Chapter 4: Confronting the Paradox

The poetry of North East India consists of the paradoxical realities of violence and myth, past and present, love and bloodshed, cultural and political dilemmas. Even as they talk about contemporary evils, they must go back to their myths and legends as their poetry reveals the “complex terrain of everyday negotiation where nature and politics, the physical and the cultural, are inextricably engaged”.¹ They take their poetry into areas that are distinctively associated with the kind of experiences that are unique to them. On one hand it brings the gunshots and the bloodstained faces of the region “within earshot distance”, while on the other hand, “it takes us right into the hearts of the people, their dreams and desires, myths and memories and long struggles through history”.²

Their journeys into the past bring out the realities of the cruel present that they have to live in:

Childhood took place
among fairies and weretigers
when hills were yours to tumble
before they housed soldiers
and dreaded chambers of torture.³
Some poets prefer to believe that the past is far better than their present, “Our past, we make believe, is pristine/ Even as we reaped heads and took slaves.” They return to their childhood years with nostalgia:

How we hunted small-game in the rice fields,
and covered every land of Imphal on bicycles,
making passes at almost every girl!

Ngangom recollects his childhood when he roamed about freely in his homeland without fear. Reality for him has, however, changed completely:

I hear a wicked war is now waged
on our soil, and gory bodies
dragged unceremoniously
through our rice fields...

Similarly too, Nongkynrih speaks about the “strange sounds” that crowd his town disturbing his sleep as he wakes up often startled “by raucous azaans, jangling bells, / wild ululations, weird conch-shells” which seem to drown out:

birds warbling, cicadas whining, crows cawing,

chicken yapping about the yard...
He misses his childhood and his past comes flashing back in remembered 
songs and ghostly ancestors getting ready to go to fields:

Out of that restlessness the past rises from dimly

remembered songs and I watch my ghostly ancestors

...  

Though they are steeped in the lore of the land they are also aware 
that their land is plagued by insurgency. This is brought out by Nongkynrih 

in his poem ‘Waking Sounds’:

How chaste were the hills! How strangely,

Divining lovely that morning when guns

were dispensing panic and lusting bullets

bent on seeking blood. 

He is woken up at dawn by the deafening “bursts of gunfire”. Nature 
remains a mute spectator to the violence and wanton bloodletting in the 
region.

Ngangom confesses that his poetry “springs from the cruel 
contradictions” of a land which boasts of its talents in the theater, cinema, 
dance and sports but at the same time, entrusts corruption, AIDS, terrorism 
and drugs to children. Thus:
I abandoned my forward-looking native people

who entrusted terror, drugs and

a civilized plague to children.9

The poet left his native land when he was fifteen. He is locked in a dilemma peculiar to many people of the region, whether to rejoice and forget what he considers to be a decaying land or be nostalgic about it.

Thangjam Ibopishak speaks of his homeland as the land of the half-humans: "...the nameless citizens the nameless representatives govern the land/of the half-humans. Because whether to give human names to the/ head or to the body - no one can decide ..."10 The image of "half-human", conveys a picture of the degradation that has crept into a society that is now described as the land of “perpetual internal strife”11 hitting the headlines almost everyday. This image evokes a candid picture of the degradation of the land and its people. According to the poet, people have stopped acting like humans, they live decadent lives that bring no profit to anyone.

In another poem, he mentions the militants in the guise of fire, water, air, earth and sky that come to kill him:

...They can create men; also destroy men at
whim. They do whatever they fancy. The very avatar of might. They come looking for him in his house but the poet chooses to escape death as he is fastidious about it. He wants only to be killed by an Indian bullet as, “the patriotic authenticity of the bullet is more important than the death it will bring.” In a state like Manipur, terrorists wreak havoc according to their will.

Chandrakanta Murasing talks about a land infested with terrorists:

I know, the airsprouts fire now in your city,

The fire burns in ecstasy.

Vehicles do not move without armed escorts.

No food is cooked without adding tears.

He talks about the intensity of terrorism in the region and how it has affected the day to day life of people. The land is now flooded with misery. Further, words like “Attention! Fire!” used frequently by terrorists and the army alike have forced their way into his own tongue, needing however, no translation. But, he believes in the sanctity of his land, “Yet they cannot touch my Garanti’s vision,” and according to him, no one can touch its body.
In another poem, the poet makes an ironic comment at those people who violently protest against the government without any response from it, "...the words are so cheap and so much in supply, / That no Government pays any heed to them." But word is his prime weapon and he asserts his right over "the one word", "marking an active stance of resistance against forces that crush, erase and rewrite histories":

I can say it to the gun.

I can go into its barrel, and then, pour out

Humming in a folk-tune,

I shall want to say that one word only.

He wants those people who have taken up guns to listen to the hearts of the people instead of making them suffer.

Mona Zote reflects upon her degraded society through the voice of a woman named "Ernestina" in her poem 'What Poetry Means to Ernestina In Peril':

I like a land where babies

are ripped out of their graves, where the church

leads to practical results like illegitimate children and bad

marriages
quite out of proportion to the current population, and your neighbour

is kidnapped by demons and the young wither without complaint and pious women know the sexual ecstasy of dance and peace is kept

by short men with a Bible and five big knuckles on their righteous hands.

Religion has made drunks of us all. The old goat bleats.

we are killing ourselves. I like an incestuous land...  

This is the reality that one has to confront in a society. In another poem, 'Gunrunning', she says that she will “leave words too” and be “a gunrunner”18, thus, bringing out the weariness that she feels at having to put up with violence and blood all the time.

Nini Lungalang also speaks of the social tensions that seem to hold the people ransom. Thus:

My neighbours quarrel

over a strip of land

that runs between

their ancestral plots;20
She reflects upon the fact that fighting even for a small piece of land seems to be a natural phenomenon. She gives voice to these social and political tensions and comments upon the materialism that has overtaken society in general.

In an age of conflict and violence, a poet like Phookan takes refuge in the legend of the protective Da-Parvatiya:

*Ageless*

*Those two women*

*At the gate of Da-Parvatiya*

*In a gesture of welcome*  

Da-Parvatiya is a tiny hamlet near Tezpur on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. It has the remains of a temple in the Gupta style which has a relatively undamaged door-frame with two river goddesses on either side. These goddesses seem to welcome everyone and are like a refuge for the poet. He chooses to believe in them rather than in bullets that have done enough damage to his land.

When things go out of control in his homeland, Nongkynrih questions the existence of the God who “presides over lives”. People seem to lose faith in God when “...shots and howls take up the morning sounds /
blood and the cortege, the morning scenes". In this kind of situation, "faith" wavers and is as undependable as it is described in the following lines: It

... comes and goes,

comes with the festivals,

goes with the terrorists\textsuperscript{22}

Ironically it is only when festivals come again that people’s faith in God seem to be revived.

Assam is portrayed to be burning with violence and hatred. In his poem ‘Nobody is Here”, Phookan reflects upon the violence through images of “wrenching and wrestling of dogs and foxes” and “bones and abdominal organs”:

\begin{quote}
In the flames of violence revenge hatred
Burns the ominous night
In the wrenching and wrestling of dogs and foxes
The bones and abdominal organs of the country\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

He asks people to open their eyes and take stock of a land which is in flames.

However, even as their land is swollen with violence and corruption, they take refuge in a past consisting of their myths, legends,
traditions and rituals. In ‘A Day In Cherrapunjee’ Part I-V, Nongkynrih talks about the beauty of his native land and the myths associated with it. In ‘A Day In Cherrapunjee: II’, he tells about the Dainthlen Falls, where according to the Khasi myth, the thlen or serpentine master was killed and cut into pieces, “how the evil Thlen was killed / in the very spot”.24 In ‘A Day In Cherrapunjee-III’, he talks about the Noh Ka Likai Falls which is named after Likai, a woman who jumped to her death in that spot after unknowingly eating her daughter: “And that was how / this waterfall got its name”.25 In the next poem, he talks about the myth of Mausmai falls: “And these are the Mausmai falls, / whose name Sngi Thiang gave / with her death”.26 Sngi Thiang, was forcibly separated from her lover and married off to a man she did not love. Later, she committed suicide at this spot. Khoh Ramhah is another myth that tells of a giant who terrorized people and was later killed by them, “They killed him, / feeding his gargantian mouth / with jasnam mixed with glass, / ground to powder”.27

Repeatedly, one finds that these poets resurrect their myths and legends, gods and goddesses in their poetry:

Yes, I believe in gods.

In the forest of good and evil,
spirits of the river,
and the dream world of the dawn.

as a sacred guiding force in their lives.

In 'The Voice of the Mountain', Mamang Dai speaks about the people of her region who still follow tradition even in a fast changing world:

The other day a young man arrived from the village.

Because he could not speak

he brought a gift of fish

from the land of rivers.

It seems such acts are repeated:

We live in territories forever ancient and new,

and as we speak in changing languages

...29

A Gift as a way of showing gratitude is a part of a tradition that her people diligently try to preserve even in a fast growing world. It goes back to a past that, for the poet, must be remembered in order to be revered and hence kept alive in one's memory.
Poets like Ibopishak want to fly away from an artificial world to the world of Nature:

I also want
To swim the expanse of colour
To frolic in abandon,
To race with the wind’s fitful gusts
Imitating the birds of your woods.\(^{30}\)

For a while, they wish to forget their worldly responsibilities and seek solace in Nature. They express grief at the destruction of nature:

The barren hills
that bear the pockmarks
of mining and foolish people
that burn and cut at will,
look as unremarkable
as half-naked little brats.\(^{31}\)

Anger is a significant emotion found in their poetry used as a tool to speak out to people. They talk about rivers which have been polluted by people:

The bomb
And the bleaching powder
Have left her with no tomorrow.\textsuperscript{32}

People have brought immeasurable damage to nature leaving their own future at stake. They have become greedy and savage. This is the reason why Nongkynrih feels the need to save his land:

\begin{quote}
Maybe, after all, someone has to save your streams and pine groves. Despite the cold wind, there are times when I feel determined to liberate your hills.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

He wishes to liberate his land from the clutches of people who destroy it. Inspite of it all, however, nature is able to redeem itself. These poets still believe in "...nature's staunch imperishable / organic image of unity"\textsuperscript{34} and still get tranquility, peace and contentment from it. They feel that the "unspeakable beauty"\textsuperscript{35} of their land is still felt everywhere. Temsula Ao also lashes out against the indifference of her people:

\begin{quote}
I can see a bald giant

Looming in my horizon

Sitting glum and shorn

And I do not know

Whether to cry or laugh
\end{quote}
At this sorry sight, showing how man’s apathy towards nature has turned it into a desert. In ‘December Rain’, she tells us how rural folks unlike the urban people unquestioningly accept nature:

Farmers say
Heaven sends this rain
So the straws in fields
Will rot to increase
The next year’s yields.

They believe in the fact that everything happens for some good reason even though it may seem unnatural.

To quote Jayanta Mahapatra, “the miseries of contemporary dilemmas are apparent” in the poetry of North East India. This is specially reflected in its persistent search for identity. Some have had to leave their lands because of the ethnic cleansing that has taken place in some parts of the region. This has become an all consuming passion for poets like Ngangom. A deep sense of loss is thus felt:

But I need a homeland
where I can recognize myself
just a map or even a tree or a stone,
to mark a spot I could return to
like a pissing animal
even when there's nothing to return for.\textsuperscript{39}

Having been torn away from his native land that has involved a deep rift in
his personal life, there is a sense of exile in his poetry. In 'The First Rain',
he describes the pain of being uprooted from his homeland:

\begin{quote}
I'm the pain of slashed roots
and the last rain is already here.
I'll leave the cracked fields of my land
and its weeping pastures of daybreak.
Let wolves tear our beloved hills.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

His fear and anguish is apparent in his poetry. In yet another poem, he asks
people to protect their identity and not to abandon their roots. Thus:

\begin{quote}
Do not say you have refused
the gift of your soul,
abandoned the sad refrain
of the \textit{duitara} waiting
to be mended.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}
He has a deep desire to put down roots and to come to grips with his own identity. As he does so, he assimilates the cultures of both his native land and his adopted land making thereby a multicultural commitment for himself. He is often called an “outsider turned insider”.

The desire to preserve one's identity is also reflected in Mamang Dai’s poetry that ‘remembers’:

...the river’s voice:

Where else could we be born,
where else could we belong
if not of memory

divining life and form out of silence

In going back to the natural world and its myths, there is an inevitable sense of loss. They can understand their present only by going back to the past. In an attempt to do so, Nongkynrih describes what the identity of a Khasi tribe entails:

A Khasi is a man, who once a year,
sport a muga-mulberry turban,
an eri shawl and is seen en grande tenue

at Weiking or Pomblang.
He sees the Khasi man embodied thus and giving importance to his festivals like Weiking and Pomblang and also to the teachings of his great ancestors.

A deep sense of loss pervades in their poetry. They write about loneliness lurking in the hearts of human beings:

In the hope of achieving something
Every man is only losing himself.\(^4^4\)

Anupama Basumatary speaks about a selfish ambition that results in great loneliness. In ‘Sculptor’, she talks about the silences of women:

Wearing a stone-dress
and jewellery of stone
I could not speak
with my lips of stone.\(^4^5\)

Women’s muteness in suffering has been described and likened to the woman sculpted in stone. The sense of loss and quest for identity maybe observed in Nini Lungalang, thus:

‘Let not this moment pass too soon!’

The pain of loss clutches the instant,

\(...^\text{46}\)
Who feels an acute sense of loss as time passes by. She cries out like a child again.

Most of the poets from North East India feel threatened that "outsiders" may swamp their identity, tradition and culture. This fear surfaces in their poetry. They blame them for distorting their culture:

They dislodged me from my moorings
They tore me from her side
They chipped and chiseled
They gave me altered dimensions.47

Using the chipped monolith as an image, Temsula Ao tells us how the ways of the hill people have been changed by outsiders who come from far off places to influence them. She feels that her people have not been allowed to grow and have been made to deny their real selves.

They talk about the influence of the West and how their boys now "...sit on terraces / with their dolorous guitars...." Before the white people came, all of them worshipped the same gods and goddesses. But with their coming they brought in the kind of conflict that is familiar even today: "...religion to divide us, before politician-priests/ who laboured for their own redemption, / mouthing the name of god among benighted heathens".
That was the time of weretiger, before
temples and churches, time of the free thinking
dormitory, when boys trained in the school of
the warrior, time of the daring headhunter,
when legends could not wait to be born, and
places were named. And time before this
English tongue we speak now.⁴⁸

They lament upon the decimation of their culture and blame their own
people for that:

But what is this wound we opened ourselves
and drew blood where no blood was?
who brought this unrest of dialects,
this alien concert of songs and dances amongst us
who honoured the same vegetation gods
and poured mutual libations of rice-wine?⁴⁹

There is the desire to once more sit back in a smoke-laden long
houses, sling the birds of technological time and not be ashamed of their
tribal ways. Similarly, there is the lament of the influence of Western
culture on people:
Like them we shed our ways
and having shed them we find
no spring to bring the flowers back.\(^5\)

People in the poet's native land follow an alien culture, "like flowers, only strangers /and strange ways have come / to bloom in this land".

Using *gudak* (their delicacy) as a metaphor for their culture, Chandrakanta Murasing portrays the exploitation of tribal culture by "outsiders". Thus:

O, look the gudak is getting overdone!

It's scorched!

The burnt smell spirals around

With wisps of smoke in the idle wind.\(^5\)

He feels that the outsiders are eating the very existence of the tribal people in their own land. The name 'gudak' has spread in a negative way. In another poem, he tells us how his people have lost their lands because of their short-sightedness:

You don't have an inch of land left,

All is lost bit by bit

In a distress sale to pay
For the cure of this man’s myopic vision.\textsuperscript{52}

Here he refers to Bengali dominated Tripura and of the fact that tribal people being simple, are not aware of their exploitation and have lost everything. Ibopishak too speaks about the invasion of the land by “outsiders” who have taken away all their fields and lakes:

The fields our ancestors bequeathed us
no longer belong to us;
The village lakes which fed us,
the fish-tanks, the canals,
the village woods we nurtured
are no longer the villager’s;\textsuperscript{53}

They have seized everything from them and the simple villagers have nothing except the wind, the sunlight and the blue sky.

Corruption and materialism have also taken hold of society in the region. Talking about materialism, Ngangom says that “poetry can never be an ally of this numbing materialism or a party to mindless violence. Materialism, wherever it abounds, begets a particular kind of terrifying alienation, for the simple reason that we forfeit our ability to love when we place commodities above our fellow men. And someone who cannot love is
always alone.” Lungalang seems to share the same view as Ngangom. She talks about how a man has become “...a stranger among his own. And his home, a space between walls”. Thus, showing one how materialism has created alienation. The stature of a man in this materialistic world according to her is “a terse of equation of his bank books”.

People have become blind to human values being lost in the “tightening noose of riches.” They seek only pleasures and have become insensitive to the feelings of others.

In his poem ‘Selling Bhagavan’, Ibopishak makes an ironic comment on materialism by saying that his wife only “wants money, gold too” which he cannot afford.

Through the use of irony and satire, these poets ridicule the people for their corruption and materialism:

You say with all my acquired learning
a mechanic, a clerk, class III officer
earn much more than me... 

Education becomes meaningless in a corrupted region where government officials like a mechanic, a clerk and class II officers earn much more than those people who are more educated and placed in higher ranks.
Politicians are a source of constant irony and satire. They are busy with nothing else except “laying a stone here / cutting a ribbon there” and showering praises on the dead elsewhere. As Murasing says in his poem ‘Panic’, these politicians dread the “fire” emitted by the people. They panic when people protest against them out of hunger and frustration. They “…give an inch and take a foot / and their promises are the latest jokes.”

However even in a land filled with violence, bloodshed, hatred, revenge and corruption, nature’s presence is felt even in the face of sure destruction:

The haunting madhavi fragrance escapes the rustle of spring,
It is acrid with the smell of gunpowder.

Poets like Phookan persistently long for renewal and search for a better world, “I have seen several times / the sighing hand of his / among countless hands.” Even though destructive forces seem to have been let loose in the world, he still has immense faith in humanity. He urges people not to look at life in a negative way but to be positive:

No do not tell me
we shall never arrive
No water in the river
No fire in the water.\(^{64}\)

In his poem 'Dancing Earth', the earth dances in “desperate torment”, “indignation” but ultimately in ecstasy. The poet believes in the survival of humanity against all odds. Even though he knows that his voice is nothing more significant “ than the chirping of crickets” but he still asks people to celebrate life for what it is:

Stones being hard water being cold
Fire burning
Peacocks spreading their florid feathers.\(^{65}\)

Confronting the paradox has always been a challenge for the poets of this region. They articulate the contradictions and speak about them in order to be able to make sense of the senselessness around them where “tradition rubs shoulders with modernity, folk rhythms jostle uneasily with the western pop, virgin forests stand a mute testimony to the debauchery of urban life, and recalcitrant nativism co-exists with the ‘otherness’ of the outsiders”.\(^{66}\) They succeed to the extent that they are able to recognise and accept the realities of a conflicting world.
End Notes


26Nongkynrih, “A Day In Cherrapunjee: IV (Sngi Thiang),” *Moments* 32-34.


41 Ngangom, “Your Name Protects,” *The Desire of Roots* 50.


47 Ao, “Prayer for a Monolith,” *Songs from Here and There* 3-5.

Ngangom, “From The Land Of The Seven Huts,” *Words and the Silence* 19.


65 Phookan, “what were we talking about,” trans. Krishna Dulal Barua, Selected Poems of Nilmani Phookan 93-95.