

SEVEN SISTERS

Echoes from India's North-East

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Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura – these seven states constitute the geographical area of this *anthology. The editor has included writings in English as well as translations from what she considered to be the representative works in local languages (including Bengali) in order to bring out an overview of the literatures of this region. 'Diversity in diversity' seems to be the underlying concept behind the compilation, for it is difficult, if not impossible, to find a common thread that may be said to give a semblance of unity to the literatures of these ethnic groups. The first volume provides specimens of fictions and the second offers a selection of poetry and quite a number of informative essays dealing with the socio-cultural and religious-philosophical aspects of peoples who are sandwiched between the 'Hindu-Aryan' and 'Indo-Mongoloid' elements, with Christianity imported by European missionaries thrown in. In spite of the preponderance of hackneyed postmodernist terminology and total disregard of the economic substratum notable in some of the essays, including the editor's Introduction (the same one printed in both volumes), the anthology supplies a long-felt want and deserves kudos. It is futile to ask why some pieces have been chosen and some neglected: every anthology is its editor's choice and constraints of space cannot be disregarded. The present reviewer is not competent to vouch for the accuracy of the translations, but most of them are readable in varying degrees.

The basic question is of course the condition of the very disparate cultures of so many ethnic and linguistic groups who are yet to be assimilated in the present day mainstream Indian culture. English rather than Hindi or any other Indian language has nurtured the writers who are as yet not sure of their readership. Identity politics is a fashionable term, which however fails to identify what the marks of identity are. Charles Chasie, for example, asserts: '...because there is no "Naga Culture" as such since there are so many Naga tribes which seemingly completely different, often contrasting cultures and languages, what follows is the Angami culture, in the specific context of Khonama village from where I come. This is so because even within the tribe there are, frequently different practices!' The creation of Nagaland as a state inside India has not solved the problem. Chasie writes: 'At the moment everyone talks "Naga" but thinks and acts according to their individual tribes. Who is a "Naga"? What makes a person a "Naga"? Unhappily, in three- and half-decades of statehood, the government, regardless of who has been "ruling", has done precious little to carry out any study in this crucial area, although the cost would have been a comparative "pittance". And most Nagas seem to prefer talking Naga Politics rather than finding out who the Naga is!' What is true of the Naga is true of most, perhaps all, of the tribes and clans of this region. North-East India is no more than a geographical entity. Detribalization, some historians have pointed out, has been in progress throughout Indian history and that is how the much vaunted concept of 'unity in diversity' has been mooted. Yet the fact is that in spite of the best efforts of the colonial powers and those who came to rule after them, assimilation of India's North-East with the body politic of India is still a far cry. The creation of a North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and the subsequent award of statehood have not gone down well with the peoples over there. Verrier Elwin's cautious plan for not 'over-administering' did not bear fruit. Nor did the Nehru Plan which sought to take up development projects without imposing anything on them produce any uplift worth mentioning. The introduction of Hindi as the means of instruction in 1956 proved disastrous, with the result that English continues to hold its sway. Drug traffic and state terrorism and underground liberation movements without any viable programmes have continued to flourish. The situation appears to be beyond redemption.

The litterateurs of the North-East, however, have adopted all contemporary trends and fashions prevalent in the rest of India and abroad that have nothing to do with their own ethnic tradition. The English language provides an outlet for the well-educated writers while their own mother tongues languish in neglect. Authors writing in their mother tongues, we are told are not sure whether their works would at all be read by their own people. Sukalpa Bhattacharya in her contribution says that the ideal reader of today crosses all national and international boundaries. She suggests: 'The Arunacali writers writing in Asamiya, like many other writers from small nationalities whose readership is also limited will have to depend more and more on capable translators and publishers who can enable them to reach out to the "small minority of literary readers" who still read good books.' She cites the case of Orhan Pamuk, the Nobel Prize-winning Turkish author, who claims that his novels are today read by the readers of world over in forty different languages. Is that the only consolation? Dependence on publishers and translators exhibits a preference for private sponsorship which in the long run cannot but prove to be counterproductive. Creative writing with an eye to translations only harms itself. Tilottama Misra envisages that writing in English is bound to grow in future. As opposed to this, one may cite the case of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan author of *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), who forsook writing in English and chose his mother tongue, *Gikuyu*, for all his future works. □□□

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