

AN  
ANTHOLOGY  
OF POETRY  
FROM  
NORTH-EAST  
INDIA

# Dancing Earth

*Edited by*

ROBIN  
S. Ngangom

KYNPHAM  
S. Nongkynrih



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## INTRODUCTION

Any introduction to the poetry of the North-East must inevitably address two important questions, first, relating to what constitutes the North-East and second, its poetry. 'North-East' is, of course, a blanket term that has been used to imply a homogeneous province, a single political domain, inhabited by kindred peoples 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 such a conglomeration of peoples, a *mélange* of cultures, languages and religions that it would be a grave injustice to make any generalized statement about them. Even though Assam and Tripura may be said to be dominated by Assamese and Bengalis belonging to the broad Indo-Aryan group and the rest of the states by some distinct tribes, the real picture is actually much more complicated. Meghalaya alone includes around twenty ethnic groups in its list of Scheduled Tribes, with all of

them breaking up into a complex network of sub-tribes and clans, speaking their own languages and dialects. The same is true of all the other states.

And yet despite this confusion of tribes and sub-tribes, cultures and languages, the literatures of the region are not as tangled as may be imagined. Apart from the Assamese, the Manipuris and the Bengalis of Tripura, who have their own distinct scripts and whose written literatures can be traced back to the fifteenth century or earlier, the literary history of most of the other communities is fairly new, as recent as the advent of the white missionaries from Wales and America in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the Khasi Hills, in about 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.

Given this background, it was only natural that the majority of the tribes would take to the same kind of literature and influence, which were exclusively Christian and English, in contrast to the Assamese, Manipuri and Bengali who were exposed to Sanskrit and Hindi literatures as well. 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 theirs, 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 nonexistent daffodils in the vales. However, this 'neo-Victorian windiness', which 'offers at best a chocolate box view of the tribal past' or, the presumption that 'the literature of the states apart from Assam ... is largely based on the folklore narrative tradition ...'<sup>2</sup> and therefore caught in a folk time-warp, should not lead the incurious reader away from the literary worth of the region's contemporary verse.

Modern poetry in the region is found in the free verse of Bengali, Assamese, Manipuri and those tribal poets of the different states who write in their native languages and in English. 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'<sup>3</sup> they find common ground in chronicling their subjective realities and the predicament of their people. It is with their poetry that *Dancing Earth* as an anthology concerns itself.

Much of the uniqueness of North-East poetry is the consequence of contemporary events, violence especially. 'The writer from the Northeast differs from his

counterpart in the mainland in a significant way ... living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but must perforce master the art of witness.<sup>4</sup> To be a tenacious witness of the agonizing political violence without sensationalizing it, is also a risk that a north-eastern poet has to undertake often. Generally speaking, there are certain features commonly to be found in North-East poetry today. There is, for instance, a strong rootedness visible everywhere in the writings of this region. The roots of the beloved land; the roots of the people's culture; the roots of the times; and most of all, the roots of the past, have sunken deep into their poetry and has given it a unique savour.

That these poets are bound together by their great love for the land and everything that it signifies can be seen in the overarching presence of nature in many of their poems, samples of which are abundant in the anthology. But in their patriotism, the poets are not blind to the fact that their land is also 'The Land of the Half-humans' where 'For six months just head without body, six months just body without/ head ...'<sup>5</sup> rules. This malaise is what has been called 'the banality of corruption and the banality of terror'. The pervasiveness of corruption is best described in the words of the Khasi poet laureate, Soso Tham, who had, way back in 1936, said: 'Government, Justice, Advocate, / It glues with pus the Silver Piece.'<sup>6</sup> Added to this worrying condition is the menace of the gun and terrorism that came with ethnic cleansing, and the growth of militant nationalism whose

demands vary from greater autonomy to outright sovereignty.

Further, the roots of the times and writing about the here and now also lend a sense of immediacy and vividness to 'the poetry of witness' practised by these poets. A few fine poets have moved beyond merely recording events and have internalized the complex conflict between themselves and the milieu. In Manipur, when the reality becomes oppressive, poets frequently seek refuge in absurdist irony often directed towards oneself, in parody, in farce and in satire. It is a rejection by these poets of the harrowing realism of the times, also revealing an inclination towards the surreal. In Manipuri poet Y. Ibomcha's 'Story of a Dream', murderous bullets turn into luscious fruits, and in Thangjam Ibopishak's 'I Want to be Killed By an Indian Bullet', terrorists visit his home in the guise of the five elements.

However, social or political poetry constitutes only one aspect of North-East poetry. Another proof of the rootedness of North-East's poetry is the recurrent appearance of myth and tribal folklore as a subject matter of the poets. But there is certainly more to the use of myth than mere Romantic escapism as suggested by some. As the poets see their people, often themselves included, losing their way completely in the midst of the unsettling cultural changes of the times, there is born a desire in them to interpret the mythic past flourishing in timeless villages and repossess this as high culture.

However, it would be a mistake to typecast the poets on the basis of these broad themes alone. The title poem

of the anthology, 'Dancing Earth' is, as its author had once said, a celebration of life in all its unpredictable variety, despite all its inherent contradictions. There is in the North-East an 'uneasy coexistence of paradoxical worlds such as the folk and the westernised, virgin forests and car-choked streets, ethnic cleansers and the parasites of democracy, ancestral values and flagrant corruption, resurgent nativism and the sensitive outsider's predicament ...'<sup>7</sup> As chroniclers of subjective realities, the poets of the region celebrate this variety, as perhaps no other poets do.

This anthology is an attempt to bring together some of the best known poets of the region irrespective of the state they belong to, the language they write in, or, the period in which they live. The criterion of selection is subjective appeal and the arrangement of names according to an alphabetical order is to draw attention to the poetry and not to the ethnic or linguistic communities of the poets. In doing this, the editors can only hope that they have shown good taste.



## ENDNOTES

1. Nigel Jenkins, 'Thomas Jones and the Lost Book of the Khasis'. *The New Welsh Review* 21 (1993): 56–82.
2. Hazarika, Sanjoy. 'Källika: The Unveiling of Literature from India's North East', *The Book Review*, Volume XXI, Number 4, April 1997, pp.23–24.
3. Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs*, trans. Hardie St. Martin (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1984) 191.
4. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin S. Ngangom, ed., *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* (Shillong: North-Eastern Hill University, 2003). ix.
5. *Ibid.* 93–4.
6. Soso Tham, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynniew Trep* (Shillong: Primrose Gathoh, 1976) 14.
7. See note 4. ix.

# TEMSULA AO

Temsula Ao was born in Jorhat district, Assam, in 1945. She has published four books of poetry and a collection of short stories. She was a Fulbright Fellow at the University of Minnesota during 1985–86, and received the Padma Shree in 2007. She is a Professor at the department of English, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, where she lives.



## *Stone-people from Lungterok*

Lungterok,  
The six stones  
Where the progenitors  
And forebears  
Of the stone-people  
Were born  
Out of the womb  
Of the earth.

Stone-people,  
The poetic and politic  
Barbaric and balladic  
Finders of water  
And fighters of fire.

Stone-people,  
The polyglots,  
Knowledgeable  
In birds' language  
And animal discourse.

The students,  
Who learned from ants  
The art of carving  
Heads of enemies  
As trophies  
Of war.

Stone-people,  
The romantics  
Who believed  
The sun can sulk  
The moon can hide  
And the stars are not stars  
But pure souls  
Watching over bereaved hearts

Here below  
With their glow.

Stone-people,  
The potters and weavers  
Planters and growers  
Hunters and carvers  
Singers of songs and takers of heads,  
Gentle lovers and savage heroes.  
Builders of homes and destroyers of villages.

Stone-people,  
The worshippers  
Of unknown, unseen  
Spirits  
Of trees and forests,  
Of stones and rivers,  
Believers of soul  
And its varied forms,  
Its sojourn here  
And passage across the water  
Into the hereafter.

Stone-people,  
Savage and sage  
Who sprang out of LUNGTEROK,

Was the birth adult when the stone broke?  
Or are the Stone-people yet to come of age?

---

*Lungterok*, literally means Six Stones. According to the Aos their first forefathers emerged out of the earth at the place called Lungterok. There were three men and three women. Some of the stones are still to be found below a village called Chungliyimti in the Ao area of Nagaland.

