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Rainbow Rising: Indian Novels from Its North-Eastern Part

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Abstract:

The overall perception about North-eastern part of India is one of clash-trodden and violent-ridden; and the first response about the literary practice that is done here is that it reflects that image of clash, violence, etc. But this paper argues that these violence, clash, insurgency, bloody incidents, ethnic rivalry are not all that the literary practice of this region upholds, rather it also reflects some positive impulses of livelihood pattern, unique set of cultural values, customs, rituals, code of friendship, bonding of trustworthiness, love, loyalty, etc. Secondly, effort has also been taken to show how far literature can be effective in erasing the overall perception about the region. The focus of this paper is restricted to the genre of novel- novels that are written recently, the oldest one being published in 2005.

Keywords: Perception- India- Northeast- Novel- Positive.

It is undeniably true that the North-eastern part of India is at present racked and tormented by incidents bordering on clash, violence etc. This scenario and the projection of this scenario through various media, newspaper reports, seminars, etc. has largely contributed to the general image-formation about the region - that no, this is not the place which we associate with peace and normalcy. Much of the focus till date regarding this area is zoomed in on the insurgency and its various ramifications. Dr. Ananya S. Guha of Indira Gandhi National Open University, in an article entitled “Violence and Literature – Realities of North East India”, argues that the writers writing on this region should focus more and more on peace-making process, rather than on violence, insurgency. He was commenting coming out of a seminar organized by a famous Delhi publishing house, where, he lamented, how almost all the paper presenters talked about various forms of insurgencies and representation of violence, and hardly any one mentioned about peace-making process that lies hidden under the veneer of insurgency. To him, the more we talk about violence, insurgency, the more it becomes advantageous for the politicians and the local leaders to perpetuate that situation. However, if we cast our glance towards the literary culture that is being practiced here and about this region, we can discover that the content of much of the writing does not fully flourish on clash-ridden incidents, and there are other dimensions that can be the focus of much literary attention. Before delving deep into this purpose, let us be

categorically clear that the focus of this article will mainly be to the genre of novel- those which are written very recently, the oldest one being published in 2005.

The popular label “Northeast” entered into the Indian lexicon in 1971. Preeti Gill in her “Introduction” to *The Peripheral Centre: Voices From India’s Northeast*, opines that “Like other directional place names (the Far East, the Middle East) Northeast India reflects an external and not a local point of view” (Gill 3). She further suggests that in none of the local languages does any word exist that has this effect of lumping together seven or eight very disparate states, where each individual state has its own cultures, ethnicities, physical contours, etc., and certainly very distinct in its nature of its problems. Rightly does she comment, “...the term Northeast India cannot easily become the emotional focus of a collective political project” (3). That’s why, it is better, to hail each and every state by its individual name, and not to unnecessarily resort to a collective rubric as that, because each and every state bears a unique cultural legacy. If it is at all needed to point towards this region as a whole, I think it would be wise to use North-eastern part of India, instead of the popular nomenclature Northeast India, because the latter term represents a duality. First it connotes that the place is a region altogether different from India, while at the same time the tag India suggests that the region is somewhat related to the country. Overall, the term sometimes evokes a sense of separatist attitude. But if we say North-eastern part of India, it denotes a directional aspect of this nomenclature, without evoking a kind of separatist attitude. The seed of this separatism was perhaps sown during the time of Independence, when some of the states wanted complete secession from India as a nation state. For example, in Nagaland ethnic violence arose as a result of Phizo’s, then leader of the Naga people, parochial demand for a separate independent Nagaland¹, but Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, then the Prime Minister of India, steadfastly refused to attribute the status to them. It was sometimes in 1955, when the Indian Government began to send armed forces when the people of Nagaland, largely motivated by the words Phizo, began to observe civil disobedience. Prior to the advent of the Ahoms in 1228 A.D., the land around Brahmaputra River was known as *Pragjyotisha* or the place of eastern astronomy and Kamrupa. Later the Burmese entered through the eastern borders and overran the territory at a time when court intrigue and dissensions were sapping the vitality of the Ahom royalty. It became a British protectorate in 1826 when the Burmese ceded the Assam to the British under provision of the treaty of Yandaboo. The problem with the people of Assam who mostly live on hill region is that after the Independence they began to look upon the plainspeople as more foreign and alien than the British. Today the demand for separate and independent Boroland keeps the state of eastern astronomy aflame. In Meghalaya the present turmoil mostly hovers on the issue of infiltration from the neighboring Bangladesh. However this is more rampant towards the eastern part of the state. Other than this, the rest of the state is peaceful and free from chaos. Most of the books which are set in Northeast India no doubt talk about insurgency and violence; there are hardly any books² of prime importance which exclusively focus on the rich variety of landscape, the enormous bio-diversity with its unique set of cultural values, etc. Under the apparent veneer of mistrust, hatred, jealousy, treachery runs the thin flow of trust, love friendliness, a sense of cooperation among people. The novels which are dealt with in this article are no doubt covered by incidents bordering on violence. But after going through the novels a sensible reader would be able to understand that only by issues as these, the characters in the novels or the worlds of the novels cannot be governed. Let us consider the novels one by one and in that process it would be convenient to establish the point.

One main problem with the North-eastern part of India is that most often people look at the region as a homogenized group. In that case one risks at overlooking the sheer variety the region offers in so many varied aspects. That's why the focus of this article will be restricted to those novels which are set in two states – Assam and Meghalaya.

The world-picture Mitra Phukan depicts in *The Collector's Wife* is coated with bloody incidents. But inside the bitter-coated pill remains the tiny seeds of sugar, which can be relished only when one cracks open the pill. Rukmini is by profession a college lecturer and her husband, Siddharth Bezboruah, is the District Collector (hereafter DC). From the very beginning the relationship between Rukmini and Siddharth is one of apathetic. Siddharth gets hardly any time to share with his wife because he is always busy with his official work. It might not be wrong to say that the ever-occurring clash-ridden incidents make the top district administrative officer always on the move. On the other hand these incidents get reported to the college staff room where Rukmini has to sit in her off time, and it creates an awkward position for her inside the staff room listening to them. While she enjoys a kind of special status being wife of the DC, the reports which by default concern her husband, debunk that comfort zone. But it would be wrong to say that everyone participates in that discussion. While there are some hidden rivalries among the staff, there are cases when support and friendship are shared. While inside the staff room Rukmini is poked by Priam Deka, the DC's wife gets to share her friendship with Nandini Deuri, wife of the superintendent of police, and Manoj Mahanta, a salesman. There is a strong familial bondage between Rukmini Bezboruah and her mother-in-law, despite the fact that Renu Bezboruah lives away from her daughter-in-law. The North-eastern part of India with its unique setting has a unique set of cultural values and practices. The value system set up by a traditional and domineering patriarchal society, fails to interpret the world-picture portrayed in *The Collector's Wife*. Rukmini is psychologically weak, yet she is strong enough to withstand all the psychological fear and trauma that comes her way; she is the wife of a top bureaucratic officer, yet she does not take pride on that issue, rather she tries to be independent- which is proved by the fact that she does not resign her college teaching post despite being a part time teacher and at the same time she does not want to completely shake off her patriarchal affiliation. Not only Rukmini, other minor characters also are hard to define in traditional patriarchal set terms. Rukmini's mother-in-law Renu Bezboruah does not squarely put the blame on her daughter-in-law for not being able to produce any children; rather she blames her own son for not being able to carve any time out of his pact schedule. Yet Mrs. Bezboruah despite being highly educated still retains the age-old belief that wearing an amulet would help her daughter-in-law's cause in producing children. Nandini Deuri, after the situation of her husband Mr. Deuri's death, is mentally strong enough to take up a business on her own in a bid to carve out her own identity niche. But that does not mean that she endeavors to deny her previous patriarchal affiliation through her new enterprise, rather she says that she was proud being Mr. Deuri's wife. Traditionally speaking, women are described as psychologically weak, passive, submissive, domesticated, dependent on others for physical mental and biological needs, etc., but the sociological dimension Phukan's novel offers here hardly fits the traditional patriarchal set terms.

Like the portraiture of Rukmini, the way her husband Siddharth is limned also defies traditional value system attached to an overbearing patriarch. He refuses to play a perfect patriarchal foil, someone who looks after her wife as a production machine for children, "He did not, like other males, hanker after a child, a male heir, someone who would "carry on the line after him""

(Phukan 52). On top of that when Rukmini reveals that she has spent a considerable amount of time with Manoj and that the child she is carrying is not Siddharth's but Manoj's, Siddharth does not squarely put the blame on Rukmini, rather he confesses his own share of irresponsibility in their conjugal life. Moreover, to keep up the so called sacred tradition of institutional marriage Siddharth could have forced his wife to undergo abortion. Instead he says, "Abortion is an ugly word. I don't like it myself. It's like imposing the consequences of the parents' action on the unborn child" (315).

The ambience of Parbatpuri is so that any sensitive man would deter to opt for something which would end life. The socio-cultural vicinity is such that it forces sensitive human beings to respect life, to do anything which would preserve life. That's why Siddharth says:

Living here in Parbatpuri I've come to respect life... Life is so cheap here. Death is everywhere. Sudden death, like Deuri's. Long-drawn-out deaths, agonizing ends, as life seeps out, drop after painful drop, through bullet holes in the body. (315)

Many critics are more prone to point out the rampant violence here in the North-eastern part of India, but very few draw their attention to how people are also desperate to save life, to preserve life, thereby endeavoring to stop violence.

That the North-eastern region is not all about insurgency and violence gets proved by the fact that it offers some fascinating landscape of peerless and charming beauty. Like Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, where the author intends to write about the transformations ushered in by the industrialization against the backdrop of agrarian England, but the novel, as it progresses, does offer some topographical features of almost pristine beauty, which shows how English countryside still retains some lush green outfield where love and some intimate relationship still has a ground to flourish, Phukan's novels also shows how the Brahmaputra valley and its vicinity offers some fascinating landscape of peerless beauty. Rukmini being the DC's wife always travels sitting inside their private car, but the four-walled atmosphere creates a kind of claustrophobic ambience for her and she gets relief when she looks out on the lush greenery outside. There are passages in the novels which show that even behind the veil of violence and clash remains the charming beauty of the region.

From Assam let us turn our focus onto another North-eastern state which is Meghalaya. As the very name suggests it is the abode of the clouds (*Megh+Alaya*, i.e., dwelling place of clouds). One signboard put up by a local holiday resort at Cherrapunji, the wettest place upon earth, runs a caption – "A Land of Breathtaking Beauty and Exotic People".

Anjum Hasan's novel *Lunatic in my Head*, shortlisted for the Crossword book Award, is set in the capital city of this state. Meghalaya is at present witnessing some problems regarding infiltration, mainly from its neighboring state Bangladesh. Thus this problem is mostly rampant towards the western part of it. The capital city Shillong and the rest of the state are generally peaceful. If the roots of insurgency and violent activities lie in the multiple nature of the ethnic culture that is so very common in North-eastern part of India, it is this very ethnic mosaic that the seeds of multicultural vibrancy lie in. India bears a long tradition of multicultural diversity – where each and every race retains its own uniqueness without disturbing the balance of the whole country as a nation state. Mr. B Dutta Roy of North-East India Council for Social Science Research, Shillong, ensconces the view that Northeast India has a long tradition of secularism

and conflict resolution. The North-eastern part of India comprising seven sister-states is like a rainbow where seven different colors are juxtaposed in one colorful bow. Apparently, each of the seven different colors is very difficult to recognize, but once one stands and stares the myriad colored rainbow stands revealed to him or her. We need patience and perseverance if we are to solve the issues regarding ethnicity, any alacrity on the part of the outsiders would only lead to further worsening of the situation. We have to learn and teach them with sufficient love and care that this ethnic mosaic (of not just North-eastern part of India, but India as a nation) is not something to make the site of war, but something to celebrate. When we open the very first page of Hasan's *Lunatic In My Head*, we get to see this mosaic printed. Firdaus Ansari, one of the protagonists of the novel and a college lecturer by profession, walks on her way to college and en route she meets people of various origins. A woman waving to her seems a quarter British a quarter Assamese of the tea planter variety, the men working in a roadside restaurant, are from Nepal, some buoyant boys are khasi – having origin in Shillong, two men walking under black umbrella are Bengalis, and the liquor store-keeper is a Goan. Firdaus herself has a complicated identity – her parents are Biharis, but she was born here. Now in describing these things the author does not take recourse of any celebratory tone, nor does she express it in any overtly fearful way. But here let me jump all the way through right at the end of the novel, where Firdaus says, "...we keep complaining about Shillong, but think of all the good things about this place" (Hasan A. 344).

Then she and Flossie "spent a few silent moments contemplating the town's unnamed virtues" (344). So, the overwhelming perception that one carves out from the novel is that Shillong is not everything about violence and insurgency; there are lots of other dimensions of the place which the people of Shillong can really be proud of.

Structurally speaking, the novel is subdivided into different parts – Wonder, Sadness, Love, etc., but the last chapter is significantly titled as Peace. Clearly the message is that however much people talk about kidnapping, instability, peace is very much within the reach. The only thing is that they remain, as the items of old furniture in an old house inhabited by old people become layered with dust and the polish and glossiness become visible only when that layered of dust is wiped clear, unused and that's why unfocussed due to overwhelming spotlight on the negative aspects. Aman Moondy, an aspirant for the highest administrative service, is in search of lovely Concordella, and he is hopeful that one day he'll meet his love. Albeit Sophie, an eight-year old girl, is very much aware of the fact that she is adopted, still she is always in search of a happy and well united family picture, and towards the end of the novel Sophie's belief that she is adopted is dimmed and "she had managed to do rather well in the final exam" (326). Mr. and Mrs. Das's struggle comes to an end, as Mr. Das finds a job that he was looking for so long and Mrs. Das starts on her tuition entrepreneurship.

Aruni Kashyap's debut novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* is written in a narrative told from the perspective of a boy called Pablo. Pablo is on his visit to ancestral place after almost four years for one of his aunt's marriage. From the outset the talk of marriage and a sinister sense regarding insurgency and military attack hover on the atmosphere of the house. The marriage does not take place until at the end when it meets with fatal tragedy. Again the novel has a bitter coating and the real taste of storytelling art lies inside the bitter pill, and once it is cracked the multiple facets of the art get revealed. The technique here employed is reminiscent of another Indian novelist's technique employed in *The Shadow Lines* – both are told from the perspective

of a boy as he moves around various places. In Kashyap's novel, Pablo comes to Mayong to attend his Moina pehi's marriage and, as the novel progresses, he meets his relatives and gets involved in various incidents. Oholya jethai with her insistence on age-old traditional customs and rituals, Mridul's brotherly affection towards Pablo and courtship with Manju Mahatu, Pablo's affair with Anamika, the love-affair between Prosanto da, who is Pablo's uncle in relation but Pablo prefers to call him an elder brother rather than uncle because Prosanto da, as Pablo thinks, was too young to be called *Khura* (uncle), and Onulupa who belongs to another community, women squabbling among themselves on various domestic issues – traditions, family values etc. – all this creates a self-sufficient world. Although Prosanto da is enamored with Onulupa, he is continuously debarred from marrying her, because Onulupa, according to the stern vigils and purists of the village, is a fallen woman as she has “slept with an army officer” (Kashyap 149-150). Moina's marriage lacks that marriage-like flavor as songs are not played on, because it is Mridul who usually takes the charge of playing songs, but he is engrossed with Manju and hardly gets time to lend that extra bit of flavor to the whole ceremony, Pablo's intermittent courtship with Anamika only ends in a tragedy when Anamika dies for, as Pablo later reminisces, their “little pleasure” (182) that they had on a bed of straw. Now all these affairs and the marriage cease to be fructified, because what had happened with Oholya jethai when she was young and marriageable works as a sinister warning against all odds that might intrude upon the scenario. Under the veneer of this atmosphere flourish the friendship between Pablo and Mridul, so much so that Pablo feels betrayed when Mridul does not share with him his little unknown facts about his personal life. In the course of the novel we get to hear that Bolen Borta, who dies midway through the novel, was once an intimate friend of Pablo's father. Although Oholya jethai stands as a stern purist sometimes verging on being querulous, Okoni pehi, Onima baroma and she do share some familial bonding. Apparently it seems that Oholya jethai does everything out of her own guilt feeling, but can we altogether deny her role in her effort in safeguarding the traditional values? Her stern objection to Prosanto da's marriage might be looked upon as a precautionary measure against further mishap. On the other hand, Prosanto da's daring attempt to defy the code of conduct even after being not nescient of Oholya jethai's disaster can be looked upon as a bold attempt in making love a true champion. It does not fan the parochial community feeling, but it tries to usher in a new wave of life against the constrained and constant feeling of fear and foul. Behind the curtain also flourish the gradual bonding between Pablo and Anamika.

Critics might argue that these are not enough to overlook the haunting feeling of terror and intimidation. But the point is that is that had the region been all about terrorized feeling, love, friendship, trustworthy bonding would have ceased to exist. The only thing is that they are suppressed, and one feels, it is our duty to interpret the story in a way that can contribute to a good cause. This perhaps gets best reflected in Kashyap's own words:

“There are many ways of telling the same story. It really depends on what you want to leave listener with” (210).

From Mayong let us turn our focus on to Shillong again, where Daisy Hasan, another emerging Indian novelist writing about the North-eastern part, sets his novel *The to Let House*. Just when the To Let Mansion is dazzling with light for the Kali puja festival, people start pelting stones at the house to turn the festival of light into that of fight. The problem in Shillong, as shown in the novel, is that the outsiders who are locally termed as “*dkhars*” are encroaching upon the native

tribal people and the opportunities for the local people are gradually shrinking³. On top of that the Central government's decision to set up military camps in various places is further deteriorating the situation. The government sets up camps with a view to normalize the situation, but the fissure remains between what the government wants and what is actually being materialized by the government agency, which gets reflected in the words of Lambert Narendra Don who is one of the characters in the novel:

Our demands for equal employment opportunities have not been met by this government. There is gross discrimination against our people on every front. The border problem remains. The army continues to brutalize our brothers in neighboring states. (Hasan. D. 102)

One feels that the problem remains in looking at things in homogenized way. We have to understand that each and every tribe has its unique demand and each and every tribe has its unique problem. To look at the seven sister-states of this North-eastern part of India from one singular perspective is not so wise, and the Central government must understand that not all the people of this region are in the violent and clash-ridden activities out of their volition. That's why Kulay in the novel "wishes for the strength to set things right" (70). Although Ma stands motionless and unable to utter a single word overwhelmed by hatred as intense as the love she had once felt, "but she knows that sooner or later her love will consume this hate again" (64).

People in Shillong are now, as if, living on a borderline, with peace in sight but never reaching it. That's why Hasan in a prefatory note to the Mansion section of the novel adds – "We are children just within reach of happiness but always falling short" (5).

In this novel also, like Phukan does in her novel, the charming and fascinating beauty of Shillong is captured in the words of Governor, another important character in the novel, "Shilling is the Rome of the east...and I am its Romeo" (49).

Certainly by writing this novel what Hasan does is to uphold the contemporary scenario before us; but if we delve deep into the fiction-world of Hasan we shall discover that people are having conflict resolving attitude, they are in the hunt of peaceful world devoid of any strife – a world where there is belief, trust and reconciliation.

Dhruba Hazarika's *A Bowstring Winter* starts with a clash that takes place at a Shillong restaurant – a clash which leaves an eyewitness who, it is significant to note, incidentally becomes instrumental in saving a life. Although John Dkhar by origin is an outsider, he is embraced by the native people like Kharkongor and James. The popular dominant image of Shillong as a struggle between the natives and the outsiders, who are termed as "*dkhars*", gets debunked here, as John Dkhar despite being an outsider, is welcomed by James and co., as he had extended his helping hand in saving a life, 'How strange it is that you have saved two men who do not deserve to be saved, at least from a beating. Ah, your sense of peace is something new in Kaizang...' (Hazarika 30).

Hazarika deliberately begins his novel with a clash, and by doing so he obliquely hints at the fact that amidst the winter of cold war remains the spring of hope for peace – John Dkhar here acts as an usherer of peace and non-violence. What is more significant is that after that incident John becomes part of a trustworthy bonding with James and Kharkongor that lasts until the end of the novel.

That the novel is not all about violence is proved by the very title. Apparently the mentioning of bow and winter bring in the association of clash and fight, but a deeper significance lies in the fact that a code of friendship remains hidden. Like the bowstring it is tight, there is no room for looseness and like the motion of arrows, it is straight without any digressions of disloyalty and faithlessness.

Living in this group camaraderie John is gradually drawn towards Jennifer D Santos, a staff from the college where John also teaches, and a love relationship begins to flourish between them. Critics try to ensconce the view that novels written against the backdrop of this region are replete with gory details. They are further of the view that the lifestyle of this region does not offer any linguistic room for anyone to record it in a manner that reflects normalcy and peace. In other words, the way people behave, talk and communicate betrays a kind of urgency- an urgency that underlines the hostile attitude among the people. Literature as a slice of the bread of broader lifestyle must reflect that inimical demeanor of the people living here in the North-eastern part of India. But chapter numbers 9 and 10 of the “December” segment of Hazarika’s novel hardly incorporate any details that might seem that John and Jennifer’s relationship trail behind violence. Rather the linguistic flow sprints along as much as the relationship between the two young people who are more prone to meet and mate than to meet and clash. John and Jennifer get to share a pleasurable time riding the boat in a lake which “remained for all Shillongites ... a symbol of grace and beauty” (97). Again the way the lake is limned attests to the fact that Shilling does offer some places of peerless beauty:

It is as if the lake had been designed for romance, for heartbeats in pairs and footsteps in elegance. It is a park where the old become young and the young become younger. (97)

Although the ghost of fear and intimidation hover on their amorous atmosphere, it is this trailing phosphorescence of fear that makes their love relationship all the more glowing and radiant. Any overt suggestion to violence is sunned by a covert symbolic hint to cold which creeps in between John and Jennifer’s physical fusion, but that coldness ceases to long last, as both of them feel the warmth of love:

Are you warm?

Yes I’m warm, John. With you near me I’ll never be cold. (108)

Thus in their love world warmth of love always triumph over coldness of death.

Nongkynrih in her “Prelude” to the book *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends* writes that “the Khasis are a great storytelling people” (Nongkynrih 2007, vii). This habit of storytelling flows down the generations in that clan based society. In Hazarika’s novel *Kharkongor* retains this art, and albeit he faces linguistic barrier, he exhibits this art while narrating his story to John.

The ethnic mosaic of this part of India offers a fascinating scope for academic discourse. How the tribal people of Shillong are desperate to keep their customs and traditions intact is proved by *Kharkongor*’s decision to fight with his bow and arrows, and it is a part of their culture to play teer game, so much so that to be in Shillong and not to have played teer is much like “a cultivator who has not felt mud in his toes” (36). *Kharkongor*’s decision to stick to bow and arrow and never use the more modernized and upgraded fire weapon like gun even when his life is at stake, is not a symbol of perpetuation of death and violence, rather it’s like a swansong to him,

something which carries traditional tribal ethos and conscious. He carries bow and arrow, but he refuses to carry the thought of killing with what is traditionally known as instruments of killing:

Perhaps a bow but not a gun. And I will use it without the thought of killing inside me... There is much poetry in the bow, John Dkhar, but in the gun there is only the matter of, what you say, much destruction, much thought of producing fear. That is not poetry, John Dkhar. (135)

No doubt Bah Kharkongor remains the best teer man in Shillong.

The British colonial intervention in the North-eastern region which started in 1826 brought with them the linguistic burden and still the local khasi people's abhorrence towards English is a marker of their attempt to keep up the purity of their native language. That's why Bah Kharkongor exclaims in disgust,

These English words! They taste like Scotch whisky, with much talk about how expensive it is, instead of enjoying a fine drink. It is unlike my own much honest kalyiad. (210)

The replacement of the local terms and names, like *Sohra* with Cherrapunji, as a result of colonial intervention throws obstacles in the smooth flow of their conversations. But the very fact that Bah Kharkongor chooses English as the medium of his communication with John, who is a professor with a local college, is a partial hint that the local tribal people are always open to global pouring in. They harbor hate towards external cultural intervention not out of sheer abhorrence towards that alien culture, but because that foreign culture is eroding away their native culture. And after the departure of the British, the tribal people of Shillong began to look upon the plainspeople as more foreign and therefore inimical to them, which is why a kind of apathetic distance continued to exist. But nowadays discussions and negotiations at the bureaucratic level have brought the situation under control and rebels groups are surrendering their arms and ammunition.

There are some passages in the novel which seem to overshadow the gory details. During the course of the conversation between Kharkongor and John Dkhar we get to see through the speeches of the former how Shillong offers some fascinating places to wander about. Out of multiple such passages I quote here one:

That is a beautiful place. The hills like mountains but not green. Blue from the sky and the mist always hanging around, and when that is not there, the sun is falling in much long lines on each hill. Ah! John Dkhar it needs much luck to have been born in a place as beautiful as that, do not you agree? (201)

What is significant to note is that Kharkongor does not resort to an escapist attitude. But he considers himself lucky taking birth and living in such a place as Shillong. The point is that a land of such a natural beauty cannot be pushed away out of negligence and ethnic violence, and the popular dominant attitude towards the region as a place of ethnic clash, insurgency and military attack do not bear the identity of the place; rather our focus should more be zoomed in on how there are some unique social values, customs, rituals, patterns of living and how there are some unique behavioral features, code of friendship, bonding of trustworthiness, love, loyalty do exist, but the overwhelming discussions of violence and insurgency sometimes overshadow them.

The apparent disjointed narrative structure of Bijoya Sawian's *Shadow Men* structurally underlines the fragmented and scattered lifestyle of the people of Shillong- a place where matrilineal system prevails. As it has already been pointed out, the present problem of Shillong mostly concerns the tussles between the outsiders who legally or otherwise immigrate into the region and the local hill people who are the original inhabitants of the region. The local Khasi people's abhorrence towards the outsiders has a mythical origin in that when two people- one from the hill and other from the plain region, were bringing the God's words to their respective people, the hill-man lost the manuscript while crossing the river which was in full spate, but the plainsman succeeded in crossing the river with the manuscript intact. This created a kind of rift between the people from the plain region and those from the hill region. But the present problem more concerns the local people's anxiety that the opportunities of getting jobs are narrowing down, and it is mostly the outsiders who are eating into those opportunities, which, as the local people think, should go to them first. It is not that the plainspeople are deliberately eating into the opportunities of the local hill people, but the fact remains that the hill people are slow to grab them; and that's why the anger is aimed at the government policies. This discrepancy is adding fuel to the rift between the plainspeople and the hill people, because the local Khasi People are administered by the plainspeople who sometimes overlook the demand of the local tribal people. Rightly does Strong capture the essence of the problem, "It's all about the powerful and the powerless" (Sawian 91).

On top of these remains the local leaders' dishonesty. A slightly better positioned person in society is only concerned about his own gain up the social ladder, and he would use other persons tempting with the bait of an overall development. But what is ultimately achieved is the gain of such persons as the Boss and the loss of such persons as Aibor.

In an age when patriarchal domination is under the scanner, Shillong, a hill town in north-eastern part of India, has a unique matrilineal system- a system where inheritance of wealth is incumbent on the weaker sex. In the clan-based society of the Khasi, the addition of this matrilineal dimension makes them a unique race with a unique tradition. However much Robert feels neglected in that system where a girl is given more preference, it is not the frustration of such people as Robert, but the fascination of the region that attracts the outsiders. I myself being an outsider feel lucky taking birth in a country like India which nurtures so many varied traditions, each of them very unique in its set-up. Thus, it is undeniable that there are some glaring problems in the region, at least as is evident from the fictions that are set in this region. But underneath those glaring problems remains the hope for solutions which are hinted at the end of the novel, where in the "Epilogue" Aita tells Raseel how "everything was much better now in Shillong" (159), and in Aita's words Raseel finds great comfort and solace.

In a nutshell, these literary products offer glimpses which uphold the fact that a region which is popularly known and labeled as violence-prone, clash-ridden, torn and tormented by various insurgencies, is not all about violence, clash and insurgency. As there are multiple facets of the same story, there are other perspectives of this region also which reveal how the seven sister-states can sit together peacefully and in a harmonious way. As we need to stand with patience and stare at a rainbow to get the charm of each of the seven different colors, we need similar kind of patience and perseverance to get the charm of each color of the seven sister-states of the North-eastern part of India, and then the rainbow of this region will not be under the black cloud of negative perspectives, but would come out and glow with its myriad rays.

Notes:

1. Nirmal Nibedin in his *North-East India: the Ethnic Explosion* quotes a Mizo official, “When a small community realises it has to live with a much larger community forever, the built in defence mechanism tells him that he is in danger. It does not matter whether or not he can give a specific name to this fear because he feels it in his innermost being and begins to anticipate its malignant effects... Yes it cannot matter whether he can specify the danger. All the same he is a victim of fear.” I think what the Mizo official hints at is a kind of deep rooted psychological fear that a small ethnic group suffers from. The same applies to the Naga community.
2. For a comprehensive list of books a reader may search under the category “Northeast India”.
3. How the term “*dkhar*” came to mean those people who do not live in the hill region, readers are directed to consult Nongkynrih’s book *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends*.

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