

# Ethno-Narratives

Identity and Experience in North East India



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Edited by  
Sukalpa Bhattacharjee  
Rajesh Dev

The specific ethno-narratives of various communities of North East India with a wide range of themes; starting from the construction of identities through folk and ethno-narratives to political and historical structuring of ethnic identities have been contributed by scholars, known both for their erudition and commitment, in this volume. Most of the articles have drawn upon a methodology of insider's and participant perspective in order to portray the experiential aspects of claims of community and identity. The book may be of the interest to those interested in the subject and in the North East India.

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**Dr. Sukalpa Bhattacharjee** teaches English at North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. She has lectured in various Universities of Europe and Asia. She has authored, *Post-Colonial Literature: Essays on Gender, Theory and Genres* and is one of the Editor-Contributor for *Human Rights and Insurgency: The North-East India* and contributed to Anthologies on Multi Ethnic Literatures of United States (MELUS), Literary Theory, Cultural Studies and journals on Postcolonial Studies.

**Dr. Rajesh Dev** teaches Political Science at Women's College, Shillong and is also currently visiting faculty at the Department of Law, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. He has contributed essays to edited volumes and journals of repute and is a regular contributor to regional and national dailies.

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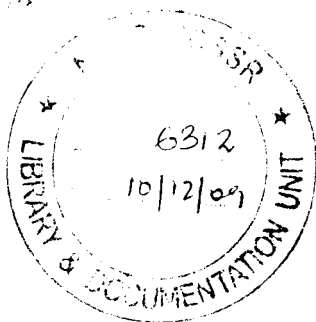
*Editors*

**Sukalpa Bhattacharjee**  
**Rajesh Dev**



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# Contents

*Preface / iii*

*Contributors / vii*

## **1. Introduction / 1**

Identity and Experience in North East India

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### ETHNO-NARRATIVES

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## **2. Gender and Power / 15**

Women-Centred Narratives from Ao-Naga Folklore

*Temsula Ao*

## **3. The Signifying Dimensions of the Folk / 26**

A Study of Ka 'Tiew Larun

*Esther Syiem*

## **4. Descent of the 'Seven Huts' / 40**

Folk Narrative as Structure of the Khasi Pnar Consciousness

*Abhijit Choudhury*

---

### CONSTRUCTIONS OF ETHNIC NARRATIVES

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## **5. Resistance in Verse / 67**

*Sajal Nag*

## **6. Narratives Claims and Identity Impasse / 79**

The Experiences of the Nowhere People

*Rajesh Dev*

- 7. Wisdom and Reason / 92**  
Decolonizing Ethnography in North East India  
*Prasenjit Biswas*

---

IDENTITY AND EXPERIENCE

---

- 8. Representation of Gender / 135**  
Marginality in the Visual Narrative of M.H. Barbhuyan  
*Moushumi Kandali*
- 9. The Failed Narratives of North East India / 147**  
Sujata Miri's The Broken Circle  
*Zilkie Janer*
- 10. Sylheti Narratives / 153**  
Memory to Identity  
*Sukalpa Bhattacharjee*
- 11. Negotiating Frontier Spaces / 165**  
Narratives and the Idea of a 'Goalparia' Identity  
*Sanghamitra Misra*
- 12. Myths, Tradition and Identity / 187**  
Women in Khasi Matriliney  
*Patricia Mukhim*

# 1

## Introduction

### *Identity and Experience in North East India*

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The book pinpoints the source of ethnic identities in the concrete experiential aspects of community, which incorporates the relationship between the self and the other. Most often the other is construed in terms of exclusion, but what is significant from the point of view of narrative is a representation of the other, in one's own stories and tales. In such representations, the other is enmeshed in the lived experience of the self. The crucial point, however, is that, such lived experiences are narrated, although they may not have been actually lived. This introduces a rich imagination of the relationship between real life form to art, which exists in a mutual exchange involving the self as narrator and the other as co-participant in a story of life.

An analytical enterprise like the present one holds on to a belief that stories involving self-other relationship have an in-built element of universality at least in the domain in which it is intended. Therefore, circulation of narratives is a must for artistic survival and appreciation. Narratives also tend to be domain specific; the domains include culture, myths, rituals and beliefs. Such domains again run through various disciplinary orientations, starting from ethnography to literature and history. Narratives derive their sustenance not from an already pre-disposed value judgment or categorization into true or false but from a sense of shared meaning that evolves through an act of narration. This brings in the question of the agency of narration, that is, how such narratives create the sense it conveys and who are



its target audience? In other words, how does one distinguish between authority and authorship that tends to get identified with the narrator who authenticates her narratives from a perspective? The perspectives keep evolving: it could be called a first, second or third person perspective, following how narrators are situated within the act of narration.

This brings one to the question of narrative construction of identity that in one sense is the relationship between personal experience and public meanings; which involves the subjectivity of choices and the objectivity of social and cultural locations. The problem before a cultural critic is bridging the gap between real and constructed identities and “how they can be politically and epistemically significant, on the one hand, and variable, nonessential, and radically historical, on the other.”<sup>1</sup> This brings us to the problems of identity and how narrative offers either a way out of these problem in a therapeutic sense or simply allows the possibility of transfiguration. Both ways, narratives provide a space for connecting subjectivity and identity, within which a historical, ideological and political interplay between the sense of belonging to an identity and its constitutive grounds operate. The end product of such interplay between subjectivities and identities is an alternative discourse of sociality that involves ethical and ontological issues.

Narrative identity is also based on a responsibility towards the other. The self of the narrator is enacted through this responsibility of constructing spaces for dialogue and solidarity in situations of conflict. Narrative, through a programme of shared meanings and memories reconstructs cultural and political communities, creating new spaces for living together. In imagining a narrative community with shared meanings and memories one also sees possibilities of interventionist roles for the narrative actors. Through a dialogic encounter, with otherness, narrative creates a space for translation and transcription of identities operating in a relay between apparently irreducible differences. Such a translation and transcription also helps to examine the concepts of the dialogic, in-betweenness and a third space that also problematizes the obstacles to dialogic encounter through narrative. In Bakhtin (1990)<sup>2</sup> one finds the possibilities of a dialogical encounter through what he calls a ‘heteroglossic’ or a multi-

voiced character of linguistic exchanges. In such a case meanings emanate from the domain or context—specific linguistic exchanges between narrative actors. Again Lyotard talks of *differend* (Lyotard, 1983)<sup>3</sup> which exists in a situation of irreducible or incommensurable difference between individuals or communities in linguistic exchanges as in the case of monotheisms or conflicting claims of identities, where meaning within the conflicting paradigms cannot be translated. In such cases of frustrated or failed linguistic exchanges arising out of intranslatability of meanings, one is left with the dialogue of the deaf. This is one very serious fallout of a failed narrative, which has been explicated in this volume.

In overcoming such a situation, of the dialogue of the deaf, the work of Paul Ricoeur (1996)<sup>4</sup> offers redemption by offering the possibilities of analysis of the ethical and linguistic character of narrative at the level of subjectivity and identity, that emerge in a certain context of linguistic encounter. This discourse about the ethical principles involved in the 'exchange of memories' and in 'translation' between cultures guides pedagogical action towards new forms of sociality and narratives of emancipation that implicitly rejects forms of oppression and violence. This brings us closer to Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity which points to the idea of the self as a storied self, an entity made of stories who is entangled in the play of story telling of the self by the other and vice versa. Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity is actually grounded in an ontology deriving from Heidegger's (1962)<sup>5</sup> emphasis of temporality as the defining characteristics of human beings.

Time, then, is a very important determinant for any understanding of being, when one thinks of oneself as a conscious being. This is at the root of our feeling that we exist as storied self in time, as beings in time, dispersed between a remembered or forgotten past, a vanishing present and in the anticipation of a uncertain future. For each subject of narrative the consciousness of 'the having-been', 'the making-present' and the 'coming-towards' constitute the three moments, of one's being-in-the-world. They also mark the space in which we question ourselves as to our way of being of a storied self. In thinking about the problem of subjectivity and of the possibility of transforming identities, we are tied to the spacing and tracing of time, in the form of memory and narrative, which allows us access

both to the inter subjective dimension of existence and to the historical framing of culture.

The idea of narrative identity that Ricoeur develops stresses the view that every identity is “mingled with that of others in such a way as to engender second order stories which are themselves intersections between numerous stories... We are literally ‘entangled in stories’ “(Ricoeur, 1996: 6).<sup>6</sup> Further, Ricoeur (1992)<sup>7</sup> conceptualizes narrative as a way of intersection between ‘the time of the soul’ with the time of the world. It may be mentioned here that Labov and Waletzky’s (1967)<sup>8</sup> hypothesis also holds that fundamental narrative structures are to be found in oral versions of personal experience, which is the ordinary narratives of everyday life. Again, narratives of everyday life also have a performative element as described in socio-linguistic studies. This aspect of performativity in narratives describes uniqueness involved in dramatized oral narratives. The idea that narratives are often performances had first emerged in the work of Hymes and Goffman; and has been explored best in Wolfson.<sup>9</sup>

This is to say that stories and memories express the time of being-in-the world, on the one hand and the being-with the duration of events and experiences, on the other. Again, every culture exhibits an inscription of shared and collective memories which reflect the biographical and historical dimensions of being-in-the world and being-with, which are lived in everyday life. A narrative self emerges with a narrative identity with the intersection of these two narratives, weaving personal into the collective. This volume attempts to trace the happening of such a narrative self and a narrative identity because communities, after all, depend on sharing stories of belonging and narratives of becoming. From individual autobiography and biography to accounts of familial ethnic generations, narratives define communities. The enterprise of the editors of this volume is to reconstruct the narrative communities of NE-India through social, cultural and pedagogical practices. In direct or indirect ways the articles in this volume ask and interrogate questions like — Does narrative discourse give knowledge? Is such, knowledge unique, particularly, in constructing a narrative identity? Narratives, however, have competing and complementary functions and that is why narratives have important roles in our social, cultural and political lives.

Ethno-narratives are a special genre of narratives that involve a transformation of the self and the community, in a mutual interrelationship. In the context of NE-India, such a transformation becomes imminent in the possibilities of redefining an identity and its crises within. Identity claims in North East India emerge from the lived space of intercultural and interethnic conflicts, but it does not evolve into a paradigm of conflict resolution. In an ironic sense such conflict are the resources for generation of specific identity narratives. Ethno-narratives, therefore, mostly divides the world up into ours versus theirs, but that is not the be all and end all of narrative identities. One can look at such narratives as merely instrumental, but this would undermine the emancipatory potential of culturally rooted narratives. Two aspects of ethno-narratives: instrumentality and rootedness intermingle in a livewire tension between the self and the other. This tension assumes an experiential dimension; as such narratives are lived through historical moments of the present and the past. The volume underscores the past as opposed to contemporary 'politics of the present' without stereotyping and hypostatizing the past. Past, for communities of the northeast assumes a lived dimension of contemporariness and it is this aspect that makes ethno-narratives not just a representational genre, but a genre of contests and conflict.

Over the years, many scholars on Northeast India have worked on the question of identity crisis, the primary thrust of which was to point to the perceived threats to one's own identity. The present volume aims to shift the focus: from crisis at the external front to the internal questions of making and unmaking of the self, as it is manifest in concrete experiential realities. Such realities are lived in memories, stories, and concepts and in all, *in* acts of narrating what one feels like. The volume tries to gather a series of alternative perspectives on identity constructions and leaves it open to further interpretative possibilities, both at the theoretical and practical planks.

Temsula Ao in her presentation "Gender and Power: Some women-centered Narratives from Ao-Naga Folklore", tries to contextualise the universal dichotomy that exists between the image of women as a weaker sex and women as an embodiment of power in myths, as in the case of the Ao-Nagas. She expresses the view that though in a Patriarchal Naga society women are denied substantial roles as power holders, in many folk narratives women are depicted

as exemplars of power. Through these women-centred narratives she subtly highlights the dichotomy between the ‘factual’ and the ‘fictional’ bases of power; where the actual power of man are fictionally re-appropriated by the women folk to control a space considered outside the purview of the ‘real’ power. Temsula echoing Dan Ben Amos calls such subversion as ‘fictive reality’. The narrative presented seeks to subtly reconstruct the ‘origin myth’ where the Ao men are visible only in relation to the Ao women in a manner that establishes the women’s authority in a patriarchal hierarchy, thereby helping the women to recover her sense of self at least in the fictive realm.

Esther Syiem depicts the intense connection between the oral folk narratives of the Khasis and the materiality of the Khasi social life. The lore of *Ka’ Tiew Larun* is significant in the context of the initiation of the individuation processes that seeks to distort the contemporary Khasi social life. Through her analysis of the *Ka’ Tiew Larun* lore, Esther delicately portrays the dilemma that Khasi society encounters in its tryst to overcome the apportioned role of the sexes in a matrilineal system. The presentation, while appreciating this by asserting the importance of the Khasi male—both as an Uncle and as a Syiem—for being the “protector and provider” of the family and the clan, introduces the doubt that such a role for the male probably emasculates the autonomy of the women in a matrilineal society. In signifying the symbolic relationship between *Larun* as a flower and the disappearance of her brother, Esther accentuates the opportunity for a possible transition of the traditionally apportioned roles among the Khasi men and women and the construction of an identity that pursues a tenuous but matching link between tradition and contemporariness.

Abhijit Choudhury’s exercise has been to unravel the ways in which the ‘origin myth’ determines the construction of a sense of collective self for the Khasi-Pnar people and in so doing links this collective conscience to the patterns of their social life and governing institutions. In this search for the ethnogenesis of the Khasi-Pnars, Abhijit narrativises certain folk myths that embody the rules of social behaviour and have a bearing on the construction of the contemporary life-world of the Khasis. He asserts that the Khasi society is founded upon a ‘Triad’ of ethico-moral commandments

that not only form the ideational underpinnings of Khasi consciousness but one that also pragmatically blend with the structure of their social, religious and (traditional) political life. In spite of this, Abhijit makes the allusion that this ideational platform possibly fails to disclose the 'real' life situations that take place differently. As illustration, he highlights the dichotomy between the 'ideal' and 'real' position of women in Khasi society; the inegalitarian principles of social organization where *Ka Hukum* as a precept of social life is contrastingly applied in cases between the "original (Bakhras) and the commoners (Paidbah-Paidkar/Kian Kur)." Above and beyond, he attributes myths as a resource of the collective conscience, which a community falls back on during the moments of crisis of identity.

Sajal Nag in his paper attempts to establish the association between the 'factual' and the 'fictional' by illustrating verses from folk narratives that portray the existential crisis that communities in the region encounter in their relationship with a modern state. He reveals how narratives constructed in literary and proto-literary texts by communities in the northeast region depict the loss of the traditional life-worlds and the resulting history of resistance. The narratives portray dilemma that many 'tribal' societies in the region face in their attempts to make sense of an emerging post-colonial reality when freedom from the "internal tyranny of chiefly rule" were countered by feeling of doubts about the "manipulative" freedom achieved. Sajal captivatingly unravels the processes through which the construction of these literary narratives are engaged in a passionate and often perfidious relationship with identity politics. The analysis juxtaposes the critical and the generative possibilities of these narratives by illustrating the "in-betweenness" of these communities, girded by metaphors of reconciliation and resistance. He shows how these narratives are a sort of an objective 'fictional' recovery of lost space and life world of the communities and a 'novelistic space' that forms the 'signifying purpose' or rhetoric resource that feed the political imagination of resistance. As the village bards "search for their poetry" in the midst of violence, conflict, coercion and resistance, the agony of uprootedness and alienation transmits itself from generation to generation only amplifying the inducement to resistance.

Rajesh Dev's analysis of the construction of ethnic narratives is that of a cascading phenomenon prevalent in this region, which is affected through strict rules of exclusion and inclusion that harps only on thick 'kinship' bonds. The process not only releases its 'other' in the purported 'non-indigenous' but also, for all practical purposes, transforms this 'other' into a politically and socially disadvantaged subject. Rajesh in his chapter draws upon the predicaments of the 'settler' Bengalis in Meghalaya to underscore their imagination of 'collective self'. In a discursive space of articulation of hegemonic (indigenous) identities, Rajesh portrays the condition of the 'settlers' as the 'other' who confront a continual "dilemma of nowhere-ness" that contrives upon their existential marginality. The paper attempts to offer an alternative dimension to the current intellectual debate that is weighed down by a concern for 'indignity'. By situating the 'settlers' in a "temporality", the author shows the diversity in their experience as an 'other' on a time-space continuum and the consequent construction of contrasting 'collective selves'. These individual 'memories' and 'experiences' as an 'other' forged in a space of alienation and exclusion, however, according to the author fails to manifest itself on a collective plane and thus gets resonance only in the form of a 'collective unconscious' and an austere awareness of nowhere-ness.

Prasenjit Biswas's *Wisdom and Reason: Ethnography in North East India* demonstrates that wisdom does not go by conceptual schemes; rather it is a product of the structure of the life world that posits a deep and embedded relationship between life and reason. The articulation of this relationship by the various communities like *Apatani* and *Khasi* is not confined to the artifactuality of their world but extends unto their normative solidarity. Wisdom and reason converge, in such a holistic embeddedness, in Northeast India. In contrast the colonial ethnographic representation of narratives of the life world, as available in colonial texts, burdens these communities with representational artifacts that constructs a world for them without an agency within. In attempting to deconstruct/decolonize such narratives, Prasenjit conducts a search for meaning in the elementary forms of life that operate within these narratives.

Moushumi Khandali in her paper explores the possibility of visual narrative of marginality from the realist paintings of M.H.

Barbhuyan, whose *leitmotif* is Muslim Women of rural Barak valley of Assam. Moushumi discusses with élan how Barbhuyan's representation of the existential plight of Muslim Women simultaneously bring out the colour of imagination of their victimhood as well as how the alienating affect of representation places them in a decontextualized setting of modernity. She elaborates through Barbhuyan's paintings how the surreal and almost tragic entanglement of daily-lived experience of these women finds its graphic and socially relevant signification in Borbhuiya's plastic forms. In her efforts at "decoding" the visual narratives she posits them amidst an "existential angst within a specific religious identity". She impresses the background of such existential angst to the specific "split-queer-hybrid modernity" context of the region where the angst is expressed often through 'real/physical' violence and conflict, though Moushumi, in her efforts highlights the 'structural/psychological' violence that characterizes the visual narratives of Barbhuyan. She emphasises the "linguistic choice" of Barbhuyan, which is characterised by "clarity of forms along with a concern for correctness of the matics". This quintessential essence of these "figurative narratives" according to Khandali, is the "readability" that blends "ideological belief with formal exploration" and reflects the political reflexivity of Barbhuyan.

The paper of Zilkia Janer entitled, *The Failed Narratives of North East India: Reading Sujata Miri's The Broken Circle* represents the plight of love as a paradigm of inter-community relationships in an ethnically demarcated identity space. Through a reading of Sujata Miri's perceptive novel *The Broken Circle*, Zilkia Janer seeks to investigate the identity-dilemma that Asha confronts through her engagement in multiple relationships whereby she seeks to overcome her *Nepaliness* yet yielding to an identity void. Zilkia gives reasons for her personal failure too; the social construction of her identity is already interrupted, which Asha deepens by exercising her choices and then by inviting others in widening the broken circle of her life.

The article entitled, *Revisiting Sylheti Narratives: Memory to Identity* by Sukalpa Bhattacharjee is a construction of a displaced Sylheti identity by revisiting a social and cultural locale *Sylhet* through folk memories and lived histories. The author examines the position of third generation Sylhetis who have never visited or lived in the



life world of Sylhet, but are subjects constantly referred to or refer themselves to Sylhet and Sylheti identity either as an attempt to reclaim a past identity or as an ‘*other*’ in the discourse of other competing identities in north east India. The paper theorizes a conflictual space of journey from memory to identity, particularly when it’s a construction of identity through the narrative of older generations represented in folk narratives and history. The author also shows how such a construction of identity through memory is appropriated through new narratives of *Sylheti* identity in the contemporary times.

Sanghamitra Misra’s article entitled, *Negotiating Frontier Spaces: Narratives and the Idea of a ‘Goalparia’ Identity* reflects on the concerns of the traditional elite in the region of Goalpara and explores their reinvention of roles within the newly emerging and expanding public sphere. The author argues that the reinventions of tradition and language by the local zamindars was an attempt at narrativising a continuing esteem for their social position in the imagination of the local population. More significantly, the writings from Goalpara were also located within a framework of resistance to the emergence of Assamese as the language of power and the construction of a Assamese linguistic identity during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, both of which had provided the broad context within which we locate these imaginings of a political space of Goalparia identity.

Finally, Patricia Mukhim’s paper presents us with an “insider/participant” view of the myths related to matriliney in the Khasi society. In her efforts to trace the crisis of the traditional “autonomy” enjoyed by women, Patricia probes the influence of a ‘new religion’ like Christianity and the impacting individuation of ‘modernising’ values that mystify traditional bonds of kinship without the attendant social support mechanisms found in a ‘traditional’ society. She analyses the social position of the *Khatduh* (youngest daughter in a Khasi family) and seeks to unravel her ‘real’ position by tracing her familial and social responsibilities in a structure lubricated by the evocative position of the “*mama*” or the maternal uncle. Patricia seeks to dispel the standard myths about gender equality among the matrilineal Khasis, by highlighting the distinct “gender division of labour”, prompting the reader to accept the line of reasoning often made about

the Khasi Society that it is a Patriarchal-matriliny. However Patricia also cautions us against such polarised contentions when she hints that such a view would inevitably give rise to gender-war that would be harmful for an evolving society. Patricia emphasises the questioning of 'tradition' as a way to keep institutions vibrant, reflecting the changing mores of an evolving society.

The present volume only indicates new possibilities of understanding construction of identity in Northeast India. There is no gainsaying the fact that such an enterprise in itself is a challenging one and a part of this challenge, we believe has been taken up by the authors of the articles in the present volume. This simultaneously expands the horizons of readerly interventions in the closures of authorial voices and this precisely limits the role of the editors in compiling such a volume. The editors may not entirely share the viewpoints and opinions expressed by the respective authors of various articles, though all lapses and shortcomings remain with the editors.

#### NOTES

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