

Metaphysics of Nature in Northeast Indian Writing in English

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Abstract:

In his *The Red River and the Blue Hill* (1954), Hem Barua for the first time canonically defined the Northeast India. Writing in English in the Northeast cropped up sporadically thereafter and was intensified after 2000 AD. The Northeast is geographically sandwiched between two major biodiversity hotspots of India. The writing in prose has been a major bulk in nature writing, though poetry has some significant reflections on nature. Nature has been glorified, mystified, colonized and sympathized in this regional literature in English, the so-called new literature, which is a distanced corpus of Indian English Literature as is the physical presence of the region from the mainland of India. Select works of select major/ minor writers like Hem Barua, Arup Kumar Dutta, Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai, Robin S. Ngangom, Temsula Ao, Sanjoy Hazarika, Ratan Thiyam, Niranjan Chakma, Lalitluangliana Khiangte, Guru T Ladakhi, and Rajendra Bhandari, have been very briefly discussed to analyze the themes and concepts.

Keywords: Red River, Blue Hill, *Hynniewtrep*, *Kelhoukevira*, *Kepenuopfü*, *Black Hill*.

The Northeast of India cohabits with two major biodiversity hotspots of India, namely, the Eastern Himalayan and the Indo-Burman biodiversity hotspots. Since the mythological eras, the region has been famous for its rich flora and fauna, picturesque landscape with myriad hills, valleys, rivers, springs, lakes, and above all, the so-called nature's paradise, which have been diversely depicted in the vernacular literatures of the region and so also in the writings in English from eight different provinces of this region in poetry as well as fictional, non-fictional and dramatic

prose. The representation of nature in this writing from this region of India, is found more in the non-fictional and fictional prose and less in poetry and dramatic prose/ poetry in exploring scenes, values, myths, mysteries and mysticism. Depiction of Nature in its myriad dimensions varies from the Deep Ecological values of Vedic and post-Vedic times to the post-industrial most recent era of waste colonialism and shallow ecological concerns, from mystical, mythical and cosmic concepts to the nude electronic ecology, both in their physical and metaphysical dimensions. The Northeast is a grand confluence of cultures as well as biodiversities. Its natural potentialities are beyond easy comprehension due to their physical diversities, complexities and haziness, and hence 'nature' here is an excellent metaphysical entity.

The grandest litterateur-saint-prophet of the Northeast, Srimanta Sankaradeva, in his play titled *Rukmini Haran* depicts the beauty of Rukmini, consort of Lord Krishna, in comparing her with some traditional images: "... She has grown up like the beautiful Moon... Her exquisite hands make gold look pale. Her legs are like the new blown flowers" (178). *The Red River and the Blue Hill* (1954) by Hem Barua, the first ever prose account of the Northeast, gives a detailed depiction of nature,

culture, history, geography, ethnodynamics and mythological significance of the region. His description of Kamarupa, the most prominent part of region as depicted in the 7th century account of Hiuen Tsang may be a representative account of nature in prose.

Sanjoy Hazarika in his *Strangers of Mist* captures the entire panorama of nature in the Northeast in his pithy lines: “India’s Northeast, . . . , is part of a great tropical rainforest that stretches from the foothills of the Himalayas to the tip of the Malaysian Peninsula and the mouth of the Mekong river as it flows into the Gulf of Tonkin. . . . it also is home and sanctuary. . . with its mist-clad hills, lush green forests and smooth valleys, the bewildering range of its languages and the rich, colourful mix of its people, ranging from former head-hunters to city slickers. . . . Its forests of pine, teak, sal and mangrove swamps are being maimed by plunderers. Yet, thick bamboo, coconut and banana groves, rubber and tea plantations, clusters of frangipani and bougainvillea still dot the country side. Its hills are terraced with rice fields. So are its steamy plains.” (xv)

Hem Barua recounts the Ahoms’ expedition into the Brahmaputra Valley in 1228 AD from upper Burma hailing it as *mung dun chun kham* (the country of golden gardens) (12) and naming the Brahmaputra as *Nam-Dao-phi* (the river of star-god) (ibid. 6). This biggest river of the region has two river islets, namely, Majuli and Umananda as the chief centre of the neo-Vaishnavite culture and a centre of Saivite culture of Assam respectively. This mythical river, which was cleft out of the Brahmakunda situated amidst the four mountains of the Himalayas, namely, Kailash, Gandhamadan, Jarundhi and Sambwartaka, by the sage Parasurama with his axe, to make it flow through Kamarupa and sanctify the land (Dutta 8), has a number of tributaries: the glacier-fed tributaries on the north are the Subansiri, Bharali, Barnadi,

Manas, and the Sonkosh and the tributaries on the south are the Dihing, Disang, Dikhau, Dhansiri, and Kalang. It is fed on its course by 57 tributaries on the north bank and 33 on its south bank (ibid. 75). The Brahmaputra on its eastern source is bounded with stretches of summer rice and mustard cultivations, thick woods and wild ferns. As this rapidly flowing great river with strong undercurrents runs through the valley, it looks like a ribbon in the midst of the mountain ranges. Deforestation for tea-plantation, growing human and urban habitation and industrialization has resulted in decimation of forests and rare animals. The British tea planters in those days routinely shot down two or three rhinoceroses before breakfast. Innumerable birds were slaughtered. Now the forested areas of the valley and hills have shrunk alarmingly. The wild animals are now to be guarded for their protection in sanctuaries. The Brahmaputra Valley has the highest concentration of such sanctuaries, like the Kaziranga and Manas National Parks, Pabha, Sonai-Rupai, Laokhoa, Orang and Pabitora wild-life sanctuaries. Kaziranga along with the population of wild-buffalo, rhino, and elephants, has four different types of deer.

The Brahmaputra with the two islets is a unique natural system with a mega biodiversity. “In length, the Brahmaputra is only the twenty-fifth largest river, but in latent energy and dynamism it is equal to any river-system in the world” (ibid. 86). The Brahmaputra river system occupies one tenth of the valley. The fertile alluvial soil and a prolonged season of heavy rainfall ensure the valley and the surrounding hills with an amazing array of flora and fauna. The marshy, low land areas close to the Brahmaputra and some of its tributaries in the plains have a typical wetland ecosystem of savanna or grassland. The grasslands consist of a medley of *Saccharum Elephantinus* (Barotakher), *Erianthus Ravange* (Ikora), *Imperata Cylindrica* (Ulnkher). *Pollinia Ciliata* (Hankher),

Phragmites Karka (Khagori), *Arundo Donax* (Nal), etc. On the foot hills and hills there are tropical and subtropical forests to a height of around 2,000 metres, consisting of big and small trees and thick undergrowth of ferns, creepers and climbers.

Ratan Thiyam's depiction of nature's mystic grandeur in realizing the religion of humanity is exposed in celestial terms of spirits and nymphs protecting cosmic values and safeguarding the humanity. The urge for the honesty and trust for safe maintenance of the world is necessitated in our love for mother Earth. Hence in his play titled *My Earth, My Love* in his *Manipur Trilogy*, the playwright introduces the gist of the purposes of the creation and role of the human beings whose aberration from their responsibility will endanger our lives and the world itself:

... , it's about the creation of the earth/from the bamboo leaves, long ago/ the song of flowers, the sublime message/... /the ultimate Immortal Voice/ has created the mind of human beings/ it's about it// ... lighting the hills thrown by nine senior Gods/ and caught by seven Celestial Nymphs/... / who can assume any form they want./ Assuming the form of birds,/ they flew all over the world/ and carried out their duties/ incarnated as human beings. (Thiyam 51-52)

Poetry in English exposes the myths, mysteries and visionary gleams of the passionate neo-romantics, who amidst the realities of late twentieth century aesthetic indeterminacies, started dreaming of both the ancient and the recent times with deep nostalgia to remind the youth of days of innocence and experience, and the mystical blue hills as depicted by Easterine Kire as early as 1982 describing the brave onslaught of legendary Naga heroes on their alien invaders and the unique Utopian vision of the Nagas. The quoted lines below depict the glory of Utopia,

the mythical world of plenty that vanished with the alien intruders who brought sorrow to the golden world of the Nagas:

The golden fields, they lay unrequited and sere/
as blood freely flowed/ and mingled with the
rains/ stained the virgin soil/ like a thousand
scarlet sunsets/streaking the evening sky/
back of the blue, blue hills....

while her fields lay barren and desecrated/
her songs sacrificed to the wind/ her warriors
to great spirit/ they trampled her silent hills/
and squeezed the life out of her/ and washed
their guilt in her blood, /washed their guilt in
her blood. ("Kelhoukevira" 22-23)

The tribes lived in the bosom of virgin nature and their association with nature was so pristine and honest that that cannot be assessed appropriately. Now everything has changed and they have alienated themselves from nature and their native land seems alien to them, and now that has been metamorphosed into tragic realities losing its magic divinity. Hence Temsula feels intrigued:

The sounds and sights/ Have altered/ In my
hills/ Once they hummed/ with bird-songs/
And happy gurgling brooks/ like running
silver/ with shoals of many fish/

The trees were many /Happy, verdant, green/
The seasons playing magic/ On their many-
splendoured sheen./...

But today, I no longer knew my hills/ The
bird song is gone/ Replaced by the staccato/
of sophisticated weaponry/ The rivers are
running red,/ The hillsides are bare/ And the
seasons/ Have lost their magic. (*Songs of
Many Moods* 49)

Again about the forests and the earth as a whole, the insensible human has not left anything free from his

torture, ruthlessness and thereby has colonized the nature to acutely insensible exploitation:

Alas for the forest/ which now lies silent/
stunned and stumped/ with the evidence/ of
her rape./ As on her breasts/ the elephants
trample/ the lorries rumble/ loaded with her
treasures/ bound for the mills/ at the foot hills.
(*Songs That Tell* 45)

The exotic land of *Hynniewtrep* with the mythical seven huts of Meghalaya has been invoked in passionate lines of Robin S. Ngangom, blending myth with memory and pining for his homeland left behind to be a sojourner in an alien land which has enticed him to another paradise, the “crucible of hearts” (33):

Solitary light/ on eastern hills/ tender rivulet/
evening bells,/ sad widow,/ forgotten
rambling rose/ poised/ for the renegade’s
hand./.../ Far away green/ and brown carpet/
woven with gentle woollens/ of rain and fog/
elusive downpour,/ elusive sky,/ raindrop/
shattering in the eye....

woman with mouth of plum,/ girl with feet/
of opaque stone./...stream of soil/ to
rainforests/ darker than sky./ Shimmering
cascade,/ nude twilight/ leaning into the eyes/
root of arterial rivers./.../ Deep-burning/
ancient rice-wine. (“Ode to Hynniewtrep”,
32-33)

The mythical *Hynniewtrep*, the first love of this passionate persona, with her mystical and mysterious beauty, made him forget the “placid pools of Loktak” (ibid. 28) and thus he remained a sojourner at Shillong tolerating the sting of nostalgia of his homeland.

Niranjana Chakma of Tripura, nostalgic of the sylvan habitat of his homeland, and of the murmuring rivulets dancing down the valley, is worried about the “identities and legal rights” (76) of the birds devastated in violent storms:

After each and every violent storm/ An
immense silence looms over the hills/
Devastated birds then get confused
overwhelmingly/ Would they go back to their
routed nests/ Or whether they would go in
search of grains!/. . . .Recently, regarding their
identities and legal rights/ A tumultuous debate
was held in Geneva/. . . (“Ballads of the
Forest” 76)

The southeastern hills (Lushai Hills) of Mizoram are another paradise of nature’s plenty, where blue hills turn green and display their magic:

Let’s look around greenish mountain spread
around,/ Where all the creatures live in sweet
repose way,/ All lovely wild jungle stars
beneath the brush,/ Dwell in peaceful abode
as serene clouds unfold// On clear bright day
from the spot of lofty peak,/ Gladden by
mirthful air and healing breeze,/ Vale of uphill
cheerful pastures seen on high,/ Ne’er we’ll
forget that shine forth upon clouded hills/
(*Khiangte* 56)

Guru T. Ladakhi in his haikus has captured the glory of natural environment of Sikkim without exposing his selfish claims. The physical nature gleams in the glitter of its own glory unfading, untainted and unspoiled: “Green bamboos/ sway in the summer breeze/ scent of mangoes- darkening sky/ rumble of distant thunder/ temple gong- stars dim/ a friend’s passing heaps memories/ burdens of the living.” (“Haikus” 63)

Rajendra Bhandari from Sikkim also paints the mystery of nature who finds pleasure in depicting mystic designs of nature in his romantic outpour of words: “The naked sky is the witness./ The sultry sun is the witness./.../Reclaiming them from sliding land/ I’ve lifted them from/ the forests, the lowlands,/ the grain fields, the cliffs.” (“Four Poems” 19)

The major quantum of poetry in English from Northeast neither glorifies nor depicts nature, on the other hand, it laments the sad denuded state of natural environment and describes how the human has mutilated and exploited nature and created deep scars on her body and neglected and oppressed her in spite of his sheer dependence on her for all his needs. The Adis in Arunachal have come out of the deep dense forests and settled in towns. Hence Mamang Dai exposes a deep sense of disbelief in her emotional remembrance of the past of her tribe:

We left the tall trees standing/ We left the children playing/ We left the women talking/ and men were predicting/ good harvests or bad/ that winged summer we left/ racing with the leopards of morning. ("Sky Song": *River Poems*, 22)

A social scientist concerned of the injustice done to the environment (referring to the twenty six dams built/ proposed on river Teesta) in the name of development, protests of the insane anthropocentrism:

The Teesta is dead / Killed with rocks and dynamite/ Killed by cement and brick/ The winds howl no more/ Thundering down its valley/ Instead a simpering sad whisper/ Touches a leaf or two of the dusty dried up trees/ Lining the hills/ Looking down in tired despair.../.../ The Teesta's death won't make it/ .../ Because it's only a river after all/ And a river has no voice... (Poem by Sanjoy Hazarika in *Strangers No More* 233-234)

The fictional narratives that explore the adventures of the colonizer British in the hills of Arunachal in cutting roads through the hills or levelling the hills or blowing off the hill tops, expose the dense deep forests and hills and beauty and ferocity of those landscapes where many humans and animals got sacrificed:

... Those who went and returned said the forest and skies were like nothing they had seen before. ... In the lashing rain and the wet earth that buried men up to their waists they drove elephants to cross rivers, remove logs and trample the jungle. The elephants strained and quivered to the shouts of their mahouts, slipped, struggled, knelt, struggled on, and many of the poor animals lost their footing and hurtled off the mountainside bellowing like mythical beasts with their eyes rolled up skywards... In the swampy valleys men died like flies, shivering with fever and fear. (Dai, *Legends* 39)

Before the colonizers intruded into the tribal world, the nature was different, the hills were inhabited by many spirits, and the life was accorded with the ways of nature. The changes came with the alien intruders and the tribal world in spite of its resistance to the aliens could not be successful in driving them away. In that old world, the nature was the regulator of life. Life had its own pace and "everything, good and bad, was inevitable" (ibid. 43). About that mysterious old world the narrator reveals:

... there had existed a green and virgin land under a gracious and just rule. The old chieftains received obeisance because they were akin to the gods... In a dispute the chiefs would look up to the sky, consult the sacred fire, speak to the spirits and there would be justice. Food was sown, harvested, stored and dispensed fairly. ... but the big trees were brought down. The spirits of our ancestors who dwelt in these high and secret places fell with the trees. ... The canopy of shelter and tradition had fallen... (ibid. 42)

The nature in the animist world is inhabited by so many evil spirits. In *The Legends of Pensam* and

The Black Hill, Mamang Dai explores the Adi cosmology and ecotheosophy and enlists a number of evils and evil spirits that live in the surrounding environment of the tribes. The following are the different categories of evils like: (i) supernatural evils, (ii) physical evils, (iii) symbolic evils, (iv) ecological evils, and (v) mysterious/ magical evils (Das 68-78). In *The Black Hill* also evils like the fire demon (188), the *uyus*, the evil spirit (171/191) *ksha*-ghosts/ evil spirits (76), certain stones (127), strange birds (86), outsiders (148) and several unlucky symptoms like laughing loudly (157), birth of twins (85), loud cry of unseen birds (76), and women wading across rivers/ streams at night (64), have been highlighted. Unlike the mystical blue hills of the region, the black hill stands for mysteries of dark steep high hill of Zayul valley near the headwaters of Dau River, the ominous shadow-like Black Hill, the bleak black hill, and finally the burnt Black Hill (267), ambushed and burnt by the British soldiers.

The magic realist narratives of Easterine Kire reveal many secrets of hilly terrain of Nagaland and beyond. Stones, hills, streams, rivers, spirits, were-tigers, herbs and other elements of nature and the diverse quests of her protagonists amidst the mosaic of nature make her narratives enchanting where beauty, bounty, divinity, mystery, mystical grandeur and ferocity of wild nature are blended superbly. The nature assumes human dimensions in her narratives: “The forest is my wife” (*When the River Sleeps* 7) says Vilie, the hunter protagonist. Again the protagonist’s strange encounter with the river is shown as: “The river was almost human as it pushed him down and under, down and under, and the water rushed at him as though it would strangle him. He was shocked at the violence of the river. ... Then he stopped struggling and concentrated instead on the spirit words he had learnt: “Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, stand aside death! Kepenuopfü fights for me, today is my duty! I

claim the wealth of the river because mine is the greater spirit. To him who has the greater spirit belongs the stone!” (103). In spite of ecological concerns of several Northeasterners, Easterine still invokes the pristine nature whereas Mamang Dai invokes the issues of both the postcolonial disasters and the pristinity of the nature of Arunachal.

The nature writing in English from Northeast India has addressed myriad issues like glorification of the rich biodiversity of the region and its significance as experienced by Hiuen Tsang, the scholar- pilgrim, the colonial intruders like the Ahoms, Muslims, Burmese, Britishers, American Baptists and other missionaries. Like nature-writing movements of other parts of the world, in the Northeast Indian Writing in English, there have been mystical trends of nature writing, and the ecological movements critiquing the oppression on nature by the colonial explorers as has been narrated in several fictional, non-fictional narratives and by some poets also. Most of the multi-ethnic writers have emphasized on eco-chronicling the animist principles, checking eco-hazards and waste colonialism in terms of ecofeminism, and creation spirituality/ spiritual ecology. As a whole the nature writing is more available in prose than in poetry as poetry has been more personal, reflective, mystical and anthropocentric than ecocentric.

Notes:

Brahmakunda: As depicted in several mythologies, the Brahmaputra flows from the Brahmakunda/ Lauhitya Ganga, a lake of forty miles’ length amidst the four mountains which absolved Sage Parasurama of the sins of matricide.

Hynniewtre meaning “Seven Huts” as per the Khasi myth. The ancestors of Khasis were heavenly beings of sixteen families descended from heaven through a connecting tree for enjoying earthly pleasures. Once while seven families were still on the earth, the tree was cut accidentally and hence the seven families built seven huts to live on the earth.

Kelhoukevira: the Utopia [(*Kelhou*= Life)+ (*kevi*=good)+ (*ra*= land/village/region)= where life is good]

Kepenuopfü: The Creator deity worshipped by Angami Nagas/ the Tenyimia community, i.e., birth spirit/ supreme God.

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