

ENGLISH EDUCATION AND LITERATURE IN THE CULTURE OF VIOLENCE IN NORTHEAST INDIA

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Abstract:

The place of English in the whole scheme of the education has been a subject of much heated debate, since English is a foreign language. In spite of all this we are ardent admirers of English. English education has admittedly done us great good. English language is one of the richest languages in the world in respect of literature and culture.

The use of English in Northeast India had started during the pre-independence period, with the arrival of the Christian missionaries and the spread of English education. Western ideas and Christianity has spread widely in this region. English language has as such become the lingua franca in most of the states in Northeast India. Thus the study of English language is both a necessity and an advantage in this region.

In this paper I would like to focus on “English Education and Literature in the Culture of violence in Northeast India”. Northeast India is known to the world for its beautiful landscape, different races, different cultures and sub-cultures. Unfortunately peace could not be sustained in this region over the years and there is conflict and insurgency amongst the different ethnic tribes asserting their identity. The negligence and indifference from the mainland had spread insecurity in the region too.

The writers of Northeast have something very different to say because of the distinct regional sensibility of Northeast India. Northeast India is precariously situated, linked to the country only by the bottle neck at Siliguri. The moment Siliguri is dislodged by any alien force; the entire Northeast will be cut off from the rest of Indian sub-continent. There was this fearful possibility during the 1962 Chinese aggression. Therefore political myopia, in this important and highly sensitive area can have grave consequences. “If the Siliguri gap were ever to fall to the Chinese, Bhutan, NEFA, Assam and Nagaland would be cut off from India”. (Mehta, 1973, p. 257).

The social, cultural and political nature of the English writings depict violence in the region as a result of times that the states had experienced in the contemporary times. Most of the writings of Northeast Indian writers have been translated into English to educate and evoke empathy for the violent socio-political situations the region has faced. They provide an insight into the contemporary culture and environment of Northeast India and awaken the readers’ sensitivity to the region. Since the Northeast is going through a crisis of values in the social and political life; disregard shown to basic values like honesty and tolerance has become a matter of grave

concern. Crime, violence, cruelty, greed and apathy to human suffering have spread to all aspects of life –political, economic, and social.

After decades of violence it is but natural that the writers from the region express their sufferings, of fear and terror they had endured, the loss of faith, the bitterness, the anger, and pain of shattered dreams; and in spite of all, hopes for a better future through their writings. They have been portraying such events of their life which has left a permanent impression in their mind.

Looking at the current situation, the goals of peace, secularism, social justice and democracy to which human kind has declared its ideological commitment have come under severe strain in the region. Forces of social and national disintegration have become active, putting our democratic social order to its severest test, which has seriously affected the quality of life of the masses and has caused social tensions and unrest. All these problems can be effectively tackled through efforts -- educational and social. Communication of messages of peace, prosperity and development amongst the masses can happen much better in English language and literature, since this is an international language and understood by most of the masses in the region.

What we need under the present circumstances is to educate the learners to a good life. English education and literature in Northeast India is in a process of transmission of values in our education--something that we consider as good and desirable for the learner to acquire both for the learner's own and the society's good.

Key words : English Education, Northeast Indian Literature, Northeast Indian Writers, Violence, &, Social reform.

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In this paper I would like to focus on “English Education and Literature in the Culture of violence in Northeast India”. An analysis has been made through close reading of some of the texts written by prolific Northeast Indian writers in English.

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In the last few decades the past ethnic collectiveness has disintegrated into multitudes of ethnic wars within. The emotional intolerance against each other has increased, making the geographical territory a home for fear, doubt and suspicion. Laws like Armed Forces Special Powers Act and the Disturbed Areas Act took away the fundamental rights in the Northeast Indian region and continued to put them at the mercy of the armed forces. The bitterness and suspicion between the mainland India and Northeast India easily trigger new conflicts contributing to the alienation. The Northeast of India has been progressing at its own pace, apart from the rest of India. Its culture, traditions and traditional practises, dances and music, folktales, etc. remained unexposed until recently. The delayed publicity of these features perhaps has made it the dream destination of India. Presently the image of this region is of a quaint virgin land, camouflaged by its inherent mysticism, fortified by its geographical seclusion and left to fend for itself against the onslaught of conquerors at various times. There existed a strain and negativity in their relationships with the mainland from the past.

This entire long drawn socio-political crisis has marred the possibilities of coping up with the National and International scenario. The social, cultural and political nature of the English writings depicts violence in the region as a result of times that the states had experienced. Most of the writings of Northeast Indian writers have been translated into English to educate and evoke empathy for the violent socio-political situations the region has faced. They provide an insight into the contemporary culture and environment of Northeast India and awaken the readers’ sensitivity to the region. Since the Northeast is going through a crisis of values in the social and political life; disregard shown to basic values like honesty and tolerance has become a matter of grave concern. Crime, violence, cruelty, greed and apathy to human suffering have spread to all aspects of life –political, economic, and social. After decades of violence it is but natural that the writers from the region express their sufferings, of fear and terror they had endured, the loss of faith, the bitterness, the anger, and pain of shattered dreams; and in spite of all, hopes for a better future through their writings. They have been portraying such events of their life which has left a permanent impression in their mind. The social, cultural and political nature of their writings reveals violence in the region. Literature that has emerged from the region in the last two decades recreates stories from a history that has been bypassed. The writers present the dynamics of socio-cultural and political scenario of Northeast India in their writings, focusing on the culture and society of the region and develop sensitivity to social, cultural and political issues on real life situations; with the idea of social reform and change in value system in the contemporary society. They present the dynamics of socio cultural and political scenario, focusing on history, culture and society of the region.

“Violence features as a recurrent theme because the story of violence seems to be a never ending one in this region...” (Misra, 2011: xix). Crime, violence and indifference to human suffering have spread to all walks of life. Prejudices and complexes transmitted through the social environment are hindering the promotion of equality. Our physical environment--rivers, mountains, forests, plant and animal life-- is getting increasingly polluted and depleted of its resources. Narrow casteist, communalist, linguistic and rationalistic outlooks are dividing the people and coming in the way of developing a unifying national and international outlook.

Almost all the eight states of the Northeast, (Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya,

Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Sikkim) have been long besieged by insecurity and violence, death, kidnappings, rape and torture on a daily basis, governmental apathy, corruption, poverty and unemployment. People are caught in the crossfire of insurgents, military, non-state actors and the government's counter – insurgency operations. But it would be wrong to say that the literary exercises produced from this region is confined to depicting violence, the political upheaval, and identity related matters only. There are writers who have used the scenic beauty of the landscapes, the fascinating myth and folklore of the region in their writings. A few have even chosen to follow their individual mind unaffected by the times. The creativity of these writers has been widely acclaimed. To name a few, Mamang Dai, Robin Ngangom, Arupa Patangia Kalita, Indira Goswami, Sanjay Hazarika Esther Syiem, Mitra Phukan, Dhruva Hazarika, Anjum Hasan, Monalisa Changkisa, Easterine Kire, Indrani Rai Medhi, Siddhartha Roy, Jahnavi Barua, Siddhartha Deb, Sebastian Zumvu, Temsula Ao, Bimabati Thiyam Ongbi, Dhruvajyoti Bora, Rita Chaudhury, Purabi Bormudoi, Manorama Das Medhi, Anuradha Sarma Pujari, Samudra Gogoi, Aruni Kashyap, Mousumi Kandali; are prolific and powerful fiction writers. They write with an intense sense of awareness for the cultural loss as a result of insurgency, ethnic conflicts and violence in the region and try to reconstruct tradition. Haunted by the past they write with a view to enable them to bring desirable changes in the society, torn apart by socio-political unrest, ethnic conflicts, and insurgency and separatist movements which have affected the cultural realms. They constantly refer to the past history and memory making historical judgments about contemporary issues. Since they have witnessed the great changes in the region's history during their lifetimes and therefore they turned to be harbinger of those changes in the region, which brought about tremendous transformation of mental outlook in the society.

The work of the older generation of writers reflects the strains of violence and death. Indira Goswami's *"The Journey"*, Arupa Patangia Kalita's powerful novel *"Phelani"* and short stories like *"Someday, Sometime Numoli"*, Sebastian Zumvu's story *"Son of the soil"* (about a young boy caught by the army for pretending to be an insurgent in order to extort money.) Temsula Ao's *"These Hills Called Home: Stories From a War Zone"* (a vivid depiction of what happened in Nagaland in the 1960s and 1970s), Bimabati Thiyam Ongbi's story, *"He's Still Alive"*, Dhruvajyoti Bora's trilogy on the insurgency, Rita Chaudhury's novel *"Ei Samay Sei Samay"* on the Assam agitation, to name but a few, have dealt with these themes in terrifying detail. Many younger writers continue to grapple with these issues. In Aruni Kashyap's first novel, *"The House with a Thousand Novels"*, seeks to understand why so many educated thinking young man took to the gun. A number of these young men are now writing novels and memoirs like Samudra Gogoi's, *"A Former ULFA Member's Memoirs"*. There is a looking back to find answers to today's troubling questions.

Much of the original English or regional language literature that has emerged from the region in the last two decades either has a very strong political tone or recreates stories from a history that has been bypassed while telling the ancient, medieval or modern history of Northeast India. Arunachal Pradesh's Lummer Dai and Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, Assam's Rong Bong Terang, Manipur's Yengkhom Indira or Mizoram's Margaret Ch Zama are authors with a strong grip on social issues. Tilottoma Misra, says:

"An intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation with 'other' cultures is a recurrent feature of the literatures of the north-eastern states. Each small community or linguistic group has responded through its oral or written communication to the encounters with the majoritarian cultures from either mainland India or from outside the borders of the country, in its own distinctive manner".

Changes in writing has been incredibly swift and phenomenal – as each crisis has brought in new themes, new motivations, new character types, new viewpoints – as a result of the change in climate and environment. There is a great creative motivation now in the new movements which brings all members of the Northeast Indian writers group together and cements them in a common bond.

Looking at the current situation, the goals of peace, secularism, social justice and democracy to which human kind has declared its ideological commitment have come under severe strain in the region. Forces of social and national disintegration have become active, putting our democratic social order to its severest test, which has seriously affected the quality of life of the masses and has caused social tensions and unrest. All these problems can be effectively tackled through efforts -- educational and social. Communication of messages of harmony, peace, prosperity and development amongst the masses could happen much better in English language and literature, since this is an international language and understood by most of the masses in Northeast India.

Education is a process of initiating the learner to a good life. It is a process of transmission of something that we consider as good and desirable for the learner to acquire both for the learner's own and the society's good. There is a need for value education in Northeast India, which can be best done through the spread of English literature and education, so that much more can be learned and understood by the national and the international world about the social, cultural and political scenario of Northeast India. The English literature curriculums in the educational institutions of Northeast India have started teaching and learning of the English Literature written by the writers of the Northeast India. But there is a necessity to include English Literature written by the writers of the Northeast India in the national institutions as well to create a better understanding of the long neglected region

The Literature of these contemporary writers, motivate the masses, and this could lead to knowledge, enlightenment, development and prosperity in the Northeast Indian region. The writers make efforts through their writings for sustaining peace in the region which can be done through peaceful debate, negotiation, give-and take, and accommodation – so that the lives of innocents can be spared and the horrors of terror and warfare averted, and ordinary men and women can at least coexist with members of other community in the same political space and look forward to fulfilling their lives in security and peace. This has been the endeavour of the contemporary writers of Northeast India, which has lead to socio-political and cultural dynamics in the region. In view of their historicity and social character, our educational aims stand in need of critical examination in the light of changing social, economic, political, cultural concerns. Educational aims after all emerge out of an image of the human individual and a vision of the good life and the ideal society as these are conceived from time to time. What we need under the present circumstances is to educate the learners to a good life. English education and literature in Northeast India is in a process of transmission of values in our education-- something that we consider as good and desirable for the learner to acquire both for the learner's own and the society's good, since English literature has given expression to great social and political ideas, which could lead to a good life in Northeast India.

This calls for a deliberate thrust on values in our education and more intense and concerted educational action for the cultivation of values. Hence, the need for value education, which the writers of English literature from the region have so far endeavoured to do.

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