

The Native and the Nation: Reconceptualizing History, Myth, and Orality from North-East India

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Abstract

The magnitude of the cultural diversity of North-East¹ India almost defies our imagination. Social formations in this region are marked by pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial transitions. Ethnic identity remains ridden with a split at its core. Colonial ethnographers had explored the inaccessible terrains of North-East India and colonial ethnographic writings had acquired ‘official’ and authentic status. In the postcolonial national narrative, the location of North-East frontiers may be defined by the statement of Jawaharlal Nehru: “The tribal areas are defined as being those lying along the frontiers of India which are neither part of India nor of Burma nor of any Indian states, nor of any foreign power. The areas are subsidized and the Governor-Generals relations with inhabitants are regulated by the ‘sanad’² custom or usage. In the matter of internal administration, the areas are largely left to themselves” (Pakem 138). Thus, colonial and post-colonial ‘nation-states’ have simply bypassed these stateless societies from the process of cultural and political recognition, although they have been made a part of the constitutional and institutional framework. But one does not require an Edward Said to tell one how the West produces its ‘other’ in the oriental ‘natives’, for one also does not require a Michel Foucault to grasp that “the historicity of such discourses lies in the use of reason to discover a deep truth about ourselves and our culture, which has to hide its history in order to function as a goal for us” (Biswas and Suklabaidya 77). Keeping in mind the aforesaid discourse, this paper is an attempt to explore its immense stories, its magical story-world. They tell us history, history unwritten, history does not describe in words, but in music and harmony. It further tries to widen the socio-political and philosophical imaginations of the ‘nation from below’³ (Biswas and Suklabaidya 231). Also, it’s time for the entire nation to look at North East as it really is, leaving apart the stereotypes.

Keywords: North-East India, Ethnicity, History, Myth, Orality.

“The Northeast is writing and is being written about”

- Mamang Dai, 2015⁴

I

India's North-East, an antique land of forty-five million people has seen an exemplary mixture and combination of divergent races, cultures, ethnicities, languages, religions, and practices since time immemorial, which has never been observed in any part of the globe. It's the Mongoloid fringe⁵ of India where the country begins to have more resemblance with Chinese, Burmese, Bhutanese, and Nepalese and have marked physical distinction with the pan Indian population. This racial difference gave North-East its unique status. It's a land of diversity and rightly been called miniature of South Asia. Out of 650 tribal communities in India, more than 220 tribal groups are dwelling here. Out of 1600 Indian languages, more than 450 languages and dialects are spoken here, belonging to four language families i.e. - Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic,⁶ and Dravidian. Only the Tibeto- Burman⁷ language family has over 175 languages spoken across these eight states. It's a region, rooted more in the geographical landscape than in the shared bonds of culture, history, and tradition. It's a British imperial construct subsequently accepted by the post-colonial Indian state-nation.

'Nation' is a psycho-culturally loaded term. "The nation's 'coming into being' as a system of cultural signification, as the representation of social life rather than the discipline of social polity" (Bhabha 1). Primarily it indicates a stable community of people, bound together by a sense of brotherhood i.e. nationness. The state is a legalo-political term which denotes a sovereign authority over a particular territory. 'Nation-State' entails a socio-political entity which has both the sense of community among the people and also a sovereign governmental institute which exercises its power with the consent of its subjects. However, in practice the relationship between Nation and State is far more complex, State often tends to eclipse 'Nation' by exerting its power beyond its supposed limit and thus giving birth to a new terminology i.e. 'State-Nation.'

This region has been notified as to the problem child of India right from the time of independence. It has also been considered as South Asia's most enduring theatre of separatist guerrilla war and an area of a disturbance where arms activities are always first, rather than the last. This region is still a 'terra incognita' (Dai 106) and remains a riddle to Indian state- nation, seventy years after the British departure from South East Asia. It's one of the last areas of the subcontinent to be conquered by the British and was never part of any trans-Indian empire in ancient and medieval times.

In post-independence India, the quest for an ethnic homeland and insurgent radicalism has been ever willing to create new states and autonomous territorial units to fulfill the ambitions of battling ethnic identities and it has become a famous political weapon in this region. The same game has been repeated in each and every North-Eastern state's right from the time of Independence. Government of India has tried a lot to nationalize the political scenario in North-East India, but the struggling ethnicities and insurgent groups of this region continued to challenge the nation-building process.

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The separatist groups often come in confrontation among themselves by drawing daggers over physical resources and conflicting visions of the homeland. In such a situation, the crisis also provided interest and opportunities to different pressure groups leading to 'lawlessness is a law'. As per the statistics of South Asian Terrorism Portal,⁸ one hundred and ten rebel groups are visible here and interestingly none of them are officially banned except a few troublemakers. But to the entire generation of decolonized Indians, the smaller problems of North-East India are not worthy at all and seriously overlooked until someone kidnapped by the rebels while working or somebody got shot while leading a military patrol.

The border conflict with China, however, changed the scenario. In an administrative move, the whole terrain of North-East has been split into several new states, mostly carved out of Assam. The anti-foreigner agitation in Assam forced the entire region to a crisis of identity. Illegal migration from overpopulated neighbouring countries, especially Bangladesh appeared as a threat to national security. The North-East could be abandoned at the time of crisis, like in 1962 when Nehru left Assam to 'its fate' (Guha 7). Since then, North-East has never again been the same and just it became more complex.

The average North-East people are less concerned about the nationalist agenda and failed to assimilate the separation of colonial from the national. Mainstream Indian discourse does not matter in a clan of Manipur or Nagaland or in Mizoram. What the men and women observed, year after year, is the Indian armed forces and brutalities. Criminalization ran rampant here. Absence of a common language or 'lingua franca' and the ceaseless narrative of tribal warfare became a hindrance to an emerging national identity. Sense of marginalization is an issue too. In the last few years, many myths and misconceptions are about to eliminate, and the mainland is coming closer to its 'troubled periphery'. (Bhaumik 1)

II

There is obviously a lack of materials and resources to construct the history of the entire North-East but some obscure references in the ancient Pail and Sanskrit texts and Claudius Ptolemaeus' *Geographica* written in 2nd century AD gave us some knowledge about this region. Allowing the error he committed in telescoping, Ptolemy depicts the region accurately enough to its present position, though he described the Naga people as 'the realm of the naked' a culture little different. In medieval times and on later days a lot of texts and scriptures were written about the North-East, particularly in Assamese. First accurate, if sketchy, historical account of the North-Eastern people can be found in the *Buranjis* of the Ahoms who entered this land in 1228 AD and established a vast Ahom kingdom. *Buranjis* are a class of historical chronicles, written initially in the Ahom and afterward in the Assamese language. The first such *Buranji* was written in 1228. Banbatta's *Harsha Charit* and Chinese pilgrim Hi-en-Tsang's account praises the land of ancient Kamrupa ruled by Kumar Bhaskar Varma. He had lived here for about a year in Pragjyotishpur i.e. the present city of Guwahati and leaves an account of the vast territory spreading up to Burma in the east, Bhutan, Tibet, China in the north-east, Korotoya river in the west and some parts of present Bangladesh and West Bengal

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as early as in the 7th century. As per his narrative, the capital city was the centre for learning Sanskrit while the common people spoke a language differed ‘a little from that of mid-India.’ To know more about the essence of all events we need to refer *Kalika Purana*,⁹ *Yogini Tantra*¹⁰ and *Padma Purana* which were composed here. Also, various other myths, like *Vishnu Purana* and *Shiva Purana* chronicled the events.

Systematic and recorded history starts with the British invasion through the First Anglo-Burmese War¹¹ in 1824-26. It was the beginning of the European colonization and conversion to Christianity from Animistic faiths and beliefs, leaving a devastating impact on their ethnic way of life. If Christianity is considered to be a new religion to the inter-ethnic clans from an alien culture, then it’s a proven fact that it gave them a traumatic experience to accommodate with the preaching and gospels of European missionaries. It altered their primitive life completely. We see negative observations of this process narrated very vividly in the writings of Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, and others. From then on, the British ruled till Independence and this one hundred and twenty years of European contact, particularly the British officials who administered this land, led many punitive expeditions into it, surveyed with diligence and settled numerous inter- and intra- village/ tribe disputes, produced several authoritative accounts, reports, and books. It’s to note that some of the British officials were turned into anthropologists, sociologists, scholars, and ethnographers – amongst them much prominent is Verrier Elwin whose name I couldn’t but mention with reference to his valuable works on tribal people on the hills and in the plains.

III

While visiting Sabarmati Ashram, Verrier Elwin was instructed by Mahatma Gandhi with the following words: “we must approach the poor with the mind of the poor” (Elwin 16) - so too we must approach the tribesmen with the mind of a tribesman. They may have little theology, but they have a great deal of religion. Local tradition regards Rukmini, the daughter of King Bishmak, whose capital was at Lohit, was carried away on the eve of her marriage by Lord Krishna himself. Ghatotkach, the brave warrior and the son of Bhima was from this part of Indian sub-continent. He was a Dimasa-Kachari prince and his mother, the Dimasa princess Hirimba had been married to Bhima.

In our study of the cultural history of this land, the great epic Mahabharat narrates that Arjun lived here in exile for some time and married the beautiful Manipuri princess Chitrangada. Perhaps due to troubles and turmoil in the war, Arjun forgot about her and left Chitrangada. In the course of Ashwamedh Yajana¹² their son, Babrubahan stopped the horse in Manipur and claimed to be the son of Arjun. Arjun disbelieved it and consequently a battle of archery followed in which Arjun fell dead. Then being pleased with Chitrangada’s prayer Lord Krishna restored life to his friend Arjun and reunited with Chitrangada and their son Babrubahan, the worthy son after Abhimanyu. The people of Assam, Manipur and neighbouring places still feel proud of Manipur as the land of Babrubahan. It also speaks of the

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Asura dynasty¹³ of Narakasura, Bhagattadatta, and Bajradatta of Pragjyotishpur and *Vishnu Puran* speak of King Bhismak of Kunhila which is now located in Arunachal Pradesh. The propagator of Assamese Vaishnavism Srimanta Sankardev¹⁴ narrated these events in several of his writings, like – *Rukmini Haran Nat* and others.

Assamese folklore has been greatly inspired by Sankardev and his disciples. The original elements of North-Eastern cultures and languages are essentially Mongoloid and Indo-Chinese stock because “the language called ‘Assamese’ in English was once upon a time a language in the land called ‘Kumbulputur’ or ‘Ka Mo Lu Po’ by the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsiang who lived at Pragjyotishpur” (Choudhury 54) and majority of the people of ‘Kumur’ were from non–Arya and Indo-Chinese stock. The spread of Buddhism during the time of Asoka was perhaps largely responsible for the spread of Sanskrit in ‘Prakrit’¹⁵ form. The Buddhist temples at different places of North Eastern states, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh bear adequate proof of this fact. The cultural history of the entire North-East is too complex.

Assamese culture is very much a syncretic culture. There are social differences, but no caste discrimination at all (Elwin (9)). Society is divided into Chiefs or nobles, middle class and slaves or servants. Clans have been divided into endogamous and exogamous. Since time immemorial, the true ruler of the hill people here is nature, it has shaped their physique and governs all aspects of life. The presence of Tibet, Bhutan, and Burma is a powerful phenomenon which is largely visible in their art, architecture, ornaments, iconography in their rites and rituals. They carried forward their Indo-Chinese cultural tradition in the process of migration and temporary settlement in the Neolithic and subsequent ages. From here starts cultural assimilation. They have a true sense of honour and dignity. In the words of Verrier Elwin:

The heritage of war has given the tribesmen spears, swords, the ubiquitous and invaluable dao, the cross-bow and the ordinary bow, and has made them good marksmen and expert hunters. It has made them adventurous and disciplined them. All this has meant that NEFA has always been a country for the tribal people for, apart from officials, the number of non-tribesmen settled there is negligible. (Elwin 8)

IV

Though the word folklore is comparatively a recent coinage of the early 19th century by William Thomas, yet the concept of orality indeed began in the German literature with Grimm brothers. Terms like – ‘Volkslied’ meaning folk song, ‘Volksseele’ (folk-soul) and ‘Volks Glaube’ (Choudhury 5) meaning folk belief, so to say was no folkloristic in the proper sense but it indicates the study of oral traditions in the form of human practices, sayings, riddles, jokes, slangs, songs, dances, myths, legends, and innumerable other aspects that are appealing to human feelings. Now it covers a larger arena within and beyond its fold because the lore of the people come under the purview of literature, particularly to cultural studies. According to Angela Carter “For most of human history, 'literature,' both fiction and poetry,

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has been narrated, not written — heard, not read” and in North-East India too, a large number of curious beliefs, customs, tales, rituals, and narratives have been handed down from generation to generation. From ethno-archaeological sources, it’s more or less confirmed that till the closure of the middle ages the whole region of the North-East was inhabited by Mongolian tribes. To know more about the tradition and culture of a community it’s important to know the social history of the people. Oral literature constitutes an important area of such knowledge. Over the ages, sources and materials of North-East Indian oral tradition have been conserved, but it has been done mostly on an individual level and in a scattered way. No such organized and institutional effort has been observed in this field. There still remains an ‘undone vast’. Oral literature in its very nature survives on collective memory and the continuity of narration. In the course of time, the language may undergo some changes, but the content is never lost. Indigenous or vernacular literature in North-East India is too vast and immense in its variety, form, style, and language but we generally consider written literature only. The vernaculars spoken here by indigenous or tribal population are very large and literary elements in most of them have survived only in the oral form. In due course, many of these oral languages, as well as literature, are about to extinct, though the value of orality and oral literature are immense. We may or may not consider all legends and anecdotes as history since their authenticity and chronology cannot always be determined but much of these are born out of the pride and sentiment of the people as well as facts and materials for the reconstruction of history often lie hidden in them.

V

Territoriality, the very idea is a European coinage and in modern times it occupied a prominent place among the developing societies. India’s North-East is no less exceptional than developing the same traits, rather somewhere obsessed with it. If modernity is considering land as a resource to be exploited, anyway we have to remember that it’s an extended part of the society’s self, based on the traditional relationship between people and land. The politics of identifying with a homeland or with an ‘imaginary homeland’ (Rushdie 9) forms the key concern in North-East India and their attempt to construct an ethnic identity based on a well-demarcated territory became a pervasive force in this region. India remains a cauldron of multiple identities and the multiplicity of identity was a formidable force in our pre-colonial existence and is determining our post-colonial concerns.

In the North-East race, language, religion, and ethnicity are providing the base of identity, sometimes conflicting, sometimes mutually supporting. For a trouble-free North-East, a secular democratic Bangladesh and a stable Burma is very essential. Since several decades, the people in North-East have lived under the shadow of guns. Literature from this region reflects this grip of violence very clearly. Temsula Ao’s – *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* and Aruni Kashyap’s *The House with a Thousand Stories* chronicle this ‘durable disorder’ (Baruah 3) very vividly.

It remains to summarise briefly the principal and distinctive features of these vigorous and sturdy people from North-East India, who have preserved their ancestral institutions and distinct way of life throughout the centuries amidst the attractions offered by the alien cultures around them. Since time immemorial, they have preserved primitive customs and manners, their laws and institutions, folklores, their ethnological affinities, their religions, their languages and their theories as to their origin. The isolation of the primitive tribes in the midst of a great enriching population and the remarkable features presented by their various institutions always attract the attention of the ethnologists, philologists, linguists, archaeologists, Indologists, experts of cultural studies and the common people in general. Let me conclude with the following words of Jawaharlal Nehru:

I am alarmed when I see - not only in this country but in other great countries too - how anxious people are to shape others according to their own image or likeness, and to impose on them their particular way of living. We are welcome to our way of living, but why impose it on others? This applies equally to national and international fields. In fact, there would be more peace in the world if people were to desist from imposing their way of living on other people and countries. (qtd in Elwin 1)

Endnotes

1. “Actually the label ‘Northeast’ is meaningless and inappropriate – it’s a label that scholars and locals object too vociferously. The expression entered the Indian lexicon in 1971. Like other directional place names (e.g. the Far East, the Middle East), ‘Northeast India’ reflects an external and not a local point of view.” (Gill 3)
2. In British India a deed granted to the rulers of the native and princely states, confirming them in their status, in return for their allegiance. See at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deed#Sanad>
3. “A nation from below are identities that attain their autonomous positions by way of inverting the claims of the dominant nation, that is, by claiming sovereignty, territory and institutional authority for themselves. This means launching a struggle against the machinery of the state, which inducts smaller identities within its fold. A nation from below does not claim of statehood as a nation from above does by establishing the primacy of the state in asserting its authenticity. The authenticity of a nation from below lies in its parallel counterclaim based on its own cultural distinctness and is not based on the power of the state.” (Biswas and Suklabaidya 231)
4. See at <http://www.digimat.in/nptel/courses/video/109106135/109106135.html>
5. ‘The Mongolian Fringe’ was the title of an official paper from 1940 authored by Olaf Caroe, the foreign secretary of the British-Indian government. It referenced the

Himalayan regional areas such as Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and northern Assam. In Caroe's eyes, inhabitants of these regions are "predominantly Mongolian population." The racial term 'Mongolian', according to the time's prevailing scientific theories of race, applied to most peoples of Central and Eastern Asia, including Tibetans, the Chinese and the Japanese. To colonial officials like Caroe, the divide between Mongolians and the inhabitants of 'India proper' was self-evident. Talking about the Excluded Areas of Assam (now a major part of modern North-East India), former Governor Robert Reid said that "neither racially, historically, culturally, nor linguistically ... [do the people] ... have they any affinity with the people of the plains, or with the people of India proper." See at < <http://m.himalmag.com/the-mongolian-fringe/>>

6. Austro-Asiatic languages are also known as Mon–Khmer and spoken by 1.17 billion people across South Asian countries. as per the statistics of 'Ethnologue' Austro-Asiatic language family has 168 languages. See at < <https://www.ethnologue.com/>>
7. The great Sino-Tibetan (ST) language family, comprising Chinese on the one hand and Tibeto-Burman (TB) on the other is equally important in the context of world civilization. In the early 21st century, Tibeto-Burman languages were spoken by approximately fifty-seven million people; countries that had more than one million Tibeto-Burman speakers included Myanmar (Burma; about 29 million), China (some 17.2 million), India (about 5.5 million), Nepal (some 2.5 million), and Bhutan (about 1.2 million). Other countries with substantial numbers of Tibeto-Burman speakers included Thailand (535,000), Bangladesh (530,000), Pakistan (360,000), Laos (42,000), and Vietnam (40,000). See at < <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tibeto-Burman-languages>>
8. See at < <https://www.satp.org/>>
9. *Kalika Puran*, a medieval Indian Sanskrit text composed in Assam in around tenth century A.D. .
10. The *Yogini Tantra* is a 16th- or 17th-century tantric text by an unknown author from Assam and dedicated to the worship of Hindu goddesses Kali and Kamakhya. Apart from religious and philosophical themes, this voluminous tantra contains some historical information
11. There are three different Anglo-Burmese Wars fought in 1824-26, 1852-53 and in 1885 between Burma or Myanmar and British. The first Anglo-Burmese War was ended with the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826) and establishment of British political foot hole in North East India with territorial expansion.
12. Horse sacrifice ritual, followed by Vedic tradition. See at < <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashvamedha>>

13. As per *Puranic* sources and also from the sources of *Mahabharata*, it's assumed that the Asura Dynasty was the legendary kingdom established by Mariachi in the Vedic period at Sonitpur i.e. the present city of Tezpur in Assam.
14. Srimant Sankrdev (1449 – 1568) was a great scholar, poet, philosopher and saint from Assam. He is the propagator of Neo–Vashnavite movement in Assam.
15. Any of the ancient or medieval vernacular dialects of northern and central India that existed alongside or were derived from Sanskrit. For more details refer *An Introduction to Prakrit* (1928) by Alfred C. Woolner.

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