

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

August 2015 Vol. 6, Issue-4



6th Year of Open Access

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Poetry of North East India and the Politics

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A tenuous historical and geographical link to the rest of India, the North East is little known and often called the ‘the insurgent heartland’ of India. I intend to delve into this ‘heartland’ where a conglomeration of people, a mélange of cultures and languages and religions, response to the violence that grips their hearts. *Dancing Earth* will be the sole text I will concentrate upon, and I endeavor to comprehend the diverse ways and means by which the poets engage with the political. I seek to see how the poets venture to work on the ‘inner politics’, that of emotions and ‘outer politics’, organized around the social realities. There is a common bond shared by the poets of North East India, though they belong to diverse spaces, cultures, languages and religions: a sensibility of connection with the land; nature having an overarching presence in their lives and the myths and folklores that have predominance. Beyond all these, a search for Identity; the self, marred by the convoluted pathos surrounding them, marked their works. The *Dancing Earth* is an Anthology of poetry that celebrates life amidst all contradictions. It captures the myriad nuances of the North East India. “Politics” says Hannah Arendt, “arises in what lies in between men and is established as relationships...Freedom exists only in the unique intermediary space of politics.” (Arendt 2005, 95) It is within these aspects of the political that I will try to comprehend what freedom is in a land torn by violence. As much as the land is filled with contradictions, *Dancing Earth* is a collection of pages that contradict each other. From a celebration of life, nature and myth to doubts, fear, and cries of the souls that fills the land. A juxtaposition of these myriad responses to the happenings within the in-between spaces of men will show the politic of these poems and the land. And, I will see if freedom be possible for men as it exist in the “intermediary space of Politics.”

The poets found common ground in chronicling their subjective realities and the predicament of the people, and they passionately grapple with the psychological and social perspectives of the present. It does not sensationalize the consequence of violence but instead tries to seek the politics of it through words. The description of the beauty of nature amidst the sounds of barrels and guns shows the spirit of defiance and the will to live. Those that capture the cries and blood spilled on the land shows the credulity of the events that adorns the land. Arent in *The Promises of Politics* mentions that:

God’s creation of the plurality of men is embodied in the absolute difference of all men from one another, which is greater than the relative difference among peoples, nations, or races. But, in that case, there is in fact no role for politics. From the very start politics organizes those who are absolutely different with a view to their relative equality and in contradistinction to their relative differences. (Arendt 2005, 96)

The instable political and social conditions of the states give rise to many groups of militants that fight against a common enemy at times and against one another at other times. Insurgencies and counter-insurgencies depict the conditions of the state. Security becomes a dream for the people. From absolute difference to the relative difference of one ethnic group to

the other triggers the violence. So, when realities become oppressive, poets frequently seek refuge in absurdist irony often directed at oneself, in parody, in farce and in satire. It is a rejection by the poets of the harrowing realities of the times, also revealing an inclination towards the surreal. Y. Ibomcha's 'Derived from a Puppy', and Thangjam Ibopishak's 'I Want To Be Killed By an Indian Bullet' can be taken as examples. Ibomcha talks of "How could we as whelps/ among these dogs, foxes and monkeys?/ I will turn into a strong and big tiger.' The wife smiled at him with "a jubilant and loving look drew on him stripes of the tiger and 'planted a tail on him' with her gingham wrap, so that he would wake the next morning with a 'growl and let out a roar, darling' like his peers; but his throat emitted only "miaow, miaow' like a cat." The lady glared at him and chased him out with a broom. And that is why he 'come running/ to hide among you my friends.' The poem alludes to the sense of belonging nowhere, of finding no place to anchor one's lost identity. An escape to surrealistic world where there could be an explainable conundrum. T. Ibopishak's 'I want to be killed by an Indian Bullet' uses the five elements of fire, water, air, earth and sky in the guise of which terrorist entered his drawing room to kill him. They interrogate him whether he is

...a poet who pens gobbledygook and drivel?

Or do you consider yourself a seer with Oracular powerst?

Or are you a madman?'

The poem is about the five elements whose 'mission is to kill' and the poet 'don't want to die of foreign bullet. 'You see I love India very much.' But they never want 'Bharat' to be mentioned! So they left without killing him... 'Being fastidious about death, I escaped with my life' (DE 2009, 132-33). Here, it is not just about the terror of death and it's elements in whose form it comes to man at the unwelcoming hours, but the politics of defiance the poets express through the little space of freedom in the pages of poetry through surrealism. It is these spaces they don't want the suspicious element to intrude upon them unawares. It is not a mode of escapism of which they are often accused of, but, more of creating a space for themselves apart from those denied to them in the real world.

The poets captures social realities with a sense of immediacy, this lend with vividness 'the poetry of witness.' 'Pacha' is an ode to the poet, PachaMeetei (1943-1990), a Manipuri writer. The poet used a conversational tone in the poem and also act as a reporter who informs the late poet, Pacha about the impracticalities, hostilities, killings, violence and present conditions of the people as they '...kill pregnant women and children' and 'Young boys and soldiers are butchering each/ other by the dozen, in the hills, the angry/ streets, day after day, and too many heroes/ and villains are not worth remembering at all.' The suppression of freedom of thoughts and expression and the dilemma of a poet can be seen when "poetry in your homeland...sew up his lips and/ Clog his ears with mud" (DE 2009, 205-06).. Important social issues like the gun's shadow, corruption, a loath for the politicians and the conditions and treatment of women in the society is penned by the writers to emphasize their role as an observer and an agent of change. Insurgency in Manipur is driven by the Manipuri 'nationalist' consciousness that predates the emergence of an independent Indian Union and other socio-economic and Political forces of the Post-Independence period. The use of violent means by the various underground organizations in the state not only has its root in the armed communist insurgency in Manipur in the late 1940s and 1950s. The issue of Identity and nationhood arises out of this. The unprecedented sectarian

violence and bloodshed Manipur experienced during the last decade of the twentieth century is a reminder of the real danger to the composite identity and non-communal politics of Manipur.

The violence and clashes has led to the emergence from relay economic blockade to relay bandh now and the baton of keeping the public under siege keeps on passing with no break in between. The poets here plays the role of articulating as a case of making its presence felt amongst the people and register itself in the consciousness of all. The 'outer politics' of the poets are realized though these poems. Sudha M. Rai's 'The Night I was Raped' give a harrowing picture of the consequences of social immorality plaguing the land. The poetess take the tone of a narrator and tells how 'he, as a hungry lion/ had torn my body and mind,/ To whom and how to show? The narrator questions the humanity of men and says 'Instead of men/ Why animals as pets?' (DE 2009, 238-40). The seething anger, the pain and doubts hankering in the lives of the people could never find an answer; and no one can answer these questions. These lines charged with loathing emotions and using the body as a means of picturing the horror in their lives the poetess 'inner politics' of protest is clearly expressed. 'Blood Smear Dawn' written by N. Bidyasagar presents the helplessness of the common people caught between the Army and militants as "Each of us ordinary citizens/ Is a target today/ Of blind bullets/ Bursting like flames from two directions" (DE 2009, 63-64). In a condition as such 'Our fate like that of a dead moon/ Is hanging precariously/ Near the Chamber of the barrels of guns.'

These poets' politics of protest does not stop with the display of the dire and dark realities enveloping their world. In fact there are beautiful notes celebrating the cultures and nature that stands with its beauty intact in spite of the horrors around. Desmond L. Kharmawplang in "Last Night I dreamed" penned the celebration of the rich myths and folklore the land is endowed with. Dreaming that he 'was a sperm swimming in the/ womb of folklore...and I crawled all fours/ scribbling the subsoil of time' (DE 2009, 145). The uses of myth in their writings suggest the richness of their tradition that entails a sense of belonging to a place. This in turn shows the inherent longing for stability and security. The 'inner politics' manifested through the myths and folklores of their land.

For India, the display and use of military power has become a routine way of asserting state sovereignty in the North-east. This situation could continue indefinitely. After all, the government can claim that it has to continue the controversial law 'enabling' army deployment since many citizens wants the army to be there. There is little scope in the tired security discourse that frames India's Northeast policy for debating whether the routine use and display of military might in consistent with the ethos of a liberal democracy, or is the best way to pursue nation-building in a cultural borderland.

Leaving aside well-organized and well-financed groups like the NSCN-IM, the proliferation and resilience of ragtag bands of the armed rebels groups in the region in the face of a long and bloody history of counterinsurgency would suggest that they serve certain functions, despite their incapacity to deliver on grandiose publicly proclaimed goals like 'national liberation.' In parts of the region, especially away from the major urban centers, when institutions of the states cannot guarantee the security of life and property, ethnic militias fill the vacuum. There is a sort of security dilemma at work, not unlike the one posited by the Realist theory of international relations. In a world of anarchy, according to Realists, states must find

security through self-help, but one state's search for security can make another state insecure. When one ethnic group in Northeast India forms a militia, a rival ethnic group might see it as a threat to its security. An ethnic militia, seen through the national security prism, may be part of a generalized threat of insurgency. But from the perspective of its ethnic constituency, it may be a provider of security. Indeed in an ethnically polarized situation, where the actions of Indian security forces are seen as partisan, offensives against militants who are seen as security providers by their ethnic kin may, of course, even add to the latter's sense of insecurity, and be an incentive for strengthening the self-help form of security. In the frontier condition of north east India, where there may be ethnic affinities between settler communities and forces engaged in counterinsurgency, the sense of insecurity of indigenous communities worsens as a result of counterinsurgency operations ordered by New Delhi. The effectiveness of militias to provide security to their ethnic kin, at least compared to that of the state, is quite self-evident to their followers and supporters.

Access to finances, it has been shown, is a significant predictor of civil conflict. The correlation between low national income and armed civil conflict is not necessarily because objective conditions of poverty sustain rebellion, but because poverty and unemployment provide a favorable context for militias to raise money and to recruit new members at a relatively low cost. For the armed rebel organizations of Northeast India, the major source of financing is what Indian officials term extortion, but in an analytical sense could fruitfully be seen as taxation by non state organizations. Despite the proliferation of rebel groups, the people of Northeast India continue to elect their state governments and representatives to the national Parliament in regularly held democratic elections. But it would be inaccurate to interpret this as a sign of the relative strength of pan-Indianism and of democratic institutions. An exclusively state-centric view of security is blind to the insecurities of citizens during armed conflicts as well as counterinsurgency operations- as powerfully articulated by the Manipuri women protesters against AFSPA. However, since the main argument of this paper is not on the political issues as a study, I will go back to the text and that of contextualizing it. The reason for presenting this backdrop is to show the political as in factual disposition, so as to understand the quagmire that preoccupies the thoughts of the poets in the *Dancing Earth*.

So, in a land distraught with an unending conflicting political space, often the poets are in conflicting situations between the world around them and their helpless selves. Some poets take refuge in absurdist irony often directed towards oneself, in parody, in farce and in satire. Y. Ibomcha's 'Worshipping Imoinu' reflects the unpredictability of life and the helplessness that shrouded everyday reality. "Imoinu" is a Meetei goddess of prosperity. A nagging wife who 'wants to turn into a mole' but instead turn into a swallow in the morning, a toad in the evening, calling down seasonal rain. She turns into a drongo when the night falls 'and kept pecking at the tuft of hair on my forehead' (DE 2009, 126-27). And on the morning of Imoinu Day, she stood like 'a goddess aglitter' and he had to 'genuflect' for it will be a blasphemy not to. It is a farce on oneself that sets the picture of never knowing what the other is or could become the next moment. The very person one trust the most could betray and at times one end up worshipping the other who served you the day before. Using oneself as the object of ridicule, the poet expresses the 'inner politics' of instable identity one holds in the society. It is not an expression of hopelessness, on the contrary the strong will to live and laugh at oneself in all credulity.

A critique of one's own society while being a part of it shows the 'outer politics' of the poets. The poet Raghu Leishangthem in 'The Old Woman's Pitcher' portrays the feign goodness of the people in the land. These poets does not stop with just lamenting and play the part of passive observer; but, a solidarity with the helpless section of the society who are no longer the harbinger of hope, as the people would call them. They are the old and the lame. The treatments meted out to them are an eyesore for the poets. The poem is written in a narrative form. As an eye witness would narrate the happening in that particular village. Since no one would give her water to drink, while she 'was almost dying of thirst' she had to fetch it by herself 'On steep hill tracks/ From deep ravines that no one knows/ This cool water. People would know only after her death that, 'The pitcher left by her, found brimming with water/ Was for dousing growing wildfires' (DE 2009, 163-64). The poet gives the picture of the stark conditions of ageing women in the society. The cruelty of the hypocrite society is critiqued by the poet. The poem 'Politicians and the White Dove' by the same poet is a satire on the politicians of the land. He juxtaposes a politician and a white dove and a story of them caught in an incident. They quarrel often because the Dove wants to fly freely in the sky but the politician replied that 'To allow you to fly or not to fly / Is my politics.' On the dove insistence on flying , the politician shows a gun, and 'The dove unable to fly remains silent;/ Now, the White dove/ Remains inside the politicians' pocket' (DE 2009, 165) This is a portrayal of the tyrannical thoughts of the democratic officials in a gun culture showing the dominance of coerce political power over the helpless people. The question of freedom could not be addressed in a situation as such. The poet's metaphorical story speaks out the politics of protest against such unruly governance. The decadence infesting the land and culture of the Northeast is brought to the fore by Paul Lyngdoh in the poem 'For Sale'. "The battered, autistic land...our young nubile girls...our cumbersome anachronistic tribal roots...our pride, values, work culture" (DE 2009, 171-72) are on sale says the poet. The poem satiric notes reflect the conditions of the land and people in a materialistic world. The lust for material gains at the expense of one's own true self. It becomes a show, following the trends around at the expense of one's culture, tradition and roots.

Thus, as demonstrated above, the poets display elements of the political through 'inner politics' and 'outer politics'. They venture into the emotional, the body, myths, folklore and social realities to create effect and a shared space between the reader and the writer that moves away at times from the rational. The poets, vis a vis 'outer politics' forays into the same by organizing their themes around questions of violence, by highlighting its undesirability and the immediacy of the need for its prevention. They did not limit themselves to these questions, but also addresses the people to look into themselves and bring about changes. The uses of farce and satire, often upon themselves, the poet shows that the first step one can take for a change is to learn to laugh oneself instead of pointing fingers at others. So, even if the poems in the Dancing Earth may seem more of like a lament or just an outburst of emotions; it doesn't just stop there, but has political elements that address the readers and the world at large.

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