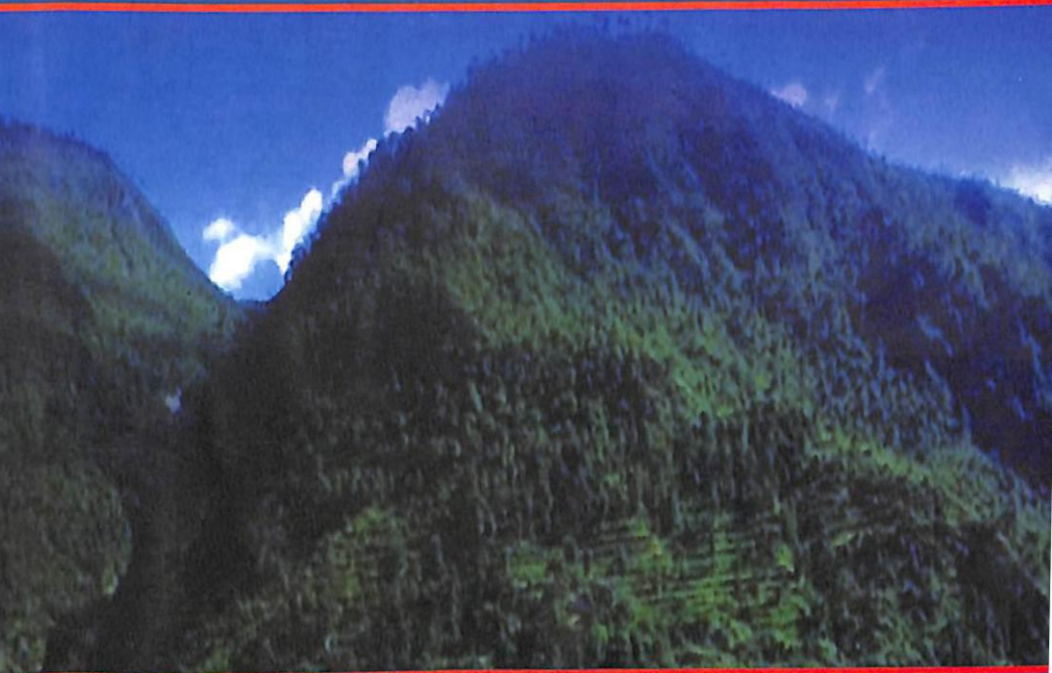


# Earth Songs

Stories From  
Northeast India



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Edited with an Introduction by  
Kailash C. Baral

# Earth Songs

STORIES FROM NORTH EAST INDIA



Edited with an Introduction by  
KAILASH C. BARAL



SAHITYA AKADEMI

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## Introduction

The present volume took over a couple years in its making. Opinions may differ on the time factor, whether two years is too short or too long a time in the preparation of a volume like this. But does it matter? Perhaps it does not. What matters is “time” as a necessary condition of life and its predicament. Similarly, time matters for the very making of the present volume – its planning, preparation and final publication. In the contexts and contingencies of the making of this volume, time has presided over the story of and the stories in the volume. The story of the present volume will terminate at a stage in time marking its publication only to begin another journey of its existence in the hands of the readers, signifying one end as another beginning – indeed another dimension of time!

Stories, as we all know, are about time and space. This volume is about some recognisable geography, about a territory that is Northeast India. Northeast India means many things to many people – those who live here, those who know about it and read about it. This land mass has existed for centuries through its legends, myths, stories, poetry, dances, arts and crafts, its conflicting history and moribund politics. It is both ancient as well as modern. Linked to the mainland with a chicken neck corridor through Siliguri, this territory has many facets to it. That is how one

looks at its map. But a map is not a territory! A territory represents real people and habitats in that it designates a living space, not an abstraction. The territory of Northeast is a land of contrasts. Its exotic landscape holds in its body huge rivers, high mountains, valleys, gorges, evergreen and tropical forests with diverse flora and fauna representing a slice of terra firma that is awesome and breathtakingly beautiful. In its fearful symmetry, here is God's plenty, – a touch of His genius!

The people who call this territory their home define the uniqueness and diversity of their cultures, customs and social practices through their oral and written literatures. There is hardly anything common about the people of Northeast, for they are as diverse as its landscape. In spite of their cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity, these communities are known for their personal warmth, indulgent hospitality and the culture of "giving" that characterise their commonness in the face of differences. Endemic militancy ironically looks on the face and challenges this culture of Northeast. In this sense the Northeast is a land of paradoxes. In the congeries of its complexities, Northeast does not only designate a territory of diverse cultures and people but also represents an idea constantly in its making. If the past has a rootedness of harmony and cohesiveness among communities and cultures, the present is a reality of profound disaffection. The violence that stalks this landscape is part of the everyday life of people and adds to the fluidity and fragility of the situation. In spite of all this, life goes on. What is edifying in the face of all this is the call for humane aspects of life that informs the stories included in the volume. It is true that creative writers seek a world different from the one they live in;



there is a moving within, a stirring that takes the form of a story, a poem, a novel, in articulating the inexpressible, transforming/transcending the mundane into a different realm. This realm is a seeking for some kind of wholeness in the face of disintegration and fragmentation. Needless to say, all genres of creative writing collect the raw material from life's fount, in that stories come into being in the unfolding of the world of words in order to give some meaning to life while connecting the individual to the society, to the world. The act of creativity in its self-knowledge and dynamics seeks to identify and erase, identity and difference while holding together the home and the world.

The present collection of stories owes its origin to my association with Katha Academic Centre at NEHU. As an Associate Director of the Katha Academic Centre, I organised a number of translation workshops in many states of the region. It was an experience of immense personal significance for me. For the first time, I was exposed to the rich tradition of oral and written stories of the different linguistic communities of Northeast. The translation exercises at the workshops provided the impetus to publish a collection of stories representing the different linguistic groups from the region. Although collections of short stories in translation from Assamese into English are available the same is not the case with other languages. The translation scene in Northeast in general is not very satisfying. The tribal communities of this region have a rich oral tradition, but the written tradition is not very old. Except Assamese and Manipuri, in most of the tribal languages of Northeast, the written tradition started with the publication of the Bible in the concerned language.

Although the early stories in these languages bear a strong Biblical influence, contemporary stories reflect variously the reality the writers live in.

The preparation of the present volume in terms of selection of the stories and their translations has been very daunting. For selecting and editing the stories, I have taken help from a number of people. However, one point has remained contentious, that is regarding the standard of translation. Without getting into the debate what is standard of translation and what is not, I take the stand that there is no perfect translation. Translation indeed is a form of writing and plays a social role in that a sense of loss is inevitable. Translation in fact produces an effect of transformation that breaks down the oppositions of author to translator, of translation to original, as the translated version emerges like an original piece with a life of its own. What needs to be ensured is that, in the sophistry of translation, the underlying message of the original piece and its cultural nuances are not lost. However, it cannot be claimed that the selection of stories for the present Volume is representative and their translations perfect; they are indeed no less if the stories are able to convey the human concerns that are embedded in them. The stories characterise different aspects of life in Northeast such as innocence, violence, humor, corruption, romantic love and the supernatural. The variety of representation, in spite of gaps and a sense of incompleteness, conjures up creative ideas about the land and its people.

“Innocence Wears Another Look” is a story from Mizoram. It deals with the fragile emotions of a young boy, who though

intrinsically good, tries his hand at a catapult, for hitting at birds to impress his friends. He manages to kill a bird and for the first time sees life being squeezed out of a living being. In fact, he is instrumental in hastening the end of the injured bird. The idea of qualities like hunting, killing is culturally conditioned in the context of the story. By doing these things one can prove his masculinity. These characteristics have been abstracted as hereditary also. The story in its moral earnestness mediates the contrast between innocence and experience in a very subtle way. The very same boy, who in his innocence has taken a life, becomes the victim of another man who accidentally runs his truck over him because of his irrepressible urge to hunt and kill animals. The story shows how quirks in our make up, through seemingly harmless and innocent acts, cause irreparable losses.

“The Silver Roll of the Bridle-Path”, an Assamese story, takes us back to our worlds of childhood where spirits of all kinds and the will-o’-the-wisps come to rule the roost. Parama wonders about the worlds of the spirits and is amazed at the world of the grown ups. He wants to know about thirsting souls and how are they released. The efforts of Dharani to see his mother’s soul released and sail smoothly through the other world reveals a story within a story. Intricately woven in a colloquial language, the story unveils a love story between Tagar and Indra. Although unable to decipher the worlds of the elder ones, Parama continues to get tangled in many a questions about the world of spirits.

“Another Moti” is a story from Assam. It depicts the death of a child and underlines the fragility of life. It is about a poor



and abandoned mother, whose existence centres on her young son Moti. The mother nurses a desire that once the boy grows up, things in her life would change. Her dream is shattered as the boy gets killed in an accident when a truck containing sacks of rice overturns and crushes him. The truck's handyman brings a sack of rice having the stains of Moti's blood on it for the bereaved mother as compensation. For days, stunned with grief, she ignores the sack. Later, unable to contain the pangs of hunger, she dips her unwilling fingers into the sack and slowly uses the rice. The woman's surrender to the demand of hunger underlines the irony of life. She discovers in the handyman her son and takes up the offer to ensnare her life like the rats around the sack of rice.

"A 'Happy Journey' for Mr. Ta En Wan Kharkrang" is a story from Meghalaya. The title of the story is ironic as it captures the excitement at the beginning of each journey and its ultimate failure. On knowing that the government and banks were advancing loans to farmers for agricultural expansion, Mr. Kharkrang – a simple, naïve villager – tries to approach the authorities for a loan. The story goes on about how he is ensnared in the web of corruption and machinations of dishonest government officials. The protagonist ends up losing time and money to find out in the end that the government has decided to terminate the scheme. The story deals with the topical issue of corruption and red-tapism and how these beguile the innocent and the naïve.

"Inspection Report" is a Manipuri story and is also about corruption. It depicts how corruption has pervaded every aspect of life in the state, including the system of education.

The story is about a schoolteacher who refuses to yield to the corrupt practices prevailing in the system. He gets a promotion and becomes an Assistant Inspector of Schools. He writes an Inspection Report about an absent teacher, who because of his connections gets the report destroyed. The forces of corruption are powerful and the fight of the protagonist against the system ends in futility. Finally, he succumbs to the pressure of the system.

“Mr. K\_\_”, a story from Meghalaya, is about moral corruption that has corroded all human values. The story drives home how power and status blind people for whom “life”, – life of a human child – has no meaning. The unborn, often considered a gift of God, a symbol of love is sacrificed for one’s empty self-respect or even bargained for personal gain. Mr. K\_\_, once a good man, is transformed into a morally depraved fellow who would ensure the termination of his own child’s life to protect his status and reputation as a minister. The woman Isabel who is his paramour does not have time even to lament for the lost child as she is seen in the company of the new MLA who is Mr. K\_\_’s rival and a minister now. The story is topical as well as universal in that it implies how power and position blind people and lead to moral corruption.

“Basan’s Grandmother” is a story from Tripura dealing with ethnic clashes that plague most of the states in Northeast, where brothers are often treated as strangers. The story is about two families, one Bengali and the other tribal, living amicably in adjacent homes. The tribal child is much too attached to the non-tribal grandmother, is very possessive of her and grows up in her lap. Trouble flares up between the



two communities insinuated by vested interests and mischief mongers resulting in clashes, looting and killing. Stranded in the midst of the mayhem, the grandmother with the tribal child, runs for her life and safety. At one point, she is at the cross roads of her life, if she has to save herself the child would be killed and vice versa. In the end both are killed with a single spear piercing the two bodies. In death they become one beyond ethnic divides.

“One Night” is a Manipuri story. The story is about suspicion and betrayal between two friends belonging to two different tribes that arise because of inter-tribal clashes. Although narrated in a staccato style, the story unfolds the turbulence amongst ethnic groups in Manipur while focusing on the innocence and humane nature of the people living there despite disturbances. The story is about a Kuki and a Naga working in the same office and sharing a room together. Suddenly, because of trouble between the two communities, the officials ask them if they would still like to live together. A group belonging to one tribe kills the other man’s family in his native village. The night is one of shared tension and the earlier comradeship shared between the two gets diluted by the recent happenings. However, the trust between the two is reawakened after the emotions of anger and suspicion dissipate into a deeper realisation of genuine humanness.

“Hope” by Mitra Phukan was originally written in English. The story is about militancy and its consequences in Assam. The lives of Sewali Barua, the mother and Nandini, the wife have been shattered after the disappearance of their only hope, Shankar. Desperate, as the two ladies are, they land

up at the house of a journalist to find out about their lost son. The story takes a dramatic turn as the two ladies learn that the particular story they thought would provide them some clue was written long before the actual disappearance of their Shankar. The story underlines the fact that in its wake, militancy in Assam has ensnared many lives and shattered their dreams.

“When the Birds Come to Nest” is an Assamese story written against the backdrop of militancy. The story talks about how mindless violence blocks all openings to human heart and stifles the very source of human feelings and emotions. In its sway, violence washes away the dreams of a twenty-three-year-old girl, who was once admired, loved and called the golden girl. Her innocent dreams that had many colours are ripped apart by bullets of her own lover, brother and admirer who now belong to a different world where human emotions have no value. Who are they? Why are they doing what they do? The girl does not have an answer and neither do the gun-totting boys. The story emphasises that the eternal spring of human love would flow one day and rekindle life allowing people to rebuild their homes that would symbolise victory of life over destruction and violence.

“A Fragmentary End” is a Manipuri story that highlights the situation of alcoholism and drug addiction in the state. Like inter-communal and tribal violence, alcoholism and drug addiction are endemic and make the lives of innocent people miserable. The story is about problems that a woman faces with an alcoholic and drug-addicted husband. The fact that drug trafficking in a state like Manipur is a menace that

The spirit of the wild wind is connected to a house which Rhys inhabits, having its own colonial legacy. The story is about two pairs of lovers who in their life as well as death have inspired others as a local legend. They represent and combine the spirits of wind and fire. The strength of the story lies in creating a *Wuthering Heights* ambience.

“Holy Dip” is a story from Assam. The story gives us a glimpse into the life in the tea gardens of Assam. Mrs. Field, who decides to stay back in Assam, is an empathetic character. What moves us in the story is Mrs. Field’s deeper spiritual realisation of the essence of Assamese Vaishnavism. She combines in her Christian piety the spiritual earnestness of a Vaishnav. The story explores through Mrs. Field’s character the “Madonna and the Child” construct, while placing it in Assamese spiritual tradition, turning cultural and religious differences into oneness.

“Civility is all that Counts” is another story from Meghalaya. It is a humorous story. It is about a man trying to sell his jeep who gets into all kinds of trouble. In trying to learn from his past errors and rectify them, he blunders even further. In the end his wife manages to sell the jeep for a competitive price and advises him in the end, ‘Civility is all that counts.’ The story is unique for the linguistic register it employs.

The supernatural has always been fascinating to us, for one does not need to seek it out, it is very much a part of our unconscious or conscious minds. “Supping with the Spirits”, a story from Nagaland, weaves into a narrative not only the experience of the supernatural but also forces us to willingly

suspend our disbelief. The story shows our awareness of the oral tradition and the many beliefs about the spirit world among the Naga people. The strength of the story is its ambience and the easy flow of narrative.

The title of the volume *Earth Songs: Stories from Northeast India* is inspired by the spontaneous, vibrant and unconstrained creative life of the people of Northeast. As stories are guides to our lives and experiences, all kinds of writings are indeed songs of our souls. The earth of Northeast has a fragrance of its own. This fragrance comes alive in the soulful songs and cascading dances of different groups that reverberate through the rivers, hills, valleys and forests of this territory. The title of the volume "Earth Songs" seems appropriate, as in sum, it attempts to capture the rhythm of life in Northeast. The stories in the volume represent different aspects of life in Northeast as well as narrative patterns of the genre of short story. The stories in the volume attempt variously to transcend time/space dichotomies, aspiring to be universal in dissecting life. If these stories are read, enjoyed and appreciated, the efforts gone into the making of the volume will be amply rewarded.

**Kailash C. Baral**



Vanneihluanga

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## Innocence Wears Another Look

**V**anneihluanga (b. 1957) is a businessman and social worker. He writes stories and plays and occasionally critical essays. His stories have received wide acclaim for their social criticism and religious message.

Pu Sena was an outstanding pillar of his community and enjoyed a social standing that few could achieve. The locals looked up to him for advice and counsel and felt reassured by his mere presence. One had only to consider his establishment and livelihood, his contribution to both society and the Church, and the circle of acquaintances that he cultivated, to measure the extent of his influence. Besides this, he was an accomplished sportsman who particularly enjoyed Mizo sports such as hunting and fishing. It was a matter of great pride that he could bring home a slain deer with its impressive antlers blatantly displayed from the back of the government Gypsy allotted to him for official use. There did not seem anything wrong in this occasional, petty misuse of government resources in a system crammed with officials engaged routinely in corrupt practices. The locals too, fully accepted such minor lapses in the light of the fact that Pu Sena was a righteous man; he was not corrupt like the others.



His wife bore Pu Sena another son in his later years. Needless to say, the boy was pampered and loved by the family, and addressed endearingly as "Mazama". By age twelve, Mazama had made a mark for himself at school as a good and smart boy. Unlike his peers, the children of other officers, who were plagued by behavioural problems, Mazama was often held up as a role model to them. His family too, was very proud of him. He took after his father and was by nature fiercely competitive and loathe to lag behind his peers. Whoever knew him often commented on the fact that Mazama was definitely destined for great things in life.

Once, during their school lunch break, Mazama and his friends sat chatting at a building site next to the school. One of their new friends happened to be a boy from a village who had recently shifted to Aizawl, and he related to his friends how he had downed three birds with his catapult in his village. This piece of information set Mazama thinking deeply, for he had never before cast a stone at a butterfly, much less a bird, and he had so far, never really been fascinated by a catapult. But he now felt a great urge to have a similar achievement in order to be on par with his new friend. So that evening, he got his father to make him a catapult without any further delay.

Mazama's father not only willingly obliged him, but went on to tell his son about his own many exploits as a boy with a catapult, and cast great disdain on the total lack of interest and absence of skill in the children of today. From that evening, Mazama learnt to use a catapult and was determined to master it as he was now completely convinced that downing three birds with it was one sure way of keeping up with his friends.

One Saturday morning, Mazama was invited by his friends in the neighbourhood to an outing at their garden not far from the Sairang main road. As this was an excellent

opportunity to prove his prowess, Mazama and his father practised with the catapult in the morning. After his morning meal, Mazama excitedly got into the vehicle with his friends, fully equipped with his new catapult and about twenty home-made pellets that reassuringly rolled and knocked about in the bag slung across his shoulders.

Once the boys arrived at the garden, with a lot of excitement they noisily engaged themselves in various activities. Some headed straight for the stream to bathe while others cut down bunches of bananas to eat, while still others started stalking birds. As the birds were much too wary and timid, Mazama had a difficult time targeting them. Finally discouraged, he sat down under the shade of a tree. Suddenly, a small bird whose name he did not even know came and perched on a branch of the tree under which he sat resting. It had a grasshopper in its beak. Mazama carefully drew his catapult and took aim. As he let go, there was the simultaneous sound of the target being hit. The little bird hurtled through the air, flew again for a short distance, and then spun down haphazardly amidst the banana trees below.

Mazama hurriedly went after the bird and discovered that it was still alive and had fallen only due to dizziness. As it saw him approaching, the bird pitifully tried to take off again. As he had never taken a bird's life before, Mazama reluctantly caught hold of the bird, and feeling it struggle against him, almost let it go again. But the thought of the possibility of such cowardice on his part reaching the ears of his friends, and the teasing that would ensue, buttressed his resolve and so, with renewed courage, he tightly gripped the bird by the neck and threw it on the hard ground with all his might.

Thus Mazama watched "life", certainly not the handiwork of man, leave the beautiful bird. A few minutes back it had revelled in its freedom, its black feathers had shone with life in the sunlight, it had been capable of beautiful warbles, and

its young had eagerly awaited its homecoming. But now, all traces of such beauty and attractiveness had disappeared. It now made no effort to cling on to the life which had earlier been so dear. As Mazama slowly picked up the little bird, he could feel the life gradually drain from it. And as he placed it on his palm, the bird feebly opened its mouth once, and then remained as it was placed, stilled forever.

Mazama visualised the building site where he sat with his friends, and the huge antlers of his father's slain deer, and felt that he now had something to tell them too. Since his friends were not ready to leave yet, he climbed up towards the Sairang main road, all the while looking forward to how he would relate his hunting experiences of the day to his family at dinner time. There was no room for any other conversation.

## II

At about this time, along the Aizawl-Silchar highway, on which hundreds of trucks ply daily, a loaded truck was toiling uphill, its engines sounding like the roar of many demons. Its driver was a divorced man, dark-skinned with a broad forehead and a perfect jaw line, known popularly as Valtea by all the girls serving in tea stalls along the highway. He knew his truck inside out as he would his tobacco pipe had he owned one. It was said that he could hold forth on the complex mechanics of the interaction between oil, steam and oxygen that fed life to the truck's powerful engine, more expertly and interestingly than talk about the Holy Land.

Due to family constraints, Valtea had been unable to continue with his studies and hence had entered his present profession, first as a handyman and later on graduated to being a driver. His motto throughout his long career had always been that, just as a butcher knows the details of the entrails of animals, and doctors that of humans; a driver must know everything there is to know about the vehicle he drives. Though he did marry once, it was not long before his wife divorced



him on the grounds that he loved his truck more than he loved her! The fact that he had never had a mishap during the ten years of his entire career was in itself a mark of his great dedication and love for the job. He was well-known throughout the driver community and the Drivers' Union would often hold him up as a shining example for them to emulate.

Yet despite all this, Valtea had one seemingly trivial flaw he could not overcome, and it was not drinks. Ever since his childhood, he could never resist going after any living creature, even though it be a humble lizard crossing his path. This urge was still so strong that while driving, were he to sight a bird or better still, a grazing deer, his first instinct was always a desire to run it over, throwing all caution to the wind. All considerations about who he was, or who his passengers were, would immediately take the back seat. Should he sight a bird perched nearby, the urge to hurl a stone and bring it down was hard to resist. This trait of his obviously explained his unusual gift of catching them and having ready meat at his table most of the time.

Valtea was unable to fathom the reason behind this *trait* in him. It certainly was not due solely to his love of meat. Perhaps he felt that not being highly educated he had nothing to brag about on that score, and therefore felt the need to be able to boast about his exploits as "pasalatheï", one who can catch game. He never really considered this trait a flaw in any way.

While he was thus preoccupied with these thoughts that day, Valtea realised he had covered quite a distance. As he passed Sairang village, he deliberately lowered his speed, and just as he was telling himself that he need not hurry since the highway was his home, two jungle cocks engaged in mortal combat, came hurtling down to the main road from the woods above. Valtea braked at once, assuming that they were domesticated birds. But on getting a clearer view, he realised they were not. He found it hard to believe that he

should witness such a rare sight on the outskirts of a town, so he rubbed his eyes and looked again. But it was real. As the birds fought on, they forgot their fear of the big truck and one of them flew and landed right in front of it. The second bird flew after it and continued its attack.

Valtea could no longer hold back. He sped his great engine at full speed, determined to run down the two combatants. At that moment, a young boy with a bag slung across his shoulder and a catapult in his hand, came on to the road from below and, seemingly unaware of the speeding big truck, was in the act of running across the road.

Valtea gave a loud cry. With feathers flying about, the truck came to an abrupt halt. Little did the huge machine, with its might and power so seemingly beyond man's control, realise the extent of the damage it had done.

Valtea leapt out of his seat and ran to the front of the truck. He saw that he had indeed run over one of the jungle cocks. But beside it, there lay a young boy of about twelve years, with what seemed like a school bag slung across his shoulder. Next to one of the wheels was a catapult.

Thus Valtea watched in great distress as "life", certainly not the handiwork of man, left the young boy. It was only a short while back that this boy was the centre of his parents' lives, one in whom his teachers and neighbours had seen great promise; a boy determined to be on par with every one. But now, he no longer held any of these admirable traits whatsoever. A few minutes back he had been filled with the desire to reach home and be with his parents, but now, the need to do so was completely gone. As the dismayed man gently lifted up the child, he could feel the life gradually drain from him. Valtea placed him on his lap, the boy feebly opened his eyes once, and then remained as he was placed, stilled forever.

*Translated from the Mizo by  
Margaret Zama*



The sixteen stories included in this volume represent different aspects that characterise the life in Northeast India such as innocence, violence, corruption, romantic love, humour and the supernatural. Various, these stories bring in the human concerns, and relationships and their fragility to focus. Although not representative, these stories give an understanding of the life and culture of societies in Northeast India. There are stories of very established authors alongside of authors who are young and talented, giving a feel of the changes in the cultural life and social dynamics. The stories in the volume variously attempt to transcend time/space dichotomies, aspiring to be universal in dissecting life.

**Kailash C. Baral**, Professor of English and Director of Northeast Campus, Shillong, is the author of *Sigmund Freud: A Study of His Theory of Art and Literature* (1994). He has edited *Humanities and Pedagogy: Teaching Humanities Today* (2001) and *Interpretation of Texts: text, meaning and interpretation* (2002) and co-edited *Theory and Praxis: Curriculum, Culture and English Studies* (2003), *Identities: Local and Global* (2004) and *Reflections on Literature, Criticism and Theory* (2004).

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