
UNIT 1 KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will introduce you to:

- poetry from the North East;
- writing from the North East ;
- Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and his two poems.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit has been divided into three broad sections. The first analyses English poetry from the North-East and its relationship to the construct of Indian English poetry. The second section examines the position of the Shillong poets in it. The third section will familiarise you with the poetry of the Indian English poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih who belongs to the North-eastern state of Meghalaya based in the capital city, Shillong. Nongkynrih is from the Khasi tribe and writes both in Khasi and in English. This unit focuses on two of his English poems, “The Colours of Truth” and the “Ancient Rocks of Cherra”.

1.2 POETRY FROM THE NORTH-EAST AND INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY: SOME DEBATES

Sanjukta Dasgupta in her essay, “Politics of Language and Post-Independence Indo-Anglian poetry” presents a historical trajectory of Indo-Anglian poetry from the pre-Independence period to the 1990s. Dasgupta mentions early poets during the “colonial period” such as Toru Dutt, Aurobindo Ghosh, Manmohan Ghosh,

Sarojini Naidu, Rabindranath Tagore and Vivekananda. Analysing the nineteenth century trends in poetry, she has explained how poets in this period made use of the tropes of English poetry to show a skilled usage of the colonisers' language. There was an attempt at a "harmonious assimilation" of the two contexts. A characteristic feature of pre-Independence poetry was the nationalistic fervour whereas the later poetry was marked by an attempt to realise hybridization of the two cultural contexts. This idea was ridiculed in the 1950s by poets such as P.Lal who formed the Writers Workshop in 1958 (Dasgupta 209). With this is associated the beginning of a new trend in Indian English poetry.

Let us face the following questions. How was one to reconcile to the issue of writers of an erstwhile colony writing in the language of the coloniser? Was it a betrayal of any sort? Would a borrowed language express the peculiarities of their context? According to Dasgupta:

Oppressed by a guilty conscience, the Indian poets writing in English experienced a sense of identity-crisis and as a result their integrity was flawed by lack of confidence, uncertainty and indecision. Their distress and desperation are registered in their poems which clearly signal their uneasiness and their simultaneous inability to use the mother tongue for the purpose of writing poetry. Tension, anxiety and schizophrenia are some of the recurrent problematics of such poetry... (210)

This anxiety regarding the use of the English language continued up to the 1980s. It is at the beginning of the 80s and later with the advent of globalization that a new idiom begins to emerge in Indian English poetry. Dasgupta elucidates how in the Third World this led to a kind of "cultural mosaic, encouraging cultural pluralism". This also created the hegemony of the West over the culture of the third world countries. But Dasgupta has also pointed out how the discourse of globalization brings in heterogeneity—

Instead of the canon and the grand narrative, activating the differences occupies prime importance, for such an approach discourages exclusionism and celebrates the primacy of inclusionism in the dissemination of culture. Aijaz Ahmed observes that in the case of a multilingual country like India, despite the fragmentation and splintering of national culture, the kaleidoscope of regional cultures simultaneously emphasises the presence of a national culture. (212)

This becomes an important point of entry to understand Indian English poetry from the region of the North-East. Dasgupta presents the polemical debate around Indian English. On the one hand English remains an elitist language since it emerges as a product of English schools and university education. On the other hand, Dasgupta uses Aijaz Ahmad's argument to point out the "Indianization" of English. The use and spread of English needs to be understood with respect to the assimilation of the language in the Indian context rather than as a "mode of ejection". Indian English poetry, too, expresses these contradictions—the use of a language that belonged to the coloniser, its assimilation within the Occidental context, overpowering market forces which allow integration in ways that make it an elitist language, and finally its use to focus on cultural heterogeneity. The last fragment is of great value in understanding the politics of poetry from the North-East. This blanket of cultural heterogeneity allows scope for a new patch of poetry to emerge. Elke Boehmer analyses the writer of Indian English as a

“cultural traveller” working and expressing third world contexts within a western premise that restores the supremacy accorded to English and the western context. Dasgupta counters the argument in the following manner:

This comment establishes the hegemony of the west on the culture of the rest of the world, which is a debatable premise, for the postcolonial writer is an empowered voice that would be able to distinguish between felicitous fusion and subordination. Migrant writers however follow the programme outlined by Boehmer as is evidenced in Rushdie, Mistry and Ghosh among others... Nevertheless, native writing in indigenous English or “Englishes” continues prioritising the culture of the nation and more intensely of the region while simultaneously expressing awareness of the dominant European cultural tradition, philosophy and intellectual experiments from Derrida to Foucault. Indo-Anglian poetry is very much a culture specific construction and its dynamism is obvious from the enthusiasm of the young and new poets who participate in thousands in the British Council sponsored All India Poetry Competition held every year. (216-217)

The critic points out how there are some “migrant poets” who would take the route suggested by Boehmer, but there are others who devise newer routes. She acknowledges the problem of English and writers from a privileged context of education, writing about the native context through a “spectatorial attitude”. But at the same time the idea of the plurality of “Englishes” allows expression of new ideas which makes it valuable both at the level of discourse and understanding. GJV Prasad, too, raises this question, “What is English doing in India that has been independent for more than fifty-six years? And what is Indian English, whose language is that?” According to him, we need to:

“... brown the language, to acculturate it, to create distinct Indian English voices. We needed our Indian English to gesture casually, with elan, to various Indian languages, to our texts and contexts, but unfortunately the language is still at ease only with white texts and literary contexts. Thus, the challenges to new Indian English poets is still the same that the earlier poets didn't or still haven't met squarely—to push English slowly but surely to the multiple locations of our complex. Indian lives. We have to ensure that the English language does not become, or should I say remain, the language that only prostitutes us—servicing the world through our call centres; we have to ensure that our English becomes truly a language that is flexible and supple and strong enough to give poetic expression to our India(s). We have to add colour to the language, to make rich with our flavours. As the poet Agha Shahid Ali once said, we should not chutnify English, we have to biryanise it, letting all flavours retain their distinct identities even when seeping into each other to create a unique offering... The fact is that English does not belong to any one region in India. (47)

According to Prasad, the term Indian English only demarcates it from English of other countries. But English in India is not a homogenous construct. Its usage, style and many other factors vary from region to region, and culture to culture. Taking cue from Prasad's argument, the writers of Indian English must interact with writers in other languages. This will help us redefine English and its role and function in life.

In our context, we might raise the question where English poetry from the North East is to be placed. What we have discussed so far would help us understand the historical evolution and transitions of a language, while also enabling us to realize the use and style of English. An attempt to analyse the poetry from the North-East necessitates an evolution of the language in that region. What is the rubric under which we can place the Indian English writers from the North-East? Do they use tropes similar to the ones used by poets from other? How do they fit in with this “globalised quilting,” to borrow Sanjukta Dasgupta’s phrase?

1.3 WRITING FROM THE NORTH-EAST

In geographical terms the North-East refers to the eight states of India—Sikkim, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura, Assam, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. In the Introduction of an anthology of poetry from the North-East, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin S. Ngangom have observed:

‘North-East’ is, of course, a blanket term that has been used to imply a homogenous province, a single political domain, inhabited by kindred people with a common history. Understandably, with a tenuous historical and geographical link to the rest of India, the North-East remains little known, and perhaps largely misunderstood (singled out, for example as India’s insurgent heartland’). Its eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura are inhabited by a conglomeration of peoples, a melange of cultures, languages and religions that it would be a grave injustice to make any generalized statement about them. (ix)

Probing the question posed in this comment would indeed be useful. The North-East is not a uniform category but a confluence of different cultures. The many states constituting the North-East have people whose lineal descent and ancestry is from various tribes. In this region, there are people from the Indo-Aryan group, too, such as Assam and Tripura. According to Patricia Mukhim the North-East is inhabited by people from “South-east Asian origin such as Tibeto-Burman and the Mo-Khmer groups” whereas the rest of India is of “Dravidian or Aryan” descent (Mukhim 177). Ngangom and Nongkynrih explain how in Meghalaya, there are twenty ethnic groups in its list of Scheduled Tribes. These are further divided into sub-tribes and clans. Each of these groups has its own dialect and cultural identity. In short, any attempt to homogenise the North-East on any count will defeat the purpose of placing it in its linguistic and cultural context. To extend this further, an analysis of literature from any one of the states should be attempted for knowing the complexity of that region.

The literature of the North-East in English is fairly recent. Whereas Assamese, Manipuri and Bengali had an established script, the dialects of many other tribes did not have a script. In the nineteenth century, the Welsh missionaries came to the Khasi hills and brought the Roman script—

[In] 1841, Thomas Jones of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists’ Mission cast the Khasi language in written form using the Roman script. As scholars on the subject have remarked, the success of Thomas Jones’s alphabet also inspired the Garo, the Mizo and the Naga tribes to adopt the Roman rather than the Bengali script, and later by almost all the tribes except for the

Kokboroks and Chakmas of Tripura, who use the Bengali script, and some in Assam, who use the Assamese script” (x).

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

An interesting cultural interaction can be marked in this discussion. Nineteenth century India was a colony of the British Empire. This was a period of great reform movements, and also one in which white missionaries came to India. In the context of the culture of the tribes, the Roman script of the coloniser provided a new medium of expression to the people of the North-East. The impact was both Christian and English. Literary expression started taking form in a language seen then. It is a fairly recent phenomenon in the history of the tribes. Ngangom and Nongkynrih point out how this created a hierarchy of a certain kind under which their own traditions were considered “pagan and preposterous”. Later in time, things moved on. Writers of today make use of Assamese, Bengali, Manipuri, and English along with their own particular dialects and languages. The important point is the influx of English as a language with its own cultural context and its linguistic and cultural aspects mingling with the North-East. Criss-crossing this are the traditions and rituals understood by people of the North-East in their own languages presented in the Roman script.

1.3.1 Welsh Missionaries, Soso Tham and Khasi Literature

It would have become clear to you by now that an analysis of Indian English poetry should take into account the specificities of the context that include region, tribe, culture and economy. The development of English in the North-East is to be gauged against its interactions with the regional languages. Schools started by the Welsh missionaries introduced literature in the English language in the study courses pursued there. Soso Tham (1873-1940), the Poet Laureate of Shillong studied in a missionary school till class VI. He finally taught Khasi in Shillong Government High School, Mawkhar. The only non-missionary poet of the region was a non-Khasi, S.M. Amjad Ali who also became the “father of Khasi poetry”. In short, the advent of the Welsh missionaries in Shillong started a new phase of writing. In “The Birth Pangs of a Poet: The Early Works of Soso Tham, Chief Bard of the Khasis”, Nongkynrih explains this cultural interaction as follows:

The Khasis, who had a rich oral literature consisting of* myths, folk stories, fairy tales, fables, narrative poetry, gnomic *phawar* (verse) and lively traditional songs, had never obtained the blessing of the written word until the mid-nineteenth century, that is, until the appearance of the Welsh Presbyterian Missionary, Thomas Jones, on July 22, 1841. Prior to this, around 1831, there were indeed attempts by Krishna Chandra Pal and Alexander B. Lish of the American Baptist Mission of Serampore, to reduce Khasi to the complex Bengali script. But these had proved unsuccessful and it was left to Jones to take up where they had left off. The tenacious and inventive Welshman resorted to Welsh orthography and the Roman script to cast the language in written form. The outcome was the publication, in early 1842, of the *First Khasi Reader* or *Cacitab Ban Hicai Ca Citien Cassia*. It is out of this little book that all other Khasi books have emerged. (141-142)

Understanding the position of Khasi in terms of the script helps locate the use of English in the early period. In its first phase of interaction, the Khasi language was written in the Roman script under the surveillance of the Welsh missionaries.

The literature was primarily “Christian and moralistic”; the exceptions being Khasi grammar books. Khasi writing in Roman script introduced English and influenced the writer imbibing both traditions in writing. Ngangom and Nongkynrih point out this dilemma:

The literary legacy of the missionaries can be said to be double-edged. While, on the one hand, they gifted the tribes with a common literary heritage, on the other, they made them deny the existence of their own literatures in their rich oral traditions and taught them to be ashamed of whatever is there is, as something pagan and preposterous. That is why the poetry of some of the hill-tribes even today is seen to be either singing hymns or adoring cuckoos in the woods and non-existent daffodils in the vales. (xi)

The advent of the Welsh missionary had given the writer a relationship with the English language. Yet, the cultural hegemony of English diluted the use of other languages as also the cultural specificities reflected in those writings. This presented a tough challenge to the writer from the North-East.

Ngangom and Nongkynrih provide new dimensions to the issue of language and the themes depicted through it. The modern poet from the North-East read extensively and are not confined to the Anglo-American trends. In the course of writing, they are able to evolve a new aesthetic—”these writers with their extensive reading of modern world literature from English translations, do passionately grapple with some of the psychological and social perplexities of the present. Having cut their teeth on Lorca, Seferis, Arghezi Neruda, and the hard-edged modernists of the Third world they find common ground in chronicling their subjective realities and the predicament of their people” (xi) Needless to say that such a venture fills them up with creative vigour and gives them a direction and a viewpoint to adopt.

1.3.2 The Shillong Poets and Indian English Poetry

Let us examine the issue of Indian English poetry in the North-East from the point of view of exclusion. We have already discussed the influence that English might exert on the writers of the North-East. But there are other related factors that exercise dominance within the domain of Indian English. One of the ways adopted by the hegemonic forces is to exclude the poets from the North East. That may benefit the writers of the mainland India writing in English. They can happily take it on themselves to represent the interest of the North-East and flaunt such a writing as genuine. In “Anthology-Making, the Nation, and the Shillong Poets”, Prasanta Das draws attention to two comprehensive anthologies. One of these is by Jeet Thayil, *60 Indian Poets* and the other by Ranjit Hoskote, *Reasons for Belonging*. Both the anthologies fail to include the Shillong Poets. So, we might wonder who the Shillong Poets are. For us, they are the ones to be found out and given emphasis. The Shillong poets include Temsula Ao, Robin S Ngangom, Desomnd S Kharmawplang, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Ananya S Guha, Indari Syiem Warjri, Almond D Syiem, and Donbokland Rynthathiang. Prasanta Das sees them in direct contrast to the Bombay poets like Jeet Thayil. Das acknowledges how Shillong with its missionary schools has over time become a place noting a peculiar flourish in Indian English writing. Citing the reasons behind their possible exclusion from these anthologies, Das explains how the tropes used by these poets are not those of Anglo American poetry. To quote:

Ngangom, Kharmawplang and Nonkynrih are dismissive of the work of the English and American poets. The poets they feel close to are the political ones like Pablo Neruda, Czeslaw Milos, Mahumd Darwish, Yehuda Amichii who by choice or circumstance (or both) voice the anguish and aspirations of their land and its people. Because Ngngom, Kharmawplang and Nongkynrih feel they have an obligation to write about the crucial contemporary problem of their region. They write about terrorism, insurgency, human rights abuses, environmental and ecological concerns, erosion of tribal values, and the corrupt politician-businessman-bureaucrat nexus. This gives their work a distinct identity within Indian English poetry but it also makes it different. The three write poetry that is narrative, emotional and lyrical; they also make statements in their poems. Thus, their poetry runs counter to the taste of “the Bombay poets” like Thayil who generally prefer poetry of symmetry, intellect, irony and wit. (20)

According to Das, contemporary poets such as Thayil concentrate on “craft”, whereas this is not the focus of poets like Nongkynrih. Das’s contention makes it clear that poets like Nongkynrih express the complex socio-political and cultural anxieties of their landscape—the political apathy of the state and the problem of insurgency against which the former is ranged. Das cites from the Introduction by Ngangom and Nongkynrih to the book on the North-East writing to say that the creative aims therein are bound to be different from poets coming from other parts of India. Arguing the case of the ethnic strife and insurgency in the North-East, Satpathy has explained how “The Shillong poets, for all their diversity, have all experienced paroxysms of ethnic strife. They have been caught in the crossfire between state terrorism and the terrorism of the insurgents” (14). Writing from the North-East will map these changes at the level of culture and politics. English language in the region will also evolve in a manner distinct from that of other regions and cultures.

This discussion benefits us in many ways. First, it approaches Indian English poetry from the point of view of the North-East. Also, it provides us with a broad spectrum of Indian English poetry. Indian English has multiple contexts from which different creative styles emerge. The concerned subjects of interest are seen as diverse and linked and they lend dynamism and vitality to the writing of the North-East within the framework of Indian English.

1.4 “THE COLOURS OF TRUTH”

Poetry from the North-East has many aspects that span the social, political, cultural, and linguistic. These factors gain substance when combined with images of the natural habitat. In poetry from the North-East, these find expression in a variety of ways. The social refers to the tribes and the non-tribal communities in the North-East. Those could be the Khasi, the Garo or any of the numerous tribes in Meghalaya. There is also the presence of the non-tribal people in the region. To begin with, the hill tribes of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo were brought under the state of Assam by the British imperialist powers. During the partition of Bengal in 1905, they came under East Bengal. Following a unification of Bengal in 1912, Meghalaya became a part of Assam. The states of the North-East became a part of India in 1950 after the Instrument of Accession. But for various reasons there have been political conflicts made more complicated by the problem of insurgency. It is only in 1970 that Meghalaya was carved out of Assam as a

separate state. The word political is therefore made complex not only by this very chequered historical trajectory but also by different insurgent factions in the region. The conflict between the tribes and the state over supremacy of various kinds marks the social, cultural and other aspects of the region. Poetry from the North-East reflects the many kinds of conflicts in the region. All this is set against the veritable beauty of the region offering a contrast. Culturally, the North-East signifies plenitude—a rich region with oral narratives, legends, and stories passed down from generations in the previous era. Each tribe generally has its own creation myth. And this is interesting as it lends plurality and diversity to Indian culture. We are generally used to understanding the creation story only in terms of mainstream religions and belief systems. But the different creation stories from the North-East make our understanding of culture and myths diverse. It is only in the recent past that a lot of these have been written down. The complex inheritance of orality carries its own structures that resist the ‘normalcy’ of the written word. Oral transmission of these narratives is a dynamic process with its own specificities. All this is wound up with the advent of the missionaries, the establishment of Christianity and the use of English as has been discussed earlier.

1.4.1 Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

Indian English poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih belongs to the North-Eastern state of Meghalaya. He is from the Khasi tribe and writes both in Khasi and in English. He teaches literature in the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong. He is the author of *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends* and is the co-editor of *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India*. He has also published plays and his most recent one is *Manik*, a play in five acts.

1.4.2 “The Colour of Truth”: An Interpretation

“The Colours of truth”

The Colours of truth

A siesta phone call

Oozes friendly warnings.

Insurgents have grown

incredibly urbane, these days.

The question is, must we subterfuge

to shield a pedagogic stooge?

I close my eyes

turn towards the sun.

The colour I see is

disgorging blood.

I close my eyes

shade them with my palms.
 The colour I see is
 life-erasing black.

These are the colours of destiny
 of immutable truth
 and the colours also
 with which warring pawns
 are daily decorating our towns.

Indian Literature 48.3 (221) 2004; pg 25

The yearning of seeds 2011

“The Colours of truth” was first published in the journal *Indian Literature* in 2004. It then appeared in Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih’s 2011 poetry collection titled, *the yearning of seeds*. In it, this poem has been grouped along with other poems under the sub-title “The Season of the Wind”. “The Colours of Truth” presents the wide-ranging complexity emerging from the region, beset by the problem of insurgency. In “The Colours of Truth” cultural and ethnic complexity is set against the backdrop of conflict and insurgency in the region. Periods of political turmoil coupled with insurgency have redrawn the cultural map of the region in different ways. The poem focuses on the impact of these factors on the people who were traumatised by the conflict in the region. In the first stanza, the reader’s expectation regarding the comfort and solace offered by an afternoon siesta is pitted against warnings conveyed over the phone. The laziness of the “siesta” and the generous claims of the word “oozes” are belied by the “friendly warnings”. The caution conveyed over the phone is part of the “normal” in Meghalaya and refers to unrest in the region.

The second stanza lends clarity to the warnings further as the poem makes an explicit reference to the “insurgents” and their new ways. People creating conflict in the region have adopted the ways of the new world and their tactics seem more “urbane” to the poet; such as threats over the phone. It is, of course, a pithy comment on the issue of insurgency in the region. The phone call by the insurgents indicates the use of more modern methods to make demands from the people. The question posed by Nongkynrih disturbs the mind—“The question is, must we subterfuge/ to shield a pedagogic stooge?” This idea lies at the centre of the poem. The word “subterfuge” indicates both deceit and strategy. The poet asks the reader if the people of Meghalaya should cover up for people who have created unrest in the region. This is a dilemma faced by the common people in their daily lives. The poet refers to the insurgents as “pedagogic stooge”—one who unthinkingly serves the interests of a person or faction without understanding their own motivation. Keeping at bay the rationality, the person starts to follow a line of thinking that is detrimental to the peace-loving society around him. This phrase captures the way in which people are suddenly and passionately engulfed by an anarchic way of thinking that harms one and all. The poet poses a question—should “we” protect such people?

In the third stanza the poet closes his eyes and turns towards the sun. He does not do so with open eyes. The fact that he closes his eyes and thinks about the sun indicates his desire for hope and new life. But all he sees is the blood pouring out. An intense image, it expresses the violence that afflicts the region, as the poet sees only the colour of blood. Hope sits uneasy with the colour that prevails in the real world—that of blood. This image intensifies further in the next stanza. The poet now closes his eyes with his palms and sees only one colour—“life-erasing black”. This line is an immediate reflection on the one before this in which the question was posed. The work of insurgents has only led to eroding of lives. The beauty of Meghalaya with its many colours, its greenery and rain and clouds is replaced by the colour black that engulfs all. This is how Mamang Dai explains how poetry from the North-East can no longer be about the beauty of the place but has to be about insurgency:

It must be owned that all our home states are totally changed from what they once were. Today the stories emerging from this region are more about bloodshed and killings. This is an area that provokes thought and debate today, both amongst writers of the North-east and those who review these writers—as if the choice for contemporary literature from the region today is between guns and bullets or ancient tales and rhapsodies that should now be discarded as idyllic irrelevance. Yes, there is writing about bullets and guns and death and betrayal. It can hardly be otherwise, when we are confronted with changes that bring such terror and anguish. (5)

The poet refers to the colour of blood and of the darkness of death. These are colours of destiny. Is the poet being pessimistic? Probably not. But he is certainly disappointed at the political situation and the problem of insurgency which is taking the beauty of the region away from it. He calls it the “immutable truth”. He is accepting the reality of the situation. You can no longer see the many colours, violence and bloodshed have left only red and black to the region. The motif of black is a telling reflection of the poet’s poignant sense of the loss of the colourful diversity of Meghalaya because of insurgency in the region.

The “warring pawns” are the many conflictual forces in the region. Nongkynrih does not mention them as warring factions but as “warring pawns”. There are conflictual forces in the region, controlled by powerful people who use these factions as mere pawns of certain forces to further their interests. This ties up with the idea of the “pedagogic stooge” as someone who blindly follows a person or idea and is in turn exploited by it.

Nongkynrih’s poetry is an expression of the pain and anguish of the people. The imagery is visual. The image of an innocent afternoon siesta gives way to that of a sinister one of insurgency. The central picture of the poet closing his eyes and waiting for sunshine expresses the stark reality of the situation where the region is marked by blood due to conflict. Closing his eyes with the palms of his hands disturbs as the poet gets no respite. All he sees is black a colour that absorbs all; in this case all life. Referring to these colours as “decorating towns” carries none of the colour or revelry generally associated with decorating towns especially during a festival. The written word and the expectation that it generates is consistently belied.

The colours that define the region are those of truth—the red of blood and the black of darkness. Hope lies in accepting the truth of the situation. Both the

poet's attempt at turning towards the sun and the creative act of writing the poem to express truth indicate hope. Writing and expression can help the poet and the people of Meghalaya come to terms with the situation by accepting the colours of truth. Thinking that the people are basking in an idyllic surrounding in sunshine or decorating the region in a cultural context needs to be abandoned. The colourful veneer should be divested of its supposed worth and the truth accepted.

1.5 “THE ANCIENT ROCKS OF CHERRA”

The Ancient Rocks of Cherra

(For Nigel, Who Questioned)

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

Poverty eats into the hills and squeezes
a living 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 barrenness.

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.

The poem “The Ancient Rocks of Cherra” is a part of the section, “The Fungus” in the collection *the yearning of seeds*. The poem refers to the landscape and surroundings of Cherrapunjee or Sohra as it was formerly called. It was also the capital of Meghalaya before Shillong.

The poem begins with a kind of epigraph to Nigel Jenkins, the famous Welsh poet and critic and creates a dialogue between the poet and Jenkins; this can be seen in other works as well. More recently in Nongkynrih's book of haikus and the senryus, *Time's Barter*, the dedication to Nigel Jenkins suggests that the debate around Indian English poetry has entered a new phase. The dedication establishes

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a historical link reminiscent of the Welsh missionaries who had come to the hills in the nineteenth century. The use of English and the transition to Christianity can be attributed to the impact of this interaction during the colonial period in India. In the present day, the interaction between the Welsh people and the people from the North-East can be called collaborative. At the same time, it ever keeps in sight the fact that English is an acquired language dealt with very differently in the case of the colonised. In this new phase the writers from the North-East evolve an identity that can be called unique.

The first stanza of the poem establishes the ancient history of Cherra through the rocks that have stood the test of time. At the same time though, the terrain of the place is rough. The rocks are old and withered and they do not make life easy for the ordinary people. Whereas the rocks show the age-old culture and physical presence of the place, their starkness reflects the region. It is a place marked by poverty. With great difficulty, the people manage to eke out a living from “stones and caterpillars/ gathered for out-of-town drunks/ each market day”. The plenty expected of a “market-day” is replaced by the plainness of the rocks and the emphasis is on squeezing a living. The market day was the time when people went out to buy and make merry. But even on such a day all they get is caterpillars gathered from the stones.

The next stanza refers to the legend of U Thlen, the man-eating serpent. According to Mamang Dai, “The legend of U Thlen is still very much alive in Meghalaya; and in the dim, rain-wet hills of Sohra, better known as Cherapunjee, it is quite easy to conjure up the shadow of the serpent and hear the ghostly beat of a drum (5). Nongkynrih explains the legend thus—The legend accounts for the introduction of evil in the society. U Thlen was the son of Ka Kma Kharai, daughter of U Mawlong Syiem, the chief god of the area. She was a harlot and hence considered depraved. She became an evil deity who gave birth to a deformed demon, U Thlen, who she abandoned in a cave at the foot of the Pomdoloï falls. As legend would have it, Thlen was an evil creature with super-natural powers who lived in the wilderness of Sohra. His favourite form was that of a gigantic python. The powerful god, Suitnoh provided a solution to get rid of U Thlen who had started eating up the people on their way to the market place. An iron ball was thrust down his throat and he vanished. Suitnoh asked everyone to consume the flesh of U Thlen in one day. However, an old woman forgot this instruction and kept some for her son leading to the resurrection of U Thlen who then tempted the old woman with riches. He eventually pushed her to get human beings to satiate his hunger and hence the practice of hiring paid killers for U Thlen. (A brief summary from Nongkynrih’s retelling of the legend of U Thlen, Refer: “U Thlen: the man-eating serpent”).

According to Nongkynrih, the legend of the man-eating serpent is much talked about and now signifies “the cause of a kind of deadly illness where a person loses his natural colour, grows thin and weak, with a strange bloatedness about his face and belly” (33). One can read into this story from two perspectives: One, that the onus of the evil lies on the women of Cherra as U Thlen is begotten of a harlot; two, that later it is an old woman who “forgets” to give the remaining piece of U Thlen’s body to her son to eat. The Biblical parallels also draw notice. The appearance of the serpent and the idea of temptation point towards Eve. But that is where this parallel ends. The Khasi legend has its own specificity. Sohra is seen through and presented by means of the lens of this tale that has been

passed orally from generation to generation. The death of UThlen “cut deep wounds into the land”. The geographic structure of the place, and its gorges are likened to the mouth of UThlen who would wait for his victims on the market-day. The ordinary people are the “desperate victims” who became food for the monster. But more importantly, an interpretation that gains ground is how the legend can be compared to the current situation in Meghalaya where the monster of insurgency makes the ordinary people its victim. In this way one can mark that poets make creative use of myths in different ways in the society.

This idea moves into the next stanza as the poet remarks how all is barren in Cherra. This sense of unproductivity is intensified by another factor. The people of Cherra have left their habitat and moved to other places leaving their homeland barren. Trees, too, have left the place leaving a “lowly breed like brush”. Who is the “lowly breed”? Whereas no clear answer emerges, there is a suggestion that it could possibly be the people left behind and who are seen as ineffectual. According to the Collins dictionary, “brush” refers to “an area of rough open land covered with small bushes and trees” Subashish Bhattacharjee and Saikat Guha have observed:

The region seems prehistoric in its barren wilderness. The only means of cultivation in some of the green North-eastern hills is *jhum* (slash-and-burn cultivation) which is practiced on the slopes of hills, but its productivity is very low. As a result, poverty reigns supreme over the hilly region... The grey rocks appear to him sages, the epitome of tolerance, which renders the unruly landscape bearable to him. It is also his profound love for his native land, bearing in its bosom the scars of insurgencies, that infuses tolerance within him... (85)

“The Ancient Rocks of Cherra” indicates that which is left behind and is neither productive nor organised. Insurgency and lack of means to improve productivity have resulted in the barren state of Cherra. The poet indicates that whatever be the situation, the dark-grey rocks of Cherra spell home to him. It asserts the desire to call people back to their space so they could bind with the historicity of the place, however stark. In “Hard-edged Modernism: contemporary poetry in North-east India” Nongkynrih has identified a kind of rootedness in the poetry from the North-East:

This same rootedness is visible everywhere in the poetry of the North-East today. The roots of their beloved land; the roots of their people’s culture; the roots of their times; and most of all, the roots of the past that is “lost” to them, have sunk deep into their psyche. And this is the chief reason why their poetry is found to be bonding—even though it may come from “the very different regions... (41)

The ancient rocks of Cherra, like the Himalayas, have been present all along. Nongkynrih’s attempt at reviving the sage-like quality of the rocks lends new meaning to the presence of the rocks of Cherra. The poem is both a creative act and one of recovery that adds new dimensions to poetry from the North-East. It is suggested that the rocks of Sohra have stood the test of time and will also overcome the phase of insurgency.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

This chapter has introduced the debates around Indian English Poetry with special focus on the idea of link between region and literature. It has emphasised, too, a vital relationship between literature and society. The unit has also presented a brief history of the beginnings of English in the Khasi region of the North-East. The insurgency and lack of political will created a dismal mood in the region. The poet, Nongkynrih struggles against all odds in these two poems to accept reality and to look for hope in the ancient history of Sohra.

1.7 GLOSSARY

- Myth** : Myth refers to a set of beliefs of a community of people. These are generally transmitted from one generation to the next.
- Legend** : It is a story that people believe in and which evolves through time, there being no historical veracity in it.
- Oral Narratives** : These are stories that are narrated and not written down. The transmission is oral. They are written down much later in the day.
- Insurgency** : Unrest and rebellion against the forces of the state.

1.8 QUESTIONS

- 1) How will you position English poetry from the North-East within the category of Indian English?
- 2) Who are the Shillong poets? Describe the different aspects of their poetry?
- 3) Discuss the significance of the title of the poem, “The Colour of Truth”.
- 4) Describe the myth used in the poem “The Ancient Rocks of Cherra”.
- 5) Comment critically on the poems of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih.

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