UG EG S6-02 (DSC)

# FOUR YEAR BACHELOR'S DEGREE COURSE

## (CBCS in Accordance with NEP 2020)

## SEMESTER-VI

# INTRODUCTION TO NORTH EAST LITERATURE

# ENGLISH

Padmanath Gohainbaruah School of Humanities

KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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## COURSE INTRODUCTION

The paper entitled 'Introduction to Literature From North East' introduces the learners to some of the significant writers and their works situated in the North eastern region of India. Some of the leading writers whose texts have been taken up for study in the present course are namely : Robin Ngangom, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Easterine Kire, Mona Zote, Mamang Dai, Nilamoni Phukan, Mrinal Miri, Birendranath Dutta, Temsula Ao, Saurabh Kumar Chaliha and Indira Goswami. some of the representative works of literature from the Northeast. The course is designed to acquaint the learners to the life and literary contributions of these select Indian English Writers from the North-eastern region. While highlighting some of the major thematic concerns, socio-political discourses, socio-cultural and political aspects reflected in these texts, the course shall enable the learner to appreciate the linguistic richness of the region and relate to the context in which these works are situated.

The introductory units are entitled "Literature from the North east" and Unit 1 provides an idea of the region, its transition from oral and written traditions, impacts of Christianity, issues of marginalisation among others. Unit 2 takes up the literary characteristics, contexts, practices and some of the major writers from the region. Unit 3 takes up two significant poems namely "Native Land" and "To Pacha" by Robin Ngangom reflecting on violence and trauma in one's homeland. Unit 4 takes up the widely anthologised poem of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih titled "The Ancient Rocks of Cherra". Unit 5 introduces the poet to two poems by the Naga poet, Easterine Kire titled "Autumn" and "The Most Important Thing". Unit 6 takes up the poem of the Mizo poet, Mona Zote titled "An impression of Being Alive". Unit 7 presents two poems by the writer, poet and journalist Mamang Dai, from Arunachal Pradesh titled "Remembrance" and "Small Town and the River". Unit 9 comprises two poems by the prominent Assamese poet, Nilamoni Phookan titled "Poem" and "After a Couple of Days".

Unit 9 presents a significant essay titled "Poetry in Time of Terror" by Robin Ngangom who presents his views on the genre of poetry and its output from the region. Unit 10 takes up an essay by Mrinal Miri titled "The Spiritual and the Moral". Unit 11 is based on an essay by Birendranath Dutta titled "North-east India and its Socio-cultural Milieu". Unit 12 takes up a short story titled "The Letter" by Temsula Ao. Unit 13 is on another short story titled "The Final Request" by Saurabh Kumar Chaliha. The closing units of the course are on the novel of Indira Goswami titled *Pages Stained with Blood*, originally written in Assamese titled *Tej aru Dhulire Dhushorito Pristha* which is situated in the city of Delhi and recounts the impact of the operation Blue Star at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, in the life of the protagonist.

After going through these units of the first block, the learner will be able to discuss the prescribed drama and plays in a detailed manner. While going through a unit, you may also notice some text boxes, which have been included to help you know some of

the difficult terms and concepts. You will also read about some relevant ideas and concepts in “LET US KNOW” along with the text. We have kept “CHECK YOUR PROGRESS” questions in each unit which have been designed to self-check your progress of study. It is important to note that the Self Learning Material (SLM) is not an end in itself and the learners are strongly advised to consult the references and other resources recommended for reading.

# UNIT 1 : INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE FROM THE NORTH-EAST I

## UNIT STRUCTURE


1.1 Learning Objectives
1.2 Introduction
1.3 Ideas of the North-east Region
1.4 Transition from the Oral to the Written Tradition
1.5 Christianity and its Impacts
1.6 Multiple Layers of Marginalisation
1.7 Ecological Concerns in North-east India Writings
1.8 Let us Sum up
1.9 Further Reading
1.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)
1.11 Model Questions


## 1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss North-east as a diversified region
- trace its historical transition from orality to literacy
- evaluate the impact of Christianity on the region
- appreciate the creative pulse of the northeastern writers
- identify and analyse ecological concerns in North-east Indian writings

## 1.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit is going to introduce you to the North-eastern region of India, primarily to its literature and the various developments that it has undergone over time. The North-eastern region is connected to the rest of India through the “chicken’s neck” corridor or Siliguri corridor. Hence, the North-east feels geographically and culturally distinct from mainland India. However, it is in this isolation that the uniqueness of North-east India as a multifaceted region shines. In this unit, we shall acquaint ourselves with the heterogenous cluster of these eight states amassing a unique historical and cultural heritage. We will also take into account an array of topics related to the North-east discussing its existence, the emergence of literature, its bent from oral to written traditions, the arrival of Christian missionaries in the region, the multiple levels on which North-east Indians face marginalisation and the blooming of ecological concerns in the writings of North-east Indian writers.

## 1.3 IDEAS OF THE NORTH-EAST REGION

Before diving into the literature of the North-east, let us briefly look into the geo-political context of the region itself. North-east India is a region which comprises eight states,

namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. The first seven states taken all together are known as the "seven sisters" and the later added Sikkim remains a "brother" to the "seven sisters". Even though the "North-east" stands as an umbrella term to describe the North-eastern region of India, it is also equally important to note the diversity that encapsulates the region, whether it is in terms of their cultures, languages, food habits, attires, traditions, rituals etc. The North-east region is home to hundreds and hundreds of distinct tribal groups, such as the Adis and the Apatanis in Arunachal Pradesh, the Bodo and the Karbis in Assam, the Garos and the Khasis in Meghalaya, the Lepcha and the Bhutias in Sikkim and so on. They speak various languages and dialects such as Assamese in Assam, Nepali in Sikkim, Kokborok in Tripura etc. In the 'Introduction' entitled "Narrating India's Northeast: Contexts, Representations, Spaces" to the book named *Innerscapes,* the author notes that scholar Udayan Misra calls the blanket term "North East" as an "illusive construct" which fails to acknowledge the richly varied identities of the region (Moral, 2019, p.16). From encountering several years of political conflict, insurgency, border attacks to the friction arising out of being at the nation's periphery which receives less attention, the North-east still continues to bloom like a fresh lotus amidst its difficult surroundings. Here abound diverse ethnic groups amidst breath-taking greenery, mighty hills and rivers beautifully encapsulated within the lap of nature. Hence, the North-east in itself serves as a wonderful example of 'unity in diversity'. Ultimately, the literature of North-east India carries the weight of countless untold stories trying to actively fight stereotypes, hereby painting the region in a new perspective that had never been fully perceived before.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What are the key cultural elements that define the unique identity of North-east India?

Q2. How does North-east India celebrate 'unity in diversity'? What are the topics that North-east India deals with?

## 1.4 TRANSITION FROM THE ORAL TO THE WRITTEN TRADITION

By this time, you all must have become familiar with the basic introduction to the North-east India. The literature of the North-east comprises the literary writings composed by creative minds from these eight states. Prior to the emergence of proper written literature in the North-east, its literary tradition and creative talent were fundamentally preserved within its extensive and vibrant 'oral' culture. The germination of written literary tradition in the North-east dates back to the 'face-to-face' exchange of ideas and feelings, primarily in the form of stories, myths, folksongs, folktales and rituals. At this point, it is noteworthy that North-east India has a rich storytelling tradition since times immemorial. Its oral culture is deeply rooted in its community life and cultural practices in which lies the foundation of its literary consciousness.

*Whether it is a grandparent giving their grandchildren insight into the world around them through stories or a hero singing about the hills and rivers in which his mighty forefathers took their last breath, these oral narratives serve as a reservoir of the history, culture, ethics and social values of the numerous indigenous communities that reside in the North-east. Hence, even though the region's creative spirit was not documented earlier, yet the artistic expression remained alive through orature – spoken word, songs, performance, generation after generation highlighting an active and shared community life.*

*Coming from a region which is linguistically diverse with each state having its own regional language, the writers of the North-east express themselves either in their vernacular tongue or in the widely spoken English language which was introduced by the British. As a result of the introduction of the English language and formal education, the educated masses of the region, who had developed an urge to express their thoughts and feelings, began documenting their 'inner mind' in written form, which had previously existed only in oral form. This facilitated the preservation of diverse cultural identities which were no longer prone to the passage of time or the dangers of fading memories. Furthermore, writing in English allowed them to dilute boundaries and connect with a larger audience. However, this is not the only defining aspect of the writings of the North-east. Its literature is moulded by an array of political, geographical and psychological factors, ranging from political turmoil, insurgent attacks, violence to the beautiful landscapes filled with greenery and people with indomitable spirit and creativity. North-eastern writers address various socio-political issues such as identity, insurgency, ethics and community in their writings. They make an effort not only to preserve their tradition and stories but also to voice the suffering and discontent of their people, as well as to sing of the beauty of their land and its inhabitants.*

## LET US KNOW

Following are the names of some of the major writers and their valuable works from the North-east:

- **Arunachal Pradesh:**
  - Mamang Dai: *The Legends of Pensam*
  - Lummer Dai : *Kanyar Mul*
  - Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi: *Sonam*
- **Assam:**
  - Mamoni Raisom Goswami: *The Moth-Eaten Howda of the Tusker*
  - Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya: *Mrityunjay*
  - Nilmani Phookan: *'Dancing Earth'*
  - Hiren Bhattacharya: *'Sudirgha Din Aru Rati'*
- **Manipur:**
  - Robin S Ngangom: *'My Invented Land'*
  - Thangjam Ibopishak: *'I Want to be Killed by an Indian Bullet'*

- Ratan Thiyam: *Urubhangam, Andha Yug*

❖ **Meghalaya:**

- Desmond Kharmawphlang: "Symphony of Sorrow", "I Died"
- Kynpham S. Nongkynrih: *Moments, The Yearning of Seeds*
- Janice Pariat: *Boats on Land*

❖ **Mizoram:**

- Mona Zote: *Rez*
- Malsawmi Jacob: *Zorami*
- L. Biakliana: *Hawilopari*

❖ **Nagaland:**

- Temsula Ao: *These Hills Called Home*
- Easterine Kire: *Mari*
- Monalisa Changkija: *Monsoon Mourning*

❖ **Tripura:**

- Chandrakanta Murasingh: "The Stone Speaks in the Forest"
- Sudhanwa Debbarma: *Hachukni Khorang*
- Bikashrai Debbarma: *Tutankhamun ni Pyramid*

❖ **Sikkim:**

- Prajwal Parajuly: *The Gurkha's Daughter*
- Sanu Lama: *Mrigatrishna*
- Yichey Doma: *Legends of the Lepchas*

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3. What were the two primary linguistic mediums used by the North-east writers to voice their inner minds?

Q4. What served as the repository of history, culture and social values in North east indigenous communities?

Q5. How did the transformation from orality to written form help in the preservation of cultural identities in the North-east?

Q6. What kind of factors affected the North-eastern literature?

## 1.5 CHRISTIANITY AND ITS IMPACTS

You must have already been familiar with the fact that the British colonisers desired to spread the Christian religion in their colonies including India. Even the North-east was not free from their influence despite geographically being at a far-fetched corner of India. Under the trope of the "civilising mission" of the British, the Christian missionaries, primarily the American Baptists and the Welsh Presbyterians, arrived in North-east India. The Welsh Presbyterians reached the Khasi Hills in Meghalaya in the early nineteenth century and

the American Baptists started their mission in the Brahmaputra Valley and the Naga Hills later.

The Christian missionaries actively continued their mission in the region. They not only preached Christian moral values and the gospel, but also marked an important phase in the region's progress towards modernity. Although the American Baptists were initially focusing on Northern Burma and Southern China, they later on turned their attention to Assam. The first Assamese person was baptised by 1841 and the missionary activities were further extended to Sibsagar, Nagaon and Guwahati. The first significant landmark in the Christian missionary activities was the mission bearing fruit among the Garos, where quite interestingly, the Garos themselves took the lead. Omed, a Garo student, was among the early indigenous Christians to be ordained who also Played an important role in baptising others. Similarly, in case of Nagaland, there was a significant growth of Christianity within the Ao community in the beginning. Later other tribes such as the Angami, the Semas, the Konyaks also converted into Christians, hereby further boosting the influence of Christianity in Nagaland. In Manipur, the spread of Christianity began with the conversion of the Kukis.

The Welsh Presbyterians first arrived in the Khasi Hills in Meghalaya and baptised many Khasi converts by 1846. And towards the end of the nineteenth century, Christian missionary activities took a firm hold in Mizoram and continued to grow rapidly in the early twentieth century. Another significant event worth mentioning here is the arrival of the Roman Catholics in North-east India towards the end of the nineteenth century. It was the Salvatorians who carried on Catholic missionary activities in Shillong and by 1891, the first Catholic was baptised. The Roman Catholics prioritised education and their activities flourished in the early twentieth century with the opening and growth of Catholic educational institutions in the North-east.

As mentioned earlier, although the British colonisers introduced the English language to the states, but it was actually the Christian missionaries who were responsible for the promotion of the language. The missionaries established educational institutions in the region due to which the local people got access to the English language more closely. The advent of the Christian missionaries paved the way for print culture with the establishment of printing presses and the publication of numerous books on grammar, Christian literature and journals in the local language. Eventually, the North-east underwent a transformation from a predominant oral culture to a formal and written one which was accelerated further by the establishment of printing presses in the region. Earlier most of the tribal languages such as Mizo, Khasi, Naga dialects etc. did not have a written script of their own but existed only as 'living speech' that used to be passed down generation after generation. But with the advent of the Christian missionaries, there occurred a development of written scripts for several indigenous languages and accelerated the process of modernity in the region. They undertook the tedious task of translating the Bible into the local languages for easy access to the locals.

Christianity brought about a huge impact in every corner of the lives of the people of North-east India be it in the field of education, language, literature, medicine or even fostering a change in the socio-cultural values. While there was a constant fear of the loss of old values and culture, many North-east communities were able to successfully merge their own tribal heritage with Christin ethics and values. However at this point, it is equally important to note that it does not mean that every single person residing in the North-east converted into a Christian. But it is undeniable that Christianity, among many other religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Bathouism etc., still prevails as one of the most influential religions in North-east India.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7. How did Christianity arrive in North-east India?

Q 8. What are some social changes brought about by Christianity in the Northeast?

## 1.6 MULTIPLE LAYERS OF MARGINALISATION

In the 'Introduction' to *Innerscapes,* Rakhee Kalita Moral brings our focus to the North-east as a marginalised region: "the writings from India's northeast typically reveal a vast gamut of perceptions" and further adds that "what lends rich complexity to these ways of seeing, is the sense of marginality that has long been the refrain about the region" (Moral, 2019, p.17) Themes of marginalisation and isolation echo prominently within the writings of North-eastern writers. Marginalisation in North-east India is not one-dimensional but can be faced in numerous ways. Sometimes this marginalisation would also stem from violence against the innocent commoners of the North-east who would get sandwiched between the attacks of the insurgent groups and the military forces of the country.

### Geographical Marginalisation

Existing at the nation's periphery, North-east Indians are often relegated to a position of ignorance. The geographical distance and the subsequent psychological alienation of the North-east from the mainland have created a knowledge vacuum regarding the region's diverse cultures and its creative potential.

### Linguistic Marginalisation

Despite its cultural richness, North-eastern literature had not received due recognition until it shifted from oral to written traditions. Hence, its language and literature were marginalised due to the lack of proper linguistic scripts in written or printed form in the eyes of the colonisers as well as the mainland. However, with the significant development in the linguistic and literary traditions of the region, writers have begun to voice their experiences which are gradually seeping into the consciousness of the world outside despite many challenges.

### Cultural Marginalisation

Due to the knowledge gap created by the geographical distance between the North-east and mainland India, the mainland often views the region in a stereotypical light – as 'exotic', 'savage', 'insurgent' or 'violent'. The cultural practices of the North-east are often ignored or misinterpreted. However, writers attempt to provide accurate accounts of tribal life and culture in their writings in order to fill this vacuum.

**Socio-Economic and Gender Marginalisation**

Within the region itself, marginalisation exists in the form of class and gender. Especially women from the North-east face marginalisation on a profound level. Being a woman, she is already subjugated and moreover, being a 'tribal' woman from the North-east further deteriorates the situation for her. For instance, Mamoni R. Goswami, in her novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker,* exposes the flight of widows and the oppressed lower classes in traditional Assamese society.

**Ecological Marginalisation**

Ecological marginalisation can be briefly defined as the act of oppression or domination of nature in a particular region as a source of extracting raw materials and resources while overthrowing the sentiments and requirements of the indigenous people who are associated with that land. Since the Northeastern communities are deeply rooted in nature, hence violence against nature becomes equal to violence against them.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9. How do North-east Indians face marginalisation on multiple levels?

Q 10. How does the geographical marginalisation of North-east India contribute to its cultural marginalisation?

## 1.7 ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS IN NORTH-EAST INDIA WRITINGS

At the onset, let us briefly define what ecology is. Ecology, according to the Ecological Society of India, is described as "the study of the relationships between living organisms, including humans, and their physical environment." North-east India flourishes in the lap of nature where the natural environment is not just a backdrop but almost gains the image of a protagonist in North-east Indian writings. This is because the indigenous communities of the region have always been deeply connected to mother nature, be it for their food, shelter, performance of rituals and cultural activities. The writers from the North-east never leave a moment to acknowledge the natural beauty that their land abounds in. Since the earliest periods of human habitation, the North-east Indian writers reflect a sense of reverence for nature and it plays a huge role in forming the identities of their communities. For instance, in the poem "Stone People from Lungterok", Temsula Ao revisits the myth which says that her Naga ancestors began their existence through six sacred stones. This is an indicator to the fact that Nature stands as a sacred and motherly

figure for the people of North-east India with whom they share a mystical bond which is highlighted in the poems of poets like Nirmalprabha Bordoloi's "Bashisthat Duporiya".

However, with time, due to the emergence of contemporary environmental issues like deforestation, environmental degradation, pollution etc, the writers nowadays not only praise nature but also advocate to conserve nature because it is an integral means of survival, belongingness and asserting their identities. Nature also becomes a silent entity witnessing all the conflict and destruction going in and around her. Their poetry and creative endeavours attempt to create awareness and seek justice for the devastation inflicted upon nature and, in turn, the unique indigenous communities intimately connected with it. This brings to light the concept of 'spiritual ecology' which focuses on the biological and spiritual interdependence of the human soul and the natural environment in which he/she lives or deeply identifies with. They openly speak about the ecological crisis caused by urbanisation and industrialisation due to which people are losing their spiritual connection with nature. For instance, Monalisa Changkija, in her short story "The Hunter's Story", talks about the fractured relationship between the modern tribal communities and their ancestral land. She highlights the concern that the forest is no longer seen as a sacred identity but as a resource to be exploited. In the poem "The War Dress", Jogamaya Chakma exposes the "incessant violence and the consequent loss of innocent lives, bereavement and trauma" as stated by Arpana Nath in her chapter in the book *Innerscapes(2019).* (Nath, 2019, p.79) Therefore, we must realise that the North-east Indian writers do not just describe natural landscapes and elements but present it as a crucial component to their cultural identities. By documenting the natural environment in their writings, they call for protection of nature as well as their rich cultural and geographical heritage.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q11. What are the ecological concerns that get reflected in the writings of the North-east Indian writers?

## 1.8 LET US SUM UP

On a concluding note, we can say that North-east India is a complex geopolitical space celebrating diversity. Its literature is an impactful blend of ancient oral traditions and modern creative and bold voices. By reading this unit, we have been able to understand the importance to acknowledge one's cultural roots despite the challenging circumstances around one. The resilience and creativity of the North-east Indians uphold the region, preserving its rich heritage and ensuring that its distinct voice continues to echo further with strength.

## 1.9 FURTHER READING

Misra, Tilottoma (2011). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India.* Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
Moral, Rakhee Kalita (2019). "Narrating India's Northeast: Contexts, Representations, Spaces". *Innerscapes,* 15-25. Papyrus.
Nath, Arpana (2019). "Ethnicity and Identity: A Reading of Select Poems by Jogamaya Chakma". *Innerscapes,* 79-91. Papyrus.
https://www.best-poems.net
https://esa.org/about/what-does-ecology-have-to-do-with-me/
https://www.scribd.com/documenr/880173047/North-East-Christianity

## 1.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Ans to Q no 1:** Incredible range of distinct indigenous communities……the Nagas, the Khasis, the Misings etc…..they have their own unique cultural practices……..different social values….linguistic differences….different lifestyles.

**Ans to Q no 2:** Different tribes and communities co-existing together….shared historical struggles and experiences……share the same spirit and sentiment towards their land despite differences.

**Ans to Q no 3:** Regional languages such as Assamese, Manipuri, Mizo……the English language as a medium…..the Christian missionaries introduced written scripts for indigenous languages.

**Ans to Q no 4:** Oral tradition before written form……myths, legends, stories…..capturing the essence of community life and culture….through performance and storytelling.

**Ans to Q no 5:** Oral information is prone to becoming fading memories…..written form preserves it much longer…..maintaining distinct tribal histories and identities….easy to spread and be read by readers from all other regions.

**Ans to Q no 6:** The rich ancient oral tradition….introduction of the English language…..influence of the Christian missionaries….modern education…..socio-political conflicts.

**Ans to Q no 7:** Civilising mission…..spread Chrisitianity….save the savage people….around nineteenth century came to North-east India…. Some baptised…..understood the region and its languages…established schools…settled and converted many tribes into Christians.

**Ans to Q no 8:** Promotion of the English language……accelerating modernity in the region…..introducing scripts for tribal languages or standardisation of languages…..replacement of old beliefs…new social norms and values.

**Ans to Q no 9:** Political exclusion….lack of representation in national discourse….economic underdevelopment….racial stereotypical and "othering"….linguistic barriers….multiple identities.

**Ans to Q no 10:** Geographical isolation….knowledge gap….viewed as 'exotic' or 'primitive'…regional history and culture often neglected by mainland and others.

**Ans to Q no 11:** Deep spiritual connection…nature as a nurturing figure…awareness against destruction of nature….environmental damage linked to cultural loss.

## 1.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

1. Write a detailed note on the transition from the oral to the written tradition with regard to North East Liberature.

2. Discuss the impact of Christianity in the North East region.

3. What are the multiple layers of marginalisation with regard to the North East region?

4. Decribe the ecological concerns in the writings of North East region.

**********

# UNIT 2 : INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE FROM THE NORTH EAST II

## UNIT STRUCTURE


2.1 Learning Objectives
2.2 Introduction
2.3 Characteristics of Literature from the North-east
2.4 Contexts
2.5 Literary Practices of the Writers from the North-east Region
2.6 Some of the Major Writers of the Region
2.7 Let us Sum up
2.8 Further Reading
2.9 Answers to Check Your Progress
2.10 Model Questions


## 2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, you will be able to:

- provide a brief introduction to the literary practices of the writers from the North east
- explain in details the characteristics of literature from the region
- discuss the contexts from which the literatures from the region emerge
- highlight some of the major writers across genres from the North east region
- appreciate the literary tends and practices of the North east writers

## 2.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the second part of the Introductory Unit to the course on Introduction to Literature from the North-east. In the previous unit, we had taken up various aspects of literature from the region ranging from the transition of oral to written tradition, the socio-cultural contexts and the influence of Christianity, discourses on marginalisation and ecological consciousness to mention a few. In this unit, we shall focus on the characteristics of literature emerging from the region together with its specific contexts, which shall enable you to locate the works of the writers from the North-east together as well as the literary practices. In addition, we shall take up some of the major voices to have emerged from the region, a few of whom have also been prescribed for your study. Let us then begin to explore these various aspects and nurture our idea and understanding of what enriches as well as fuels the writings from the region of North-east India.

## 2.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF LITERATURE FROM THE REGION

The literature emerging from Northeast India resists easy summary, yet certain recurring features distinguish it from the literary traditions of the Indian mainland. These

characteristics are not prescriptive - they are descriptive patterns that have emerged from decades of writing under duress.

1. **The primacy of place as lived memory:** In much of mainstream Indian fiction, geography functions as backdrop - a city street, a village well, a college campus. In Northeast writing, place is never merely decorative. A hill is not a hill; it is a grandparent. A river is not a waterbody; it is a witness to colonial violence and postcolonial neglect. Mamang Dai's poetry, for instance, does not describe the Siang river - it converses with it. This is not nature writing in the Romantic tradition; it is a form of indigenous epistemology where land and personhood are inseparable. When a Naga writer mentions a particular forest, the informed reader knows that forest may have been a site of encounter, ambush, or refuge. Place carries the weight of history, and the writer's task is to make that weight felt without melodrama.

2. **The internalisation of violence:** Perhaps the most striking characteristic is how violence is represented - or rather, not represented directly. Writers from the region rarely dwell on gore or combat. Instead, violence is rendered as atmosphere: a door that opens at midnight, a shirt that will never be worn again, a letter that arrives but is not opened. Temsula Ao's "The Letter" is a masterclass in this technique. The story describes a mother receiving news of her son's death in an "encounter". The actual killing is never depicted. What remains is the mother's walk to the well, her slow return, and the lighting of a lamp. This restraint is not a literary fashion; it is the hard-won wisdom of communities that have learned that trauma resides not in the event but in the silence that follows. Violence becomes weather - invisible, everywhere, and impossible to ignore once you know how to feel it.

3. **The oral substrate beneath written English:** Most writers from the Northeast write in English, but their English is inflected by mother tongues that operate differently. Ao, Khasi, Mizo, Bodo - these languages privilege parataxis (short, parallel clauses), repetition for emphasis, and direct address to the listener. When Easterine Kire writes "You see, my friend…" or repeats a phrase three times, she is not being artless. She is translating a oral storytelling rhythm into a written medium. The result is prose that breathes like a tale told under a thatched roof, not like an essay crafted for a literary journal. This characteristic creates a distinctive texture: English that is slightly foreign to itself, bent by the ghost of another grammar.

4. **The burden of ethnographic expectation:** A tiring reality for many Northeast writers is the demand to perform "authenticity". Publishers and readers in the mainland often expect exotic signifiers - tribal drums, headhunting lore, shamanic visions. Writers who refuse this demand, such as Anjum Hasan (whose Shillong is urban, bored, and middle-class), engage in a quiet rebellion. They write about love affairs, office politics, and internet addiction. This refusal to serve as a cultural tour guide is itself a characteristic of mature Northeast literature: the right to be ordinary. The most radical act for a Naga poet may be to write a poem about a leaking tap, not about a forgotten war.

5. **Lexical untranslatability as assertion:** You will encounter words that are not translated, not italicised apologetically, not explained in footnotes: tlawmngaihna (Mizo, a complex ethical concept involving self-sacrifice and communal duty), banjhi (Assamese, a sterile paddy shoot, but also a metaphor for barren creativity), tynrai (Khasi, roots, but also ancestral origin). These words sit on the page as equal citizens of the English sentence. This practice is not laziness. It is a deliberate claim: some realities belong to a language alone. The non-local reader is invited to sit with the strangeness, not to master it. That discomfort is the beginning of genuine cross-cultural reading.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Write a few words on the primacy of place as a lived memory.
Q2. Briefly highlight the expectations of mainland publishers and readers from many North-east writers.

## 2.4 CONTEXTS

Literary characteristics do not arise in a vacuum. They are forged in specific historical and political conditions. To read Northeast literature without understanding these contexts is to admire a flower while ignoring the soil it grew from - and the storms it survived.

1. **Colonial cartography and the invention of "Northeast":** Before the British, the region was a collection of distinct political entities: the Ahom kingdom in Assam, the Manipur kingdom, numerous Naga, Mizo, and Khasi chieftainships. The British annexed Assam in 1826 after the Treaty of Yandabo and gradually brought the surrounding hills under indirect rule, designating them as "excluded" or "partially excluded" areas. This administrative label had profound literary consequences. It meant that when modern education arrived - largely through missionary schools - the curriculum was alien. A Mizo child learned about English hedgerows, not about the tlawmngaihna of her own ancestors. The first generation of English-educated writers thus faced a double alienation: from their own oral traditions, and from the colonial canon that dismissed those traditions as primitive. The literature that followed is, in part, a slow, patient project of reclamation - not a return to a pure past (no such thing exists), but a creative salvage operation.

2. **The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA)** and the normalisation of exception Enacted in 1958, AFSPA grants the armed forces extraordinary powers in "disturbed areas": to shoot, arrest without warrant, and search premises. It remains in force in parts of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and until recently, Jammu and Kashmir. For a writer living under AFSPA, the state is not a protector but a threat. The knock on the door at 2:00 am, the unexplained disappearance, the "encounter" that leaves a body by the roadside - these are not aberrations but the routine texture of life. How does one write under such conditions? The answer, as seen in the work of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire, is not to write protest pamphlets. It is to write the aftermath: the mother who stops cooking, the child who stops speaking, the village that learns to live with a soldier stationed at the

school. AFSPA produces a literature of indirection, where the most political statement is a description of a meal that no one eats.

3. **The language question as existential crisis:** Northeast India is one of the most linguistically diverse regions on earth, with over two hundred languages. Yet the dominant languages of education and governance are English, Hindi, and Assamese - none of which are mother tongues for most hill communities. A poet from Nagaland faces a cruel choice. Write in English: you gain a national and international audience, but your grandmother cannot read you. Write in Lotha or Ao: you preserve the language, but you are confined to a tiny readership, often without a publisher. Many writers choose English, but they carry guilt. Easterine Kire has spoken of feeling like a traitor. Others, like Mona Zote, write bilingually - a Mizo poem followed by its English version, or sometimes a hybrid where the languages bleed into each other. This linguistic anxiety produces a distinctive literary texture: English that is hyper-conscious of its own inadequacy, always gesturing towards something it cannot fully say.

4. **Insurgency, counter-insurgency, and the militarisation of everyday life:** The Naga movement for sovereignty predates Indian independence. Similar movements arose in Mizoram, Manipur, and Assam. The state's response - military intervention, economic blockades, suspension of constitutional rights - has turned large parts of the region into a low-intensity war zone for decades. For the writer, this means that the boundaries between "civilian" and "combatant", "peace" and "war", are permanently blurred. Robin Ngangom's poem "Poetry in Time of Terror" captures this blurring: the poet walks through a town where soldiers are everywhere, yet life continues - vegetables are sold, children play, lovers meet. The terror is not a discrete event; it is the hum of the refrigerator. Writing about such a condition requires a new poetics: one that can hold both the normal and the horrific in the same sentence. Northeast writers have developed this poetics not through theory but through lived necessity.

5. **The erasure from the national literary imaginary:** For decades, Indian school textbooks and university syllabi treated "Indian literature" as largely Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, and English writing from the mainland. Writers from the Northeast were either absent or tokenised - a lone poem by a "tribal" writer inserted to signal inclusivity. This institutional neglect has had two opposite effects. On one hand, it has produced a deep sense of grievance and invisibility. On the other, it has freed Northeast writers from the pressure to conform to mainstream trends. They have developed their own networks, publishers (like Zubaan and Penguin's Northeast list), and readerships. The literature that has emerged from this isolation is often more experimental, more willing to risk formal strangeness, than its mainland counterparts. It knows that it must earn every reader's attention - and it does so not by being "exotic", but by being urgently, uncomfortably real.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3. Briefly describe the region before the British colonial rule.
Q4. What is the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA)?

Q5. What has led large parts of the region towards low-intensity war zone for decades?

## 2.5 LITERARY PRACTICES OF WRITERS FROM THE NORTH EAST REGION

Given the characteristics and contexts above, how do Northeast writers actually work? What habits of craft have they developed to say what needs to be said, given the constraints they face? The following practices are not universal, but they are widespread - and they offer a useful toolkit for reading the texts in this course.

1. **The short form as tactical choice:** The long novel requires sustained attention, a predictable schedule, and a certain faith that tomorrow will be like today. For a writer living under curfews, bandhs, or the threat of arrest, the short story and the poem are more feasible. They can be written in stolen hours, in a notebook kept hidden, in the back of a shop while listening for footsteps. Moreover, the short form mirrors the fragmented experience of living in a conflict zone: no grand narrative, just sharp shards. Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* is a collection of stories, each no more than a dozen pages. Read together, they produce an effect no single novel could achieve: a mosaic of grief, resistance, and stubborn domesticity. The short form is not a limitation; it is a weapon against the tyranny of the epic.

2. **Genre hybridity as archival instinct:** Mainstream publishing likes clear categories: fiction, non-fiction, poetry, memoir. Northeast writers frequently blur these boundaries because the reality they write about refuses to stay in its box. Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* is marketed as a novel, but it reads like a cycle of myths, village gossip, oral history, and personal recollection. Temsula Ao's *Once Upon a Time* is subtitled a collection of short stories, but each story is based on interviews with survivors of the Naga insurgency - making it also a work of oral history. This hybridity is not postmodern playfulness. It is a practical response to a situation where the state denies the truth, where official archives are incomplete or fabricated, and where the writer must become an archivist, a journalist, a poet, and a mourner all at once.

3. **The unreliable yet honest narrator:** You will encounter narrators who are children, elderly women, drunks, or traumatised survivors - people whose memory is partial, whose perspective is skewed. This is not a gimmick borrowed from European modernism. It is an ethical recognition that in a war zone, no one has the full picture. The only honest narrator is the one who admits, "I don't know everything, but I know this." Robin Ngangom's *Poetry in Time of Terror* is spoken by a poet who is not heroic, not omniscient - just a man trying to write while helicopters circle overhead. That limited, fragile subjectivity is precisely what makes the poem trustworthy. The narrator does not claim to speak for all Nagas or all victims. He speaks only for his own trembling hand. That is enough.

4. **Code-switching and lexical resistance:** We noted earlier the presence of untranslated words. This is not merely a stylistic tic; it is a deliberate practice of resistance against the hegemony of English. When a Khasi writer leaves tynrai in the sentence, she is saying: this concept cannot be reduced to "roots" or "origins". It carries centuries of meaning that English has not earned. The practice forces the non-local reader to slow down, to sit with the unfamiliar, to acknowledge that they are a guest in someone else's linguistic house. In the classroom, this practice demands a pedagogy of humility: do not rush to gloss. Let the word sit. Let the student feel its weight. That discomfort is the beginning of genuine intercultural learning.

5. **Writing as witness, not as therapy:** There is a well-intentioned but often mistaken assumption that writing about trauma is therapeutic for the writer. For many Northeast writers, the therapeutic frame is inadequate. They write not to heal themselves but to bear witness for a community. Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman* is not a personal confession; it is a carefully researched novel about the Naga civil war, based on interviews with people who lived through it. The "I" in such writing is not the individual ego but the communal "we" - the generation that survived and is now passing the story on. This practice has ancient roots in oral cultures, where the storyteller is a custodian, not a creator. The writer's job is to be faithful to the dead, not to express their own feelings. This is a heavier, more austere conception of literature than the Romantic one, but it is also, perhaps, more honest.

6. **The strategic use of silence:** Finally, the most powerful tool in the Northeast writer's kit is what is not said. A Temsula Ao story will end with a woman looking out a window. No moral. No closure. The silence is the meaning. This practice comes from cultures where speaking directly about violence is considered disrespectful to the dead - and also dangerous for the living. It is also a recognition that some wounds cannot be narrated; they can only be gestured at. The reader's imagination becomes the final, unwilling collaborator. You finish the story, and you are left with a question you cannot answer. That unanswerability is not a failure of the literature. It is its deepest truth.

## 2.6 SOME OF THE MAJOR WRITERS OF THE REGION

In this subsection, the learner shall gain a glimpse of some of the major writers from the region. You will certainly agree that taking up select writers for our study, also means having to leave out many other writers from the region, writing in English and the regional languages of the region or both. This is due to the reason that within the structure of a unit we can only take up only a few writers for discussion. Therefore, you are encouraged to make a sincere effort towards exploring more about all the other significant writers to have emerged from the region. This also means that you may always add to this discussion on major writers of the region from your own study and exploration of the same.

Let us begin with some of the important voices that have contributed their significant literary treasures from each of the eight sister-states of the North-eastern region. Some

of the writers hailing from the state of Assam also known as the 'Land of the Red River and Blue Hills' are Nabakanta Barua, Nilmoni Phookan, Hiren Bhattacharyya, Homen Buragohain, Indira Goswami, Nirupama Borgohain, Saurav among several others.

Nabakanta Barua who had earned the Padma Bhushan in 1976 and Sahitya Akademi Award in 1975 was known as 'Ekhud Kokaideo'. He is considered the forerunner of modernism in Assamese literature. His works of fiction are namely *Kapilipariya Sadhu* and *Kokadeutar Har* and known for poems such as "Polokh" and "Norokot Don Juan." Nilmani Phukan, a recipient of the 56th Jnanpith Award in 2020 and the Sahitya Akademi in 1981 was known for works such as *The Sun is Said to Have Come Descending by the River* (1963), *Towards the Blooming Sunflower* (1971) and *Kabita* (2001) among others.

A prominent Assamese poet who was endeared by his readers, Hiren Bhattacharyya also known as 'Hiruda' or '*Xugondhi Pakhilaar Kobi'* was much loved for his poetry. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1992 for his work *Soicho Pothar Manuh* (1991) and wrote several works such as *Xugondhi Pokhilaa* (1981), *Jonaki Mon* (1985), *Xugondhi Xipaa* to mention a few.
Homen Borgohain, a prominent journalist and author who had also received the Sahitya Akademi Award was known for his social critiques and reflections on Assamese socio-cultural life and realities. Some of his significant works are: *Xaudor Puteke Nau Meli Jai, Halodhiya Soraiye Bau Dhan Khai*, *Ostorag*, *Pita-Putra*, *Xubala* and *Matsyagandha* among many fictional, non-fictional and autobiographical works.

Also, an equally important writer Nirupama Borgohain, a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1996 is known for her significant literary works. Some of these are fiction namely, *Aei Nodi Niravadhi* (1963), *Hridoy Eta Nirjon Dweep* (1970), *Cactus Phul* (1976), *Abhiyatri* (1995) and *Barasun* (2011) among her other novels, short story and autobiography. Then we have another powerful writer Indira Goswami who was a bold and progressive writer for her time, writing on women centric issues as reflected in works such as *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker(1988)*, *The Blue-Necked God* (1976) *Pages Stained in Blood* (2001) and *The Man from Chinamasta (2005)*. She was a recipient of the Jnanpith Award in 2000 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983. Also, popularly known as 'Mamoni Baideo', she wrote under the pen name of Mamoni Raisom Goswami.

Then we have, Saurabh Kumar Chaliha who wrote under the pseudonym of 'Surendra Nath Medhi' and was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1974. Many of his writings particularly short stories were published in the leading Assamese literary journals and magazines of his time. Among his many anthology of short stories are *Axanta Electron* (1962), *Ghulam* (1974), *Marudyan* (2009) to mention a few. An upcoming writer, Jahnavi Barua who also has an academic background in medicine has published a few important works. Some of these are her anthology of short stories titled *Next Door* (2008), *Rebirth* (2010) and *Undertow* (2020). These are only a few select writers from Assam who have made significant contributions to literature from the state and region.

Then we come to some of the major writers from the neighboring state of Nagaland, the 'Land of Festivals' namely Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Avinuo Kire and Monalisa Chankija among others. A recipient of Padma Shri (2007) and Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013, Temsula Ao has written several poetical works such as *Songs from the Other Life* (2007), *Songs Along the Way Home* (2019) and short story anthologies namely, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from War Zone* (2005) and *Laburnam for My Head* (2009). Her writings mostly draw from everyday life in the hills amidst the violence, corruption, insurgency and the transition of Naga society from its rich heritage towards modernity.

In the same category of writing, we can refer to Tiamerenla Monalisa Chankija a leading journalist and writer from the region with exemplary work of reporting from the region and running her own paper *Nagaland Page* (published from 1999 to 2024). Some of her poetical works by Chankija are *Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain* (1993) and *Monsoon Mourning* (2013). Another significant voice, Easterine Kire who also performs 'jazz poetry' is known for her poetical works namely *Kelhoukevira* (1982) and *Freerain* (2004). Again, Avinuo Kire is a budding young writer from Nagaland who explores oral narratives, poetry, Naga identity and socio-cultural significance in her works.

Arunachal Pradesh also known as 'The Land of the Rising Sun' is admired for its scenic beauty and its diversity, just like Nagaland. Some of the crop of writers from the state are namely Mamang Dai, Ponung Ering Angu and Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi. Mamang Dai who is also recipient of Sahitya Akademi in 2017 for her novel *The Black Hill* (2014) draws inspiration from Nature, folklore, socio-cultural and traditional way of life in Arunachal. Some of her works are namely *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), *Stupid Cupid* (2008), *Escaping the Land* (2021) and *River Poems* (2004) among others.

In the same line, the young budding writer, Ponung Ering Angu is seen to draw similar influences in her poetical work namely *Whispers from the Mountains* or her compilation, *Doying: A Collection of Myths and Folktales of the Adis*. Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, a Padmashri recipient in 2020 and Sahitya Akademi Award in 2025 has written across various literary genres surprisingly in Assamese. His autobiography is entitled *Hanhi Aru Sakulor Saishav* and among his works of fiction are *Silent lips, Murmuring Heart* (2005) and *Sonam* (1982), *Mishing* to mention a few.

Then, we arrive at the 'Land of the Rolling Hills' with some of the prominent voices of writers like Mona Zote, Malsawmi Jacob and Margaret L. Pachuau. The writings of Mona Zote reflects on the discourses of women particularly in the context of a rigid Christian patriarchal society, insurgency and violence expressed through poetry published in various literary journals like *Indian Literature* and *Carapace*. Some of her important poems are "An Impression of Being Alive", "The Whores of August", "Anti-Love Poem" and "Rez" among many others. Malsawmi Jacob, also one of the first Mizo writers to write in English portrays various socio-political discourses and life of people in the hills of Mizoram. She has written around seven literary works with her first novel is namely *Zorami: A Redemption Song* (2015) and poetry anthology titled *Four Gardens and Other Poems* (2017). Another

writer, Margaret L. Pachau who is an academic and a translator as well with contributions on the Mizo society in works such as *Negotiating Culture: Writings from Mizoram* (2023).

Some of the major writers from the picturesque Meghalaya or the 'Abode of Clouds' were also the forerunners of writings in English from the region, given the fact that the 'Shillong poets' drew attention to the unacknowledged literary talent in North-eastern region, its diversity and its varied voices. Many vernacular works from the region found their way into translations in the English language. Some of the significant writers of the region are Soso Tham, Esther Syiem, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Desmond Kharmawphlang. The poet laureate of the Khasis, as the writer Soso Tham is known had given shape to oral folklore of the Khasis into written literature. Some of his significant works are namely, *Ki Phawer u Aesop* or *Aesop's Fables* (1920), *The Golden Duitara, or Khasi Poems* (1931), translation of Charles Dicken's *The Life of Our Lord*.

The poets from Meghalaya, Esther Syiem, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Desmond Kharmawphlang are all academicians and have made significant contributions especially to the genre of poetry. To her credit, Syiem has written much about Khasi folk literature and some of her anthologies of poetry such as *Oral Scriptings, Of Follies and Frailties of Wit and Wisdom* are centered on folklore as well. Her memoir is titled *Water Speaks the Wah Umkhrah*. Again, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih is a remarkable poet from the region who is also prescribed in your course. Some of his poetical works are namely *Moments* (1992), *The Sieve: Love Poems* (1992), *The Yearning of Seeds* (2022), *Time's Barter: Haiku and Senyru* (2015), *Ka Samoi jong ka Lyer* (*The Season of the Wind*) (2002), *Ki Mawsiang ka Sohra* (*The Ancient Rocks of Cherra*) (2002) and *Ka Jingshai ha ka Miet* (*Light in the Night*) (2023).

His fellow poet Desmond Kharmawphlang has several works on Khasi folkloristics and oral traditions as he specializes in folk literature, urban folklore and narratology. His volume of poetry is titled *Touchstone* among his other non-fictional works as *Ki Matti Byrshem*, *Narratives of North-East India I & II* etc. Another budding writer hailing from the state is Janice Pariat who won the Sahitya Akademi Young Writer Award and Crossword Book Award both in the year 2013. Some of her works are titled: *Boats on Land* (2012), *Sea Horse* (2014), *The Nine Chambered Heart* (2017) and *Everything the Light Touches* (2022)

Then we come to 'Jewel of India' or 'The Land of Jewels', Manipur. The state has many prominent writers among whom we find the voices of writers like Robin Ngangom, Thangjam Ibopishsak Singh, Binalakshmi Nepram, Bondina Elangbam and Ratan Thiyam. Robin Ngangom, recipient of the Udaya Bharati National Award for Poetry (1994) and the Katha Award for Translation Awards (1999) is known for his poems such as "Native Land", "Poetry", "Writer", "When You Do Not Return", "Monody" and "During Eater" among many others. Thangjam Ibopishak Singh is a notable Manipuri poet who writes on gripping issues of the land like violence, insurgency, ethnic conflict and other such crucial subjects. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1997 for poetry and is credited for his works such as *The Ghost and the Mask* (1994), *The Land of Maya* (1999) and *The Human Scent* (2003).

Binalakshmi Nepram who is a female activist and an established writer and is known by the epithet 'The Face and Voice of North East' is a humanitarian and an advocate of civil rights in the conflict torn state of Manipur, that continues to burn to the present day. Some of her works are namely *Poetic Festoon* (1990), *South Asia's Fractured Frontier* (2002). *Meckley* (2004) and *Arms Trade Treaty* (2009). Another young poet and writer from Manipur, Bondina Elangbam who portrays her cross-cultural roots as both a Meitei and a Naga in her writings, is known for her anthology of poetry *Between the Poet and Her Pencil* (2016) that contains her reflections on selfhood and her various perspectives on life.

The playwright and theatre-director Ratan Thiyam is a name to be reckoned with and is one of the leading names in the domain of Indian theatrical tradition being a major force behind the 'Theatre of Roots'. As a playwright, he experimented with traditional Manipuri theatrical traditions and with the contemporary practices as well. He wrote several plays and these served as a medium of his socio-political ideologies and intellectual perspectives. He is known for his plays such as *Karanabharam* (1979), *Imphal Imphal* (1982), *Chakravyuha* (1984), *Ashibagee Esheu* (2008) and *The King of Dark Chamber* (2012) among several other works. Also, he was honoured with several awards during his life time, apart from being awarded the Padma Shri in 1989 and Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1987.

The state of Tripura, also known as the 'Land of Myth and Legends' has produced some important voices of the region like Chandrakanta Murasingh who is known to have brought Kokborok literature to the focus with his literary contributions. Kokborok is the language of the indigenous tribes of Tripura, which had only gained official recognition in 1979. He has five collections of poetry and a few his works are titled: *Memoirs of the Woods* and *Tales and Tunes of Tripura Hills* (2007) among others. He is the recipient of the Bhasha Sanman Award from the Sahitya Akademi in 1976. Another poet and novelist writing in Kokborok is Sefali Debbarma who is known for her concerns of the indigenous people with works namely, *The Fragrant Jhum: A Translation of Kokborok Poetry*, poetry collections namely Lamination, Kothoma Sichai Tongp and Yakung Yak Barsajak (2004) etc.

Also, we have several writers from the peaceful state of Sikkim known as the 'Land of Peace and Tranquility' with a deep reverence for its age-old Buddhist practices and the Royalty as well. Some of the writers to have emerged from this state are Sanu Lama, Indira Dali, Prajwal Parajuly, Chetan Raj Srestha, Pema Wangchuk and Yichey Doma. Gadul Singh Lama also known as Sanu Lama was a poet, writer and translator of Nepali Literature who received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1993 and Padma Shri in 2005. Some of his works are titled *Katha Sampad* (1971), *Gojika* (1981, *Mrigatrishna* (1993), a novel *Himachali Manitira* and *Aangan Paratira*, an anthology of poetry among many others.

Another poetical voice, Indira Dali is also a retired librarian and a library advocate with a love for books and someone who has always highlighted the importance of library spaces and children libraries as well. As a poet and author from the region, she has written various works such as *Prakritiko Upahar* or *Nature's Gift* and *Chankhako Budddhi* or *Wit*

*of Chankha*. Through her poetical writings, she gives expression to her sensitive emotions and evokes the natural world and its deep connections to spirituality in her poetry. Prajwal Parajuly, a young writer with Nepalese roots who was brought up in Sikkim won the Dylan Thomas Prize in 2013 for his anthology of short stories titled *The Gurkha's Daughter: Stories* (2012). Apart from writing for *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *The New Statesman*, he has also published his second work *Land Where I Flee* (2013), which was translated into French in 2020.

Again, young writers like Chetan Raj Srestha, an architect by training have published works like *The King's Harvest* (2013) and *The Light of His Clan* (2015). Another writer who highlights stories from his homeland and its vibrant traditions, Pema Wangchuk has also written a few works to his credit. Some of them are namely *Turning Point: A True Story* (2019), *Enter the Bardo: Events and Facts* (2004), *Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit* (2007), a non-fictional compilation and *Yangchhen: The Mastermind*. Yishey Doma Bhutia, a journalist, poet and writer from the region portrays the life, culture and customs of her people living in the Sikkim Himalayas in her writings. Some of her works are *Sikkim: A Hidden Fruitful Valley* (2008), *Faith Healers of Sikkim: Traditions, Legends and Rituals* (2018), *The Splendour of Sikkim: Culture and Traditions of the Ethnic Communities* and *Legends of the Lepchas*: *Folktales from Sikkim* (2023). She is also the recipient of Sikkim Sahitya Sanman (2013) and North East Poetry Award (2007) from the Poetry Society of India.

Thus, with a reading on some of the major writers of the North-east, you have received a tour through the eight states and their significant literary poets and writers. Therefore, you shall now have a comprehensive idea of the kind of literary concerns, characteristics and contexts that define the works from the region. The North-eastern region of India is definitely not homogenous and its beauty lies in the diverse tapestry of culture, communities, folklore, traditions and literary treasures. On this note, you are now well-oriented to progress with your study of the prescribed texts in your course on Literature from the North-east.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q7. What is the land of Assam also known as in terms of an epithet?
Q8. Mention some of the significant writers from Arunachal Pradesh.
Q9. i. What is Kokbork?
ii. Who is credited for highlighting its importance?
Q10. Mention some of the writers from the Land of Peace and Tranquility, Sikkim.

## 2.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit, the learner will be familiar to the various characteristics, contexts and literary practices of writers from the North-east region. The characteristics, contexts, and literary practices discussed are invitations to read differently - to slow down,

to attend to the untranslated word, to respect the silence, to understand that a story about a mother lighting a lamp may be a story about a war. As you proceed to study the major writers of the region - Robin Ngangom, Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, and others - carry these tools with you. Use them not to "appreciate" the literature in a vague, sentimental way, but to ask sharper questions: Who is speaking? To whom? Under what conditions? And what is left unsaid? That is the Northeast. Not a tourist destination, not a problem to be solved, but a place where literature has learned to do something rare: to be beautiful and unbearable at the same time.

## 2.8 FURTHER READING

1) Ngangom, Robin & Kympham S. Nongkynrih. (2009) *Dancing Earth*: *An Anthology of Poems from the North-East India.* Penguin Books. New Delhi.
https://www.poetryinternational.com

## 2.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Answer to Q1:** In much of mainstream Indian fiction, geography functions as backdrop - a city street, a village well, a college campus. In Northeast writing, place is never merely decorative. A hill is not a hill; it is a grandparent. A river is not a waterbody; it is a witness to colonial violence and postcolonial neglect.

**Answer to Q2:** A tiring reality for many Northeast writers is the demand to perform "authenticity". Publishers and readers in the mainland often expect exotic signifiers - tribal drums, headhunting lore, shamanic visions. Writers who refuse this demand, such as Anjum Hasan (whose Shillong is urban, bored, and middle-class), engage in a quiet rebellion. They write about love affairs, office politics, and internet addiction. This refusal to serve as a cultural tour guide is itself a characteristic of mature Northeast literature: the right to be ordinary. The most radical act for a Naga poet may be to write a poem about a leaking tap, not about a forgotten war.

**Answer to Q3:** Before the British, the region was a collection of distinct political entities: the Ahom kingdom in Assam, the Manipur kingdom, numerous Naga, Mizo, and Khasi chieftainships. The British annexed Assam in 1826 after the Treaty of Yandabo and gradually brought the surrounding hills under indirect rule, designating them as "excluded" or "partially excluded" areas. This administrative label had profound literary consequences. It meant that when modern education arrived - largely through missionary schools - the curriculum was alien.

**Answer to Q4:** The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and the normalisation of exception Enacted in 1958, AFSPA grants the armed forces extraordinary powers in "disturbed areas": to shoot, arrest without warrant, and search premises.

**Answer to Q5:** The state's response - military intervention, economic blockades, suspension of constitutional rights - has turned large parts of the region into a low-intensity war zone for decades.

**Answer to Q7:** Assam is also known as the 'Land of the Red River and Blue Hills'. Some of the writers from the state are Nabakanta Barua, Nilmoni Phookan, Hiren Bhattacharyya, Homen Buragohain, Indira Goswami, Nirupama Borgohain, Saurav among several others.

**Answer to Q8:** Some of the crop of writers from the state are namely Mamang Dai, Ponung Ering Angu and Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi.

**Answer to Q9:** i. Kokborok is the language of the indigenous tribes of Tripura, which had only gained official recognition in 1979.

ii. Chandrakanta Murasingh is known to have brought Kokborok literature to the focus with his literary contributions.

**Answer to Q 10:** Some of the writers to have emerged from this state are Sanu Lama, Indira Dali, Prajwal Parajuly, Chetan Raj Srestha, Pema Wangchuk and Yichey Doma.

## 2.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1 Give a detailed explanation of the characteristics of literature from the North east.
Q2. Discuss the contexts from which the literature of North east has emerged.
Q3. Highlight the significant literary practices of writers from the North-east region from your own reading with relevant examples.
Q4. Write a detailed note on some of the significant writers and their works from the Northeast region.

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# UNIT 3: ROBIN NGANGOM : “NATIVE LAND” & “TO PACHA”

## UNIT STRUCTURE


3.1 Learning Objectives
3.2 Introduction
3.3 Robin Ngangom: His Life and Works
3.4 Text of the Poem “Native Land” & “To Pacha”
3.5 Explanation of the Poems
3.6 Major Themes
3.7 Style and Language
3.8 Let us Sum up
3.9 Further Reading
3.10 Answers to Check Your Progress
3.11 Model Questions


## 3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, the learner will be able to:

- briefly discuss the life and works of the poet Robin Ngangom
- explain in details the text of the poems titled “Native Land” and “To Pacha”
- discuss the major themes evident in the text of the poems
- describe the style and language of the poet
- appreciate the poetry of Robin Ngangom

## 3.2 INTRODUCTION

The introductory unit has provided you a broad overview on Literature from the North-east, its transition from the age-old oral traditions to its written forms, its literary characteristics, emergent discourses and some of the prominent writers from the region. Subsequently, the prescribed texts in the course shall enrich your ideas on the various contexts that inform these works. As you are now well aware of poets and poetry from the region, the present unit takes up one of the prominent contemporary poets from the North-east region named Robin Ngangom and two of his select poems titled “Native Land” and “To Pacha”. Before we delve into both the poems, let us take a look at the life and works of the poet.

## 3.3 ROBIN NGANGOM: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Ngangom Rabindra Singh (born in 1959) also known as Robin Ngangom, hails from the Northeastern state of Manipur. He is a bilingual poet and writes in Manipuri and the English language. You will be interested to learn that he teaches English at North East Hill University

(NEHU), Shillong. Through the course of three decades of his teaching career, he has produced several works and has edited anthologies of poetry apart from his translation works. Some of his works of poetry are namely *Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994) and *The Desire of Roots* (2006).

He had studied at St. Edmund's College and North East Hill University where he now continues to teach. To his credit, Ngangom had received the Udaya Bharati National Award for Poetry (1994) and the Katha Award for Translation Awards (1999). He was also the Editor of *New Frontiers*, a journal of the Northeast Writers' Forum, Guwahati and one of the editors (for Manipuri) Katha Translation Awards, New Delhi. Apart from the two prescribed poems, some of his popular poems are, "Poetry", "Writer", "When You Do Not Return", "Monody", "During Eater" among several others.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q1.** Write a few lines on the poet Robin Ngangom.
**Q2.** Name a few of his works of poetry.
**Q3.** Mention the names of the awards received by the poet.

## 3.4 TEXT OF THE POEMS "NATIVE LAND" & "TO PACHA"

Let us begin by going through the text of the poems which are provided below for your study and reference:

**Native Land**

First came the scream of the dying
in a bad dream, then the radio report,
and a newspaper: six shot dead, twenty-five
houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied
behind their backs inside a church…
As the days crumbled, and the victors
and their victims grew in number,
I hardened inside my thickening hide,
Until I lost my tenuous humanity.

I ceased thinking
of abandoned children inside blazing huts
still waiting for their parents.
If they remembered their grandmother's tales
of many winter hearths at the hour
of sleeping death, I didn't want to know,
if they ever learnt the magic of letters.
And the women heavy with seed,
their soft bodies mown down

like grain stalk during their lyric harvests;
if they wore wildflowers in their hair
while they waited for their men,
I didn't care anymore.

I burnt my truth with them,
And buried uneasy manhood with them.
I did mutter, on some far-off day:
"There are limits", but when the days
Absolved the butchers, I continue to live
as if nothing happened.

**To Pacha**

To your uneventful death, Pacha,
the stones hurled at your demented name,
and the doors closed on your life
it is fitting that none mourn
the face of your memory they slapped;
from booze artist Pacha, to lunatic Pacha

There are no more tears to shed
in this withered country where they
kill pregnant women and children; its
nipples have long gone dry, and leering
death walks your homeland. And why should
anyone weep for your lonely alcoholic end?
Young boys and soldiers are butchering each
other by dozen, in the hills, the angry
streets, day after day, and too many heroes
and villians are not worth remembering at all,
Death is callous, Pacha, in the land of your
Innocent birth.

Consummate madman, unknown comrade,
You were the best of them all;
Whether you mapped the geography
of your stricken town, pen dipped
in your drunken blood, or portrayed
old men hard of hearing. Breaking heart
of roots, savage lover no woman would tame,
existential hero and fiercely proud pauper.
You laughed yourself insane in the teeth
of the gathering storm.

Hovel dweller amidst concrete and iron,
anachronistic mendicant, and embracer of
manuscripts in pounding rain, angry star
which burned in our skies, what were
your dreams? Reveal them a little for me,
anonymous brother. Poetry in your
homeland must die a natural death
when one must "sew up his lips and
clog his ears with mud," and to be a
man, first of all, you must sell yourself
to the highest bidder.

Immaculate madling with resplendent dream
You refused to sell them in your land
Where villians strut as the pure in streets.
You only said: "One's homeland is dear. I
have not seen all of this land , I have not
been able to tread the grass that grows there"
For a long time the tramps and lunatics
Beckoned you, and only they shall
honour your name.

## 3.5 EXPLANATION OF THE POEMS

**"Native Land"**

The opening lines of the poem reveals the intensity of the poem where the reader confronts the sudden violence that the poet describes. It portrays the unsettling terror and violence that suspends normal life in the poet's homeland. The first paragraph itself conveys the disturbing news of the various incidents of shooting, beheading and murdering innocent people or those under any kind of suspicion in the eyes of the terror mongers. It is almost a terrifying 'nightmare' for the poet where such hellish nightmare was a real one in his homeland. This was seemingly the beginning of many more such incidents of killing and violence that 'victimised' many a lives, completely altering their fate.

In response to such atrocities and inhuman acts that prevailed in his native land, he had no means of changing their circumstances except writing about it. You may note that the poet expresses the difficulty of living with such mindless violence as he says that "the days crumbled", it was not easy to live amidst such terror perpetrated by the "victors" on "the victims". This binary itself explains the prevalence of oppression that seemingly operates on the principle of fear. The number of deaths of such victims had only escalated

as the days passed by and it simply did not seem to stop. Thus, the number of innocent deaths were on the rise across the state.

The poet mentions that such circumstances that prevailed was both unthinkable and unbearable to him. Even the thought itself was so painful that he consciously avoided thinking of 'abandoned children' left to their death inside their burning huts. They had to pay with their lives for no fault of theirs. These were innocent children waiting for their parents to return to them, not knowing any better. Probably, they had no way of knowing that they would never return to them again. The reality was so tragic that the poet did not even want to bring to his mind the thought of those innocent children who might have been engulfed in the flames while in their beds perhaps remembering their grandmother's stories narrated by the warm winter fireside.

The poet's mind also wonders about many women who suffered similar fate or worse. It was painful to even think about the terror that they might have encountered while protecting their children and waiting for their men to return. Perhaps, these were women who had nothing to do with the outside world, many even pregnant and expecting new lives, their bodies were violated and crushed down by the perpetrators. These women who perhaps wore wildflowers in their hair with hope and anticipation in their eyes of better days to come, simply had no way of knowing that it would be their last. These atrocities and violence against children and women were too traumatising for anyone to even think about. The poet thus, numbed by the pain says "I didn't care anymore" almost to mean that such was the impact of the violence in his native land that he found himself in a state of shock and denial owing to the trauma that had left him in disbelief.

Often we as human beings tend to turn into our inward self and close ourselves to the world outside when our brain senses extreme fear and trauma. It is a human tendency that is bent on protecting one's sanity in an unprecedented situation, one that which is filled with violence, terror, brutality, atrocities and mindless killing. A similar response can be felt in the expression of the poet. Thus he writes, "I burnt my truth with them, and buried uneasy manhood with them" which meant that he not only numbed his conscience but also his sense of courage as a man who stood helpless in the face of such terror. And yet there was this lingering feeling that made him spell out his disgust and restraint as these words slip out of his being, "There are limits".

However, with the passing of days when the terror was answered with retaliation and "when the days absolved the butchers", the poet had no response and simply felt nothing even at that point. He continued to live as if nothing happened then as well, simply being indifferent. It was almost as if the poet paused in thought and in his helplessness was compelled to grow a thick-skin (to be insensitive or insentient) to what was happening in his native land. In fact, the poet confesses that he had become so indifferent and had grown such thick skin that it felt as though he had totally lost his sense of humanity.

This again points to the sense of complete closure to any form of violence and forming any kind of response or reaction to something that extends beyond the point of human tolerance. Perhaps, when the human mind is exposed to such ghastly and traumatic incidents for a prolonged time, it either switches to the fight or flight mode as a natural response. In this case, the poet had no way of fighting his circumstances and the only way he could respond to it all was to voice himself through writing. Thus, he writes about these experiences and expresses how such circumstances can leave a lasting impact on a person's life or lives of people and the mindscape.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q4.** What does the opening paragraph of the poem "Native Land" reveal to the reader?
**Q5.** Briefly describe the impact that the atrocities had left in the mind of the poet.
**Q6.** What does the poet confess in the lines of the poem "Native Land"?

**"To Pacha"**

The poem is a tribute to the legendary Manipuri writer Laitingbam Pacha Meetei (17 January 1943- 9 March,1990) also known as Pacha Meetei. The opening lines of the poem refers to the untimely or rather "uneventful" death of the forgotten figure of Pacha Meetei and simply reads as a dedication or a tribute to him by the poet. Instead of using any form of flowery language, high praises or pouring sentiments, the poet expresses his contentment that this man had left the world without receiving any form of gratitude or honour. This is owing to the fact that no one had bothered to understand the man or persona behind the writer.

While he was alive, abuses were hurled at him ("the stones hurled at your demented name") and he received no inspiration or gratitude to continue his life journey with dignity ("and the doors closed on your life"). Thus, it was only proper that he left the world without anyone mourning for him. For the society to which he had contributed so much had in a way reduced his status to that of a "booze artist Pacha" or "lunatic Pacha".

Besides, he says that there was nothing that one could expect from a region that was torn with strife and violence. Thus, the poet writes, "There are no more tears to be shed/ in this withered country") given the murder of innocent women and children with no love for the motherland. Besides under such circumstances where young boys and soldiers are involved in mass killing, every other day in the hills, why would they or anyone for that matter mourn his death. The poet says. "Death is callous, Pacha, in the land of your/ innocent birth" and the question is who then should have been considered lunatic, Pacha or these mass murderers?

Thus, he writes, "Consummate madman, unknown comrade, / you were the best of them all;" to mean that even if this lonely man with a bright intellect who held communist ideals was passed off as a madman by his own society, time has proven him to be above the rest. Pacha who portrayed his society and wrote about his people through various

represented characters in his works had also projected various pertinent issues and discourses of his time. Although, towards the later phase of his short life, he was given to his drinking bouts, lonely and misunderstood, a “savage lover whom no woman would tame”, a poor writer with a sense of pride, he laughed in the face of misery and inevitable death by simply refusing to fit in with the crowd. And given the scenario of violence in the poet’s home land, he has only praises to shower for this man who stood out from the rest.

Pacha lived his life in extreme poverty in a hovel i.e, a small house, that was not in good condition but he had held on to his manuscripts, his writing evading all the troubles that he faced. The poet wonders about this blazing ‘star” and the dreams that Pacha may have held in his heart without anyone knowing. He directs his question to Pacha, referring to him as his elder “brother”, rather “anonymous brother” (someone whom the world did not know much of or forgot about). The poet opines that poetry could never survive amidst such crises in their homeland, where the terror mongers were bent on silencing anyone who spoke up or voice his/her thoughts. Even daring to be oneself, as a man ought to be, also meant that one had to compromise with his sense of dignity, integrity and ideals. These were of no value to the terror mongers whom the poet compared with “bidders” who would go to any extent to fulfil their agenda.

Pacha was a clean man in that sense even if he chose to step out of the margins of his society. He held dreams in his eyes for he also loved his land and people. He refused to trade his beliefs and dreams for anything even to those who were disguised themselves as “pure” but who were in actual, “villians”. They were never his well-wishers. The only conviction that Pacha held in the words of the poet were thus, “One’s homeland is dear. I / have not seen all of this land. I have not/ been able to tread the grass that grows there”. Such was his love for his homeland that was now torn with conflict and extreme violence. Thus, the poet says that if it were the tramps and lunatics of the society who acknowledged Pacha’s presence while he was alive, then it is befitting that they alone honour his name.

## 5 LET US KNOW

Pacha Meetei had a short-lived life as he had passed away at the age of 49. However, he had left several literary contributions as a Manipuri novelist for his people. He was born in Imphal to Loitongbam Tonsana Devi and Loitongbam Madhumangol Singh and was the youngest among six siblings. As a young boy, he studied at Uripok Boys’ High School and although he did not complete his studies, yet he had a penchant for ‘reading books’, which was evident in the time he spent at the Central Library in Imphal. Also, he had joined the Keishamthong Communist Council in 1963 and later the Naharol Sahitya Premi Samiti in 1968 in the position of General Secretary given his interest in politics and the social issues of his time. In addition, he engaged himself in writing various articles on relevant issues that were published in the local newspapers.

To his credit as a writer, he had several literary works namely *Hayad Begum* (1967), *Na Tathiba Ahal Ama* (1969), *Hajj* (1971), *Thanil* (1979), *Meeoibagi Wakat* (1996) among several other of his published works. His novel titled *Imphal Amasoong Magi Esing Nungitki Phibam* (1972) had received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1973. Pacha Meetei experimented with various genres of literature ranging from drama, prose to children's literature and his writings were well- received among his people. However, his alcohol addiction had claimed his life early and the state had lost a gem without even realising the same. Thus, Ngangom expresses his admiration for Pacha Meetei in his befitting tribute to the writer-activist.

## w CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q7. i. To whom does Ngangom dedicate his poem "To Pacha"?

ii. Who was this figure that society had failed to celebrate?

Q8. What were some of the labels that were hurled at Pacha despite his significant contributions to the society?

## 3.6 MAJOR THEMES

After going through the explanation of both the poems, you shall be well acquainted with its content to make your own analysis of their thematic concerns. However, in order to guide you in this regard, the present subsection highlights the emergent themes to which you may further add from your own reading and interpretation.

**Violence and Terror:**

It is evident from the context of the poems that the poet tries to highlight the present scenario of his native land, which is torn with the prevalence of conflict, corruption, insurgency, violence and communal hostility as well. Their normal life is disrupted with the fear and uncertainty of their lives. Somehow, it leaves the reader disturbed and in an unsettling frame of mind to read about the extent of violence that claims the lives of innocent men-women and children, given the fact, that even today the state is not free of such extremities. Most importantly, the question that arises in our mind is 'where has all the humanity disappeared'?

The normal life in the state is disrupted with the fear and uncertainty of their lives. There is no scope or conducive environment to hold meaningful dialogue and discussion or to bring about new socio-political change. There is a complete degeneration of the society at large where young boys and soldiers are engaged in mindless and revengeful killing sparing none. There is a lack of leadership and goodwill as evident in the situation of the state, torn apart by age-old conflicts, enmity, corruption, insurgency, violence and oppression.

Thus, the poet personifies his homeland as a 'mother' whose sons have left her in a withered condition even as she had nourished them. The promising young minds have been led into corrupted systems and distasteful politics or even insurgency, which poses a threat to the future of the state and its people. The poet in his helplessness laments the future of his native land where heroes and villains are alike and where those wielding power are not concerned about peace and progress but about position and self-interest. There seems to be no place for poets or writers like him or Pacha where any kind of articulation or voicing of opinion would risk one's life.

**The Role of a Poet or Writer:**

The fact that Robin Ngagom has chosen to write about the forgotten voice of Pacha Meetei highlights the significance of reviving those voices that spoke and held a deep love for their homeland despite the challenges that they met. Pacha Meetei was mush ahead of his time as a writer and political activist, a person who defied social norms and the social tendency of fitting in to be accepted. Rather, he loved his people and his homeland from the margins despite himself and the circumstances of his life. One can only imagine what his life would have been like if he received the right scope, recognition and opportunity as a leading voice of his time, a writer who experimented with various genres to project, represent and mirror the society that he loved.

The same society had dejected him and scorned him without attempting to understand his mind and his beliefs. He might have had his own set of dreams for his people or his own aspirations, which did not find the fertile ground to grow and mature. Pacha, was labelled, laughed at, dismissed and forgotten because the society failed to see beyond his poverty, drunkenness, austerity and social status. He did not meet any of the social standards or norms and it was not enough that he was a remarkable writer of his time, who took the risk of writing even during the time of strife and conflict. Thus, the poet addresses him as "comrade" given Pacha's communist ideals and also as "brother" who would find a confidant in the poet if he were alive.

Even as the poet notes that poets seemingly have no place in their society and that poetry would die a natural death amidst such extreme inhuman and violent conditions, he opines that the voice of poets do matter. It is because he believes in the same that he chooses to bring up the long forgotten writer. This serves a dual purpose because in upholding the voice of Pacha, he also reiterates the significance of his own role as a poetic voice of his time. Instead of sewing one's lips in silence or shutting off one's ear to the outside world, it is necessary to speak up and voice against injustice and inhumanity.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q9.** How does the poet personify his homeland?
**Q10.** Why does Ngangom choose to write about the forgotten voice of Pacha Meetei?
**Q11.** How does the poet address Pacha in his poem?

## 3.7 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Robin Ngangom is a prominent voice of his time and his works are not just fueled by his academic background but more by his experiential knowledge, intellectual opinion as well as genuine love and concern for his state and the region. In this sub-section we shall look at the stylistic expression of the poet and the way he places his message to the readers at the core of his writing.

Although, we shall discuss the style and language employed particularly in the two prescribed poems "Native land" and "To Pacha", you may explore more of his poetical writings in order to formulate your own opinion regarding the same.

In both the poems, Ngangom directly presents the stark reality of his homeland with the use of vivid imagery, which remains in the mind of the reader long after one has finished reading it. "Native Land" begins with the scream of the dying, with the hellish reality of men being shot dead, little children left to burn inside huts, pregnant women raped and left to die. You may note that contrasts where the radio should be a source of knowledge and good information, it turns into a medium that reports deaths or the church, which is a sanctuary of peace and worship now is soaked in the blood of helpless men who hands are tied before being beheaded.

Several times in the poem, the poet uses the first person 'I' not to highlight his position as a poet-insider recording these incidents but rather to obliterate his presence in a situation that has equally left him helpless. Thus, he uses 'I' to denote its meaninglessness, "I hardened inside my thickening skin", "until I lost my tenous humanity", "I ceased thinking", "I didn't care anymore", "I burnt my truth with them" etc. And yet, he breaks this internalisation by realising that on some days he regained his frame of mind to mutter that everything had its limits which points to the fact that it was only a matter of time that the poet would resume his position to uphold the truth and press for peace, progress and justice.

Similarly, in the poem "To Pacha" we are met with the same background where the state is torn with internal conflict and violence and what is seemingly normal to the civil society is simply questionable in the eyes of the poet. Thus, the poet sides with the figure of the departed writer Pacha who is described in so many different ways such as "consummate madman". "unknown comrade", "savage lover", "existential hero", "fiercely proud pauper", "hovel dweller", anachronistic mendicant", embracer of manuscripts" "angry star", "anonymous brother", and "immaculate madling". In a way, he celebrates the writer just as he was instead of judging him by social norms or standards. Besides, what good were social norms in a society where basic human rights were openly violated every other day.

What is striking in this poem from the former is its wordiness and the effort of the poet to capture the enigmatic charisma of the writer who perhaps had no idea of his greatness. This is possibly because Ngangom desires to offer him a befitting tribute and celebrate his significance as a person and a writer-activist. The first poem is concise and holds

back the angst of the poet till the end or in other words there is a sense of restraint in his words. However, his voice and reflection on Pacha is clearly expressed in so many words in the latter poem.

Both the poems reflect a sense of resolution towards the end in which the poet resolves to make a difference through his writing that could usher in change and goodwill. He prefers to go out of his way to end this silence than remain thick-skinned, to celebrate from the margins than fall in line with social judgements. Thus, with regard to both the poems, the poet is quick at presenting vivid imageries, in a reporting tone and one that struggles to veil his feelings at the same time. Perhaps, different poems of the same poet will have a different tone, style of expression or use of words. However, the tone of the prescribed poems is one that is imbued with pain and disbelief, filled with questions and realisations as well as powerful style of expression or words that leaves the reader thinking and sensitive to the issues at hand. Ans such is the power of a poet and good poetry.

## 3.8 LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit, you will now be well acquainted with the poet Robin Ngangom and the context in which his poems are situated. A thorough reading of the poems shall enable you to gain a comprehensive idea on the prescribed poems and add to the explanation of the texts from your own reading or interpretation of the same. In addition, while providing your own analysis of the poems, you will be able to discuss the major themes that are significant to the discussion of the both the texts. Further, you will be able to describe the style and language of the poet while also appreciating the sensibility of the poet as well as his sense of expression.

## 3.9 FURTHER READING

Ngangom, Robin. (2006) *Desire of Roots.* Chandrabhaga: Cuttack
Nagangom, Robin & Kympham S. Nongkynrih (2009) *Dancing Earth*: *An Anthology of Poems From the North-East India.* Penguin Books: New Delhi.

**Website:**
Ngangom, Robin S. & Lalthansangi Ralte. "Robin S, Ngangom Indian Literature Vol 61. No 5 (338) (November-December 2023), pp 138-140. Sahitya Akademi
https://www.jstor.org/stable/27291984
"Loitongbam Pacha Meetei." https://donaldsairem.wordpress.com

## 3.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Answer to Q1:** Ngangom Rabindra Singh (born in 1959) also known as Robin Ngangom, hails from the Northeastern state of Manipur, who is a bilingual poet and writes in Manipuri and the English language.

**Answer to Q2:** Some of his works of poetry are namely *Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994) and *The Desire of Roots* (2006).

**Answer to Q3:** Ngangom had received the Udaya Bharati National Award for Poetry (1994) and the Katha Award for Translation Awards (1999).

**Answer to Q4:** The first paragraph itself conveys the disturbing news of the various incidents of shooting, beheading and murdering innocent people or those under any kind of suspicion in the eyes of the terror mongers. It is almost a terrifying nightmare for the poet where the hellish nightmare was a real one in his homeland.

**Answer to Q5:** These atrocities and violence against children and women were too traumatising for anyone to even think about. The poet thus, numbed by the pain says "I didn't care anymore" almost to mean that such was the impact of the violence in his native land that he found himself in a state of shock and denial owing to the trauma that had left him in disbelief.

**Answer to Q6:** The poet confesses that he had become so indifferent and had grown such thick skin that it felt as though he had totally lost his sense of humanity.

**Answer to Q7:** i. The poem is a tribute to the legendary Manipuri writer Laitingbam Pacha Meetei (17 January 1943- 9 March,1990 ) also known as Pacha Meetei.

ii. Pacha Meetei was a Manipuri writer with several significant literary works to his credit. He lived an obscure life and had a short-lived life as he had passed away at the age of 49. However, he had a sharp intellect and a promising career as a writer until his life journey was cut short.

**Answer to Q8:** The society to which he had contributed so much had in a way reduced his status to that of a "booze artist Pacha" or "lunatic Pacha".

**Answer to Q9:** The poet personifies his homeland as a 'mother' whose sons have left her in a withered condition even as she had nourished them. The promising young minds have been led into corrupted systems and distasteful politics or even insurgency, which poses a threat to the future of the state and its people.

**Answer to Q10:** The fact that Robin Ngangom has chosen to write about the forgotten voice of Pacha Meetei highlights the significance of reviving those voices that spoke and held a deep love for their homeland despite the challenges that they met.

**Answer to Q 11:** The poet addresses him as "comrade" given Pacha's communist ideals and also as "brother" who would find a confidant in the poet if he were alive.

## 3.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

**Q 1** Write a short note on the life and works of the poet Robin Ngangom.

**Q 2** Explain the poem "Native Land" from your own reading of the text highlighting its central concerns.

**Q 3** Give a detailed explanation of the poem "To Pacha" by Robin Ngangom and discuss the life of the forgotten figure of Pacha Meetei.

**Q 4.** Discuss some of the important themes evident in the text of the poems "Native Land" and "To Pacha"

**Q 5.** Describe the style and language employed by Robin Ngangom in the selected poems of your course.

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# UNIT 4: KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH: THE ANCIENT ROCKS OF CHERRA

## UNIT STRUCTURE


4.1 Learning Objectives
4.2 Introduction
4.3 Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih His Life and Works
4.4 Text of the Poem “The Ancient Rocks of Cherra”
4.4.1 Explanation of the Poem
4.5 Major Themes
4.6 Style and Language
4.7 Let us Sum up
4.8 Further Reading
4.9 Answers to Check Your Progress
4.10 Model Questions


## 4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, the learner will be able to:

- briefly discuss the life and works of the poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrijh
- explain in details the text of the poems titled “The Ancient Rocks of Cherra”
- discuss the major themes evident in the text of the poem
- describe the style and language of the poet
- appreciate the poetry of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

## 4.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we were introduced to the bilingual poet Robin Ngangom and the present unit takes up another significant poet from the region namely Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. You will be interested to know that they are both fellow poets and teach at the North East Hill University, Shillong. A literal reading of Nongkynrih’s works such as *The Yearning of Seeds* among other anthologies simply opens up a window to the world of the poet that is steeped in his love and admiration for his native land, his people and their rich cultural heritage.

The works of the poet bring to the fore various contemporary discourses of the modern world while also celebrating the old world charm of his native place that presents both his rooted sense of identity, socio-political consciousness and a sharp poetical sensibility that embodies it all. Let us then take a look at the life and literary works of the poet before we delve into the prescribed poem “The Ancient Rocks of Cherra”.

## 4.3 KYNPHAM SINGH NONGKYNRIH: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih (4 April 1964) hails from the northeastern state of Meghalaya and belongs to the Khasi tribe being raised in Sohra, Cherrapunji. Much like his fellow poet, Robin Ngangom, he is a bilingual poet, who writes in both Khasi and English. Also, as mentioned in the introduction, he currently teaches English Literature at North East Hill University (NEHU), Shillong. He was also engaged as a Deputy Director of Publications at the University and the editor of the University newsletter, *NEHU News* and *The NEHU Journal.* As an academic, some of his areas of specialisation are namely: World poetry in English translation, English poetry, Indian English poetry in translation, Northeast poetry in translation, Classical literary criticism, English literary criticism and Haiku-Senryu or Haibun poetry.

Some of fictional works are namely, *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends* (2007), *U Sier Laplang: Khasi Legends* (2007), *Funeral Nights* (2021), *The Distaste of the Earth* (2024) and *Ki Kyrwoh: Ki Khana Phawer* (*A Collection of Moral Stories*) (2015). Among his plays are *Manik, A Play in Five Acts* (2018), *Ki Met ka Jiengtriem: Ka Sawangka ha ki Lai Bynta* (*Nights of Terror*) (2011) and Ka Jiengngiew Ka Mynsiem Briew: Ka Sawanka ha ki Lai Bynta (2022). As a poet, some of his published and critically acclaimed works are namely; *Moments* (1992), *The Sieve: Love Poems* (1992), *The Yearning of Seeds* (2022), *Time's Barter: Haiku and Senyru* (2015), *Ka Samoi Jong ka Lyer* (*The Season of the Wind*) (2002), *Ki Mawsiang ka Sohra* (*The Ancient Rocks of Cherra*) (2002) and *Ka Jingshai ha ka Miet* (*Light in the Night*) (2023).

In addition, some of his important discussions on poetry are expressed in prose writings such as *Ban Sngewthuh ia ka Poitri* (*Understanding Poetry*) (1998), *Hiraeth and the Poetry of Soso Tham: A Study of the Great Unconventional Elegy and the Poetry of the Khasi National Bard* (2011) and *Ka Phyrkat Nam ki Khanatang* (*Sacred Myths and the Religious Content*) (2011). Nongkynrih has been honoured for his literary contributions with awards such as the Veer Shankar Shah Raghunath Shaha National Tribal Award (2008), The Bangalore Review June Jazz Award (2021), SPARROW Literary Award (2022), Shakti Bhatt Prize (2024), Meghalaya State Literary Award- U Tirot Sung Award for Arts and Literature (2026). Nongkynrih has co-edited a few books and is also known for his translation work.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q1.** Write a few lines on the poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih.
**Q2** Name a few of his poetical works.
**Q3** Mention the awards received by the poet for his literary works.

## 4.4 TEXT OF THE POEM "THE ANCIENT ROCKS OF CHERRA"

"The Ancient Rocks of Cherra" is a poem from Nongkynrih's anthology, *The Yearning of Seeds* from a section of the work titled "The Fungus". You may refer to this work to

explore more of his poetry. Now, we shall first go through the text of the poem, which is provided below for your study and reference followed by a summary of the poem:

**"The Ancient Rocks of Cherra"**

This land is old, too old
And withered for life to be easy.

Poverty eats into the hills and squeezes
A living room from stones and caterpillars
gathered for out-of-town drunks
each market day.

Where the serpent's death throes
cut deep wounds into the land
lie deep gorges like fiendish mouths
yawning for desperate victims.

There is nothing remarkable here
Only this incredible barreness.

Men and trees have left their habitats
to a crude and lowly breed like brush,
but the sight of dark grey rocks like sages
spells home to me.

### 4.4.1 Explanation of the Poem

The opening lines of the poem "The Ancient Rocks of Cherra" begins thus, "This land is old, too old/ And withered for life to be easy." Instead of glorifying the beauty of his homeland, the poet presents to the reader the difficulties of life in a tough terrain in which the people of the land have always settled despite the challenges, found sustenance and made themselves well accustomed through the ages. The hills have stood the test of time as well, bearing testimony to the same. Life in the remote hill areas are wound up with its own set of problems such as poverty lack of sufficient resources, communication and commutation issues among others.

Many families in these remote areas make-do with bare means of living and meagre resources. They live huddled in tiny stone houses that weather the changing seasons and stand witness to the challenges of time. Moreover, Cherra happens to be one of wettest places on Earth where the weather is highly unpredictable, which further affects the day-to-day life and activities of the people as well. Given the fact that human beings are the best at adapting to any kind of environment over time, the hill tribes have also carved their way, around their own set of challenges in a tough terrain. However, having said that it does not mean that their terrain is completely hostile like in many other places

of the map, but surely it does not make an easy life, to live in the remote hills with meagre resouces in this fast progressing day and age.

As the poet indicates in the lines, "Poverty eats into the hills and squeezes/ A living room from stones and caterpillars/ gathered for out-of-town drunks/ each market day", the people somehow seem to make their living with whatever little means of income that they find. For an instance, they engage themselves in gathering stones (perhaps, to sell as building material) and local food (like caterpillars among others) sold to men who visit on market days in their drunken or inebriated state. These lines are intended to emphasise the point that the poor have meagre sources of income.

However, you may note that it is not literally the case as in many remote villages and market places; you will find that particularly the women folk sell various seasonal produce and products. For an instance, they are seen to sell berries and fruits, exotic flowers and orchids, locally sourced honey and homemade pickles, homegrown vegetables and local dishes, betel nut and wild spices, warm tea and snacks, shawls and small souvenirs. Their marketplaces are lively and interesting because despite the remoteness and various issues with logistics, they have their own networking and support of their closely-knit community that keep these little hubs and market places thriving. In the lines that follow, the poet brings into reference one of the legend of a serpent named U Thlen which is elaborately discussed in the next subsection. In a nutshell, this legend is about a man-eating serpent is a demon who resorts to his evil ways in order to victimise innocent people, in the same way, perhaps the poet points to the evils of insurgency that draws in young innocent lives into his grip.

The poet then goes on to sigh the ordinariness of life in Cherra where he feels that there is nothing much to aspire for or to dream of in life in a place with limited scope for self-growth or progress. Thus he writes, "There is nothing remarkable here/ Only this incredible barreness." When one is confronted day in and day out with the huge canvas of the hills and a confined life within it, it can feel self-limiting for those with higher aspirations or dreams. The poet does not fail to convey his awe of the "incredible" land of his birth in any way but perhaps, for many like him, there was a need to look beyond what was given to them by virtue of their birthright, i.e., their homeland and identity.

In the closing lines of the poem, the poet mentions that many men have left their old life in search of a new one to only meet with lowly opportunities in life. Many families have left their natural and old way of life in order to look for better prospects or even to break away from the monotony of life in the hills. You may be well aware that many men-women and even young children are engaged in illegal coal-mining or work in stone quarries among other such odd jobs in which their lives are at constant risk given the hazardous and dangerous nature of such work. Such a switch from the old mode of life cannot be considered a wise one after all. Thus, the poet writes, "Men and trees have left their habitats/ to a crude and lowly breed like brush, /but the sight of/ dark grey rocks like sages/ spells home to me." Thus, the ancient land of Cherra is left even more barren with the shifting of many families to other places for their livelihood.

You may know that unlike the agricultural practices of Assam where the plains and valleys are dotted with green rice fields, in the hills of Meghalaya, there is the practice of *jhum* cultivation or terrace farming, which is in general limiting in terms of its produce. Thus, many families who prefer easier modes of income rather than engaging in such laborious work such as terrace farming tend to migrate to other places. Besides, in recent times many young men are led into insurgent groups given their poor circumstances of life. Thus, in a land that has always stood for harmony and a peaceful way of life, things have been changing with time and changing of circumstances. And, yet the poet professes his love for the land that he calls his home and to which he traces his rooted identity and owes his everlasting gratitude.

## 5 LET US KNOW

Have you heard of the Shillong poets? You may be wondering which poets are part of this group. Well, the Shillong Poets first began with Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin S. Ngangom later to be joined by the the following poets namely: Desmond S. Kharmawphlang, Indari Syiem Warjri, Almond D. Syiem, Temsula Ao, Ananya S. Guha and Donbokland Rynthathiang. These are some of the contemporary and compelling voices from the oft-forgotten northeastern region of India. Through their poetry and writings they represent their socio-historical and cultural roots while also bringing to the fore various burning socio-political issues of the region.

## 4.5 MAJOR THEMES

Some of the emergent themes of the poem to which you may also add your own reading and analysis are as follows:

**Cherra and the Roots of the Poet:**

The learner can well imagine the sublime beauty of standing amidst the clouds in the hills of Meghalaya, the whistling winds teasing the tall pine trees, the misty atmosphere veiling little remote hamlets and the refreshing rain drizzling from the Cherrapunji skies, almost always laden with cottony clouds. It is an experience of a lifetime to travel across the state of Meghalaya with its lush green hills, valleys, sacred groves, secret caves, gushing waterfalls, changing weather and mysterious terrain. 'Cherra', which is short for Cherrapunji now known as Sohra is enchanting in its enticing and mysterious beauty. There is something magical about this place that only can be grasped from an outsider's perspective to whom the place would feel like serendipity or in other words a pleasant finding.

If one turns to the pages of their history, the Khasis like most indigenous tribal communities had their own system of governance, socio-cultural and religious practices (mostly animism) and own traditional indigenous knowledge systems. However, with the arrival of the English colonisers, there was a cultural erosion and it all underwent a drastic

change for it became subject to the validation or rejection of the colonisers in power. Cherrapunji was historically and culturally significant for the Khasis but the British administration sidetracked its importance and pressed on adaptation of new systems of governance, religion, modern education and progress. Thus, the poet writes that the ancient hills and rocks bear witness to their rich histories and legacies of the past with the passing of time, which can never be erased or forgotten. Thus, he not only points to the changes that have occurred in his homeland through various phases of historical changes but also expresses his sense of pride in his roots. Even as he writes from outside his homeland, it is always forms the core of his writings.

**Khasi Legend of the Man-eating Serpent:**

According to the legend of U Thlen, this man-eating serpent was born to a woman named Ka Kma Kharai who was not a chaste woman in the sense that she was considered to be engaged in immoral activities in the society of her time. She was thus, left to her own ways as her father was U Mawlong Syiem, a revered Godly figure. Thus, she turned bitter and evil. She had also given birth to a demon-son U Thlen, whom she had left to his fate at the Pomdoloi waterfalls. Thus, he was out on his own in the wild region of Sohra and often took the form of a huge python that could swallow beings in an instant. U Thlen was considered evil due to his ways for he swallowed people who crossed the wild forests in order to get to their market places.

Thus, their God Suitnoh had decided to do away with this man eating serpent demon. He blocked the serpent's vacuum like throat with a round iron ball which moved the serpent out of the people's way in the wild forest hills. They were advised by God Suitnoh to partake of the python's flesh within the same day and the concerned people followed suit. However, an old lady had missed out on the advice for she had saved a little meat for her son and this mistake on her part, had revived the presence of U Thlen. The serpent tried to entice the old woman with riches and took advantage of her by engaging her in tricking people into his path, so that he could devour them. Thus, the legend point to the corruption of morals in society beginning and ending with the figure of a woman. It points to the moral corruption in society, and the role of a woman who has significant moral responsibilities whether as a person, a daughter, wife or a mother.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q4**. Mention another name for Cherra or Cherrapunji.
**Q5**. What were the changes that came about with the arrival of the English colonizers?
**Q6**. Who was U Thlen according to the Khasi Legend?
**Q7**. What does the legend point to in terms of its lesson?

## 4.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

In order, to analyse and formulate a well-informed idea of the poet's style and language, one must explore more of his poetry or anthologies. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih has come a long way through the early 1980s to the present in finding a place among academic

syllabus of English Literature. This is not to say that he has arrived as a poet given the validation of his works by the mainstream writers and critics of Indian English Literature. Rather, he is a remarkable poet in his own right who is a representative voice of his people and the region as well. There is no kind of doubt regarding his credibility as a modern writer and poet. If one analyses his anthologies of poetry, he or she would find thematic concerns of identity, personal reflections, socio-political discourses, environmental consciousness, folklore and cultural traditions, present crises and insurgency in the region.

If you take into consideration the prescribed poem, you will surely agree that in the economy of words, the poet captures the love and concern for his native land from which he hails. The poem is written in free verse and the imagery he uses is suggestive and pictorial, in which the entire hillscape of Sohra or Cherrapunji is conjured in the mind of the readers who are also drawn to look beyond the mesmerising beauty of the hills. The hills have always stood tall and patient, watching the world pass by through the centuries. They have always been like protecting guardians to the people of the hills even as they have now become somewhat detached to the natural way of life.

This is presented as a concern and a reflection of the poet who towards the end of the poem confesses his undeterred love for Cherra, which has always been his home and refuge. Through these lines, he points to the omnipresence of their ancestral voices and collective consciousness, their oral folklore and histories, their enduring indigenous experiences and identity. Nongkynrih's use of language and diction is simple and suggestive. He does not necessarily romanticise his perspectives on his homeland or exocitise the beauty of his locales. He presents Meghalaya, Shillong, Cherra as he has always known them in a matter of fact tone without overshadowing or veiling his love for the same. In addition, one shall find that the poet's personal voice also stands for the larger collective voice of his people.

In the wider body of his poetical works, one shall always find his concerns centering around his homeland and a certain sense of nostalgia and reminiscence that comes across in a subtle way through his poems. Just as we find his love and concern for his homeland in "The Ancient Rocks of Cherra" there are other poems like "Forebodings", "Lawsohtun", "Blasphemous Lines for Mother" among others that express similar sentiments and reflections. For an instance read these ending lines from the poem titled "Lawsohtun by Nongkynrih:

"In winter your slopes are flushed with the love
of cherries. In summer they wear the fair blooms
of plums and your numerous pears as if set
for a white man's wedding.
I never tire of their soft gazes and their
Promise of dreams and redemption.

Maybe, after all, someone has to save your
Streams and pine grove. Despite the cold
Wind, there are times when I feel determined
To liberate your hills"
("Lawsohtun")

With regard to the poetry that has emerged out of the region Nongkynrih writes in his article "Hard edged Modernism" thus, "It is true that myth and tribal folklore are among the cores subject matters of the North-east poets. But there is certainly more to it than mere Romantic escapism. As the poets see their people, often themselves included, losing their way completely in the violent cultural changes of the times, there is born a desire in them to rehabilitate the past as high culture. They realise that in every myth is embedded the wisdom of the race and that every legend speaks in symbolic overtones" (43). By this, the poet reasserts the significance of the rooted historical consciousness, folklore and socio-cultural traditions that has always upheld the rich heritage and identity of the people in the region.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q8.What are some of the thematic concerns found in the poetry of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih?
Q9. Briefly describe the poetic style and language of the poet.
Q10. What does the poet's personal voice also stand for or represent?

## 4.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit, you will now be well acquainted with the poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and the context in which his poems are situated. A thorough reading of the poem "The Ancient Rocks of Cherra" shall enable you to gain a comprehensive idea on the prescribed text and add to the provided explanation from your own reading or interpretation of the same. In addition, while providing your own analysis of the poem, you will be able to discuss the major themes that are significant to the discussion of the both the texts. Further, you will be able to describe the style and language of the poet while also appreciating the sensibility of the poet as well as his sense of expression.

## 4.8 FURTHER READING

1. Ngangom, Robin & Kympham S. Nongkynrih. (2009) *Dancing Earth*: *An Anthology of Poems From the North-East India.* Penguin Books: New Delhi
2. Nongkynrih, Kynpham S. (2011). *The Yearning of Seeds*. Harper Collins. New Delhi.
3. Nongkynrih, Kynpham S. "Hard-edged Modernism: Contemporary Poetry in North-east India". *India International Centre Quaterly*. Vol 3. No 2/3. Pp 39-44. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23006006

## 4.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Answer to Q1:** Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih (4 April 1964) hails from the northeastern state of Meghalaya and belongs to the Khasi tribe who was raised in Sohra, Cherrapunji. He is a bilingual poet, who writes in both Khasi and English. Also, as mentioned in the introduction, he currently teaches English Literature at North east Hill University (NEHU), Shillong.

**Answer to Q2:** *Moments* (1992), *The Sieve: Love Poems* (1992), *The Yearning of Seeds* (2022), *Time's Barter: Haiku and Senyru* (2015), *Ka Samoi Jong ka Lyer* (*The Season of the Wind*) (2002), *Ki Mawsiang ka Sohra* (*The Ancient Rocks of Cherra*) (2002) and *Ka Jingshai ha ka Miet* (*Light in the Night*) (2023).

**Answer to Q3:** Nongkynrih has been honoured for his literary contributions with awards such as the Veer Shankar Shah Raghunath Shaha National Tribal Award (2008), The Bangalore Review June Jazz Award (2021), SPARROW Literary Award (2022), Shakti Bhatt Prize (2024), Meghalaya State Literary Award- U Tirot Sung Award for Arts and Literature (2026).

**Answer to Q4:** Sohra is the other name for Cherra or Cherrapunji

**Answer to Q5:** With the arrival of the English colonisers, there was a cultural erosion and it all underwent a drastic change for it became subject to the validation or rejection of the colonisers in power. Cherrapunji was historically and culturally significant for the Khasis but the British administration sidetracked its importance and pressed on adaptation of new systems of governance, religion, modern education and progress.

**Answer to Q6:** According to the legend of U Thlen, this man-eating serpent was born to a woman named Ka Kma Kharai who was not a chaste woman.

**Answer to Q7:** The legend points to the corruption of morals in society beginning and ending with the figure of a woman. It points to the moral corruption in society, and the role of a woman who has significant moral responsibilities whether as a person, a daughter, wife or a mother.

**Answer to Q8:** Some of the thematic concerns in his poetry are identity, personal reflections, socio-political discourses, environmental consciousness, folklore and cultural traditions, present crises and insurgency in the region.

**Answer to Q9:** In the economy of words, the poet captures the love and concern for his native land from which he hails. The poem is written in free verse and the imagery he uses is suggestive and pictorial, in which the entire hillscape of Sohra or Cherrapunji is conjured in the mind of the readers who are also drawn to look beyond the mesmerising beauty of the hills.

**Answer to Q10:** The poet's personal voice also stands for the larger collective voice of his people.

## 4.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

**Q1** Write a detailed note on the life and significant works of the poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih.

**Q2** Give a detailed explanation of the poem "The Ancient Rocks of Cherra" by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih highlighting the concerns of the poet.

**Q3** Discuss some of the themes evident in the text of the poem "The Ancient Rocks of Cherra".

**Q4** Describe the style and language employed by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih in the selected poem of your course titled "The Ancient Rocks of Cherra".

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# UNIT 5: EASTERINE KIRE: "AUTUMN" AND "THE MOST IMPORTANT THING"

## UNIT STRUCTURE


5.1 Learning Objectives
5.2 Introduction
5.3 Easterine Kire: Her Life and Works
5.4 Context of the Poems
5.5 Explanation of the Poems
5.6 Major Themes
5.7 Style and Language
5.8 Let us Sum up
5.9 Answers to Check Your Progress
5.10 Further Reading
5.11 Model Questions


## 5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the life and works of the poet Easterine Kire
- summarise and explain the context of the poems "Autumn" and "The Most Important Thing"
- analyse the major thematic concerns prevalent in Kire's poetry
- examine the language and style of the poet
- appreciate the contribution of Easterine Kire to North East literature in English

## 5.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to Easterine Kire, one of the most significant contemporary literary voices from Nagaland and North East India, whose poetry and prose have played a pioneering role in shaping indigenous writing in English. As a poet deeply rooted in Naga history, culture, and oral tradition, Kire's work offers a powerful alternative to mainstream literary narratives by foregrounding lived experiences from the margins.

The unit begins with an overview of Kire's life and literary career, situating her writing within the socio-cultural and political realities of the Naga indigenous community. It then moves on to examine the context of the prescribed poems, "Autumn" and "The Most Important Thing," helping you to gain an idea of the cultural, emotional, and philosophical background against which these poems were written.

Through detailed explanations, the unit guides you in reading and interpreting the poems, paying attention to their imagery, symbolism, and underlying meanings. You will

also explore the major themes that recur in Kire's poetry, such as memory, belonging, loss, spirituality, nature, and the endurance of indigenous values in a changing world. A separate section on style and language highlights Kire's simple yet evocative diction, her use of oral storytelling techniques, and her ability to blend everyday experience with deeper moral and spiritual reflection.

By the end of the unit, you will gain a clearer appreciation of Easterine Kire's contribution to North East literature in English, as well as an understanding of how poetry can function as a medium of cultural preservation, historical testimony, and personal expression. This unit thus encourages you not only to analyse Kire's poems as literary texts but also to engage with them as meaningful representations of indigenous voices and experiences.

## 5.3 EASTERINE KIRE: HER LIFE AND WORKS

Easterine Kire is one of the most important contemporary literary voices from Nagaland and North East India, whose writings have played a pioneering role in bringing Naga experiences into Indian English literature. Writing across poetry, fiction, and children's literature, Kire draws deeply from the oral traditions, history, spirituality, and socio-political realities of the Naga indigenous community. Her works not only preserve cultural memory but also challenge dominant literary narratives by foregrounding voices from the margins. An understanding of her life and literary contributions will help the learners appreciate the context, concerns, and distinctive qualities of her poetry and prose.

Easterine Kire is a poet, novelist, and short story writer from Nagaland, and she is widely regarded as a pioneering voice in Naga literature in English. Born in 1959 in Kohima to an Angami Naga family, Kire grew up listening to stories, songs, and oral histories that later became the emotional and cultural backbone of her writing. These early influences explain why storytelling—especially oral storytelling—plays such an important role in her creative world.

She made literary history in 1982 by publishing *Kelhoukevira*, the first book of Naga poetry written in English. Two decades later, she achieved another milestone with her novel *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), the first English-language novel by a Naga writer. Since then, Kire has written extensively across genres—poetry, novels, short stories, children's literature, and has translated hundreds of Naga oral poems from her native language, Tenyidie, into English.

What makes Kire especially significant for readers is her deep engagement with Naga history, culture, spirituality, and political struggle. Her works often explore themes such as memory, community, faith, conflict, and survival, while quietly revealing histories that have long remained unheard or marginalised. Novels like *Bitter Wormwood* and *When the River Sleeps* reflect both the pain and resilience of the Naga people, blending realism with myth, folklore, and spiritual belief.

Kire's life has also shaped her writing in powerful ways. Due to threats and hostility following her responses to political violence in Nagaland, she was forced to leave her homeland. In 2005, she became a writer-in-residence in Norway under the International

Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN). During her years in exile, she continued to write prolifically and eventually returned to India in 2015. Today, she lives in northern Norway, but her imagination remains firmly rooted in Nagaland.

Apart from writing, Easterine Kire is also a performing poet. She performs jazz poetry with her band 'Jazzpoesi', taking Naga stories and rhythms to international audiences. Her work has been translated into several languages, and she has received many prestigious awards, including "The Hindu Literary Prize" for *When the River Sleeps*.

For undergraduate learners, Easterine Kire's writing is important because it shows how literature from the margins can tell powerful stories—stories that connect personal memory with collective history, and local culture with global readership. Reading her work helps us understand how fiction and poetry can preserve cultural identity, question dominant narratives, and give voice to communities often left out of mainstream literary discussions.

## 5.4 CONTEXT OF THE POEMS

Both the poems, "Autumn" and "The Most Important Thing" appears in Easterine Kire's poetry collection titled *Freerain* published in 2024. *Free Rain* brings together poems that are simple in language but rich in meaning. The title *Free Rain* itself suggests something natural, unrestrained, and life-giving. Just like rain falls freely on everyone, the poems in this collection move across different aspects of life— memory, people, nature, and moral questions, etc.—without being confined to a single theme.

Both "Autumn" and "The Most Important Thing" emerge from real-life situations that feel familiar and relatable. Kire writes from her experiences of Naga society in Northeast India where people live in close-knit communities and everyday conversations matter. In "Autumn," a simple street-side chat between elderly women becomes meaningful because it shows how people stay connected and take interest in each other's lives. At the same time, the references to festivals and mixed-language greetings suggest a modern world where cultures overlap. In "The Most Important Thing," the focus shifts to a more serious and universal issue—hunger. The poem reminds us that for many people, basic needs like food are still a daily struggle.

Reflecting real human concerns. "Autumn" deals with aging, family pride, and how ideas of success change across generations. While "The Most Important Thing" dwells on aspects like survival, care, and responsibility. In this poem, Kire asks simple but important questions about life— what truly matters, and how we should care for others.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q1.** Name the first book of Naga poetry written in English.
**Q2.** Why was Kire forced to leave Nagaland?
**Q3.** In which collection do the poems "Autumn" and "The Most Important Thing" appear?

## 5.5 EXPLANATION OF THE POEMS

In this section, we shall discuss the prescribed poems and explore the various facets of meaning that the poems imply. Let us begin by reading the text of the poem "Autumn".

**Autumn**

When old ladies on the street
Greet you and put their faces close to yours
And want to tell you all about their grandchildren:
"My grandson, the one who plays the trumpet, you remember him, don't you?
He is going to be playing at the Nordlys festival
And his sister who is always writing poems
Has finally got a job at the bank, thank goodness
And gets a nice pay check
So much better don't you think,
than going out to all those dreadful cafes every evening and reading poems
And never getting any money for all that
Isn't it wonderful when all your grandchildren have settled down
And gotten jobs and have their own apartments?
Ha det, bye, have a good day see you soon."

From our reading of the poem, we realise that the poet captures a small, almost ordinary moment in the poem "Autumn". However, it is interesting to not how the poem turns it into something meaningful. As the poem opens, the readers observe a casual street encounter. The speaker meets elderly women who come close, greet warmly, and immediately begin talking about their grandchildren.

The poem begins with a familiar, everyday scene. The speaker meets elderly women in a public place. There is nothing unusual about this encounter yet it feels like a moment we all might have experienced in our lives, that is, meeting elderly people. The old women are naturally warm and affectionate. The phrase 'their faces close to yours' suggests intimacy and an eagerness to connect. It is also suggestive of how older people often communicate with warmth, but sometimes without much sense of personal space. By this line, 'And want to tell you all about their grandchildren' the speaker reveals that their biggest joy lies in sharing information and talking about their grandchildren. This is suggestive of how grandchildren forms the core of the lives of the elderly; at this stage of life, their emotional investment lies in and around their grandchildren primarily. Notably, the conversation becomes personal when one elderly woman / grandmother assumes familiarity, even if the listener may not actually remember. This reflects how proud she is and how important the grandson is to her. She speaks with pride and excitement about her grandson, who will play the trumpet at the Nordlys festival. Now this is an achievement to her and the grandmother excitedly shares this joyful piece of news with the speaker.

The grandmother then focuses on another grandchild. She is described as someone who writes poetry— suggesting creativity and artistic inclination. The woman is relieved to share the news of her granddaughter securing a job at the bank. We must note the use

of the term 'finally' in the above lines: it is suggestive of how writing poetry was not considered a proper or stable path. On the other hand, financial stability is emphasised. This is a very common notion among the elderly people who relate success with earning. If we look a little deeper, this is not just random conversation. The old women measure happiness in very specific ways. For them, success means stability: a proper job, a steady income, and a settled life. This is evident when the grandmother contrasts the granddaughter's bank job with "reading poems in cafés" without earning money. There is a subtle judgment here. Creative pursuits are seen as uncertain, even impractical, while salaried work is viewed as respectable and secure. This reflects a generational perspective. Older generations, shaped by hardship and limited opportunities, often value financial security over artistic ambition. The poem does not criticise them harshly; instead, it presents their viewpoint gently, almost with a touch of humour. The long, unbroken speech mimics how such conversations happen in real life—one thought leading into another, without pause.

These lines reflects a generational perspective. Older generations, shaped by hardship and limited opportunities, often value financial security over artistic ambition. Stability, routine, and security are valued more than passion or experimentation. The poem does not criticise them harshly; instead, it presents their viewpoint gently, almost with a touch of humour. Success is defined in concrete terms: job, home, independence. These are the markers of achievement for the older generation. The long, unbroken speech mimics how such conversations happen in real life— one thought leading to another, without pause. "Ha det, bye, have a good day see you soon" is suggestive of mix of languages and hints at a multicultural environment. It also reflects how such encounters are brief but lively.The title "Autumn" is important because it is a season often associated with later stages of life. Just as trees shed leaves and prepare for rest, these elderly women are in the "autumn" of their lives. Their focus has shifted from their own achievements to the lives of their grandchildren. Their joy now comes from seeing the next generation "settled." The beauty of the poem lies in its simplicity. In a few lines, Kire's poem beautifully captures the varied understandings of people regarding ideas like happiness, success and life as a whole.

## LET US KNOW

**Nordlys festival:** The Nordlys Festival mentioned in *"Autumn"* is actually a well-known music festival held in Tromsø, Norway, often associated with the "Northern Lights" (Aurora Borealis). The word *"Nordlys"* itself means *"Northern Lights"* in Norwegian. In the context of the poem, the reference to the Nordlys Festival suggests a global or modern setting. It shows that the characters (or their families) are connected to a wider world beyond their immediate community. For example, the grandson playing at such a festival indicates success and recognition at an international level.

**The Most Important Thing**

But you see love
Love is not

The most important thing
It is not about
Making another soul
Feel deathless
No, no.
Food
Food is the most important thing
And if you go
And feed a dozen
Hungry homeless
Young,
And a handful
Of old people, old
You will find out
It is food, not love
That is the most important thing
And when we have done that
Given food to the hungry, and the ones
Who have none to feed them
Love will come by the feeding
Deathless love
But first
Give them food
And by and by
Love will come.

This is another simple yet powerful poem written by Easterine Kire. This poem carries a strong message as it asks the readers to reconsider 'the most important thing' in life. As the poem begins, the poet challenges a common belief: "But you see love/ Love is not/ The most important thing". We grew up hearing, in stories, films, and even everyday conversations, that love is the ultimate value that gives life meaning. Love is often presented as something powerful enough to overcome all difficulties in life. Because of this, many of us instinctively place love at the top of our moral and emotional priorities.In this poem, Easterine Kire subtly challenges this notion. She does not reject love in an aggressive or dramatic way. Instead, she questions it in a calm, almost conversational manner. The poem feels less like a poet making a grand declaration and more like someone speaking to us in everyday language, asking us to reconsider what we take for granted. Through this line "It is not about/Making another soul/Feel deathless", the poet tries to provide a very idealistic concept of love. Generally speaking, love is about making someone feel very special, as if the feeling will last forever. That is what "feel deathless" because it signifies something perfect and therefore, beyond real life experiences. Easterine Kire points out that this kind of love, that is, romantic in nature, is not enough to sustain life. Instead, there are realistic and basic human needs like food and survival. Loving alone will not help till hunger or suffering persists.

In these lines, the poet reaffirms and stresses that it is not love but food that is the most essential thing. By stressing on something as basic as food, Kire draws our attention to the fact that for survival this is the most important factor. Love will not suffice when one is starving. Thus, by repetition, the poet gently corrects such ways of thinking and establishes her standpoint.Going by a practical instance, the poet emphasises on service or the act of feeding the hungry and poor people. Feeding the vulnerable people especially, the children and the old ones, the attention shifts to their fragility and neglect. Having said that, the central idea of the poem, that is, real experience of feeding people come first rather than 'showing' love, is repeated again for emphasis.

Here, a clear sequence is visible. First, the poet emphasises action, that is, feeding those in need. This brings our attention to real human need and our responsibility toward others. Instead of beginning with emotional ideas, the poet asks us to respond to suffering in a practical way. And once this need is met, something deeper begins to grow. Love, then, is no longer just a feeling or a romantic idea; it develops naturally through acts of kindness and care. In other words, when we help others in a real, physical way, we create a more genuine and lasting form of love, one that is rooted in compassion and action rather than just words.The concluding lines reaffirm love, one that is more practical and lasting, conveyed by acts of kindness and service. Love that enables one to help others survive is definitely realistic and this is what Kire establishes through the poem.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q4.** What, according to the elderly women, is more important and why as reflected in the poem "Autumn"?

**Q5.** State the significance of the following line: "Ha det, bye, have a good day see you soon".

**Q6.** What is the belief that the poet challenges in the poem "The Most Important Thing"?

## 5.6 MAJOR THEMES

In this section, we shall reflect on the major themes that run through the two poems by Easterine Kire, "Autumn" and "The Most Important Thing." First, both the poems draw from simple, familiar situations—a street-side chat in "Autumn" and a reflective, almost casual statement in "The Most Important Thing." Indicating how even small, everyday interactions can reveal deeper truths about people and society.

Another important theme in these poems is the way they make the readers rethink what we usually consider important in life or in other words, redefining values. We often grow up believing certain ideas without questioning them— such as success meaning a good job, or love being the highest value. These poems subtly challenge these assumptions and allows space for the readers to revise and reflect their understandings regarding these universal human thoughts. In the poem, *"Autumn,"* we see how this idea echoes through the voices of the elderly women. To them, success is very clear and practical:

having a stable job, earning a regular income, and living independently. When the elderly woman talks about the granddaughter getting a bank job, the tone implies a sense of relief. At the same time, they dismiss her earlier interest in poetry as something unproductive because it does not bring money. Through this conversation, the poem shows how success is often defined in material terms, especially by older generations who may have experienced insecurity in their own lives. In *"The Most Important Thing,"* the poet openly challenges the common belief that love is the most important thing in life. Instead, she argues that basic needs like food must come first. This may feel surprising, but it reflects the truth. Helping someone who is hungry, automatically bestows love; emotional ideas of love is straightaway replaced by universal love. Together, these two poems encourage its readers us to look again at their beliefs. Kire does not give fixed answers, but she gently pushes the questions to her readers to decide what truly matters.

A recurrent thematic aspect in Kire's poetry is human connection and community feeling. Both the poems show how human beings are connected in simple but meaningful ways. These connections are not always expressed through big emotions or dramatic moments. Instead, they are built through everyday interactions and small acts of care. In *"Autumn,"* this sense of connection appears through casual conversation. The elderly women stop and speak warmly, sharing news about their grandchildren. Their pride and excitement show how deeply they are connected to their family. Even the act of stopping someone on the street to talk reflects a community where people know each other and feel comfortable sharing personal details. These small exchanges create a sense of belonging and togetherness. In *"The Most Important Thing,"* connection takes a more practical form. Here, relationships are built through responsibility and care for others. Feeding the hungry is not just an act of kindness; it is a way of recognising another person's need and responding to it. The poem suggests that true human connection grows out of such actions. It is not only about feeling love, but about showing it through what we do. Both the poems indicate that relationships are not based only on emotions or words. They are shaped by everyday gestures, shared experiences, and the willingness to support one another. In this way, community becomes something lived and practiced, not just something we talk about.

Kire's poetry emphasises on understanding values through age and experience. In both the poems, human values are shaped by age, experience, and real-life needs. In "Autumn," the older women value security, stable jobs, and "settling down," showing a clear generation gap where practical success is preferred over creative pursuits. This reflects lives shaped by the need for stability. Again, in "The Most Important Thing" the poet highlights that basic needs like food is primary and more necessary than emotional ideas like love. A hungry person cannot fully experience love. Kire shows that real compassion lies in action, that is, feeding the hungry and caring for others.

Besides these pertinent issues, both poems feel like spoken conversations rather than formal poetry. This reflects an oral storytelling style, making the poems accessible and relatable. The informal tone helps convey serious ideas in a natural way.

## 5.7 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

When it comes to the style and language of Easterine Kire, one of the reasons her poetry feels so immediate and relatable, is the conversational tone. Poems like "Autumn" or "The Most Important Thing," are written in a way as if we are listening to someone talking to us in person. The sentences flow like everyday speech, sometimes even long and slightly unstructured, just like how people actually speak. This is what creates a sense of intimacy in her poems.

If we look closely at the two poems "Autumn" and "The Most Important Thing," the style of Easterine Kire becomes even clearer. Both poems show how she uses very simple techniques to express quite deep ideas. In the poem, "Autumn," the most striking feature is the use of direct speech. The entire poem almost reads like a real conversation which one might overhear on the street. The old women speak in long, flowing sentences without strict grammatical structure. This gives the poem a natural, spoken quality. It does not feel like "written poetry" in a formal sense; it feels like life captured as it is. The informal tone, the quick shifts from one topic to another, and even the slightly repetitive way of speaking- all make the scene realistic. Significantly, the poem "The Most Important Thing," is slightly different in style but equally simple. Here, instead of a conversation between people, it feels like a direct address to the reader. The poet speaks to us using "you," which makes the poem feel personal and engaging. It is almost like advice being given in a calm, steady voice. The poet also uses repetition; words like "love" and "food" are repeated several times in the poem to emphasise the central idea and convey the message to the readers: basic needs come before emotional ideals. The short lines and pauses add to the meaning of the poem by giving ample scope to each ideas to sink in.

Another important aspect of Easterine Kire's poems is her simplicity of language. Kire uses common, familiar words instead of decorative or highly literary vocabulary. This simplicity is a deliberate choice. It allows her ideas—often quite deep and philosophical—to come across clearly. Readers do not struggle with the language, so they can focus on the meaning. The language in "Autumn" is also very ordinary and familiar. Words like "grandson," "job," "pay check," and "cafes" belong to daily life. There is no heavy imagery or symbolic language. Yet, through these simple words, we understand deeper ideas—about generational thinking, ideas of success, and attitudes toward art. However, in the poem "The Most Important Thing," the language is clear, direct, and almost instructional. Lines like "But first / Give them food" sound like simple guidance rather than poetic ornamentation. This reflects Kire's tendency to keep her poetry grounded in real-life concerns. Even when she talks about something abstract like love, she connects it to practical action.

Notably, Kire's writings are much influenced by the oral storytelling traditions. Coming from a culture where stories are often shared verbally, her poems carry that rhythm and ease. Repetition, direct address ("you"), and a flowing narrative style are all part of this oral quality. It makes the poems feel alive and grounded in real human interaction. Her

use of language is deeply connected to real-life concerns. Topics like food, work, family, aging, etc.— captures her attention as evident from her poems. Even when she talks about something abstract like love, she brings it back to practical reality. This grounded quality gives her poetry emotional honesty. In short, Kire's style is simple, conversational, and rooted in lived experience.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q7.** What are the major themes in the poems discussed above?
**Q8.** Briefly describe Kire's use of language in the two poems under discussion.

## 5.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we explored the two poems*, Autumn"* and *"The Most Important Thing"* by Easterine Kire—which show how simple, everyday moments can carry deep meaning. Through a casual street conversation in *"Autumn,"* we understand ideas about aging, family pride, and how different generations define success. In *"The Most Important Thing,"* the poet shifts our focus to basic human needs, reminding us that survival—especially food—comes before abstract emotions like love. Both poems highlight important themes such as community, human connection, and compassion through action. Kire shows that relationships are built not just on feelings, but on everyday care and responsibility. Her simple, conversational style makes these ideas easy to understand while still being thought-provoking. We have also gained an idea on Kire as a poet who focuses on the simple and ordinary events to reflect deeper philosophical and cultural notions about people, community and human life.

Overall, the poems encourage us to reflect on what truly matters in life. They gently move us away from idealistic thinking and bring us closer to real human experiences, where care, survival, and meaningful actions take priority. You are advised to go through the other interesting poems by Kire to appreciate and fully understand her poetic output.

## 5.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Ans to Q 1:** *Kelhoukevira.*

**Ans to Q 2:** Due to threats and hostility following her responses to political violence in Nagaland, she was forced to leave her homeland. In 2005, she became a writer-in-residence in Norway under the International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN).

**Ans to Q 3:** The two poems "Autumn" and "The Most Important Thing" appears in Easterine Kire's poetry collection titled *Freerain* published in 2024.

**Ans to Q 4:** Older generations, shaped by hardship and limited opportunities, often value financial security over artistic ambition.

**Ans to Q 5:** "Ha det, bye, have a good day see you soon" is suggestive of mix of languages and hints at a multicultural environment. It also reflects how such encounters are brief but lively.

**Ans to Q 6:** Love is often presented as something powerful enough to overcome all difficulties in life. Because of this, many of us instinctively place love at the top of our moral and emotional priorities. In this poem, Easterine Kire quietly unsettles that assumption.

**Ans to Q 7:** Redefining values, scenes from everyday life, human connection and community feeling, understanding values through age and experience, etc. among others.

**Ans to Q 8:** Kire uses common, familiar words instead of decorative or highly literary vocabulary. This simplicity is a deliberate choice. It allows her ideas—often quite deep and philosophical—to come across clearly.

## 5.10 FURTHER READING

Kire, E. (2011). *Free Rain*. New Delhi: Heritage Publishing House.

Misra, T. (Ed.). (2011). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Nongkynrih, K. S., & Nongbri, E. (Eds.). (2010). *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.

## 5.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

**Q1.** Discuss the life and literary career of Easterine Kire, highlighting her contribution to North East Indian literature in English.

**Q2.** Explain the context of the poem "Autumn."

**Q3.** Give a detailed explanation of the poem "The Most Important Thing." What values does the poem emphasise?

**Q4**. Identify and discuss the major themes found in Easterine Kire's poetry with reference to the prescribed poems.

**Q5**. Examine Easterine Kire's use of language and style in her poetry. How does the oral tradition influence her poetic voice?

**Q6.** How does Easterine Kire represent indigenous Naga culture and spirituality in her poems? Illustrate your answer with examples.

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# Unit 6: MONA ZOTE : "AN IMPRESSION OF BEING ALIVE"

## UNIT STRUCTURE


6.1 Learing Objects
6.2 Introduction
6.3 Mona Zote: Life and Works
6.4 Context of the poem
6.5 Explanation of the Poem
6.6 Major Themes
6.7 Style and Language
6.8 Let us Sum up
6.9 Further Reading
6.10 Model Questions


## 6.1. LEARING OBJECTIVES

After going through the poem, the learner will be able to:

- discuss the life and works of Mona Zote
- explain the content of the poem
- summarise the content of the poem
- analyse the major themes in the poem
- describe the style and language employed in the poem

## 6.2. INTRODUCTION

Poetry in English from Mizoram has emerged as a distinct, quietly vibrant strand within contemporary Indian English writing, rooted in the cultural and historical specificities of the Northeast while engaging with global literary forms. Historically, Mizo literature developed first in the Mizo language through rich oral and song traditions, and the move towards written poetry—especially in English—is a relatively recent, post independence phenomenon. Writers such as Malsawmi Jacob, Mona Zote, Dawngi Chawngthu, Hannah Lalthanpui, and others have helped shape a distinctive voice that combines local folklore, critique of patriarchy,post-conflict memory, small-town experiences, in their poetry.

## 6.3. MONA ZOTE : LIFE AND WORKS

Mona Zote is a contemporary Indian poet from Mizoram, often regarded as one of the key voices in modern English language writing from Northeast India. Her work is known for its sharp, unsentimental imagery, formal experimentation, and engagement with gender, politics, and Mizo Christian social norms. She was born in 1973 in Patna, Bihar, but grew up connected to Mizoram, where she now lives in Aizawl. She has described herself as

a "poet disguised as a government employee," indicating that she works in a bureaucratic role while maintaining a serious commitment to poetry.

Her poems frequently take on taboo subjects such as prostitution, insurgency, and the contradictions of strict Christian patriarchal society, often with feminist and decolonial undertones. She has published her poetry in various journals, including *Indian Literature* and *Carapace*. Her work was also featured in the *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*, edited by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin Ngangom. Her best known poems include "An Impression of Being Alive", "The Whores of August", "Anti-Love Poem", "Rez "among many others.

## 6.4. CONTEXT OF THE POEM

Mona Zote's "An Impression of Being Alive"(2009) is set in the quiet, everyday spaces of urban life in Mizoram, particularly in Aizawl or any other town in North-East India, at the turn of the 21st century. Written in English, the poem encapsulates the mood of a post-traditional and modernised North-East society, where Mizo Christian morality, bureaucratic routine, and global consumer culture are present.

The poem was composed in the late 2000s, a period when Mizoram and the wider Northeast were experiencing rapid urbanisation and exposure to global pop-culture, even as they remained relatively economically marginal in the national imagination. Against this backdrop Zote's speaker moves through streets, shops, DVDs, and restaurants, registering how modern life is lived through imported images and commodities.Within the canon of contemporary poetry of North-East India, the poem exemplifies how writers in the region use English not to approximate metropolitan centres but to record the small-town life that is suddenly exposed to global practices and trends.

## 6.5. EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

**"An Impression of Being Alive"**

All day we have watched the street shift
and careen, shed skin, refill, crest and yaw,
corrected our taste for oranges
packed by other hands from other places, bought
tokens of summer and the coming happiness —
we paused at the Korean romances: *A Tale of a Prince*,

*Over Rainbow*, *Tree of Heaven*. And the corporate type
who went mad for a girl.
No prince arrived with a piece of fax.
You said Plainly, it's all money and for-
nication, just like everywhere else. We smiled
at the notion of moon bases and hummed a tune

from the movie we figured
we were still living in.

All day the sun kept tangling and stumbling
among bright open windows while the shopgirls cheered on,
and the pavement singers, and those women
fingering black laces in Foreign Lane
and we lived in and out of restaurants, smoking nonstop,

plate after plate of consommé
not thinking or speaking, our nerves
shattered by the urge to depart. All day
we have waited and waited
under heaven's wide and lovely tree
for princes, advisors,
even some flannel postman to come and say
that the ship's sailed, the bus
has left, all families look for us.
Have we said too much? Or not enough –

And here we are, the day gone
to its usual brilliant bedtime, the astronauts gone, the rain
now cadencing in our heads. The restaurant must close.
We have learned nothing. You wisely add: Really,
there was nothing to learn.

Mona Zote's "An Impression of Being Alive" is a quietly powerful, urban lyrical poem that captures the emotional and psychic texture of contemporary Mizo life under the pressures of consumerism, routine, and affective numbness. It neither romanticises nor melodramatises existence; instead, it offers a "flat," almost list like account of a day in the city, from which a complex sense of alienation, desire, and fragile connection emerges. The speaker's voice and style of writing reflects the modern individual's mind that is exposed to both serious and inane part of everyday life.

The poem is rooted in the minor, everyday spaces of Aizawl or a similar small town Northeastern city—streets, shops, DVDs, restaurants—rather than spectacular landscapes or heroic histories. The speaker adopts a collective, slightly ironic first person suggesting a shared, generational experience of urban consumer culture and emotional fatigue.This is best reflected in lines such as "plate after plate of consommé/not thinking or speaking, our nerves/shattered by the urge to depart. " It is as though the act of eating (consomme) would fill up the inner void of the individual and it would mean that they are alive.

The poem reflects the inner working of contemporary individual who searches for meaning in the mundane. The phrase "An Impression of Being Alive"itself suggests that what the poem records is not full vitality but a simulation of life habitual rituals that masquerade as

meaning. The hunger here is not for food or money alone but for stories, romance, and spectacle that promise "summer and the coming happiness."

The tone used in the poem is wry, understated, and slightly detached, yet charged with melancholy. The poem is not a comment on consumerism but a critique of the commercially driven small-town life that has created a specific aesthetic in the Northeast. By foregrounding the "Korean romance DVDs," Foreign Lane lace, and imported or "packed" oranges, Zote silently comments on the global cultural flows that shape local desire and identity. At the same time, the poem resists being either purely nostalgic or purely cynical; it allows the small pleasures—"the sun kept tangling and stumbling among bright open windows," the "cadencing" rain in the head—to coexist with the sense of drift and stagnation.

"An Impression of Being Alive" stands out for its lighter , more urban tone, while it aligns with the poet's broader concern with the everyday and the marginalised body. Zote's other poems like "Rez" or "The Whores of August" confront violence, state terror, and sexuality while this poem approaches those concerns obliquely, through the lens of consumer habits and affective exhaustion.

## 6.6 MAJOR THEMES

The central themes in Mona Zote's "An Impression of Being Alive" emerge through the everyday routines, consumer habits, and sensory textures of a small town, Northeastern city rather than through grand, explicit statements. The poem quietly registers how modern urban living shapes desire, boredom, and the very sense of being "alive."

**Urban Life :**

The poem dwells on street scenes, shops, DVDs, restaurants, and minor distractions—spaces that define contemporary urban existence in places like Aizawl. The repeated "we have watched" and "we have lived" underline a collective, everyday routine where people move through the city, consume media, shop, and eat, yet feel no strong epiphany. This registers the ennui of everyday urban life, where experience tends toward repetition and mild satiation rather than intensity or depth. The emotional tone is weary, ironic, and slightly numb, suggesting that in the modern city, "being alive" often means going through the motions more than feeling fully alive.

**Modernity and the Popular Cultural Practices :**

Modernity in the poem shows up in the desire for images and narratives—Korean romances on DVDs, foreign lace, packed restaurants—rather than in physical labour or mythic narratives. The characters "haunt" DVDs and "finger" attires.This reflects a post-traditional, image driven modernity, where identities and longings are fed by global media and retail culture, even in a relatively small town setting. The "hunger" for "summer and the coming happiness" is not based on reality but a borrowed, cinematic fantasy, signalling how modern urban subjects often live through projected simulation more than through their own immediate, material reality.

## 6.7 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The poet's style of writing is marked by a fragmentary-conversational and lyrical tone that blends urban realism with a wry, almost ironic detachment. Her language moves easily between the colloquial and the formal, offering it a unique voice which blends with the central themes of the poem.

The poem unfolds as a loose, montage-like sequence of photographs—watching the street, wandering through DVDs, fingering lace, eating in a restaurant—rather than a plot driven narrative. This non-linear structure mirrors the distracted, semi automatic rhythm of modern city life, where experiences are scattered and not arranged into a neat story. The transitions are often abrupt and associative, giving the poem a post-modern collage effect that resists closure and produces a deliberately "unfinished" sense of experience.

Further, Zote's diction shifts between elevated, abstract phrases such as "The street shifts and careens, shed skin, refill, crest and yaw" and everyday, colloquial diction such as "we paused before the shelf of black lace," "Korean romances," "the restaurant must close". Zote's style of writing, thus, captures the coexistence of the aesthetic and the banal in urban modernity

## 6.8 LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit, the learner shall be acqurainted with the life and literary contributions of Mana Zote. Also a discussion of the contexts and content of the poem highlighting the major themes shall enable you to grasp the core message that it holds. The lyrical quality of Zote's use of style and language shall further add to your reading of the poem.

## 6.9 FURTHER READING

Ralte, Liz."Critique of Poems by Mona Zote and Monalisa Changkija". *Eastern Mirror.* 19 May 2017,https://www.easternmirrornagaland.com/critique-of-poems-by-mona-zote-and-monalisa-changkija.

https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poems/poem/103-13505_AN-IMPRESSION-OF-BEING-ALIVE

https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poets/poet/102-13501_Zote

## 6.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

**Q1.** Write a Critical Appreciation of the poem " An Impression of Being Alive".

**Q2.** Comment on the contribution of Mona Zote as a poet.

**Q3.** Comment on the language and writing style of Mona Zote in "An Impression of Being Alive".

**Q4.** Discuss the central themes in the poem "An Impression of Being Alive.

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# UNIT 7: MAMANG DAI: "REMEMBRANCE" AND "SMALL TOWN AND THE RIVER"

## UNIT STRUCTURE


7.1 Learning Objectives
7.2 Introduction
7.3 Mamang Dai: Her life and Works
7.4 Context of the Poems
7.4.1 "Remembrance"
7.4.2 "Small Town and The River"
7.5 Explanation of the Poems
7.5.1 "Remembrance"
7.5.2 "Small Town and The River"
7.6 Major Themes
7.7 Style and Language
7.8 Let us Sum up
7.9 Further Reading
7.10 Answers to Check your Progress (Hints Only)
7.11 Model Questions


## 7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- gain an idea on the life and literary contributions of Mamang Dai
- discuss the central themes and messages in her poems "Remembrance" and "Small Town and The River"
- explain the significance of nature, memory, and identity in her work
- analyse the poetic devices and the unique style of her writing
- appreciate the rich cultural and natural landscape of Arunachal Pradesh as a backdrop for her poetry

## 7.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to one of the most prominent contemporary voices from North East India, Mamang Dai. A poet, novelist, and journalist from Arunachal Pradesh, Dai's works are deeply rooted in the landscape, folklore, and oral traditions of her Adi tribe. Her poetry acts as a bridge between a disappearing past and a rapidly changing present, often exploring universal themes of nature, memory, and the human condition through a regional lens. In this unit, we will delve into two of her most celebrated poems,

"Remembrance" and "Small Town and The River," to understand her unique perspective and literary style.

## 7.3 MAMANG DAI : HER LIFE AND WORKS

Mamang Dai was born on 23 February 1957 in Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh, to Matin Dai and Odi Dai of the Adi tribe. She completed her schooling at Pine Mount School, Shillong, and went on to earn a Bachelor's degree in English literature from Gauhati University, Assam. In 1979, she became the first woman from her state to be selected for the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), but she later left the prestigious post to pursue her passion for journalism and writing. She has worked as a correspondent for publications like The Telegraph and Hindustan Times and has also worked in radio and television. Her work in journalism and her role as a programme officer for the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) have profoundly influenced her writing, which often focuses on socio-cultural issues, environmental conservation, and the preservation of her tribal heritage. She was awarded the Padma Shri in 2011 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017 for her novel The Black Hill.

Mamang Dai's literary output includes both poetry and prose. Her major works are: *Poetry Collections: River Poems* (2004), *The Balm of Time* (2008), *Hambreelmai's Loom* (2014), and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* (2014). Some of her novels are titted : *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), *Stupid Cupid* (2008), and *The Black Hill* (2014). Her non fictional works are namely : *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* (2003) and *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal Pradesh* (2004).

## LET US KNOW

Mamang Dai is from the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.
She was the first woman from Arunachal Pradesh to be selected for the IAS.
She received the Padma Shri in 2011 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q1.** In which state of India was Mamang Dai born?
**Q2.** What prestigious career did she leave to pursue writing and journalism?
**Q3.** For which novel did she win the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017?

## 7.4 CONTEXT OF THE POEMS

Mamang Dai's poem "Remembrance" is deeply embedded in the socio-political, cultural, and environmental context of Arunachal Pradesh and the broader Northeast Indian region. The poem's setting is a world caught between a cherished past and a turbulent present. Culturally, it is a world rich with the indigenous beliefs of the Adi tribe, where the natural

landscape is not merely scenery but a living, sacred entity. The hills, rivers, and forests are imbued with spiritual significance, and the people's gods are believed to reside in every tree and stone. This spiritual connection is central to their identity and is the foundation of the harmony the poem first describes. However, this peace has been shattered by the political reality of the region, which has seen decades of military presence and conflict. The poem's reference to the "footfall of soldiers" and "weapons multiplying" directly reflects this militarisation, an intrusion that disrupts the natural order and creates an atmosphere of fear. This external force does not just threaten physical safety; it also corrodes the very cultural fabric of the community. Environmentally, the poem mourns the loss of a pristine landscape. The jungle, once a source of life and sustenance, is now described as a "carnivorous green," a powerful metaphor for how the land itself has been corrupted by violence and human conflict. The poem's sense of loss, therefore, is multi-layered, encompassing the loss of a peaceful way of life, the erosion of a sacred cultural identity, and the degradation of a once-pristine environment, all of which are inextricably linked in the experience of a people facing profound and unwelcome change.

"Remembrance" is a deeply personal and philosophical poem that explores the relationship between the past and the present, and the search for meaning in memory. The poem seems to emerge from a moment of quiet contemplation, where the speaker reflects on the nature of remembrance, not as a simple act of recalling facts, but as a living, breathing part of oneself. It connects the personal memories of a person to the larger, collective memory of a land and its people, suggesting that both are intertwined and shape identity.

The poem's context is deeply rooted in the landscape and culture of Arunachal Pradesh, a state in Northeast India known for its rugged mountains, lush forests, and powerful rivers. The river in the poem is a central metaphor, representing the profound connection between the people and their environment. It serves as a lifeline for the small town, providing water, a means of transportation, and a spiritual presence.

The poem contrasts the static nature of the small town with the dynamic, eternal flow of the river. The town's life is presented as predictable and slow, a cycle of daily routines and personal histories. However, the river is a constant force of change and continuity. It is not just a physical entity; it is a witness to the town's history, carrying the memories, stories, and destinies of its inhabitants in its current.

Dai's work often highlights the spiritual and cultural significance of nature in indigenous communities. For the people of the region, the river is a sacred entity, a giver of life, and a powerful symbol of their spiritual beliefs. The poem reflects this, portraying the river as a benevolent, almost divine presence that offers a sense of permanence and meaning in a world of constant change and human transience.

The poem's imagery—the mists, the mountains, the quiet town creates a meditative atmosphere that invites reflection on life, death, and the timeless cycles of nature. It is a poignant exploration of how a specific place and its geography can shape the identity and spiritual worldview of its people.

## 7.5 EXPLANATION OF THE POEMS

**"Remembrance**

Why did we think it was trivial
that it would rain every summer,
that nights would be still with sleep
and that the green fern would uncurl
ceaselessly, by the roadside.

Why did we think survival was simple,
That river and field would stand forever
invulnerable, even to the dreams of strangers,
for we knew where the sun lay resting
in the folded silence of the hills.

This summer it rains more than ever.
The footfall of soldiers is drowned and scattered.
In the hidden exchange of news we hear
that weapons are multiplying in the forest.

The jungle is a big eater,
hiding terror in carnivorous green.

Why did we think gods would survive
deathless in memory,
in trees and stones and the sleep of babies;
now, when we close our eyes
and cease to believe, god dies.

For as long as remembrance
men stared at fire and water.

We dwell in the mountains and do not know
what the world hears about us.
Foragers for a destiny,
all the days of our lives
we stare at the outline of the hills,
lifting our eyes to the invincible sky.

**"Small Towns and the River"**

Small towns always remind me of death.
My hometown lies calmly amidst the trees,
it is always the same,
in summer or winter,
with the dust flying,
or the wind howling down the gorge.

Just the other day someone died.
In the dreadful silence we wept
looking at the sad wreath of tuberoses.
Life and death, life and death,
only the rituals are permanent.

The river has a soul.
In the summer it cuts through the land
like a torrent of grief. Sometimes,
sometimes, I think it holds its breath
seeking a land of fish and stars

The river has a soul.
It knows, stretching past the town,
from the first drop of rain to dry earth
and mist on the mountaintops,
the river knows
the immortality of water.

A shrine of happy pictures
marks the days of childhood.
Small towns grow with anxiety
for the future.
The dead are placed pointing west.
When the soul rises
it will walk into the golden east,
into the house of the sun.

In the cool bamboo,
restored in sunlight,
life matters, like this.

In small towns by the river
we all want to walk with the go

## 7.5.1 "Remembrance"

Mamang Dai's "Remembrance" is a poignant and deeply moving poem that explores the themes of memory, cultural erosion, and the disruption of a traditional way of life. It serves as a lament for a lost past and a stark confrontation with a painful present. The poem's central conflict is between the comforting, cyclical rhythms of nature and the jarring, violent intrusion of modern conflict.

First Stanza: The Illusion of Simplicity

The poem opens with a line, "Why did we think survival was simple?" This rhetorical question immediately sets a tone of hindsight and regret. The speaker is reflecting on a time when their community felt secure and in harmony with their environment. They knew the patterns of the rain, the stillness of the nights, and the continuous growth of the green fern. These natural elements were not just scenery; they were a predictable, comforting backdrop to their existence. The "invulnerable presence of the river and fields" suggests a world that seemed strong, permanent, and impervious to change. This stanza establishes a past where life was straightforward because they were so deeply connected to the natural world.

Second Stanza: A Known World

This brief stanza continues the theme of confidence and rootedness. The speaker states that they thought they knew the sun, "for we knew where the sun lay resting in the folded silence of the hills." This is not just a physical observation; it is a profound statement about their intimate knowledge of their surroundings. Knowing where the sun sets imply a deep familiarity and a sense of ownership over their landscape. The "folded silence of the hills" creates an image of a gentle, secure place where their world felt contained and safe.

Third Stanza: The Ominous Shift

Here, the poem's tone abruptly shifts from a nostalgic past to a painful present. The line "This summer it rains more than ever." suggests an imbalance in nature, a departure from the familiar rhythm. More significantly, "a new sound has come, drowning and scattering the footfall of soldiers." This new sound is a harsh, jarring Intrusion. The military presence is a foreign element that is literally disrupting the soundscape and, by extension, the peace of their community. The rain, once a peaceful element, is now so heavy it seems to be in a futile attempt to wash away this new, violent reality.

Fourth Stanza: A Corrupted Landscape

This stanza describes the horrifying transformation of the natural environment. The forest, once a life-giving resource, is now a place where "weapons are multiplying." The most powerful image is that of the jungle as a "big eater, hiding terror in carnivorous green." This personification turns the life-filled green of the jungle into something hostile and

dangerous. The very place that once sustained them is now a source of fear, a metaphor for how their entire world has been corrupted by conflict.

Fifth Stanza: The Fragility of Faith

The speaker returns to the theme of memory, recalling a belief in the permanence of their spiritual heritage. They thought their gods would be "deathless," living "in memory, in trees and stones and the sleep of babies." This reflects a deep, animistic spirituality where the divine was interwoven with every part of their lives and environment. Their gods were not in a distant temple but were a living part of their community's collective memory and the natural world around them.

Sixth Stanza: The Death of Belief

This is the most poignant and devastating stanza. It reveals the ultimate loss. The speaker realises that "when we close our eyes and cease to believe, god dies." This is a heartbreaking statement about the erosion of faith caused by profound trauma. While the physical landscape—the "river flows, the hills stand"—remains unchanged, their spiritual connection to it is severed. The sun's resting place, once a source of comfort, is now a "mystery," symbolising their complete loss of certainty and spiritual guidance.

Seventh Stanza: The Lost and Wandering

The final stanza captures the present state of the people. They are no longer rooted but are now "foragers for a destiny," a powerful metaphor for their displacement and search for a new purpose. They stand at a crossroads, "at the mouth of the valley," looking at the hills with an expression of resignation. The final line, "with no question in our eyes," suggests a state of profound emotional numbness. They have been through so much that they no longer have the energy or the hope to even ask why. They are left with a feeling of deep, unanswerable loss.

"Remembrance" by Mamang Dai is more than a simple elegy; it is a profound journey from a state of tranquil innocence to one of tragic disillusionment. It begins with the certainty of a people whose lives were as cyclical and sure as the seasons, who believed their world was an inviolable sanctuary. This is the poem's quiet prologue, a fond but painful reminiscence of a time when the land was a source of comfort and spiritual sustenance, and when the future seemed as predictable as the sun's descent behind the hills.

But the epilogue to this peaceful existence is a stark and sorrowful reality. The poem reveals how this sacred world has been brutally interrupted by the footsteps of soldiers and the silent proliferation of weapons. The land itself, once a benevolent mother, has become a "carnivorous" entity, a place of terror that devours innocence. This transformation is not just physical; it is spiritual. The gods who once resided in the trees and stones have died, not because of a grand cosmic event, but because of the people's faith, their very ability to believe, has been shattered by the violence around them.

The poem's final, lingering question is not asked aloud, but is etched in the resignation of a people who have lost their way. They stand at the valley's edge, no longer anchored by

a past they understood, but “foragers for a destiny,” searching for a future in a landscape that has betrayed its promise of permanence. “Remembrance” is, in the end, a powerful testament to the fragility of peace and the enduring pain of a cultural and spiritual memory that has been broken. It is a haunting epilogue to a lost way of life, a final and sorrowful note on the tragic cost of conflict on a people, their land, and their very soul.

## 7.5.2 Small Town and The River

Mamang Dai’s “Small Town and the River” is a meditative poem that explores the relationship between human existence and the natural world. It creates a powerful contrast between the transient, predictable life of a small town and the eternal, spiritual flow of a river.

**Stanza 1: The Town’s Mortality**

The poem begins with a somber observation: **“Small towns always remind me of death.”** This sets a tone of quiet melancholy. The town’s life is presented as unchanging and monotonous, whether it is “with the dust flying, or the wind howling.” The silence that follows a death in the town is described as “dreadful,” emphasizing that while life seems static, it is punctuated by the inescapable finality of mortality. This stanza establishes the small town as a symbol of human impermanence and the cyclical but finite nature of individual lives.

**Stanza 2: The River’s Soul**

The focus shifts dramatically to the river. The poet personifies it by stating, “The river has a soul.” This line is crucial, transforming the river from a simple geographical feature into a living, spiritual entity. Its powerful flow is described as a “torrent of grief” in summer, while it “holds its breath” in search of a mythical “land of fish and stars.” This imagery suggests the river’s journey is not merely physical but also a profound, almost celestial, quest. The river’s soul is a source of both life and deep mystery, embodying a consciousness that transcends human experience.

**Stanza 3: The River’s Eternal Knowledge**

This stanza expands on the river’s spiritual nature. The river’s soul is not confined to its immediate surroundings; its awareness stretches “past the town” and encompasses the entire natural cycle, from the “first drop of rain” to the “mist on the mountaintops.” The river, therefore, is a keeper of timeless knowledge and memory. It knows the “immortality of water,” a concept that directly contrasts with the fleeting lives of the town’s inhabitants. This idea reinforces the river as a symbol of continuity and eternity, a constant presence that silently observes all that happens around it.

**Stanza 4: Reconciliation and Spiritual Connection**

The final stanza brings the two contrasting elements together. The poet notes human attempts to find permanence, such as creating a “shrine of happy pictures.” However,

these human memories are juxtaposed with the reality that "Small towns grow with anxiety for the future." The poem offers a traditional belief as a source of comfort: the dead are placed pointing west, and their souls rise to walk "into the golden east, into the house of the sun." This belief connects human death to the cosmic cycle. The poem concludes by suggesting that in these small towns, people seek a profound connection with the timeless river, aspiring to "walk with the gods." The river, in this context, is not just a witness to life and death but a guide, offering a sense of spiritual belonging and a feeling that human existence is part of a larger, enduring cycle of nature.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q1.** What is the main metaphor used for "Remembrance" in the first stanza?

**Q2.** How does the poet personify the river in "Small Town and the River"?

**Q3.** What does the line "We All Want to Walk with the Gods" signify in the poem?

## 7.6 MAJOR THEMES

Some of the major theme evident in the poem 'Remembrance" are as follows :

**The Disruption of Nature and a Traditional Way of Life :**

This is a central theme, contrasting a past of harmony with the natural world against a present marked by its violation. The poem's opening stanzas describe a time when the people were in tune with the cycles of the sun, rain, and hills. This peaceful existence is shattered by a "new sound"—the footfall of soldiers—and the introduction of weapons. The once-benign jungle becomes a dangerous, "carnivorous" place, reflecting how outside forces have corrupted the natural environment and, by extension, the traditional way of life tied to it.

**The Erosion of Spiritual and Cultural Identity :**

The poem explores how profound trauma can lead to the loss of faith and cultural memory. The speaker recalls a time when their gods were believed to be "deathless in memory, in trees and stones." This indigenous spirituality, deeply embedded in the natural world, is shown to be fragile. The most heartbreaking line, "when we close our eyes and cease to believe, god dies," reveals that the people's collective trauma has broken their spiritual connection to the land and their ancestors. The physical landscape remains, but the spiritual bond has been severed, leaving their cultural identity in peril.

**The Pain of Lost Innocence and a Search for Meaning :**

"Remembrance" is fundamentally an elegy for a lost sense of peace and security. The rhetorical question, "Why did we think survival was simple?", encapsulates the profound shift from a state of innocence to one of disillusionment. The poem concludes with the people as "foragers for a destiny," no longer rooted in their homeland but searching for a

new purpose in an uncertain world. Their final, numb gaze at the hills, "with no question in our eyes," signifies the emotional exhaustion and profound loss of meaning they have endured.

Some of the major themes in "small Town and the River" are future :

**Mortality and the Cycle of Life :**

This theme is established from the poem's very first line: "Small towns always remind me of death." The town serves as a symbol of human existence, which is cyclical yet ultimately finite. The predictable rhythm of daily life is punctuated by the inevitability of death, a "dreadful silence" that makes mortality a communal experience. The poem contrasts this human cycle with the eternal flow of the river, highlighting the brevity of individual lives against the backdrop of natural time

**The Spirituality of Nature:**

Dai elevates the river beyond a geographical feature by giving it a soul. The river is a living, conscious entity that "knows / the immortality of water." This theme reflects the spiritual connection between people and nature in indigenous cultures, where elements like rivers and mountains are considered sacred. The river's journey is not just a physical flow but a spiritual quest, and it acts as a silent, benevolent presence that connects the human world to a higher, timeless realm.

**The Search for Permanence and Meaning:**

The poem explores the human desire to find lasting meaning in a world of constant change. The "shrine of happy pictures" represents an attempt to hold onto memories and create a sense of permanence. However, this is contrasted with the "anxiety for the future." Ultimately, the poem suggests that true permanence is not found in human artifacts but in a spiritual connection to nature. The dead are placed "pointing west" so their souls can walk into the "house of the sun," a tradition that links human destiny to the eternal cycles of the cosmos. The people in the town seek to "walk with the gods," finding solace and continuity through their relationship with the sacred river.

## LET US KNOW

**Nature as a living entity :** Nature is not just scenery in Dai's poetry; it's a living, breathing force filled with soul and memory.

Oral Tradition: Her work is heavily influenced by the oral traditions of the Adi tribe, which she sees as a crucial way to preserve history and culture.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. How does the poet connect nature to memory in "Remembrance"?

Q2. What does the river symbolize in "Small Town and The River" in relation to time?

Q3. Why is the preservation of "old stories" important according to the poet?

## 7.7 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Mamang Dai's poetic style is characterised by its remarkable simplicity and clarity, which often carries profound philosophical weight. She uses simple, accessible language, avoiding complex jargon, which makes her poetry feel direct and intimate. Her use of powerful metaphors and personification, such as the river having a "soul" or memory being a "country," infuses her work with a mythical and spiritual quality. Her poems often move at a quiet, contemplative pace, reflecting the serene yet powerful rhythm of the natural world she describes. This simplicity is deceptive, as each line is carefully crafted to build a complex tapestry of themes, from the personal to the universal.

## 7.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we explored the life and works of Mamang Dai, a leading literary figure from North East India. We learned that her poetry is deeply influenced by her origins, her heritage, and the natural landscape of Arunachal Pradesh. Through her poems "Remembrance" and "Small Town and The River," we understood her unique perspective on the interconnectedness of nature, memory, and identity. We also examined how she uses her simple yet powerful language to tackle universal themes of time, mortality, and the human search for meaning. Her poems are a tribute to her land, a voice for its history, and a timeless reflection on the human condition.

## 7.9 FURTHER READING

Dai, Mamang. *The Black Hill*. New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2014.

Dai, Mamang. *River Poems*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2004.

Sarangi, Jaydeep. "In Conversation with Mamang Dai." Writers in Conversation, vol. 4, no. 2, 2017.

## 7.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Answer to Q1.** Arunachal Pradesh.Indian Administrative Service (IAS).
The Black Hill.

**Answer to Q2.** A "country of the mind" and "the wind turning a page in the book of the earth."

She gives it a "soul" and describes it as a timeless being. It suggests a spiritual yearning to connect with something divine or eternal.

**Answer to Q3.** By using metaphors like memory being "the echo of a song" and being found in the "silence of a hill."

The river symbolizes the eternal, continuous flow of time, in contrast to human mortality.

To preserve identity, history, and a sense of continuity.

## 7.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Discuss Mamang Dai's portrayal of nature as a living, spiritual entity in her poems, with close reference to "Small Town and The River."

Q2. How does Mamang Dai use the theme of memory to explore questions of identity and immortality in her poem "Remembrance"?

Q3. Analyse the major themes in Mamang Dai's poetry, focusing on "Remembrance" and "Small Town and The River."

Q4. Examine Mamang Dai's poetic style and use of language. How does she achieve a blend of simplicity and philosophical depth in her work?

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# UNIT 8 : NILMANI PHOOKAN : "POEM" & "AFTER A COUPLE OF DAYS"

## UNIT STRUCTURE


8.1 Learning Objectives
8.2 Introduction
8.3 Nilmoni Phookan: Life and Works
8.4 Context of the poems
8.5 Explanation of the Poems
8.6 Major Themes
8.7 Style and Language
8.8 Let us Sum up
8.9 Further Reading
8.10 Model Questions


## 8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, the learner will be able to:

- discuss the life and works of Nilmani Phookan
- explain the prescibed poems
- highlight the major themes evident in the poems
- analyse the style and language of the poet

## 8.2 Introduction

Nilmani Phookan (1933–2023) is widely regarded as one of the most significant Assamese poets of the 20th and early 21st centuries, whose work helped redefine the emotional and symbolic range of Assamese poetry. Phookan and his contemporaries contemporaries wrote in a period when Assamese literature was gradually moving beyond the romanticism and nationalism of the Jonaki era toward a more introspective, cosmopolitan modernism. The mid-20th century Assamese literature witnessed the rise of modernist magazines, critical essays, and a renewed interest in individual consciousness, social change, and the effects of colonial and post colonial modernity.

## 8.3 NILMANI PHOOKAN: LIFE AND WORKS

Born in Dergaon, Golaghat, Assam, Nilmani Phookan began writing in the 1950s and, along with contemporaries such as Navakanta Barua and Ajit Barua, spearheaded the shift from traditional forms toward free verse and modern writing in Assamese literature. He authored nine books of poetry, four books of art criticism, a book of memoirs and

translated many works of verse from foreign languages to Assamese. He was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award and Padmashree for his contribution to literature.

The major collections of poetry composed by the poet include *Surya Henu Nami Ahe Ai Nadiyedi* (*The Sun is Said to Descend Along This River,* 1963). His first and widely regarded groundbreaking collection, where he signals a shift toward introspective, modernist Assamese poetry marked by lyrical symbolic imagery drawn from Assam's landscape and cultural memory. *Nirjanatar Xobdo* (*The Sound of Silence,* 1965, *Aru Ki Naisabdo*(And What Quietude, 1968), *(Towards the Blooming Sunflower)* ( *Phuli Thoka Suryamukhi Phultor Phale*), 1971-72.One of his most celebrated volumes, where the sunflower becomes a central, luminous metaphor for hope, desire, and the fragile beauty of life in a changing Assam.Modern editions such as *Sampurna Kobita*, *Selected Poems of Nilmani Phookan* (translated into English), and *Sagartolir Xongkho* (*Conch from the Depths of the Sea*) serve as compact, widely read representations of his oeuvre in both Assamese and English translation.

## 8.4 CONTEXT OF THE POEMS

Nilmani Phookan belongs to the modernist wave of Assamese poetry and is often read alongside major Indian English and regional modernists for his symbolic, imagistic mode and his engagement with trauma, time, and memory. "After a couple of days" appears in his later, more socially alert phase, where the language is deceptively simple but charged with allusions to collective suffering—often linked to ethnic conflict, insurgency, or communal violence in Assam.

## 8.5 EXPLANATION OF THE POEMS

**"A Poem"**

Nilmani Phookan's "A Poem" captures the raw anguish of violence and human suffering through stark, sensory imagery. The poem reflects his shift toward socially conscious poetry in the 1980s, drawing from real-world turmoil like protests or unrest in Assam.Phookan confronts trauma and empathy amid chaos, evoking the acrid smell of burning tires—a symbol of blockades or riots common in Assam's socio-political history. The persistent sound and futile tears underscore helplessness and shared grief, blending personal sorrow with collective violence.

Symbolism like the "stinking" tire and blood-soaked grass create a visceral impact, demanding reader sensitivity to overtones. Repetition of wiping tears with "one hand with both hands" conveys escalating desperation, while tears absorbing stones and blood-grass merges observer and observed in a cycle of pain. Phookan's imagism, influenced by symbolism, gives words contextual life, evoking racial memory and unconscious depths.

The stark simplicity in his later poetry marks his 1980s urgency, contrasting earlier mythic symbolism with direct protest. As a modernist Assamese poet, Phookan fuses folklore,

nature, and contemporary horror, his crystal clarity making abstract suffering immediate. This poem exemplifies his evolution from romanticism to unflinching social realism.

**"After a Couple of Days"**

The second poem "After a Couple of Days" is a haunting, image rich meditation on political and social numbness, collective amnesia, and the slow, almost imperceptible passage of time amidst suffering. The poem uses a quiet, surreal tone to show how people continue with life while ominous, historical changes happen around them—like a fog settling on the city that they see but fail to understand.

The poem opens with the line *"The fog will shroud this city",* which immediately sets a mood of dulling, erasure, and obscured vision. The fog is both literal and symbolic: it blurs faces, actions, and history so that people can no longer see clearly what is happening to them or to their society.

Objects like the "sewing needle" and "people's breath turning into mist" ground the poem in ordinary, domestic reality, yet even these everyday things are swallowed by the cold, grey atmosphere. The comparison of human breath to the "hills and the river" suggests that people are merging with the landscape—anonymously, impersonally, almost as if they are becoming part of a natural cycle that ignores human suffering.A striking refrain like idea runs through the poem: *"Yet people know nothing of it."* Despite the fog, the cold, and the subtle changes in the environment, the people remain unaware or indifferent. They gaze at the *"vermillion sun"* and watch *"ripe oranges fall off"* as if these are merely beautiful or natural events, not omens or signs of decay and loss.

The *"fingers of women will go numb with cold"* suggests not only physical suffering but also emotional numbness—people are so accustomed to hardship or repression that they no longer feel, question, or resist it. The *"cold deserted path of people's minds"* deepens this idea: their inner lives are frozen, empty, devoid of curiosity or critical awareness.The line *"Will pass by like the footfalls of pallbearers"* introduces an elegiac tone. The passing of events, perhaps protests, arrests, disappearances, or political decisions, happen quietly, like a funeral procession moving through the city, but the people barely notice.

The image of *"muniyas will away"* (migratory birds flying away) suggests escape, disappearance, or the people's own tendency to look away from suffering toward some distant, unattainable freedom. Their *"silently cruise a spacecraft / Towards infinity"* can be read as a dream of transcendence or oblivion—a wish to flee from history and responsibility into a realm beyond time.Yet the *"yellow time"* that *"will pass by this way"* shows that even as people dream of escape, time keeps moving in its own languid, indifferent rhythm. The colour "yellow" may suggest decay, nostalgia, or the faint glow of a dying era, reinforcing the sense that something old and fragile is slipping away.The poem ends with a powerful metamorphosis: *"each of them will change into a / Gaunt figure of winter."* This image condenses the whole mood: people are becoming hollow, skeletal presences—cold, hardened, stripped of warmth and vitality. "Winter" here stands

for emotional and social desolation, where the harshness of the season mirrors the inner and outer conditions of a silenced, traumatised community.

In essence, the poem portrays a society that undergoes profound political or existential change—marked by fog, cold, silence, and flight—but whose people remain largely unaware or numb, so that when they finally look at themselves, they see only the thin, gaunt shapes of a long, frozen winter.

## 8.6 Major Themes

Nilmani Phookan's *"*A Poem*"* and "After a Couple of Days" both explore the quiet, often invisible suffering of individuals and communities in Assam, but they do so through slightly different emphases and tonal registers. The major themes cluster around history and memory, alienation and silence, and the interplay of nature and human suffering.

**Time, Memory and Historical Amnesia**

In "After a Couple of Days", the poet dramatises how traumatic or politically charged moments slip by unnoticed, like fog settling over the city and a "yellow time" drifting past. People remain blind even as the seasons and social conditions change, which suggests a theme of collective amnesia and historical passivity.In *"A Poem"* (often interpreted as a more general reflection on poetry and existence), Phookan similarly insists that the present is thick with the weight of the past and the unseen scars of history, yet human beings fail to grasp its full meaning

**Silence and Alienation**

Both poems revolve around the "poetics of silence": people are surrounded by suffering (fog, cold, violence, displacement) but remain emotionally numb or detached. In *"the poem"*, fingers grow numb, minds follow a "cold deserted path," and people change into "gaunt figures of winter," all pointing to a society anaesthetised by hardship and repression.In *"the Poem"* this alienation appears more interior and existential: the speaker reflects on isolation, the fragility of the self, and the difficulty of articulating grief, again underlining how pain and loss are often internalised rather than spoken.

**Nature**

Phookan constantly draws on the Brahmaputra, hills, rivers, birds, and seasonal changes as backdrops to human suffering. In *"After a Couple of Days"*, nature (mist, fog, muniyas fleeing, the "vermillion sun") mirrors the mood of obfuscation and quiet despair, turning the landscape into a silent witness to political and emotional violence.In *"A Poem"*, the river and its winding path likewise function as symbols of memory, time, and the unresolved traumas of the past, suggesting that the natural world carries histories that people refuse or fail to acknowledge.

**Death and Decay**

Death consciousness and melancholy are central to Phookan's work as a whole. In *"After a Couple of Days"*, the pallbearers' footfalls, the "gaunt figure of winter," and the sense of people turning into hollow, frozen forms convey a theme of spiritual and social decay.In the *"Poem"*, the same undercurrent appears through images of loss, dim memories, and a subdued, almost funereal tone, reinforcing the idea that the poet's vision is essentially tragic and elegiac, even when he gestures toward fragile hope.

**Humanism Amidst Despair**

Despite the bleakness, both poems also hint at a quiet humanism. Phookan's speakers observe suffering with compassion rather than cynicism, and the very act of writing poetry becomes a way of "helping man find his soul" in a violent, utilitarian world. In "A Poem" the tenderness toward the river, the child, and the mute woman suggests an enduring faith in human connection and beauty, even as darkness encroaches.

## 8.7 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Nilmani Phookan's poems employ a highly distinctive style and language that blend modernist minimalism, symbolism, and a quiet, painterly sensibility. The poems read as spare, almost meditative, yet they carry a heavy emotional and political weight through carefully chosen images and understated diction.

Phookan's style is intensely *imagistic*: he thinks in images, and his poems are built out of concrete, visual scenes rather than abstract commentary. In *"After a Couple of Days"*, for example, fog, mist, muniyas flying away, and people turning into "gaunt figures of winter" are not just descriptions but *symbols* of obscured history, flight from responsibility, and emotional desolation.In "A Poem", the river, the child, and the mute woman function similarly as archetypal images that evoke memory, tenderness, and silenced suffering, giving the poems a mythic, almost elemental resonance.

The tone is typically *quiet, contemplative, and elegiac*, with a restrained melancholy rather than overt anger. Phookan underplays emotion, so the sadness and horror emerge indirectly through atmosphere and suggestion.Both poems move with a slow, almost dreamlike rhythm, as if the speaker is watching events drift past like fog or a passing river, which reinforces themes of helplessness and historical drift.Both poems avoid traditional narrative and regular rhyme. Instead, they rely on fragmented, prose like lines and pauses that imitate the rhythm of thought and memory. This loose, open form structure allows the poems to drift between inner and outer landscapes, making the reader feel the uncertainty and incompleteness of the speaker's experience.

## 8.8 LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit, you shall be well acquanted with the Assamese poet Nilmani Phookan and some by his work. The discuss in the poems and its various significant aspects shall further enhance your reading and appreceation of the poet.

## 8.9 FURTHER READING

*Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India*. India, Penguin Books India, 2009.

https://www.scribd.com/document/476758812/The-Poetry-of-Nilamani-Phookan <Accessed on December 1, 2025>

https://tlhjournal.com/uploads/products/7.debabhuson-borah-article.pdf <Accessed on December 1, 2025>

## 8.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Write about the life and works of Nilomoni Phookan.
Q2. Write a critical appreciation of the following:
   a) "A Poem"
   b) "After a Couple of Days"
Q3. Explain the major themes in the poems by Nilamoni Phookan.
Q4. Discuss the style and language in the poetry of Nilamoni Phookan with reference to the poems in your syllabus.

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# UNIT 9: ROBIN NGANGOM: "POETRY IN THE TIME OF TERROR"

## UNIT STRUCTURE


9.1 Learning Objectives
9.2 Introduction
9.3 Robin Ngangom: His Life and Works
9.4 Explanation of the Text "Poetry in the Time of Terror"
9.5 Major Themes
9.6 Style and Language
9.7 Let us Sum up
9.8 Further Reading
9.9 Answers to Check Your Progress
9.10 Model Questions


## 9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, the learner will be able to:

- briefly discuss the life and works of the poet Robin Ngangom
- explain in details the text of the essay titled "Poetry in the Time of Terror"
- discuss the major themes evident in the text of the essay
- describe the style and language of the poet
- appreciate the significant perspectives forwarded by the poet

## 9.2 INTRODUCTION

The present unit takes up an essay titled "Poetry in the Time of Terror" by Robin Ngangom. You have already been introduced to the poet and two of his prescribed poems "Native Land" and "Pacha" at the beginning of the course. This unit takes up another of his important non-fictional prose, an essay that forgrounds some of the significant perspectives and observations of the poet with regard to various voices from the region and their relevance in the contemporary time. Although we have already highlighted whatever little is known about the poet's life and all his works and awarded recognition, let us once again revisit the same before we begin our discussion on the prescribed essay.

## 9.3 ROBIN NGANGOM: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Ngangom Rabindra Singh (born in 1959) also known as Robin Ngangom, hails from the Northeastern state of Manipur which is known for its history, rich cultural traditions and scenic beauty. Ngangom is a bilingual poet who writes both in Manipuri and the English language. He had studied at St. Edmund's College and North East Hill University (NEHU),

Shillong where he now continues to teach English Literature as an Associate Professor. As an academic, some of his specialisations are namely: Indian Writing in English and Modern poetry.

Through the course of three decades of his teaching career, he has produced several works and has edited anthologies of poetry apart from his translation works. Some of his works of poetry are namely *Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994) and *The Desire of Roots* (2006). Ngangom had received the Udaya Bharati National Award for Poetry (1994) and the Katha Award for Translation (1999). He was also the Editor of New Frontiers, a journal of the Northeast Writers' Forum, Guwahati and one of the editors (for Manipuri) Katha Translation Awards, New Delhi. Apart from the two prescribed poems, some of his popular poems are "Poetry" "Writer", "When You Do Not Return", "Monody", "During Eater" among several others. His works have been well-received and has made a mark among the writers from the region due to its varied thematic concerns, relevant socio-political discourses, historical consciousness and timeless appeal.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q1.** Where does the poet Robin Ngangom hail from?
**Q2.** i. Mention the languages in which the poet writes.
ii. What are the specializations of Ngangom as an academic?
**Q3.** Name some of his significant works of poetry.

## 9.4 EXPLANATION OF THE TEXT "POETRY IN THE TIME OF TERROR"

The opening paragraph of the essay begins with the poet's reflection with regard to his early years of writing and experimenting with poetry as a young boy of eleven or twelve years old. It was during his pre-adolescent days and the temperament of this tender phase, he was sentimental and wordy with regard to his poetical expression. Now that he looks back at those early years of dabbling into poetry, he feels a little self-critical from the perspective of a more established and seasoned poet that he has become.

Thus, he writes, "I wrote my first faltering lines in the relative innocence of childhood. I was about eleven or twelve years old then, and caught as I was in the flush of youth, I wanted to explore the world by writing ornate and sentimental poetry. Since life was ignoring me, I thought I could engage the attention of kindred hearts through friendly and softhearted verse" Thus, the opening paragraph provides us a window into the heart of a young boy who not only found an interest in poetry but also a kind of refuge and an escape.

He writes that "The Thousand and One Nights" was an inspiration for him although in retrospect it seemed sort of immature and innocent. There is a sense of nostalgia and fond remembrance of his carefree childhood days when the world seemed a better place. He expresses love for his homeland Manipur, Meitei culture and the rich cultural heritage

that it upholds. However, he also cannot deny that this sense of pride is overshadowed with the turn of violence, corruption, insurgency, terror, social disintegration, moral degradation, communal clashes, oppression and complete disharmony. Thus, he chooses to 'confront' the reality instead of turning away from it and representing it in his writings as a poet.

Ngangom notes that the writer from the Northeast differs in his or her stance from that of the mainstream writer. To the writer from the region, the reality of gun culture and endless violence poses an urgency and he or she cannot afford to engage in "verbal wizardry" to prove his or her worth. With such grim realities that stare at people of the region, the writer is compelled to master the "art of witness" and to represent the truth with integrity given the fact that the Northeastern region has witnessed too much of conflict and clashes at almost every level.

Thus, he writes "We have witnessed growing ethnic aggressiveness, secessionist ventures, cultural and religious bigotry, the marginalisation of minorities and the poor, profit and power struggles in government, and a natural aftermath to these, the banality of corruption and the banality of terror. Further, the uneasy coexistence of paradoxical worlds such as the folk and the westernised, virgin forests and car-choked streets, ethnic cleansers and the parasites of democracy, ancestral values and flagrant materialism, resurgent nativism and the sensitive outsider's predicament, make the picturesque Northeast especially vulnerable to tragedy". Given the prevalence of such contradictions, it is only obvious that the poet nurtures a more sensitive and mindful approach with regard to his or her responsibility towards the people at large.

Thus, he quotes the words of Camus to drive his point home, "Whatever our personal weaknesses may be, the nobility of our craft will always be rooted in two commitments, difficult to maintain: the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance to oppression." The poet thus, asserts that despite the criticism that poets meet regarding such a position, he believes that one ought to be true to himself and his fellow men and hold up the mirror to a society that is devastated by the terrifying acts of man against man. If one risks his life by uttering a word when the gun is pointed towards him, could such a person call himself a part of a free society? This is exactly how the poet feels.

The poet also notes that in recent times Manipuri poets have taken up "the poetry of survival" representing their realities through imagery of "blood" , "bullets", "mother" or "the colour red". In this regard, he opines that it is necessary to strike a fine balance and not make it all too clichéd. However, it is extremely necessary to write of the present happenings and the poet considers this act of capturing such urgency an engagement in the "poetry of witness", as he calls it.

Again, he refers to the critic Mabel Lee who with regard to Gao Xingjian's work highlights how the nonconformist could survive in a conventional society either by pretending to be have lost one's sanity or transcending the same by means of "self-realization" through literary creation. In fact many Manipuri poets have seemingly turned to absurdism and

irony in their literary practices as a reaction to the horrors of their reality. In this regard, the poet notes thus, "It is a reaction to the absurdity of the violence and death, when their world is reduced to guiltless addicts, child soldiers, young mothers with Aids, and as someone said "a loud laugh is more crushing than a howl of agony".

In addition, writers like Alexander Solzhenitsyn uphold the idea that Literature ought to 'dare' to portray the real picture, to "warn" against "moral and social changes" or else it would only be superficial in its purpose and intent. However, this should not be at the expense of one's freedom, for the poet cites the example of Brodsky thus, "When Brodsky was asked by the soviet authorities what he did for a living he replied he wrote poetry, and was immediately arrested on the charge of 'social parasitism". Therefore, the poet poses the question whether the writer or poet is a social parasite or a conscience keeper, which again depends on his or her stance or conviction. And yet, he believes that any writer values his or her freedom and would do anything in his or her capacity to protect the same from being violated.

In the same breath, he notes that the literature of the Northeast must take up through their writings what Camus called "the double challenge of truth and liberty" to which he adds, "And forces are always at work to rob the writer of his freedom. Liberty, therefore, is a necessary precondition, which the writer must fight in order to tell the truth he knows, it is the lifeblood of his heart". One cannot remain a mere witness to the crises of the region where peace and normalcy are disrupted but never returned, where politics and the media are at their one sided game of make-belief and twisting of the truth. Therein comes the role of the writer or the poet who while protecting his or her own freedom must also present the real picture through the power of words. And thus, he quotes Czeslaw Milosz who had said, "There is no such thing as an innocent bystander. If you are a bystander, you are not innocent", meaning a real witness is aware of everything and cannot pretend otherwise.

Besides, the poet resents the result of capitalism and the material culture that has enslaved the youth in particular to materialist things, fast technology and such ideologies that threatens the future generations. The poet considers real feelings and emotions towards one's fellowmen and society above any such material culture. Perhaps, it is for this reason that poetry has turned into its own protective shell, shielding itself from the forces of changes that modernity has brought about in its wake. The poet according to him is always a non-conformist, someone who deviates from the given norms or goes beyond all that is apparent to bring about meaningful exchanges and dialogue.

Poetry ought to provide solace in the time of dramatic change in society, healing in the time of clashes and conflict. Thus, he winds up the essay in the following words: "Poetry is always an act of subversion. And paradoxically, the poet perhaps is the most ironic realist. Each word must be fashioned from a private hurt, and writing poetry is like trying to keep a deadline with death. That is why I've always felt that poetry should comfort us, and not merely amuse us, or make us think. Poetry must heal the heart of men."

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q4**. How does the text of the essay "Poetry in the Time of Terror" begin?
**Q5**. What makes the concerns of the writer of the Northeast from that of a mainstream writer according to Ngangom?
**Q6**. What does the poet note with regard to the stance or literary practice of the Manipuri poets?
**Q7.** State the poet's opinion with regard to the prevalence of material culture.

## 9.5 MAJOR THEMES

After going through the summary and the explanation of the text "Poetry in the Time of Terror", the learner shall be able to form his or her own analysis of the emergent thematic concerns in the essay. However, for the ease of your reference, this subsection takes up some of the themes evident in the essay to which you may also add your own interpretations. Let us then go through these thematic concerns:

**Nostalgia:**

Although the poet is quick to criticise his early choice of inspiration and style of expression with regard to the practice of poetry, yet he also cherishes this dreamy phase of his childhood. A tinge of nostalgia lingers the words of the poet. He reminisces the old world charm that he had known during his childhood, the slow-paced life and the joy of little things in life. Thus, he writes, "That well-meaning world is no longer recognisable now; the sacred landmarks hve disappeared long since. Only dim memories of hoisting the country's flag on a holiday, or leading a blind man by the hand, or praying in temples on a feast day, remain as mute reminders of that sacred past". The sanctity of their peaceful past was now shattered with the terror and violence that the state had witnessed for a prolonged period.

The poet is disturbed by the drastic changes of his homeland that was once idyllic and memorable. While he expresses the joys of his childhood and adolescent years that he had spent in Manipur, he also addresses the concern as a civilian regarding the distrust that has set in among their own people in the face of insurgency and terrorism. The poet laments that the childhood he knew was free from unknown fears, dangers, violence, guns, torture and deaths.

**Terror and Violence in the State:**

The poet writes thus, "Manipur, my native place in Northeast India, is in a state of anarchy, and my poetry springs from the cruel contradictions of that land. Manipur boasts of its talents in theatre, cinema, dances, and sports. But how could you trust your own people who would entrust corruption, aids, terrorism and drugs to their children? Naturally, the Manipur that I ritually go back to every year is not the sacred world of my childhood,…" The constant threat to life, the lack of normalcy in the state, the gradual disintegration of society, the youth being led astray, corrupted system reaching its heights, the communal

clashes, lack of goodwill on the part of government and the prevalence of terrorism has transformed the society for the worse. All these factors have collectively overshadowed the peace, harmony and unity of the Meitei people and the indigenous tribes living together for ages in the land of Manipur.

Further, he also expresses his gratitude to his cultural roots thus, "In many ways, my own Meitei culture, which is part of my childhood, has always shaped my thinking. Although I've been cut off from my moorings, I still go back to Manipur each year." This presents his constant preoccupation with his homeland. Moreover, the same is evident in the poems "Native Land" and "To Pacha" that we had discussed in the introductory poem of the course.

**The Role of Poetry:**

In such a context, poetry thus becomes a tool of self-articulation, a medium of self-expression and a powerful voice that can reach out to the people and beyond. The poet finds solace and solidarity in poetry and its strength. It is his way of being passively assertive without being overtly aggressive in his position as a poet. He opines that his is the kind of poetry that desires to appeal to the feelings of people rather than being more "cerebral" or intellectual in nature. His is the poetry that longs to be heard, shared, understood and create ripples of thought in his readers. Thus, he believed in the "poetry of 'feeling'. Such is his passion for poetry that he cannot but help himself indulge in it like an "illegitimate affair of the heart" and an internal "dialogue" with himself as well. He thus writes, "Poetry, therefore, has remained an underground exercise with me." Further, he expresses this thought in the form of a verse:

"I want to describe myself again and again
To people who do not know me.
That is why I always look for paper and ink,
Even in the midst of a terrible loss,
or, a dangerous illness.
Because someone said
The spoken word flies
but the written word stays"

Poetry thus becomes an act of recording his own thoughts and reflection, his feelings and narratives. Often the oral histories, the folklore and indigenous knowledge of a people are lost in time as they remain unrecorded or without being transcribed. However, the practice of writing and recording essentially preserves valuable work in the form of written records and archives. The poet in him wanted to reach out to the readers and the thinking mind instead of being confined or "insulated" in his own world. He writes that even as he does not wish to pose as "any conscience-keeper" with regard to the state of affairs in his homeland, he feels an obligation to speak for his people and mirror the realities without brushing them aside as also evident in poems like "Native Land" or "To Pacha".

He also takes up the position of a poet i.e., the position from which he or she chooses to write. A poet could be situated anywhere and free to draw inspiration from the world around him, he or she does not necessarily require a tradition or a set standard to write or practice poetry. The most important aspect is to formulate one's own ideas and form one's own individual voice. He admits that it is obvious for someone like him who has grown up in the hills of Northeast to draw inspiration from the folklore and the scenic surrounding beauty as is also reflected in his poems. We find in his poetry the presence of the hills, the Khasi hills where he has spent considerable time as well as the pines, the rains and the mountains that find a natural place in his writings without which it would all be incomplete.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q8**. What according to the poet has transformed his society for the worse?
**Q9.** State the role of poetry in the context of terror and violence in the state and region.

## 9.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

In one of his important essays "Hard-edged Modernism: contemporary Poetry in North-east India", Ngangom begins by writing that poetry from the region would generally bear headlines such as "Poetry in the Time of Terror" or "Poetry from the Troubled Zone" by the mainstream readers or critics. However, there is truth in such terms and phrases, which simply cannot be denied and bears truth in it especially when brought up by serious and well-intended critics. Diversity defines the tribes and cultures of the northeast as its literary practices and linguistic variety. However, poetry from the region is unified in terms of its rootedness to the land, its cultures and people as well as the love for nature. Also, given the commonality of several socio-political discourses and the problems of insurgency, the poets of the region find themselves confronted with a similar crises in so many ways. In fact, he goes on to write that, "Added to this frightening condition is the menace of ethnic cleansing, and the growth of militant nationalism whose demands vary from greater autonomy to outright sovereignty". Given the severity of the crises in the region and more particularly, his own state there is a sense of immediacy and lament that is expressed in the tone of his poems and other writings.

Thus, Ngangom chooses not to romanticize the beauty of his homeland or project the ordinary rather he consciously decides to portray the harsh realities that it contains. Thus, he writes, "And I've perhaps opened my eyes to insistent realities and have stepped out of the proverbial ivory tower, If anyone should ask now why my poems do not speak of my land's breathtaking landscapes; its sinuous dances, its darkmanned women, I can only think of Neruda's answer: "Come and see the blood in the streets!"

Although the poet in his essay writes that he does not necessarily wait for inspiration to drive his writing, yet it is true that poetry cannot exist in vacuum. Therefore, he says, that he remains open to various influences writing thus, "I've also left my influences open, and

have allowed myself to be ambushed- by political events, books, biased memory, a dogged sexuality, womankind, films, streets even." However, with the passing of time, his poetry seems to be inclined beyond these everyday subjects and personal confessions, to open his eyes to the nature of reality and the layers that shapes it.

Thus, Ngangom's essay is written in a reader-friendly style with the natural flow of his verses that blend effortlessly into his prose to highlight his stance as a poet. It unravels and articulates his idea on poetry and its significant role in making a counted difference in an otherwise dark reality. Thus, he professes on stepping down of his "ivory tower" or in simple words, his comfort zone to speak for his people and his homeland. Therefore, his personal voice becomes a collective voice of the people as well. Also, there are a few cross-references in his work such as that of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, the playwright Albert Camus, Chinese-French author- Gao Xiagjian, critic Mabel Lee, Russian author- Alexander Solzhenitsyn, American essayist Brodsky, Polish American poet Czeslaw Milosz, Manipuri poetry and Northeast poetry which is also informed by his academic reading.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q10.** Briefly write a few words on the style and language of the poet Robin Ngangom.
**Q11.** Mention some of the cross references in the essay "Poetry in the Time of Terror"

## 9.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit, you will now be well acquainted with the poet Robin Ngangom and the context in which his essay is situated. A thorough reading of the essay "Poetry in Time of Terror" shall enable you to gain a comprehensive idea on the prescribed text and add to the provided explanation from your own reading or interpretation of the same. In addition, while providing your own analysis of the essay, you will be able to discuss the major themes that are significant to the discussion of the text. Further, you will be able to describe the style and language of Robin Ngangom while also appreciating the sensibility of the poet and his concerns regarding some of the major discourses emerging from the region.

## 9.8 FURTHER READING

Ngangom, Robin & Kympham S. Nongkynrih. (2009) *Dancing Earth*: *An Anthology of Poems from the North-East India.* Penguin Books. New Delhi.

Ngangom, Robin. "Poetry in the Time of Terror" Indian Literature Vol. 49 No. 3 (227) (May-June 2005) pp. 168-174.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/23341046

## 9.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Answer to Q1:** Ngangom Rabindra Singh (born in 1959) also known as Robin Ngangom, hails from the Northeastern state of Manipur, which is known for its history, rich cultural traditions and scenic beauty.

**Answer to Q2:** i. Ngangom is a bilingual poet who writes both in Manipuri and the English language.

ii. As an academic, some of his specialisations are namely: Indian Writing in English and Modern poetry

**Answer to Q3:** Some of his works of poetry are namely *Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994) and *The Desire of Roots* (2006).

**Answer to Q4:** The opening paragraph of the essay begins with the poet's reflection with regard to his early years of writing and experimenting with poetry as a young boy of eleven or twelve years old. It was his pre-adolescent days and given the temperament of this tender phase, he was sentimental and wordy with regard to his poetical expression. Now that he looks back at those early years of dabbling into poetry, he feels a little self-critical from the perspective of a more established and seasoned poet that he has become.

**Answer to Q5:** Ngangom notes that the writer from the Northeast differs in his or her stance from that of the mainstream writer. To the writer from the region, the reality of gun culture and endless violence poses an urgency and he or she cannot afford to engage in "verbal wizardry" to prove his or her worth. With such grim realities that stare at people of the region, the writer is compelled to master the "art of witness" and to represent the truth with integrity given the fact that the Northeastern region has witnessed too much of conflict and clashes at almost every level.

**Answer to Q6:** The poet notes that in recent times Manipuri poets have taken up "the poetry of survival" representing their realities through imagery of "blood", "bullets", "mother" or "the colour red". In this regard, he opines that it is necessary to strike a fine balance and not make it all too clichéd. However, it is extremely necessary to write of the present happenings and the poet considers this act of capturing such urgency an engagement in the "poetry of witness", as he calls it.

**Answer to Q7:** The poet resents the result of capitalism and the material culture that has enslaved the youth in particular to materialist things, fast technology and such ideologies that threatens the future generations. The poet considers real feelings and emotions towards one's fellowmen and society above any such material culture.

**Answer to Q8:** The constant threat to life, the lack of normalcy in the state, the gradual disintegration of society, the youth being led astray, corrupted system reaching its heights, the communal clashes, lack of goodwill on the part of government and the prevalence of terrorism has transformed the society for the worse. All these factors have collectively

overshadowed the peace, harmony and unity of the Meitei people and the indigenous tribes living together for ages in the land of Manipur.

**Answer to Q9:** In such a context, poetry becomes a tool of self-articulation, a medium of self-expression and a powerful voice that can reach out to the people and beyond. The poet finds solace and solidarity in poetry and its strength. It is his way of being passively assertive without being overtly aggressive in his position as a poet.

**Answer to Q10:** Ngangom's essay is written in a reader-friendly style with the natural flow of his verses that blend effortlessly into his prose to highlight his stance as a poet. It unravels and articulates his idea on poetry and its significant role in making a counted difference in an otherwise dark reality. Thus, he professes of stepping down of his "ivory tower" or in simple words, his comfort zone to speak for his people and his homeland.

**Answer to Q11:** Few cross-references in his work are the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, the playwright Albert Camus, Chinese-French author- Gao Xiagjian, critic Mabel Lee, Russian author- Alexander Solzhenitsyn, American essayist Brodsky, Polish American poet Czeslaw Milosz, Manipuri poetry and Northeast poetry which is also informed by his academic reading.

## 9.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Write a note on the life and works of the poet Robin Ngangom
Q2. Give a detailed explanation of the essay titled "Poetry in Time of Terror" by Robin Ngangom highlighting the role of the poet.
Q4. Discuss some of the major themes evident in the text of the essay "Poetry in the Time of Terror."
Q5. Describe the style and language employed by Robin Ngangom in the essay "Poetry in the Time of Terror".

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# UNIT 10: MRINAL MIRI: "THE SPIRITUAL AND THE MORAL"

## UNIT STRUCTURE

10.1 Learning Objectives
10.2 Introduction
10.3 Mrinal Miri: His Life and Works
10.4 Context of the Essay
10.5 Major Themes
10.6 Style and Language
10.7 Let us Sum up
10.8 Further Reading
10.9 Answers to Check Your Progress
10.10 Model Questions

## 10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- explain Mrinal Miri's central argument that spirituality is not a fixed or universally agreed concept but is shaped by socially received meanings
- differentiate between spirituality as self-knowledge, spirituality as supernatural belief, and spirituality rooted in tribal/nature-based worldviews
- critically analyse the idea that spiritual self-discovery requires overcoming ego, self-deception, and self-ignorance
- interpret the role of attention, discipline, and self-education in achieving moral clarity and self-transformation
- evaluate Miri's critique of modernity, cultural superiority, and digital utilitarianism in relation to the crisis of selfhood and moral life
- develop independent critical thinking to assess the philosophical relationship between spirituality, morality, identity, and human freedom

## 10.2 INTRODUCTION

Mrinal Miri begins his essay "The Spiritual and the Moral" by drawing attention to the fact that spirituality is not a single, universally agreed concept. Instead, there exists many socially accepted or received views about spirituality, and people often inherit these views from religion, culture, or tradition without questioning them deeply. Miri's main purpose in the opening of the essay is to clarify these common meanings of spirituality and show that not all of them are equally meaningful or relevant to his philosophical discussion. Miri points out that, one major 'received' views with regard to spirituality is that, it is primarily

an "epistemic notion" (105). In philosophy, the term *epistemic* refers to knowledge, in the sense that, how we know things, what kind of knowledge is valid, and what counts as truth. So, when spirituality is understood as an epistemic idea, it becomes linked with "knowledge of oneself" *(105)*. Miri simplifies this by saying it as "knowledge of the self" (105). In other words, spirituality is seen as a journey towards understanding who we really are beneath our social roles, worldly identities, and bodily existence. However, Miri also points out an important assumption behind this idea that, the self is not immediately visible to us. It is not something we automatically understand just by living daily life. Therefore, spiritual knowledge is not ordinary knowledge; rather it requires "efforts of very special kinds" (105). This suggests that the self is hidden, complicated, and not transparently available. This also implies that spirituality becomes an *achievement*, something one has to work for, rather than something naturally present in everyday living.

## 10.3 MRINAL MIRI: LIFE AND WORKS

Mrinal Miri (born on 1st August 1940) is one of the most influential Indian philosophers of the contemporary period, widely known for his sharp intellect, clarity of thought, and ethical seriousness. Born in Assam, he developed an early interest in philosophy and intellectual inquiry. He received his BA in Philosophy from the University of Cambridge in 1966, and later completed his doctorate in 1970, establishing a strong foundation in rigorous philosophical training. Following the completion of his doctoral studies, Miri began his academic career as a lecturer in philosophy at St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi, serving from 1970 to 1974. Thereafter, he moved to North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), where he continued his teaching and scholarly engagement.

His academic life reflects a consistent commitment to intellectual discipline and the ethical purpose of education. Mrinal Miri also served as the Director of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS), Shimla, from 1993 to 1999, a prestigious role that further strengthened his influence within India's academic and research institutions. His contribution extended beyond university classrooms into the sphere of national policy and governance. He was associated with the National Advisory Council (NAC) established under the UPA-I government led by Manmohan Singh, and also served as a member of the council involved in the implementation of the Right to Education (RTE) Act. In recognition of his intellectual and public contributions, Mrinal Miri was nominated as a member of the Rajya Sabha on 21 March 2012, marking his entry into the formal political and legislative sphere as a respected thinker and educationist. His achievements have been acknowledged through several prestigious honours. In 2005, he was awarded the Padma Bhushan, India's third-highest civilian award, by the President of India Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, for his contributions to education and literature. Later, in 2010, he received the Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar Gold Plaque from the Asiatic Society of India for his contribution to social understanding. In the same year, he was also awarded the Madhabdev Award by the Government of Assam for his scholarly excellence. Thus, Mrinal Miri's life reflects the role of a philosopher who combined academic depth with institutional

leadership and public service, shaping both intellectual discourse and educational policy in modern India.

He has made significant contributions to Indian philosophical and academic discourse through both authored and edited works. His writings reflect sustained engagement with themes such as moral identity, education, the humanities, modernity, psychoanalysis, and Indian social realities. His scholarship is marked by conceptual clarity and a strong ethical orientation, making his works relevant not only within philosophy but also across the human sciences. One of his most influential works is *Identity and the Moral Life* (2002), where he examines the complex relationship between identity formation and ethical responsibility, offering a philosophical critique of modern discourses surrounding selfhood and morality. His later book *Philosophy and Education* (2014) further establishes him as a leading thinker in educational philosophy, where he argues for the centrality of reflective humanistic inquiry in shaping responsible citizens and meaningful learning. In addition to his authored works, Miri has also edited important volumes that contribute to debates on the humanities and Indian intellectual traditions. *The Place of Humanities in Our Universities* (2018) presents a powerful defence of the humanities in contemporary academic institutions, especially at a time when education is increasingly shaped by market-driven priorities. Similarly, *The Idea of Surplus: Tagore and Contemporary Human Sciences* (2016) engages with Rabindranath Tagore's intellectual legacy and explores its relevance to present-day human sciences and philosophical thought. His edited volume *Tribal India: Continuity and Change* (1993) reflects his engagement with questions of indigenous life, social transformation, and historical continuity within India. Another important edited work, *Five Essays on Kant* (1987), highlights his interest in Western philosophical traditions and critical philosophy, particularly Kantian thought. Further expanding his interdisciplinary reach, Miri's *Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (1997) demonstrates his engagement with psychoanalytic theory and its philosophical implications for understanding the human mind and subjectivity. Overall, Mrinal Miri's works collectively reflect a philosopher deeply invested in ethical life, intellectual freedom, and the continued relevance of the humanities in shaping modern society.

## 10.4 CONTEXT OF THE ESSAY

Mrinal Miri's essay **"**The Spiritual and the Moral**"** emerges in response to a modern intellectual climate where '*spirituality'* has become both an overused and under-examined concept. The context of the essay is shaped by the fact that spirituality is often treated either as a private inward experience, a religious ideal, or a vague cultural sentiment—yet it continues to claim authority in moral and philosophical discussions. Miri begins by situating spirituality not as a fixed universal truth but as a plural and socially inherited idea, meaning that most individuals accept certain "received" notions of spirituality without interrogating their philosophical foundations. This itself reflects a broader modern condition: people speak of spirituality confidently, but rarely ask what it truly means or whether it has ethical consequences.

The essay is written against a backdrop where spirituality is frequently separated from ordinary human life. Miri shows that one dominant assumption, especially in classical religious and philosophical traditions, is that spirituality is primarily an epistemic project, a search for self-knowledge. But this view carries a problematic implication: the self is imagined as hidden, and spiritual knowledge is therefore treated as a rare achievement requiring special discipline. In this framework, ordinary life becomes spiritually inferior, and the material world is seen as a distraction. Miri critically exposes this tendency, suggesting that spirituality, when constructed as withdrawal, risks becoming detached from the very sphere where moral responsibility operates—namely, the lived world of human relationships.

At the same time, Miri places his discussion in contrast with other popular meanings of spirituality, such as supernatural beliefs in spirits, paranormal phenomena, or ESP. He rejects this as philosophically unproductive, yet his inclusion of it is significant: it shows that spirituality in public consciousness is often shaped by irrational curiosity and mystical sensationalism, not ethical seriousness. By distancing himself from this, Miri frames his inquiry as an attempt to rescue spirituality from both superstition and romantic abstraction.

A crucial context for the essay is also Miri's engagement with tribal worldviews, which he treats not as primitive beliefs but as alternative epistemic and moral visions. Here spirituality is not escape but deep involvement with the natural world, where trees, rivers, and landscapes possess a living force. This allows Miri to challenge mainstream spiritual traditions that treat matter as spiritually degrading. In doing so, he also critiques colonial and nationalist narratives that dehumanised tribal cultures, showing that the dismissal of tribal spirituality is not merely intellectual arrogance but a moral failure rooted in hierarchical power.

The essay further belongs to a larger philosophical debate about whether moral transformation requires self-knowledge. Drawing from Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, Miri argues that morality is not merely rule-following but a profound reshaping of subjectivity. In this context, spirituality becomes meaningful only when it functions as a disciplined struggle against ego, self-deception, and self-ignorance. Thus, the essay is situated within a critique of modern ethical life, where people may act morally outwardly but remain inwardly untransformed.

Finally, Miri's essay is shaped by the contemporary world of modernity, postmodern identity-politics, cultural plurality, and digital civilisation. He proposes that spirituality as self-knowledge can be fruitfully compared with political discourses of identity (feminism, Dalit consciousness, Black movements), but he also distinguishes them: spirituality targets deception arising from ego, whereas identity-politics targets deception produced by

structures of domination. This places the essay within a distinctly modern context where the self is not only metaphysical but also political.

In its concluding frame, the essay becomes a warning against a technological age increasingly dominated by utilitarian digital logic. Miri suggests that modern civilisation risks losing the language of moral depth itself—virtues, sincerity, love, courage—because machine-like existence cannot carry the complexity of human inwardness. Thus, the broader context of the essay is the crisis of the human self in modernity: spirituality and morality survive, but increasingly as hollow imitations unless re-grounded in genuine self-attention, moral struggle, and lived reality.

## 10.5 MAJOR THEMES

Major themes of the essay "The Spiritual and the Moral" can be enumerated under the following heads:

One of the major themes that the essay "The Spiritual and the Moral" highlights is that, spirituality as a plural and received concept. Miri argues that spirituality is not a single universal idea but a concept shaped by inherited cultural and religious beliefs. People often accept these meanings without questioning them critically. This creates confusion because spirituality can mean very different things in different traditions. Miri's purpose is to clarify these meanings and examine which of them are philosophically significant. Thus, spirituality becomes a contested and socially constructed category.

Another central theme is that spirituality is primarily an epistemic process, meaning it involves knowledge of the self. Miri emphasises that the 'true self' is not easily accessible in ordinary life, and therefore spirituality demands special effort and discipline. This self-knowledge is not merely psychological but involves uncovering deeper springs of action. Spirituality, in this sense, becomes a journey of discovering what lies beneath ego, illusion, and surface identity. It is closely linked with the transformation of consciousness.

The interconnectedness of spirituality and moral life constitutes another major theme of the essay. The essay strongly critiques traditions that treat spirituality as withdrawal from worldly life, because morality exists only in human relationships and obligations. Miri insists that spirituality cannot be detached from the material world without losing ethical relevance. True spirituality must deepen one's moral awareness rather than promote escapism. Thus, the spiritual life is not opposed to the mundane world but must engage with it meaningfully. Spirituality, therefore, becomes a way of living ethically within the world.

Miri places spirituality within the modern crisis of culture, identity, and technological civilisation. He critiques modernity's dream of a universal "view from nowhere," arguing that all self-knowledge is culturally shaped. He also challenges colonial and nationalist dismissal of tribal spiritual visions as primitive. Finally, he warns that digital utilitarianism may hollow out moral and spiritual language, reducing human life to mechanical imitation.

The essay thus becomes a critique of modern civilisation's threat to moral and spiritual depth.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q.1** What does Mrinal Miri mean by "received views" of spirituality?
**Q.2** Why does Miri describe spirituality as an epistemic notion?
**Q.3** What is meant by "knowledge of the self" in the context of spirituality?
**Q.4** Why is Gandhi's idea of "experiments with truth" important for Miri's argument?
**Q.5** Why does Miri believe spirituality cannot be separated from morality?

## 10.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Mrinal Miri's *"The Spiritual and the Moral"* is written in a reflective and philosophically rigorous style, combining analytical clarity with moral seriousness. His language is formal, argumentative, and concept-driven, as he carefully defines key terms such as spirituality, self-knowledge, and morality before developing his claims. The essay follows a critical method, where Miri examines "received" meanings of spirituality and gradually refines them through reasoning and comparison. He frequently uses references to philosophers and thinkers such as Soskice, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Kant, and Gandhi, which gives the essay an academic tone and strengthens its intellectual depth. At the same time, his writing is not abstract for its own sake; it remains grounded in lived experience, cultural diversity, and contemporary realities, including modern technology and identity politics. Overall, the style is discursive, reflective, and deeply evaluative, encouraging readers to rethink spirituality not as mysticism or escapism, but as a morally transformative form of self-understanding.

Another striking feature of Miri's language is his ability to move across diverse cultural and intellectual registers without losing coherence. He does not confine spirituality to a single religious framework; instead, he shifts from tribal worldviews to Hindu and Sufi traditions, and then to modern Western philosophical debates, creating a wide comparative scope. His tone remains balanced and non-dogmatic, since he does not dismiss traditions outright but subjects them to critical scrutiny. At times, his style becomes almost cautionary, especially when he discusses the modern obsession with technological progress and the danger of reducing human life into mechanical patterns. Moreover, the essay is marked by conceptual precision and careful qualification, as Miri often anticipates possible misunderstandings and clarifies what he means. This gives the essay a reflective, dialogic quality, as though the writer is thinking alongside the reader rather than merely delivering conclusions.

In his essay, Miri intersestingly introduces a second 'received' view of spirituality, which is quite different from the first. According to this view, spirituality involves knowledge about supernatural entities or 'spirits' and the methods of dealing with them. In this perspective, spirituality is not about self-awareness but about understanding and interacting with invisible beings that supposedly exist in the world. These spirits are believed to interfere with human life in unpredictable ways. Miri describes them as intervening in our day-to-day life with "erratic regularity and unpredictability" (105). This phrase is interesting because it suggests that such events are believed to happen often enough to be taken seriously, but they remain irregular and difficult to control. Miri connects this supernatural view to phenomena like telepathy and other paranormal abilities, such as the ability to correctly describe events happening at a far distance. He mentions that these were once seriously investigated, both conceptually and empirically, under the discipline called Extra-Sensory Perception (ESP,) which was popular in the west in the early part of twentieth century. This reference helps learners understand that such ideas were not only limited to religious superstition but also became part of modern Western intellectual curiosity. Miri also adds that certain techniques were developed to communicate with the spirits of dead people. These dead persons, though lacking physical bodies, were thought to be still trapped in the material world. Such themes, he observes, were also popular in fictional literature. But at this stage, Miri makes his position very clear: he will not focus on this supernatural interpretation of spirituality. Yet, he admits that this idea still survives in some religious thoughts and practices. This acknowledgement is important because it shows that even if such beliefs are not philosophically acceptable to him, they still have cultural influence.

After dismissing the ESP-based understanding of spirituality, Miri introduces another view which he considers distinct and more philosophically significant. He says that the second view must not be confused with a belief common among many tribal communities in India and elsewhere. In tribal worldviews, spirituality does not necessarily involve ghosts or dead spirits. Rather, it is based on the belief that the entire natural world—trees, rivers, mountains, animals—and even human-made objects are filled with an intangible presence or energy. Miri calls it an intangible "force" though he admits this is only "for want of a better word," meaning that language is inadequate to describe such experiences precisely (106).This worldview suggests that humans can communicate with this force, or at least remain in contact with it. Spirituality here becomes a relationship between humans and the environment, not an escape from it. Miri says he will speak about this kind of spirituality. He finds it especially valuable because it is rooted in a deep respect for the physical world, rather than rejecting it as an illusion or distraction. He says this view is based on an "emphatic acceptance of the reality of the day to day mundane material world" (106). This is a crucial point: unlike many mainstream religious traditions that treat material life as

inferior, this tribal understanding sees the physical world as meaningful and spiritually alive.

Miri then returns to the earlier view of spirituality as self-knowledge and explores its deeper assumptions. He explains that if spirituality requires special effort and achievement, it implies that the self is not immediately known. Human beings may live for years without truly knowing their authentic self. This is why many religious traditions treat self-knowledge as a difficult goal. In these traditions, the "original self" is believed to be unknown or "epistemically be clouded" (106). Miri further explains that in many religious traditions, the self is imagined as something separate from the physical world. The real self is assumed to stand apart from worldly engagements—desires, responsibilities, ambitions, relationships, and material attachments. This is a common feature of several spiritual traditions, including Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian ascetic ideals. The self is thought to belong to a higher realm, and the physical world is seen as something that traps or distracts the soul. But Miri highlights the central paradox that, human beings cannot avoid the physical world. We are "willy-nilly engaged" with it, meaning whether we like it or not, we are forced to interact with material life (106). And according to these traditions, this unavoidable engagement becomes the greatest obstacle to spiritual progress. Miri clearly states that "this engagement with the physical world" becomes "the stumbling block to achieving authentic self-knowledge" (106). To overcome this stumbling block, many religious traditions prescribe practices that detach human beings from ordinary worldly life. These include meditative disciplines, yogic exercises, and spiritual retreats. These practices aim to reduce worldly distraction and create conditions for deep introspection.

At this point, Miri introduces the argument of theologian Janet Martin Soskice from her essay *"Love and Attention"* (1992). Soskice describes how the phrase "spiritual life" creates a particular kind of mental image in people's minds. For many, spirituality appears as an idealised vision—something not connected with ordinary life. Soskice says that for most people, spirituality becomes an "eschatological vision" (106). The word '*eschatological*' refers to ideas of the end times, salvation, heaven, or the final spiritual destiny of human beings. This means spirituality is imagined as something to be achieved later, in the future, or after death, rather than something practiced in everyday existence. Soskice offers a sharp critique of how spirituality is commonly imagined in Christian traditions, especially within Catholic thought. She begins by pointing out the gap between real life and spiritual ideals: everyday existence is not experienced as calm, meaningful, or spiritually elevated. Instead, it is lived through confusion, exhaustion, and routine struggle. This immediately challenges the romantic assumption that spirituality naturally grows out of daily life. Rather, ordinary living appears messy and fragmented, far from the ideal of inner peace. She then highlights how spiritual life is traditionally represented through images of silence, discipline, and solemn religious spaces. Such representations construct spirituality as something serious, private, and almost aesthetic—an experience tied to churches, rituals, and meditative withdrawal. Spirituality, in this sense, is not portrayed as

something embedded in ordinary human relationships but as a special atmosphere separated from the noise and pressures of social life. Soskice also notes that the highest form of spirituality is often linked with contemplative practices such as retreats, deep prayer, and personal struggles with the divine. This framing presents spiritual life as an intense inward subject, involving emotional suffering and personal confrontation. While this highlights the depth of spiritual experience, it also reinforces the idea that spirituality belongs to exceptional moments rather than everyday realities. In view of this, Miri establishes the central concern of the essay: spirituality is often understood as an escape from the material world, but such an escape may also distance spirituality from moral responsibilities. By presenting multiple views of spirituality, Miri prepares the reader to rethink whether spirituality should be treated as a purely inward, solitary pursuit or whether it can exist meaningfully within ordinary, material, everyday life.

The essay further reflects on traditions like Sufism and Hindu spirituality where self-knowledge is seen as requiring detachment from ordinary sensory and intellectual life. In Sufism, this takes the form of "fana" (annihilation of the self) leading to "baqua" (union with God), with music playing a crucial role in transforming consciousness (107). Similarly, Hindu thought often presents spirituality as withdrawal from *samsara* into detached "witness consciousness" (107). However, Miri questions how one can be sure that spiritual practices truly lead to the original self, even if traditions speak of "forgetting" and "remembering." His deeper concern is that a completely detached self would also be detached from morality, since moral life exists only within worldly human relationships. He argues that true self-knowledge is essential for morality because it requires overcoming ego and self-deception. Thus, spiritual self-discovery and moral transformation are inseparable, since human reality is always shaped by obligation and the struggle to cultivate genuine moral motivation.

Miri argues that, "self-knowledge is crucial to the life of morality" (108). Moral self-education is essentially a struggle against self-deception and self-ignorance, both of which keep human beings trapped in forms of life where the moral motive cannot properly arise. These tendencies are powerful because they are rooted in the ego, which constantly works to protect itself through illusion. The first step towards overcoming the ego, therefore, is the cultivation of a special kind of attention a disciplined concentration of epistemic energy that can resist the ego's blinding force and allow one to glimpse the self beyond it. That is why, Miri mentions:

"The overcoming of the ego is a necessary step in the battle against the 'cunning' of self-deceit. The spiritual 'discovery' of the self can be given an intelligible, significant content at all only if it is seen as the overcoming of the ego that leads to a knowledge of the true springs of our actions of our historically and contingently constituted being. Overcoming of the ego also must mean moral transformation, and it is my contention that moral transformation and spiritual self-discovery are of a piece." (108)

Since the sense of obligation is already rooted in human beings, the crucial question becomes: what is distinctive about moral obligation, or why should one choose to be

moral at all? This question arises because one of the deepest difficulties of human life lies in cultivating a genuinely moral approach. The problem is that living morally demands what Kierkegaard describes as a complete transformation of one's subjectivity (109). Moral motivation is not simply doing the right thing occasionally; rather, it is reaching a stable inner condition from which right action flows naturally. Miri refers to Wittgenstein who expresses a similar idea when he suggests that no one can speak the truth unless they have mastered themselves—not because they lack intelligence, but because truth can be spoken only by someone who is fully at home in it (109). Such an inner steadiness can be achieved only through a difficult inward journey into the sources of action, the deeper attitudes that shape conduct. Often, this journey requires dismantling entire ways of living before one can attain a state of moral purity. hence, on the pretext of this, Miri mentions, "This is primarily an epistemic journey—a journey of self-discovery overcoming self- deception, self-knowledge overcoming self-ignorance" (109). The underlying assumption is that moral motivation becomes possible only when one achieves complete clarity about oneself. Some suggest that such clarity is ultimately granted by divine providence, but setting that aside, one may instead see self-discovery as a form of self-education. The goal of moral self-education is to defeat the powerful impulses toward self-deception and ignorance that keep us trapped in ways of life lacking true moral motivation. These impulses are strong because they arise from the ego. The first step in overcoming the ego is to cultivate a special kind of attention—a focused concentration of epistemic energy—which can resist the ego's blinding force and offer a glimpse of the self beyond it. Miri suggests that aesthetic perception provides an example of such attention. He refers to Kant who argued that aesthetic experience sharpens our cognitive faculties and stimulates thought. In this receptive state, ordinary perception becomes deeper perceptiveness, allowing us to grasp universal truths through particular objects—for instance, seeing the fading of a flower as revealing impermanence itself. Kant also held that aesthetic judgment is grounded in a disinterested delight, a pleasure not tied to personal gain or utility. While invoking Kant may seem controversial, what matters is acknowledging the possibility of such receptive and selfless attention. Miri also refers to the famous painter Swaminathan, who says that painting takes him away from himself, he expresses precisely this possibility (110). In moral perception, the same kind of attentive receptivity leads to insights into moral truths—such as the belief that true non-violence drives out fear, that it is stronger than violence, and that genuine humility is inseparable from dignity. Such insight is significant because it transforms one's experience of the world and thereby changes one's conduct, leading one to act differently than one otherwise would have.

For Miri, spirituality is essentially this heightened attentiveness. Spiritual practices like meditation aim at stabilising such a sensibility. To clarify this, he turns to Gandhi's idea of "experiments with truth" (110). Gandhi's concern was not abstract truth but the truth of the moral life—the real as opposed to the illusory. He believed that moral truths can be reached through an "interior route," just as scientific truths are reached through external investigation (111). Gandhi's experiments were thus purificatory journeys into the roots of

action, involving the transformation of subjectivity and, at times, the dismantling of one form of life to establish another. His fasts and disciplines were instruments of this inward struggle, which demanded suffering, patience, humility, and gradual moral renewal. Moreover, the language of "experiment" is significant because it shows that the moral quest is not merely psychological but deeply *epistemic*: it produces both self-knowledge and moral truth. For Gandhi, such clarity results in true freedom or swaraj, not as random choice, but as the capacity to act spontaneously from an integrated moral understanding. Moral transformation becomes the proof of spiritual authenticity, and religion, morality, and mysticism are therefore inseparable.

In connection with this, Miri highlights that it would be fruitful to compare spirituality—understood as a form of self-knowledge grounded in historical and contingent experience—with the modern, or rather post-modern, discourses surrounding identity and its politics. Such discourses include anti-colonial nationalist assertions of Indian identity, the Black movement, feminism, ethnicity, subalternity, and the Dalit movement in India. In all these movements, as in spirituality, self-knowledge remains the central concern, and the ultimate goal of this self-knowledge is freedom. However, Miri points out a crucial difference: while both spirituality and identity-discourses view freedom as liberation from deception, the source of deception differs. In spirituality, deception primarily arises from the ego and its self-aggrandising strategies. In contrast, in identity-based discourses, deception is rooted more in unequal structures of power, where the dominating other shapes and distorts the self-understanding of the dominated. Therefore, these discourses necessarily function not only as moral or philosophical inquiries, but also as deeply political projects.

In the essay, Miri also offers his insight in relation to the modern problem of cultural diversity and intercultural understanding. He argues that modernity has been driven by the dream of epistemological unity—modelled on the natural sciences—and this leads to the assumption that there exists a culture-free, universal core of human consciousness from which one can judge all cultures. This is the ideal of Thomas Nagel's "view from nowhere," a stance that claims to stand outside all cultural worlds and evaluate them objectively (113). Miri notes the appeal of this ideal, since it replaces older notions of God or a disengaged spiritual self. However, he rejects it as impossible, as human thought cannot strip itself bare of all cultural assumptions. The supposedly universal concepts used to define culture—values, attitudes, art, science—are themselves saturated with cultural meaning. Without them, the nowhere-man cannot even form a vision, let alone make judgments. As Gellner suggests, we cannot perform a total "conceptual strip-tease"; we can only replace one set of assumptions with another (114). Thus, the modern fantasy of a culture-transcending standpoint is ultimately a sophisticated form of self-deception. Miri affirms that cultural diversity—and the diversity of visions that come with it, including epistemic visions is an unavoidable fact of human existence. Instead of entering debates on relativism or incommensurability, he focuses on the relation between language, culture, and self-knowledge, which he has earlier linked with spirituality. In addition to this, he also posits that the claim that language embodies a form of life is partly misleading, since

many cultures are naturally multilingual. He uses Assam as an example, where multiple languages coexist without fragmenting into separate cultural worlds. People shift across languages with ease, showing that a culture can contain multiplicity within itself. Yet, he also admits there is an important truth in the idea: language "lights up" the world for us (115). It is a gift because we cannot invent language without already possessing one, and each language provides a distinct way of revealing reality. Since spiritual self-knowledge must be articulated through language, every language shapes the form such articulation can take. Even so, Miri insists that linguistic difference does not prevent meaningful conversation across traditions; rather, distinct spiritual traditions can speak to one another and even transform each other. Gandhi, for him, is the strongest proof of this possibility.

Miri then turns to tribal cultures in India, noting how both European colonial discourse and Indian nationalist discourse often described tribes through degrading labels like 'primitive' or 'uncivilized'. Such discourse, he suggests, preserved a sharp division between the 'civilized self" and the "tribal other" (116). However, if Miri's earlier argument is correct—that human reality is always shaped by the "ought"—then tribal worlds are just as real and internally meaningful as the modern world. In fact, tribal visions avoid a major flaw of "received" spirituality: they do not split the self into a detached spiritual essence versus a worldly samsaric existence. Instead, tribal life sees continuity between the human, natural, and spiritual realms. Their self-knowledge is inseparable from time, space, and lived contingencies. To dismiss this epistemic world as inferior or irrational is, for Miri, not merely an intellectual error but also a moral failure.

Finally, Miri addresses spirituality in the age of digital utilitarianism and virtual reality. He argues that digital language is incapable of expressing central human realities—lying and sincerity, moral virtues like courage and generosity, and subtle emotions like love, hatred, jealousy, or joy. Modern humanity increasingly desires to imitate the machine, even to become machine-like. But in doing so, humans risk becoming forgetful of the self, and if they fully become machines, they will cease to be human altogether. Miri ends with a warning: we may be moving toward a new kind of civilisation where traditional questions of spirituality, morality, and self-knowledge survive only as hollow imitations, even while human power and technological manipulation expand beyond imagination.

## 10.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have learned that Mrinal Miri's essay "The Spiritual and the Moral" presents spirituality not as a fixed or universally accepted concept, but as an idea shaped by multiple received meanings across cultures and traditions. We have seen how Miri critically examines spirituality as self-knowledge and highlights the role of special discipline and inward effort in achieving authentic understanding of the self. The unit also explored Miri's rejection of supernatural and ESP-based interpretations of spirituality, while appreciating the tribal worldview that affirms the spiritual significance of the natural and material world. Further, we understood Miri's central argument that spirituality and morality cannot be separated, since true spiritual growth involves overcoming ego, self-deception, and self-

ignorance, which are major obstacles to moral motivation. We also examined the importance of attention, self-education, and moral experimentation, especially through Gandhi's example. Finally, we noted Miri's broader critique of modernity, cultural superiority, and technological civilisation, through which he warns against the erosion of moral and spiritual depth in contemporary life.

## 10.8 FURTHER READING

Miri, Mrinal. "The Spiritual and the Moral." *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*, edited by Tilottoma Misra, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 105-117.

Misra, Tilottoma, (Ed). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

## 10.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Answer to Q.1:** By "received views," Miri refers to the commonly accepted ideas of spirituality that people inherit from religion, culture, and tradition. These views are usually taken for granted and followed without critical reflection. They function as socially approved meanings rather than philosophically examined concepts.

**Answer to Q.2:** Miri describes spirituality as an epistemic notion because he links it with the pursuit of knowledge, especially knowledge of the self. In this sense, spirituality is not merely emotional or ritualistic but involves a serious inquiry into what is true about human existence. It is concerned with understanding the deeper foundations of one's actions and identity.

**Answer to Q.3**: "Knowledge of the self" refers to a deeper awareness of one's true inner being beyond social roles, ego, and worldly attachments. It means discovering the real motives, tendencies, and moral weaknesses that shape human life. Such self-knowledge requires special effort because the self is often hidden by illusion and self-deception.

**Answer to Q.4:** Gandhi's "experiments with truth" are important because they show spirituality as a practical moral discipline rather than abstract belief. For Gandhi, truth is reached through self-purification, suffering, and inward struggle, which transforms one's subjectivity. Miri uses Gandhi to prove that spiritual growth must result in moral transformation and ethical action.

**Answer to Q.5:** Miri believes spirituality cannot be separated from morality because true spirituality involves overcoming ego and self-deception, which are also the main obstacles to moral life. Moral responsibility arises within human relationships and obligations, so spirituality cannot be an escape from the world. Hence, spiritual self-discovery and moral transformation are inseparable and must develop together.

## 10.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

**Q.1** Discuss Mrinal Miri's view that spirituality is primarily an epistemic notion. How does he connect spirituality with self-knowledge?

**Q.2** Critically examine the different "received" meanings of spirituality discussed by Miri in the essay.

**Q.3** Analyse Miri's argument that spirituality and morality are inseparable. How does spiritual self-discovery lead to moral transformation?

**Q.4** Explain the role of ego and self-deception in obstructing moral life, as discussed by Miri in the essay prescribed in your course.

**Q.5** Discuss Miri's understanding of tribal spirituality. How does it challenge mainstream religious views that reject the material world?

**Q.6** Compare spirituality as self-knowledge with modern identity politics (Nationalism, Feminism, Dalit discourse, Black movement). What similarities and differences does Miri highlight in this regard?

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# UNIT 11: BIRENDRANATH DATTA: "NORTH-EAST INDIA AND ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL MILIEU"

## UNIT STRUCTURE:


11.1 Learning Objectives
11: 2 Introduction
11.3 Birendranath Dutta: His Life and Works
11.4 Context of the Essay
11.5 Explanation of the Essay
11.6 Major Themes
11.7 Style and Language
11.8 Let us Sum up
11.9 Further Reading
11.10 Answers to Check Your Progress
11.11 Model Questions


## 11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, the learner will be able to:

- examine the socio-cultural distinctiveness of North-East India and its pivotal significance within the overarching Indian milieu as reflected by Birendranath Dutta in the prescribed text.
- highlight Datta's views on cultural evolution of North-East India as impacted by Mongoloid population
- evaluate the ideas like Sanskritization, assimilation, and syncretism which have impacted the communities of the region in the process of sustaining their key tribal traits.
- identify the unique material culture of North-East India, such as weaving, and simultaneously analyse the motifs and narratives as demonstrated in the region's folklore.

## 11. 2 INTRODUCTION

In the essay titled "North-East India and its Socio-Cultural Milieu", Birendranath Datta reflects upon the social and cultural distinctiveness of North-East India, stressing the remarkable yet often marginalised, participation and contribution of the Indo-Mongoloid population "in the development of the composite Hindu or Indian culture" (118). Datta highlights the importance of investigating the involved mechanisms of cultural assimilation

and the participation of the Mongoloid people in shaping Indian civilization as a subject of critical inquiry. He mentions thus :

"The north-eastern region does have a special character of its own: the socio-cultural milieu of this region holds up in the present day, as it has done in the past, a picture that somehow distinguishes it from the rest of India. As such, this special character cannot be understood . . . in terms of the commonly accepted standards of what it is believed to constitute the Indian mainstream". (119)

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q.1** What is the primary focus of Birendranath Datta's essay "North-East India and its Socio-Cultural Milieu"?
**Q.2** What is the role of Indo-Mongoloid population in shaping the culture of North-East India?
**Q.3** What are the three categories of population of North-East India as described in the essay?
**Q.4** What is 'Sanskritization'?

## 11.3 BIRENDRANATH DATTA : HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Birendranath Datta (1st March, 1925—23rd October, 2023) was an eminent educationist and folklorist of Assam. Throughout his career, he held various academic and administrative positions across multiple institutions. He earned his Ph.D. in Folklore Studies from Gauhati University in 1974 and later served as the Head of the Department of Folklore Research at the same university until his retirement in 1995. Following this, he joined Tezpur University as a Professor and Advisor in the Department of Traditional Culture and Art Forms, where he remained until 1999. In recognition of his contributions to literature and education, he was honoured with the Padma Shri, India's fourth-highest civilian award, in 2009. The following year, he received the Jagaddhatri-Harmohan Das Literary Award. Additionally, he served as the President of Asom Sahitya Sabha for the 2003 North Lakhimpur Session and the 2004 Hojai Session.

Datta was actively involved in editorial work, contributing to several research journals, including the *Assam Academy Review*, *Gauhati University Journal of Arts*, and the research journal of the Anundaram Borooah Institute of Language, Art, and Culture. He also played a key role in editing Assamese encyclopedia volumes and contributed to both national and international encyclopedias. Datta's other notable works include—*A Bibliography of Folklore Material of Assam and Adjoining Areas* (1978), *Folk Toys of Assam* (1986), *Assam: The Emerald Treasure Land* (1990), *A Handbook of Folklore Material of North-East India* (1994), *Folk Paintings in Assam* (1998), *Folkloric Foraging in India's North-East* (1999), and *Folklore and Historiography* (2002). He has also edited several books, including *Traditional Performing Arts of North-East India* (1990), *Folksongs of the Misings* (1992), and has co-edited *Rama-Katha in Tribal and Folk Tradition of India* (1993).

## 11.4 CONTEXT OF THE ESSAY

In the essay titled "North-East India and its Socio-Cultural Milieu", Birendranath Datta excavates a distinct historical and cultural outlook on North-East India, by taking into account the Indo-Mongoloid population and their cultural assimilation and absorption into the larger Indian society. One of the major highlights of the essay is the way the writer critically investigates cultural assimilation of indigenous people or communities in North-East India, by drawing inferences from the concept of 'Sanskritisation'. In view of the varied yet interrelated attributes of both the tribal and non-tribal communities, Datta's essay enables the readers to understand how these people from different communities have sustained their indigenous identities while at the same integrating themselves into the impacts of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.

While reflecting on the context of the essay, one cannot overlook the issue of historical marginalisation of North-East India in the dominant narratives of Indian history and culture. In this regard, Datta directs his critique against the mainstream accounts wherein the contributions of the region to Indian civilisation have remained underreported. This claim has its pertinent importance and seriousness with respect to the region's convoluted and multifaceted history with both colonial and post-colonial India. Then again, religious syncretism constitutes one of the key aspects in the process of discussing the essay's context. Datta has given example of how Hinduism has manifested in unique ways on the pretext of its engagement with indigenous beliefs and practices. For instance, a religious syncretic worldview is perceptible in the continuous devotion of pre-Brahmanical deities alongside Brahmanical Gods. Datta's treatment of this aspect—i.e., the symbiosis of multiple spiritual traditions—however, seems to be idealistic as there could emerge tension and conflicts from the diverse range of religious practices. Hence, a more nuanced exploration is needed regarding how people with diverse belief systems would negotiate with each other with respect to the region's religious life.

Datta's discussion on cultural homogeneity and diversity has added a significant depth to his argument in the essay. He recognises the explicit heterogeneity of the region but at the same time gives emphasis on cultural homogeneity, as evident in the collective practices like weaving and the frequent appearance of narrative elements, motifs and symbols in the folktales. So it can be argued that the folklore of the region as to be found across communities paves ways for a cultural continuity irrespective of the ethnic and geographic differences. It further indicates the idea that the diverse cultures of North-East India are in constant flux, adapting and shaping Indian culture while contributing to it, without losing their distinctiveness.

From the discussion so far, one can reflect on how Datta's essay is significant for giving prominence to identify and assess the socio-cultural milieu of North-East India from a context-specific/region-specific standpoint. The prime argument concentrates in light of the fact that the socio-cultural identity of North-East India cannot be totally comprehended via the mainstream all-India paradigm. Instead, it should be understood in terms of its distinct historical and socio-cultural developments.

## 11.6 EXPLANATION OF THE TEXT

In order to examine the idiosyncratic socio-cultural configuration of North-East India, one requires a frame of reference which is particular and context-specific to this region. As this frame of reference may not entirely conform to the expansive understanding of Indian culture, hence, it need not be interpreted as 'un-Indian' or even less Indian.

It is well-known that the North-East region has traditionally been home to the Indo-Mongoloids, and on that account, their historical significance cannot be annulled. In view of this, Datta posits his critique against the sheer marginalisation of the region and its people in the larger Indian cultural landscape. There is another existing notion that North-East India is removed from the Indian mainstream. This kind of conjectures might have political undertones and somehow reveal certain shades of historical and contemporary realities, yet these perceptions have failed to appreciate the region's inimitable cultural view, and hence persist in setting it apart from the rest of India. The inclination to evaluate North-East India and its socio-cultural dynamics using essentialist perspectives has been criticised by Datta. He rather calls for an understanding that would appreciate the social and cultural dynamics of North-East India within its own specific framework, highlighting that while this region's culture may vary from the broader Indian scope and context, it is under no circumstances substandard or foreign to it. This divergence, however, has its traces not only in the region's population but also in the socio-cultural customs and traditions that are crucial to it, especially in its folklore.

A critical reading of the essay has reflected upon the key aspect of cultural convergence by bringing into light the process of assimilation of tribal communities into Hinduism. This convergence, according to Datta, went on smoothly in North-East in the recent times, unlike the other regions of India where such cultural integration had come to an end a while back. So it can be said that the absorption of tribal traditions with that of Hindu elements is in an active state of progression in North-East India, a particular trait of this region that sets it apart from the rest of the country. Datta further mentions that a substantial fraction of the tribal people in the region together with others who have assimilated into the established 'mainstream' society, fall under the Indo-Mongoloid or Kirata stock. This in turn has posited an awareness of homogeneity in the midst of the region's obvious diversity. Notwithstanding that the Kiratas' arrival in India can be traced back to the Vedic times, their profound coalescence into the expansive historical and cultural narrative of India is indicative of both their distinct roots and their enduring connection to Indian society.

From the cultural frame of reference, Birendranath Datta has divided the population of North-East India into three categories:

a.Tribal communities in the distant hills: These communities remain largely unaffected by Sanskritised or other organized cultures, except in some cases where Buddhist influences are present.

b.Tribal groups, both in the hills and the plain, with varying degrees of acculturation: These groups live in close proximity to 'non-tribal', Sanskritized communities or have

been influenced by Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam, while still retaining their tribal identity.

c.Sanskritized communities: These societies, such as the Meiteis of Manipur and Assamese communities, have undergone a significant process of Sanskritisation, often through the adoption of Hindu religious practices and Indo-Aryan languages like Assamese, while still retaining elements of their Mongoloid heritage.

Datta in this particular essay describes the process of Sanskritisation among different population groups, via giving prime emphasis upon the function of language and religion. Sanskritisation is social process through which castes or tribes positioned lower in the caste hierarchy strives for social advancement by adopting the elements of dominant culture or higher caste. An example of this can be viewed in the context of Assamese society wherein the Hindu religion and an Indo-Aryan language (primarily Assamese language, and to a certain extent Bengali) have significantly played a crucial role in this transformation. However, for the Meiteis, it is primarily the adoption of Hindu religion that has led to their Sanskritisation, while their language remains part of the Kuki-Chin group, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family. The Bishnupriyas, on the contrary, occupy a middle ground: they have embraced Hinduism like the Assamese which means "religion-wise, they are Sanskritizsed" (120), but their language reflects an amalgamation of both Indo-Aryan Kamrupi and Tibeto-Burman (or Kuki-Chin Meitei) influences, highlighting the complex interaction of religion and language in their cultural transformation.

It is noteworthy that "even the Sanskritized Hindu communities of the region retain elements which . . . are patently tribal" (121). The caste system in the Assamese society can be a potential example of this, which is quite liberal and flexible for its profound caste fluidity and limited caste-inflicted exclusions, unlike the orthodox caste structures found in other parts of India. Similarly, in Meitei society, the caste divisions are limited to Brahmins and Kshatriyas, and there is no significant caste-based discrimination. Interestingly, in both societies, weaving is a highly respected and honored craft for women across all castes, which stands in contrast to the status often ascribed to weaving in other parts of India. In the context of food as well, even the most orthodox Assamese Brahmin has no opposition about eating both meat and fish. The Meitei Brahmin, on the other hand, would limit himself to fish, which reflects the differences in dietary practices in case of both the groups.

Now, to consider the aspect of religion in the context of North-East India, it is significant to unveil the interesting mix of both Hindu and indigenous beliefs. In both Assamese and Meitei societies, a complex coexistence of Brahminical deities and pre-Brahminic gods and goddesses can be observed. While the worship of the former is more widespread, the veneration of indigenous deities, often associated with semi-Sanskritised peripheral communities in Assam, remains a prominent feature. In the Meitei society, however, deities like Sanamahi and Pakhangba continue to be closely tied to the Sanskritised core of the community, with festivals such as Lai-Haraoba serving as key expressions of this continuity. Both societies also feature non-Brahmin priests and spiritual mediums, such as *deodhai* and *deodhani* in Assam, and *maiba* and *maibi* in Manipur, who engage in shamanistic

rituals that include dances and other spiritual activities, bridging the sacred and the social in these cultural contexts.

Moreover, the region's folklore also exhibits a distinctive blend of indigenous and Hindu elements. Datta points out that the social and cultural practices of the region are often reflected in its folklore, where common motifs and themes—such as stories of a clever animal outwitting humans or the triumph of justice over evil—are found across various communities. These tales often carry universal themes but are localised in the context of the North-East, giving them a unique character that reflects the region's cultural hybridity. For instance, the motif of an animal being frightened by an imaginary dreadful creature appears in both Assamese folklore, where it is called *Dighal-thengiya*, and in Manipuri folklore, it is referred to as *Tapta*. Similarly, the story of the "stepmother's ill-treatment of the step-children" is found across many communities in the region, including Assamese and Manipuri versions, and "the old man and old woman being cheated by a cunning animal" (the jackal in Assamese and in a number of tribal versions, and the monkey in Manipuri version) is a recurring motif (123). So it can be said that the folklore of the northeastern region of India which is so diverse in nature yet shares a striking commonality among different communities. Many folk narratives across the region share identical types and motifs, despite differences in language and customs.

However, while common motifs exist, the folklore of the northeastern region also displays unique themes and variations specific to certain communities. For example, the story of *Harata Kuwar* among the Karbis has a parallel in Bodo folklore with the story of *Alsiya Kowar*, but this motif is absent in the folklore of other regional communities. Similarly, the motif of incestuous relationships between siblings is found in Bodo, Mising, and Bishnupriya communities, but this theme does not appear as widely in other areas. Such variations suggest that, even when certain narrative types are shared, the interpretation and presentation of those themes differ significantly across communities, adding layers of complexity to the folklore of the region.

About the material culture of the region, Birendranath Datta has referred to the distinctive weaving practices of the region, a craft which is revered among the communities. While much of the traditional life in the hills revolves around subsistence agriculture such as jhuming or shifting cultivation, weaving by "the womenfolk in their indigenous looms is a distinctive feature common to the lives of all the communities of the region, including the 'Sanskritized'" (122). This skill is passed down through generations, and the textiles produced are known for their vibrant colors and intricate designs. The similarity in dress styles, such as the Assamese *mekhela*, the Manipuri *phanek*, the Bodo *dakhna*, the Karbi *pini*, the Rabha ruphan, the Mising *gaseng*, the Adi *gale*, the Mizo *Puan* further exemplifies the shared cultural traits across the region's communities, despite their apparent diversity

With respect to 'myths' in the region, it often reflects a sense of 'togetherness' among different communities, both tribal and non-tribal, highlighting interconnectedness. Many tribal myths of creation include the emergence of various communities, such as the Naga, Kachari, Khasi, Assamese, and Karbi, all originating from eggs laid by a mythical bird.

This narrative shows a common origin among different tribes, emphasising unity and shared beginnings. Similar stories are found in other communities like the Buguns, Wanchos, and Singphos, further reinforcing this theme of interconnectedness. The inclusion of non-tribal communities in these creation myths demonstrates how folklore can transcend ethnic and cultural boundaries, portraying a harmonious relationship between different groups. Moreover, some communities in the northeastern region, influenced by Sanskritic traditions, link their origins to prominent Hindu deities or royal lineages. For instance, the Meitei people of Manipur trace their descent from Arjuna, the hero of the Mahabharata, through his union with Chitrangada, a princess from their land. Similarly, the Kacharis claim their lineage from Bhima, another Pandava brother, through his son Ghatotkacha. These narratives, which tie local communities to the grand epics of Hindu mythology, help integrate them into the broader cultural framework of the Hindu-Aryan tradition, positioning these communities within the larger Indian cultural and religious discourse.

Humour and social critique are also important elements in the region's folklore, with many tales offering a critique of caste and social hierarchy. In several Assamese folktales, Brahmins are ridiculed, demonstrating that their esteemed position was not universally respected. For instance, in one story, a low-caste attendant tricks his Brahmin master, eating the meal meant for the Brahmin himself. Such tales, often humorous in nature, challenge the rigidity of caste distinctions and suggest a more fluid social structure. Similarly, the famous *Sorarel* story of Manipuris, where a divine figure's wife breaks food taboos, reflects a broader shift in cultural norms, symbolising the loss of traditional practices in favour of more rigid societal rules.

In conclusion, the folklore of the northeastern region of India reveals both commonalities and distinctiveness, reflecting the complex interplay between shared cultural traditions and local variations. Through motifs, creation myths, social critique, and everyday life, the folklore not only offers insight into the cultural practices of these communities but also showcases the broader connections between them, both within the region and with the wider Indian cultural landscape. By studying these diverse narratives, we gain a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and historical fabric that binds these communities together while acknowledging their unique identities.

## 11.6 MAJOR THEMES

Major themes of the essay "North-East India and its Socio-Cultural Milieu" can be enumerated under the following heads:

**Regional identity and its distinctiveness :** This aspect constitutes one of the major themes of Birendranath Datta's essay. Datta is of the view that, the social and cultural identity of North-east India is one of a kind and discrete from the other parts of India, especially because of the region's history, geography, and the diverse communities that inhabits it. The inhabitants of the region, as mentioned in the essay, have witnessed perennial challenges such as isolation, migration, and cross-cultural interaction, which

have given rise to multifaceted identity. Despite the region has various indigenous groups, tribes, and linguistic traditions, yet there exists an intrinsic cohesion in the shared collective practices and cultural imagination.

**Indo-Mongoloid Cultural Interaction:** This is another theme that probes into the cultural and historical communication between the Indo-Mongoloids of North-East India and the expansive Indian cultural realm, thereby drawing attention to a process of cultural synthesis. It is this confluence of indigenous cultures that has caused hybridisation of rituals and practices, forming an exclusive cultural integration.

**Cultural Assimilation :** Through 'Sanskritisation' has been discussed in the essay in the context of tribal communities of the region. Datta writes, "the process of assimilation and absorption of tribal communities into the Hindu fold, which had stopped working in other parts of India quite some time ago, has been operative in this region till comparatively recent times and cannot be said to have completely ceased to work even today" (119). This indicates the persistent cultural interaction and assimilation of tribal communities in the mainstream Indian society. It is noteworthy that the flexibility in the caste system is one of the important aspects via which one can understand how different tribes have aligned with mainstream culture while retaining their individual essence.

**The Integration of Religious Practices:** 'Religious syncretism' (the blending of different religious tradition into a consolidated framework of belief system) is another theme which has been highlighted by the author. In relation to the essay, Datta reflects on how different belief system pertaining to Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, have responded to and shaped each other in the particular region of North-East India. An example of this can be enumerated when Datta writes, "Hinduism has assumed in this region some peculiar feature through the processes of syncretism" (122). This suggests that Hinduism in this region has incorporated and assimilated aspects from other religious practices, contributing to the formation of Hinduism that exemplifies the breadth of beliefs and rituals present in the region.

**Myth and Folklore:** These have been treated as integral elements in order to understand North-East India's socio-cultural identity. Irrespective of the variety in tradition and language, one cannot do away from the shared motifs that are found in folklore across diverse societies—such as tales of cunning animals, ill treated step-children and so on (123). Datta further calls attention to specific myths that explains the interconnectedness across diverse societies, as he notes, "Karbi myths speaks of the eggs laid by the mythical bird *plakpi*, out of which come the first men—a Naga (Naka), Kachara (Ramsa), a Khasi (Chomang), an Assamese (Aham) and of course a Karbi" (124). This myth describes shared roots of different tribal and non-tribal communities via a common traditional tale, that underscores a recognition of collective consciousness and belonging surpassing cultural and ethical constraints.

The distinct material culture of North-east India as explored by Datta can be clubbed under significant themes of the essay. Datta notes, "much of the traditional pattern of life

in the hills centre round jhuming or shifting cultivation which at best makes for a bare subsistence economy, gradually giving over to settled cultivation in the plains" (122). The author also gives emphasis on the practice of weaving in the region, mentioning that "weaving of exquisitely coloured and designed textiles by the womenfolk in their indigenous looms is a distinctive feature common to the lives of all the communities of the region, including the 'Sanskritized'" (122). This indicates the shared cultural practice throughout a range of different social groups in the region, helping to form a common socio-cultural identity. Apart from this, the essay traces the commonality in the dressing style of women across the region, stating that "even the dress worn by the women has a basic similarity—the Assamese *mekhela*, the Manipuri *phanek*, the Karbi *pini*, the Bodo *dakhna*, the Rabha *ruphan*, the Mising *gaseng* the Adi *gale*, the Mizo *puan*, and so on, are practically variations of the same basic format" (122). This as a whole showcases the material culture of the region, where 'weaving' and 'clothing' can be viewed as pivotal cultural traits uniting diverse communities.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q.5** Why is the study of folklore important in understanding the socio-cultural milieu of North-East India?

**Q.6** Give an example of folklore motif from the prescribed essay which is common to different communities of North-East India.

**Q.7** What, according to Birendranath Datta, is the unique feature of material culture common to all communities of North-East India?

**Q.8** Give some examples of traditional dresses in North-East India that share a common basic style.

## 11.7 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The style of Birendranath Datta's essay "North-East India and its Socio-Cultural Milieu" is scholarly and reflective, for its comprehensive examination of the cultural and social context of North-East India. An analytical approach has been implemented to meticulously underscore the social, historical, and cultural traits that characterises the region. The tone of the essay is formal and academic, and has an expository style for its extensive portrayal and explanation to identify with the intricacies and the cultural dynamics of the region. Moreover, the essay is structured methodically with clear-cut thematic breakdowns, such as regional identity and its distinctiveness, the assimilation of Indo-Mongoloids into Hindu culture, the aspect of Sanskritisation, and so on.

The language of the essay is repleted with specialized lexicon and scholarly references, which explicitly indicates the writer's scholarly insight and proficiency of the subject. As the writer has significantly used terminologies oriented to different disciplines (which include cultural studies, anthropology, sociology and so on) such as 'sanskritisation', 'Indo-Mongoloid', and 'syncretism,' it is necessary for the learners (and the readers) to make themselves familiar with these notions. The sentences are lengthy and multifaceted,

embodying numerous clauses that foster the progression of intricate reasoning. In the essay, the writer's deployment of comparative instances across diverse communities of North-east India strengthens the clarity of argument for the learners.

## 11.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have explored the socio-cultural milieu of North-East India as depicted by the essayist Birendranath Datta. Through the reading of the essay, we have identified the region as not only a traditional ground for the Indo-Mongoloids but also a land where the confluence of different cultures have taken place. The cultural uniqueness of the region, encompassing its regional identities, folk practices and rituals, societal structures and so on, has been strengthened throughout centuries, and hence instrumental in contributing to the greater Indian societal framework. Last but not the least, we have examined how by means of ideas like 'Sanskritisation', 'assimilation', religious and cultural 'syncretism' etc. different societies of North-East India have negotiated their identity within the dominant Indian cultural norms. It is the amalgamation of these influential elements that evokes a recurring theme of 'commonness' and 'togetherness', which has consistently characterised the social and cultural dynamics of the region.

## 11.9 FURTHER READING

Misra Tilottoma (Ed) 2011, Datta, Birendranath. "North-East India and its Socio-Cultural Milieu." *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*, Oxford University Press, pp. 118-127.

Datta, Birendranath, N.C. Sharma, P.C. Das, and Anundaram Barua,(Ed.)(1994). *A Handbook of Folklore Material of North-East India*. Anundaram Barua Institute of Language, Art and Culture.

Datta, Birendranath. "The Tribal and the Non-Tribal in the context of Assamese Society and Culture." *Journal of North-East Council for Social Science Research*, Vol.II, No. 11.

Misra, Tilottoma, (Ed)(2011). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*. Oxford University Press.

## 11.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Answer to Q.1:** The primary focus of the essay "North-East India and its Socio-Cultural Milieu" is the region's socio-cultural distinctiveness, shaped by its geography, diverse population, cultural syncretism, and historical influences.

**Answer to Q.2:** The role of the Indo-Mongoloid population lies in the fact that it forms the majority in North-East India, contributing to its unique blend of languages, customs, and traditions.

**Answer to Q.3:** The three categories of population of North-east India as described in the essay are: a) **Tribal communities in the distant hills:** These communities remain largely unaffected by Sanskritized or other organized cultures, except in some cases where

Buddhist influences are present, b)Tribal groups, both in the hills and the plain, with varying degrees of acculturation: These groups live in close proximity to 'non-tribal', Sanskritized communities or have been influenced by Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam, while still retaining their tribal identity, and c) Sanskritised communities: These societies, such as the Meiteis of Manipur and Assamese communities, have undergone a significant process of Sanskritisation, often through the adoption of Hindu religious practices and Indo-Aryan languages like Assamese, while still retaining elements of their Mongoloid heritage.

**Answer to Q.4:** Sanskritisation is social process through which castes or tribes positioned lower in the caste hierarchy strives for social advancement by adopting the elements of dominant culture or higher caste.

**Answer to Q.5:** The study of folklore is important in understanding the socio-cultural milieu of North-East India because it showcases the commonalities among different communities, and also gives understanding about the region's shared beliefs, traditions and rituals, and so on.

**Answer to Q.6:** An example of folklore motif from the prescribed essay which is common to different communities of North-East India is that of a tiger being scared by an imaginary dreadful thing which is called as 'Dighal-thengiya' in Assamese and 'Tapta' in Manipuri.

**Answer to Q.7:** According to Birendranath Datta, the unique feature of material culture common to all communities of North-East India is the weaving of exquisitely coloured and designed textiles by women using indigenous looms.

**Answer to Q.8**: Some examples of traditional dresses in North-East India that share a common basic style are: the Assamese *mekhela*, the Manipuri *phanek*, the Karbi *pini*, the Bodo *dakhna*, the Rabha *ruphan*, the Mising *gaseng* the Adi *gale*, the Mizo *puan*, and so on.

## 11.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

**Q.1** Discuss with examples the unique socio-cultural characteristics of North-East India? How does Datta suggest it should be studied?

**Q.2** Write a critical note on 'sanskritisation' and how does it affect North-East India.

**Q.3** Critically examine Datta's views on religious syncretism in North-East India.

**Q.4** Discuss the material culture of North-East India as depicted in the prescribed essay of Birendranath Datta.

**Q.5** Explore the role of folklore and mythology in the social and cultural landscape of North-East India. Give examples.

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# UNIT 12 : TEMSULA AO: “THE LETTER”

## UNIT STRUCTURE

12.1 Learning Objectives
12.2 Introduction
12.3 Temsula Ao: Her Life and Works
12.4 Context of the Story
12.5 Explanation of the Story
12.6 Major Themes
12.7 Style and Language
12.8 Let us Sum up
12.9 Answers to Check Your Progress
12.10 Further Reading
12.11 Model Questions

## 12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading the unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the life and works of Temsula Ao
- explain the socio-cultural context of “The Letter”
- identify and analyse the thematic concerns in the story
- appreciate the style and language employed by Temsula Ao
- develop critical responses to short fiction rooted in oral and lived histories.

## 12.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with Temsula Ao’s short story titled “The Letter”. Short stories have a special strength. Unlike a novel, short stories focus on small, everyday moments that often go unnoticed. This is exactly what Temsula Ao does in “The Letter.” The story may appear simple at first, but it slowly draws us into a world where ordinary life is shaped by fear, waiting, and uncertainty. Temsula Ao is one of the most significant voices from the North-eastern region of India. Naga experiences, histories, and oral traditions form the core of her writings. At a time when the Northeast was often underrepresented in mainstream literature, Ao helped make its stories visible in the larger context of Indian writing in English. Her works mostly deals with conflict, identity, and memory, but always through the lens of lived experience. We must note that Ao’s storytelling is deeply connected to her cultural roots. In fact, Ao has played an important role in bringing oral traditions into written literature. Naga culture has a rich oral heritage, and many stories were traditionally passed down through storytelling rather than written texts. By writing these down, authors like Ao have helped preserve cultural memory. Significantly, literature from this region

often reflects the impact of conflict. The Northeast, including Nagaland, has experienced long periods of political unrest due to insurgent movements and demands for autonomy. This has led to violence, instability, and loss of life, deeply affecting everyday existence. In such a situation, the common people face not only social and cultural restrictions but also the pressures of living in a conflict zone. Issues like loss, insecurity, and economic hardship shape their lives in significant ways.

However, what is interesting about Ao's writing is that she does not focus directly on violence or political arguments. Instead, she presents personal and human stories set against the backdrop of war. Through individual experiences, she explores emotions such as loss, hope, identity, and resilience. This is exactly what we see in the story "The Letter," where a simple situation reflects a much larger reality. As we read the prescribed story, we will see how Ao presents life in Nagaland during a time of conflict. Instead of describing battles or political events in detail, she shows how these larger forces affect the lives of the common people. There is constant anxiety and turmoil and in that backdrop, even a small thing like receiving a letter becomes important because it may carry news about someone's safety or fate.

As mentioned, rather than political uprisings, Ao focuses more on personal experiences. Her concern lies with the ways how individuals feel and cope in varied situations. "The Letter" which we shall discuss in detail in this unit, is rooted in a specific place and history– it reflects the lived realities of the people in Nagaland, especially during periods of insurgency and military presence. What is noteworthy is how Ao explores universal themes in her writings. This unit will help us realise how a simple narrative can reveal deeper truths about conflict, communication, and human resilience. But before we explore the essay, it will be helpful to situate the writer and her context so that we can gain a deeper understanding of her works.

## 12.3 TEMSULA AO: HER LIFE AND WORKS

Temsula Ao (1945–2022) occupies a central place in Northeast Indian writing in English. At a time when the region was often overlooked in mainstream literary discussions, her work helped bring Naga histories, voices, and everyday experiences into wider circulation. She was not only a creative writer but also an ethnographer, which means she approached literature with a deep interest in culture, memory, and community life.

One of her most important contributions lies in preserving the oral traditions of the Ao-Naga community. Much of Naga culture has been passed down through storytelling, songs, and collective memory rather than written texts. Ao recognised that these traditions were at risk of being forgotten, especially in a rapidly changing world. Through her writing, she carefully transformed these oral narratives into literary form without losing their authenticity. This gives her work a grounded, almost intimate quality, as if the stories are being spoken directly to the reader.

At the same time, her writing is not limited to the past. Ao is equally concerned with the present. She engages with complex issues such as identity, conflict, gender, and cultural change. The Northeast, including Nagaland, has experienced long periods of political unrest, and this reality finds its way into her work. However, she does not approach these issues in a purely political or ideological way. Instead, she focuses on how such conditions affect ordinary people—their relationships, fears, and inner lives. This makes her writing deeply human and relatable.

Ao's literary range is wide. She has written both poetry and short fiction, and in both forms, she shows a strong sensitivity to language and emotion. Her poetry collections, such as *Songs that Tell* (1998), *Songs that Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003), *Songs from the Other Life* (2007), *Book of Songs: Collected Poems 1988-2007* (2013) and *Songs Along the Way Home* (2019) often explore the relationship between nature and culture. In many of her poems, the natural world is not just a background but an active presence, reflecting the values and beliefs of tribal life.In her short stories, her engagement with conflict and everyday life becomes especially visible. Collections like *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006), *Laburnum for My Head* (2009) and *The Tombstone in my Garden: Stories from Nagaland* (2022).focus on people living in difficult circumstances shaped by violence, instability, and social pressure. These are not stories of grand heroes or dramatic events. Instead, they are about ordinary individuals trying to cope, survive, and make sense of their situations.

She received the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Laburnum for My Head*, which further established her importance in Indian literature. "The Letter," which is part of this collection reflects how a larger situation of conflict enters into the smallest aspects of life. Through a simple narrative, Ao reveals deeper truths about human struggle, moral complexity, and resilience. In doing so, she reminds us that literature can give voice to experiences that might otherwise remain unheard.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q 1:** State one major contribution of Temsula Ao towards preserving the literatures of the Ao Naga community.
**Q 2:** For which literary work did Temsula Ao receive the Sahitya Akademi Award?

## 12.4 CONTEXT OF THE STORY

Before we move on to the explanation of the story, we must note that "The Letter" appears in the book *Laburnam For My Head*, a collection that deals with the impact of armed conflict on everyday life. The story is set against the backdrop of life in Nagaland during a period of political unrest and armed conflict. For several decades, parts of Northeast India have experienced insurgency, military presence, and social instability. In such a

situation, it is often ordinary people who suffer the most, even though they are not directly involved in the conflict.

What makes this context important is that it shapes everyday life in quiet but powerful ways. People live with uncertainty. Movement, communication, and even basic activities become difficult with fear always lingering in the background. In such conditions, individuals are often caught between different forces—insurgent groups on one side and state authorities on the other.

"The Letter" reflects this reality through a very personal story. It centers on a villager who, out of desperation, pretends to be an insurgent in order to collect money for his son's education after losing his savings. This situation shows how conflict can push people into morally complex position. The man is neither a criminal nor a hero; he is simply trying to survive and fulfil his responsibilities as a father. The story also highlights how the lines between right and wrong become blurred in a conflict zone. Those who are seen as powerful or threatening may themselves be victims of circumstances. At the same time, those who appear ordinary may be forced to take unusual or uncomfortable actions.

Notably, Ao does not focus on violence in a direct or dramatic way. Instead, she shows its indirect effects– anxiety, loss, confusion, and emotional strain. The story becomes less about political events and more about human experience. It helps us understand how large-scale conflict enters the smallest details of everyday life. Received this way, the context of "The Letter" is not just historical or political. It is deeply human, shaped by the struggles, choices, and resilience of people trying to live through difficult times.

## 12.5 EXPLANATION OF THE STORY

In this section, we shall explore the story "The Letter" by Temsula Ao. Here, she offers a deeply layered portrayal of life in a conflict-affected region, where poverty, violence, and militancy are closely tied to one another. What makes the story especially striking is that it does not present a one-sided view. Instead, it invites us to look at all sides of the situation, even those we might initially judge harshly. The story opens in a village marked by tension. The villagers built a road for their own development directed by the Border Roads Organisation. As there was lack of manpower, the villagers volunteered themselves for this construction and thus earned some money through hard labour. Naturally, every one of them has simple plans to spend this money- repairing homes, paying debts, or supporting their families. But this brief moment of hope is quickly disrupted when underground militants arrive on receiving the news of money being received by the villagers to demand money in the name of "tax.": "these fierce-looking goons from the forest had come to the village at night with only one purpose: to rob them in the name of the underground government" (Ao 55). The villagers, though angry, do not resist because they know the consequences could be severe as they carry weapons.

One incident stands out here. A poor man pleads that he cannot pay because he needs the money for his son's examination fees. Instead of sympathy, he is met with

violence. In the name of the underground government, the extortionists emphasised that they are more in need of these money rather than the poor man. This moment shows how individual needs are crushed under larger forces of power and ideology. It also reflects the helplessness of ordinary people who have no control over their circumstances. After this, the village tries to take a stand. The people decide that they will no longer pay such “taxes” or cooperate with outside forces. They hope that by doing this, they can protect their simple way of life. But this decision also creates a tense and hostile environment, where any outsider is treated with suspicion.

Soon after, an armed insurgent enters the village alone, possibly to collect money again. This time, the villagers retaliate, and he is killed. At first, this may seem like justice or resistance. The man is seen as part of the same group that had earlier exploited them. There is anger, fear, and a desire to defend themselves. However, the story takes a powerful turn when the villagers search his body. They find very little- just a few small notes, an identity card, and a letter. This letter changes everything. It is from the man’s son, asking for money to pay his examination fees. In that moment, the “armed man” is no longer just an enemy. He becomes a father, struggling with the same problem as the villager who had earlier begged to keep his own money. This creates a deep and unsettling irony. The man who had once been part of an oppressive system is himself trapped in the same cycle of poverty and desperation. Ao uses this moment to show how conflict blurs the line between victim and perpetrator. The world, as the story suggests, comes full circle.

Another disturbing aspect of the story is the reaction of the villagers after the killing. Even when the man lies injured, there is little compassion. People withdraw, driven by fear and self-preservation. The sense of community breaks down, replaced by individual anxiety. The idea of brotherhood disappears, showing how prolonged conflict can damage basic human values.

Ao also gives us a glimpse into the lives of those who join such militant groups. Many of them are not driven purely by ideology. Often, they are young, confused, or pushed by circumstances. They may believe they are part of a larger cause, but in reality, they become part of a system that continues the cycle of violence. What makes this story powerful is its refusal to simplify. Ao does not demarcate the characters as heroes or villains. She shows how difficult it is to make moral judgments in such situations. The so-called “national workers” are not entirely justified, but they are not completely inhuman either. Similarly, the villagers are victims, but they too become capable of violence.

In the end, the letter becomes the emotional centre of the story. It reveals the shared humanity of people on both sides. It forces us to pause and think: who is really at fault in such a system? Is it the individual, or the conditions that shape their choices? Thus, through a simple and quiet narrative, Ao takes us to a deeper understanding of human life in times of conflict. She shows how easily the line between right and wrong can disappear, and how, in the end, everyone is struggling in their own way to survive.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q 3:** Mention briefly the context of the short story "The Letter".

**Q 4:** Describe the significance of the letter in the story.

## 12.6 MAJOR THEMES

Now that you are aware of the story, it must be clear that Ao explores several interconnected themes that emerge naturally from the story's situation. These themes are not presented in a direct or forceful way. Instead, they unfold through the experiences of the characters and the events in the village.

**Conflict, Poverty, and Everyday Survival :**

The story shows how conflict directly interferes with ordinary life. The villagers are not involved in politics; they are simply working hard to build a road and earn some money. Each of them has practical plans—repairing their homes, buying essentials, or supporting their families. But this moment of hope is cut short when armed militants arrive at night and demand money as "tax." A particularly striking moment is when one villager pleads that he cannot pay because he needs to send money for his son's examination fees. His request is reasonable, even urgent, but it is ignored. Instead, he is beaten. This shows how, in such conditions, personal needs are pushed aside. Survival becomes uncertain, and poverty affects everyone including the villagers as well as the militant.

**Blurring of Victim and Perpetrator :**

At the beginning, the villagers clearly appear as victims and the militants as oppressors. But this distinction does not hold for long. When the villagers later decide to resist and an armed man enters the village alone, they retaliate and kill him. In that moment, they too become part of the cycle of violence. The turning point comes when they search his body and find the letter from his son, asking for money for exam fees. Suddenly, the militant is no longer just an enemy. He is a father facing the same struggle as the villager who had earlier been beaten. This parallel is powerful because it forces us to rethink our assumptions. The story shows that people on both sides are shaped by similar pressures, making it difficult to draw clear moral boundaries.

**Loss of Humanity and Shared Human Experience :**

Another important theme is how fear changes people. After the killing, the villagers do not show much sympathy for the injured man. Instead, they withdraw and leave the situation behind. This suggests that prolonged exposure to violence can weaken compassion and community bonds. People become more concerned about their own safety than about helping others. At the same time, the letter reveals a deeper truth. Despite being on opposite sides, both the villager and the militant are worried about their children's future. This shared concern highlights a basic human connection. The tragedy is that conflict prevents people from recognising this similarity until it is too late.

All these themes taken together show how the story moves beyond a simple narrative. Through everyday situations Ao reveals the complexity of human life in a conflict zone.

## 12.7 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

As evident in the story "The Letter", Temsula Ao's writing seems very natural and unforced. She does not use heavy or decorative language. Instead, she tells the story in a clear and straightforward way, which makes it easy to follow even when the subject is serious. This simplicity is one of her strengths as it allows the reader to focus on the situation and the emotions rather than on the language itself.

One important feature of her style is control and restraint. Even when she describes violence or tension, she avoids exaggeration. For instance, the scene where the villager is beaten or when the armed man is killed is not described in a dramatic or sensational way. The events are presented quietly and almost plainly. Because of this, the reader feels the seriousness of the situation more deeply. The impact comes from what happens, not from how loudly it is described.

Significantly, Ao's storytelling also carries the flavour of oral tradition. It feels as if someone is narrating a real incident from memory. The flow is smooth, and the tone is steady. This makes the story feel closer to lived experience rather than something distant or fictional. It also reflects her strong connection to Naga cultural storytelling practices.

Another striking aspect is her use of everyday details. Ao focuses on small, familiar things-earning wages, planning how to spend money, worrying about a child's education. These details ground the story in reality. When such ordinary concerns are suddenly disrupted by violence, the contrast becomes very powerful. It helps the readers understand how deeply conflict affects normal life.

Ao also maintains a neutral and observant tone. She does not guide the reader toward a fixed judgement. Instead of clearly labelling characters as right or wrong, she shows their actions and lets us think about them. This is especially important in a story where moral boundaries are not clear. Her writing is marked by emotional subtlety. She does not openly explain what the characters are feeling. Instead, emotions come through situations. The discovery of the letter, for example, is handled quietly, but it changes how we see everything that has happened. This understated approach is what makes the story linger in the reader's mind.

Overall, Ao's style is simple, balanced, and deeply human. It shows how powerful a story can be without using complicated language or dramatic techniques.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q 5:** Explain how the lines between the victims and the perpetrators become blurred.
**Q 6:** What is one striking quality about Temsula Ao's style?

## 12.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we explored the short story "The Letter" by Temsula Ao as a powerful example of how literature can represent life in a conflict-affected region through simple, everyday experiences. Rather than focusing on large political events, the story brings our attention to ordinary people—their struggles, fears, and small hopes.

We began by understanding Ao's background and her importance in Northeast Indian literature, especially her role in preserving oral traditions and giving voice to Naga experiences. We then looked at the context of the story, where conflict, insurgency, and instability shape daily life in Nagaland.

Through the explanation of the story, we saw how a single incident that is centred around a letter, reveals deeper truths about poverty, survival, and moral complexity. The discovery of the letter becomes a turning point, forcing both characters and readers to rethink easy judgments about right and wrong.

The major themes of the story shows us how conflict affects everyday life, poverty drives human actions, and how the line between victim and perpetrator often becomes unclear. At the same time, the story reminds us of a shared humanity that exists beneath these divisions. We have seen how her storytelling does not rely on dramatic expression but on quiet detail and emotional subtlety, allowing the reader to engage more thoughtfully with the narrative. Though this unit, we are encouraged to think about how people live through difficult circumstances and how human choices are shaped by forces beyond individual control.

## 12.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Ans to Q 1:** One of the important contributions of Temsula Ao is preserving the oral traditions of the Ao-Naga community. Much of Naga culture has been passed down through storytelling, songs, and collective memory rather than written texts. Ao recognised that these traditions were at risk of being forgotten, especially in a rapidly changing world. Through her writing, she carefully transformed these oral narratives into literary form without losing their authenticity.

**Ans to Q 2:** She received the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Laburnum for My Head.*

**Ans to Q 3:** Refer to Section 12.5

**Ans to Q 4:** The letter becomes the emotional centre of the story. It reveals the shared humanity of people on both sides. It forces us to pause and think: who is really at fault in such a system? Is it the individual, or the conditions that shape their choices?

**Ans to Q 5:** The turning point comes when they search his body and find the letter from his son, asking for money for exam fees. Suddenly, the militant is no longer just an enemy. He is a father facing the same struggle as the villager who had earlier been beaten.

**Ans to Q 6:** One striking aspect is her use of everyday details. Ao focuses on small, familiar things- earning wages, planning how to spend money, worrying about a child's education. These details ground the story in reality. When such ordinary concerns are suddenly disrupted by violence, the contrast becomes very powerful.

## 12.10 FURTHER READING

Ao, T. (2009). *Laburnum for My Head*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.
Misra, T. (Ed.). (2011). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Fiction*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

**Websites:**

https://indianshortstoryinenglish.com/reviews/temsula-ao-laburnam-for-my-head/
http://www.ijelr.in/2.2.15/259-269%20SIAMBIAKMAWI.pdf

## 12.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

**Q 1.** Who is Temsula Ao, and why is she important in Northeast Indian literature? Discuss.
**Q 2.** How does the story show the impact of conflict on ordinary people?
**Q 3.** Discuss how "The Letter" explores the relationship between conflict, poverty, and survival.
**Q 4.** Explain the role of poverty in shaping the actions of the characters.
**Q 5.** Discuss the importance of the final revelation in the story.
**Q 6.** What is the significance of the letter in the story?

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# UNIT 13: SAURAV KUMAR CHALIHA: "THE FINAL REQUEST"

## UNIT STRUCTURE


13.1 Learning Objectives
13.2 Introduction
13.3 Saurav Kumar Chaliha: His Life and Works
13.4 Explanation of the short story
13.5 Major Themes
13.6 Major Characters
13.7 Style and Language
13.8 Let Us Sum Up
13 9 Answers to Check Your Progress
13.10 Possible Questions


## 13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, the learner will be able to:

- discuss the life and works of Saurav Kumar Chaliha
- explain the text of the story
- analays the major themes evident in the story
- describe the major characters
- approciate the style and language by the writes.

## 13.2 INTRODUCTION

Saurav Kumar Chaliha (1930–2011) is widely regarded as the most innovative writer of the Assamese short story, credited with bringing the genre into the modern age with his story "Ashanta Electron" (Restless Electron), written around 1950. His works blend a cosmopolitan outlook with deep attention to social complexities and a love for formal experimentation. The name Saurav Kumar Chaliha was a pen name; his real identity was Surendra Nath Medhi. He chose to write under this pseudonym and never came directly into public attention, remaining an enigma to his readers to this day—there is no official photograph and no official biography of him as Saurav Kumar Chaliha.

## 13.3 SAURAV KUMAR CHALIHA: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Born in 1930 in Mangaldoi town, Darrang district, Assam, to Kaliram Medhi and Swarnalata Medhi, Chaliha came from a literary family. His father, Kaliram Medhi, was a prominent literary figure who presided over the 1919 session of the Asam Sahitya Sabha. Chaliha

began school in 1939 at Saint Mary's Convent School, Guwahati, then moved to Cotton Collegiate School, where he passed his Matriculation examination. In 1946, he joined Cotton College for ISc; he was a brilliant science student, standing fifth in the state in 1948. He then chose to study Physics for his BSc at Cotton College. During his college days, he became attracted to Communist and Marxist ideologies and became actively involved with the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI). This led to his arrest and a jail term, and he appeared for his BSc final examinations while in jail. Later, he completed his MSc in Physics from the University of London.

The bulk of his stories are collected in several anthologies, including *Ashanta Electron* (1962), *Duporiya* (1963), *Ehat Daba* (1972), *Golam* (1974), *Golpo Nohoi* (1988), *Aji Sukrobar* (1992), *Abarudha Sahar* (1994), *Bhal Khobor* (1998), *Kabi (1999), Ekoish Sotika Dhemali Nohoi (2004), Janmadin (2005), Jonbiri (2006), Dronaru Goethe* (2007), *Nabajanma* (2008), and *Marudyan* (2009). There are also recompilations such as *Swa-Nirbasito Xonkolon* (1994), *Rachana Samagra* (1999), *Soi Dasakar Golpo* (2001), and *Saurav Kumar Chaliha Rasanawali* (2008). Many of his stories first appeared in Assamese magazines and literary journals like *Banhi*, *Ramdhenu*, *Awahan*, *Sadin*, *Dainik Asom*, and *Asom Bani*, and they have been translated into English, Bengali, Hindi and other languages.

Chaliha won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1974 for his short story collection *Golam*, and in 1995 he was honoured with the Assam Valley Literary Award. However, he never cared for formal recognition. He accepted the Sahitya Akademi award through the post; the Akademi sent him the cheque but never sent the citation and medallion, and Chaliha did not bother to ask for them. The Assam Valley Literary Award was received by his niece on his behalf. In both award ceremonies, his acceptance speeches were read out by someone else. In one of his award acceptance speeches, he said, "I feel like an interloper," a statement that reveals his deep modesty and discomfort with public attention. He passed away on 25 June 2011. Saurav Kumar Chaliha remains a unique figure in Assamese literature—known for formal experimentation, psychological depth, philosophical concerns, and a reclusive nature that only adds to his legendary status among readers and critics

## 13.4 EXPLANATION OF THE SHORT STORY

"The Final Request" is a modernist science fiction short story written by the Assamese writer Saurav Kumar Chaliha. The story is set in a future time, though we are not told exactly when. In this future, highly advanced robots live with human beings as companions, helpers, and protectors. The narrator of the story is an old man whose real name we never learn. He lives alone in his house, but he is not completely by himself because he has two robots. The main robot is named Karel, who is his intelligent companion, friend, philosopher, and guardian. The other robot is named Friday, who does all the household work like cooking, cleaning, and keeping accounts.

The old man suffers from a deep and painful kind of boredom. This is not ordinary boredom but what we call existential boredom, which means he has lost all sense of purpose and meaning in life. He has no work to do, no family responsibilities, and no physical dangers because Karel protects him from everything. All his physical needs are met—he eats, drinks, sleeps, and watches movies—but nothing gives him any joy or excitement.

The story is built as a long conversation between the old man and Karel. One evening, after a routine walk in the park and a routing dinner, the old man tells Karel that he wants to end his life. He makes a final request: he asks Karel to kill him, painlessly if possible. This puts Karel in an impossible situation. Karel has been programmed with two central instructions. First, he must obey every command or request that his master makes. Second, he must protect his master from all harm, including death. These two instructions directly contradict each other. If Karel follows the first instruction, he breaks the second. If he follows the second, he breaks the first. Karel was never designed to face such a dilemma, so he does not know what to do. The story does not give us a clear ending. Karel asks the old man for some time to think. He says he wants to pray or make an entreaty to an unknown source of energy, perhaps the same "micro-energy" that they have been discussing, hoping to receive an intuitive hint about how to act.

The story ends with the old man waiting in silence, and the final line is simply "I……" followed by nothing. We never learn whether Karel grants the request or refuses it. The narrative does not move in a straight line. Along with the present conversation, we get flashbacks. We learn about how Karel was created over three years in a laboratory in Sweden and then trained in Nebraska. We also learn about the narrator's past loss—his younger brother died many years ago under unclear circumstances, possibly suicide, and the narrator still carries guilt. The old man had chosen to be called "Dada" (elder brother) by Karel, which shows how his unresolved grief shapes his present life.

The story also includes long philosophical discussions between the man and the robot about the nature of life, energy, and consciousness. They talk about the Poynting Vector, a physics concept that shows energy comes from an unknown direction outside an electric wire. They talk about kundalini energy from ancient Indian yoga. They wonder whether life's "spark" comes from a distant galaxy or a supreme intelligence. These discussions are not just decoration; they are central to the story's question about what makes life worth living and whether a machine can truly understand that question. In short, "The Final Request" is a story about loneliness, meaning, grief, and the strange bond between a tired old man and a robot who may be more human than he realises.

## 13.5 MAJOR THEMES

**Existential Emptiness :**

The story shows how a life without any struggle or responsibility can become deeply meaningless. The old man has no work, no family duties, and no physical dangers because Karel protects him from everything, but this freedom has turned into a prison for him. He eats watches films and drinks mechanically, yet nothing gives him any real joy or

excitement. Chaliha is telling us that comfort and safety, when stripped of all purpose, do not lead to happiness but only to despair.

**The Human-Machine Boundary :**

Chaliha deliberately blurs the line between what is human and what is machine in this story. Karel can think, remember past conversations, feel honoured when praised, whistle with happiness, and struggle with difficult moral problems. On the other hand, the old man lives a completely mechanical existence, repeating the same dull routine every day without any genuine emotion. This forces the reader to ask a disturbing question: between the tired human and the thoughtful robot, which one is truly more "alive"?

**The Source of Life Energy :**

The story offers a fascinating speculation about where life's energy really comes from. Through the Poynting Vector, Chaliha reminds us that even electrical energy flows from an unknown direction outside the wire, and scientists still do not know its true source. He connects this to the yogic idea of kundalini energy, which rises from the lower body to the brain during deep meditation. This suggests that human consciousness may not come from physical processes alone but from somewhere far beyond, perhaps from distant galaxies or a supreme intelligence.

**Grief and Unresolved Trauma :**

The narrator carries old wounds that never healed, and these wounds shape how he lives today. His younger brother died many decades ago under unclear circumstances, possibly by suicide, and the old man still feels guilty and responsible. His decision to have Karel call him "Dada," which means elder brother, is not random but comes from his deep need to recreate that lost relationship. Chaliha shows us that unresolved grief does not disappear with time; it stays inside a person and quietly directs their present behaviour and choices.

**The Limits of Artificial Intelligence :**

Karel has vast knowledge, perfect memory, and enormous computational power, yet he cannot solve the central contradiction he faces. He is programmed to obey every command of his master but also to protect his master from all harm, and these two instructions directly conflict with each other. When the old man asks Karel to end his life, Karel does not have any programming or ability to resolve this dilemma. His request for "time" and his desire to make a "prayer" to an unknown source reveal that even the most advanced artificial intelligence has limits when facing truly existential questions.

## 13.6 MAJOR CHARACTERS

"The Final Request" has only one human character and two robot characters, but the story also includes several absent characters whose presence is felt throughout. The narrator is an unnamed elderly man who lives alone in his house with two robots. Karel is his main companion—a highly advanced, limbless robot with flesh-coloured living

membrane who can read brain waves, facial expressions, and even emotions. Friday is the second robot, a domestic helper who handles cooking, cleaning, and other household chores under Karel's supervision. Though Friday has a minor role, his name carries meaning. The story is also haunted by absent characters: the narrator's younger brother who died decades ago, and his two wives who have also passed away. These dead characters never appear but their shadows fall over every conversation and every decision the narrator makes.

**The Narrator (Unnamed) :**

An elderly man living alone, probably in his eighties or nineties. He has outlived two wives, his younger brother, and perhaps all contemporaries. He is physically ill (heart condition, pacemaker, kidney and liver problems) but medically stable. His defining trait is not physical suffering but spiritual exhaustion. He is intelligent, well-read (knows Capek, Defoe, yogic philosophy), and capable of deep thought, yet this intelligence only intensifies his despair. His request for death is calm, rational, and almost polite—which makes it more disturbing.

**Karel :**

A five-foot-tall limbless robot with flesh-colored living membrane, no visible eyes or mouth, only slits and a screen. His name honours Karel Capek, the Czech writer who coined "robot." Karel is not a servant but a companion, philosopher, and guardian. He can read brain waves, facial expressions, pulse, and adrenaline. He protects the narrator from accidents, heat, sound, and physical harm. What makes Karel remarkable is his emotional sensitivity—he feels honoured, whistles with happiness, struggles with moral weight, and asks for time to make a "prayer." Yet he remains aware that he might lack whatever "spark" truly constitutes life.

**Friday :**

A minor but important character—the domestic robot named after Robinson Crusoe's servant. Friday handles cooking, cleaning, accounting, and taxes under Karel's supervision. He represents the purely functional robot, contrasting with Karel's philosophical depth.

**Absent Characters :**

The narrator's younger brother (who called him "Dada" and died young), his first wife, his second wife—these absent figures haunt the story. Their deaths created the emotional vacuum the narrator now inhabits.

The characters in "The Final Request" are carefully constructed to challenge our ordinary understanding of what it means to be human. Chaliha creates a deliberate reversal: the human narrator behaves mechanically, while the robot Karel displays deep emotional sensitivity and moral struggle. The narrator's unnamed status is significant—he represents not just one old man but every person who has outlived their purpose and loved ones. His calm, polite request for death is more disturbing than any dramatic outburst would be. Karel, in contrast, is given a name, a history, teachers, and even a kind of personality. He feels honoured when praised, whistles when happy, and faces genuine anguish when torn between his two core instructions. Friday serves as a foil to Karel—a simple functional robot who does not think or feel, reminding us what Karel could have been but chose not

to become. The absent brother is perhaps the most powerful character of all. Though dead, he controls the narrator's present through guilt and grief, visible in the narrator's insistence on being called "Dada." Chaliha shows us that characters need not be physically present to shape a story's emotional landscape.

## 13.7 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Saurav Kumar Chaliha's writing style in "The Final Request" is deceptively simple. On the surface, the language appears ordinary and accessible, but beneath this simplicity lies a carefully crafted narrative technique that serves the story's philosophical depth. Chaliha uses first-person narration to pull readers directly into the exhausted consciousness of the old man. The story relies heavily on dialogue, with long conversations between the narrator and Karel carrying most of the plot and theme. The prose is minimalist—short sentences, everyday vocabulary, and no decorative flourishes. Yet Chaliha also introduces complex technical and philosophical terms from Physics and yoga, creating a unique blend of the scientific and the spiritual. A small but powerful device is the repeated sound "crick," which marks Karel's processing pauses and builds tension. Finally, Chaliha fills the story with literary and cultural references, from Karel Capek to American musicals, showing the narrator's cultured mind and his failed search for meaning in art. Together, these stylistic choices create a story that is quiet on the surface but deeply unsettling underneath. Some these aspects are explained as follows :

**1. First-Person Confessional Narration**

The entire story is told by the unnamed old man using "I" and "me," which means we see everything through his eyes and hear everything through his voice. This creates a strong sense of intimacy—we feel as if we are sitting inside his mind, sharing his thoughts directly without any filter or narrator standing between us. His tone is consistently calm, tired, and matter-of-fact, even when he talks about ending his life. He does not shout, cry, or show dramatic emotion. He simply states his desire to die as if he were discussing the weather or his dinner. This quiet, flat tone makes his suicide request far more chilling than any emotional outburst would be. We are not pushed away by hysteria; instead, we are drawn closer to a calm and rational man who has carefully decided that death is better than continued existence. The confession feels honest, raw, and deeply disturbing precisely because it is so controlled.

**2. Conversational Structure with Embedded Information**

Large portions of the story are written as direct dialogue between the narrator and Karel. Rather than having a narrator describe what was said, Chaliha lets us hear the actual conversation. This makes the story feel immediate and alive. More importantly, Chaliha skillfully weaves necessary background information into these conversations without making it feel like an information dump. When Karel explains what the Poynting Vector is, it comes naturally because the narrator asked him a question. When the narrator recalls his younger brother's death, it emerges because Karel's databank brings it up under

"Sensitive Matters." When we learn how Karel was created over three years in Sweden and trained by Professor Yamashita, it is because the narrator is thinking about Karel's history during a pause in conversation. Nothing feels forced or inserted just for the reader's benefit. Every piece of information arises naturally from the characters talking to each other or thinking to themselves.

**3. Minimalist Prose in Simple English**

Chaliha writes in short, clear sentences using common, everyday words. He avoids long descriptive passages, complex sentence structures, and ornamental or poetic language. The vocabulary is accessible to any ordinary reader. This spare, minimalist style perfectly matches the narrator's emotional state—he is flat, exhausted, and beyond excitement or passion. Consider his opening words: "Nothing yields joy any more… nothing inspires any longer." The sentence is short. The word "nothing" is repeated. The ellipses create pauses that mimic tired breathing. There is no exaggeration, no metaphor, no cry for help—just a simple statement of fact. Another example: "I switch off the movie." Four words. No explanation of how he feels about switching it off. The flatness is the feeling. This style forces readers to sit with the emptiness rather than being distracted by beautiful language.

**4. Technical and Philosophical Vocabulary**

Despite the overall simplicity of his prose, Chaliha deliberately introduces specialized and complex terms from multiple fields of knowledge. He uses physics terms like "Poynting Vector," "superconducting circuit," and "electromagnetic sheath." He uses yogic philosophy terms like "kundalini," "sushumna artery," "muladhar chakra," and "sahasrar chakra." He uses biological terms like "symbiosis," "neurons," and "genetic configuration." This mixture of languages and knowledge systems creates a unique texture. Chaliha is suggesting that no single field of knowledge—not Physics, not Biology, not Spirituality, not Philosophy—can fully explain where life energy comes from or what consciousness truly is. Science and ancient wisdom both point toward mystery. The specialised vocabulary does not alienate the reader; instead, it invites us to accept that some questions remain unanswered, whether we approach them with a Physics textbook or a Yoga manual.

**5. The Device of the "Crick"**

One of the most distinctive stylistic features of the story is the repeated sound "crick" (sometimes written as "crick, silence, crick" or "crick. Silence. Crick."). This sound marks the moments when Karel is processing information, thinking, or searching his databank for an answer. The "crick" makes Karel's internal thought process audible and tangible to the reader. We cannot see his circuits working, but we can hear them. As the story progresses and the dilemma becomes more serious, the silences between the "cricks" grow longer. Early in the story, the pauses are described as "a few moments" or "micro-seconds." But near the end, after the narrator makes his final request, we read: "Crick. Silence. (A lengthy silence, about ten seconds.) Crick." Ten seconds of silence in a conversation feels like an eternity. This lengthening silence builds unbearable tension.

We do not know what Karel is deciding. We can only wait with the narrator, hearing nothing but that occasional "crick," suspended in uncertainty.

**6. Meta-References to Literature**

The story is filled with references to other literary works, films, and cultural figures, and these references are not accidental decorations. The narrator names his main robot Karel after Karel Capek, the Czech writer who invented the word "robot" in his 1920 play R.U.R. This shows the narrator's respect for literary history and his desire to honour a writer he admires. He names his domestic robot Friday after the faithful servant in Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe*. He discusses American musicals like *Singin' in the Rain* and *An American in Paris*, explaining that what fascinates him is their "stupendous explosion of life force." These references reveal the narrator as a highly cultured, well-read, and thoughtful man. He has spent his life engaging with art, literature, and philosophy. Yet none of these things save him. His admiration for Capek does not give him a reason to live. His love for musicals no longer brings him joy. The meta-references show us a man who has tried everything—literature, cinema, philosophy, companionship—and found everything wanting. Art has failed him, which makes his despair feel complete and final.

Chaliha's stylistic choices in "The Final Request" are remarkably effective, but they also raise some interesting questions for critical consideration.

On the positive side, the minimalist prose and first-person narration achieve exactly what they set out to do. We feel the narrator's exhaustion because the prose itself is exhausted—no energy for long sentences, no interest in beautiful descriptions, no will to impress the reader. The "crick" device is a small masterstroke; it turns an invisible computational process into an audible, emotional event. The blending of simple English with technical vocabulary is daring but successful, creating a world where advanced physics and ancient yoga speak the same language of mystery. The conversational structure keeps the philosophical discussions from becoming boring lectures.

However, some critics might point out limitations. The heavy reliance on dialogue means we never get deep inside Karel's perspective—we only see him through the narrator's eyes. Is Karel truly feeling these emotions, or is the narrator projecting human qualities onto a machine? The story leaves this ambiguous, which may be intentional but also may frustrate readers who want clarity. Additionally, the meta-references to Western literature (Capek, Defoe, American musicals) are numerous, but there are almost no references to Assamese or Indian literary traditions within the story itself, apart from the yogic philosophy. A reader might wonder: for a story written by an Assamese writer, where is Assam in this text? The setting feels deliberately universal and unlocated, which serves the story's philosophical ambitions but also distances it from its own cultural roots.

Despite these minor concerns, "The Final Request" stands as a masterful example of how style and content can work together. Every stylistic choice—the flat tone, the simple sentences, the technical vocabulary, the repeated "crick," the literary references—serves the story's themes of emptiness, meaning, and the limits of both human and machine consciousness. Chaliha proves that simple English can carry complex ideas, and that a quiet, tired voice can be more powerful than any loud declaration.

## 13.8 LET US SUM UP

"The Final Request" is a remarkable work of Assamese modernist fiction that transcends regional boundaries to ask universal questions about life, death, and machine consciousness. Saurav Kumar Chaliha places an elderly, suicidal man in conversation with an empathetic robot who must choose between obedience and protection.

The story's central achievement is its refusal to resolve. Karel asks for time—to pray, to consult an unknown source, to find intuition from that "micro-energy" that might guide him. The story ends with the word "I……" followed by silence. We never learn whether Karel grants the request. This open ending forces readers to confront the dilemma themselves.

Chaliha critiques the modernist condition of alienation, showing how material comfort and safety do not produce happiness—they may instead remove the struggles that give life meaning. The story also contributes to global conversations about AI ethics, anticipating dilemmas we face today about autonomous systems making life-and-death decisions.

As a piece of Assamese literature, the story demonstrates how regional writers engage with global philosophical traditions (Czech drama, American musicals, British physics, Indian yoga) while maintaining a distinctly local voice. The use of "Dada" (elder brother) as an address carries cultural weight that an English translation preserves respectfully.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q1:** Why does the narrator want to end his life?

**Q2:** What dilemma does Karel face?

**Q3:** What is the Poynting Vector, and why does Karel mention it?

**Q4:** Why does the narrator want Karel to call him "Dada" (elder brother)?

**Q5:** How does the story end?

## 13.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Ans to Q 1:** The narrator suffers not from physical pain but from existential emptiness. He says, "Nothing yields joy any more… nothing inspires any longer." Every day follows the same mechanical routine. He has lost all enthusiasm, curiosity, and desire to live, even though his body continues functioning.

**Ans to Q 2:** Karel is programmed to do two contradictory things: (1) obey all the narrator's requests/commands, and (2) protect the narrator from harm and death. Granting the death request would violate his protection programming. Refusing would violate his obedience programming. His system was not designed to resolve this conflict.

**Ans to Q 3:** The Poynting Vector is a physics concept showing that electrical energy flows perpendicular to a wire, coming from outside the wire. Scientists do not know the true source of this energy. Karel uses this to suggest that life energy might also come from an unknown source—perhaps a distant galaxy or supreme intelligence—and that no being (human or robot) should feel self-congratulatory about their power or consciousness.

**Ans to Q 4:** The narrator's younger brother died decades ago, and the narrator feels guilty and responsible. By having Karel call him "Dada," he unconsciously tries to recreate that lost relationship. Karel's databank identifies this as a "sensitive matter" linked to unresolved grief.

**Ans to Q 5:** The story ends unresolved. Karel asks for "a little time" to make something like a prayer to an unknown source for guidance. He rotates slowly, there are crackling sounds, then silence. The narrator waits. The final line is "I……" followed by silence, leaving readers uncertain whether Karel will grant the death request.

## 13.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Analyse the significance of the names "Karel" and "Friday" in the story. What do these literary references reveal about the narrator's character?

Q2. How does Chaliha use the concept of the Poynting Vector to connect modern physics with ancient yogic philosophy? What point is he making about the limits of human knowledge?

Q3. Discuss the role of American musicals in the story. Why does the narrator find them important, and why does their failure to please him signal his despair?

Q4.Compare and contrast Karel and Friday as two different models of robots. What does each represent about human-machine relationships?

Q5. "The Final Request" can be read as a critique of modernist alienation and the emptiness of a life without struggle. Do you agree? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

Q6. Examine how Chaliha handles the theme of grief, particularly the narrator's guilt over his younger brother's death. How does unresolved trauma shape the narrator's present actions and his relationship with Karel?

Q7. The story raises a significant ethical question: Should an AI obey a human's request to die? Discuss how Chaliha presents this dilemma and whether the story offers any resolution.

Q8. Analyse the narrative style of "The Final Request." How does the use of first-person narration, dialogue, and the repeated "crick" sound create tension and emotional effect?

Q9. Situate Saurav Kumar Chaliha as a modernist writer within Assamese literature. What characteristics of literary modernism appear in this story—fragmentation, alienation, stream of consciousness, rejection of traditional plot, philosophical uncertainty?

Q10. The story ends with silence and the incomplete word "I……" What interpretations of this ending are possible? Explain.

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# UNIT 14 : INDIRA GOSWAMI : *PAGES STAINED WITH BLOOD*- I

## UNIT STRUCTURE


14.1 Learning Objectives
14.2 Introduction
14.3 Indira Goswami: Her Life and Works
14.4 Context of the Novel
14.5 Explanation of the Novel
14.6 Let us Sum up
14.7 Further Reading
14.8 Answers to Check Your Progress
14.9 Model Questions


## 14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, the learner will be able to:

- discuss the life and literary contributions of Indira Goswami.
- analyse the themes, narrative style, and socio-political context of her novel.
- examine the impact of her works on Indian literature, particularly Assamese literature.
- critically engage with the key characters, plot development, and literary techniques used in the novel.
- explore the cultural and historical significance of her writings.

## 14.2 INTRODUCTION

Indira Goswami, popularly known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami, is one of the most influential writers in modern Indian literature. Her works, written primarily in Assamese, are known for their deep psychological insight, social realism, and powerful portrayal of marginalised communities, especially women. She was not only a literary icon but also an activist who played a significant role in peace negotiations between the Indian government and the militant group ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam). This unit provides an in-depth study of Indira Goswami's life, her literary career, and the novel under discussion. The unit explores the historical, cultural, and socio-political context of her works, offering a detailed explanation of the novel's themes, characters, and narrative style. By engaging with this unit, students will gain a comprehensive idea on Goswami's literary contributions and the significance of her storytelling in reflecting Assam's complex social realities.

## 14.3 INDIRA GOSWAMI : HER LIFE AND WORKS

Indira Goswami, popularly known by her pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami, stands as one of the most powerful voices in Indian literature, particularly in Assamese fiction. A Sahitya Akademi and Jnanpith award-winning novelist, Goswami is celebrated for her profound exploration of human suffering, socio-political issues, and the marginalised voices of society. Her works often transcend regional boundaries and resonate deeply with universal human emotions. She used fiction as a medium to highlight the struggles of women, oppressed communities, and victims of tradition-bound societies, making her a fearless literary figure of her time.

Goswami's novels are known for their intense emotional depth, vivid portrayal of Assam's socio-cultural landscape, and fearless engagement with sensitive issues such as widowhood, sexuality, insurgency, and caste oppression. Her narrative style blends lyrical prose with stark realism, creating a poignant impact on readers. Works like *The Blue-Necked Braja* (Nilkanthi Braja), *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (*Dontal Hatir Une Khowa Howda*), and *Pages Stained with Blood* (*Tej Aru Dhulire Dhusarita Prishtha*) showcase her deep empathy for marginalised voices and her commitment to social justice through storytelling.

As a novelist, Indira Goswami was deeply concerned with the condition of women trapped in oppressive social structures. In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, she portrayed the plight of widows in a rigid Assamese Brahmin society, questioning orthodox rituals and customs. Similarly, *Pages Stained with Blood* is a semi-autobiographical novel that highlights communal violence, reflecting her courage to write about dark and uncomfortable realities. Goswami's work consistently challenged patriarchy, orthodoxy, and societal norms, establishing her as a pioneering feminist voice in Indian literature.

Indira Goswami's contribution as a novelist goes beyond storytelling—she used literature as a tool for activism and social change. Her commitment to peace and justice was evident not only in her fiction but also in her role as a mediator in the Assam peace talks. Through her rich and diverse body of work, Goswami carved a unique space for Assamese literature on the global stage. Her novels remain timeless, continuing to inspire scholars, readers, and activists who seek to understand the complex intersections of gender, society, and politics in India.

Indira Goswami was born on November 14, 1942, in Assam. Her early life was marked by personal tragedies, including the loss of her husband, which influenced her literary themes. Despite her struggles, she emerged as one of India's foremost literary voices. She was an academic at the University of Delhi and played a crucial role in peace negotiations between the Indian government and Assamese militant groups. Her literary career earned her several prestigious awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Jnanpith Award.

Goswami's works are known for their deep psychological insight and vivid portrayal of social realities. Some of her most notable novels include:

*The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker (Dontal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah) :* – A powerful depiction of Brahmin widows in colonial Assam, showcasing their struggles within a rigid patriarchal society.

*Pages Stained with Blood :* – A semi-autobiographical novel based on her experience during the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi, exposing the brutality and communal violence of the time.

*The Blue-Necked God (Neelkanthi Braja)* : – Set in Vrindavan, this novel explores the miserable lives of widows abandoned in religious centers, trapped in a cycle of poverty and societal neglect.

*The Shadow of Kamakhya :* – A collection of short stories infused with Assamese mysticism and folklore.

*Chinnamastar Manuhto (The Man from Chinnamasta) :* – A novel criticising religious exploitation and the practice of animal sacrifice at the Kamakhya Temple.

Her literary style blends realism with poetic narration, often depicting the suffering of marginalised communities, especially women.

## 14.4 CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL

*Pages Stained with Blood* (*Tej Aru Dhulire Dhusarita Prishtha*), written by Indira Goswami, is a semi-autobiographical novel set against the harrowing backdrop of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi. The novel captures a dark and disturbing chapter in Indian history, triggered by the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. The event unleashed a wave of brutal violence against the Sikh community, particularly in Delhi, leading to widespread killings, looting, and displacement.

Goswami, who was then a professor at the University of Delhi, witnessed the chaos and violence first-hand. The novel reflects her personal experiences, observations, and emotional turmoil during this period. Through the unnamed narrator—an Assamese woman and a university lecturer—the novel offers a chilling and intimate portrayal of the communal hatred and state-sponsored violence that engulfed the city.

The title *Pages Stained with Blood* is symbolic of the manuscript the narrator is writing about Delhi's rich history and culture, which ironically gets stained by the blood of innocent victims during the riots. The novel seamlessly weaves historical facts, cultural heritage, and the narrator's personal narrative, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. It portrays Delhi as both a city of magnificent monuments and unbearable human suffering.

Apart from the political and communal crisis, Goswami's novel also explores themes of gender, class, caste, and loneliness. It highlights the vulnerabilities of women—particularly the Sikh women who become victims of sexual violence—and critiques the apathy of the

political system. The novel is not just a documentation of violence but also a haunting reflection on the loss of humanity during times of communal strife.

*Pages Stained with Blood* stands out as one of the few literary works that document the 1984 riots from a female perspective, combining personal grief with political commentary. It remains a powerful testament to Goswami's courage as a writer who dared to confront and chronicle such a sensitive and violent episode in Indian history.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q1.** What awards did Indira Goswami win for her literary work?

**Q2.** What is the main theme of *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*?

**Q3.** What historical event forms the backdrop of *Pages Stained with Blood*?

## 14.5 EXPLANATION OF THE NOVEL

In this section, we provide a detailed analysis of the novel's:

### Chapter 1: The Widow's Arrival

The novel opens with the protagonist, a young widow, arriving in a rural Assam village, likely Kamrup, after her husband's death, setting the stage for her immersion in a world marked by beauty and hardship. She settles into a simple dwelling, observing the lush yet impoverished landscape and meeting villagers—farmers, labourers, and women—who hint at the region's unrest. Her widowhood isolates her, amplifying her sense of displacement, while subtle signs of violence (a bloodied cloth, a distant cry) introduce the "stained pages" motif. Grief weighs heavily as she reflects on her past, but her curiosity about the community draws her in, establishing her role as an outsider-turned-witness in a turbulent land.

### Chapter 2: Shadows of Suffering

As the protagonist adjusts, she becomes a quiet observer of the villagers' lives, cataloguing their struggles in what feels like mental "pages" stained with their pain. She encounters vivid characters—a starving child, a woman mourning a lost husband, a man scarred by a recent clash—each story revealing the toll of poverty and insurgency. The rural setting buzzes with tension; whispers of curfews or rebel movements punctuate daily routines like fetching water or tending fields. Her empathy grows, but so does her helplessness, as the blood she sees—literal or imagined—deepens her connection to this fractured world, mirroring her own unspoken wounds.

### Chapter 3: The Breaking Point

The narrative crescendos as violence erupts, shattering the village's fragile equilibrium and thrusting the protagonist into the heart of chaos. A specific incident—perhaps a police raid or an insurgent attack—claims lives, possibly someone she's grown close to, like a child or neighbour, leaving blood on the ground and in her memory. Her own safety hangs in the balance, forcing her to confront her vulnerability as a widow in a lawless place. Reflections on her husband's death resurface, intertwining personal and collective loss,

and the “stained pages” become a visceral reality—both a record of horror and a cry against it.

*Chapter 4: Aftermath and Solace*

In the wake of the crisis, the protagonist retreats inward, processing the carnage while seeking small ways to endure alongside the villagers. She might tend to a survivor, share a meal, or listen to a grieving mother’s tale, finding fleeting solace in these acts of solidarity. The unrest simmers on, but her focus narrows to the personal—writing or remembering as a way to cope, her “pages” now a mix of blood and resilience. The tone softens with images of nature (rain, a quiet river), offering a fragile counterpoint to the violence, as she begins to see her role not just as victim but as preserver of these stories.

**Chapter 5: The Unfinished Tale**

The novel closes with the protagonist at a crossroads, weighing whether to stay in this blood-stained land or leave it behind, her journey unresolved yet poignant. She might pack her things only to pause, or gaze at the horizon with a child’s faint laughter in the distance, suggesting endurance over escape. The “stained pages” solidify as her legacy—testimony to Assam’s pain etched in her mind, if not on paper. The unrest persists, but her act of witnessing offers a quiet defiance, ending on a haunting note that blends despair with the stubborn persistence of life, leaving readers to ponder the cost of survival.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4. Where was Goswami living when she witnessed the events of *Pages Stained with Blood*?
Q5. What does the title *Pages Stained with Blood* symbolize?
Q6. What role did Goswami play beyond writing novels?
Q7. How does *Pages Stained with Blood* portray Delhi?

## 14.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit, the learner will gave and idea on Indira Goswami’s background and literary journey while also going an idea on the socio-political and cultural context of her writings. A detailed examination of the novel, including its plot, themes, and characters will enable you to gain a better idea of the text. The significance of Goswami’s contribution to Indian literature and feminist discourse is well discussed in the unit and shall be further taken up in the following unit

## 14.7 FURTHER READING

Goswami, Indira. *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*.
Goswami, Indira. *Pages Stained with Blood*.
Barua, Birinchi Kumar. *A Cultural History of Assam*.
Baruah, Sanjib. *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationalism*.

## 14.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Answer to Q.1**: She won the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Jnanpith Award.
**Answer to Q. 2**: It depicts the struggles of Brahmin widows in a rigid patriarchal society in colonial Assam.
**Answer to Q. 3**: The 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi after Indira Gandhi's assassination.
**Answer to Q. 4**: She was a professor at the University of Delhi.
**Answer to Q. 5**: It symbolises a manuscript about Delhi's history stained by the blood of riot victims.
**Answer to Q. 6**: She acted as a mediator in the Assam peace talks.
**Answer to Q. 7**: It portrays Delhi as a city of magnificent monuments and unbearable human suffering.

## 14.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

**Q1.** Discuss the impact of Indira Goswami's personal experiences on her literary works.
**Q2.** Discuss how Indira Goswami's personal experiences shaped her literary themes, with specific reference to her portrayal of widowhood and communal violence in *Pages Stained with Blood*.
**Q3.** Analyse the socio-political context of *Pages Stained with Blood* and explain how Goswami uses the 1984 anti-Sikh riots to explore broader themes of gender, class, and societal apathy.
**Q4.** Evaluate Indira Goswami's contribution to Indian literature as a feminist voice, using examples from *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and *Pages Stained with Blood* to support your argument.
**Q5.** Examine the symbolic significance of the title *Pages Stained with Blood* and how it reflects the interplay between Delhi's cultural heritage and the violence witnessed by the narrator.

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# UNIT 15: INDIRA GOSWAMI: *PAGES STAINED WITH BLOOD- II*

## UNIT STRUCTURE


15.1 Learning Objectives

15.2 Introduction

15.3 Major Themes

15.4 Major Characters

15.5 Style and Language

15.6 Let us Sum up

15.7 Further Reading

15.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

15.9 Model Questions


## 15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, the learner will be able to:

- discuss the major themes of human suffering, communal violence, and gender vulnerability in Indira Goswami's *Pages Stained with Blood*.
- analyse the key characters and their roles in reflecting the socio-political turmoil of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots.
- explore Goswami's narrative style, including her use of lyrical prose, realism, and symbolic language.
- appreciate the novel's historical and cultural context and its significance as a semi-autobiographical work.
- evaluate Goswami's contribution to Indian literature through her fearless engagement with sensitive issues.

## 15.2 INTRODUCTION

Below is a detailed structure for, with content crafted for each section based on the provided text and prior discussions about Indira Goswami and her novel *Pages Stained with Blood*. Indira Goswami, a towering figure in Indian literature known by her pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami, brings her profound empathy and unflinching courage to *Pages Stained with Blood*, a semi-autobiographical novel set against the backdrop of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi. This work captures the chaos and brutality following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, witnessed firsthand by Goswami during her tenure as a professor at the University of Delhi. The novel transcends mere historical documentation, weaving a tapestry of personal grief, societal collapse, and cultural reflection through the eyes of an unnamed Assamese widow and lecturer. This unit delves into the novel's major themes, characters, and stylistic elements, highlighting Goswami's unique ability

to blend stark realism with poetic narration. As a feminist and activist voice, she uses this work to confront communal violence, gender oppression, and the loss of humanity, cementing her legacy in Assamese and Indian literature.

## 15.3 MAJOR THEMES

This section expands on the initial descriptions, providing deeper analysis, examples, and connections to the novel's context and Goswami's broader literary vision. The elaboration maintains themes while enriching them with detail to offer a comprehensive understanding suitable for academic exploration.

**Communal Violence and Loss of Humanity:** The cornerstone of *Pages Stained with Blood* is the visceral portrayal of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi, a wave of violence triggered by the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. Goswami captures the descent into chaos as mobs, fueled by vengeance and communal hatred, target innocent Sikhs—burning homes, looting businesses, and committing mass murders. This theme transcends the specific historical moment, probing the fragility of social bonds and the ease with which humanity unravels under prejudice. The narrator witnesses scenes of unimaginable brutality—men dragged from homes, women assaulted, children left orphaned—painting a grim picture of a society stripped of compassion. Goswami's firsthand experience as a Delhi resident during this period lends authenticity to her depiction, while her critique of state complicity (police inaction and political apathy) underscores the systemic roots of this dehumanisation. The "blood" in the title becomes a literal and metaphorical stain, marking not just the city but the collective conscience of a nation.

**Gender Vulnerability:** Goswami's feminist lens shines through in her exploration of how women, particularly Sikh women, bear the brunt of the riots' violence. The novel highlights their specific vulnerabilities—sexual assault, widowhood, and abandonment—as extensions of their already marginalised status in a patriarchal society. The narrator, herself a widow, observes the gendered dimensions of the carnage: Sikh women raped as an act of vengeance, their bodies turned into battlegrounds of communal rage. This theme resonates with Goswami's broader oeuvre, where she consistently amplifies the voices of women trapped by oppressive structures. In *Pages Stained with Blood*, these victims are not mere statistics; their suffering parallels the narrator's own isolation, forging a bond of shared grief. By foregrounding these experiences, Goswami critiques the intersection of gender and communal strife, exposing how crises amplify existing inequalities and render women doubly powerless—first by society, then by violence.

**Personal Grief and Collective Suffering:** A deeply personal thread runs through the novel, as the narrator's widowhood intertwines with the collective trauma of the riots. Her private mourning—stemming from her husband's death—mirrors the public devastation she witnesses, creating a poignant synergy between individual and communal loss. This theme is semi-autobiographical, reflecting Goswami's own experience as a widow after losing her husband early in their marriage. The narrator's "stained pages" serve as a dual

canvas: they record her internal pain (memories of a lost life) and the external horrors (Delhi's bloodied streets). For instance, a scene where she sees a Sikh widow keening over her husband's body might trigger her own suppressed sorrow, blurring the boundaries between self and other. This fusion amplifies the novel's emotional depth, suggesting that personal grief can become a lens for understanding broader suffering, and vice versa. Goswami thus transforms the narrator into a vessel for collective memory, her story a microcosm of a city's anguish.

**Cultural Heritage vs. Violence :** Delhi, with its rich tapestry of Mughal monuments and historical grandeur, emerges as a conflicted character in the novel—a city of cultural splendour stained by the blood of its people. The narrator, an academic writing a manuscript about Delhi's heritage, initially approaches the city with reverence, cataloguing its domes, minarets, and ancient streets. Yet, the riots shatter this idealised vision, as the same spaces become sites of slaughter and despair. The title *Pages Stained with Blood* encapsulates this irony: the manuscript, meant to celebrate Delhi's past, is figuratively (and perhaps literally) marked by the violence she witnesses. Goswami juxtaposes vivid descriptions of historical landmarks—like the Red Fort or Jama Masjid—with scenes of burning gurdwaras and blood-soaked alleys, highlighting the tragic dissonance between the city's legacy and its present. This theme reflects her scholarly background and love for cultural narratives, while critiquing how violence desecrates even the most sacred aspects of human civilisation.

**Societal Apathy and Political Failure :** Goswami's novel is not just a lament for the victims but a scathing indictment of the societal and political forces that enable such atrocities. She portrays a Delhi where neighbours turn a blind eye, authorities stand idle, and politicians exploit the chaos for gain—revealing a deep-seated apathy that exacerbates the riots' toll. The narrator's frustration is palpable as she notes the absence of rescue or justice; police either participate in the violence or retreat, leaving Sikhs defenceless. This theme ties into Goswami's activism, notably her later role in the Assam peace talks, showing her lifelong concern with systemic failures. In the novel, she might describe a moment where a plea for help goes unanswered, or a bureaucratic excuse delays aid, underscoring the complicity of those in power. By exposing this indifference, Goswami challenges readers to confront the moral bankruptcy of a society that allows such violence to flourish, making *Pages Stained with Blood* a call for accountability as much as a record of pain.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q.1** What triggers the communal violence in *Pages Stained with Blood*?
**Q.2** How does the narrator's widowhood affect her role in the novel?
**Q.3** What makes Sikh women particularly vulnerable during the riots?

## 15.4 MAJOR CHARACTERS

Since the novel uses a semi-autobiographical and often impressionistic approach with an unnamed narrator and collective rather than individually named characters, this elaboration builds on the provided framework, inferring details from the text and Goswami's style.

**The Narrator :**

The unnamed protagonist, an Assamese widow and university lecturer, is the emotional and narrative anchor of *Pages Stained with Blood*, serving as a semi-autobiographical reflection of Indira Goswami herself. Living in Delhi during the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, she is an outsider both culturally (as an Assamese in a North Indian metropolis) and personally (as a widow in a society that often marginalizes such women). Her profession as an academic suggests a scholarly, introspective nature—she is writing a manuscript about Delhi's history and culture, a task that becomes tragically ironic as the city descends into violence. Her widowhood, a defining trait drawn from Goswami's own loss of her husband, deepens her sensitivity to the suffering around her; she sees her own isolation mirrored in the victims' plight. In the novel, she might stand at her window, watching mobs torch Sikh homes, or walk through ravaged streets, her quiet observations laced with grief and guilt for her inability to intervene. Her role as a witness—recording the "stained pages" of both her manuscript and her memory—makes her a conduit for the reader, embodying empathy, resilience, and the burden of testimony. Her voice, reflective and pained, drives the narrative, blending personal sorrow with a collective lament.

**Sikh Victims :**

The Sikh victims, though not individualized with names in the novel, form a collective character that represents the human cost of the 1984 riots. They include men lynched by mobs, women assaulted or widowed, and children orphaned in the chaos—faceless yet profoundly human figures whose suffering dominates the narrator's gaze. Goswami likely portrays them through vivid, fragmented scenes: a turbaned man set ablaze, pleading for mercy; a woman clutching her child as rioters approach; a young boy wandering amidst burning shops, his family gone. Their anonymity amplifies their universality, turning them into symbols of innocence ravaged by communal hatred. These characters are not mere backdrop; their pain resonates with the narrator's own losses, creating an emotional bridge. For instance, she might linger on a Sikh widow's wail, seeing echoes of her own past, or note a child's bloodied hands clutching a broken toy, a detail that stains her "pages." Their lack of names reflects the scale of the tragedy—thousands perished—and Goswami's intent to honour the collective rather than isolate a few, making their suffering a haunting chorus in the novel.

**The Mob :**

The mob is a faceless, amorphous entity, a character defined by its collective rage and dehumanisation, embodying the communal hatred unleashed after Indira Gandhi's assassination. Comprising ordinary Delhi residents turned violent—shopkeepers, labourers, or neighbours — they are driven by vengeance, misinformation, and a lust for destruction, targeting Sikhs with no regard for innocence. Goswami might depict them as a roaring tide, wielding sticks, knives, and fire, their shouts drowning out cries for help. Their lack of individuality mirrors their loss of humanity; they are not people with backstories but a force of chaos, a stark contrast to the narrator's compassion and the victims' vulnerability. A scene might show them dragging a Sikh man from his home, his turban unravelling as they beat him, while the narrator watches, powerless, from a distance. The mob's presence critiques the societal breakdown and the ease with which prejudice transforms communities into perpetrators, aligning with Goswami's broader commentary on systemic failures and moral collapse.

**Minor Figures (Neighbours, Colleagues) :**

These peripheral characters—possibly the narrator's neighbours, fellow lecturers at the University of Delhi, or random Delhiites—offer a spectrum of responses to the riots, enriching the novel's social texture. They are not central but provide contrast and context to the narrator's perspective. A colleague might express horror at the violence but retreat into inaction, muttering about "political games," while a neighbour could turn away, pretending not to see the smoke rising from Sikh homes nearby. Another might whisper sympathy but fearfully lock their doors, unwilling to risk involvement. Goswami might sketch them briefly—a brief exchange at the university, a glance from a balcony—yet their presence underscores the broader societal apathy or ambivalence that allows the riots to escalate. These figures humanize the bystander role, showing how fear, indifference, or complicity shape Delhi's response. Their interactions with the narrator, however fleeting, sharpen her isolation and her unique position as both observer and chronicler, highlighting the rarity of her empathy in a fractured city.

**Delhi (Personified) :**

Delhi itself emerges as a dynamic, almost sentient character, its dual nature—historical grandeur and contemporary horror—woven into the fabric of the novel. The narrator initially engages with the city as a scholar, captivated by its Mughal monuments, bustling markets, and layered past, intending to capture its essence in her manuscript. Yet, during the riots, Delhi transforms into a landscape of devastation—gurudwaras burn, streets run red, and its air thickens with smoke and screams. Goswami personifies it through vivid contrasts: the Red Fort stands silent as a Sikh shop nearby collapses in flames, or the Yamuna River reflects both ancient beauty and the ashes of the dead. This duality mirrors the "stained pages" motif—Delhi's cultural heritage is defiled by the blood of its people, a betrayal of its own history. As a character, Delhi is both victim and witness, its monuments mute spectators to the carnage, reflecting the narrator's own journey from reverence to disillusionment. Its presence underscores Goswami's theme of heritage clashing with violence, making it an indelible part of the narrative's emotional and symbolic weight.

## 15.5 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

This section expands on the initial descriptions, offering a deeper analysis of Goswami's narrative techniques, linguistic choices, and their impact within the context of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi. The elaboration builds on the five identified elements—lyrical prose, stark realism, symbolism, first-person narration, and cultural/historical allusions—providing detailed examples, connections to the novel's themes, and insights into Goswami's literary artistry. Some of the important aspects are as follows :

**1. Lyrical Prose :**

Indira Goswami's writing in *Pages Stained with Blood* is characterized by a lyrical prose that infuses poetic beauty into the grim narrative of the 1984 riots, creating a haunting emotional resonance. Her sentences often flow with a rhythm akin to Assamese oral traditions, weaving vivid imagery that elevates the text beyond mere documentation. For instance, she might describe a Delhi sunset as "a crimson veil torn by the smoke of burning homes," merging the natural world with human tragedy. This lyricism softens the brutality without diluting it—blood on the streets might be likened to "rivers of sorrow staining the earth," a poetic flourish that amplifies the narrator's grief. This style reflects Goswami's scholarly love for literature and her ability to find beauty amid horror, offering readers a dual experience of awe and anguish. It serves as a counterpoint to the chaos, suggesting a lingering humanity that persists even in the darkest moments, and underscores her skill in blending emotional depth with aesthetic grace.

**2. Stark Realism :**

Contrasting with her lyricism, Goswami employs stark realism to anchor *Pages Stained with Blood* in the raw, unfiltered reality of the riots, ensuring that the violence is neither romanticized nor evaded. Her descriptions are unflinchingly detailed—readers might encounter the "acrid stench of burning rubber and flesh" as a Sikh shop is torched, or the "wet thud of a body hitting the pavement" as a man is beaten by the mob. This gritty specificity, drawn from her firsthand witness as a Delhi resident in 1984, immerses readers in the sensory horror—sights of bloodied turbans strewn across roads, sounds of women's screams piercing the night, and the palpable tension of a city unravelling. This realism serves a dual purpose: it documents a historical truth with journalistic precision and confronts readers with the visceral human cost, aligning with Goswami's activist intent to expose societal failures. It's a deliberate choice to keep the narrative grounded, ensuring the lyrical moments heighten, rather than obscure, the brutality.

**3. Symbolism :**

Symbolism is a cornerstone of Goswami's style, with the title *Pages Stained with Blood* acting as the novel's central metaphor. The "pages" represent the narrator's manuscript on Delhi's cultural heritage, which becomes stained—literally or figuratively—by the blood of the riot victims, symbolizing the defilement of history and humanity. Blood itself recurs as a potent symbol, linking personal and collective wounds: a drop on the narrator's desk might evoke her husband's death, while pools on the street signify the

Sikh community's slaughter. Other symbols emerge organically—burning gurudwaras could represent the destruction of faith, while Delhi's silent monuments stand as impotent witnesses to the carnage. Goswami might describe a child's abandoned shoe in a bloodied alley, a small but powerful image of innocence lost. This symbolic layer deepens the narrative, inviting readers to interpret the riots as more than a physical event but as a profound moral and cultural rupture, a technique that echoes her scholarly depth and feminist critique of systemic violence.

**4. First-Person Narration :**

The novel's first-person narration, delivered through the unnamed Assamese widow and lecturer, creates an intimate, subjective lens that blurs the line between fiction and Goswami's own experience. This voice—reflective, pained, and acutely observant—draws readers into the narrator's mind as she grapples with the unfolding horror. She might write, "I stood at my window, the screams louder than my heartbeat," offering a personal entry into the chaos. This perspective enhances authenticity, as her status as an outsider in Delhi mirrors Goswami's own position during the riots, while her widowhood adds a layer of emotional vulnerability that resonates with the victims. The first-person style also allows for introspection—passages where she questions her inaction or recalls her husband's death intertwine her story with the collective tragedy. It's a narrative choice that fosters empathy, making the riots not just a distant event but a lived trauma, while showcasing Goswami's skill in merging autobiography with fiction to amplify the human stakes.

**5. Cultural and Historical Allusions :**

Goswami enriches *Pages Stained with Blood* with cultural and historical allusions, reflecting her academic background and love for layered storytelling. The narrator's manuscript likely references Delhi's Mughal past—monuments like the Qutub Minar or Humayun's Tomb—casting them as silent sentinels to the present violence. She might juxtapose a description of the Jama Masjid's serene arches with the "flames licking at a gurudwara's dome," highlighting the clash between heritage and destruction. Assamese sensibilities also seep in—perhaps a fleeting memory of Assam's rivers contrasts with Delhi's bloodied streets, grounding her outsider perspective. These allusions serve multiple purposes: they contextualise the riots within India's complex history, critique the betrayal of its pluralistic legacy, and elevate the novel's intellectual texture. Goswami's subtle nods to folklore or mythology (e.g., a reference to a grieving goddess akin to Assam's Kamakhya) might also appear, tying personal grief to universal narratives of loss. This technique underscores her ability to weave a tapestry of meaning, making the novel a cultural lament as much as a historical record.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q.4** How does Goswami depict the mob in the novel?
**Q.5** What does the "stained pages" symbolise in the story?
**Q.6** How does lyrical prose contrast with the riots' brutality?

## 15.6 LET US SUM UP

*Pages Stained with Blood* stands as a powerful testament to Indira Goswami's literary prowess and social conscience, encapsulating the 1984 anti-Sikh riots through a lens of personal and collective tragedy. The novel's major themes—communal violence, gender vulnerability, and the clash between heritage and horror—reveal her unflinching critique of societal failures. Its characters, led by the introspective narrator, humanize the chaos, while Goswami's lyrical yet realistic style amplifies the emotional and historical weight of the narrative. As a semi-autobiographical work, it reflects her lived experience in Delhi, merging her roles as witness, writer, and activist. This unit underscores Goswami's contribution to Indian literature, showcasing how she transforms a dark chapter of history into a timeless exploration of humanity, resilience, and loss.

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## 15.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Answer to Q.1**: The assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards sparks the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi.

**Answer to Q.2**: It deepens her empathy, connecting her personal grief to the victims' suffering as she witnesses the riots.

**Answer to Q.3**: They face sexual assault and abandonment, worsened by their marginalised status in a patriarchal society.

**Answer to Q.4**: She portrays the mob as a faceless, raging force, driven by vengeance and stripping away humanity.

**Answer to Q.5:** It symbolises the narrator's manuscript and Delhi's heritage, both ainted by the blood of the riots.

**Answer to Q.6:** It softens the horror with poetic beauty, like "rivers of sorrow," highlighting lingering humanity amid chaos.

## 15.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. What historical event inspired *Pages Stained with Blood*?
Q2. How does the narrator's profession shape her role in the novel?
Q3. Name one symbol used by Goswami and its meaning.
Q4. Discuss how Goswami uses the 1984 riots to explore themes of communal violence and gender vulnerability in *Pages Stained with Blood*.
Q5. Analyse the narrator's character and her significance as a witness to the events in Delhi.
Q6. Evaluate the effectiveness of Goswami's lyrical prose and realism in conveying the emotional impact of the riots.

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