

Poems from North Eastern India

(Curated by Suranjana Choudhury)

Introduction

Suranjana Choudhury

The geographical region which is called ‘India’s northeast’ is home to many tribes, ethnic groups, religions, cultures and languages. From the colonial times this place been seen as a ‘land frontier’ with resources that attracted many immigrant communities. In course of time several claims and contradictions emerged that contested and challenged its heterogeneity and pluralistic character. The practice of positing ‘northeast’ as a singular category has been questioned and critiqued from various quarters and rightly has been done so. Territorial proximity of the states and some cultural similarities do not in any way justify mapping of an uncomplicated category of analysis. Udayan Mishra pertinently points out in this regard, “One has to recognise that there are many different communities in the region and the dynamics of each single movement have to be taken care of, if any solution is to be achieved.” However, it is useful to remember here that it is often used as a ‘category of convenience’ to address the embedded dynamics of geopolitical and cultural interrelatedness.

Literature from the northeast is not a newly formed tradition; its antiquity is significant and formidable. Different states constituting the northeast have distinct strands of literary and cultural heritage- each exhibiting its individuality and unique character. In most of the states here the oral blends with the written to yield a kind of literature, which in the views of many, is a confident assertion of voice and identity. Literary culture in this region is marked by a remarkable terrain of “oral narratives that have networked society and informed it.” (Syiem) Poets, novelists, essayists writing from different places here have drawn upon its outstanding trove of stories, legends, lores and songs to build up an impressive canon of literature. Because of the diversities and differences present within ethnic communities residing in the northeast, translation scenario is informed by a predictable set of challenges and difficulties. Each state

preserves and practises a large number of tribal cultures that have their own individual vernacular languages, different and distinct from other languages. These characteristics primarily render the exercise of translation in this zone tough and complex. It is important to note that due to the lack of adequate number of translations very few communities and their languages have representations on global stage. This compilation of translated poems and songs from different states of northeast included in this specific issue on translation proposes to offer important insights into the lived realities, customs, traditions and cultures of India's northeast. These translations, in more ways than one, affirm the importance of preserving such voices which remain largely unacknowledged and which continue to haunt the margins.

Suranjana Choudhury teaches literature at North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, India. Her areas of interest include Partition Studies, Women's Writing and Cultural Studies. She is currently coediting a volume on women's experiences of displacement to be published by Routledge. Her recent book *A Reading of Violence in Partition Stories from Bengal* has been published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing from the UK. She may be contacted at suranjanaz@gmail.com

Language/Region - Assamese (Assam)

Farewell

By Nilim Kumar

Bid farewell

like

lips away from lips

like

air from trees

birds from the sky

fish from water

A mangled hand from my hand

A gush of wind splits into two

to enter our hearts

Farewell

in tight-bosomed

embraces

Plucking eyes from my eyes

who returns in the path

under the Godhuli Gopal

Godhuli Gopal: A fragrant tree

A Poem for Brajen Morol

By Nilim Kumar

At times I think

after breaking everything

I will go to your house

You have a clock

in your house

by which I will watch the time.

You have a car

You drive and

next to the window I will sit

to gulp the wind, to let my hair loose

You have a handkerchief

You keep it folded in your pocket

The one you bought

to wipe my tears off

You know my thirst

You know my exhaustion

You know the language of my insomnia

You know the creases of my letters

You say--- My lines that slant

should remain the way they are.

Sometimes I think

after breaking everything

I will go to your house

In your courtyard at the back

I will sit by the fire

You watch, the warmth will herald

summer in our town.

Then people will ask me---

Who is Brajen Morol?

A man or a woman?

Where does he live?

Where do you live Brojen Morol?

I too don't know where do you live?

Where?

You are an enthusiastic reader

gyrating in my poems

At times I think

after breaking everything

I will go to your quiet house

A Love Story in a City

By Nibedita Phukan

In the pond of water lilies

for the first time I beheld

the sun mating the moon

So many people's spectacle is dawn!

That arrow of light and darkness rendered me blind

We too rehearsed building a house with closed doors and windows

like those pair of birds that carry hay and sticks,

build a nest in the verandah of the room closed for so many days

Our theatre hall is our long three-seater sofa

The TV a Sadar jail

In the corner of the table a marble Taj Mahal

Our love was intact till the city was beautiful

The path to our love was lit by neon lights

My love was like the city

Your love was like the eminence of the city

Many a times after joining the crowd in processions

We rehearsed our love in the cramped structure of a house on return

The curtain of the only window turned graver in darkness

Its slight flutter made the people outside restless

One day the drains in the city swelled up with a filthy stink

In another city in the same time

an arrow of love,

and eminence

leaves the bow

In a dawn like this

I heard a knock on my door

The only window of the room shook
when hit by the hawker boy's
bundle of newspaper.

Translator of the Assamese poems: Namrata Pathak

About the Authors :

Nilim Kumar, a known name in Assam, has penned down more than seventeen volumes of poetry and a few novels. His poems are translated into several languages (including English, French, Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi and Nepali). His poetry has won various accolades and prestigious awards including the Uday Bharati National Award, the Raza Foundation Award, the Shabda Award to mention a few.

Nibedita Phukan: Nibedita Phukan has been dabbling in poetry since 1995. Her poems are published in almost every vernacular magazine in Assam. Currently she is working with Kailash Satyarthi Children Foundation in New Delhi.

About the translator:

Namrata Pathak teaches in the department of English, North-Eastern Hill University, Tura, Meghalaya. She has an M.Phil and PhD from English and Foreign Languages University (formerly, CIEFL), Hyderabad. She has four books to her credit, and her latest is forthcoming from Sahitya Akademi. Her articles and creative writing have found a place in *Vayavya*, *Nezine*, *Café Dissensus*, *Northeast Review*, *Kitaab*, *Coldnoon*, *Setu*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, *Muse India*, *Raiot*, *The Tribe*, *Dead Snakes*, *The Thumb Print Magazine*, *Wagon Magazine*, *Bengaluru Review*, to name a few. Her debut collection of poems, *That's How Mirai Eats a Pomegranate*, was brought out in 2018 by Red River

Language/Region - Bangla (Barak Valley, Assam)

14th August

By Amitabha Dev Choudhury

Riding his bicycle, a boy sells flags
An old story. I watch him with intent eyes
Here in Silchar. At M Market. Amidst evening crowd
Riding his bicycle, a boy sells flags.

He has no eyes. Hunger drives his eyes.
The confused alphabets of my poem are rendered mute
I buy a flag then, with eager arms
I will hoist it tomorrow uprooting memories of partition.

Do we search for anything in the flag anymore?
You carry my flag around. Unhindered door
I carry your flag around. Quiet neighbourhood.
No strength to carry it. Yet some signs

Provide us with flags along the octaves of heart.
Is that boy of M market mine? This question, I see, sets future on fire.....

!9th May

By Amitabha Dev Choudhury

Some people had loved their language-
Fire remains witness to it till day, still awake

Some people had loved my language-
Blood remains witness to it till day, still awake
Some people had loved your language-
The railway tracks remain its witness, see, they are still awake.

We trade fire to buy lives
We trade blood to buy laughter
We trade future to buy short vacations.
So, our children
have forgotten the longing of language for fire.

The Curse of Roots

By Amitabha Dev Choudhury

All trees are not trees with deep roots
Everyone knows that.

But some trees do have deep roots.
Only he knows for whom

love of homeland
bears the curse of roots even today.

Translator of the Bangla poems: Suranjana Choudhury

About the author:

Amitabha Dev Choudhury: Amitabha Dev Choudhury is one of the most engaging creative voices of Barak Valley in the state of Assam in India. He has written numerous novels, short fictions and a wide range of poems. His partition trilogy comprises three novellas-

UponashyerKhonje (In Quest of a Novel), UdashMohol, ShunyoGolin (Pensive Palace, Empty Lane)and PotakaGachh (The Flag Tree) His writings explore an expansive span of subjects and an equally challenging mass of techniques. Silchar-a provincial town in India and its fringes-enjoy an abiding presence in many of his writings.

About the translator:

Suranjana Choudhury teaches literature at North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, India. Her areas of interest include Partition Studies, Women's Writing and Cultural Studies. She is currently coediting a volume on women's experiences of displacement to be published by Routledge. Her recent book *A Reading of Violence in Partition Stories from Bengal* has been published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing from the UK. She may be contacted at suranjanaz@gmail.com

Language/Region - Khasi (Meghalaya)

Who Rules the Roost?

By Esther Syiem (Author and translator)

I've heard it said
that women in our society
rule the roost;
until I saw her
bent and shuffling
sniffing steadily
after the one
still roosting
in the afternoon;
her can of worms
snatched out of sight,
tucked somewhere safe
for secret access,
for himself alone

or passed off
on his own terms.

I've heard it said too
that our women are more equal than our men;
but there've been occasions more than one
when our men are more equal,
and our women
lose claim
even upon themselves.

I've also heard it said
that when the roost is breached
and the coop is smirched
then chickens shall lay eggs
even when still clothed in soft yellow down.
Cuckolding roosters will spike up
for the strutting and the crooning
and the sparring for the hens,
and the sparring with the hens,

who've left off the scratching and the squawking
for the Portentous Crowing
of a hen-kind.

Portentous Crowing

By Esther Syiem (Author and translator)

I've heard it said that
the Portentous Crowing –
when a hen begins to crow like a rooster –

signifies the end
of the world.

I've heard this said too
of the Portentous Crowing;
that women in our society
straddle the roost
to take control
of a gendered kind.

I've also heard it said
that our men do strange things
to protest their crowing women
who will do stranger things
to flip their rooster-men over.

But what was that again?
If the crowing rooster flaps
only to flip over
can hens stop the crowing?

And so they say
hens crow these days.

But this I say
hens too have to crow, you know.

About the author who is also the translator :

Esther Syiem is Professor of English Literature at the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. She has been involved in the study of Khasi folk literature for more than a decade and has

written on Khasi folklore, myth, and history. A bilingual writer and established poet, some of her publications include two collections of poetry: *Oral Scriptings* and *Of Wit and Wisdom of Follies and Frailties*. Other works include *The Languages of Meghalaya* (with G. N. Devy), *Race of the Rivers*, *Oral Discourse in Khasi Folk Narrative*, and a play in Khasi, *Ka Nam*. She has published with Orient Blackswan, Tulika, Easternbook Publishers and Writer's Workshop.

Language/Region - Manipuri (Manipur)

To Pacha

By Robin S Ngangom (Author and Translator)

To your uneventful death, Pacha,
the stones hurled at your demented name, and
the doors closed on your life
it is fitting that none mourn
the face of your memory they slapped;
from booze artist Pacha, to lunatic Pacha.

There are no more tears to shed
in this withered country where they
kill pregnant women and children; its

nipples have long gone dry, and leering

death walks your homeland. And why should

anyone weep for your lonely alcoholic end?

Young boys and soldiers are butchering each

other by the dozen, in the hills, the angry

streets, day after day, and too many heroes and

villains are not worth remembering at all.

Death is callous, Pacha, in the land of your

innocent birth.

Consummate madman, unknown comrade,

you were the best of them all;

whether you logged the meteorological conditions

of your stricken town, pen dipped

in your drunken blood, or portrayed

old men hard of hearing. Breaking heart

of roots, savage lover no woman would tame,

existential hero and fiercely proud pauper.

You laughed yourself insane in the teeth

of the gathering storm.

Hovel-dweller amidst concrete and iron,
anachronistic mendicant, and embracer of
manuscripts in pounding rain, angry star
which burned in our skies, what were
your dreams? Reveal them a little for me,
anonymous brother. Poetry in your
homeland must die a natural death
when one must “sew up his lips and
clog his ears with mud,” and to be a
man, first of all, you must sell yourself
to the highest bidder.

Immaculate madling with resplendent dreams,
you refused to sell them in your land
where villains strut as the pure in streets.
You only said: “One’s homeland is dear. I
have not seen all of this land. I have not

been able to tread the grass that grows there.”

For a long time the tramps and lunatics

beckoned you, and only they shall
honour your name.

About the author who is the translator:

Robin S Ngangom is a bilingual poet and translator who writes in English and Manipuri. He has three books of poetry in English and his poems have appeared in *The New Statesman*, *Planet: the Welsh Internationalist*, *Verse* and *The Literary Review*.

Language/Region - Mizo (Mizoram)

Local Mizo Songs¹

1. When the twelvemonth approaches closure

Rousing beauteous wintertide sunshine;

Illuming yonder scenes and woodlands

Each bough of trees your bestowed appeal!

Behold profound beauty of earth!

Air of faunas and fair flow'rs,

Flaunt esse hailing the divine

¹ These are oral songs, unauthored, without a title and only numbered.

Can mortals mould marvels as such?

2. A maiden's fair features you eclipse,
With each bloom's beauty your bestowal;
Even white men with worthy wisdom,
Not once stirred a shade sightly as you,
Wintertide sunshine, earth's beauty,
My artless lauds ne'er ample
Perchance it must have been you whom
The Prince of Peace advanced for.

3. Heart drenched with echoes of bygone days,
Made manifest through the heart's mirror
Wandering lengths in sheer melancholy,
In heartfelt pine to prospect each tree
Swapping state with the songbird's life
And pass woes of earthly esse
With want to tread thick woodlands
Lauding wintertide morn's sunshine.

German Combat Songs²

[Translator's note: The emergence of "German Run Zai" or "German Combat Songs" dates back to 1917 in the thick of the turbulent World War I encompassing the warfare between the British Army and the German Army. To fight against the forces of the German and to support the British Army, two thousand and five hundred Mizo lads were then transported to France which their Mizo tongue enounced *Feren*. The unfamiliar things as well as the course of events encountered by these men were sung and narrated in songs by these men. Correspondingly, the womenfolk awaiting at home expressed their melancholy and agonies in songs as well. These songs consequently sing as accounts of narrations pertaining to the brave men advancing towards the battlefield and the mothers, wives and lovers waiting steadfastly at home. These songs evolve as storehouses comprising perspectives and experiences of World War I achieved by Mizo people inside and outside the warzone. Below are a few selected songs of German Combat Songs, sometimes referred to as Domangi Songs.]

1. Leave him be the one who haunts my home,

Choose not my beloved to fight German foes;

Take to heart how lonesome I will be.

2. Dreading the desertion of children,

For them to meander fatherless is my fear;

It's not for us to fight German foes.

3. Mother, do you not heed my laments?

That day we stood against German foes' great wall,

Bullets barraged on us like rainfall.

² The writers of the songs are unknown or not recorded. These are among the old songs which Mizo community calls Puma zai. The tune of the songs flow that of Domangi zai.

4. For who combat German foes are us,

The South quakes, the Northern horizon is reached;

Comes forth calls for the death, of allads.

5. Forwhoelude facing these archfoes,

Should don a skirt, immerse on the loom indoors;

Rather I'd ask your hand in marriage.

6. Hark their beseech, better I depart,

Nevermore to liken vernal bamboo sprouts;

Dearest, pledge your troth, to someone else.

7. Your dearest dread to wed another,

A day will fall when German foes evanesce;

Let not our children meet desertion.

8. In the midst of Chanmari highway,

Pining for her dearest departing;

Tearfully she grasps her lover's arm.

9. Mother, let me not wed another,

Rather I'd await him battling German foes;

Enduring delay of parenthood.

10. Struck with yearning ceaseless for our land,

Amidst scenic Zokhawsang³ woods clad in green;

Cherished sweetheart beams in cheerful mirth.

11. Home we have come, us men of valour,

Honour us with tanchhawn,⁴ German conquerors;

Our prestige outspreading far and wide.

Translator of the Mizo poems: Lalremtuangi

About the translator:

Lalremtuangi, born and raised in the small hilly town, Lunglei, Mizoram, completed her Master's Degree in English at North Eastern Hills University and has joined the PhD programme at the same university in February, 2020. With a few published works in different journals and magazines, she is undergoing a gradual process of mellowing her lifelong passion for literature.

Language/Region - Naga (Nagaland)

Are you not my son?

By Asosü Kholi Pijü

³ Zokhawsang, literally translated, means the steep land of Mizo community. It is often used in poetry and prose to elucidate the geographical features of the hilly Mizoram.

⁴ Tanchhawn is a head dress of warriors made out of goat hair, dyed in red colour and fixed in a pointed piece of wood. It is only worn by completing all the rites over the head of the enemy killed. The man could put on this Tanchhawn in his tied diartjal, like a turban.

(Translator's note: The speaker in the poem is a father having a conversation with his son on how his son and his generation have discarded the traditional narratives and the wisdom behind them. Instead the father narrates how this new culture has not only alienated the younger generation from the older generation by way of differences in cultural values but also disrupted the intimate relationship between him and his son. The father sees the younger generation as superficially imitating this new culture (represented by the italicised word "it") at the cost of forgetting one's own roots and identity. The entire poem is a plea to the son, that when he finds himself lost and alone, his father (or, the word "Mother" in the poem is a personification of culture/homeland) is always lovingly awaiting his homecoming.)

Are you not my son?

As if you would catch me alive like your prey!

With your onslaught aimed at me non-stop,

Your eyes sickeningly wide like an owl's

As though coercing its way to devour my eyes!

Under the facade of a stranger,

As though braced to roast and eat me raw,

Gravely conniving to spill my flaws,

Looking down on me with disdain from a pedestal.

Don't you want to come closer to me?

Who are you ashamed of?

Suspicious of being belittled by others,

Are you so afraid to lean beside me?

You found it so dazzlingly white?

Do you not see the trap hidden under it?

Do you not see them prowling in silence?

Look at the back of your head and you will see!

The sight of you being crushed down,

Aches my heart so much.

Your eyes which cannot see,

Even when I lay, I twist and turn to look for you.

Open your eyes and see,

Do not over indulge in dining and drinking,

Lest you cross the “big tree”,

Turn your trudging feet back now!

Those clothes, fashionable attires,

I may not wear according to your standards.

My face, eyes, and form might be austere,

My feet may not be fitted with burnished hooves.

Is that why you are ashamed of conversing with me?

But I implore you to look into my heart.

Then, now, and hereafter – your Mother is the same.

When you thirst or hunger,

When people despise you,

When comrades turn against you,
The day you forget your way,
And people deny you the way,
When you are tired and weak,
And your way is barricaded by others,
Come back to me, my beloved child.
Morning, night and day, I'll be waiting for you.

Translators of the Naga poem: PF John Bosco and Athew.

About the Author:

Written by (in Mao dialect) **Asosü Kholi Pijü** (published in *Mao La Bvü: Mocholeshe Kophroleshe. Book-II* by Mao Academy). No more information is available on the author.

About the translators:

PF John Bosco is a PhD research scholar in the Department of English, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. His research interest includes writings in English from Northeast India, Indian Diaspora and Post-colonial literature.

Athew completed his Master's degree in the department of Folkloristics in North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. He is currently pursuing Bachelor of Divinity (3rd year) from Eastern Theological College, Jorhat

Language/Region - Kokborok (Tripura)⁵

⁵ All poems in this section are translated from Kokborok to Bengali by Chandrakanta Murasing & Translated from Bengali to English by Sukla Singha

1. Shyamacharan Tripura

By Shefali Debbarma

Remembering Shyamacharan Tripura,
the tong-ghors stand in silence,
the jhum is hurt and lonely.

The music of the waterfall dies away.

Proud fishes hide themselves
under the submerged rocks that
could not see what was happening above.

The pyre still smells of flowers,
like little children sleeping on their mother's bosom.

2. Hide and Seek

By Shefali Debbarma

You tell me to hide
But where shall I go hiding?
My infancy was kept hidden in rags
My girlhood was veiled underneath the Risa
My youth, covered with the aanchal, wasn't allowed to dream.
I have spent all my life in hide-outs

and yet you ask me to hide.

Tell me, where shall I go hiding?

3. I Want to Pluck the Fruits of Our Stories

By Shefali Debbarma

Our stories are laden with fruits. I shall

pluck them one by one and fill the laanga,

and gift them to my friends.

Keeping the laanga on the ground

I rein in my thoughts only to find

the Nuyai bird weaving a string of tales

in the sky.

In the tongghor,

the fragrant Binni rice

and the godak in bamboo tubes

are waiting to tell us a new story.

Now the sky is aglow with the morning star,

but the rooster's song is yet to be heard.

In the warmth of the mud-oven, Grandmother smokes a bamboo hookah while pouring the old ways of life

in the Kaiseleng*,⁶

⁶ Kaiseleng: A small basket for storing grain.

mixing dreams and reality.

Translator of Kokborok poems: Sukla Singha

About the author:

Shefali Debbarma (b. 1964) is one of the eminent poets of Tripura writing in Kokborok. She is the editor of 'Bumul' and has two collections of verse to her credit. She has featured in renowned literary journals and anthologies.

About the translator:

Sukla Singha (b.1985) teaches at a school in Tripura. Her writings have appeared in Muse India, The Sunflower Collective, Cafe Dissensus and elsewhere. She can be reached at shukla.singha85@gmail.com.