The ‘largest democracy in the world’.

Sounds good on paper; not too good

For those who, in a land that professes

To deny the presence of a mainstream,

Still has little rivulets and brooks

Furiously trying to keep pace with the river,

Sidelined, side-tracked, side-stepped,

A minority in a majority world.

(Chhangte 2011: 76)

Postcolonialism is a body of discourse that critiques the ‘Empire’. Its chief concerns are the experiences of exclusion, ‘othering’ and resistance under colonial power centers. It “addresses itself to the historical, political, cultural, and textual ramifications of the colonial encounter between the west and the non-West, dating from the sixteenth century to the present day” (Boehmer 2006: 340). It critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship undercutting the myths of power, the race classifications, and the imagery of subordination in the colonial discourse. Postcolonial literature believes that one’s identity is rooted in one’s own tradition. Hence it explores traditional value system in quest for personal, racial or cultural identity. This exploration as well as the dismantling of the myths of power, subordination, race, or gender classifications add a strong dimension to postcolonial writing and it becomes a powerful tool for resistance as well as identity, assertion and
self-definition. For this self-definition of the colonized people, and to obtain a space and a place for them, postcolonial literature seeks to reconstruct the past even by recreating history.

The legacy of anti-colonial nationalist thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi or Frantz Fanon is very much crucial in molding a spirit of opposition, resistance and self-determination—the very spirit of postcolonialism. But it was the publication of *Orientalism* by Edward Said in 1978 that marked the beginning of postcolonial studies as a critical, academic, or even a political discourse. Said argues in this book that the ‘Orient’ is a construct of the West and has always been considered as the ‘other’. In his words, orientalism is ‘a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient’ (Said 1978:11). There can be marked, in a broader sense, three main historical and cultural genealogies of contemporary postcolonial critical practice:

- The shaping force of anti-colonial and non-Western national liberation struggle by people like Mahatma Gandhi or Frantz Fanon.
- The deconstructive or interrogative impact of French post-structuralist thinking pioneered by people like Derrida, Foucault, or Lacan.
- The influence of form-giving concepts derived from the so-called Third World literatures and the critical frameworks through which they have been read. (Boehmer 2006:343).
Postcolonial ecological writing is a resistance against the colonial gaze on nature and the rampant destruction of the natural world. Under the mask of development and progress, there was the terrible face of the colonial agenda of exploring and exploiting nature and thereby degenerating it. All the colonies, including India, have a long history of this experience.

The term ‘Postcolonial’ is a portmanteau word derived from the combination of the words ‘postcolonial’ and ‘ecological’. It is a theorizing of the ecological and postcolonial concerns to address the issues of ecocide derived from the current contexts of the marginalization of Nature, waste colonialism, environmental racism, discriminatory intellectual property rights, ecocidal globalizing scientific technology and the absence of Nature as a category in the theorizing of postcolonialism (Nayar 1999:71). Pramod K. Nayar defines the role of Postecological theory as the following:

Postecological theory …advocates ecocentric epistemologies and development models geared to local needs and conditions…. Postecological theory and its radical praxis-politics constitutes a definitive “detraditionalisation” involving a shift of authority from “without to within” (i.e., from the centralized, non-local modes of planning to a locally self-empowered one) and “entails the decline of the belief in pre-given or natural order of things” (Heelas1996:12)…. In short, postecological theory seeks a deconstruction of power structures that circumscribe Nature and women by their colonial modes of operation. (ibidem 73-74)
This argument obviates that Deep ecology is a significant constituent of postcolonial thought. As we depend on the Mother Earth for our various needs like (i) survival needs (food, shelter, health), (ii) security needs (protection from danger), (iii) belonging (social needs-love, friendship) (iv) self-esteem (ego needs-recognition, status) and (v) self-actualisation (creativity, fulfillment of potential) (ibidem 77), we must protect our eternal abode and honour her.

The Northeast part of India being a biodiversity hotspot has been famous for its natural glory since time immemorial. This land of the Mother Goddess Kamakhya is a real manifestation of the eternal Nature. But the colonial regime distorted its glory. As such during both the colonial and postcolonial times there have been several forms of resistance to the colonial forces to safeguard the erosion of the biodiversity and such resistance has been reflected in the literatures of the region.

Nature has a significant place in Indian traditional values. It has been worshipped and revered since time immemorial. Basic Indian ethos teaches to be compassionate to nature and to be in complete harmony with it. It propagates the idea that human beings and nature share a bond of mutual understanding, respect and interdependence. It is interesting to note that traditional Hindu beliefs associate various birds and animals to different gods and goddesses, and thus attributing those birds and animals a position of respect and reverence. For example, a white swan is believed to be the companion of Lord Brahma, the Hindu god of Creation; a bull and snakes with Lord Shiva, the god of Destruction; or Garuda, the half-human, half-eagle-like creature with Lord Vishnu, the Protector. Even the physical feature of Garuda is very
significant which is suggestive of traditional Indian belief of the deep and intrinsic relationship between the human world and the world of nature. This is what in modern terminology may be said ‘the greening of the self’. This traditional reverence for the animal world is seen from such further associations of gods and animals such as the owl with goddess Laksmi, the rat with lord Ganesha, the goose with goddess Saraswati, the peacock with lord Kartika, or the lion with goddess Durga. Nature has always been a mystery for the human world. People have been worshiping nature mystifying its presence and entity. The malevolent aspect of nature has been a source of human woe and wonder since the dawn of human civilization. Because of a sense of the presence of an ‘evil’ in nature human beings have been worshiping it in its different manifestations. Indian traditional belief worships lord Indra, the god of the storms and wars, and who is associated with a white elephant. Lord Varuna, the rain-god, and who is also the god of the sky and the ocean, is believed to be accompanied by Mukura, a sea-monster. All this indicate traditional awareness, concern as well as knowledge of the fundamental constituents of environment like air, water and soil. This also reflects reverence for both the biotic and abiotic elements of the natural world suggesting eco-consciousness in traditional values. The cultural ethos of various tribes of Northeast India is also reflective of the spirit of reverence for the world of nature. In the folk narratives of Tripura, Burasa, the god of woods and forest is worshipped (Murasingh 2006: 12), while the Sikkimese myths of Creation believe that the earth was created by Itbu-moo or It-moo, who they believe is the Great Mother Creator (Chophel 2006: 15). Reverence for nature is reflected in people’s worship of the natural objects like the Sun, trees, rocks, rivers, fire or various animals. People worshipped those forces and natural agencies from which they were benefited by getting energy and life force. It was reciprocity, a way of showing gratitude to the
benevolent nature. This is the very concept of Deep Ecology and this has been practised with all sanctity and sincerity in Indian society since time immemorial.

The Indian scriptures written thousands of years ago speak of the preservation of nature, environment and the entire ecosystem. The Indian scriptures, which are said to be the repositories of Indian philosophy, speak of preservation of environment and thus to maintain the ecological balance. The Hindu scriptures, such as the Vedas, the Upanishadas and the Puranas are abundant with hymns glorifying and worshipping the environment. The ecological concern found in these scriptures written thousands of years ago testify the traditional Indian attitude towards environment. Ecological consciousness can be marked in the following hymn from the Yajurveda, one of the four Vedas:

\[
dwou santih, antariksa santih,
\]
\[
prithvi santih, apah santih,
\]
\[
ausadhaya santih, vanaspatayah santih,
\]
\[
viswadeva santih, brahma santih,
\]
\[
sarva santih, santih eva santih,
\]
\[
sa ma santih edhi. (Sarma & Rama 1965: 37.17)
\]
This means:

let there be peace in the sky,

peace in the space,

peace on earth,

peace in the water,

peace in the herbal forest,

peace in the world of vegetation,

peace in every creature in Nature,

peace among all gods,

peace in the whole universe,

and then only I can expect peace in me. (Tr. Debashis Baruah).

The ‘I’ in the last line stands for all human beings. The importance of the ecological chain of being that says that everyone is dependent on everyone else in the entire ecosystem is beautifully depicted in this hymn. This concern for environment and the ecological awareness in these ancient literatures are amazing that reflect the Indian consciousness towards environment conservation. In the Rigveda, the earliest of the four Vedas, there are a number of beautiful hymns dealing with environment and the need to protect it with all its purity. One of the hymns in the Rigveda says:
madhu vata ritayate,

madhu ksaranti sindhavah,

madhvirna santoosadhi,

madhu naktumutosaso,

madhumat parthivam razah,

madhu daurastu na pitah,

madhumanoo vanaspatih,

madhumanastu suryah,

madhirgabo vavantoonaah. (Sarma & Rama 1962: 55)

This means:

sweet do the winds become for the one who abides by the moral law,

sweet do the streams for that one,

sweet do the herbs,

sweet be the night and the dawn,

sweet be the earth and the heaven,

our father, the sylvan god be sweet on us,

sweet be the Sun,

and sweet may our kins become. (Tr. Debashis Baruah).
This is a holistic view of the universe as well as the entire ecosystem that reflects the traditional Indian values, concept and awareness for the environment and the ecology.

Then the British came and there started a new history in India. The colonial gaze of profit and prosperity has started exploiting nature. In the name of progress and development, nature was made to degenerate to the deepest extent. The age-old values regarding nature and its sanctity were shaken of which the colonized people had to be mute spectators. They were the ‘other’ compelled to live in the periphery and whose voice was obviously unheard.

People gradually started sensing the loss of nature as an aftermath of colonialism. They began to suffer due to the ecological imbalance. Population growth, environmental pollution and resource depletion have posed great threats to human civilization. To cope with the changing scenario in the environment, people started undertaking various projects like plantation, resource management, etc. This is what basically Shallow Ecology is all about. It is predominantly a postcolonial concept.

Postcolonial ecological writing in English from India’s Northeast constitutes an important discourse. Many of the writers deal with the issues how nature was destroyed, how traditional values became dilapidated, how ecology of this pristine region was degenerated during the colonial period. Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* can be said to be one of the representative postcolonial ecological writings.
Arunachal Pradesh is one of the twenty-five biodiversity hotspots of the world where there are twenty-six tribes with one hundred and ten sub-clans with rich culture and tradition, various species of flora and fauna, rivers, hills, forests and valleys. “Isolation has so far been the best protection for the pristine ecology of Arunachal. But Mamang, through the nineteen chapters of the book upholds how the myriad shapes of pristine ecology and changes during the colonial period and the tribe’s life reflect both the cosmic and toxic consciousness. The animistic faith of the people here and their co-existence with the forest ecology and natural world depict the matrix of many mysteries” (Das 2011: 163).

Dai’s novel is an account of the ‘virginity’ of the land in the pre-colonial era and also its erosion during the colonial regime. There is a conscious exploration through the tribal myths and legends, rites and rituals in order to restore the traditional values. The revival of tradition only, as the novel consciously tries to project, can help in retaining an identity. It may also help in developing an ethic that inspires and teaches to live ecologically.

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya’s novel also portrays the doubts and conflicts of the local people with regard to the colonial rule. In his novel *Love in the Time of Insurgency*, the conversation between two characters has a hint on the Janus-faced colonialism:

But don’t you see how Christianity and education have widened our outlook, released us from the bondage of a superstitious and parochial existence?” Khating asked impatiently. “Thank god for Reverend Pettigrew and Dr
Brock. They opened schools and churches in the villages and gave us new ideas, and the benefits of modern medicines and machines. The government has set up a modern administration, built roads, ended things like head-hunting. Are these not the very things that we wanted? We want builders, not destroyers and cranks.

“Pettigrew!” Ngazek barked out. “He comes here and makes us all cowards. You call his work, work? Because of your ideas people will no longer remain real Nagas. To be modern means aping your masters. Puny white men. Puny black men. Mental slaves. You see the sahibs laugh at you when you ape them. They don’t consider you their equals. Are you not ashamed of it?” (Bhattacharyya 2005: 36).

Arup Kumar Dutta’s seminal book on the ‘Brahmaputra Ecology’ can also be studied from a postcolonial standpoint. There are many places in the book where postcolonial ecological writing has a strong presence. It is a historical as well an anatomical study of the river Brahmaputra. It studies the politics, economics, tradition and culture centering the river. The impact of colonialism on the river and thus on the entire ecosystem centering it is observed:

The natural vegetation of the basin is as diverse as the terrain, changing from alpine meadows and steppes of the Tibetan ranges to the tropical evergreen, mixed deciduous forests and tropical savanna of tall reeds and grasses of the plains. Within the century, due to increased colonization and consequent man-induced changes such as deforestation as well as denudation of hillsides
for shifting-cultivation, the natural vegetation of the region has suffered a sea-change for the worse. Both in Arunachal and Assam the once dense tropical forests have been woefully depleted due to wanton felling of trees. Though experts differ on the extent of depredation caused by exploitation by man, his contribution towards ecological imbalances leading to climatic aberrations cannot be denied. (Dutta 2005: 82-83).

The thick forests in the entire Northeast region of India are known around the world for their rich biodiversity and wonderful scenic beauty. Over two hundred and forty distinct ethnolinguistic groups are distributed through the mountains, plateaus, upland valleys and river plains, making the whole region one of the cultural as well as biodiversity hotspots on the planet. The unique ecology of the region has shaped a typical mindset in its inhabitants. The people of this region, those represent varied ethnic clans, have been living with an eco-cosciousness since the remote past. Their society, culture, values, economy, and their life-style as a whole, has been based on reverence, mutual understanding and inter-dependence with the world of nature. This relationship of inter-dependence has been pivotal in maintaining the ecology as well as the growth of a sustainable economy. As for in Assam, the then geographically larger valley people were economically self-sufficient till the Burmese marauders in the 19th century. Problems like food-scarcity, hunger, or famine were foreign to them. This self-sufficient economy was possible primarily because of their ecological awareness and their art of living with the world of nature in perfect harmony and inter-dependence. “Fish, fowl, game, fruits, ferns and herbs from Nature, betel-nut and paan from the backyard, lime from snail-shells or limestones — the humblest of farmer or artisan, indeed, did not lack for anything!” (Dutta 2005:166). And then the
British came. They had their colonial gaze on the naturally rich region and that colonial gaze not only disturbed the political, economic and socio-cultural life of the ‘natives’ by turning their world to a topsy-turvy one, but also had serious impact on the ecology of the region. The Britishers “through colonial exploitation impoverished it beyond measure” (ibidem 165). The following lines from a poem by Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, the poet from Meghalaya, depict the change in the overall environment after the arrival of the British:

I never get tired of talking about my
hometown.

In summer the sky is pregnant,

swollen with unborn rain.

Winter arrives, with a tepid sun
touching the frozen hills, the dream-boats on lakes….

Later came the British

with gifts of bullets, blood-money

and religion.

A steady conquest to the sound of
guns began.
Quite suddenly, the British left.  

There was peace, the sweet

smell of wet leaves again.  

(Kharmawphlang 2003: 134).

That colonial legacy continues even today. In recent decades deforestation and watershed deterioration have progressed rapidly due to land clearing by migrants and local people and heavy timber demand from Bangladesh and urban centres of India. A lament for the degraded ecology and also a strong voice of postcolonial resistance can be marked in these lines by Almond D. Syiem:

I can talk endlessly about my land,

my ancestors, the myths, its geography.

I can narrate tales of love and sacrifice,

of warriors who brought home foreign women

from the wars they waged, the white man

who taught us how to be inferior,

and the dark man came with a smile

on his face and a viper in his heart.

Today, they still inflict wounds upon

These tragic hills, while fools continue

To barter their names for cars and houses.  

(Syiem 2003: 174)
These lines also seem to voice the sentiments of the marginalized groups having the neo-colonial experience, which is the matter of concern of this glorious region.

Robert Bruce, one time employee of the East India Company, during his visit to the land in the 1820s, came to know about the tea bushes grown wild in the jungles of Assam, and that those have been traditionally used by the native tribes such as the Singphos and Khamtis as a popular drink. Bruce was introduced to Beesa Gam, a Singpho chief by a nobleman Maniram Dutta Baruah, popularly known as Maniram Dewan. In order to check the Chinese monopoly in tea, the British were in search of a suitable place for tea plantation. Assam, having a ‘virgin’ land for production, and with the mighty Brahmaputra for transportation of the produced material, was recommended by the East India Company as an ideal place for tea plantation. The rapid growth in this trade greatly profited the Company and thus boosted the British economy. But in this growth and development of their economy the contribution of people like Beesa Gam had never been recognized. Even Maniram Dewan, who first brought the existence of the tea-plant to the notice of the British, was later convicted of rebellion against the Empire and hanged! (Dutta 2005:178).

The prospect of huge profits in the tea trade attracted a good number of Europeans to the land and eventually they became the biggest landlords in the region. The divide between the natives and the Britishers was ever increasing due to “the reckless expansion of British entrepreneurs into new lands, which threatened British
political relations with the hill tribes” (Baruah 2005: 94). The Company also imported people from tribal areas of Bengal, Orissa and Bihar as labourers required for the tea-gardens in Assam. They were transported to Assam in country-boats and steamers like cattle, resulting in a great mortality rate. But the irony lies in the report by the then Superintendent of the Jorehaut Tea Company in 1860 where it says that, “there were only two casualities.” (ibidem 181-182). This immediately reminds us of the experiences of the African labourers transported to the United States during the “Infamous Middle Passage”. We encounter the horrible experiences of those people imported as slaves in a number of literary works. Beloved, a novel by Toni Morrison, the Nobel laureate is a telling tale of the pain, agony and anguish of those African labourers. This is the very colonial experience also of the labourers imported to the tea-gardens of Assam. Their experiences are touchingly depicted in the Assamese novel Ezak Manuh Ekhan Aranya (Songs and Shackles in the English version) by Umakanta Sarma and also in Two Leaves and a Bud, the widely-acclaimed novel by Mulk Raj Anand, the doyen of Indian Writing in English.

The purpose of annexing the land to the British Empire was to “turn Assam into an agricultural estate of tea-drinking Britons and to transform local traditional institutions in such manner as to suit the colonial pattern of economy” (Guha 1977: 34). The colonial gaze of greed, exploitation and profit-making was on each and every natural element of the land and they were viewed only as resources:

Oil was struck and India’s first refinery set up at Digboi. Coal was discovered and mined much earlier, as also minerals like silimanite. Plywood factories
were set up all over the valley to exploit the forest wealth of the region, particularly to make tea-chests. (Dutta 2005:183)

This had an adverse effect on the ecology of the region. In the opinion of the ecological historians Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha, “As one mode of resource use comes into contact with another mode organized on very different social and ecological principles, we expect the occurrence of substantial social strife. In fact the clash of two modes has invariably resulted in massive bursts of violent and sometimes genocidal conflict.” (Gadgil and Guha 1993: 53).

The colonial subordination and dominance were based on the binaries like ruler/ruled, exploiter/exploited, master/slave, or self/other. This finds expression in the following passage from Durable Disorder:

Even communication between villages was disrupted as parts of public roads were fenced off and villagers were denied access….Even many weekly bazaars and hats, where the villagers brought their farm products for sale came within the limits of tea gardens. Planters exercised exclusive control over these markets. Indeed the right of way through tea plantations became a major issue during the anti-colonial struggle in the twentieth century. For in many parts of Assam, a villager had to walk many miles around tea gardens. The use of roads that went through the gardens was restricted. For instance, Indians could not go through a tea plantation on a bicycle or on horseback, or with an umbrella open. When the automobile arrived on the scene there were
cases when bullock carts were not allowed on these roads for they might
damage the roads and make them unfit for the automobile. (Baruah 2005: 93)

Search for identity exploring own tradition is one of the notable features of
postcolonial literature. Contemporary writing in English from Northeast India can be
seen as a journey in quest of roots. The multi-ethnic writers often revisit tribal
folklores, myths and legends, rites and rituals and re/discover a contemporary
meaning in them. The ecology of the region is also consciously used in their writing
as a tool for acquiring identity and for self-assertion. In Mamang Dai’s *The Legends
of Pensam* a girl named Arsi, who represents the young, modern generation, is upset
with her native land that has a remote geographical location, and is far off from the
mainstream India, or from ‘modern’ civilization. She cries out in utter agony and
disgust:

> Is this a place to live? ... Why did our forefathers choose this place? Surely
we are outcasts dumped in this bone and knuckle part of the world!  
(Dai 2006:74)

To this the older, self-conscious voice of Mamo Dumi replies in an assertive tone:
This is our world (ibidem 74). This is the voice of assertion and consciousness that
identifies itself with the ecology of the region. It can also be seen as a strong appeal to
the modern, rootless generation who suffers from identity crisis due to their ignorance
of their native tradition and culture.
Postcolonial literature critically scrutinizes ‘othering’ in the name of race, gender, or class. The ‘othering’ of women as a marginalized, secluded class is one of the dominant issues in postcolonial discourse. In the following lines from *The Legends of Pensam* we may mark the parallelism drawn between women and the world and also the underlying ironical note regarding the ‘othering’ of women and their vulnerable position in an essentially male-dominated world:

The women stirred uneasily. It was a big thing to invoke the Sun and the Moon. Words have magic, and powerful words have powerful magic. We knew, in this village, that the men slept peacefully with no blame to touch them. The laws of birth, life and death were fixed and unchangeable. And despite everything women always prayed: ‘Let no harm come to our men.’ (ibidem 77)

In the section entitled “river woman” of the same book, Dai depicts the sad tale of Nenem, an innocent village girl. Her story also suggests the kind of position a woman holds in the patriarchal hierarchy. Even the title of the section “river woman” bears significance. All this can well be studied in ecofeminist terms. This is what seems to make *The Legends of Pensam* a noteworthy postcolonial ecological writing.

It is quite interesting to note that postcolonial nationalism is a political formation, and, according to political theorist Tom Nairn, is ‘janus-faced’ (Boehmer 2006:348). It works within the dialectics of ancient cultural traditions and modern political structures. If nation is an imagined community (Anderson 1983), nationalism or national identity may also be seen as an abstract idea. The concept of postcolonial
nation-state is based on the very colonial set-up of power and authority. Class, gender, or racial hierarchies remain intact. The divide between the centre and the margin remains the same. The irony of the post-independent nation-state is manifested in the struggle for identity and space of the marginalized voices those are echoed in the corridors of power in the centre. This is what the great leader from Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah terms as neo-colonialism. (ibidem 349)

The term ‘Northeast’ itself is a political construct that carries the colonial legacy in it. Although usually clubbed together as a single stereotypical entity, India’s Northeast comprises eight states with huge cultural, linguistic, ethnic or religious diversity. Hence the concept of ‘Northeast’ tries to homogenize an extremely heterogeneous cluster of people. A land mass of approximately 2.55 lakh sq. Kms. the region is linked to the rest of the country by a narrow corridor and sharing only two percent of its boundary with India while the other ninety-eight percent is shared with the international borders of Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh. This geographical or ‘between-ness’ has also a cultural or even psychological implication. “As the crow flies, it is closer to Hanoi than to New Delhi.” (Hazarika 1994: xv)

The geographical land mass often referred to as the Northeast immediately brings to the mind the centre-periphery model of state-formation. Stereotyping, and thus ignoring the essential differences among its constituent states the Northeast has been very often referred to by the rest of India suffixing different adjectives from time to time — a land with rich natural resources, a land of exotic beauty, or a troubled zone. It seems to be a kind of packaging of sort, a strategy of market economy in this
age of globalization that “has become a money-spinner for the more enterprising bureaucrats and NGOs from across the country” (Mukhim 2006: 179). The following advertisement published in the Employment News (21-27 April, 2012) further substantiates the packaging and stereotyping of the region:

Incredible! Northeast

The North-eastern States of India are indeed incredible in terms of their diversity, natural beauty and rich cultural heritage. However, they lag behind in economic development. There is need to channelize the vast resources for the overall growth and development of the region. Employment News is launching a new feature ‘Incredible! Northeast’ from the issue dated 28.04.2012. The major objective is to strengthen human resources specially of youth to make them skilled and employable… (ibidem 1)

Such stereotyping of the region seems to fail to understand the fact that each of the eight states of the region, some of which are even bigger in size than states like Kerala or Goa, has widely different socio-political, or economic problems. “Each state has its own strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. To therefore embark on a policy that does not recognize these strategic needs and interests but treats the region as a composite whole with atypical problems is to belittle diversities and the inherent strengths that lie untapped — in this ‘remote eastern frontier of India’ which is actually the gateway to South-east Asia.” (Mukhim 2006: 179)
In any discourse on the Indian nation-state it is seen that the Northeast has been seen as ‘the other’. It is “commonly referred to as the ‘periphery’ or the margin of the Indian nation-state. This idea is clearly a post-independent concept which emerged from the sudden isolation of the North-eastern region from the rest of the country following Partition…Once this region became a periphery of the centre, a variety of socio-economic as well as historical factors surfaced, eventually leading to the rise of militant ethno-nationalism. It is in this cimplex North-eastern mosaic of different nationalities at different stages of socio-economic and political growth that the Indian nation-state is today facing some of its gravest challenges. It is here the centralized authority of the Indian state is being repeatedly questioned, issues relating to uneven development raised, and the very idea of the ‘mainstream’ being re-defined” (Misra 2006: 265-266). Even the creation of a separate ministry by the government of India in order to give the people of this region a feeling of government’s concern for them is resented by the people as the benefits flowing out of that ministry actually do not reach the people thanks to official red-tapism and rampant corruption in the bureaucracy. The so-called ‘development’ remains confined only in the official reports while the common people struggle hard for the basic amenities required for a decent living. “Subjected to the highly extractive nature of colonial rule for almost a century, this resource-rich state (Assam) is today amongst the most backward in the country in terms of per capita income, industrial growth rate, literacy, health, etc. this, despite the fact that the state produces about 54 per cent of the country’s tea, a substantial portion of its petroleum, and is rich in timber, coal and hydro-power resources. Upto one and a half centuries ago, Assam was quite in the hub of development, which continued till Independence” (ibidem 269). The irony of shouting slogans of achieving progress and development as against the stark reality of
unfulfilment of the basic needs of the common mass is powerfully expressed by Monalisa Changkija, the poetess from Nagaland in one of her poems entitled “Of People Unanswered”:  

You tell me we are advancing rapidly  

into the 21st century  

and never fail to mention  

that you brought  

progress to our tribes.  

But I wonder why you remain silent  

when I say we are hungry.  

(Changkija 2003: 216).  

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, the poet from Meghalaya says in an article that satire is a powerful weapon for the Northeastern poets. He opines:  

Reacting to the rampant corruption, the poets [from Northeast India] resort to the only weapon available to them — satire. There is a lot of it in their poetry as they denounce, with anger and disgust, those who are turning the place into a habitation of headless and bodiless monsters … While they talk of the perils of terrorism, they also talk to the greater peril of lawmen turning terrorists. Whatever may be the case, as the common man gets caught in the crossfire between insurgents and security forces, the poetry becomes more and more a reflection of this reign of terror. (Nongkynrih 2006: 42).
The following few lines from the poem “I Want to be Killed By an Indian Bullet” by Thangjam Ibopishak, the poet from Manipur substantiate the aforesaid observation made by Nongkynrih:

Whatever it may be, if you must shoot me please shoot me with a gun made in India. I don’t want to die from a foreign bullet. You see, I love India very much. (Ibopishak 2009: 133).

The sharp tone of irony is in these lines cannot escape from our attention even for a moment.

Indian government’s strategies for negotiating the struggle of certain ethnic nationalities of Northeast India for political space may raise many eyebrows. The voices of resentment have been suppressed by military forces even by introducing some draconian laws like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958. Irom Sharmila (1972 - ), a poet and a civil rights activist, who is known as the “Iron Lady of Manipur” has been on hunger strike for the last twelve years (from 2 November, 2000) demanding that the Indian government should repeal the said Act. There are other such powerful acts of protest like the incident where a group of Manipuri women parading naked before the Indian Army inviting the soldiers to rape them too protesting the alleged rape of one of their fellow women by jawans of the Indian Army deployed in the region to conduct counter-insurgency operations. Such reports appear occasionally in the national media. “But they do not capture national attention long enough to provoke serious debates and soul-searching. The region seems distant from the hearts and minds of many Indians: its lush green landscape evokes the picture of another part of monsoon Asia, and the local people, in the eyes
of many, look racially different. An undifferentiated picture of nameless ‘insurgencies’ and Indian soldiers engaged in the defence of ‘the nation’ dominate popular impressions of the region. This is hardly the climate for an informed and vigorous national debate on nearly four decades of failed policy” (Baruah 2005: xv). Insurgency and counter-insurgency operations in Northeast India since Independence have been ravaging the entire region. This seems to be very much functional in broadening the divide between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, or the ‘centre’ and the ‘margin’. The following lines from “Sister”, a poem by Saratchand Thiyam, a contemporary Manipuri poet are very much suggestive of the present atmosphere of terror, fear, anxiety, and insecurity of Northeast India:

This rain has not let up

Don’t go out yet, sister….

Your umbrella alone will be useless, sister

You’ll not be able to cover

Your body from the raindrops….

Sister, I won’t allow you to go

Every road is reverberating

With the deafening utterance of boots.
Hide inside the house, sister

Don’t you go at all.

(Thiyam 2003: 103-104).

Sally Morgan says in *My Place* (1987) as referred to by Elleke Boehmer, “The trouble is that colonialism isn’t over yet” (Boehmer 2005: 246). Boehmer in this regard refers to the aboriginal people of Australia or New Zealand who consider themselves still colonized under the white domination. It seems that such a feeling prevails in the minds of the majority of the people of Northeast India also. In an interview with Sanjoy Hazarika and Geeti Sen, Indira Goswami, popularly known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami, the Jnanpeeth Award winner litterateur from Assam, while speaking of the reasons why the people of this part of India feel neglected and ignored by the rest of the country, refers to the bias even in writing history:

In (NCERT) books prescribed for history, I have grown up reading about the Richard the Lion Heart, the Vijaynagar Kingdom, the Kalinga War, the French Revolution, the downfall of the Mughal Empire. All on British history and Indian history — but there is nothing about Assam or the 6oo – year old Ahom rule, the same dynasty ruling a huge state for 6oo years. Even a major uprising like the revolution of common people against the Ahom monarchy where, it is said, one lakh people died in the “Moamoria Revolution” is not mentioned.” (Sen 2006: 295)
There are many other such examples. The contributions of the local heroes from this region in the ‘periphery’ seem to be unheard of by the ‘mainstream’. “The same can be said also about U. Tirot Sing, the Khasi martyr who fought against the British aggressors for the freedom of his native land and died for that cause. But he also fails to find a place in ‘Indian’ history. Apart from apathy in the political level all these have contributed in increasing the gap between the centre and the margin.” (Baruah 2010: 68).

For decades India’s northeast has been experiencing violence in its ugliest form. Bombings, kidnappings, extortions, insurgency and counter-insurgency operations have become a regular part of news from this region. But this does not necessarily mean that the people of this region are in an enemy territory conspiring against the Indian state. They have their own tale to tell and seem to appeal to the ‘centre’ to listen to the voices from the ‘margin’ with patience. There has been raising of voices of resentment as there has been a strong feeling among them that their voices have been suppressed with strong hands:

Since long, I could not sleep, only my eyelids are closed

Out of fear I cannot open my eyes, tell me what should I do!

If I crave something, only the stormy-fire,

If I move out, only the heat of the path!

I will never know

How long you will burn, Northeast horizon!

(Chakraborty 2003: 247).
They are upset with all such proceedings that have been not only ravaging their life, but also degrading the ecology of their beloved land. This lamenting voice of resentment and protest is very often heard in contemporary writing from this region. Few lines from the poem “Forest — 1987” by Chandra Kanta Murasing, the poet from Tripura may be cited here to identify the lamenting voice for the degenerated ecology:

For I miss the cock’s call at dawn,
And the deer’s bark in the dusk.

The hen in the forest now
Roams and clucks from noon to dusk,
The haunting *madhavi* fragrance escapes the rustle of spring,
It is acrid with the smell of gunpowder.

(Murasing 2003: 254).

It is felt from a close reading of contemporary writing from Northeast India that the margin is consciously writing back. It is in search of roots, of identity, and seems to claim with conviction a legitimate space in the national narrative. This attitude of contemporary writing from Northeast India has an echo in a statement (as quoted by Utpal Borpujari in an article) by Easterine Iralu, presently Norway-based
Naga writer and former teacher in the Department of English, Nagaland University. She says:

The North-east has always been under-represented because all literary output from it has been hitherto overshadowed by the political conflicts that plague the region. We have had to make our own mark in the Indian literary world by focusing The North-East Writers Forum and showing the rest of India that there was much more to the North-East than political literature…The entire cultural base of the North-east is different from the rest of India. We may have some shared folk stories with some of the other states of India but otherwise, what the region has to offer is a wholly new literary experience. Its myths and legends are tied to the land, the hills and the rivers. Both the natural world as well as the spiritual world is always alive and real to the North-easterner. What the North-East has to offer in the spiritual apprehension which is unlike anything that the other states have in their cultures. (Borpujari 2011).

Iralu further articulates the postcolonial voice from Northeast India in one of her essays:

We feel the immense pressure to document our oral literature and native wisdom and simultaneously direct the path Naga writing would like to take. But Naga writing is facing the same fate that Aboriginal writing of Australia had faced some years ago. As Ernie Dingo, Aboriginal actor and poet wrote:

Aboriginal achievement
Is like the dark side of the moon
For it is there
But so little is known.
Naga writers face the same experience of apathy and more. We have always lived on the periphery. This is my experience, I have been marginalized simply because I am a Naga, twice-marginalized because I am a woman and thrice-marginalized because I am a tribal, a member of an indigenous community… Our truths are being distorted. Our stories are being stolen. Our voices are being silenced. These prisons are man-made and invisible. But they are as real as visible prisons. (Iralu 2011: 273-274).

It is felt from a minute reading of this body of work that in their search for identity and root, and in claiming a space and a place, these writers use ecology of the region as a powerful tool. “Forest Ballads”, a poem by Niranjan Chakma, the Chakma poet from Tripura is a befitting example of postcolonial ecological writing. Here in this poem Chakma strongly satirizes the strategic suppression of the marginalized voice by different power centres. He draws various objects from the natural world as his metaphors and uses them as tools for attaining identity and a space for himself. A powerful voice of postcolonial resistance as well of assertion is unmistakably heard in this poem:

After each devastating storm

a silence descends on the entire hill.

Distraught birds are puzzled!

Should they return to their shattered nests

or go out in search of food?

One fine morning the birds are afflicted
with an identity crisis.

The name currently used to spot them

had never been heard by them before.

Recently a huge debate about their identity and rights

rocked a scholarly Geneva conference.

References were copiously made to the Vedas.

Stale, century-old theories of the expansionists

were presented with great gusts.

But these participants

had never tried to understand

the ballads of the forests.

(Chakma 2009: 81)

It is seen that these writers are concerned of the degradation of ecology and seem to believe strongly that loss of ecology of the region will eventually lead to the loss of their identity. A strong voice of protest is heard in their work against the prevailing atmosphere of violence created by insurgency and counter-insurgency operations as these have adverse effects also on ecology, besides doing other evils. The works of many of these writers expose, with blatant irony and satire, the darker side of the so-called counter-insurgency operations presently going on in the region. Some of these writers seem to be very much critical even of the local militants, who want to dictate terms at gunpoints. The following lines from the poem “Of A People
Unanswered” by Monalisa Changkija exemplify this attitude, and can be seen as the
*vox populi*:


Don’t waste your time
laying down diktats
and guidelines
on how to conduct my life
on matters personal and political.
You may not know
for you do not know
beyond the AK-47…

(Changkija 2003: 217).

Such expressions are reflective of the desire of the common people for an end to the atmosphere of violence by bringing back the good old days of peace and normalcy. But what will be the nature of the peace that the people of this part of the country want? This seems to be a significant issue. While talking about the nature of that peace, Sanjoy Hazarika opines: “peace with honour, peace with justice, peace with dignity” (Hazarika 2006: 294-95). Peace apparently means absence of war. But war always does not necessarily mean fighting with arms alone. It may also be in the mental or psychological level. A person from Nagaland or Mizoram, or any other state from Northeast India for that matter, while checking into a hotel in Delhi is
asked to show his/her passport at the reception counter because of the physical features s/he shares with the people of China, Japan or Thailand. The experiences of students from Northeast India studying in Delhi or Mumbai are, most of the times humiliating. The girls are often referred to as ‘Chinki’ because of the shape of their eyes and the high cheek bones, and the boys as ‘Chapta’ because of their flat nose. A Naga student resided in Pune once commented that he became “half Naga and half Indian” after coming to Pune, while he was ‘a complete Indian” before (Baruah 2006: 169). Another student from Manipur said about his experiences in Mumbai that he was treated as a foreigner, and when he had told that he was from Manipur, people asked where this place was and whether it was really in India. In order to avoid such embarrassing situations he started telling them that he was from Thailand because “it was more convenient”. (ibidem 169)

Such incidents or attitudes can very well be seen as nasty and ugly wars that leave a permanent scar in the mind or the psyche. But even then, it is felt that these marginalized people of this part of the country are eagerly waiting for brighter days to come:

There’s got to be … a morning … after … the night …

… for a better tomorrow!

(Khiangte 2011: 78)

In a meeting in Mumbai, a minister from Arunachal Pradesh said with all his agony and pain that in a vast country like India a few Indian people may even look
Chinese, Japanese or Thais, and the rest of the people should accept this fact. He invited people from other parts of India to his native land Arunachal Pradesh to see how they would be greeted with “Jai Hind’ by the local people of this northeastern state of India bordering China, Bhutan and Myanmar (Baruah 2006: 175). The minister here seems to have the resonance of the postcolonial voice of resistance as well as of assertion — a voice that strives for a place and a space in the larger discourse.

A similar sentiment may be felt while reading the following few lines. This is an extract from a poem entitled “What does an Indian Look Like” by Cherrie L. Chhangte, the poet from Mizoram:

You look at me, and you see
My eyes, my skin, my language, my faith.
You dissect my past, analyse my present
Predict my future and build my profile.
I am a curiosity, an ‘ethnic’ specimen.
Politics, history, anthropology, your impressive learning,
All unable to answer the fundamental question —
‘What does an Indian look like?’
— An Indian looks like me, an Indian is Me.

(Chhangte 2011: 76)
This can be seen as a strong postcolonial voice that asserts an identity of its own and claims a ‘space’ in the greater discourse of the ‘nation’.

These writers are writing with a consciousness. Their works present before us a myriad, mesmerizing world of nature, and, at the same time, echo a conscious voice of resistance as well as assertion. Contemporary writing in English from India’s Northeast negotiates varied issues simultaneously. It has to fight against the very notion of ‘Northeast’, a stereotypical construct, has to assert an identity, and has to create a ‘space’ and a ‘place’ for itself amidst political and cultural hegemony. It is quite interesting to note that the ecology of the region is one of their strongest weapons for all such negotiations. The writings in English from this region, having serious ecological concerns, can be seen as essentially a postcolonial discourse. It presents a critique of the colonial perspective of, and the colonial attitude towards, the environment. It is seen that contemporary writing in English from India’s Northeast is also a literature of resistance against what can be termed as neo-colonialism. Because of this consciousness of the ecological degradation and sincere efforts of propagating ecological preservation in writing, this body of ecological writing can very well be said canonical.
Works Cited


