the valley that James Scott highlights are represented by 'flights' where renegade soldiers, slaves and tax evaders from the valley escaped to the hills to disappear in the 'non-State' spaces. On

the foothills of the Naga Hills as a site where his troops could make further arrangements for food supplies, coolies and give the expedition party easy access to the hills. The Lieutenant notes that setting base in the foothills helped the expedition party "ascertain" the feelings of the hill people towards them. The Lieutenant proposed that the villages in the foothills could be presented as a model of good governance to the hill people.⁶

The foothills also appear in colonial fiction as the last bastion of safety and protection. A novel by Winfred Holmes titled *Tekhi's Hunting: A Story of the Naga Hills* presents the story of a British administrator in a plantation at the foothills of the Naga Hills. In the novel, the planter's two children, Timothy and Jane, wander away from their home one afternoon and arrive at an area where they converse about their safety. Their sense of fear is real. Although surrounded by guards and the plantation regulations that keep the hill people away from foothills, in reality, mobility and movement never ceased, it only became regulated. As the story proceeds, Timothy and Jane's adventures include encounters with the Naga people—the inhabitants of the

hills who come down to the foothill *bazaars* to trade. The novel depicts a sketching of a foothill *bazaar*—from the perspective of the European—with its primitive stalls where Nagas from the hills sold cucumbers, chillies, fermented fish, and fluffy white cotton along side “yellow skinned” Assamese from the foothills selling brass-cooking pots, sugar canes, Assamese silk, and homemade sweetmeat. Tea garden coolies in their Sunday best and cunning merchants from the valley trying to cheat the hill people completed the picture of the foothill bazaar (Holmes 1941: 42-48). One might wonder how the bazaar in the foothill has transitioned.

Singibil Bazaar

The foothill bazaar continues to be a vibrant space where the hill people come down and sell their goods along with traders from the valley. Alemla, a farmer and a trader from the Naga Hills comes down to the foothill bazaar regularly to sell her products. She says that experiences of the foothill bazaar are both good and bad. The women traders frequently face unpleasant experiences from the valley customers when they refuse to sell their products at lower prices. She explains that the traders from the valley who bring the mass cultivated vegetables in trucks have made it difficult for the people from the hills to trade in the foothills. Even as the prices of food products and other consumer goods in the valley have increased, the prices of products from the hills have remained static. Since the valley traders took over the foothill bazaars, Alemla has begun to select her vegetables keeping in mind products, which will fetch a good price in the market. For instance, yam, pumpkin or squash are heavy vegetables, which are not profitable. She gives an example: if a basket of yam fetches around 80 rupees, a basket of ginger can fetch anywhere between 300 - 350 rupees.

Hill people have always come down to the foothills to trade, but the present-day foothill bazaar can be an indicator of how laws and regulation have remained static just like the products from the hills. It feels as if the laws and regulations that control movement and demarcate the valley and hills have become congealed and trapped in a colonial time wrap. Activities and transactions between Alemla and the valley inhabitants in bazaars created by their ancestors as spaces of trade, interaction and communication have turned into spaces of conflict and contradictions. In this process, while the foothills become unstable and are likely to be swallowed by the dominant discourse of the valley, the hill as a construct of wildness remains intact.

Understanding the foothill

The reality which exist in the foothills is characterised and defined by the postcolony through inheriting the colonial economy of tea plantations and the oil installations⁷, and at the same time, the existing hill-valley distinctions and laws which enforces security agencies the right to kill anyone they find suspicious.⁸

Nilikesh Gogoi's death, when citizens and the State failed to accept each other's accounts about how he died, begins to outline and interrogate whether there is a shared experience of understanding of rights and justice

between the authorities and the people. The foothill inhabitants' rights about mobility and movement in contiguous spaces which falls within the same national territory, and the claim to justice to recognize the foothills as a *legitimate* space and not as a sensitive zone where 'law and order' needs to be maintained indefinitely. Foothill inhabitants like Nilikesh Gogoi or his Ahom ancestors and the hill people like Alemla, the trader, or her forefathers have traversed both the hills and the foothills putting their trust not on the colony or the post colony, but rather on a diplomatic relation they trace to a system of customary law and agreement which falls outside the existing framework of national laws.

The shared history of friendship, war, diplomacy and co-existence between the hill people and the foothill residents is present in their myths and legends as well. Ongkhai Phom from Anakhi village narrates a popular legend where a hill tribe called the Phom and the Ahom people from Upper Assam are said to be brothers. According to this Naga legend, the elder brother's name was Jaidoknangma.⁹ One day, the father distributed the cattle, pigs and poultry equally between the brothers. The elder brother stayed in the hills and did not corral his livestock unlike the younger brother who left for the valley and corralled his share. The elder brother let his land become wilderness while the younger one made fields and farms. The Phoms believe that the elder brother's livestock went to the forests — that is how there are so many wild animals in the forests. The younger brother's livestock increased and became domesticated. One day the father came to see the brothers. He saw that the elder one could not retain any of the wealth that the father had left him, but the younger brother's house was surrounded with livestock. The father thought the elder son Jaidoknangma was foolish.¹⁰ As time went by, the elder brother came to be known as the Phom, while the younger brother became the Ahom.

When history and memory overlap with communities and landscape—such accounts take us beyond the binary of the hill-valley distinction. Pointing out that spaces are after all social constructions, anthropologist Willem van Schendel highlights the importance of “refining the concept of scale”. While scale has been an important tool in studying territories and spaces, van Schendel offers a framework he calls, “...the geographical imagination of groups” (van Schendel 2005: 11). Nilikesh Gogoi's geography stretched beyond the colonial demarcations. One may conclude that violent ends await those who refuse to operate within existing territorial frameworks. But the foothills constitute a homeland for some. Contrary to the stories we come across about epic journeys that groups or races have undertaken to march towards the Promised Land—a land of milk and honey—for some, the Promised Land remains the foothills. As a space traversed with security regulations, encroached by the plantations, and manned by armed security guards, the exclusion of their homeland from the politics of scale or from the hill-valley distinction ought to be interrogated.

If the memory, politics and culture of the foothills continue to be clubbed within the larger “valley” discourse,

experiences of inhabitants like Nilikesh Gogoi or the memories of hill people like Simon who remembers the diplomatic agreement his village and the Ahom people entered 180 years ago exist as misnomers. The State will always be suspicious of people like Nilikesh, and therefore hold them responsible for their own death. The old question pops up: what was he doing in the hills? What was his relation with the hill people? Our search for an answer is limited as long as we view such events within the framework based on a national spatial definition shaped by a dominant understanding of borders or the hill-valley divide. The foothills and the hills have always been interdependent. If the hills have played an important role in creating the foothill as a social, political and historical space, so have the foothills remained an alliance of the people in the hills. ■

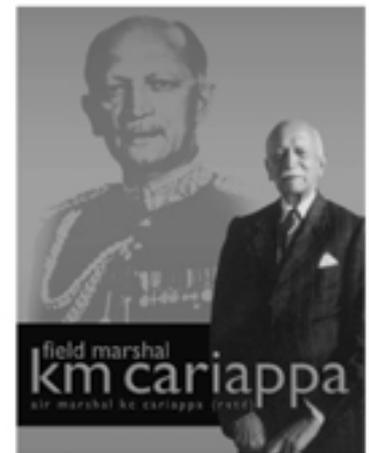
ENDNOTES:

- Tea plantations
- Nilikesh Gogoi was a local businessman and an activist who initiated local forums and unions to protest against the central government's appropriations of lands to expand plantations and oil exploration sites in the region. Nilikesh's death was noted by an international human rights organization, Amnesty International (AI), as well. <http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?lang=e&id=ENGASA200052007> (last accessed on 10 May 2008).
- Interview with Bhai on July 22, 2007 in Jorhat, Assam.
- Interview conducted with Simon in November 2005 in Kangtung, Nagaland.
- Foreign Department: Political A, August 1881. Nos. 283-284. National Archive of India, New Delhi
- Home Department Public Proceedings: File No: 394; 30th October 1865
- After the transfer of power from Britain to India in 1947, the Northeast frontier regions were regulated under the existing colonial laws. However, as several communities demanded the Right to Self Determination from the Indian state, security regulations like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958), the Assam Disturbance Act (1942), and the Nagaland Security Act (1963) were imposed on the region. These laws and regulations function on the principle of 'suspicion'. For more on India's coercive laws, such as AFSPA, see: http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/document/actandordinances/armed_forces_special_power_act_1958.htm (last accessed May 22, 2007).
- Talal Asad notes that 'suspicion' occupies a space between law and its applications. He argues that, “all judicial and policing systems on the modern state presupposes organized suspicion, incorporate margins of uncertainty”. See Talal Asad “Where are the margins of the State?” In *Anthropology in the margins of the State* (2004) ed. Veena Das & Deborah Poole, Santa Fe, School of American Research Press
- In Phom language it means, “the younger brother is more shrewd”.
- Story recorded by the researcher in Anakhi village (Nagaland) on October 29, 2005.

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NIYOGI BOOKS



by Air Marshal K.C. Cariappa (retd.)

In Field Marshal KM Cariappa, Air Marshal KC Cariappa (retd.), the airman-son presents the lesser-known face of a disciplinarian, yet loving father who tried to ensure that his son and daughter grew up well despite the absence of a mother; who wished his son to follow in his footsteps, before conceding that “The Air Force needs a few good chaps too!” He allowed his daughter to drive his Plymouth that no one else was permitted to touch. To help him meet the demands made of him by his profession, he counted on his siblings and nieces. Fond of reading, sports and music, he was a great success with children and had deep admiration for the apostle of non-violence—Mahatma Gandhi.

During Field Marshal KM Cariappa's illustrious career in the Army spanning over three decades (1918-1953), he had a series of firsts to his credit: the first Kodava to join the first batch of Indian cadets at the Daly College, Indore, from where he was commissioned; the first Indian Officer to enter Staff College, Quetta; the first Indian Brigadier; among the first Indians to enter the Imperial Defence College, UK; the first Indian Major General in 1947; the first Indian Commander-in-Chief. After retiring from the Indian Army in 1953, he served as High Commissioner to Australia and New Zealand till 1956.

In 1986, the Government of India conferred the rank of Field Marshal on this outstanding son of the soil.

With a strong visual narrative comprising archival matter sourced from private and state-owned archives, *Field Marshal KM Cariappa* is a moving tribute from a son who regrets he was unable to spend more time with his father—the Father of the Indian Army.

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Transgressing borders: maps of the mind

KAZIMUDDIN AHMED



From Bollywood films to barbed wire fences, there seems to be no end to our cultural obsession with borders. But more often than not, these contested spaces are given a treatment they barely deserve. From ideas to concrete structures, borders are created, manufactured, constructed and constantly manipulated. These become signifiers of strength and spaces for the contest of power, often the entity with an upper hand in the power equation keener on consolidating it. The nation-state has been able to use borders to their optimum, most often manipulating the very basis of its existence—the citizen.

While the border gains priority over rights, justice and dignity that ideally come with citizenship, it is gradually internalised as sacred over notions of citizenship. The border becomes a powerful legal monolith and any act of transgressing it without “proper authorisation” is blasphemy. Citizens—from paid soldiers to jingoistic volunteers—die for what they believe to be the space between “us and them”. What is forgotten in this are peoples—as legal entities called citizens—social beings with human relations and individual and shared identities manifested in cultures and traditions.

The number of human beings inhabiting borders significantly exceeds the length in miles of internal and international boundaries that India has. But the lives of this lot twist and turn with every manipulation of the border—their lives become harder and more insignificant with every act played in this theatre. Social and cultural relations

have to be negotiated in terms of the border rather than a human plane. This leads to disappearance of cultures, relations and, in some cases, peoples. The border lives on.

More and more, the notion of the border is proudly concretised using tools ranging from maps to barbed wire fences. In Northeast India, where more than 90 per cent of borders are international, this process is on a war footing. For instance, more than 75 per cent of the 856 kilometres of border that Tripura shares with Bangladesh has been fenced, displacing thousands of people and rendering them landless. But the guardians of the borders are proud.

A Border Security Force personnel

in Tripura says, “Our tribal brothers and sisters do not know what a border is. They used to just walk over to the other side (to Bangladesh) to visit their relatives. Now, with the border fence, they are able to realise that this is a border and that they cannot go to the other side.” From a notion to a tangible structure, the task seems complete. The psychological war is won. The citizen is tamed.

These images are the other story of these borders. Concrete structures cannot veil the absurdity of this notion. The mind has its own borders. These may not necessarily be in congruence with fences.



A border gate at the Indo-Burma border at Manipur. This gate is at the Moreh market. There is another market on the other side of the border in Burma. These markets—spaces for cultural, social and economic interactions—are central to peoples' lives on both sides.



Women carrying furniture from Tamu in Burma to Moreh in Manipur. This early morning traffic is part of a regular movement of people and goods across the Indo-Burma border. Burmese teak is a commodity of great demand. Most wood comes in the form of finished products. With the money that they earn from selling such products, Burmese people buy provisions from the market at Moreh.

(left) A Burmese Naga person who has just arrived in Pangsau, Burma, after shopping for provisions at Nampong, Arunachal Pradesh. People from Burma regularly visit Arunachal Pradesh for provisions commuting on the historic Stilwell Road. Many people in Arunachal and Burma are from the same ethnic groups and have relatives on both sides.



Children play cricket at the Indo-Bangladesh border in Tripura under the watchful gaze of armed Border Security Force personnel. The playground is inside what can be termed as the “no man’s zone” — between the fence that India has erected and the pillars of the actual line of control. The playground was once the front-yards of their homes. The families were displaced to make way for the border fence.



A wooded patch in Bangladesh where villagers come to collect firewood. About 10 feet from the actual Line of Control, residents of Bangladesh look at India from these woods with utter curiosity. Many of these families have relatives in India, sometimes 20 metres away and without any impeding structure. Till recently they would give each other fruits, vegetables and even a bowl of curry for the evening meal. But a stricter border regime put an end to all this. All they are able to do now is to gaze across a border they cannot fathom.

The tragedy of Suryya Bhuyan

BODHISATVA KAR

The Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti was a Guwahati gathering of enthused amateurs with some patrons in the local government. It was established in 1912 to assemble evidences and source materials of Assamese history following the publication of Edward Gait's *History of Assam*. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, a graduate in English from Presidency College, Calcutta and a teacher in the local Cotton College, was a member of the Samiti. By the age of 27, when he became the Secretary of the Samiti, Bhuyan had already published six books and a number of articles in Assamese, indicating his sustained interest in history. By 1926, he was already expressing his discomfort with the lay setup of the Samiti, and in March 1927, in the paper he read in the next anniversary meeting of the Samiti, Bhuyan vigorously made a case for organising 'An Asiatic Society of Assam' with salaried staff, suitable infrastructures, and a permanent reserve fund to constitute 'a central bureau of research':

Let the Asiatic Society of Assam remain forever a never-perishing example of the humanising influence of our western contact. We cannot conceive of the exact nature of the white man's burden if the infusion of the critical spirit, love for truth for its own sake, veneration of the past, and rigid and selfless worship of culture be eliminated from its category. ... An act of Providence has wedded the once glorious Kamarupa kingdom with the British; and it is in the fitness of things that the history and antiquities of that ancient country and of the lands fringing on its borders should be studied and investigated under the auspices of that benign connection.

It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which Bhuyan's dissatisfaction with the nature of the work of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti had pushed him. But it is evident that when the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS) was set up in 1928 to assume most of the responsibilities of the Directorate of Ethnography, Bhuyan was happy to join it as the Assistant Director. It was this government Department—the only one of its kind in the entire British Indian empire, specifically entrusted with 'the pursuit of historical and antiquarian research' in the province—which spearheaded the new movement for professional and scientific history. As an active and self-conscious participant in the process, Bhuyan consistently privileged the experts over the amateurs, the scientific over the mythical, and the written over the oral.

The New History, which Bhuyan pledged to offer, wished to see itself as sharply differentiated from "the romancings, inventions and exaggerations of uncritical history-writers." And although "the public here [in Assam were] ... not trained to appreciate the laborious and scientific reconstructions of academic workers", said Bhuyan, "[t]he present writer and his comrades [were] engaged in the wearisome and spendthrift business of original research." The invective was not misfired. In a review of the *Second DHAS Bulletin*, where Bhuyan wrote these unkind lines, Kanaklal Barua regretted the fact that Bhuyan had not

even mentioned the names of the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti or its founder-member Padmanatha Bhattacharya Vidyavinoda: "Any writer on historical research in Assam is bound not simply to mention but to gratefully acknowledge the valuable work done by the Society and Pandit Vidyavinod." Since Bhuyan significantly emphasized the need for 'scientific reconstruction' and 'critical history writing', Barua retorted by saying that neither of the two "is confined only to himself and his comrades in the Government."

What Barua did miss in his criticism was the emergence of a new theatre in the new history of Bhuyan: 'the State.' The Sanskrit sources for the history of Kamarupa—on which the Samiti members were almost exclusively focused—were not telling 'the intricate detail of the State machinery.' But that was something '[t]he Ahom conquerors and settlers and their

on the corresponding indigenous system which is already in existence. The mentality of the people must be realised, their expectations thoroughly studied, and precedents under the old regime must clearly sifted in order to eliminate the risk of committing catastrophic political blunders.

This strategic enmeshment of the art of government and the discipline of history was further confirmed between 1930 and 1938, when at least nine *Buranjis* were published by Bhuyan from the DHAS. These *Buranjis*, usually understood as the age-old chronicles of the Ahom courts, have shaped the 20th-century Assam historians' cosmos in a fundamental way. Prompted by Bhuyan, the editor of these *Buranjis*, the historians choose to overlook the implications of the substantive editorial labour that went into them.

Why would Bhuyan remain unnoticed in today's historiographical recapitulations on South Asia, while he was undeniably one among the first-rate historians in his contemporary India and even chaired the Modern History Section in the 1952 Indian History Congress at Gwalior? The tragedy involves the problematic of the hierarchised national. Within the grids of this problematic Bhuyan is compelled to describe Lachit Barphukan as an Ahom Shivaji, Mula Gabharu as an Ahom Lakshmi Bai, the Moamaria insurgency as a "northeastern Sikh revolt" or to cite the title of his book, *Rani Phuleswari* as "An Assamese Nur Jahan." Not much is left for the 'provincial historian' except marshalling his belated-local facts into the already-national models

Assamese compatriots' appeared to offer. They had maintained a rigorous system of reducing everything to writing. Every event that happened within the land, and even outside it, was duly recorded, and was ultimately incorporated in the voluminous chronicles of the government which were known as *Buranjis*. They have conserved the language, customs, institutes, official and judicial procedures, social and religious usages, and the intricate detail of the state machinery. One would be justified in saying, "Give me the *Buranjis* of Assam, and I will say, what the people are."

And this knowledge, as Bhuyan pointed out elsewhere, was of primary concern to the State:

Full and detailed knowledge of the institutions of a country is indispensable for its good government; for no political measure, however assiduously conceived and constructed will fall in the natural stage of evolution unless it is based

the minutiae of Assam history. He laid out ten steps of editing the *Buranjis*:

1. Transcription of the original
2. Comparison of the transcript with the original to guarantee accuracy
3. Grouping of the transcript into paragraphs and chapters with appropriate headings
4. Collation of the text in the event of there being two or more chronicles containing the same version, so that no important detail or expression having any philological interest may be left out from the final version
5. Correction of orthographical errors which reveal scribal idiosyncrasy rather than a system, rigidly avoiding any correction which will involve phonetic alteration
6. Preparation of a fresh copy for the press if the transcript has been subjected to heavy alterations and corrections
7. Numbering of the paragraphs
8. Correction of the galley proofs by comparison with the original manuscript so that in accuracy in the transcript undetected in previous comparisons may have one more chance of being detected
9. Correction of the page-proofs once, twice, and even thrice by comparison with the corrected galley-proofs and with press-copies and originals where necessary
10. Compilation of the title-page, table of contents, preface, errata, etc., and their transcription and proof-reading.

The editorial work was enormous, laborious, demanding—but hardly innocent. Collation of texts and correction of 'errors' left enough room for the editor to present the *Buranjis* as a singular, indivisible unity frozen in the condensed centuries classed as the Ahom period. The construction of this stately pre-British archive under the aegis of the British government was possible only by determinedly overlooking its fractures and crucially underplaying its inconsistencies. The influential *Tungkhungia Buranji*, published in 1933, was compiled by the editor from numerous contemporary *Buranjis* in the languages and manner of the old chronicles. The editor has not framed any new sentence; he has simply picked up sentences or passages from the older chronicles and inserted them in due place in the evolution of a monarch's reign. No information acquired from sources other than old chronicles has been incorporated in this section. The editor's object has been to compile the history of the earlier period of the Tungkhungia supremacy in a style naturally fitting in with Srinath Barbarua's chronicle which follows.

Even without questioning the editor's appreciation of Srinath Barbarua's 'style', the whole method of mobilising discrete and widely spaced texts into one coherent historical narrative might appear disquieting to the professional historians today. However, the textual politics of editing the *Buranjis* corresponded to the larger politics of defining selfhood in terms of the unitary and the singular, of the authentic and the immobile. As Bhuyan explicitly said, "[t]he *Buranjis* are our strengthening tie to bind us with the past, and maintain the solidarity of the Assamese people, and protect us from any threatened erosion of our nationalism." This nationalism was a nationalism of authentic, authoritative

and assertive heroes: Bhuyan exalted Lachit Barphukan and Atan Buragohain, two 'Ahom' nobles, for having "suppressed the voice of rupture, brought the jarring elements into concord, punished delinquency, and encouraged valour and inventiveness" —something, I am tempted to say, he was doing with the collected manuscripts.

In Bhuyan's original work, the Ahom tradition, about which the older Indological writings were somewhat silent if not apologetic, was increasingly construed as an object of collective pride, culminating in an elaborate State structure that could successfully hold back in face of the mighty Mughal invasion. This had a curious double function to offer: while this suggested a moment of glorious resistance to the force of dominant Indian history and thus indeed constituted a remarkable departure from the 'include us' cry of the provincial Indologists, at the same time it also folded the 'Ahom' narrative back into the dominant history of 'India' by situating the Ahom kingdom purely in relation to its contemporary Mughal Empire. Refusing to look at the Ahom realm in its multiple other contexts, Bhuyan's new statist history substantially contributed to a particular form of provincialisation of Assam. The meaning of Assam could derive only from its historical connections with mainland India. It was never the centre of its own worlds; it was always a polity on the fringe of the essential India. Its Yunnan trade, its Ava obligations, its

cultural transactions with Southeast Asia were all attending trifles. Its sole importance lay in providing a partly successful resistance to the Mughal forces in the 17th century. In his Introduction to *Tungkhungia Buranji*, Bhuyan categorically said that "the history of the Ahoms of the 17th century was the history of the Assam-Mogul conflicts."

Bhuyan's heroes are distinctive in this sense. Just now we have described them as authentic, authoritative and assertive. But there is at least another strikingly common element: all of them are tragic heroes fighting the ineluctable force of dominant history. There is of course Rudra Singha, who dies before he can succeed in executing his plan of building an Ahom empire in post-Aurangzeb India. He is Bhuyan's missed train to 'mainstream.' But there is also Lachit Barphukan, Bhuyan's most favourite Ahom general who earns a formidable victory against the mighty Mughals in Saraighat and yet remains unnoticed in the dominant South Asian history. "He was no less than Nelson and Wellington of England, or Mazzini, Cavour and Garibaldi of Italy, or Pratap Singh of Rajputana or Shivaji of Maharashtra," said Bhuyan. But the "name of Lachit Barphukan has not traveled beyond the frontier of his own country."

The limitations suffered by Lachit Barphukan's fame and glory are not attributable to any inferiority of his qualities of leadership in the battlefield; they are due mainly to the lack of

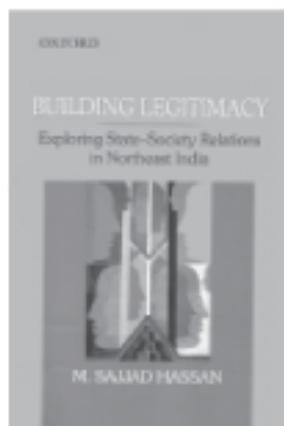
publicity which, unfortunately, has fallen to the lot of all the great and good things of Assam, the deeds of her heroic sons, and the contributions and thoughts of her poets, philosophers and saints.

What did this tragedy involve? Simply an instrumental failure? A 'lack of publicity?' The absence of 'an Asiatic Society of Assam?' Bhuyan probably thought so, and all his laborious efforts at professionalising the discipline were directed to this end. We fear a disagreement here. Why, then, would Bhuyan with the breathtaking thickness of his research and his excellent skill of storytelling, remain unnoticed in today's historiographical recapitulations on South Asia, while he was undeniably one among the first-rate historians in his contemporary India and even chaired the Modern History Section in the 1952 Indian History Congress at Gwalior? These lines appear so uncannily autobiographical! The tragedy is deeper and it has not deserted us. It involves the problematic of the hierarchised national. Within the grids of this problematic Bhuyan is compelled to describe Lachit as an Ahom Shivaji, Mula Gabharu as an Ahom Lakshmi Bai, the Moamaria insurgency as a "northeastern Sikh revolt," or to cite the title of one of his early books, *Rani Phuleswari* as "An Assamese Nur Jahan." Not much is left for the 'provincial historian' except marshalling his belated-local facts into the already-national models.

In the *Third Bulletin of the DHASin*

1936, Bhuyan proposed a series of similar models from 'world history': Bhaskara Varmana is Assam's Julius Caesar; Harshadeva is Assam's Alexander; Momai-Tamuli Barbarua is Assam's Solon; Atan Buragohain is Assam's Pericles; Pratap Singha is Assam's Charlemagne; Rudra Singha is Assam's Frederick the Great; Jaymati is Assam's Griselda; Assamese Vaishnavism is "Assam's European Protestantism" [sic!]; the Battle of Saraighat is Assam's Battle of Blenheim; the Battle of Itakhuli is Assam's Battle of Trafalgar; the Battle of Mohgarh is Assam's Battle of Waterloo; Syiemships of Khasi and Jaintia are Assam's Democracies of Athens and Sparta; Bodos are Assam's Macedonians, and so on and so forth. In the same piece, Bhuyan looked for "an Assamese Gibbon" among his countrymen who would write a *History of Decline and Fall of the Ahom Kingdom* and 'an Assamese Lecky' who would compose a *History of Rationalism in Assam*.

What could be more tragic than this acute recognition of the inauthenticity of 'the Assamese pasts' which necessarily accompanies the passionate insertion of Assam into 'world history'? Bhuyan devoted most of his academic life to retrieve what he perceived as the lost sovereignty of Assamese history: its distinctive sources, its specific events, its exact nature. And yet, he has no other language to communicate it than that of the metropolitan modern, no other representation than the pale reflection of forms operative elsewhere. How much more independent are we? ■



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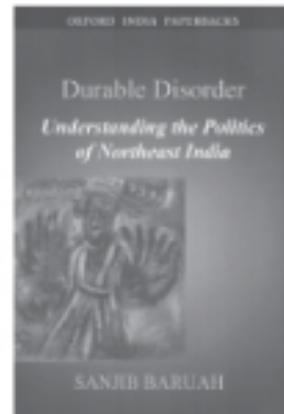
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How many roads must the State build?

Revisiting a region's developmental puzzle

LIPOKMAR DZUVICHU

Today, more than 60 years since India became independent from British colonial rule, the Indian State continues the colonial policy of administering the Northeast region as "troubled areas". While on the one side the structures of power and authority which the British imposed over the region are still in place, on the other, the region has also long been subjected to what has aptly been referred by Felix Padel, though in another context, as internal colonialism (Padel 2000: 288). In fact, the practice of internal colonialism has been accompanied by the pervasive and systematic "development of underdevelopment" of the region, manifestations of which are particularly evident in the sphere of transport and communication. States like Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura are characterised by a pervasive sense of underdeveloped road and rail networks, which is paradoxical considering both their strategic importance as well as the fact of their categorisation as "disturbed areas". This essay primarily considers this puzzle and looks at the imperatives that underlay the early colonial ventures at road building in the region. It sketches out an approach that situates road building within relations of power and political economy both of the colonial period and in a suggestive way, of the present.

Colonial Legacy

The borderland routes of the Northeastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) in the 1960s, according to Mahnaz Z. Ispahani, differed little from those of a century earlier. In the words of Neville Maxwell:

No roads reached more than a few miles from the plains into the foothills, and there were no lateral roads in NEFA at all—the north-south lie of the great ridges running down from the Himalayas made lateral movement almost impossible, and access to the

different sectors of the McMahon Line was from the Brahmaputra valley." (Ispahani 1989: 173)

This impoverished state of road networks is puzzling considering the fact that during the 19th and early 20th

small societies in the frontier "legible" to a centralising State. For, an "illegible" society, to use James Scott's well-known phrase, is considered a hindrance to any effective intervention by the State, whether the purpose be

In carrying out their plans, architects of these developmental policies often seemed to reinstate colonial systems of infrastructural development. Geared largely to meet the Indian military needs, the cosmetic development of border roads, as Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman argues, "were never going to be enough for the genuine development of the economy of the Northeast and nor were they meant for purposes of cross-border trade". These infrastructural developmental projects were also as much, in the words of Sanjib Baruah, "the product of the Indian State's push to nationalise the space of this frontier region"

century the British had evinced a keen interest in developing roads in these frontier tracts. Yet, without some understanding of the British road-building enterprise it is difficult to understand contemporary predicaments, as well as points of continuities and discontinuities in the State's drive for development.

The colonial imperative for building roads primarily arose from a perceived need to make scattered ecologies and

plunder or public welfare (1998: 78). Improved roads access therefore came to be one of the most frequently cited items in the wish list of the 19th and early 20th century British political officers. Route development across the frontier spaces however hinged on and worked through a complex network of colonial practices which, among others, included the formulation of a policy of simultaneous *exclusion* and *inclusion* (Menziés 1994). While the *exclusionist*

policy marginalised the hills, by "drawing lines between the hills and the plains," through a policy of *inclusion*, there was a sustained drive to set up infrastructure of communication in the hills, which would enfold the "strange wild tribes" and secure a borderland for the Empire.

Consequently, grand schemes were plotted by officials like Alexander Mackenzie, Secretary to the Government of Bengal in 1873, to "open up the hills" by building roads, which would simultaneously enable the "Nagas and other hill tribes" to "a full development of their potentialities" (Foreign and Political Proceedings 1873). By 1875, a network of bridle paths was constructed of which some important routes were the Tura-Dalu route, Golaghat-Samaguting-Kohima route etc. As objects of progress and transformation, colonial roads also sought to help resolve issues of socio-economic exclusion in the frontier tracts by giving people access to new circuits of traffic and exchange. In fact, 19th-century British officials such as Colonel R.H. Keatinge came to consider road building as "the most useful work of a civilising nature" in the frontier hill tracts. Such colonial 'civilising' projects were nonetheless shaped as much by contingent circumstances like the indigenous reactions to colonial encroachments and the need to control strategic spaces and making territories accessible, as much by the 19th- and 20th-century imperial rivalries, political maneuvering and the shifting colonial imperatives. Despite the significance of the frontier tracts in the security calculations of the colonial state, road building could however take low priority and be regarded as an unnecessary expenditure at junctures in which military-strategic imperatives dominated the picture. While district officers would often complain of insufficient funds for road works in the hills, demands for increased funding for road works were countered with proposals "to curb state expenses" (Home and Political Department 1883). The justification for this, in one instance, was that "local needs of the Naga Hills do not count for such in the plains" (Tour Diary 1916).

Nonetheless, by the late 19th and early 20th century a handful of roads slowly worked their way into the hills. Even so, to borrow Penny Edwards' words, the "liberating road" taking the hill people to markets also took tax collectors to the hill peoples, besides taking people away from their homes to serve as porters and carriers which accompanied troops in the varied frontier campaigns and global wars. Moreover, these access routes came to replace what is often referred to as the 'tyranny of distance' with a new 'tyranny of proximity' which extended the reach of the State in a myriad ways, from colonial armies dispatched along routes to crush dissent to mobilising *corvee* labour to lay new roads (Edwards 2006: 427). Ironically, some or most of these roads were built in the course of military pacification campaigns. Following the Abor expedition in 1911-12, Robert Reid thus writes: "the expedition entailed no fighting worth mentioning, but the result was a great opening up of the country by means of roads" (1944: 20). Subjugation was often followed by the announcement of grand 'public works' with the aim to consolidate its newly acquired territory.



KAZIMUDDIN AHMED

Wayside story

Displaced by violence during the Bodo movement in the early '90s, these families laid their shacks by the side of the National Highway 31 in Assam. The year was 1996 and this was their second camp. While camp residents including a number of children were regularly mowed down by highway traffic, uncountable calls for proper relocation went unheeded. In January 2007 the government's highway expansion project reached their shacks. They were obstacles and had to be removed to make way for national development. The government ordered them to be relocated in a week. Allegedly, a relocation site was still not earmarked. One fine January evening they were told to pack up to leave early the next morning. The act of relocation that was pending for ten years was made to happen overnight. Finally their wishes were fulfilled. What happened after is a different story.



KAZIMUDDIN AHMED

Yet, the infrastructure built was largely designed to satisfy the military and strategic imperial needs. Its architects were often military men who placed emphasis on keeping important communication lines open throughout the year, especially for troop's circulation, communication, reinforcement and patrol routes against "infiltration" and "incursions" from beyond the border. Thus, following Ispahani, one can argue that the rationales for construction of these frontier routes were lodged more in the political and military purposes of the State than in their economic discourse.

Despite grand colonial claims, many of the roads built under the British dispensation were no more than little 'improvements' over existing native bridle paths. Works along these paths usually involved levelling out certain sections and filling in holes and ruts etc. Even so, colonial officials could invest in the extension of a small bridle path with great civilisation significance for a "backward tract". Moreover, these improvements could often be very ephemeral. Heavy rains could turn supposedly all-weather cart roads into a morass. This is what the *Manipur Administration Report of 1899 - 1900* had to say on the Assam-Burma road:

It is serious matter that it should have been found to keep open during the rains the cart road from Golaghat to Kohima which was made at a cost of 35 lakhs of rupees. It is unmetalled and traverses heavy soil which when soaked with rain cuts into a morass.

(Foreign and Political Department 1900)

The situation was no different in the early 20th century. And against this one has to balance the fact that old circulatory routes were blocked off and access sporadically denied or regulated in the frontier. According to the *Imperial Gazetteer of 1905*, the total mileage of roads in the Naga Hills in 1903-04 was 73 miles of cart roads and 470 miles of bridle paths, which by 1909 came to 621 miles of bridle path. To add to this, the state of communication was considered as "sufficient for the requirements of its

inhabitants," even as access routes along imperial borders were often left to languish in disrepair.

Roads to Development?

If the legacy of British colonialism was uneven development, under the new state of India, the region received scant attention during the early years. In fact, few infrastructural programmes were initiated until a series of insurrections such as the Naga and Mizo political struggles' in the late 1950s and '60s and the war with China in 1962 rudely awakened the Indian State on the significance of its borderlands. Developmental advances in the physical infrastructure of the Northeast frontier thus assumed a significant shift and the process received added impetus following the recommendation of the *Study Team on Administration of Union Territories and NEFA* that construction of roads is imperative "both from the points of view of security and development". To facilitate the road development projects the Study Team proposed "to formulate a separate Five Year Road Building Plan for NEFA" so as to ensure "that adequate finances are provided for its implementation in the stipulated period" (Report 1968: 202). Even as India took steps to improve communication and transport facilities throughout the Northeast, "an integrated plan for new airfields, motor and jeep roads and trails for porters, horses, mules was quickly put forward." However, in carrying out their plans, architects of these developmental policies often seemed to reinstate colonial systems of infrastructural development. Geared largely to meet the Indian military needs, the cosmetic development of border roads, as Mirza Zulfikar Rahman argues, "were never going to be enough for the genuine development of the economy of the Northeast and nor were they meant for purposes of cross-border trade" (2008).

Although the State-sponsored road-building schemes were largely framed from the perspective of "national security," the infrastructural develop-

mental projects were also as much, in the words of Sanjib Baruah, "the product of the Indian State's push to nationalise the space of this frontier region" (2007: 35). A flurry of infrastructure development followed with the hope that better communications would foster national integration. Moreover, by investing symbols of power such as roads over the frontier landscape the State sought "to push the idea of state-ness out to the edge of its borders". Grandiose road building schemes were conceived which were then executed through agencies such as the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), a construction firm under the Ministry of Transport and made up mainly of military personnel. In fact, since its inception in 7 May 1960, the BRO has come to play a profound role in advancing the notion of "nationalising space" into the borderlands. Moreover, its actions in the borderlands have come to be largely projected and celebrated as truly one in the service of nationhood [BRO Official Website]. Over the years, the road building projects undertaken by the BRO have come to serve as a key link in the territorial legibility of the nation-state.

Despite decades of investment in communication infrastructure by successive modernising Governments, contemporary Northeast India is also characterised by a pervasive sense of under-development and of deep social inequality. In the words of Sudha Venu Menon:

Even after 60 years of planned economic strategy we failed to provide basic infrastructure and resource base to this geographically isolated and ethnically sensitive region. As a result Northeast lagged behind other states, when the entire mainstream economy was moving ahead with market led growth strategy." (2007: 1)

Such a predicament is also fashioned by the fact that the so-called developmental measures are often an economic prescription handed down from the policy makers or experts while the people affected or targeted having little or no control over the process. What emerges in the process is the picture of a flawed and paradoxical developmental policy pushed forward by the Indian nation-state in the region.

In recent times, infrastructural development like road building has been



KAZIMUDDIN AHMED

Cooking a last meal before the bulldozers arrive

emphasized within the developmental discourse on the region. This has largely been a result of India's current Look East Policy, where road construction constitutes a top priority for State economic planners in order to link the region with a 'progressive' global economy. Today as ambitious infrastructure projects like the Tamu-Moreh-Kalewa Road (India-Myanmar Friendship Road), India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway, Trans-Asian Highway, India-Myanmar rail linkages, Kaladan Multimodal project are being promoted, a range of 'possibilities' and 'prosperity' is being imagined for the region. However, the image of a *plentiful, vulnerable and available* Northeast also continues to entertain the fantasies of the Indian capitalist-politico-security establishment. At the same time, the nature, timing and location of the proposed road building projects could also allow the State to blur the distinctions between economic and military purposes and to foster development of 'backward areas' while improving their geo-strategic environment along this resource rich, yet 'troubled' borderland.

Whose interest?

Amidst all this noise, international donor agencies like the World Bank (WB), Asian Development Bank (ADB), International Development Association (IDA) etc., have come to play an active role in framing the regions developmental discourse. The on-going

enthusiasm for and investment in major road building projects however requires us to ask new questions about the role and agendas of these international financial and developmental agencies and how their activities are implicated in defining the nature of social change in the region. Perhaps, a case in this point is the multi-million US dollar WB-funded Road Project in the state of Mizoram. Approved by the WB on 14 March 2002, this more than 70 million US dollar mega road project was designed to link more than 40 villages with Aizawl, the capital of the State and the main lifeline of these 40 villagers (Neitham 2007). Inaugurating the Road project, Chief Minister of Mizoram, Zoramthanga, has promised the people that "the WB will be replacing the old run down road with a new road that will be smooth and sleek as a snake". However, contrary to its stated objective to connect the capital of the state with the outlying villages, the WB road project as of 2007, has not lived up to its ambitious plans. It has instead led to a messy reality. Alongside charges of embezzlement, there are also considerable doubts about the quality of these roads. After more than five years of work on the road building project in Mizoram, what has emerged is a story of anguish, hopelessness, ecological degradation, and a serious threat to some alternative modes of livelihood. Although the State was intent on making people believe that the region would become 'legible' and knowable while integrating the

region to a larger global economy the outcomes of the current phase of road-building informs us of the dangers of taking programmes of infrastructural development at face-value, especially in a region where an array of grand investment initiatives continues to be promoted.

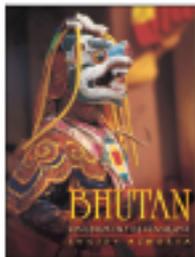
From the colonial times to the current phase of WB-funded road projects, relations of power have not changed. Indeed, the seemingly grand road projects have further unsettled, depleted and impoverished a region already suffering acute economic underdevelopment. At the same time, there is no denying the fact that these development projects have also given rise to local stakeholders who continue to thrive from the region's dispensation. If roads were an invocation of progress and modernity, today, roads are also known as places of ambush and assault, *bandhs*, blockages and protests, while being frequented by smugglers and other delinquent actors, thus often contradicting the presumed intention of the rulers. As the region is drawn into a new phase of regional and global interconnections, it remains to be seen how far the on-going integrative road projects will result in the 'prosperity' of these 'marginal peripheries'.

Note: Primary archival materials like the Foreign and Political Proceedings, Home and Political Department and Tour Diaries etc., in this article have been consulted from the National Archive India, New Delhi; Assam State Archive, Guwahati; and Nagaland State Archive, Kohima.

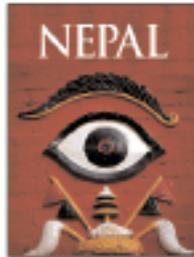
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Presenting Roli Books



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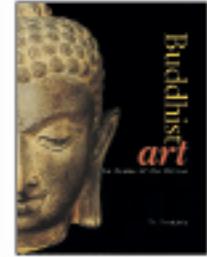
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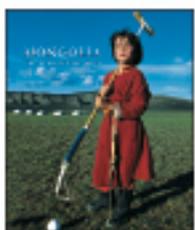
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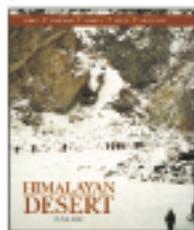
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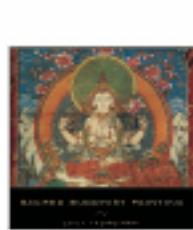
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Shame and pride

Nellie 1983: A postmortem Report into the Most Barbaric Massacre of Assam Movement in Nellie on 18 Feb. 1983

By Diganta Sharma

Ekalabya Prakashan, 2007, 87 pp., Rs 55

25 Years On . . . Nellie still Haunts

By Hemendra Narayan

Self-published, Delhi, 2008, 47 pp., Rs 80

Ei Samay, Sei Samay

By Rita Choudhury

Banalata, Guwahati, 2007, 472 pp., Rs 150

ISBN 81-7339-484-9

RAJARSHI KALITA

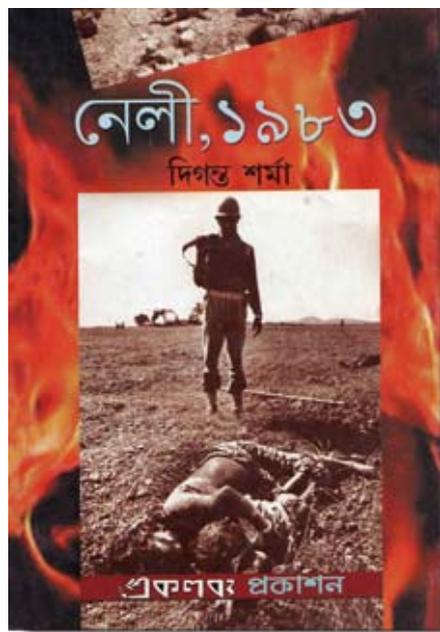
The Assam movement of 1979-85 remains a site of different interpretations, expressions and feelings. It is a reminder of bloody massacres of thousands of innocent men, women and children and ironically is also the source of nostalgic pride for the leadership of the movement. Such dialectical feelings have been a part of the Assamese cultural scenario and inform the three texts under review, where the same movement is interpreted and presented in different representative voices.

Two of them—Diganta Sharma's *Nellie 1983* in Assamese and Hemendra Narayan's *25 Years On*—are factual journalistic reports on the most horrific and notorious massacre of the agitation: on 18 February 1983, over 3,000 Muslims were killed in the tiny town of Nellie in the aftermath of the All Assam Students' Union's agitation against illegal migrants from Bangladesh. Even as both books condemn the incident as an abject attack on innocents, they try in different ways to show what really happened. Sharma's book tries, and with a lot of success, to bring to light the hidden communal, regional and linguistic forces that planned the massacre. What is most striking about Sharma's book is that it is written from the perspective of an adult who was a mere six-year-old child when the massacre took place. And the tone of his book thus bears what Harold Bloom termed as the 'anxiety of influence'—especially in his attempts at constructing a viewpoint that rejects the extreme sub-nationalism of the earlier generation that culminated in the massacre. What he stresses upon is the shame faced by the Assamese community, both internally and vis a vis the international community. Armed with facts and documents, he courageously exposes the hidden Hindu communal forces that instigated the Assamese people to massacre more than two thousand children, women and men, and also how the local tribes—such as the Tiwa—were made scapegoats by the movement leadership. He also points out that despite charge sheets being made no action was taken against anyone, something that needs to be rectified if the survivors and the killed alike are to receive any justice, even if it comes after a long twenty five years. An eleven-page appendix lists the available names and ages of the victims, and even a casual look will fill the reader with remorse, anger, guilt, pain or shame, depending on his subjective position. A very important aspect that he raises is that the wounds have not healed but have been forcefully covered by the victims as they needed to get back to their daily routine of life; survival itself was at stake, primarily because of their meager resources, which were further depleted by the attacks on their houses and livestock. One wishes though that Sharma had presented a bit more of analysis over and above the facts which have been so excellently put together. He also could have avoided a lot of printing mistakes which often irritate the reader besides taking a lot of the sheen away from what is a much-needed work of investigative journalism, as the events of Nellie have always been tried to be swept under the carpet, both by the movement

leadership and their opposition political parties. However, a chilling cover-page and more chilling photographs inside the book make up for the technical defects.

The author of the second book, Hemendra Narayan, was one of the four journalists who were present in Nellie by sheer chance on the fateful

more skillful editor. But *25 Years on* is important simply because it tries to combine the eyewitness accounts with Government committee reports, public memoranda like that of the Lalung Durbar to the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi; a booklet that reflects the then Government of India's view on the massacre, a Non-official



Assam movement. The victims, because of their lack of education and their economic situation, could not speak back. These texts could act as a voice that might help bring some justice to the unfortunate survivors of Nellie, many of whom still carry multiple scars from wounds inflicted by spears, bows, guns, machetes, axes and clubs

day of 18 February 1983. They were the ones who exposed the brutal truth in the press as eyewitnesses to the ghastly massacres. He formulates a documentative anthology of the massacre but does not travel much beyond that. The eye-witness account had the potentiality of being a gripping and chilling read, but ridiculous linguistic and grammatical errors often leave the reader wishing for a better and

Sharma and Narayan's books might not rate highly in the index of books, but they bring to light one of the worst massacres of Indian history, where almost 3,000 people were killed on a single day, going by unofficial records. And this was only a part of a number of lesser incidents that marked the blood-stained days of 1983 and the

Judicial Enquiry's report and some observations by the Election Commissioner on the situation of Assam during the days of the 1983 election. However, it has all the faults of a hastily compiled work marred by a huge number of grammatical and printing mistakes.

Both these books have a number of shortcomings and might not rate highly in the index of books, but the

importance of these books should not be gauged by their quality but by the fact that they bring to light one of the worst massacres of Indian history, where almost three thousand people were killed on a single day, going by unofficial records. And this was only a part of a number of lesser incidents that marked the blood-stained days of 1983 and the Assam movement. The victims because of their lack of education and their economic situation, could not speak back. These texts could act as a voice that might help bring some justice to the unfortunate survivors of Nellie, many of whom still carry multiple scars from wounds inflicted by spears, bows, guns, machetes, axes or clubs.

If these two books are primarily documentations of an event of the Assam agitation, Rita Choudhury's *Ai Samay, Sai Samay (These Times, Those Times)* is an absolutely different take on the agitation. It does not mention any of the massacres and tries to portray the movement as a mass uprising based on ideological grounds of sub-nationalism (as Sanjib Baruah calls the feelings of ethnic unrest in Assam). Whatever might be the weakness in the way she tries to illustrate her ideological stand in the novel, Choudhury is indubitably successful in creating a very elaborate yet well-connected plot. Her narrative style resembles that of a suspense novel and the reader just cannot keep down the book till the denouement ties up the myriad loose threads in terms of both plot and characters. There are some quite unbelievably melodramatic events in the novel, however the well etched out characters more than make up for this blemish in the text. At the level of ideas, the novel employs the Bakhtinian chronotope or the idea of time-space—temporal and spatial connections—evident the most in the title. The body of the novel however fails to really substantiate the associations Choudhury tries to explore between the idealism of the agitation days and the spirit of the generation which had missed the event, being born after 1983. She tries to interpolate past idealism within a generation brought up to believe the forces of globalisation and selfish individualism but does not really manage to link up these disparate processes of thought.

The novel succeeds not at the level of ideological formulations but at the level of plot and narrative, where the element of suspense acts as a strong measure against a very weak ideological framework. Another strong point of the novel is its ability to illustrate the spirit that went into the Assam agitation and also the disappointment, disillusionment and the consequent distress that follows when ideas do not work the way you intend them to do. It captures a period and sentiment in the history of Assam which one can look back on with anger, shame, remorse or pride, but which one just simply cannot ignore.

The three texts share one commonality, and that is the reaction of the new generation to the Assam movement. Though Rita Choudhury's novel seems to find the fire of the agitation burning in a different way in the present generation, the other two texts try to expose the violence and turbulences that marked the movement, and which ultimately led to further unrests that continue till this day. ■

Beyond boxes and borders

The Adventures of Tejimola and Sati Beula

By Parismita Singh

Published by Parismita Singh, Guwahati, 2008, 32 pp., Price Not Mentioned

DHIREN SADOKPAM

Parismita Singh's new comic book is based on some of the most popular folktales from Assam with variegated twirls. It is a gratifying read for several reasons. Unlike her previous works, 'Cleopatra' and 'The Floating Island' (which is due to appear in her forthcoming graphic novel tentatively titled *The Hotel at the End of the World*) *The Adventures of Tejimola and Sati Beula* is not a sequence of distinct yet simple visual narratives that have a beginning and a climax. It reaffirms the power of visuals and their limitless possibilities. Further, it holds out the possibility of independent comic book production by artists or graphic novelists themselves, despite financial insecurities of being a comic book artist or a graphic novelist.

Unlike the great upsurge in children's comic book production in India in the mid 1970s and '80s and their 'unintended' functional role of substituting grandparents from their roles as storytellers in urban nuclear families, this comic book is an adult read not by virtue of its explicitness but by its implicit social and political subtexts. The genre of this work is literary fiction, not kitsch. *The Adventures* is a modern spin on the encounter between two female Assamese folk characters—

Tejimola and Sati Beula. The original Tejimola's is a tragic tale of how she was murdered by her wicked (step)-mother in the absence of her father. There are variations of the same folktale in other parts of the Northeast as well. Tejimola was ground in a large wooden mortar with a heavy wooden pestle. Her remains when thrown out into the backyard turned into a gourd tree. When the mother realised this, she cut down the plant, which only re-grew as a lemon tree. The mother uprooted

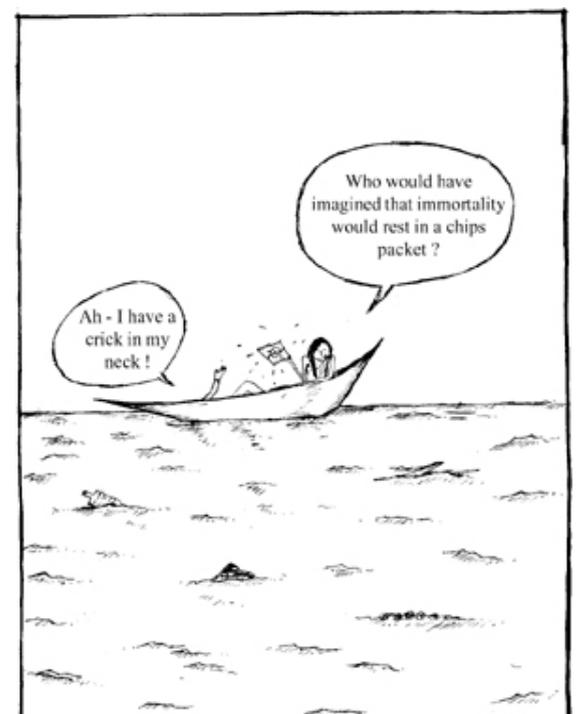
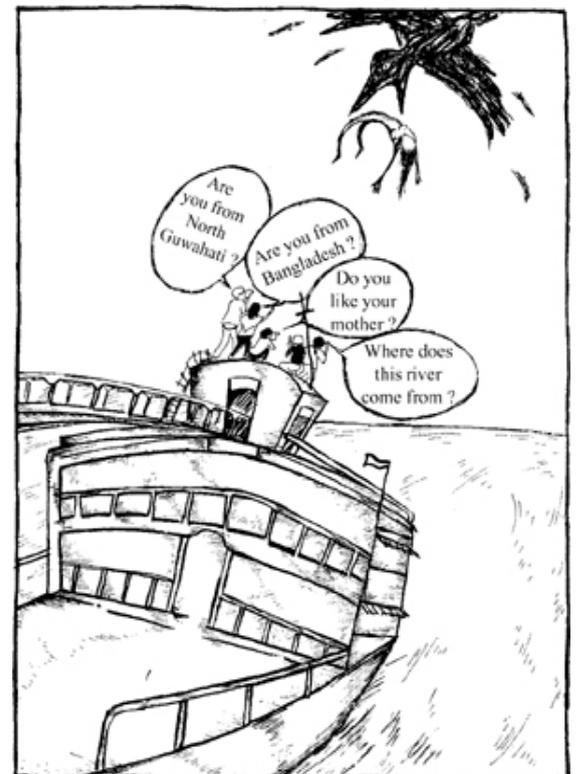
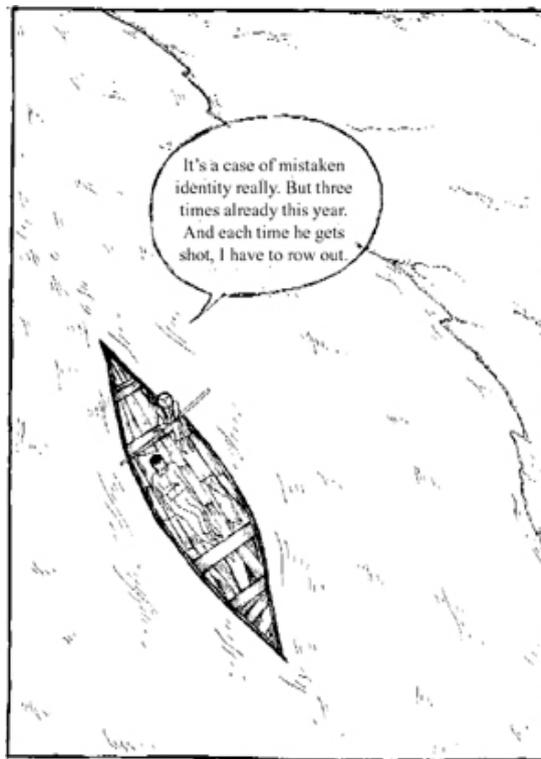
the lemon tree and threw it into the river but it sprouted into a lotus flower/water lily and later transformed into a sparrow. When her father recognised the bird to be his daughter, she finally transformed back into Tejimola.

Sati Beula was a widow who set sail down river on the Brahmaputra with her dead husband's body in the hope of bringing him back to life. While on sail, she sees a washerwoman on the river bank who takes her own child's life because he is troubling her and

revives him once her chores are over. Beula reposes faith in the washerwoman's power and hopes to bring her husband back from the dead.

But these are not the tales Singh sets out to tell in her comic book. The comic book begins from where Sati Beula sees the antics of the washerwoman. A mourning Sati Beula is told that three people have been killed in a military operation but the security forces are unable to establish the identities of the deceased. She loses hope of bringing her husband back to life. And somewhere over the swelling Brahmaputra, Tejimola becomes prey to a huge crow flying over towards the bank where many other crows are feasting over the garbage dumped down by *very very important* unscrupulous residents. The crow carrying Tejimola stops mid-air when a group of video artists and photographers ask: "Are you from North Guwahati?", "Are you from Bangladesh?", "Do you like your mother?", "Where does this river come from?" When the crow opens its beak to speak, Tejimola's body hurls down in to the river. An armed man shoots Tejimola down, saying, "First Air, now river terrorists, must be

With a liberal splash of contemporary issues that have besieged Assam and multi-layered symbolic insertions of the same to familiar folktales, Singh's ingenuity lies not only in her ability to sketch, but also a seemingly effortless empathy with these issues. The visual and textual metaphors in *The Adventures* are a scathing indictment of the State's response to the turmoil in Assam



Deccan." (Reference is being made to the arrest of an Air Deccan employee for helping the banned United National Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) hatch a plot to hijack a passenger plane.) Tejimola falls right onto a shipyard where workmen are busy repairing inland water ships and recycling metal scraps. As Tejimola lands there, she is pounded by the hammers of the workers along with the metals. She now turns to sparks of oil and fire, flying out of the shipyard that fall into the river. The sparks finally settle inside a floating empty packet of chips. Now enters someone who recognizes that these sparks were Tejimola's battered soul and limbs. Unlike the folktale, it is her mother not father, who recognizes Tejimola while standing on the river bank. She instructs Sati Beula, still sailing at a distance with her dead husband, to pick up the floating chips packet.

With a liberal splash of contemporary issues that have besieged Assam and multi layered symbolic insertions of the same to familiar folktales, Singh's ingenuity lies not only in her ability to sketch, but also a seemingly effortless empathy with these issues. Once the reader auto-establishes the context, it is easier to guess the intention of the creator's work. This very intent gives her the leverage to say more in between the texts and the images. The visual and textual metaphors in *The Adventures* are a scathing indictment of the State's response to the turmoil in Assam. Yet, one can point fingers to the directness of what certain symbols represent in the creator's mindspace. Take for instance, the mourning Sati Beula: it is an unmistakable representation of wailing widows whose husbands, sons, fathers and brothers are killed in the State-versus-non-State political violence. The ever sad and miserable Tejimola, on the other hand, is a metaphor for the unceasing hopes of the common people in Assam. Make any attempt to annihilate her, she will find a way out to sprout back to life and continue living. The sequence of the video artists and the photographers questioning the crowd brings out restrained manifestations of identity politics. Mark the texts that include words like 'North Guwahati', 'Bangladesh', 'mother' and 'river'. What do they signify? It is not difficult for a reader to immediately associate the crowd as the 'signifier' of the transnational/cross border migrant population. Or is one reading too much into a comic book?

In between the texts and images of the comic book lie numerous real and imaginary human activities along the Brahmaputra. What is apparently disjointed is connected by the very rationale of finding a destination beyond borders. Parimita Singh's *The Adventures* owes its strength only to her dexterous handling of the theme and the unity of her presentation. One will not be disappointed to see multi-hued twists and turns in the multilineal black and white dots and lines and follow Sati Beula and Tejimola's adventures as they explore the river and the riverside world. ■

The terms, 'tribe', 'gender' and 'minority' are the site of vexed and continuing debates both historically and in the contemporary moment. I have replaced 'caste' with 'gender' because I want to distance myself from the tired debate in Indian Sociology, initiated by G. S. Ghurye, among others, about whether tribe is actually caste and the attendant desire of its participants to enfold the category of tribe into caste or to see it only in relation to the Hindu caste system. While caste has relevance in the context of the Northeastern states, I do not think it is assimilable to or subsumable by caste as a category. The very category of tribe, as K.C. Bindu shows us, was produced in opposition to the Hindu in successive Census reports culminating most explicitly in the Report of 1881.²

Further, my concern here is with how the 'Northeast' as a category gets reproduced for the consumption of the mainstream Indian reader. I focus on writing by women because if the Northeast is considered a minority space in relation to the Indian nation-state, women are produced as a minority category, even if they constitute half the population, and added to the list of other minorities: Dalits, tribals, women, the disabled. Northeastern women, then, are doubly minoritised—on the bases of region and gender—and I want to trace the effects, if any, of this double marginalisation on writings by women from the region and on the representation of the Northeast as a whole.

However, it is first important to examine these terms—tribe, gender and minority—to begin to be able to situate my argument about the production and consumption of women's writing from the Northeast. To begin with tribe, as indicated earlier, the 1881 Census offers a definition which marks the beginning of a taxonomy which is as muddled then as it is now, repeatedly conflated and confused with 'Dalit' which in turn is classified as 'Hindu' and finally distanced from Hinduism because they were seen as outside caste and, therefore, outside Hindu.³ By the mid-19th century, colonial officials routinely distinguished between castes and tribes.⁴ Nevertheless, the fact is that tribe has never been properly defined in the Indian context.

Successive postcolonial Indian governments have deliberately left this category vague so it could conveniently be attributed different shapes and definitions as and when different circumstances arose.⁵ In both the colonial and postcolonial contexts, however, tribe was seen as an inferior category. In constructing the tribe as the 'Other', it became an object of enquiry seen in necessary relation to an often unstated norm, mainstream Indian (read Hindu) society. The two dominant approaches to tribes, the isolationist and the integrationist, led to the twin tropes of either romanticising the tribe or seeking to domesticate it. Sangeeta Kamat succinctly summarises these hegemonic conceptions:

The ideal of the tribe has provided for the production of images of organic cultures and identities, detached from the more differentiated and modern set of political, economic and social relations

Doubly displaced

Theoretical reflections on the terms 'tribe', 'gender' and 'minority' in Northeastern Women's Writing

ASHLEY TELLIS

typified by caste, religion and commerce. Such theorising predicated as it is on an image rather than an actually existing situation has allowed both for a romance with, and a rejection of, tribals. The modern subject's nostalgia for a 'lost' state of freedom, on the one hand, and its censure of the non-modern on the other, coalesce around this image. Thus, debates among Indian anthropologists have tended to operate within the dualism of tribal as 'noble savage' who must be protected from the ravages of modernity and tribals as 'primitive' needing to be urgently assimilated into the State processes of a developing society. As such the binary represents the continuation of colonial thinking in a postcolonial context, where the Colonial/National self battles over the fate of the Exotic other.⁶

My concern here is with how the 'Northeast' as a category gets reproduced for the consumption of the mainstream Indian reader. I focus on writing by women because if the Northeast is considered a minority space in relation to the Indian nation-state, women are produced as a minority category, even if they constitute half the population, and added to the list of other minorities: Dalits, tribals, women, the disabled. Northeastern women, then, are doubly minoritised—on the bases of region and gender—and I want to trace the effects, if any, of this double marginalisation on writings by women from the region

The dualistic pattern Kamat identifies, however, repeats itself in the very logic of the next term 'minority'. The idea of a minority presumes a majority and minority then gets defined in relation to, or as different from, majority. This leads to a liberal multiculturalism, which seeks to "recognise diversity only to contain or repress it."⁸ The Indian nation-state has in its very construction of the categories, tribe and women, marked them in the dual logic of exalted category and sought to curtail them through coercive and violent measures. The minoritising impulse then, is simultaneously, one involving dehistoricising and control.

What this dual process conceals is the fact that "the 'primitive' (as an idea and as a concrete being) always already inhabits the regime of the modern [...] it is the presence of the primitive which makes historicity possible in the first place."⁹ It also conceals the fact that the 'primitive' or the minority in being pushed into the imagined realm of "pure, sensuous practice" helped

practice get reinvented as the 'primitive Other' of thought, giving representational knowledge a hegemonic privilege in modernity. Prathma Bannerjee writes:

The emerging dominance of the historical, as the only mode of harnessing time, was based precisely on the emerging dominance of this representational mode over those not present ie. those in need of representation.¹⁰

Thus, the very term 'minority' and the representational politics associated with it locks tribals into a position which does not allow for any serious critique from them of the very structuring principles of modernity and the nation-state which frames the tribal in a certain limited and disabling way. If the tribal appears today in excess of the nation—whether in Jharkand, the Northeast, Chattisgarh or Orissa—it is not because the tribal is essentially 'primal,' but

because modernity makes her so, as Bannerjee indicates. Bannerjee calls for a contingent and temporalised understanding of identity.¹¹

Gender in relation to tribal society has also been understood within similar stultifying frameworks. K.S. Lyngdoh, for example, introduced the anthology *Women in Naga Society*, by referring to the "special dynamism" of Naga people, posits them as outside modernity.¹² This is endorsed by Lucy Zehol who speaks of traditional versus modern contexts; of progressive modernisation brought by Christianity; opposes home to career and marks home as limited and the outside world as leading to an achieved status.¹³ The papers collected in this volume constantly speak the language of "status of women", which appears often in the titles. Gender, as we need to understand it, is well-defined in the pioneering anthology *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, whose editors Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid wrote:

A feminist historiography rethinks historiography as a whole and

discards the idea of women as something to be *framed* by a context, in order to be able to think of gender difference as both structuring and structured by the wide set of social relations. In this sense, feminist historiography is a choice open to all historians. Not as a choice among competing perspectives, or even as one among personal predilections of the sort which dictate interest in a particular region or a particular historical period. Nor is the issue here the tokenist inclusion of women or the numerical or even qualitative evaluation of their participation in this or that movement. Rather as a choice which cannot but undergird *any* attempt at a historical reconstruction which undertakes to demonstrate our sociality in the *full* sense, and is ready to engage with its own presuppositions of an objective gender-neutral mode of enquiry, as well as with the presuppositions of the social moments and movements it sets out to represent.¹⁴

Sangari and Vaid's 'feminist historiography,' then, is not as a niche zone in some gender-neutral historiography, which has not and cannot be written. They envisage it instead as gender questions being read at the heart of historical analyses all kinds of relations. The move away from an analysis of the "status of women" kind in a particular epoch to locating patriarchal structures as constitutive of and constituted by class, caste and regional affiliations across history is the hallmark of their approach to historiography. In fact, the merit of this approach lies in the destabilising of monolithic feminism in the face of pressing historical conjunctures of patriarchy, capitalism and hegemonic discourses in both feminism and patriarchy.

Tiplut Nongbri offers just such an account in her essay "Khasi Women and Matriliney: Transformations in Gender Relations" where she shows how modernity, Christianity and State intervention only work against women and try to establish control over women as seen through the Khasi Custom of Lineage Bill, 1997. She effectively shows how women's sexuality is controlled by patriarchal forces within Khasi society and the State, both of whom borrow their armoury from ethnicity. Nongbri shows how matrilineal societies can be equally if not more oppressive of women and how modernisation has challenged all that is progressive in matriliney and reinforced patriarchy.¹⁶

It becomes clear, then, that we need conceptions of tribe, minority and gender that are critically aware of the ways in which tribals are produced as objects, denied agency and subjectivity and attributed random, mythicised and historically variable essences. Such an awareness will allow us to contest the violences on the categories tribe, minority and gender and produce versions of them in accordance with what I have shown K.C. Bindu, Prathama Bannerjee and Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid doing, as contingent, historical and temporalised.

I want to examine the space of the literary and see whether women writers who are producing a new body of writing from the Northeast manage to enapulate the necessary theoretical insights we need to have or whether they fall into the established patterns of representation in which they have been used to pouring themselves in accordance

with State and anthro-pological diktat.

The space of the literary, as Gayatri Spivak reminds us, is singular and unverifiable¹⁷ and as such becomes a site from where one can disinter more complex formations of tribe, minority and gender than the reductive and ahistorical templates in which we are used to seeing these categories. However, the literary is not free in its institutionalisation and marketing from hegemonic patterns, both at the moments of production and consumption. Do Northeastern women writers replicate these patterns or contest them, or do they circumvent them altogether? Three texts will tell us: Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*, Temsula Ao's *These Hills We Call Home: Stories from a War Zone* and the poetry of Irom Sharmila.

The Legends of Pensam, located among the Adi tribes in the central belt of Arunachal Pradesh, is written in an unashamedly ahistorical mode, placing the tribals in a simultaneously timeless and time-specific mode, the latter marked by the explicit expression of an anthropological and journalistic gaze, that of the narrator and her friend visiting these people and collecting stories. Repeating the dehistoricising, romanticising colonial/modern processes I have just been describing, the stories appear in much the same manner in which Northeastern folklore—songs, legends, tales, among other forms, another big new market in Indian publishing—are produced.¹⁸ Indeed, within the stories are accounts of the writer—an ex-civil servant (need one say more?) going with a journalist friend to find stories about these strange people in exotic places. This is how one story begins: "In dreams, my people say, they see the rain mother sitting on the treetops, laughing in the mist." Move over Marquez, here comes Mamang.

By contrast, Ao, who also adopts the oral story-telling mode, locates all her stories in *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, (its unfortunate subtitle notwithstanding) very clearly in the early part of the Naga movement. However, as she states in her Introduction, entitled "Lest We Forget," she does not see the stories as being about 'historical facts' or justice or justification but opts instead for a universalising 'We all suffer in conflict' and 'There are no winners' mode.¹⁹ She posits the Naga as traditional, placid and rural and the conflict with the Indian State as having disabled themselves and damaged their psyche. However, the stories themselves can be read as militating against this framework.

An earlier, otherwise laudatory review, points to a problem at the heart of Ao's fiction: the timelessness and the lack of particularity in the stories imparts them a universality that is "both liberating and (somewhat unfortunately) subject to self-censorship. The vague references to political positions and positioning of people as victims of circumstances beyond their comprehension are somewhat misleading." As a result, the reviewer adds "one is left with a nagging doubt that one half of the story is missing."²⁰ Not all Ao's characters are victims, indeed many are subversive in remarkable ways—fooling the Indian State by disguising militants; a girl singing even as she is brutally raped by the Army.

Further, Ao's own characterisation

of her fiction and the opaque and departicularised surface of her writing notwithstanding, it is nevertheless possible to read the stories themselves as containing a reservoir of sublimated political anger and her departicularisation as a poetics that resists the ethnicising impulses of the Indian State. A detailed study of the modes of her writing—her creation of narrative suspense in each story, her articulation of internal difference through a subtle critique of the logic of gender relations and of community, her use of figures and figurations of marginality, for instance, the insane, the illegitimate—might offer us a more nuanced understanding of the processes by which politics is transmuted in art.

A similar displacement is visible in Irom Sharmila's poems which are not published in English translation yet; indeed they are not easily accessible even in Manipur, though, in a wonderful instance of the power of translation, ten poems have been translated (by Haripriyari Devi Thokchom and Raman Sinha) into Hindi and appeared in the Hindi journal *Shabdhyog*. Sharmila is well-known to any one with a conscience in this country as the woman who has been on hunger strike for eight years running now as a protest against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), the draconian law in place in many parts of the Northeast,²¹ and whose poetry is marked by these constitutive contexts even though she never speaks of them explicitly. In her poetry, her privatised lyric 'I' is never overtly politically or socially marked, but, as Adorno has told us, the lyric poem always carries the deepest sense of the historical and the social.²²

Sharmila's poems become a good place to begin the sort of aesthetic and therefore, necessarily, historical and political work needed for the 'Northeast' or 'tribal' to be particularised out of the miasmal mists (*pace* Sanjoy Hazarika) in which they are mired. In 'Nameless Poem,' she writes:

I spread my hands
My dear friends
Greet me well
I am very restless
I can't express it in words
I want to tear my chest
And show
This bland smile

With a simple, solitary voice
I want to blow up the shrapnel of bombs
To burn the garbage
After some cheap tears have fallen
All the faces want to shine
In the light of a new era
A weak step
Wants to do the work of a hundred feet
To become the song of the brave
Open the door and leave.
Despite our mouths and minds
We will not be able to live without complaining.²³

Her complaint is where we can begin to articulate the historicised voice of the gendered and minoritised ('tribal')²⁴ Northeasterner. ■

ENDNOTES:

¹ This piece was first presented as a paper at the XIIth Indian Association of Women's Studies Conference held in Lucknow on February 7-10, 2008 on a panel entitled "Tribe, Caste, Minority: Structures and Exclusions."

² K.C. Bindu, 'Constructing Adivasi Identity: Reading the Dominant, Reading

the Adivasi.' Unpublished PhD thesis, Department of English, University of Hyderabad. 2004.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Ajay Skaria, 'Shades of Wilderness: Tribe, Caste, and Gender in Western India.' *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 56 3 (1997) 726-745.

⁵ Virginius Xaxa, 'Transformation of Tribes in India: Terms of Discourse.' *Economic and Political Weekly* XXXIV 24 (1999) 1519-1534. See also, 'Tribes as Indigenous People of India.' *Economic and Political Weekly*. XXXIV 51 (1999) 3289-3595.

⁶ Sangeeta Kamat, 'Anthropology and Global Capital: Rediscovering the Noble Savage.' *Cultural Dynamics* 13 1 (2002) 31.

⁷ K.C. Bindu, 'Constructing Adivasi Identity.'

⁸ Kumkum Sangari, 'Which Diversity?' *Seminar* 484 (December 1999) 24.

⁹ Prathama Bannerjee, *Politics of Time: 'Primitives' and History-Writing in a Colonial Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005) 2.

¹⁰ *ibid.* 3.

¹¹ Colonial categorisation also influenced spatial geography to the extent that it began the process of fixing 'tribes' to locations (hill tribe, plain tribe and so on). This would be one other way to engage with the specificity of the regional debate on tribe, gender and minority, beyond the scope of this piece. I thank Sanjay Barbora for pointing this out to me and for general comments on this piece.

¹² K.S. Lyngdoh, 'Foreword.' *Women in Naga Society*. ed. Lucy Zehol (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 1998) v.

¹³ Lucy Zehol, 'Introduction,' *ibid.*

¹⁴ Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, 'Introduction.' Eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989, p. 3.

¹⁵ Shad Naved, 'Gayatri Spivak and the Possibilities of Gendered Critique,' MSt. thesis, Women's Studies, Oxford University, 2004, pp. 19-20.

¹⁶ Tiplut Nongbri, 'Khasi Women and Matriliney: Transformations in Gender Relations.' *Gender, Technology and Development* 4(3), 2000. 369-395.

¹⁷ Gayatri Spivak, 'Righting Wrongs,' in *Other Asias* (London: Blackwell, 2007) 23.

¹⁸ See, for example, *Around the Hearth Khasi Legends*. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, New Delhi: Penguin, 2007. Sahitya Akademi also produces a slew of books on Northeastern folklore and literature under their 'Indian Literature in Tribal Languages' Series which has a set of problems all their own.

¹⁹ Temsula Ao, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006.

²⁰ Sanjay Barbora, 'Book Review: Reading Temsula Ao', *The Morung Express*, September 12, 2006.

²¹ See Uma Chakravarti's 'Archiving the Nation-State in Feminist Praxis: a South Asian Perspective' for an account of the AFSPA and the specific contexts of women's protest around it in Manipur, a part-version of which she presented at the Indian Association of Women's Studies conference in Lucknow and two other part-versions of which have been published as 'The 'Burdens' of Nationalism: Some Thoughts on South Asian Feminists and the Nation State.' Eds. Neloufer de mel and Selvy Thiruchendran. *At the Cutting Edge: Essays in Honour of Kumari Jayawardena*, New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2007, pp. 1-35, and 'Archiving Disquiet: The Nation-State in Feminist Praxis.' Ed. Ujjwal Singh. *Human Rights and Peace: Ideas, Institutions, Movements*, New Delhi: Sage, forthcoming, for an account of the AFSPA and the specific contexts of protest around it in Manipur, part of which she presented at the same conference in Lucknow. The full essay will be published soon as an Occasional Paper by the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), New Delhi.

²² Theodor W. Adorno, 'Lyric Poetry and Society.' *Telos* 20 (Summer 1974) 56-70.

²³ Irom Sharmila, 'Benaam kavita' *Irom Chanu Sharmila ki kavitaye' Shabdhyog* 6 (July, 2007) 142-43. The translation from the Hindi into English is mine and so all infelicities/errors in it are mine.

²⁴ As a member of the dominant community in Manipur, the Meitis, Sharmila is, of course, not "tribal", but her struggle against the AFSPA offers a potential site of solidarity between the Nagas, Kukis and Meitis (otherwise locked in bitter conflict) against the Indian State.

Quality literature in English has seen a long dormant period in Northeast India. But fiction works produced in the last few years in the region come as a gleaming hope towards ending this impasse. Emerging from a society caught between a proud past and a turbulent present, one such book unveiled recently is Easterine Iralu's *A Terrible Matriarchy* published by Zubaan. Here the micro becomes the macro in Kohima village of Nagaland as Iralu takes us into a world of traditional mores and the free spirit of a girl through whose eyes we view this world. It is as if Iralu reconstructs a personal history in the first person narrative of a four-year-old who grows with the novel.

Ostensibly, it is a simple story of a little girl coming of age. But a few pages into the book as one begins to experience it along with its primary protagonist, one realises that *A Terrible Matriarchy* is a book about so many other things: everyday life in a Naga village; the importance of adhering to traditions in a clan-based (patriarchal) society; the larger Indo-Naga army conflict that pervades homes and collective memories of a people; and the passage of time, space and mortality.

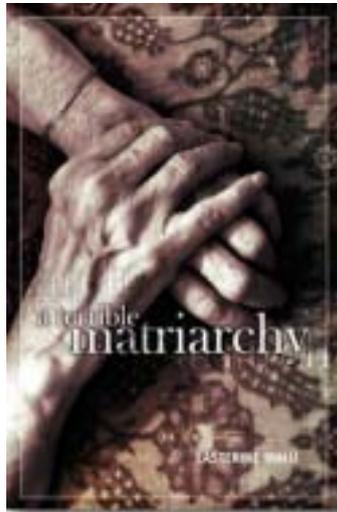
The subtle but principal theme of the book, however, is about being a woman in a society steeped in customary laws that provide only token gestures to the rights and desires of a woman. This is the prime cause of conflict between Dielieno and her paternal grandmother who brings the girl to her own house aspiring to raise her as a good Naga wife and mother. According to Lieno's grandmother, girls don't need an education, they don't need love and affection, or time to play, or even a good piece of meat with their gravy!

The gender divide and the rights of men as opposed to women run throughout the novel. At the Christmas feast organised annually by the church, it is always the men who cook and serve. On other days of course the women have to do all the cooking, serving the best pieces of meat to the menfolk. Another time Lieno goes to live in the house of Grandmother Neikuo (her father's aunt) when the older woman falls ill. Neikuo never married and so stayed on in her father's house. Lieno knows that the house actually belonged to Neikuo's brother Sizo, after their father's death, but since Sizo had married and chose to settle in another town, Neikuo could live there. Lieno states emphatically that it will still be Sizo's house when Neikuo dies someday.

Iralu eloquently explores universal themes like death, grief and aging through one girl's lived experiences. The story touchingly articulates the intense desperation felt by Lieno and her kin when Pete, her frail brother, dies of a congestion in the lungs. The scene in the children's ward before Pete's death is most poignant. The helplessness of the mother, the quiet mourning by the eldest brother and the terrible realisation of a little girl as she observes that her brother has stopped breathing is brought out in a manner most vivid and humane.

"The year that Pete died, many things changed at home", Iralu writes. And there is a gradual shift in the tone of the narrative as cracks transform

The inheritance of loss



A Terrible Matriarchy

By Easterine Iralu

Zubaan Publications, New Delhi, 2007, 320 pp., Rs 295

ISBN 978-81-89884-07-9

SUSHMITA KASHYAP

into ever widening chasms. One thing leads to another: Lieno's mother never fully recovers from her son's death and grows absent minded and weak; Vini, another brother, takes to alcoholism and gets violent to vent his pent-up rage against an isolated life with no opportunities. This is the time when Lieno, now a young woman of eleven, comes back to her parent's home to take the place of her grieving mother.

The sensitive topic of teenage alcoholism is tackled through Vini's addiction. The drinking houses by one side of the village road become almost a terrifying metaphor for the young girls and married women who have to face the larger consequences of the

stagnancy brought about by the Indian State's constant intrusions into their spaces. Iralu does not take a stand on this political issue but there are strong undertones in some conversations. This anger against the Army and the fake encounters takes more definite form in Vini's drunken outburst about his reasons for resorting to alcohol:

"Do you want to know why I drink? Why all of us drink and brawl? It's because life here in Kohima is so meaningless. Do you know the reason why Rocky was hitting the other guy? Well, they were arguing about politics and the other chap said it was no use fighting for independence because, in any case,

The strength of *A Terrible Matriarchy* is its deceptively intelligent storytelling. Easterine Iralu displays deep insight and writes from the perspective of one situated in the patriarchal world of the Angami society but who has also been exposed to the larger worlds outside—both of which serve to influence her profoundly. She raises many questions in her book about identity, culture and the inheritance of loss. Her approach, however, isn't belligerent or bitter. It is a sensitive reflection of a rich community life that has survived through repression and alienation

excesses of their male counterparts. When a male member in the village dies of alcoholism, the family left behind suffers most trying to cope with everyday life and gossip-mongers. Vini's death leaves his wife and child in a similar situation but Nisano has it a little better as her in-laws mourn along with her and support her.

Alcoholism is a major problem in Nagaland as more and more youth try hard to rebel against their social conditions, feeling crippled by the

the Naga cause was a dead cause. That made Rocky mad and they kept arguing and the man said that Rocky was a fool because he couldn't see that the people who were getting anything out of the conflict were the Parties and those who sided with them. Rocky said that he would rather die than give over his country to another nation...Do you know how frustrating it is to be a Naga and live with the fear of being shot all the time? Do you know what it

does to your insides when you hear about the people tortured and killed by the army and you can't do anything about it? And then, along comes this smart Alec who thinks it is all right to stop fighting for freedom, to stop being men and be sitting at an office desk, having sold your identity away for a bundle of money. You didn't know that Rocky's father was killed by the Indian army, did you?"

Apart from such references to present social and political conditions, there is emphasis on folklore, spirits and general customs in the narrative that presents the Angami community's way of life. These beliefs and social values have been handed down over generations and are, in a sense, the principal medium through which the Nagas express their most intense emotions and fears. The elaborate funeral rites described by Iralu show the intricacies of the Naga society in a canvas where age-old customs and relatively new Christianity come together.

The most likeable aspect of the book is its lucid style and humour. This simple style is probably an attribute of the rich Naga storytelling tradition. The hill peoples of the Northeast have a long oral tradition that encompasses the cosmology of their society and brings forth their strong links with their natural environment. Another interesting book on the Nagas by yet again a woman writer, Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories From A War Zone*, makes use of this same oral tradition and its treasure of stories and ideas. While Ao's book is a collection of short stories about the pain and suffering of her people because of the long-drawn conflict, Iralu's book takes on a more cheerful tone to express the larger changes that are influencing life in Kohima. When electricity comes to the village, for instance, reactions of people vary from distrust to awe in finding it effective.

Iralu raises many questions in her book about identity, culture and the inheritance of loss. Her approach, however, isn't belligerent or bitter. It is a sensitive reflection of a rich community life that has survived through repression and alienation. Through Lieno's subtle rebellions, the author intervenes on issues like education of the girl child. Lieno's resentment against some of the norms forces the reader to think about things that are sometimes taken for granted in certain societies; what is apparent is very often not what is dreamed for.

Another female character, Bano, lives on in Grandmother's house even after the latter's death not because she likes it but because she has known no other life. Being uneducated and unmarried, she has little prospects of owning property or choosing an independent career option.

The strength of *A Terrible Matriarchy* is its deceptively intelligent storytelling. Easterine Iralu displays deep insight and writes from the perspective of one situated in the patriarchal world of the Angami society but who has also been exposed to the larger worlds outside—both of which serve to influence her profoundly. This influence is manifested in the racy narrative of the novel that leaves the reader with vivid images long after one has finished reading it.

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Anjum Hasan's delightful first novel, *Lunatic in my Head*, is the biography of a small town. And yet, it is as much about Shillong as the world outside it, a world which is available to its citizens only through eavesdropping. Zac O'Yeah's cover photograph shows a man holding an umbrella, his back to the world. There is a tiny reflection of this image on the water to his right. There couldn't have been a better image to represent Shillong's relationship with the world: "tilted and dishevelled from days of rain", Shillong is curiously self-content. Its back is to the world and yet it can hear; it looks at itself, sees its image as diminished, and waits with umbrella in hand. Its temper is one of anticipation.

In writing about Shillong, Hasan writes a psychological history of many small towns in Northeast India. "Aman disliked this about Shillong—how rumours got trapped in the webs of their creation ..." But in small towns like Shillong, even history is a rumour. "My dear, this is an institution with a history," says Mother Gertrude about her college to Firdaus. The words that follow transform history to gossip: "Just the other day ... Friday, was it..."; "the diamond jubilee souvenir"; "milestones".

Hasan begins by assembling a series of dreams: "Aman was now studying for the Civil Services exam a second time"; implicit in these dreams is the foreboding of failure: "If he didn't pass, he would act on his failure - try something else, leave town, try again." She is one of the first Indian-English writers to write about the legitimacy of failure. In that sense, the book ends where it had begun (imitating the "progress" of a failure), because none of its protagonists have succeeded in achieving what they had set out to do: Firdaus, lecturer in a college, is still thinking of completing her MPhil dissertation and becoming someone else; eight year old Sophie, though she no longer believes that she is Anne-of-the-novel, still imagines herself as adopted; and Aman, with his history of failures at the Civil Services exam and his dreams about becoming a musician, still cannot imagine a life without Pink Floyd.

These people are failures because they are dreamers. The book begins as the story of three dreamers, but by the time it ends, even pragmatists have begun to dream. For towards the end of the book, either these "dreams" have been transferred (as he falls asleep, Aman's father sees "images of Aman as a failure in the eyes of the world: a petty clerk in a government office, a school-teacher, a teller in a bank") or they have been re-made (Sophie looks at the house which she had so long imagined as Anne-of-the-novel's and thinks, "It was not her house" because "she had recently discovered Nancy Drew").

The beauty of Hasan's book lies in the revelation of this gap between ambition and dreams, often used interchangeably in a contemporary metropolitan capitalist discourse; in *Lunatic*, the first is often achievable, the latter remains a private pinch on the soul.

In his essay "What is a Classic?" Coetzee writes, "To such young people, the high culture of the metropolis may arrive in the form of powerful

The legitimacy of failure



Lunatic in My Head

By Anjum Hasan

Zubaan-Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2007, 291 pp., Rs 295

ISBN 978-81-89884-05-5

SUMANA ROY

experiences which cannot, however, be embedded in their lives in any obvious way, and which seem therefore to have their existence in some transcendent realm. In extreme cases, they are led to blame their environment for not living

into the classroom where Firdaus teaches *The Old Man and the Sea*, and immediately puts this thought inside Firdaus's and the reader's head: "Firdaus had never seen the sea". Through this she exposes the gaps that

The title of Hasan's book comes from the Pink Floyd song, "Lunatic is in my head". She appropriates the title to discourse the surrogate character of small-town life, one where borrowing is not just embellishment of thought but a part of the small town's genetic code of claiming the sky as its own, even if in part. Hasan cannot resist turning this metaphor of borrowing into the literal: "Can you bring some? Just to listen to. I'll give them back," says Jason, their landlady's son to Sophie, asking to see her father's collection of records. What is significant is not just the rhetoric of exchange but the 'commodities' being exchanged. For, in the end, it is only music and literature that give even "dkhars" (outsiders) a sense of community

up to art and to take up residence in an art-world. This is a provincial fate ...".

"You lock the door/ And throw away the key/ There's someone in my head but it's not me" goes Pink Floyd's "Lunatic is in my Head". This is an anthem for the double lives that Aman, Firdaus and Sophie lead; but, perhaps more importantly, this is also a critique of the effect of reading a 'foreign'-language literature in a provincial town, a space which is almost all classroom for all knowledge comes from the 'outside' in the tone of an education. The campus novel atmosphere that Hasan creates to wondrous (and cunning) effect in the Firdaus-sections is not only appropriate; Hasan takes us

exist between an English text and its context-deprived reader, a common disease of the university syllabus in a post-colony, diagnosed long ago by Derek Walcott in his essay about reading Wordsworth's "Daffodils" without ever having seen the flower; but Hasan does something more. She takes up the sense of disconnect between Firdaus and English and ensures that we mark this as a general tendency in Firdaus's personality, some "awkward" nerve in her that makes her feel alienated in every surrounding, even at home. In that, all three—Firdaus, Aman and Sophie—are "awkward", all foreign, all outsiders to their place and themselves, in other words, lunatics in

their heads (for isn't that the etymology of the word 'mad'—one who has come out of oneself?).

Hasan breaks and makes narrative rules all the time. After having shown the gap between the minds of the characters in her novel and the minds of the characters of the English novels they read, and thereby establishing how Firdaus—like most residents of provincially—move about as grumbling satellites of an unfamiliar elsewhere, Hasan moves on to establishing a sense of identification between two women characters of two women novelists—Austen and herself ("Firdaus ... identified with Anne Eliot in *Persuasion* ..."). As if to stretch the point further, Hasan puts a series of half-thoughts in the reader's mind and gives it the energy of gossip: Angel War, who "taught English in a men's college, had topped several exams ... excellent teacher ... ambitious and good-looking", in other words, everything that Firdaus would like to be, is writing a "PhD on George Eliot". Hasan is not just content with the tired Jane Austen-George Eliot binary; she makes the reader work out the Firdaus-Angel War opposition and later the Flossie-Firdaus binary (Firdaus "did not swing between the extremes of Shakespeare and servant troubles"). Sophie and Aman, too, develop as characters by pitting themselves against someone, often an imaginary Other. Hasan seems to be suggesting the essential creed of a small-town existence: Comparison. The small town resident cannot help being a comparativist; his eyes are on the periscope all the time. Even "Sophie thought of history as stories about what happened in India, *as against* English literature, which consisted of stories that took place elsewhere in the world"; and Aman asks, "Who says it has to be *exactly* like the Pink Floyd thing?" (italics mine).

And just as "music was Aman's silence—it was the background against which everything else happened," music is the background against which Hasan's novel moves. "Read up your rock history," says one character to another; the seeming self-consciousness here is only part of the gesture, the other is the collocation of the real with the abstract—at the musical Happening, "all of them were moved by the self-same impulse ... that people could be drawn together by as abstract an idea as Art, and yet their tangible presence in a room, their voices ... could result from that impulse".

The title of Hasan's book comes from the Pink Floyd song, "Lunatic in my head". She appropriates the title to discourse the surrogate character of small town life, one where borrowing is not just embellishment of thought but a part of the small town's genetic code of claiming the sky as its own, even if in part. Hasan cannot resist turning this metaphor of borrowing into the literal: "Can you bring some? Just to listen to. I'll give them back," says Jason, their landlady's son to Sophie, asking to see her father's collection of records. No, he does not "give back" all the records; some borrowings are permanent. Sophie continues with the code of exchange: after promising to bring Cilla Black for Jason, she asks him, "Okay ... can I see that book?" What is significant is not just the rhetoric of exchange but the 'commodities' being exchanged. For, in the end, it is only music and literature that give even "*dkhars*" (outsiders) a sense of community: "they could talk music and think music together, and moments like these bound them up ..."

It's alright to be a "lunatic", says Hasan, without dusting off Pink Floyd's quotation marks (Her name appears on the cover in the "Weirdo" case as "aNjUm HaSaN"). Madness and daydreaming are prerequisite

conditions to maintaining sanity, especially in a small town like Shillong which can only be represented with a re-making of the theory of the *rasa*, as Hasan does in the names she gives to the different sections of her novel: "Wonder, Sadness, Love, Courage ...". A space which can only be constructed with the architecture of emotions is, in the end, a damp and dark space, one out of which passage is imperative: "I've stayed long enough inside this dungeon, I want to come out into fresh air now, that's what it's saying". These are Sophie's mother's words to Sophie, ventriloquising the thoughts of the unborn child in her womb. But they are, at the same time, the words of Shillong's residents for Shillong is womb but also welter, out of which passage is inevitable.

Aman was going to leave town ... The point is that I'm leaving, I'll be like all those other boys who leave town and there's no room for sentimentality anymore, they don't matter at all to those who stay behind, those who continue thinking of the old days and live by vague gestures.

This is how the book ends, with a sense of tentativeness that is usually a foreboding to journeys. Aman makes plans to leave for Delhi, and Sophie, though she does not know it yet, will leave for Bangalore. The promise of a sequel to *Lunatic*—about Sophie's journey to the city—from writer and publisher, is also a part of the ethics of the small town: "The new city," says Ashis Nandy in *An Ambiguous Journey to the City*, "enlarged the scope for a radical and legitimate rejection of the village as that part of one's self which had out-lived its utility". Shillong, of course, is no village, but for Aman, Firdaus and Sophie, it has "out-lived its utility"; the journey from outlived utility to possibility—also a part of the

aesthetic of the sequel—is, of course, a part, only a part of the promise.

"It doesn't fit with this shadowy world, the idea of leaving. It's too drastic, too final. It's unforgivable, really. He lit himself a joint," thinks Aman. And yet it is inevitable that this leave-taking is turned into the unreal, accompanied as it is, with a "joint". There are two journeys, and Hasan puts both the journeys into one sentence, separating them only by a comma: "too drastic, too final". The first is the physical journey to the city, the other an imaginary revisiting to the small town, thus completing the circle with broken lines; the first part of the sentence is cruel but true, the second is untrue for no imaginary journey is ever "final". So the journey back to the town, to Shillong, will always be an insubstantial journey, a journey to the heartland of reverie. And yet, Aman's father's words ("Aman, you go to Delhi ...") and Aman's words to himself ("I can't go, he thought desperately") are not just dialogues between spaces; they are part of a new aesthetic of self-fashioning (not becoming), of an impulse and contra-impulse towards the late capitalist creed of makeover, an ability to turn new without moulting:

Aman realised that he would not and could not bring any of his Floyd tapes with him. It would be unbearable, listening to them in a new place. He'd have to find entirely new music to listen to.

For life in a small town is all future but the future is only looking at life through a rear-view mirror: "a kind of reverse nostalgia".

It is this sense of "reverse nostalgia", its power to turn the subculture of dreams into a contemporary political fable that will make *Lunatic* classic in the years to come. We will be proud to have been its earliest readers.

■

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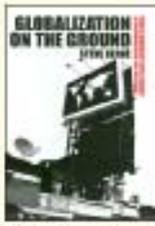
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The Bodos are the most numerous and politically articulate tribal community of Assam. Their movement for a separate homeland over the last two decades has drawn much national as well as international attention.

However, this attention has not transformed itself into an equally informed and academically rigorous scholarship on the subject. So one naturally expects Sujit Choudhury, a professor of History in a college of Assam, to fulfill this long-standing vacuum through his research on the Bodos.

Choudhury makes a number of interesting points in his book. In the first two chapters, he tries to locate the 'historical isolation' of the Bodos in the failure of the ancient states of Assam to incorporate the former in their Bramanical Hindu fold. Taking cue from historians like R.S. Sharma and D.D. Kosambi, Choudhury regards Brahmanical Hinduism as the cultural expression of settled agriculture and feudalism. According to him, expansion of settled agriculture did not form a part of State policy in ancient and early medieval Assam. As a result, tribal groups like the Bodos continued to practise shifting cultivation as against the settled agrarian communities in the neighbourhood. In a later period, he suggests, it hindered in the growth of clear-cut nationalities in the region.

Towards the late medieval period, however he finds some weak attempts at bringing these tribes within the fold of statecraft and settled agriculture; however, opines Choudhury, these attempts were never whole hearted or substantial in any way. He laments the Ahoms' hatred of Shankarite Vaishnavism, which for him, was the ideology of feudal mode of production. Similarly he regards the defeat of the Bara-Bhuyans at the hands of Ahom rulers as the historic loss of opportunity for the de-tribalisation of the region; for him the Bara-Bhuyans represented an urge to bring the tribals within the Hindu fold and thus de-tribalising and bringing them under settled agriculture.

Here one can clearly see the relics of a very outdated methodology where it is assumed that time progresses through a very linear trajectory (slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and so on) and any alternative to such a trajectory is necessarily utopian or reactionary. Thus the Bodo resistance to settled agriculture merely appears as 'non-progressive' to Choudhury. In this tyranny of analytical structures, Choudhury has lost a suitable opportunity to ponder over probable rationality of such resistance in the world-view of the Bodo tribes. In fact, Marxists themselves, who are generally blamed for such analytical rigidities, have long abandoned such explanatory frameworks. In fact, one wonders how far such a narrow analytical framework can escape becoming an apology for Brahmanical Hinduism and the caste system. Though Choudhury appeals to the reader not to read his narrative in such a light, it is difficult to do otherwise.

In Chapter Three, Choudhury gives us a narrative of the changes brought by colonialism in to Bodo society and politics. He views the emergence of colonialism in early 19th century as a dramatic process, which introduced an altogether different terrain of politics

Ethnic imaginations

The Bodos: Emergence and Assertion of an Ethnic Minority

By Sujit Choudhury

Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Simla, 2007, 166 pp.,

Rs 300

ISBN 81-7986-054-X

MAYUR CHETIA

into the region. It was only some decades ago that the Bodos had started to adopt settled agriculture. Choudhury finds a new class of well-to-do farmers emerging from within Bodo society, which he reasons, was the outcome of this new adoption. This created a new situation as a newly emerging elite class was looking for an ideological framework for themselves.

majority in the legislature. Choudhury gives us some details about how after Independence, the Tribal League decided to merge itself with the Congress in return for the promise of retention of reserved seats and protection of the tribal belts lands.

In the subsequent chapters, following the (now familiar) line of Amalendu Guha, Choudhury examines

One question which Sujit Choudhury has not asked is why communities in Northeast in general, and Assam in particular, have almost always opted for a 'ethnic-homeland' kind of solution for their grievances? The roots of the ethnic imaginations of homelands in India's Northeast lies to a large extent in the structures or the grammar of politics laid down by the Indian State. To pre-empt the possibility of insurgency in the states, the central government carved a number of new federal units in the Northeast, which caught the imagination of the struggling communities

Choudhury views the emergence and growth of the Brahma movement in the later half of 19th century under the leadership of Kalicharan Brahma, in this changed socio-economic milieu. Apart from providing a new ideological framework to the emerging elite of the Bodos, the Brahma dharma also provided a critique of the corrupt practices of the Shankarite Gurus who used to extract huge amounts of money from the Bodos in return for the entitlement of *Sarania* (caste) status. This was a conventional way of adjusting the upwardly mobile Bodos within the caste hierarchy of 'mainstream' Assamese; and though otherwise exploitative, Choudhury laments, this was one of the very few ways of 'assimilation' of the Bodos within the Assamese society, which with the increasing acceptability of the Brahma dharma among the Bodos, simply died out.

In Chapter Four, Choudhury looks at the emergence of electoral politics in Assam in the beginning of 20th century which for him was yet another watershed in the history of the Bodos. He describes at length the strategies and manipulations made by the Brahma elite to stay in power by allying with whoever came to the power. The 1937 election verdict gave the tribal leaders a historic opportunity to bargain for their demands with the mainstream parties, as Congress and Muslim League both failed to secure a clear-cut

the role played by the aggressive Assamese cultural politics in isolating the tribals from the 'mainstream'. He regards the language movement launched by the Assam Sahitya Sabha and AASU in the second half of 20th century as one of the main factors which finally forced the Bodo leadership to take the road of separation. He gives us details about how due to the aggressive and hegemonic cultural practices of the Assamese middle class and the Government of Assam (which was again composed mainly by the Assamese middle class only) the moderate leadership of the Bodo society got delegitimised before the more militant and non-conformist sections of the emerging radical youth. In 1967 the Plain Tribals Council Of Assam (PTCA) was formed and it demanded the formation of a Union Territory called 'Udayachal' within Assam for the plains tribes. In 1968 and afterwards, the question of script to be used in Bodo language created another controversy. The Assamese middle class viewed the decision of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) to use the Roman script with contempt and declared it as a conspiracy of the Christian Bodos to divide Assam's social structure. Similarly, the Government of India did not pay any heed to the long-standing demand of the Bodos to implement the Bodo language up to the sixth standard in schools of the Bodo inhabited areas.

The movement launched by the BSS in this regard met with severe repression by the state government. When the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) formed a government in the state in the post-Assam movement period, the moderate wing of the PTCA tried to ally with the new government and negotiate a deal for the Bodos. But the latter intensified the process of Assamisation and ignored the cries of the Bodos about their eviction from their forestlands. This paved the way for the rise of ABSU as the real and uncompromising leader of the Bodos who started a movement for a separate state with the slogan of "divide Assam fifty-fifty".

All of this is familiar historical narrative. What Choudhury has done is to add some more details to the already known facts and events. The point however is to move beyond this binary of Assamese middle class versus the tribals. One question which Choudhury has not asked is that why communities in Northeast in general, and Assam in particular, have almost always opted for a 'ethnic-homeland' kind of solution for their grievances? Here the formulations of scholars like Sanjib Baruah can be brought into the discussion. Baruah argues that the roots of the ethnic imaginations of homelands in India's Northeast lies to a large extent in the structures or the grammar of politics laid down by the Indian State. To pre-empt the possibility of insurgency in the states, the central government carved a number of new federal units in the Northeast, which caught the imagination of the struggling communities. Here Choudhury has lost a good opportunity to look into the larger politics of disorder in the region.

The book's weakest point is that it does not address the question of ethnic clashes, which became regular events following the launch of the Bodo Movement. Other communities like Santhals and Koch-Rajbongshis also share the Bodo inhabited areas. The demand for the formation of a Bodoland state under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution rendered many other communities politically vulnerable. Hence they claimed that the Bodo inhabited areas do not form an uninterrupted land mass and therefore they are not eligible for inclusion within the Sixth Schedule. This led to a long and tragic history of fratricidal killings among these communities, which took a huge toll on human lives. It is shocking to see the total absence of this important dynamic from this book, for it could have formed an analysis of intra-community relations in Assam. Neither does Choudhury try to analyse in depth as to why the Bodo leadership in the post PTCA period, decided to undo their alliance with the other plains tribes.

Moreover, Choudhury frequently deploys the term 'class' in his analysis. However it's not clear whether he is using it in the Marxist or Weberian sense. In all probability, he is using it in a mere heuristic manner. But it begs more questions, for he talks of a 'hegemonic' class within the Bodo as well as the Assamese society. A comprehensive analysis of class relations within the Bodo society is missing from the analysis. Finally, it can be said that this book is valuable for some of the details it provides; but that said—it is far short of a theoretically rigorous and imaginative work. ■

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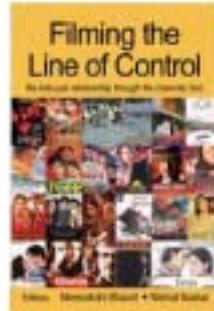
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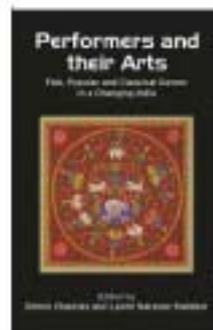
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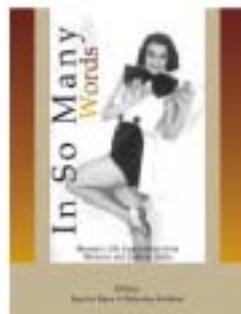
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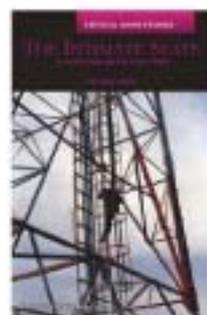
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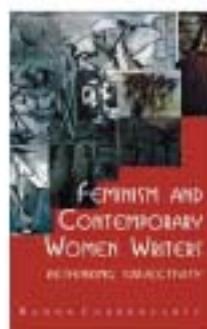


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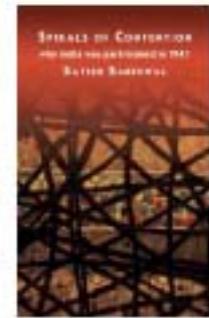
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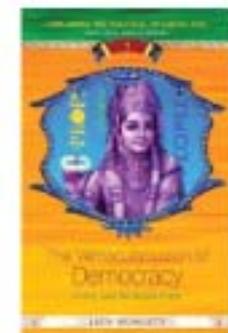


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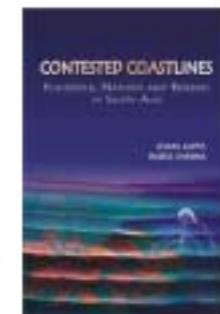


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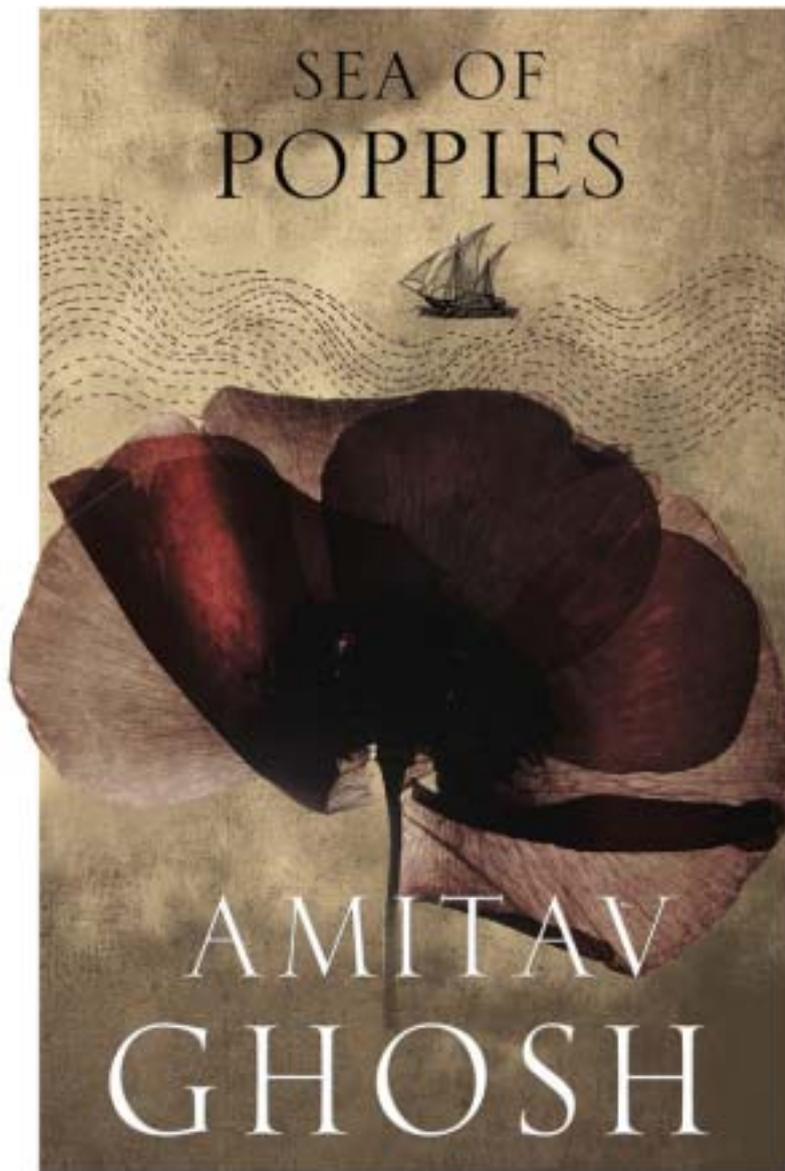
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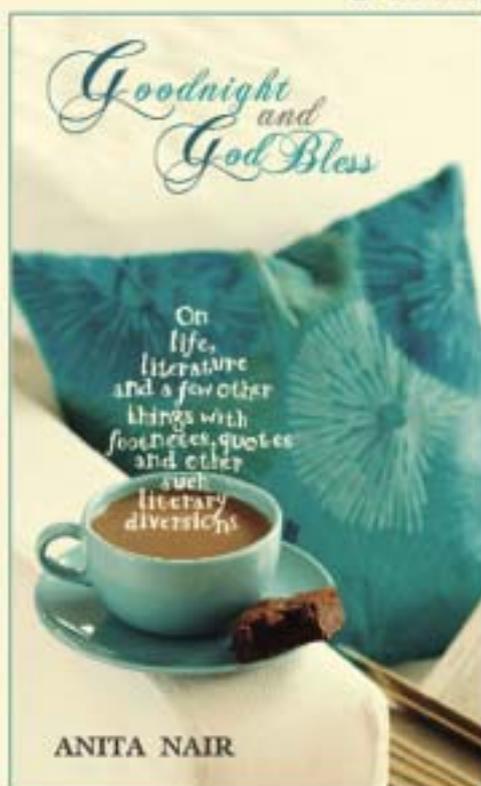
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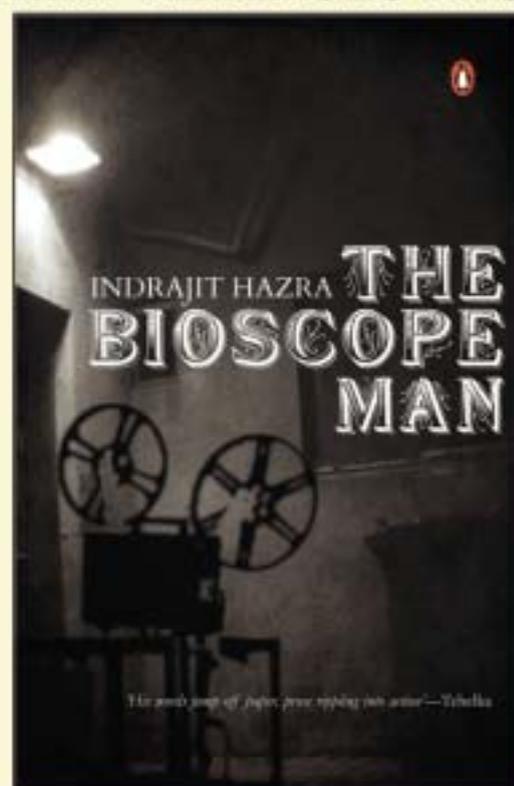
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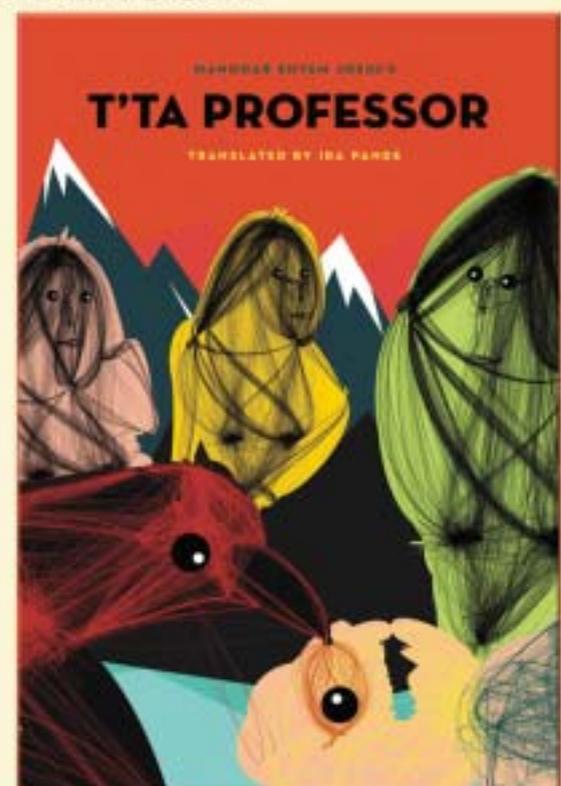
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