

## **Poetry Dripping Blood: The Experience of Violence in the Contemporary Poetry of Northeast India**

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### **Abstract**

The graphic and metaphoric images of violence such as blood, bomb blast, gun muzzle, bullet, the colour red and dark night predominate the poetry of Northeast India which manifests a uniqueness in attaining the art of witness. The poets of the Northeastern periphery who has been a witness to the prolonged state of violence emerging out of insurgency and counter-insurgency operations faithfully reflect on the political imbroglio. The region bears testimony to state-sanctioned violence justified in the pretext of maintaining the integrity of the country. On the other hand, the insurgent groups fighting for the sake of their identity, culture and financial well-being often take recourse to violent means to achieve their goals. The poets reflect on the jeopardy of common people living amidst the unrest and bearing the brunt of atrocities. Using the basic theoretical paradigms of Schmitt, Althusser and Agamben, the paper focuses on how the poetry of Northeast India criticises the justification of violence unleashed by both the Government and the militia out of retaliation against each other, and at the same time, illustrates the banality of violence which takes the toll on common lives.

**Keywords:** Northeast India, politics, violence, insurgency, counter-insurgency, state of exception.

Northeast India which consists of the “Seven-Sister States” of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura is a cultural melting pot in the true sense of the term. While the earlier settlers in the hills were distinctly of Mongoloid origin the plains were invaded by the Aryans. The presence of the Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian can also be noted. The constant demographic shifts from the hills and the plains at successive times, the British invasion of the area in the nineteenth century, and migration from Bangladesh and other parts of India made the region an ethnically and cross-culturally rich area. As such, the region could not remain resilient to the “outside” influences which inevitably engendered cultural mutation. The intervention of the outsiders was not taken positively by the traditional communities, especially by the hilly tribes. Then the annexation of the region to India at the time of the latter’s Independence caused dissatisfaction among the various ethnic communities of the region which never considered them as part of India. The “in-betweenness” that T. Raatan finds in the geo-cultural condition of the Northeast ensues from its location between two great traditions—the Indic Asian and the Mongoloid Asian. He elucidates, “While the Northeasterners are politically Indian, they are racially and culturally Mongoloid. The consciousness of the two differing identities is pulling the people and shakes the political loyalty” (11).

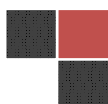
The dispersion of population into these two broad groups marks the crisis of identity as the “mainland” posits a threat to the Northeastern tribes. Various other socio-political and economic factors contributed to the ethnic strife in Northeast, as Preeti Gill summarizes:

The common problems of economic underdevelopment, exploitation of natural resources, environmental degradation and changing demographic profiles in the states of the region have provided fertile ground for the growth of local militancies, many of which turned into popular secessionist movements. (4)

The mainland Indian poetry, partly Sanskritised and partly shaped by European models, is considered to be superior to the poetry of Northeast. The latter is relegated to the back seat as mere exercises in primitive folklore or politically-charged agenda-like writings. The Northeast of India remains disadvantaged and misunderstood at the heart of the “mainland” discourse. This is a sort of cultural violence which the Northeastern writers face. Rajeev Patke, in his discussion of postcolonial poetry, illustrates how the aborigines/tribals (and recent migrants to settler countries) who write from minoritarian position face several cultural disadvantages they are subjected to by the major cultural canon from where they are excluded:

They find themselves drawn to a poetics of resistance in relation to a dominant majority. Their protest has a sense of the belated about it, since it occurs after the success of decolonisation and nationalism in the former European colonies. Their circumstances remain colonial, even though the societies on whose margins they live cease being colonial. (163)

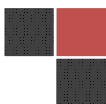
The earliest to date among the insurgencies in the Northeast was the Naga “freedom movement” which began under the leadership of A Z Phizo, since the Independence of India. The Nagas protested against being identified as “Indians” because their residential area had never been a part of any mainland Indian empire. The Naga “freedom movement” marked the onset of a long line of insurgency. At subsequent periods, Assam witnessed the violent insurgent activities of ULFA which began



primarily as a reaction against the Bangladeshi immigration to the state. Manipur and Tripura too had been heavily affected by the insurgent activities. The organized form of Manipuri insurgency began with the setup of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) by Samarendra Singh in 1964 and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) by Bisheswar in 1978. Along with these a number of other insurgent groups exacerbate the atmosphere of unrest in the state with frequent acts of violence, murder, extortion, drug business and so on. The Naga inhabited hilly areas have been affected by the two factions (Isaac-Muiva and Khaplang) of National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) whose demands vary from autonomy to the inclusion of the hill districts to the Greater Nagaland or "Nagalim" (a free, sovereign country). The Kuki insurgents emerge in the scene in the 1990s as a result of their conflicts with the Nagas. Most of the insurgent groups of the region are "ethnic militias", according to Sanjib Barua, which "may accurately describe the support base and even the agendas of many insurgent groups" (*Durable Disorder*6). The tribal and other ancient communities are motivated by ethnic sentiments, and they take up arms for the preservation of their culture and the resources of the Northeast. Barua writes that in "the process of standardization associated with the rise and consolidation of nation-states" the specificities of the ethnic groups are obliterated (6). This intra-India hegemony is one of the major causes of outrage of the militants. The militant groups take recourse to various violent means such as bomb blast, murder and kidnap of common people, ambushes to police and army camps and so on.

The Central Government deploys armed forces in the region to counter the insurgent groups. The Central Government, in order to maintain its sovereignty, employs various ideological and repressive state apparatuses to combat the insurgency. As Althusser notes, repressive methods too depend on ideological means. For instance, the Government holds the deployment of army necessary in the Northeast for the safety of common people. Moreover, the presence of the armed forces is often made to justify on the pretext of preserving the country's unity and integrity. The imposition of the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) is an extension of this project of repressive authority where the distinction between the law and the lawless is blurred. It might be labelled as a "state of exception" which, according to Carl Schmitt, is the feature of a sovereign. In John Lechte's paraphrase, "The sovereign must, first of all, decide when a state of exception exists and, second, decide upon strategies—including the suspension of normal legal processes—to deal with it" (210). Within this scheme of political accomplishment some Northeastern "insurgent" groups are declared as dangerous, anti-legal and anti-state elements whose repression and, sometimes extermination, is legally sanctioned. Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical paradigm takes cues from Carl Schmitt in order to demonstrate the strategies of the sovereign during the "state of exception". A "state of exception" such as one created with the provisions of the AFSPA reduces the target groups to "bare life". Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series is "structured by the distinction between *zoē* and *bios* that Agamben uncovers in Ancient times, specifically in the works of Aristotle" (Boever 30). To be precise, "bare life" is "life that is produced whenever *zoē* is separated from *bios*, and *bios* (ethical and political life) calls *zoē* (biological life) into question" (30). In other words, bare life is not synonymous with mere biological life, but life which is divested of its political significance, or "abandoned" by law. Agamben explains:

He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed and threatened on



the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable. It is literally not possible to say whether the one who has been banned is outside or inside the juridical order. (23)

In such a vague condition, the “banned” groups of people, identified as threat to the integrity or sovereignty of the state, become vulnerable to state-sanctioned violence. In the words of Ewa Ziarek,

Stripped from political significance and exposed to murderous violence, bare life is both the counterpart of the sovereign decision on the state of exception and the target of sovereign violence. [...] bare life, wounded, expendable, and endangered, is not the same as biological *zoē*, but rather the remainder of the destroyed political *bios*. (194)

“Homo sacer”, the first “bare life” figure, can be killed with impunity, that is, their murder is not even tried as murder, or a crime at all. As a consequence, extreme violence can reign in a “state of exception” (Agamben’s classic example is the Holocaust). In the present context, the oppression of the army and their violation of human rights which came into notice of the “mainland” people in 2004 following the “mothers’ nude protest” against the arrest, gang-rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama on some alleged grounds. The insurgent groups and the civilians who allegedly support militants in Northeast India are blacklisted by the Government of India. However, with the misperception of the difference between the militants and the civilians, which at times gets more complex with the complicity of the duo, the latter become scapegoat of the state-sanctioned violence.

A large part of the poetry of Northeast India reflects violence, turmoil, unrest and bloodbath that ensue from insurgency and counter-insurgency activities. “Through much of its post-colonial history,” writes Gill, “insurgencies and counter insurgency operations have been a part of the fabric of everyday life in Northeast Indian with militarization having become ‘a way of life’ in the region” (12-13). The written poetry of Northeast India which has its emergence since about three decades record the atmosphere of unrest and violence. The Manipuri poet Robin Ngangom marks the general tendencies of contemporary Manipuri poetry thus:

Today, when heart-rending things are happening all around a poet, when he hears only chilling accounts of what man has done to man, how can he close his eyes to the brutalisation of life and remain narcissistic? When a man of even an iota of conviction is in immediate danger if he speaks up, when a gun points at you if you don’t observe a prescribed code of behaviour, how can I claim that I am living in a free society? In contemporary Manipuri poetry, there is a predominance of images of ‘bullets’, ‘blood’, ‘mother’, ‘the colour red’ and, paradoxically, ‘flowers’ too. A friend told me of how they’ve been honing ‘the poetry of survival’ with guns pressed at both your temples: the gun of revolution and the gun of the state. (“Poetry in Time” 172)

These characteristics summarise the inclination of the poetry of Northeast India in general. In the introduction to the anthology *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from Northeast India*, the poet-critic Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih describes the poetry of Northeast India as the “poetry of witness” and the “poetry of survival”. There is no scope of indulging in graceful lyricism and beautiful images. The poet Mona Zote from Mizoram writes in “raw” terms what poetry should mean to a woman in the hills:



*[...] Poetry must be raw like a side of beef,  
should drip blood, remind you of sweat  
and dusty slaughter and the epidermal crunch  
and the sudden bullet to the head. (318; italics in original)*

Robin Ngangom's poem "Native Land" portrays his beloved home Manipur in its present militancy-ridden plight. The violence that emanates from the insurgent activities in the land has become a part of everyday experiences of common people which no longer inspires awe in them. The poem is written from the perspective of a commoner who is so habituated with bombs and bullets, murder and bloodshed that violence does not stir him anymore; rather, he becomes indifferent to violence:

*[...] six shot dead, twenty-five  
houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied  
behind their backs inside a church [...]  
As the days crumbled, and the victors  
and their victims grew in number,  
I hardened inside my thickening hide,  
until I lost my tenuous humanity. ("Native Land", n. pag.)*

He expresses the loss of his heart's humane sensibilities at the havoc of terror and violence in Manipur. Nevertheless, Ngangom does not hide his dissatisfaction for what is going on in the name of peace-accords. His lines harbour obvious irony when he writes about the misuse of his homeland:

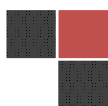
*I often hear about its future  
in conflict resolution symposiums  
where professors and retired generals  
analyze the fate of my people and their misery. ("Everywhere I Go", 46)*

The "landlocked misery" of Manipur does not stimulate the policy makers to consider the state's core political issues (47). The imposition of the AFSPA in Manipur and some parts of Assam in 1958 was inspired with the primary aim of preventing anti-state or insurgent activities, but the Centre's stubborn political convictions had always been implicitly present. With the auspices of the AFSPA, the armed forces were granted, even if indirectly, the inhuman laws to arrest, torture and murder anyone on mere grounds of suspicion. The repressive mechanism came into limelight as late as 2004 when a Manipuri woman named Thanjam Manorama was arrested, brutally gang-raped and shot dead by the soldiers of the Assam Rifles. Sanjib Barua succinctly puts the ghastly incident and the vehement protest that followed thus:

*The Indian army claimed that Ms. Manorama was a member of the banned People's Liberation Army, and it challenged the Manipur State Government's authority to hold an inquiry, citing the controversial act. In July 2004 about a dozen Manipuri women protested the Manorama incident with an act of unusual courage and eloquence. Standing naked in front of the Indian army's base in Manipur's capital city Imphal, they held a banner that read 'Indian Army Rape Us'. ("Northeast India" 29-30)*

Ngangom refers to the Manipuri mothers' protest in "Everywhere I Go":

*And I went to tell my poet-friends  
of the twelve mothers who stripped themselves*



and asked soldiers to rape them. (47)

Within the ambit of a “state of exception”, created with the provisions of the AFSPA, the common Manipuris, especially the poor, rural folk, are exposed to such state-sanctioned violence. They are deprived of even their basic human rights and relegated to a sub-human status which approximates Agamben’s idea of “bare life”. Following the Manorama incident, the Government of India appointed a committee headed by the former Supreme Court Judge B P Jeevan Reddy to review the AFSPA. Although the Reddy Committee “tried to find a middle ground” between “the security of the nation” and “the rights of the citizens”, and recommended the repeal of the AFSPA, neither was the report made officially public nor did the Government acted on the committee’s recommendations (Baruah, “Northeast India” 34-35). Instead of finding genuine roadmaps to the problems unique to Northeast India such as border tensions, indigenous-settler conflicts, poor development and negligence, the mainland India’s response to the region “has consisted of counterinsurgency operations, and in recent years a bloated development budget” (33). Common people bear the brunt of the insurgency and counterinsurgency operations active in Northeast India. The exploitation and butchery of innocent people are often forgotten in the eloquent rhetoric of peace accords between the Government and the militants despite the fact that many of the ceasefire agreements exist for a ridiculously short duration. The apparent insignificance of life in Northeast India has been touchingly captured by Nilmani Phukan in these lines from the poem “Do Not Ask Me How I Have Been”:

Do not ask me how I have been  
[...] for forty-two hours  
my corpse lay there  
on the footpaths of Guahati

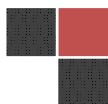
For even now I have my eyes open  
even my death stares open-eyed (230)

The dead do not receive any respect just as the living do not receive any assurance of life. In a “state of exception”, characterised by the absence of the state as guarantor of a section of people’s security, violence and death do not surprise anymore as these become the norm.

Laishram Samarendra’s poem “There’s No Time” exposes the loss of humanity at the face of lurking death. The speaker is fleeing from his village which is under attack either by the insurgent militias or by the Indian Army. He is carrying a little rice with him “With the intention of feeding the children”, but as soon as firing begins he considers it profitable to save his own life and leave the children behind. He is only occupied with the instinct of saving himself:

Did you hear gunfire,  
Did you hear wails?  
Did they carry away corpses in a vehicle?  
There’s no time, I’m leaving,  
There’s no time. (250)

The images of gun, bullet, blood and the colour red frequently feature in the poetry of Northeast India. R K Bhubonsana’s poem “Bullet” celebrates the awe-struck calibre of the bullet in apparently romantic phrases. The bullet bursts through like cold water “On a



parched throat / Fatigued after a long journey” (58). Such an image does metaphorically refer to the state of Manipur which is exhausted with violence, death and destruction. The bullet’s journey has been compared to “canals of parched fields / On the forehead / Of a drought-stricken farmer” and “*jhum* fields, lush, / On slopes charred by wildfire” (59). Such similes only heighten the implied unease beneath the surface valorisation of the bullet which is the stark reality of the region. The cool evening breeze of the hills and chanting songs on dark roads at night are identified with the journey of the bullet. The apparent calmness of the comparisons then violently shattered as the next expression “Piercing someone’s breast” (59) is oddly mentioned. Such a violent juxtaposition was necessary in demystifying the earlier images that romanticise the bullet.

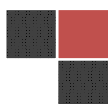
Saratchand Thiyam’s poem “Gun Muzzle” well sums up the prolonged state of violence which has dominated much of the history of Northeast India. The ordinary people reside at the gun muzzle. They are soft targets of the militants as well as the army. The poet talks about the impossibility of imagining peaceful situation in a landscape which has been so long exposed to violence and bloodshed. It is a foolish endeavour to seek light or expect a better situation in the state which is infested with insurgency and counter-insurgency operations. Even the militants are divided into factions and they often take up arms against each other. What happens as a result is that the lives of common people are put at stake. In the words of the poet:

When that youth who journeyed seeking light  
Returns covered with a white cloth  
Who’d like to receive him?  
Gun muzzles too face each other sometimes  
And grief becomes the lot of ordinary people. (285)

The lives of common people are jeopardised as a result of the tussles among the militias. The former only wait for gun muzzles “to be lowered / Or pointed to the sky” which insinuates at either the end of violence or the battle against the Central Government. However, their fights do not remain restricted within the binary division of the centre and the periphery. They often unleash combats and ambushes against each other. Inter-community, inter-tribe, inter-militia fight makes the situation in the Northeast more complex and tenuous. The tribal ethos and sentiments play a vital role in such inter-tribe tensions. Moreover, whenever one militia or faction signs an agreement with the Government the others see it a threat to their interest and become desperate and irrational. It is believed by political thinkers such as Sanjib Barua that the Government secretly provides help to some militias to counter their rival groups. Nongkynrih’s poem “Sundori” portrays a problematic love where the speaker and his beloved belong to different tribes, and the fatal hostility between these tribes stands as an impediment to their union:

Yesterday one of my people  
Killed one of your people  
And one of your people  
Killed one of my people.  
Today they have both sworn  
To kill on sight. (210)

But the speaker seeks union with his beloved because it is neither him nor her who wants to cherish enmity among themselves.





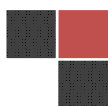
Thus, we can see that the poets' reactions to the state of violence vary greatly. While most of them solicit the establishment of peace some are indifferent and hopeless, and some want resistance to atrocities. The Assamese poet Shimanta Bhattacharya portrays the stoic resignation of people to acts of violence in the poem "Between Bomb Blasts". It is "silence" or meaningless rituals that fill the uncanny gap between bomb blasts. The people are so used to violence and bloodbath that slaughtering of innocent lives does not concern them any longer:

After the explosion, the silence blithely  
Resurrects itself. There is no report of casualties.  
People are so used to being blown to bits these days:  
Prayers shiver down sodden wicks on Diwali. (49)

The Manipuri poet Naorem Bidyasagar does not find any possibility of hope in near future for the distant hills which are a haunt of the militants. However, in "Blood-smeared Dawn", he persuades his fellow civilians to strongly resist violent activities which deprive common men and women of their human rights:

Let it burst now  
On the forehead of this highland smeared with blood,  
Bombs with pins drawn  
Like a volcano erupting.  
Let red-hot bullets rain  
Like *Enga's* downpour. (Bidyasagar, 64)

Some poets expressly condemn the militants because of their immoral and violent means which are scrutinized with scepticism. The militants, who were often hailed at first as "freedom fighters," have lost their popular support with the course of time. The growing atrocities directed against common people, like mass murder, bombing, extortion, kidnapping and blackmailing, by the militants consolidated their image as villains not only to the Government and other ethnic groups but also to their own communities. The separatist politics of the militants does not necessarily reflect popular attitude of the region. Thangjam Ibopishak's poem "I Want to Die by an Indian Bullet" presents an argument between the poet and a troop of militants ultimately insinuating the victory of poetry over bullet. In the poem he imagines the militants in the guise of the five Puranic elements of life—fire, water, air, earth and sky. They are both destroyer and preserver—"they can create men; also destroy men at whim" (Ibopishak 132). In reply to the poet who asked them what his fault is, the leader of militant group replies that their "mission is to kill men", and they would kill the poet with bullet. The foreign connection of the militant is made apparent when they say that the guns are "Foreign made. All of them made in Germany, made in Russia, or made in China" (133). Their hatred for India is expressed in such lines as: "Let alone good guns, India cannot even make plastic flowers". The poet is, however, not convinced by the bloody design of the militants and says that he'd rather prefer to die with an Indian bullet to a foreign bullet: "I don't want to die from a foreign bullet. You see, I love India very much". Failed to manipulate the poet, the militants left him without killing. Thus, instances where the poets cherish assimilationist tendencies do exist in the corpus of the poetry of Northeast India. Even though they live amidst turbulent realities and they are subjected to the mainland power bloc's negligence and repression, they still want to be identified as Indians. This ethical gesture is a reply to the insurgent groups as well as to the armed forces whose unscrupulous and immoral activities are no longer warranted.

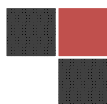




The alienation of a large section of people from the mainland Indian society, politics and culture has been a marked characteristic of the Northeast, and which is also a major cause of misunderstanding, disorder and political instability in the region. The mainstream politics imbued with the ideology of subjugation and domination further deteriorated the peace prospect of the peripheral region. Sanjoy Hazarika, a noted policymaker from the region, recounts the fate of the Northeast as “extraordinarily tragic in the range of the violence it has suffered and the blood that has been shed in the name of preserving national unity and upholding India’s security” (ix). He is always critical about the Centre’s inconsiderate reliance on Armed forces to suppress the dissenters, as he writes “the dependence of the states on the Army must be reduced to the minimum and armed forces should be deployed only as a last resort” (4). The prospect of development and progress in Northeast India is vast because of the region’s rich natural resources such as oil, coal, minerals, forest resources and tea gardens. The picturesque Northeast also has the possibility of developing a lucrative tourism business. The “Look East” policy which was undertaken by the UPA Government in the 1990s was an attempt to develop the infrastructural base of Northeast India. In accordance with this, the BJP Government undertook the “Act East” policy (2014-) which emphasises practicing more action-oriented policy towards East Asia. The march of progress under the auspices of these policies as well as the state Governments’ initiatives show some glimmer of hope to the Northeast for a better future.

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