Violence to what end?

Literary expressions in the north-east
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Violence is enmeshed in the literary culture of north-east India because of long standing oppressive binaries of militarism and militancy it has been subjected to. By responding to violence, several writers have not just emphasised the syncretistic nature of the different literary cultures but also rejected straightjacketing of their expression as manifestations of their violence-prone existence alone.

Violence, a recurring motif in literature, is emblematic of disorder and chaos which jeopardises thought processes and militate against the status quo. Its manifestation in literature and art can be read as an internalisation of that anarchy. Demonic violence has long been a characteristic trait of human civilisation, but violent moments also convey an urgency to communicate. Depicting violence, which often involves sifting for clarity amid efforts to obfuscate the truth, is a difficult exercise in which literary biases have to be discarded.

Much of the discussion today surrounding the literature of north-east India focuses on violence as a thematic interest. The literature of north-east India, which has gained a lot of attention in the last three decades, and especially in the last one and a half decades, has attracted interest from other parts of the country due to this cult of violence. This interest was first witnessed in the social sciences in the 1980s when almost all discourses on north-east India veered towards questions of ethnicity and violence. Mainstream publishing houses capitalised on this trend, publishing books and manuscripts as a spinoff of seminars and conferences.

Literature: A Possible Antidote to Violence

Two years back, a publishing house based in Delhi held a three day meet on violence in north-east India titled “Cultures of Peace”, and how writers could bring about an exegesis of peace through their writing. There were endless discussions on the subject, but these remotely touched upon peace-building as an idea. Geopolitical issues such as the Assam-Nagaland border dispute were also discussed, but, lamentably, the discussion on how creative writing can actually be an antidote to violence and restore sanity in a world of
disorderliness was glossed over.

Speaker after speaker at the meet took to rhetoric to reel off examples of conflict in north-east India. But where was the concept of underlying peace that the theme “Cultures of Peace” was supposed to bring forth? Not one writer mentioned the intercultural interactions in the region centred around literature and poetry. It remained untold that many of the established Assamese writers in Assam, such as Rong Bong Terang, Sameer Tanti and Sananta Tanti, are from the tribal communities of Assam or say Arunachal Pradesh. Perhaps even fewer would know that there is a cluster of Manipuri poets in the Bengali dominated Barak Valley of Assam.

For over two decades, Pijush Dhar, a Bengali poet based in Shillong, published a magazine – Paharia (From the Hills) where Bengali translations of Khasi, Assamese and Bodo poetry were published. This was one of the attempts to forge ethnic harmony using the “weapon” of literature. Anupama Basumatary, who is from the Bodo community, prefers to write in Assamese irrespective of the fact that the community has a separate Bodo Sahitya Sabha – as distinct from the Assam Sahitya Sabha – and that the Bodos have long been agitating for an independent state carved out of Assam. Writers writing in the language of their choice are taken for granted when that choice itself is symptomatic of the amorphous nature of linguistic culture in the north-east.

Agony of the Common man

I came out of the meet a shaken person because most participants emphasised the searing differences within the communities of north-east India; differences that politicians try to maintain and encourage. The fact is that writers of north-east India use violence as a reactionary motif to respond to their surroundings but not necessarily to emphasise their violence-prone existence. Bijoya Sawian, a novelist from Meghalaya, in her perspicacious novel, The Shadow Men speaks poetically about violence-prone Shillong, which breeds affection and love in the protagonist – a lady who was born and brought up there and now lives in Delhi. She comes to Shillong to meet her old school friend and her family, beckoned by her childhood memory of Shillong and her school. But she gets entangled in violence and bears witness to a brutal killing. She sees one killing after another revealing a world of disaffection, heinous crime and lust for blood and money. But when she hears after a few years that the situation has improved considerably, there is suppressed euphoria.

When Thangjam Ibopishak, the Manipuri poet, exclaims in one of his poems through an allegorical technique that he wants to be killed by an Indian bullet and not by the bullet of terrorists, he is reclaiming identity and voicing the trauma of a desperate soul. Recurring in contemporary poetry of north-east India, is the absolutism of violence pinning the common man down between the oppressive binaries of militarism and militancy. However, there are also poets writing in English such as Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Robin S Ngangom, Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih who subvert such concern with
violence by evoking the beauty of natural surroundings and reviving folk, oral and mythic
traditions. If this is indeed a political solution, one does not know.

Violence and art go together in this scenario and should not be viewed as disparate
elements. A great attempt was made by two poets from Shillong, Robin S Ngangom and
Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih when they brought out a collection of north-east Indian poetry,
published by Penguin India, a couple of years back. An eclectic collection, the volume
includes poetry in a language such as Kok Borok spoken by the Tea Tribes of Tripura to
writings of Bengali poets residing in north-east India, who animatedly write about the ethos
of the region. This anthology is an intrepid voice of the community of poets irrespective of
their ethnic communities. Some of the poets of Meghalaya and Tripura are bilingual and
write both in Khasi and English and Kok Borok and Bengali. Literature and subversive
politics cannot co-exist but rather exist as conflicting currents in the region.

A political solution to violence is a long and difficult process, but there may be an aesthetic
solution, however temporary its nature may be. This effort could bring about a literary
tension, and generate in its wake a felt experience, something which can be universally
comprehended. Contemporary north-east Indian poetry is exactly a realisation of this
experience.