You can go home again….so long as you understand

That home is a place where you have never been

After this journey to these states of North Eastern region of India, we can deduce some interesting facts about this beautiful land. It is that existing part of the country, which was always there with its unique culture, rituals, and scenic beauty, but was left unnoticed.

The seven wonderful states or the so called ‘Seven Sisters’ are located on the eastern most region of India. It is the most ethnically and linguistically diverse region of India. It has higher number of tribal population which makes it distinct from rest of the country. There are numerous tribal races and each has its different culture and practices. People of this land also make it unique through the diversity of culture, language, religion, festivals and rituals. Various tribes like Bodo, Assamese, Nagas, Adi, Khasi, Akas etc. follow different beliefs and practices.

Although these states are a mark of beauty and have rich biodiversity but their sufferings too are immense. They bear the harsh impacts of ethnic clashes, poverty, climatic disturbances, dogmatic religious practices, and orthodox social traditions due to lack of education and awareness. Clashes among tribal groups among themselves for land and agitation against the people set in these states from other countries like Bangladesh, keep affecting the peace of this land. Problem of insurgent groups, violence and insecurity of life to the

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people in these areas is also very prominent. Crisis and troubles in these states have affected the life of almost entire region. No wonder, people here are trying to bring up the issues through some sources or other. Literature too is doing its great job of bringing these issues in light.

If we talk about the emerging Indian English Literature from these states we may say that it is gaining vastness day by day. Various writers from this region are writing to bring up the contemporary conditions of these states which include, social facts, issues related to insurgency, growing corruption, identity crises, distorted society, poor condition of people and their sufferings etc. These writers too, have experienced or faced these problems either directly or indirectly and thus they have projected all this effectively through their literary works whether fiction, poetry or prose. The three writers Indira Goswami, Siddhartha Deb and MitraPhukan, who were taken to be analyzed in this study belong to different states of this region and they bring out facts related to the society, politics and economy.

There is difference between their styles of projection of these issues but all write focusing upon the North East region. They have focused on the problems related to the life of people here and the various prevalent social evils. After a study of these writers, we can say that the facts related to the society are effectively revealed by them. All have unveiled new aspects and dimensions Although their perspectives differ. The issues they discuss may vary but the roots of these problems are same as they all are talking about one native land. We may
say that they stand on the same ground but pick up different issues prevailing around them and present them in their own individual style.

We can analyze these writers on the basis of their style and the issues discussed by them revealing the social truth. One of the common characteristics which these writers reveal is their focus on the problems related to the way north east India has been suffering because of its geographical features and how it has been left isolated by the rest of the country. Issues like Ethnic clashes, problem of insurgency, and violence are also clearly shown by these writers and they all talk about the different dimensions related to these problems.

Ethnic clashes are one of the most prominent issues prevailing in these states. As we see that Siddhartha Deb in his novel The Point of Return shows how after the formation of Bangladesh when people migrated to North East India, it gave rise to ethnic clashes adversely affecting the lives of people. He shows that people here suffered the consequences of being in the region with International borders and due to less security measures taken up by the government. We see in the novel that Dr. Dam who migrated from Bangladesh after its formation out of Pakistan, suffered in the region where he lived near Shillong.

People from Bangladesh were not accepted by the tribal population of North East India. Dr. Dam, who was an honest officer, suffered as he worked under the tribal ministers who made him work as per their wishes on gunpoint. These people from other countries were strongly opposed by the tribal people,
due to which they suffered the violence and insecurity in their lives. These ethnic clashes disturbed their lives completely, leaving these people utterly helpless. This is how the *The Independent (London)* states about his novel:

A coming-of-age story not just of one young man, but of a nation,

This subtle novel asks questions about authority, patriarchy, and

How people are damaged by power and, crucially, corruption.\(^2\)

In his another novel *An outline of the Republic or Surface*, too, Deb shows that how the intertribal disputes were also a part of the society, causing violence and hatred. People in lust of power and land fought amongst themselves to gain power and acquisition on other’s land. Their greed to extend their boundaries and hope to attain separate lands gave rise to such clashes. Many Insurgent groups were formed infecting the society with violence, killings, and bloodshed. These groups, in order to oppose the government and their orders in form of protest, instigated violence and hatred. They disturbed the remaining peace of these states thus endangering the lives of common people. He also shows the various diseases prevailing in these states like AIDS, Cancer due to high intake of drugs and alcohol by people living here.

MitraPhukan too, in her novel *The Collector’s Wife*, shows kidnapping, extortions, murders, bomb blasts, mass killing and all sorts of devilish activities planted by organizations who demanded an exclusive land for themselves. She

shows how even those people who were in authoritative posts and were honest, also suffered due to these ill occurrences. As we see in the novel, Siddhartha is a Collector and had to put his life on stake for the welfare of other people. The novel is set against the Assam agitation of the 1970s and 80s. The violent insurgency that grips Assam forms the backdrop of the novel. It is shown that the Assam students’ agitation of the 1970s and 1980s that began as a movement for self-determination develops into a full blown insurgency. Kidnappings, extortion and political instability are still the order of the day. The issue of illegal migration from across the border has further spread mistrust and bitterness among the people of the region. The atmosphere prevailed in the states was of tension and fear. As the novelist reveals in her novel *The Collector’s Wife*:

People stopped going outdoors during the day. The streets of Parbatpuri, even MG Road, were almost deserted at noon.

Since the unrest continued unabated, people were still wary of going out at night. It was only during the early evenings people were still wary of going out at night. It was only during the early evenings that Parbatpuri showed some signs of life.³

Indira Goswami’s *The Man from Chinnamasta* is set in the Pre Independence British India but also focuses on the social evils prevalent in the North-Eastern region. She reveals how British people exploited poor people in Assam and left them homeless in their own land, giving rise to problems like poverty, illiteracy, hunger, corruption resulting in violence. She shows how poor people who were left penny less were forced to tread on the path of corruption, making them addicted to drugs and alcohol.

Hiren Gohain in the book *Indira Goswami (Mamoni Raisom): A Critical Study Of Her Writings* writes:

> The sheer physicality of the life and the relationships to which women are condemned in such a society-the signs of mensuration, forced loveless relationships, abortion, the sterile burning of unfulfilled desire-finds repeated mention in her novels.\(^4\)

These writers also focus on the fact that how people here were dissatisfied with the central government and its schemes. They had this feeling of suffering through discrimination and of being left isolated by the government. As we see in the novel *An outline of the Republic* or *Surface*, Siddhartha Deb reveals that oil wells were being dug up by the government officials but the benefit from these

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was never shared by the people of the state. And this gave rise to the spirit of protest and dispute.

Another theme covered by these authors is the Image of women in the society. Although three of them show different situations which a woman undergoes, but the altogether, the image which comes up is of a suppressed and troubled individual. Despite the fact women of Khasi tribes in Meghalaya are worshipped by the people there and the property is inherited by them, we see that women were not treated well and their sufferings and troubles were enhanced by the society. Imposition of orthodox rituals, typical expectations from a woman to keep working as a slave to her husband and his family are the basic traits shown by these writers.

Indira Goswami in her both novels *The Man from Chinnamasta* and *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* shows how women were suppressed and they suffered due to it. Women belonging to all age groups were targeted and victimized. In the novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, we see that women had to suffer due to the orthodox practices imposed on them. Young girls who attained the age of puberty were compared to criminals if they were left unmarried. They were taught that the only aim of their life was to get married with whosoever they find and because of this attitude we see that many young girls in the novel were married to drunkards and old men. Married women were not spared as it was believed that they were required to serve their husbands, however they treated them.
Widows were treated in a worse manner. They were considered as an outcaste and were left alone to suffer the brutalities and tough rules and regulations imposed on them. They were even deprived of comfort, food and proper clothing. Their condition was more pitiable than the untouchables. We see many women in the novel who suffer due to the harsh and dogmatic customs of the society. Durga, Giribala, Eliman one being married another widow and the latter was unmarried at the age of twelve all suffered due to the social constraints present in the system. They longed for love from their partners but whole life they couldn’t get the true love and were tied for whole life to a bond of marriage which gave them nothing but just sufferings and mistreatment.

In her another novel *The Man from Chinnamstawe* see the same picture of women who suffered. Bidhibala, a young girl was forced to marry an old man who had two children. She wanted to escape this marriage as she loved another man of her age, but couldn’t put her wish forward as she was afraid of the harsh behaviour of her father and the social issues which stopped her from doing so. In the end of the novel we see that she dies as it was hard for her to disobey her father and also to go against the norms of the society. She didn’t want to be a part of that marriage and to escape she decided to run away from her home and ultimately she died. We see that Goswami has presented a pitiable and poor condition of woman where her sufferings and suppressions never isolate her.

Like Goswami, Siddhartha Deb too, focuses on the poor condition of women which can be seen in the North Eastern Society. Deb too shows how women were believed to be a part of household and were deprived of rest other
creative activities. He shows in his autobiographical novel *The Point of Return* that how his mother when decided to move to their house in Silachar, was expected by his uncle to cook food for the family, and obey the orders whatever will be given to her. He asked her not to follow the life which till now she had been leading. He wanted her to know the rituals and position which was given to a woman in the family i.e. of a domestic servant bound in chains of household duties.

In his other novel *An outline of the Republic or Surface*, we see that the writer projects the sufferings of a woman at the hands of the authoritative Insurgent groups. We see in the novel that Leela an innocent girl became the victim of an Insurgent group named MORLS. They blamed her to be a porn actress and made her parade in front of the media people and later killed her mysteriously. The girl was an employee in a highly professional social project but became a target of the Insurgent group to be projected as a culprit and an example so that others may be scared of such groups and would not dare to oppose them. Deb shows how these women were used as an object, their life was considered worthless as we see in the novel Malik head of the organization where Leela worked, believed that blaming a girl for an ill deed is best way to escape troubles. We see that people took women for granted and made them suffer in or out of the house.

Mitra Phukan too in her novel shows the sufferings of a woman. We see in the novel *The Collector’s wife* the protagonist of the novel Rukmini after her marriage has to discard her own dreams and follow her husband wherever he
goes. Her husband keeps shifting from one place to another and so does she with him. Her own life is finished, she wishes to become a lecturer in a college but because of her husband’s job couldn’t get her wish fulfilled.

Her husband was a busy man and couldn’t spare time for her and she was left isolated to suffer. She felt her life was completely ruined as she lived far away from her parents. Her husband couldn’t give her time and work was also not an option for her. Thus we see that she was forced to remain like a domestic animal she couldn’t lead her life in her own way.

Misinterpretation of Religion is another factor depicted by these writers as a cause to bring social ills in the society. The culture and rituals in these states which tribal people have adopted includes violent practices like head hunting, these people have various superstitious beliefs and practices due to lack of education and awareness and thus it is clearly revealed by the writers in their books. We see in the novels of Mamoni Raisom Goswami that how religion was misinterpreted by the people bringing troubles to the society. Animal sacrifices, poor treatment of women all this was due to misinterpretation of religious values and orthodox rituals. They valued people belonging to higher caste considering them equivalent to God, and thus introducing new social evils troubling the society.

Deb too in his novels brings out such issues focusing on the various rituals practiced in the society due to the religious dogmas and superstitious beliefs. Suppression of women which took place in the society, adaptation of Christian
religion and culture by most of the population is clearly revealed by the writer. Rituals which were practiced troubled people of every strata of the society.

Thus we see that how these writers have brought up the picture of women in North East Indian region covering different aspects of their lives. Women were suppressed and bore the harsh consequences of orthodox practices. All of these writers reveal the true picture of women and talk about the different situations which reveal various dimensions of it.

Apart from the above similar issues which these writers project; we also come across some facts which are shown distinctly by these writers. These issues are identity crisis, Animal sacrifices and inequalities on the basis of caste. These writers unveil these dark truths prevailing in the North East Indian society with stark realism. Indira Goswami in her novel *The Man from Chinnamasta* shows the harsh picture of animal killings where the innocent animals were sacrificed by the priests of the ancient Kamakhya temple in the name of religious rituals. The author shows how brutally these animals were killed and sometimes they were slaughtered by the hands of the priests. These temple priests even advocated human sacrifices and blamed the people who abandoned such sacrifices for all the ill happenings prevailing in society of that time. Mamoni Raisom Goswami thus shows a dark truth where animal killings were mercilessly done by the hands of religious hypocrites.

In her another novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* we see that the writer shows us how the society is divided not only on the basis of money and
power but caste is also an important divisive factor. In the novel Goswami introduces us to the Sattra, a particular caste of vaishnavite followers, and shows how these people considered themselves superior to all other races and looked down upon the rest. In her novel we see how women of the sattra family were horrified even when shadow of some lower caste people touched them. They were not ready to touch anybody of other caste even if that person was lying on the death bed and needed their help.

Identity crisis is also a major theme projected by these writers. We see how Siddhartha Deb and MitraPhukan reveal this issue effectively through their novels. We see that the problem of identity crisis occur due to the flaws present in society and later it becomes a cause for various other social disturbances which take place. Siddhartha Deb in his novel _The Point of Return_ shows that people who migrated from Bangladesh to North East Region developed the sense of isolation and being homeless. Babu a migrant in this novel was termed as a foreigner and was troubled by the fact that he had no place to call his home. He neither was a part of India, nor Bangladesh nor even Pakistan. He and others like him were discarded because they didn’t share the same language as they did and looked different from them. This feeling made him suffer immensely. Writer clearly brings out this fact recording and exposing each and every trouble which Babu undergoes. We see that this leads them to develop destructive faculties due to such harassment and isolation.

Corruption in Political system is another important issue unveiled by these writers. We see in Siddhartha Deb’s _The Point of Return_ the political
system which was polluted and coloured in violence, cheating and greed. The author reveals how the whole system from head to toe was under the influence of corruption. People like Dr. Dam too suffered here and were suppressed if they wanted to work honestly. In his other novel *An outline of the Republic or Surface*, we see that here the focus is on the central government who exploited these people in North East Regions and made full use of their resources while leaving them empty handed. We see that because of the apathy of these government officials, people here suffered and were also forced to become a part of corruption.

We can see autobiographical note in the works of the three writers. MamoniRaisomGoswami in her both novels share the facts which she experienced in her life. Her novels bring out the issues which she experienced in her life and troubled her since her childhood days. Discrimination on the basis of caste, Suppression of women, Animal sacrifices all this she saw in her life and brings out her protest to these issues through her novels. Similarly Deb too focuses on the issues like ethnic clashes, problem of insurgency which he experienced in his life. His both novels bring out the political and social issues which troubled him and his family throughout his life. He brings out the dark truths related to his culture and society.

If on one hand the study has revealed numerous similitudes between the three writers from North- East, on the other hand there are various points of divergence in the portrayals of reality through their works. The first and foremost difference traced in the works of these writers is their focusing on different time
periods of history to trace the background of the state of devastation of their regions. Indira Goswami while going back to the history to trace the root cause of the growing unrest in the North Eastern states, even sets her novels in the pre-Independence time and shows how people here were deprived of basic necessities under the British regime. They were exploited of everything thus forcing them to adopt wrong means of living. People developed wrong habits like taking drugs and alcohol. From here itself the corruption started expanding its paws in this region.

Siddhartha Deb too in his novels talks about a different historical aspect which became a cause for present day ethnic clashes. He discusses the formation of Bangladesh as a new country out of Pakistan and this he states became a major cause of violence and corruption in the North East Indian states. Due to it mass killings took place in Bangladesh and people migrated to North Eastern States. However, unlike Goswami, he sets his work in the contemporary era and goes on to depict the post effects of migration in large number. He shows that the migrants became a major cause of conflicts as ethnic clashes started taking place ruining the life of various people.

MitraPhukan shows the carving out of smaller states from Assam, which gave rise to more and more small tribal groups. These groups fought among themselves and disputes started disturbing the peace of the society. These people started demanding more power on land and longed for a separate state. These groups are a major cause of violence and corruption in the states like Deb she too takes up the contemporary setting for her works. We see that although
three of them give us strong historical background for the corruption prevailing today, but they introduce us to different factors responsible for the present day condition.

Another difference which comes up in the setting of the novels of the three writers is that although all the novels are set in the North Eastern regions of India, but some writers reveal the conditions and situation of the urban society and some stick to situations in the rural and tribal areas. As we can see Mamoni Raisom Goswami in her novels doesn’t show the city life. Her Novels are set in small towns where various issues like animal sacrifices, caste differences are prevalent. Mitra Phukan, on the other hand shows life on hills and planes. She shows violence and corruption on an isolated hill top. She also sets her novels in small towns and reveals the expectations and mindset of people there. Siddhartha Deb on the other hand takes the readers to both urban and rural areas. He reveals dark truths of both urban as well as a rural place. He through the help of the protagonist shows the distinct situations prevalent in these states. His novel *The Point of Return* is set in an urban area near Shillong, but the writer also shows us the situations prevalent in the small towns also through the protagonist Babu who keeps visiting his home town Silachar.

Another important finding is that each of the three writers presents violence and corruption prevalent in these states, but some leave us disturbed, ending the novel with a pessimistic note, while others show a balanced picture giving us an optimistic view towards the end. Mamoni Raisom Goswami ends her novel with a positive note; she does not leave the readers with a heavy heart
troubled due to the harsh picture of society which she depicts in her novels but displays, us a ray of hope that things will change in the future. She leaves her readers with a ray of hope.

Siddhartha Deb on the other hand ends his novel on a pessimistic note. *Surface* is a novel which projects a hopeless picture, similarly in *The Point of Return* we see that at the end the writer leaves us with a heavy heart and with a sense of longing for the more glorious past. MitraPhukan whereas does not stick to a single pattern she ends her one novel with a pessimistic note and the other with a definite happy end. The atmosphere of her novels keeps shifting from light to dark. Although a single background of trouble and tension prevails in the novel but all over there is not gloomy atmosphere it keeps changing from dark to light.

Every writer belonged to different culture and state and these cultural variations are clearly shown in their novels. MamoniRaisomGoswami belonged to a sattra in Assam and so her novel depicts the culture and life of these sattra families. She witnessed the brutal animal killings in Kamakhya temple during the festival of Deodhwani and this is clearly revealed by the writer in her novels. Siddhrtha Deb belongs to a migrant Bengali family living in the north eastern region of India and so through his novels he show us the life and society of these people. MitraPhukan is a great classical vocalist from Assam and so through her novels we are introduced to the life of a musician, a singer their culture, and their take on the changing circumstances from bad to worse.
They bring out these facts in their own unique styles of writing and present the emotions, situations and these typical conditions very effectively.

Their techniques to present the story also differ. Siddhartha Deb writes his novels using the first person narrative and the protagonist narrates the whole story to the readers. He divides the novels into different sections and takes the readers to past through the technique of flashback. MamoniRaisomGoswami prefers to write using the third person narrative. No character from the novel is seen narrating the story. Her diction involves religious precepts from ancient Hindu religious books. She takes words from Hindi, Sanskrit as well as from Assamese language. MitraPhukan writes in simple language with the first person narrative. The protagonists of her novel present the whole story to the readers. Thus we see that these writers differ in style and made use of various techniques in their novels.

Hence, after going through the works of these selected writers from North Eastern region, we can say that they have effectively brought out the facts related to the society. Although these social facts are distinctly shown by them in their own unique style but they are written with the same background of North Eastern Culture.

We can deduce that the society or people in these states are not leading a very happy or secure life. They are troubled due to the various factors which have totally disturbed their lives like problem of insurgency, easy migration of people from other countries like Bangladesh, China, ethnic clashes etc. They are
suffering more because these states are neglected by both the government authorities as well as social reformers.

Although they have regional political parties from which they expect security and help, but they too wish to expand their paws and gain power and exploit the wealth. These people are troubled and their society is totally distorted due to these issues disturbing their lives and stopping their progress and growth. The three writers bring up these social issues effectively in their novels; they do not give the readers a piece of entertainment, but force them to ponder on this dark picture of life in this region.

These writers who themselves belong to these states, must have experienced and witnessed the same situations which they have effectively revealed in their works. They open a windowpane for us to peep into the harsh truths which are prevalent in the society. These facts which were till now unknown to the rest of the world.

Their works make us aware about the existing truths related to a major part of our country, which seeks attention from people for the improvement in their troubled conditions. Preeti Gill (Columnist) writes,

Each writer from the region is closely rooted within his/her own culture, tradition and history and this is something that provides depth and substance to their writing.\(^5\)

These writers don’t simply lay down the problems in front of the readers; in fact they bring out the dynamic approach towards these problems. These writings from North East India are not simply picture of violence, hatred and bloodshed but also trace the insight into psyche of the troubled mass living here. They reveal the facts how poverty, lack of education, frequent use of alcohol and drugs have disturbed the social life of these people.