

IDENTITY CRISIS IN NORTH EASTERN STATES OF INDIA: A STRUGGLE FOR SUSTAINING IDENTITY

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Abstract

The North-Eastern region of India, also known as the Land of seven sisters, is unique for its exquisite beauty, wild life and literature. This place is a home for diverse tribal communities speaking different languages and following diverse cultural practices, but over the years, the region has been experiencing inter and intra tribal conflicts and human rights violations by the security forces.

The influx of refugees from Bengal, Nepal, Bangladesh and migrant workers from Bihar and UP has reduced the tribal community into a minority, establishing immigrants as the imminent residents. The sights of alienation, uprootedness, violence, injustice is reflected in the literary works of the writers from this land. Most of the ethnic assertions are due to the ethnic groups' desperate attempt to protect their identity.

The paper would try to explore the identity issues of the indigenous people of north-east India, focusing on the four stories from an Anthology of North East Writings edited by Tilottoma Mishra --The Slaughter by Imran Hussain, Nightmare by Yumlembam, The Mauled Cub by Tayenjam Bijoy kumar Singh and The Curfew Man by Temsula Ao, bringing out the atrocities towards women who have borne the brunt of the circumstances, how young boys are swept by youthful revolutionary zeal to transform the world, how brutality and violence change them completely making them unrecognizable and how a common man copes up with the adversities in this violence-prone area.

In this terror and violence-stricken land, where the quotidian life is threatened, a few writers like Irom Sarmila have tried to stimulate courage and strength amongst the residents through their writings. The paper would also focus on her maiden poetry collection Fragrance of Peace, which acts as a stimulant in building peace in the war-torn land.

Keywords: *Conflict, Identity Crisis, North-Eastern States*

Man, being a social animal wants to get associated with a group for identity and existence. It is a person's ethnic identity that gives him credibility as a part of a group. It is this ethnic identity that projects a person for external struggle. Israelis and Palestinians, India and Pakistan, governments and insurgents, Protestants and Catholics, whites and blacks, labour and management..... these are all examples of identities that have at some time and some places resulted in intractable conflicts. The clash of cultures has often led to the loss of traditional forms and the adoption of new cultural icons that threatened the existing ones.

The concept of Ethnicity refers to the identification and labelling of a group of people. The criteria may be linguistic, racial or cultural (Jha, 1992: 84). Ethnicity is a term used by the people to identify themselves within a multicultural society. It may be defined as an organizing set of principles by a group of people to differentiate themselves from other groups in terms of race, kinship, language, the customary mode of livelihood, culture and religion. Thus, they claim to have a separate identity (Priyadarshini, 2006). The literature on ethnicity defines ethnic groups as people who see themselves or are seen by others as sharing a distinctive and enduring collective identity based on a common belief, a common origin, a common history, a common destiny and culturally specific practices. Physical appearance, language, and a shared territory may further contribute in varying degrees to ethnic identity (Borgohain, 2014).

The present paper would focus on the issues of identity, specifically ethnic identity of the indigenous people of north-east India, a region known for its exquisite beauty, wild life and literature. The region is geographically, cut off from the rest of the country with a narrow link in the North which makes it difficult to have good communication system. Independence and the partition of India, led this region thinly linked to the rest of the country, thus making this region a remote area. It is important to note that before the advent of British rule in the region, there was a high degree of fluidity in the socio-cultural arena so that inter-mingling of various streams of people, including biological admixture, produced diverse social alignments and group identities. The boundaries of the groups were never very rigid. It is this flexibility, characteristic of a frontier tract experiencing considerable population movement from different directions, which provided scope for shifting alliance and identities. Pre-colonial social setting in the region was more fluid and flexible than in the subsequent colonial and post-colonial periods. Thus, various 'tribal' inhabitants of the hills got integrated. The annexation of Assam by the British (i. e. the East India Company) brought the people of this region into deeper contact with socio political currents then prevailing in the rest of the country. The British set in motion a series of moves to establish a degree of political and administrative dominance over the plains as well as on the hills. The British policies and the activities of Christian missionaries who came into the region significantly affected the communities and social formation. The British came to India and the country colonised for a long period, thus creating a hegemonic structure by identifying the Indians as uncivilized and barbaric, or inferior to the West in every possible aspect.

It was the British colonialists who invented the term Northeast, to identify a geographical area, later adopted by Indian officials to mark the seven states situated in the northeast part of India and after independence the states went through identity crisis due to continuous marginalization by the centre. With Sikkim being added, the no. has come up to eight instead of seven. The term certainly requires scrutiny in the light of contemporary political situation. The local people do not use the term Northeast and it has no feasible meaning to them since there are apparent traits that mark a clear-cut distinction between the various groups. The various ethnic groups in the North East prefer to identify themselves under their own specific group identity such as Assamese of Assam, Nagas of Nagaland, Mizos of Mizoram, Bodos of Assam and so on.

Northeast is the region that depicts diversity of languages and cultural practices. For instance, there are more than 16 languages spoken in Nagaland alone and they have their own rich tradition. The oral tradition of the states of the Northeast shows that they are rich in their cultural heritage. Every society is identified by its root or link to the past. The North-Eastern have carried forward their past or the history

of their forefathers in the forms of comprehensive and vibrant story telling. Tilottoma Mishra says, “Most of the communities from the North-East India can pride themselves for possessing a vibrant story telling tradition.” People whose history and civilization has been put to the margins took up the challenge of recreating. They speak of the anecdotes that tell how they created their own identity on which they stand even now. These stories, being part of an oral tradition, have been carried forward through oral-aural process from grandfathers to grandchildren. And forgetting the stories would be catastrophic. This strongly proves how important the oral tradition of story telling is for the people of the Northeast.

The Post-Independence era has been a period of confusion in the Northeast. Because of negligence (or should we say marginalization) people were confused about their future and their identity which resulted in many movements and struggles. The migration of Bangladeshis, Nepalese and migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to this region has given rise to the insider and outsider syndrome, which has crippled the social, political, economic and cultural life of the tribal communities. In Tripura, the indigenous tribal population became landless due to Bengali migration. The tribal community was reduced to minority and the migrant Bengalis emerged as the dominant force. This threat increased due to illegal migration which created further social exclusion. The material existence of tribal communities was threatened by the influx of migration and the occupation of key government jobs by non-tribals has led to their further exclusion. The phenomenon of ethnic extremism is further activated by declining jobs opportunities in the government sector. The continuous marginalization has brought about more distrust and apathy, resulting to violence.

The deploying of Army in this region is seen with a great resentment, which has resulted in the emergence of ‘insurgency groups’. The term insurgency etymologically comes from a Latin word “insurgere” which means to “rise up”. In English, the word could mean a “rebel” or a “revolutionary”. Therefore, the official Indian perception or interpretation comes from the latter and is one sided. Explicitly infused with the English prejudice, officials, media and social scientists have branded Northeast as being infested by various “insurgency groups” or “rebel groups”. On the contrary, it follows from the original word “insurgere” it can be taken to mean that people have “risen up” against marginalization. The Mizo National Front movement in 1966-1987 when Mizoram was an autonomous district council under the state of Assam is a good example of such an instance where people have “risen up” against the negligence of the state towards a devastating famine that had ailed the region.

The paper endeavours to study the theme of violence which extends beyond the borders of the North-East Indian states, leading to identity crisis. The study will concentrate on select short stories, focusing on the four stories from an Anthology of North East Writings edited by Tilottoma Mishra —*The Slaughter* by Imran Hussain, *Nightmare* by Yumlembam, *The Mauled Cub* by Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh and *The Curfew Man* by Temsula Aowritten in English or their English translations, by writers from North-East India, particularly from Assam, Manipur and Nagaland

The story *The Curfew Man* by Temsula Ao presents the conflict between Naga Militancy and the Military. The two warring armies; the one overgo round labelling the other as rebels fighting against the state and the other, operating from their underground hideouts and calling the Indian army illegal occupiers of sovereign Naga territories. “Caught between the two, it was the innocent villagers and those living in small townships who had to bear the brunt...” (229). The story centres around Satemba, who was formerly

a football player and a constable in the Assam Police. But during a rough game, he injures his kneecap very badly, with a result, he not only loses his chance of playing further but also his job. He and his wife Jemtila decide to leave for their village with a pension of Rs. 75 per month. Jemtila with great efforts tries to earn by working in several houses, but even then, this amount was not enough to meet their ends. Compelled by the financial circumstances, Satemba takes up a job of government informer and is deputed as a Curfew Man. He is discreetly reminded that his wife's job was somehow connected with the job what he was being offered, and her job was the only source of their livelihood. Through the story the writer has pointed out that how innocent and peace-loving people are forced by their circumstances to turn to means that they would not ordinarily employ to stay safe and alive. The citizens are caught in a vice-like situation which makes them lead an insecure life. They are petrified at every moment of their life which foretells a dismal future for them. The writer informs the readers of the self-diminishing moves and counter moves of people living in a limbo.

The story *The Mauled Cub* by Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh portrays the life of the womenfolk living under the shadows of violence, terror, insecurity, betrayal and human rights violation. Tombi, the young girl, is raped twice within the span of one single day by the two opposing parties - once by the leader of insurgent group belonging to her own community who stealthily takes shelter at their house, and then is gang raped by three army personnel partaking search operation after there is an explosion in the locality. The two women have been shown to live under utter personal sacrifice when Tombi is shown to hide her bruise and pangs of being raped from her mother lest this "disturbing news put her mother in a state of delirium" (184) who has already suffered a lot after her husband's death and son's abduction by security forces.

The story *Nightmare* by Yumlembam Ibomcha portrays the picture of violence and violation of human rights of a simple cultivator who was accused of having underground connections with the security personnel. The writer shows the uncertainties of the life of the indigenous people. The commoners are abducted from their homes merely on suspicion by the police, who are unable to prove the validity of their charge against them. The fifty years old Chaoba is brutally tortured with the butt of the gun, is asked to mimic like a dog and cat. All the pleadings of his little daughter, "our father is innocent. He does not steal, he doesn't use a gun. Please release our father." (175) go unheard by the uniform men. On the other hand, the security personnel have a hearty laugh over him, kick him with boots, cut his tongue with a knife in front of his daughter and bury him alive. The cries of the girl could not be heard in the surroundings as one of the men covered her mouth with his palm, strong like steel. She could notice those men "as big as the hills." However, the story presents the little child having only a nightmare. But the fact is that her father was abducted by security forces from their residence and there were no whereabouts of him for a long time.

The Slaughter by Imran Hussain is the portrayal of the young boy Sonti, son of a retired school teacher, who could not kill a pigeon for meat, is transformed into a cold-blooded murderer. Sonti was the pride of the village who was studying in the university after his brilliant academic performance at home. The father despite his poor health and bad climatic conditions tries so that he can serve a good meal of pair of pigeons to his son who had come home from the hostel along with his friends after a long time. The father goes out in the misty dark night to get the pigeons killed for meat. But to his distress he is unable to find anyone to kill the bird for him. He was thunderstruck when he was informed by the headman that

his son Sonti had joined the organisation and was suspected to be involved in the brutal and violent attack on the half-witted idiot Benga of their village. It was a shocking news to the father since he knew that Sonti found it difficult to kill a bird, he needed someone else to do the job. He was very sure of his son of not being guilty. “Whatever else my son might be guilty of, he would never commit murder.”(141) But the reader is made dumbstruck to witness Sonti ‘wringing the necks of the birds one after another’. (143) Through the story the writer points out that a public murderer does not have to carry a rough and virile personality, that he can be a soft voiced Sonti who touches his father’s feet for blessings and behaves very obediently to his parents. The writer points out to the temptations of the youth who are misled and thus end up following the evil path of violence.

Much of the discussion today in the literature of North East India focuses on violence as a thematic interest. Violence can deeply affect sensibilities and disturb the psyche. Thus, in the creative mind is entrenched a deep-seated urge to communicate and share whether in literature, films or paintings. The stories from the native land of the writers direct us to contemplate over the dismal fact as how youth are swept by the youthful revolutionary zeal to transform the world or just the temptation of life makes them step into violence and brutality, which changes them completely, making them unrecognizable and but on the other hand it is the common man who faces the adversities in the violence prone area, who live under constant anxiety under the shadow of violence from both the insurgents and security personnel. The plight of the common people is such that neither they can refuse shelter to the insurgent groups nor can they inform the police and their neighbours about it.

In this terror and violence-stricken land, where the quotidian life is threatened, a few writers like **Irom Sarmila** have tried to stimulate courage and strength amongst the residents through her writings. Her maiden poetry collection *Fragrance of Peace*, acts as a stimulant in building peace in the warn-torn land. It reveals a woman’s anxiety over the land of ‘Kanglei’ (Manipur) and her visualisation of her land infested with death, conflict and violence due to insurgency and counter insurgency operations. At the same time, she has written poems of strength, courage, determination- never to cow down to pressure, patriotism, belief in God, patriotism and trust in honour of the land of Manipur.

*The outer cover is sure to dry out
Let it rot under the ground
Let it be of some use to future generations
Let it transform into ore in the mine
I’ll spread the fragrance of peace
From Kanglei, my birthplace
In the ages to come
It will spread all over the world.*

Her several other poems reveal the concern and determination of the female persona to transform Manipur into an abode of peace. One cannot deny the fact that such type of writings play an important role to alleviate conflict and violence and bring harmony in the land of identity crisis.

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