

Prominent Indian English Fiction Writers from North East--An Overview

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Abstract

Indian Writing in English does not have a long history. Undeniably the British Education Policy helped to spread English Education in India. With time we have witnessed the growth of Indian writing in English. This growth is seen as part of upgrading, opportunity, and also acceptance all over the world. Till recently publishers were not interested in writings from the North East beyond its politically turbulent environment. This paper attempts to map the journey of the prominent Indian English Fiction writers from the North East.

Keywords: growth, politics, North East, fiction, prominent

INTRODUCTION

Indian writing in English should not be seen merely as a repercussion of hegemonic opposition flowing from the authors of a colonized nation on matters like identity, tradition, culture, and so on. The British Education Policy helped in spreading English education in India, a fact which cannot be ignored. But the emergence of Indian writing in English should be seen as part of modernization which incorporated urbanization, industrialization, mobility, independence, social change, and a change in the global scenario.

As reported in the leading national Daily The Hindustan Times, although publishing is brimming with new novels from the North East coming out at regular intervals, the creative endeavour of the authors of this part is yet to get due recognition and visibility, and a wider readership. We can call these authors North easterners because they all came from the Northeast. But their works are just as different from each other's as their cultures are. North Eastern literature is not homogeneous as it boasts of heterogeneous cultures. Moreover not all the works are even set in the Northeast. Naga writer Easterine Kire explains this diversity beautifully--"our problems are different, our mythology is different and most important, our languages are different, which means our world views are different. Of course, we share many similarities. But each state is distinctly different from the other". But the people belonging to outside North-East only prefer to see the region as 'lush, beautiful, green' but politically

turbulent, insurgency-ridden disturbed area, and nothing beyond, if we ignore the few exceptions here and there. Even publishers were not interested till recently. "Until recently publishing houses were not interested if we did not feature politics," says Easterine Kire. They could not see beyond the political definitions of the Northeast, even while we writers were telling them there is more to it than just politics.

AN OVERVIEW

The younger generation of English language writers from Northeast India includes Jahnvi Barua, Siddhartha Deb, Arnab Jan Deka, Siddhartha Sarma, Nitoo Das, Janice Pariat, Nabanita Kanungo, Mona Jote, Ankush Saikia, Bijaya Sawain, Uddipana Goswami, Aruni Kashyap, etc. These writers express strong political awareness by addressing issues such as identity and ethnicity. A few hailing from Assam interrogates the violence that has ravaged their home state Assam due to the tussle between the secessionist militant group ULFA and the Govt. of India in complex ways. Some of them like Arnab Jan Deka explored the spiritual and intellectual heritage along the Brahmaputra valley and also highlighted its environmental fragility. Discussing the works of the new generation of writers from Northeast Preeti Gill says, "Many younger writers continue to grapple with these issues. Having grown up in the shadow of the gun, their desire to analyze the common people's reaction to the insurgency is as strong as ever". Literary journal Pratilipi represents the issues that concern writers from the Northeast in its special feature, "it is tragic that the long-running unrest, violence, and terrorism in the Northeast have remained a mere digression in the mainstream of the Indian Nation-state---".

Several works of fiction by writers from the Northeast have appeared recently. Siddhartha Deb's debut novel *The Point of No Return* was published in 2002. His second novel *Surface* was published in 2005 as was Mitra Phukan's novel *The Collector's Wife*. Dhruba Hazarika's novel *A Bowstring Winter*, Temsula Ao's short story collection *These Hills Called Home* and Mamang Dai's short fiction *The Legends of Pensamall* came out in 2006. Though the publication dates of these works suggest otherwise, Indian English writing from the Northeast is not an entirely new phenomenon. Legendary Arup Kumar Dutta's *The Kaziranga Trail*, acknowledged to be the first Indian English adventure story for children was published

in 1979 while Robin S. Ngangom, Desmond L. Kharmawplang, and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih have been active as poets for nearly two decades now.

Arup Kumar Dutta along with Ruskin Bond pioneered the creation of Indian English Children's fiction with credible settings, characters, and situations. The Kaziranga Trail is set in the famous wildlife sanctuary in Assam but Dutta avoids using the language and images of the tourist brochure.

Temsula Ao is a poet, short story writer, and ethnographer. A retired professor of NEHU, she received the Sahitya Academy Award for her short story collection, *Laburnum for MY Head* in 2013. She is widely respected as one of the major literary voices in English to emerge from Northeast India along with Mitra Phukan and Mamang Dai. Her published poetic works are- *Songs that Tell* (1988); *Songs that Try to Say* (1992); *Songs of Many Moods* (1995); *Songs from Here and There* (2003); *Songs from the Other Life* (2007). Temsula Ao's Two short story collections have been published- *These Hills Called Home: Stories from the War Zone* (Zubaan) and *Laburnum for My Head* (Penguin India). Ao's *Laburnum for My Head* is a collection of eight short stories. The stories are about the lives of people from the vibrant and troubled region of Northeast India. The stories in this collection have mythical as well as modern overtones. *These Hills Called Home* is a collection of ten Stories based on the Naga insurgency, the first and still unresolved threat to the idea of India as a nation. The stories are set in the 1950s- 60s when the Naga rebellion was at its peak and deal with the insurgency in Nagaland first by right to self-determination of the Naga people. Ao's stories remind us of the human costs of 'integrating' the Nagas into the 'mainstream'.

Kire is Nagaland's first published novelist in English. *Mari* (Harper Collins, 2010) is a novel about a seventeen-year-old girl who along with her sisters is evacuated from their house and separated from the rest of the family as Japanese forces invade their village during the Second World War. Mamang Dai is a journalist, author, poet, and former Civil Servant hailing from Itanagar, the capital city of Arunachal Pradesh. She was awarded Padma Shri for literature in 2011. She also received Sahitya Academy Award in 2017 for her work *The Black Hill*. This is a doomed love story of a girl from the Mishmee tribe, set against the picturesque backdrop of 19th Century Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. In the *Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai creates an unusual collage of voices and genres. Fiction, history, myth, and memory merge in a deceptively seamless manner in this slim book, revolving around several generations of an Adi family. Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* was set in the days of Assam agitation and insurgency of the 1970s and 1980s. The novel focuses on the life of its protagonist Rukmini, the wife of a district collector, from a small town in Assam.

Dhruba Hazarika, a Shillong boy, is a familiar name in Indian Writing in English. Serving as an IAS officer, he had the opportunity of visiting different places. His illustrious career as an author began with the novel *A Bowstring Winter* (2006). In his unique and innovative style of storytelling, he grasps the imagination of his readers unconventionally. Set in the picturesque location of Shillong, the novel tells the story of an unusual friendship between John Dkhar, a political science teacher, and James Kharlukhi and his gang. Hazarika here writes about Shillong with a good deal of affection. His second novel *Sons of Brahma* (2014) is another outstanding work of fiction in Indian writing in English. The novel centers on the dark world of the underground and a group of ruthless govt. officials. He has a short story collection to his credit which is titled *Luck*. Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* (Random House, 2013) is a collection of sublime short stories set in Shillong from 1800 to the present. The stories were infused with Khasi folklore with realities of life in the hills and the landscape. This debut collection of short stories tries to look into the transformation that swept through Northeast India over three centuries. This book also won the Sahitya Academy Young writer Award for the English language, the first from Meghalaya.

Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* (Penguin, 2013) is set in the village of Mayong. His debut novel tells the story of human suffering in the backdrop of insurgency and draconian administration through the eyes of a young city boy, Pablo. The work showcases Assamese culture and tradition. Kashyap says, "As a writer from Northeast, a region that is either underrepresented or misrepresented or denied representation, I did feel compelled to write about something that would try to address urgent realities of the times I grew up in". Siddhartha Sarma's *The Grasshopper's Run* deals with the invasion of the Japanese army in 1944, which wiped out an entire Naga village. Gojen, a young boy is intent on avenging the murder of his best friend. *The Grasshopper's Run* won the Crossword Book award for Children's Literature of 2010. Jahnavi Barua's debut novel *Rebirth* explores the journey of its protagonist Kaberi, who unfolds episodes of her life and vivid memories of her unborn child. She also wrote *Next Door*, a collection of short stories.

Siddhartha Deb's outstanding debut novel *The Point of Return* deals with nationhood, identity, memory, home, migration, exile, ethnic violence, bureaucratic corruption, and a son's gradual if belated understanding of the meaning of his father's life. Though the town is never mentioned, *The Point of No Return* is set in Shillong and tells the story of Dr. Dam and his son Babu. With the publication of *Surface*, his second novel, Deb seems to have consolidated his position as one of the best among the new crop of Indian English novelists. His *Share of Sky* by Rashmi Narzary is a collection of short stories set in a

remote Bodo village and follows the adventure of a young boy and his friends. Narzary won the 2016 Sahitya Academy Bal Puraskar in the English category for this collection. Ankush Saikia's *The Girl from the Nongrim Hills* is a thriller portraying the dark side of Shillong. Boasting of an interesting title Kenny Basumatary's *Chocolate Guitar* Momos captures the story of an aspiring musician Joseph and his unsuccessful relationships, though in a light-hearted manner.

CONCLUSION

Although it is too early to talk about a tradition (if it exists) of Indian English writing from the Northeast, memory, history, witnessing an overt or covert engagement with politics, including the politics of marginalization are some of the broad areas of concentration we have noticed in these writings. While Arup Kumar Dutta has a fairly large body of work to his credit, others like Deb or Kashyap are still in the early stages of their careers. With the active role played by the Publishing Houses like Penguin Books India and literary fora like the Shillong Poetry Society and North East Writers' Forum there now seems to be a climate set across the region conducive to writing.

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