Chapter 5: Conclusion

The contemporary poetry of North East India provides insight into a region that is lush, with verdant forests, hills, valleys, rivers, and waterfalls. Myths and folklore tell of “ancestors from the shadowy past, from mountains steeped in mist and romance, from lands far away, of snake gods and princesses, epic battles and great warriors”.¹ The other aspect of its poetry reflects the terror and grief of warfare and tragedies of wasted lives that have taken over the region. This poetry is also pregnant with images of violence, corruption, politics as also of the countryside, rhythms of village life and its rich cultural heritage. Mamang Dai constantly brings out this double-edged aspect of poetry, “we wade through gutted entrails slippery with blood, and we run through the green bamboo crushing earthworms and frogs, living amidst death and resurrection all at the same time”.²

Poets from this region grapple with the changes that have taken place in their land and also with the violence that has been associated with it. As Robin S Ngangom says, “hostile forces have often compelled poetry to burrow deeper into itself, it has retreated into its shell of obscurity and isolation. In such precarious times, writing poetry is always a defiant gesture that poets make against power and money, insensitivity and terror”.³
He talks about his homeland, Manipur, which has become ugly with corruption, drugs and AIDS. People have lost the old values but he hopes for the birth of a meaningful poetry that will transform them. Ibopishak too, speaks about his state Manipur and confesses that he is always caught up in issues like "violence, fear, moral dessication and political turmoil" besieging his land.

Since, North East India has been synonymous with militancy, poets from the region cannot remain silent when they are witness to horrifying incidents. Their poetry has always reflected the chaos that has erupted in the region. They talk of people who live in constant fear, who sometimes are unable to express their feelings freely due to the terrorism that prevails over all of them. Chandrakanta Murasingh speaks of "agonies" of life in "contemporary Tripura", a land where "the ugly thud of boots" of both "extremists and the Indian Army" is fast replacing the cadence of "rivulet and birdsong". He tells us how common people are caught in the crossfire between the two. He feels that "guns" will not bring any solution.

They speak of innocent people being killed in fake encounters and also of others who have had to flee to jungles to escape from the torture of the Indian Army. They sympathise with the young who join rebel groups
but make waste of their lives. They enunciate conflicts and analyse the ideologies of people who want to maintain their identity; critiquing a society in poetry that sees everyone as being "victims" where there can be no "winners".

These poets also talk about the corruption and materialism which are prevalent in the region. Money rules the region and everything is bought and sold, including honour. However, against all odds some of these poets still believe in the survival of humanity. Poetry for some of them "is the voice of humanity" and "each poem is a human moment... Moment of inexpressible joy and sorrow, culminating in a silent but sure regeneration of awareness".

The injustice that prevails in the region finds expression in the use of irony and satire. Politicians are ridiculed for the vices that create instability in the region. People are warned of the social dangers that lie ahead. Their poetry gives one a picture of a troubled-torn region that is "weighed down by acute security-related dilemmas" and which has a "keen political edge, reflecting a zeitgeist of mounting unease and menace - a feature typical of contemporary writing from the Northeast".
Women poets like Temsula Ao, Nini Lungalang and Mona Zote also raise their voice against the violence, conflict and turmoil that has engulfed the region. Their concern for the problems that confront their society may be seen in the agony, the sense of loss and the quest for identity that identifies their poetry. Anupama Basumatary talks of loneliness lurking in the heart of a human being. These are sensitive areas of concern that connect these women poets with one another.

Alongside these themes of violence, corruption and politics, the poets from the region also use myths in their poetry. Rooted in their past, their land and people, they talk of their origin and creation myths, traditions, rituals, festivals and dances. They also talk of their ancestors and compare the past with the cruel present. They identify places that are linked to myths. They draw stories from their legends and use them as themes in their poetry. These deal with tragic love affairs, relationships between human beings and animals and characters tragically touched by fate. They also talk of their gods and goddesses, their kings and chiefs who ruled them in the past.
As has already been discussed in the preceding chapter, there is a sense of rootedness in many of the poems written by the women poets from North East India:

The history of our race

begins with the place of stories

we do not know if the language we speak

belongs to a written past

Mamang Dai goes back to the past to trace the origin of her race as she searches for identity. Temsula Ao uses the past to highlight the present. Both use myths and legends as themes that enable them to situate themselves and their people in their history.

Above all there is an overwhelming presence of nature in their poems. A poet like Anupama Basumatary “gives us a feel of alien realities,” her sensitivity to nature being “moulded by a childhood spent in rural Assam among her Bodo brethen”. These poets talk about a village life, sunset, a farmer or a cowherd. In his book, ‘Strangers of the Mist’, Sanjoy Hazarika poses such questions: “which other area has such beauty among its people and its environment?…which other area can match it in the sheer raw power of nature: whether it is the Brahmaputra that resembles
a great sea during its rain-swollen, flood-hungry days; or the force of its
gales and the grace of its waterfalls, the lushness of its forests and bamboo
thickets. And the solitude of its spirit found in the midst of the
mountains”¹³. The unfailing images of beauty tell of their green hills and
valleys, waterfalls and rivers. But the poets express sadness and
disappointment to see the destruction of nature and the land turning barren,
even as rivers are being polluted. They vent their anger at those who are the
cause of destruction.

The erosion of tradition and culture is a worrying aspect of the poets’
insight into everyday life. The alien culture that has infected the region
causes them to look back at their past with nostalgia. The “outsiders” who
have suppressed them and outnumbered them are the object of scorn and
disillusionment in much of their poetry. Nongkynrih speaks about the
urbanization of a town that now emits strange urban sounds. The degraded
social conditions of the present juxtapose with the mythical perfection of
the past. These form a significant dimension of poetry that moves
backwards and forwards in time, in order to establish a pattern of thought
and understanding. The presence of nature does not outweigh the images of
violence that erupts in their poetry. Rather these poets reveal an innate
ability to understand the true nature of things, thereby taking an unambiguous stand against violence and yet refusing to idealise the past.

According to Nilmani Phookan, all “art aims at developing the full sensibility of man. It is poetry’s function also to humanise. The creative power in man, his capacity to realize truth in experience, the subtle sense of right and wrong, the expansion of the human consciousness, to freshen the impulses, to make imagination create as well as see into the nature of things - all this can be achieved through poetry”.

Poetry from North East India thus reflects two opposite worlds - the world of myth and nature on one hand and the world of violence and bloodshed on the other. These poets have skillfully manoeuvred their poetry through these paradoxical worlds. While caught up in issues like insurgency, corruption, political turmoil and conflict that have taken over everyday life, their poetry also reveals the beauty of natural landscapes and the enduring quality of their myths and legends. The coexistence of these paradoxical worlds in their poetry is a strong motif that identifies them as being poets of this region, consciously writing about the rifts that divide and
control them. Though they are rooted to their land, yet their poetry has a universality that communicates itself to all readers.
End Notes


6 Temsula Ao, These Hills Called Home Stories from a War Zone (New Delhi: Zubaan Penguin Pubs.) x.


^Hazarika, *Stangers of the Mist* xx.
