

Focusing on the Periphery: Introducing Northeast Literature in Indian Universities

Shibani Phukan

Abstract

This paper proposes to explore the growing interest in the literature from the northeast to examine the necessary complexity of understanding required for a nuanced and comprehensive exploration. Pivoting on its continued absence in syllabus of Indian universities despite the growing interest, the paper argues how a consideration of literature from the northeast in terms of its thematic engagements, both the dominant and known tropes and the lesser-known and emergent tropes, the challenges posed thereof, can enable a more nuanced and intensive understanding and pave the way for its inclusion beyond tokenism. Beyond such an aim, the paper puts forth the possibility of how understanding literature from the northeast can create empathy and enable the forging of deeper ties between the northeast and mainland India.

Keywords: Northeast, literature, interdisciplinarity, syllabus, mainland India

Introduction

The northeast of India has garnered considerable interest in recent times. This interest could be a result of many reasons such as curiosity generated by social media and accessibility to places that few had heard of a decade back. Government policies such as the Act East Policy introduced in 2014 has paid dividends and resulted in the growth of infrastructure in the northeast, eased travel to the northeast, with better connectivity being made available. This fact is compounded by a hitherto unseen growth in the desire of the average Indian to travel to what has traditionally been seen as a difficult terrain, a growth paralleled by the mushrooming of

places to stay to suit every budget. As a result of these reasons, amongst others, the northeast has witnessed a shift from the periphery to the centre of interest for many. This growing interest in the northeast is also well reflected in the interest in literature of the northeast, marked by its presence at literature festivals and even at bookshops that stock some of the latest and the best of northeast literature.

The questions that therefore follow and what this article seeks to investigate are how one arrives at the category of literature from the northeast, what are some of the dominant themes it engages in, what are the tools necessary for effective understanding of such literature and is the general interest in the literature from the northeast reflected through its inclusion in Indian universities. The article aims that such a discussion will ultimately facilitate the inclusion and understanding of literature from the northeast in the syllabi of English literature courses beyond the few universities that offer such a paper and enable a discerning readership to appreciate better what the literature of the northeast offers. The article suggests an interdisciplinary approach and puts forth the possibility of how an appreciation of literature from the northeast can thus foster greater understanding of the region, its people and their issues amongst a wider audience. The article is framed by a culture studies framework and also incorporates critical commentary and interviews by subject experts.

Changing Face of English Literature

The position and visibility of Indian literature, one's understanding of it and its study, has grown exponentially in the last few decades, the awarding of the Booker Prize to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) catapulting such writing to the international stage and deepening further interest at home. This interest was further reaffirmed with Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Jhumpa Lahiri's winning of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and encouraged a renewed engagement with Indian literature. A growth in international stature of Indian literature was paralleled with inclusion of Indian literature in English Literature courses in Indian universities and Panja (1999) recognises the contribution of scholars like Harish Trivedi who through their pioneering efforts brought about a change in the English Honours curriculum in universities such as the University of Delhi. In more recent times, English literature

syllabi have become even more diverse, recognising the many Indias that inhabit India, and this recognition was acknowledged and reflected in the syllabi. For example, Jadavpur University offers a paper on 'The Rise of English Literary Studies' that includes readings by Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajeswari Sundar Rajan and Gauri Viswanathan amongst others. The University of Delhi offers papers on 'Dalit Writings' and 'Partition Literature' as part of the English literature course. The University of Mumbai also offers optional papers on 'Dalit Literature' and another on 'Tribal Literature and Culture'. However, literature from the northeast continues to be neglected and marginalised in the English literature syllabi of most Indian universities even today and if it is included, it is usually tokenism at best. There are a few exceptions to that case and a brief perusal of those could serve as an example for others interested in including literature from the northeast in the syllabus.

The English Literature courses offered by Mizoram University, Sikkim University and North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) can be seen as pathbreaking as they are the rare exceptions that offer an entire paper titled 'Writings from North East India' (<https://mzu.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2i>), 'Writings in English from Northeast India' (https://cus.ac.in/images/content/static/Syllabus/Sch_Lang_Lit/English_UG.pdf) and 'Literature from North East India' (https://anthony.ac.in/resources/mdl/academics/syllabus/ug/doc_EnglishSyllabus.pdf) respectively, as part of their English literature course. It is significant to note, though unsurprising, that all the above mentioned universities are in northeast India. Arguably, the most comprehensive paper on northeast literature is offered by Mizoram University which not only offers readings from each state that comprise the northeast, but also ensures that Tilottoma Misra's (2011) 'Introduction' from *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India*, which provides necessary context to reading literature from the region, is compulsory reading for the paper. The paper offered by Sikkim University includes various genres and a balanced mix of the popular names such as Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao and Robin Ngangom, but also Prajwal Parajuly from Sikkim and Tarun Bharatiya who lived in Meghalaya and wrote extensively on issues pertaining to the northeast. The paper from NEHU is crafted along similar lines, wherein each unit is devoted to a particular genre and the suggested readings comprise writers such as Sanjoy Hazarika, Malsawmi Jacob, Tilottoma Misra among others. Namrata Pathak, who

teaches at NEHU, explains, “These are four credits courses. Hence, if we divide the writings under categories like essays, poetry, fiction etc., the distribution of credits is even and uniform” (Namrata Pathak, personal communication, April 17, 2026).

Syllabus designing is never an easy task and the process of selecting authors and texts is fraught with challenges. Integral to the process of syllabus design is the inevitable and unenviable task of selective inclusions but such systematic exclusion cannot be ignored or justified. One of the reasons responsible for the failure of writing from the northeast making inroads to the syllabi of Indian universities could be that scholarly engagement with literature from the northeast has not kept pace with the remarkable creative writing that has emerged from the region of late. As Abrona Aden from Sikkim University says, “the foremost challenge is the scant critical material on the texts” (Abrona Lee Pandi Aden, personal communication, April 18, 2026). Or it could be that most academic works are in the regional languages, and hence inaccessible to a larger readership for study. This neglect of the study of the northeast might slightly differ in the case of a subject such as Political Science because of the acknowledged importance of the northeast as a frontier region as Manjeet Baruah (2012) has persuasively argued. Thus, it is worthwhile to examine some of the dominant themes and issues that preoccupy such literature to understand the challenges that need to be negotiated to read, analyse and introduce literature from the northeast to universities across India and possibly, also to a wider reading public.

Category of the Northeast and Its Thematic Resonances

The category of the northeast is a problematic one and is fraught with dangers of homogenising the linguistic, ethnic, religious, geographical, class and other differences that impinge upon it. Preeti Gill (2013) writes that the term “north-east India,” a directional place name, entered the Indian lexicon in 1971, more as an administrative concept than a local point of view. However, the category despite its limitations is a useful one and can be used strategically to harness and complicate the interest the category evokes. The fact that many of the states such as Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh that comprise the northeast were carved out of Assam, many occupy a frontier status, have been periodically plagued by violence and insurgency and continue to share a fraught relationship with the nation state, also enables one to envisage some commonalities

underlying the differences. Prodhani and Sharma draw attention to how the region has in fact become visible owing to the category:

Northeast, as an onomastic category, has provided a shared and equitable space for marginal literary traditions such as Naga literature, Mizo literature, Arunachali literature, Sikkimese literature, and others, enabling them to emerge as part of a common literary collective rooted in shared struggles and aspirations despite diversities. (Prodhani & Sharma, 2026, p. 5)

It is a sentiment echoed by Tilottoma Misra (2011) who observes that, “A collection of writings which represents a wide variety of cultures, nationalities, and languages cannot be [compiled] based on similarity of style or content,” (p. xix) but goes on to say that it isn’t completely avoidable. So, once the dangers of homogenising are comprehended, an overview of dominant themes and preoccupations of literature from the northeast is an enabling approach to understand and analyse literature from this region. An engagement with the same will not only lead to a more nuanced understanding of literature from the region but also pave the way for its inclusion in syllabi once one realises how it enhances our understanding of Indian literature and even more significantly, facilitates an understanding of a much-neglected region, its people, culture and politics.

The most over-arching theme that one expectedly comes across is the theme of violence that literature from almost all the states is engrossed in. While novels such as Easterine Kire’s *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) examine the violence that tore apart common people’s lives during the Naga people’s struggle for independence from India, Mitra Phukan’s *The Collector’s Wife* examines the terror unleashed by the ULFA during the years of insurgency in Assam. Poets such as Robin S. Ngangom from Manipur writes, “There is something sadly inevitable/About this land .../Like a beast which stalks its own death” (Ngangom & Nongkynrih, 2009, p. 63). It is this terror of living with the constant threat of violence that leads to Thangjam Ibopishak Singh to powerfully declare, “I want to be killed by an Indian bullet” (1999) even as he poignantly makes a plea in “Don’t kill me, I was born on this land” (2003) for peace and acceptance. The poems by Singh in fact point towards a few other important preoccupations of literature from the northeast. One such pertinent issue is the troubled relationship that northeast shares with the

centre. As Manjeet Baruah (2012) perceptively remarks, “politics became not merely a protest against the government of India but also against the Indian ‘nation’ state system itself” (p. 144). The growing sense of mistrust, othering and apathy that the northeast has often protested about but in vain are concerns that Mrinal Miri (2011) sees as reminiscent of colonial practices, ironically playing out in anti-colonial, nationalist history narratives. Such a decolonial stance becomes increasingly evident in literature from the northeast as evident in Singh’s poetry or in novels such as Temsula Ao’s *These Hills Called Home* (2005) or Siddharth Deb’s *An Outline of the Republic* (2005).

Postcolonial and Resistance Literature

The increasingly decolonial stance was preceded by one that was quintessentially a postcolonial one. One of the dominant tropes of postcolonial literature is its attempt to wrest the narrative back, to tell the story of the colonial encounter from the perspective of the colonised. Increasingly, postcolonial writing has also concentrated on shifting the stance of the colonised from being passive recipients to one of active resistance. The urge to do so is rooted in how literary texts were “crucial to the formation of colonial discourses” (Loomba, 1998, p. 74) and therefore played an instrumental role in furthering imperialist agenda as Edward Said demonstrated in his pioneering work *Culture and Imperialism* (1994). Such a postcolonial attitude is revealed in the dominant theme of narrativising history reflected in literature from the northeast. While the theme’s importance lies in addressing the erasures in mainstream Indian history, the focus on historical events in such literature, such as the impact of British colonialism on the northeast and its resistance, also has meaningful consequences. The drawing of linkages between important historical events in Indian history and tracing how those events unfolded in the northeast establishes a sense of connectedness amongst those from the northeast with those from the rest of India. In several instances, such narrativisation also provide a context to understand the rise of insurgency or ethnonationalism in parts of the northeast. Such a task is ably taken up by novels such as *Swarnalata* by Tilottoma Misra (2013), *The Black Hill* by Mamang Dai (2014) and Easterine Kire’s *Sky Is My Father* (2018) that map the arrival of colonial modernity to the northeast and the resistance it garners. Further, novels such as Kire’s *Mari* (2010), Rita Choudhury’s *Chinatown*

Days (2018) and Siddhartha Sarma's *The Grasshopper's Run* (2009) shed light on the impact of the Second World War on the northeast. Nikhil J. Alva's *If I Have to be a Soldier* (2024) is about events that led to the Mizo National Front's leader, Pu Laldenga declaring independence from India, resulting in decades of insurgency.

The focus on the themes of violence and literary historiography further alerts us to yet another preoccupation of literature from the northeast, the problem of identity politics and ethnonationalism which has led to most of the violence that the northeast witnessed and continues to do so. The understanding of the same is contingent upon one's understanding of how issues of ethnicity intersect with caste, gender, religion to complicate matters. In many ways, ethnonationalism is echoed in multiple ways in the literature of the northeast, rarely valorised, and increasingly critiqued for its celebration of a chauvinistic patriotism. While several works from the region examine the rise of ethnonationalism and offer a critique of it, perhaps Arupa Patangia Kalita's, *The Story of Felanee* (2011), is one of the most compelling works to do so. One discovers that Felanee is born to a Bengali father and a Bodo mother who marries a Koch and is thus the bearer of multiple ethnicities, often at war with each other. The issue of Felanee's identity is further complicated by her gender, her poverty and her status as a widow and a refugee in her own homeland. By creating Felanee as a bearer of multiple competing ethnicities, Kalita strikes a loud note of resistance at the narrative of muscular nationalism which is primarily based on identity politics and the need to celebrate a singular identity while denouncing others. Therefore, when a doctor at a refugee camp poses a dehumanising query, "What are you, anyway?" (Kalita, 2011, p. 32) Felanee's appropriate response of "Just a human being, what else?" (p. 32) neutralises the narrative of her interlocutors who were insistent on seeing her only in terms of her ethnicity, robbing her of her essential humanity.

Kalita's novel also signals the ascension of resistance literature especially by women writers from the northeast and an insistence on putting forward a narrative of peace. Thus, Neilhounou in Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) laments, "It was a man's war. If it had been left to the women, maybe they would have talked it over and sorted it out long back" (p. 117). It is a stance that is reflected by several women writers across the states. As Naga poet Rozumari Samsara (2022) expresses, "The Naga nationalist told me to hate—the Indians/The Hindu nationalist

told me to hate—the Pakistanis/The European nationalist told me to hate—the Immigrants/The American nationalist told me to hate—the Terrorists/I said NoNoNo—let me think for myself” (p. 122). Alongside this foregrounding of literature that commends peace, is a growing conscious refusal to portray protagonists of stories of violence as passive victims of violence. Once again, this survivor trope is especially noticeable in the literature by women writers but also extends to that written by men as one notes in Bhabendra Nath Saikia’s *The Hour Before Dawn* (2009) about Menoka reclaiming life after being devastated by her husband’s infidelity.

Emerging Thematic Concerns

In recent anglophone literature from the northeast, Baishya and Moral (2023) see a turn towards the ‘planetary’ as the predominant emerging trend. Such a focus is often reflected through a relationship between women, violence and their environment; and how they are at once ravaged and scarred by violence. Sometimes this women-violence-environment continuum reveals the damage, and at times we see them forging a symbiotic relationship in their journey towards healing. This relationship is depicted in several works of literature but perhaps one of the best exposition of the same can be found in Janice Pariat’s *Everything The Light Touches* (2023) which powerfully tells the story of the determined fight of indigenous people against uranium extraction in Meghalaya, especially the resistance of one woman, who refuses to sell her land despite monetary enticements and threats, a story inspired by the real life heroism of Kong Spelity. This concern for the environment also needs to be viewed in the context of the challenging geography of the northeast wherein the fight for natural resources sometimes becomes responsible for internal hostilities and the outbreak of violence. It is a concern that also harks back to a time before colonial modernity impacted the northeast and brought about great changes in the life and culture of the people. Therefore, the desire to recover the past is also noted in the tendency to focus on the richness of the oral tradition, an integral aspect of literature from the northeast, before the advent of print capitalism. Esther Daimari and Ivy Daimary (2022) emphasise that while literacy is a privilege in the northeast, the spoken word most commonly reflects the local sensibilities. Hence, one notes the presence of the folk in the form of origin stories or a turn towards

mythical narratives and cosmology that one notes in the Easterine Kire's "foregrounding of such connectivity [that] necessitates an immersion in an indigenous relational worldview that includes humans and other-than-human entities" (Baishya & Moral, 2023, p. 184). Such a tendency becomes even more pronounced and a defining characteristic in the writings of novelists such as Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's as evident in *Funeral Nights* (2022) and *The Distaste of the Earth* (2024). The folk makes its presence felt in other significant ways too, such as in the fact of Indira Goswami's *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* (2015) drawing inspiration not from archival sources but local folk songs and tales celebrating Thengphakhri, the first woman tehsildar from Assam under British colonial rule.

Call for Interdisciplinarity

A study of some of the dominant themes that literature from the north-east engages with makes one thing very clear, it is "admittedly a heavily political literature, as all of these terms would suggest, even where, or perhaps especially where, the political is denied or sidestepped" (Dutta, 2024, para 2). Thus, any attempt at understanding literature from the northeast must necessarily adopt an interdisciplinary approach. While such contextualising of any literature is important given that the socio-cultural-political context directly or indirectly influences the content of a text and the issues it addresses, in the case of the northeast this becomes imperative owing to the general lack of knowledge about the region's history and complicated politics owing to its absence from mainstream Indian history books and syllabus. For example, the significance of Goswami's *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* featuring a Bodo protagonist is lost unless one is aware that peace talks were underway between the Bodo militant outfits and the state at the time this novel was published. Goswami's initiative was one to bridge the trust deficit between the Bodos and the Assamese. Similarly, the implication of the warring Mishmees and the Khampti clan fighting together against the British in Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014) would resonate only if one was aware of the animosity. While the need for an interdisciplinary approach to study literature from the northeast has been argued, the fundamentals of what would comprise an interdisciplinary approach could vary. M. Asaduddin says, "Given the vast diversity and different degrees of awareness about the Northeast in different parts of the

country ... courses are usually designed according to the expertise of the instructor and certain assumptions about the level of understanding the students bring to the table in terms of their earlier exposure/readings" (M. Asaduddin, personal communication, April 18, 2026). He goes on to suggest that, "as a conceptual framework you can choose materials that would be designed to make the students aware of the brief history of the area, myths and orature, advent of print literature etc. Then you can include representative writings from select literatures."

Asaduddin's observations point to challenges in designing a paper on literature from the northeast. The problem arises due to the uneven development of literature in the eight states that comprise the northeast. While Assam and Manipur have a thriving literature written in local languages and English, this is not the case with the other states. Veio Pou (2023) corroborates this, "when one talks of literary traditions of the region, one is tempted to assume that only Assamese and Manipuri (Meitei) ... literary traditions thrive" (p. 307). Even as translations of literature from the northeast into English have increased, it has in many ways only contributed to the existing unevenness. One must also be aware that there exists in many northeast states a rich tradition of writing in the language or languages of the region along with a vibrant tradition of oral literature. In fact, Misra (2011) has warned that there could be a time in the future when even those from the northeast might read their own literature only in translation. Samrat Choudhury (2023) endorses this point of view when he writes that there are around 200 languages that are spoken in the northeast and that itself is indicative of the literature that is lost in English translation. Thus, admitting that most of what is read by an interested readership, or what could be offered in universities is only a small slice of literature from the northeast, one needs to consider the reasons for still advocating the study of such a literature. One of the most compelling reasons that one could offer is that literature from the northeast provides a glimpse into culture, history and politics of a region historically neglected. Such awareness, albeit a little, can pave the way for a better understanding of the people and their problems, and bring into focus the states and their people who have continued to feel alienated even years after independence. In doing so, literature can play the role of forging greater ties between the northeast and the rest of India.

References

- Alva, N. J. (2024). *If I have to be a soldier*. Harper Collins.
- Ao, T. (2005). *These hills called home: Stories from a war zone*. Penguin.
- Baishya, A. R. & Moral, R. K. "Insides-outsides": Northeast Indian anglophone literature. *South Asian Review*, 44(4), 180-190. DOI: 10.1080/02759527.2023.2255045
- Baruah, M. (2012). *Frontier cultures: A social history of Assamese literature*. Routledge.
- Choudhury, R. (2018). *Chinatown days*. Pan Macmillan India.
- Choudhury, S. (2023). *Northeast India: A political history*. HarperCollins India.
- Dai, M. (2014). *The black hill*. Aleph Book Company.
- Daimari, E. & Daimary, I. (2022). Ecofeminism and bodo folktales and folksongs. In D. A. Vakoch & N. Anae (Eds.), *Indian feminist ecocriticism* (pp. 93-106). Lexington Books.
- Deb, S. (2005). *An outline of the republic*. Ecco.
- Dutta, N. (2024). Institutionalising northeast Indian anglophone literature. <https://indianwritinginenglish.uohyd.ac.in/institutionalising-northeast-indian-anglophone-literature-nandana-dutta/>
- Gill, P. (2013). *The peripheral centre: Voices from India's northeast*. Zubaan Books.
- Goswami, I. (2015) *The bronze sword of thengphakhri tehsildar* (A. Kashyap, Trans). Zubaan Books.
- Kalita, A. P. (2011). *The story of Felanee* (D. Phukan, Trans.). Zubaan Books.
- Kire, E. (2010). *Mari*. Barkweaver.
- Kire, E. (2011). *Bitter wormwood*. Zubaan Books.
- Kire, E. (2018). *Sky is my father: A Naga village remembered*. Speaking Tiger.
- Lahiri, J. (1999). *The interpreter of maladies*. HarperCollins.
- Loomba, A. (1998). *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. Routledge.
- Miri, M. (2011). The spiritual and the moral. In T. Misra (Ed.), *The Oxford anthology of writings from north-east India: Poetry and essays* (pp. 105-117). Oxford University Press.
- Misra, T. (Ed.) (2011). *The Oxford anthology of writings from north-east India: Poetry and essays*. Oxford University Press.
- Ngangom, R. S., & Nongkynrih, K. S. (Eds.) (2009). *Dancing earth: an anthology of poetry from north-east India*. Penguin Books.
- Nongkynrih, K. S. (2022). *Funeral nights*. Westland Books.
- Nongkynrih, K. S. (2024). *The distaste of the Earth*. Penguin.
- Pariat, J. (2023). *Everything the light touches*. HarperCollins.
- Panja, S. (1999) *Many Indias, many literatures: New critical essays*. Worldview Publications.

- Phukan, M. (2005). *The collector's wife*. Zubaan Books.
- Pou, V. K. P. (2023). Literary traditions. In Jelle J. P. Wouters and T. B. Subba (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to northeast India* (pp. 307—311). Routledge.
- Prodhani, J. & Sharma, D. (2026). "Provincialising English": Northeast India as an ethnopolitan space. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 18(1). <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v18n1.01>
- Roy, A. (1997). *The god of small things*. Penguin.
- Rushdie, S. (1981). *Midnight's children*. Random House.
- Said, E. (1994). *Culture and imperialism*. Penguin.
- Saikia, B. N. (2009). *The hour before dawn* (S. C. Maitreyee, Trans). Penguin.
- Samrat. (2018).
- Sarma, S. (2009) *The grasshopper's run*. Scholastic.
- Samsara, R. (2022). "NoNoNo woman." In A. Longkumer (Eds.), *The many that I am: Writings from Nagaland* (2nd ed). Zubaan Books.
- Singh, T. I. (1999). *Illusionary land*. Writers Forum.
- Singh, T. I. (2003). *Human smell*. Writers Forum.

Shibani Phukan is an Associate Professor in the Department of English, ARSD College, University of Delhi. Her areas of interest include writing from the northeast, women's writing, and translation studies.

shibaniphukan@gmail.com