

Original Paper

The Sky Is Rigged with Booby Traps: Tracing Eco-Anxiety in Some Select Poems of Assam and Tripura in India's North-East

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Abstract

Indian literatures in general including those written in English, entail (in a vivid or veiled manner) a rich legacy inherited from the epics, other classical texts and the Puranas which promote overall, an equilibrium in the eco-space, the flora and fauna, while at the same time strongly recommending a protective role of the human and his being in perfect peace with the habitat. The literature of India's North-east, poetry in particular, further posits an interesting case study of both adulation and apprehension. Here one experiences an abiding respect for the exotic beauty of nature - the mystic hills and magic rivers with the sprawling verdure around- which, with a potency though to lure poetic hearts into the realm of thoughts offering some emancipatory streaks of revelations, cannot however dispel the confounding mess of impressions of the muddled present which is lacerated by political unrest, insurgency and its countermeasures, the culture of dominance and finally a seamless urbanization which is keen to trammel up the traditional ways of life and thought that have enjoyed a sanctity of practice over generations. The poems discussed in the paper articulate a disquieting awareness of some grim possibility lurking under the Edenic greenery around.

Keywords

eco-space, habitat, political unrest, apprehension, urbanization

The treatment of earth-centric affiliations in literature has ever been a primordial feature of artistic sensibility which only receives tonal varieties of expression over the ages. Though the term "eco-criticism" originally applies to the bulk of literature written in English where the writerly sensibility is actuated by a strong commitment to the well-being of the flora and fauna and the subject as a field of study shows a tendency for theoretic alignment to the West, there is however no denying

the fact that in the classical texts and even epics of India, the issue of the human role in the shaping of nature /environment has been problematised, more often than not, as something determinant of history or the destiny of men or a community concerned. For example, the *Khandavadahan* episode (burning of the forest named *Khandava*) in the *Mahabharata*, which relates the story of a royal project of setting up the capital *Indraprastha*, at the cost of forest wealth, nevertheless shows the flip side of urbanization/development by way of offering the saga of enmity between the reptile *Takshak naga* and the *Pandavas* which ensued as a result somehow connected to the burning of the forest. Hence, keeping in view Indian culture and literature, the *Khandavadahan* episode can be claimed to thematically serve as a central metaphor of how the ecocide for human purpose can acquire a teleological significance in shaping up the destiny of a community or a nation.

Yet, the permeation of ecology in the field of literature as a conscious artistic strategy has been considerably great since the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and now a days, eco-narratives are studied as forms of oral literature popular among indigenous communities in which narratives relating to nature and surroundings of a particular region, dealing both with its primeval purity of the past and subsequent changes wrought in course of time, holds as a receptacle the history and development of the community living there and its habitat into its present look.

Though Indian literatures including those written in English, entail a rich legacy of exalting the essential role of the eco-space as providing the ideal sort of background for life as it is; the ecosphere as something that enters the collective consciousness of a particular community, becomes remarkably manifest in the literatures of India's North East. Here folk and literate traditions serve to focus nature as a vital force which is further endowed with human feelings. Here amidst the plenitude of divergences of religion and social mores, indigenous cultural variations and ritualistic conventions with songs and orally transmitted tales, do work as synthetic forces to make men feel bound to their ancestral roots with a naïve, ingrained faith that Nature, if allowed to retain her purity and freshness, serves to safeguard eco-space and in a sense, works as a living ambience with the potential to accompany creative imagination.

A synoptic survey of the poetry in the seven (or eight including that of Sikkim) sister states in India's North-east bears out how even a minor change in the familiar environment sparks off a writhing sensitivity in the poetic heart that always felt a perfect peace with the plethora of nature such as the mystic hills and magic rivers flowing with their gorges and ravines through dense forests along mountain ranges, often punctuated by small habitations in hamlets characterized by, among other things, —the *jooms*, the mixed smell of traditional flowers and the fragrant rice in the *Nabanna*, the melodic spell of a mythic bird or a traditional stringed instrument that fills the hollow of the evening sky. However, eco-consciousness as a mark of poetic experience shows distinctive qualities as per the delicate nuances of thoughts and feelings bred by the changed milieus, however little, for poets of different states. The present article proposes to offer a bird's eye view of the works of some leading poetic figures of Assam and Tripura.

In the poetry from Assam, changes in ecosphere such as, pollution, urbanisation, global warming and deforestation elicit poetic concern as manifest in the works of *Navakanta Baruah*, *Anupama Basumatary*, *Ram Gogoi*, *Harekrishna Deka*, *Hiren Bhattacharyya* among others. Though the theme becomes more explicit in the Assamese poems of poet Nabakanta such as “Tamrongi Akax” (Copper colored sky), “Futsai boronor prithibi” (Ash colored world) etc.etc., his poems originally written or translated in English also bear a streak of ecocriticism. For example, the poem *Palestine* bears under the garb of socio-mythic implications, an alarming consciousness of a total disaster drawing near us as a result of our violation of moral norms and the apprehension is conveyed through a deft use of natural metaphor:

We housed them in prisons
For they wanted a home,
We killed them for they wanted eternal life
Then bulldozed their prisons into fields of corn.

(Nabakanta, 2009, p. 13, pp. 1-4)

The sacrilegious acts are fated to face natural justice sooner or later as the person holds:

What’s that hand sticking out from the earth?

Other hands will sprout from it ---

And tickle us to death (L. 5-7).

This acute eco-sensibility can also be marked in the works of another poet Anupama Basumatary. For instance in the poem *Snail*, the speaker’s vicarious pleasure at breaking the shell of snails to watch on the floor “their certain strange rhythm/that hid the agony of their dying” (L.8-9), is counterbalanced by “the heart-breaking agony” received by the shell of the speaker’s as she fails to negotiate the surge and resurge of the “marauding waves” of the sea.

An acute poetic urge to return to the elemental essence of life in the terrestrial world can be traced in the poetry of Lutfa Hanum whose poem titled *Poem* amply expatiates this centripetal nature of consciousness operating in nature as per the poet’s vision:

The fallen leaves want
A green passage
Back to the branches of trees.

(Hanum, 2009, p. 22, pp. 1-3)

However, this symbolic return to the original self caught in imaginative perception breeds a similar penchant in the speaker to retain her original self notwithstanding the fulfillment of the reciprocity of feelings and passions with her lover and here the poetic reflection is reminiscent in a way, of the lover’s intention of retaining each a hemisphere and yet at the same time constituting together, a separate world in Donne’s love-lyric *The Good Morrow*—“Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one’ (L.14).

And me, melting in you
Seek a passage back to me
Through the green ,
Through water, stones
Words and tunes.

(Hanum, 2009, p. 23, pp. 16-20)

Interestingly, while the metaphysical poet rests on the union of souls, for the poet from North-east here, the passion of love and the urge for union too can't but get expressed in the vesture of eco-consciousness.

The poetry of Srimanta Bhattacharya often marks a pallid projection of nature in the fitness of a pathetic tone of the theme that veers around a sense of loss in the atmosphere. In the poem *Between Bomb Blasts* for example, one notices a stunning economy of expression in the poetic attempt to silhouette the silence permeating atmosphere preceding and following blasts (of terrorism or counter-terrorism?) as the proverbial stillness before storm:

The Sky is rigged with booby traps. Nobody mentions
Death by lightning. Natural occurrences are rare;
In life as much as in death. So long as the silence lasts
There is no cause for panic.

(Srimanta: 2009, p. 49, pp. 11-14).

Another poem of this writer *A Lament for Their Eyes* is soaked in pity possibly for the dead youth ostracized at the cult of violence and much in the fashion of Owen's famous verse *Anthem for the Doomed Youth*, the poem distills a moving pathos of flowery youth consigned to doom.

The sky sometimes weeps
The eyes do not weep, they cannot
The eyes have become clogged with excess salt
They cannot wash themselves clean like the sky
The eyes do not have the luxury of tears....

(Srimanta, 2009, p. 47, pp. 8-12)

However, the treatment of nature as a means of self—projection is often found to receive a Freudian twist in a poem like *Moonlight* by another noted Assamese poet Harekrishna Deka for example, where “the emerging moon” standing on “the floor of the sky” seems to be emblematic of the poet's self (“is it a reflection of my manhood”?) and, as if under a faint spell of the libido, the speaker receives a sort of revelation:

The Golden field of crop glistens,
I realize that like all women
The earth becomes pregnant.

(Deka, 2009, p. 96, pp. 11-13)

The opulence of beauty in the moonlit night evokes a sense of sexual fiesta which though luring, remains elusive to the adolescent psyche of the persona:

Do the abundant crops dancing in the waves of moonlight

Give an inkling of some illicit love affair? (L. 14-15)

The yearning for a happy past, the lost home which was just an extension of nature is also found in the works of later day poets like Nilim Kumar among others. The following extract from a poem titled *Thief* articulates under the metaphor of “theft,” the pang of losing as if one’s umbilical cords of existential bliss that can be felt only in harmony with nature:

My deserted homestead of the past

Is now devastated and of concrete.

Trees and shrubs of stone and brick

Breathes with leaves of glass panes.

(Nilim, 2009, p. 155, pp. 1-5)

The ironic thrust at the quality of experiences as the bounty of modernism or progress is hauntingly exposed in the following lines:

I wish that he steals

From my dining table the iron apples

The bronze grapes, the fleshy chopper

And from the fridge the white cold laughs. (L.8-11)

On the contrary, time has stolen bigger issues from the speaker’s life and the images of fruits in the quotation above spell out the trauma of losing the blissful, familiar eco-space that sustains and encourages life:

Where is it lost, where is it lost

That mysterious ancient being of mine? (L.6-7).

Taken overall, the poetry of Assam posits a space which so often disturbed by natural disasters and man-made ills though, yet retains its nuclear innocence with the flora and fauna constituting as it were, a mythic realism envisioned in traditional *Bihu* songs and *Bagurumba* dance which uphold in the collective consciousness, the sanctity of heritage.

On the other hand, the poetry in Tripura offers an interesting picture of adulation and retrospection in terms of poetic attitude to nature in the works of the tribal and non-tribal poets of the state respectively. In Kokborok poetry, best represented by the formidable phalanx of indigenous poets of Tripura such as Nanda Kumar Debbarma, Sachlang and Sudhanya Tripura, Shefali and Dipali Debbarma, Manishankar Mura Singh among others, the poetic approach to nature and environment is chiefly that of an absolute awe, at times tinged with some worries for wrongs done to her, but rarely showing any tendency to trace any ruthless element in the ecosphere.

In a poem called *Jungle*, Nanda Kumar Debbarma from Tripura, a pioneering figure in Kokborok poetry, presents the forest as something embedded in the very consciousness of the people, a being that

seems as if coursed in the blood of the people living in close contact with the forest. Imagined as an entity immune to the agents of physical destruction such as flood and bonfire, the jungle develops in the poet's vision into something like a purer essence of the mind, the human mind in a state of some spiritual trance: "... waking up in your dreams/she speaks to you" (L.5-6). For the foresters, the Jungle develops into some emotional omnipresence which is capable of smothering the traumatic effects of the external world. This palliative nature of the Jungle is expressed with the analogy of a way- shower to a strayed traveller who has lost his way in the dark. The poet has nicely put it thus: "when the road abandons you,/she transforms to a burning torch to you/and shows the way...(L.10-11)."

What emerges here is the fact that such an ingrained faith in nature and perception of a well convinced bliss is something more than an individual's experience. It is just a scrap of a history, the history of a hereditary relationship and mutual interdependence with nature, the surroundings which reserves a beatific, soothing coverage for the human beings who amidst their struggle for existence finds solace only in dependence on nature exactly like a child which after its limbs run wild and sore at the end of the day's play, lies down at the mother's lap for rest. Thus the literature of North- East is rich in eco-narratives- narratives that tells about the checkered history of relationship between man and ecology. In several other poems of the land, one comes across a tensed tryst of love of the surroundings and a concern for the same.

Celebrating the role of a poet as a chronicler of the omnipresence of nature that can be perceived at some rare moments of revelation even amidst the love-hate experience accrued in "the business of living," appears to be the theme of the poem *A house by the river*. Standing on riverside, here the speaker feels an emotional affinity with his brethren on the banks of Mekong and Hwang Ho.

Another poem by the same poet *Stone Flower at the Pyre* describes the hilly site of Unokoti of North Tripura as the scene of a visionary enactment of the past when human beings lived in perfect consort with nature:

"with birds and beasts all around

And the fragrant incense of jungle flowers in the wilderness

xxxx

When, beholding whose propitious face

Did the family prosper with relations,... (L.3-7)

Now the minstrelsy of this beatific peace is no more and the lyre lies in neglect with broken strings:

"Thenonly the conmpreng with its ruptured strings remained (L.9);"

And the smouldering pyre of the bard assumes an uncanny yet hypnotic melancholy strain that seems to tell "the glory of the other days' in the form of whispering breeze blowing in the slopes of the hill:

Sometimes in the melancholy silence can be heard

That melody, the loom-nurtured song

Mingled with weeping

At Unokoti (L.12-15).

The same note of loss and a wistful looking back at the past becomes most prominent in one of the best poems of Nanda Debbarma *A Trip to the Shakhantang Hill*. The deserted look of a *tong ghar* on a mound beside a forlorn joom triggers forth the poet's vision of the festive look that the whole scenario wore during the *Nabanna* or the harvest festival. The setting sun beyond the fringes of the hill signals the passing by of the agrarian society marked by a rich harvest, the mouthful of scented rice from the grandma, the enchanting fairy tale from the grandpa and droning sound of the charkha run by a senior. The calm and quiet flow of life was graced with rites and practices that had the sanctity of experience through generations such as the jingling anklets of dancers related to the folk dance attending the lyric of *Dangdu* that marked the *Nabanna* night. But now the epiphany of peace and comfort is broken with the pathetic discovery of a river which might have been once a life-line for the community, has now turned thin and slender.

But the element of eco-anxiety is couched in the last part of the poem where the resinous essence caused by marks of axes on green trees assume the colour of blood in the poet's eyes as the mute witnesses of human atrocities on mother earth. The former Elysium now looks like a broken nest unable to provide sustenance to the wretched soul. The whole poem sounds like a sentimental rehearse of the famous Shelleyan clench "We look before and after/ And pine for what is not". But whereas for the romantic bard it is the splendour of natural beauty in the form of a bird that evoke such an emotional pang of uncertainty, for the minstrel of North-East such as Nanda Debbarma, it is the impoverished look of his familiar landscape as a result of change in ecosphere that breeds an acute feeling of loss.

A similar kind of expression can also be traced in the poetry of Sudhanya Tripura where the poet mourns the loss of the familiar world as a result of human violence and bloodshed. The inarticulate nature of pathos as in the poem *Again and Again* for example, is beautifully expressed when one sees that the speaker's speech of "love" told "in the language of the mind" is returned "in the language of bloodshed" by his fellow men. Sometimes, as in another poem *Uang Bird*, the fear caused by human atrocities assumes the dimension of a mythic premonition of some graver evil and the whole environment as if turns into a metaphor of some impending doom. As a result, almost the whole poem often strikes as an example of an extended pathetic fallacy.

Someone has taken away the joom crop
Now in the vacant joom hill,
My weeping heart
Stands spellbound.
The tong-ghar has been stilled to silence.
It's the dead of night.
The *Uang* bird cries
And a flock of a dark fear
Dips its nails into my dreams. (L.1-9)

In another poem *The Refugee Heart*, the readers come across how the man made factors such as militancy can make the heart of the indigenous people a “refugee of spirit” by spoiling their natural habitat and how this kind of act breeds a mutual recrimination and a mute feeling of distrust between the tribal and non-tribal people who have a tradition of enjoying a kindred relationship with each other for decades. The vulture flying above the burnt out home and joom of a tribal woman and her “refugee” heart trembling like an “anaemic paper” “deep within” the forest symbolize the ravenous influence of change and violence in the life of ordinary people which even renders the forest, the traditional matrix of the simple, unsophisticated form of life, unable to act as a cohesive factor in the real-life experience of existential struggle.

In the poetry of Sachlang Tripura however, the anxiety for change in ecosphere gives way to a strong note of some revelation, of a transcendent joy in the conjunction of nature and life. The poet’s experience of the subdued suffering of humanity (“a poor man cries all alone”) seems to be only a part of the eternal flow life which again metaphorically merges with the irrevocable course of nature—here that of the river *Hokutwisa* in his native place with the same name:

The dazzling crystals of his tearfall

Mingle with the flowing Hokutwisa.

Playing with the pebbles and stones,

The stream flows in quest of the ocean. (L.5-8)

However, the river’s quest for infinite (the “ocean”) is counterbalanced by the limited range of search in men and animals. While at dawn the birds stir out of their nest in search of “food grains” and “men and women, poor and destitute” move out “in search of a living”, the poet, a different breed of nature, starts along the course of Hokutwisa on lookout for a completely different and elusive thing, —a “poem” which alone paradoxically, can initiate one like the poet into the mystery of a “rendevouz”, the cross-over point between the infinite and the finite—the destination of the river and that of the men and animals respectively.

Another poem of Sachlang Tripura, *Love notes to the moon* (or *Moon amor*) presents a conjunction between poetry and poverty. In moments of hunger, the moon looks like edible mushroom which if added to the barest form of a tribal dish—salted and dried fish (“shidal”), a few green chilies and rice, —would taste as elixir to the famished bard : “I would hardly perceive/when my hunger would be satiated”(L.16-17). After all, in spite of stiff struggle for existence and the common philistine attitude to poetry in this urbanizing, materialistic world (“There is no one to buy my fuel wood./Nor is there any to buy me.” L.8-9), the nexus between poetry and nature is timeless: “...the relation between the moon and the poet/is time immemorial” (L.20-21).

The same note of tranquility even amidst the shadow of death is once more heard in the poem *In close proximity to people*. Here, only a handful of rice and the panoramic beauty of nature—the cry of *kunkok* bird, the fragrance of flowers and the rambling clouds in the sky—numbs the poet’s smarting feeling of proximity to death and breeds a lyrical urge for music:

...a desire to sing,
guarding a corpse at night,
beating the drum notes of death
during the day. (L.10-13)

Yet, the note of hunger and desolation mollified by the sedative beauty of nature is
unmistakably couched under an inclusive metaphor of love in the closing lines of the poem:

...and lying on a lonely *gyring*,
I long to play the love notes on my flute
beating out rhythms on my empty belly.
In this calm tranquility,
sucking the nipple of the virgin forest
I wish to stay in close proximity to people. (L.16-21).

In another poem titled *Fingers of half burnt tree stumps*, the desolate joom set against the lovelorn sky of the new year with the old year approaching the horizon on the wings of Nuyai, a bird of mythic lineage, brings in the poet's mind the association of a happy past when the life of his ancestors was presided over by an idyllic love fortified by a sanctity of rituals.

The poem *Spring in the blue forest* shows almost a triumphant statement, very much in the fashion of Wordsworth, of nature's benevolence ("The nature keeps a sleepless vigil by our bedside") untrammelled by human atrocities ("Wild out-laws frame rules and conduct rituals/at gunpoint.").

Sachlang's faith in nature's omnipotence once more comes out in the projection of a grove which as if like Spenser's "bower of bliss," projects *stasis* amidst the flux of life:

bamboo groves and trees jostle with each other,
overhead the *thaichual* vines form a shrouding canopy.
Here history stands spell bound and silent
and time has come to a standstill. (L.5-8)

Yet, the poet's concern for militancy comes out in the form of an appeal to those souls that have turned wayward as per the poet, due to their indifference to nature which is the true only omnipotent element on this earth; not the vendors of violence who, under the seductive garb of some false messiah, only tantalize the innocent youths with the baits of power and money and turn them into cronies of crime:

I fail to understand whose omnipotence
favours the doing of these outlaws
Yet, take a look,
blooming flowers have decked up the trees,
and the blue forest has woken up to the advent of spring. (L.11-15)

The spring, being a season of regeneration, the poet's eulogy of nature paradoxically reveals a veiled concern for the turbulence in community life tinged with an indirect invocation for the renewal of hope in the misguided youth and their re-integration with the mainstream.

The poetry of Dipali Debbarma is redolent with the use of myth to bring into focus a flamboyant past in sharp contrast to the modest and restrained present. The speaker's invocation of Nuyai in the poem of the same name, a mythical bird symbolizing love and sacrifice, to fly back once more in this familiar world is intended to beatify the present as a beneficial influence by permeating the habitation, vegetation, and terrestrial aspects of the speaker's world. However, for a poet, all the associations of the bird only bolt into a symbol of a collective memory with an emotional omnipresence that can have a creational role:

You are a living memory

In our fairy tales.

ruffle your strong wings,

unfurl your colourful plumes;

Beholding you, I shall compose a poem. (L.13-17)

Unlike the Classical Phoenix or the *Homa* bird of Hindu religion famed for the capacity of re-birth from its own ashes, Dipali's Nuyai in spite of mythic origin, is more of an earthly creature like Keats' Nightingale and more like Shelley's Skylark sympathetic to human aspirations:

Let your clarion call open up

The shackled hearts of human bondage (L.18-19).

Another poem of the same poet, *Who shall wake us up*, is characterized by a strong sense of nostalgia and wistfulness. The beautiful, autumnal sky at twilight decked with red and orange embers of the setting sun, the blooming lilies tossing at forest breeze, the twinkling lamps in the evening sky beckon exactly the natural setting of the speaker's childhood. The imagistic pattern reflects the quick transition of phases in the environment as per the speaker's memory until her eyes fall upon the sad memorabilia of her grandfather—the *sharinda* and the *chompreng*, the indigenous stringed instruments he used to play in the evening and create a hypnotic melody in the air. The poet's inability to create melody by repairing instruments of her grandpa signifies the break up in the continuity of tradition and the harmony of life. The emotional journey in the poem concluding in the nostalgic feelings for the grandfather substantiates the statement of Gibran Khalil—"Remembrance is a form of meeting." A haunting evocation of natural setting is here remarkably wedded to an acute feeling of nostalgia.

The poetry of Shyamlal Debbarma is characterized by some interesting contraries. Here one comes across at a time some delicate nuances of love (be it a dreamy escapism amidst natural bliss, or an acerbic feel of fear of loss); a stoic stance to the sordidness of existence; a rich evocation of psychological realism and finally, a strong urge for self-definition both as a person and a poet. In the poem *Come closer* for example, the persona's intention for refilling his empty heart with love notwithstanding a disturbing awareness of the empty stomach and empty *japa khutruk*, however does not get cowed by realistic considerations and instead, sharpens his craze for the true nature of love "sitting cross-legged/behind the mask" (L.17). However, the urge for an idyllic experience of love in this poem ("shall unfurl a moonlight of /filled to the brim in my heart..") is counterbalanced by a

poignant awareness of the struggle for existence in the poem *Reality* -- “Surviving Ata/piling up debt upon debt”(L.15-16). Poems like *Don't scare me* and *Psychosis* as the names suggest, project an outcry against the encroaching reality of fear alternately in the persona of a toddler and a lover. In the former, the child refuses to be lulled to sleep by the mother's scary tales of hideous birds or demons in myth –

...I have made you smile,
by finally standing erect and walking
I will have to walk more,
I will have to run longer,
chasing away Uangs and Asikoloks
and weeping away all darkness (L.34-39)

In the latter, the speaker recounts how the emotional tantrums of the beloved, mute or vocal generate a smothering effect of a psychosis upon him with “layers of fear pile up/one over the other” (L.12-13).

Two other poems viz, *Groping for words* and *The Inner Song*, spell the dilemma of poetics and the reliance on nature itself for creative inspiration. In fine, Shyamlal's poetry posits a nice fusion of the eco-space with the mindscape and his poetry admittedly lacks that excruciating concern for the loss of the familiar space which as a dominant trait among others, so often marks the works of, say, Sachlang Tripura or Dipali Debbarma.

The ecosphere in the Kokborok poetry of Tripura discussed so long, appears to be a space much lacerated by human greed and violence, and yet retaining much of its beauty and harmony to attract “poets, lovers and bird-watchers” to quote the title of a poem by Nissim Ezekiel.

In a word, the element of eco anxiety in Tripuri poets gets ultimately smothered by a visceral love for and an unquestioned dependence on nature. Apart from Kokborok poets, some other leading poets of the land such as Bhaskar Roy Barman (1950-), Niranjana Chakma (1951-), Kalyanbrata Chakraborty (1940-), Kritibas Chakraborty, Pijush Routh and Gombhini Sorokkhaibam (1971-) also have vociferously dealt with the themes of indigenous myth, legend and the ecology of their land.

In his poem entitled *Tripura*, poet Kritibas Chakraborty (in the book *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*, pp. 246-248) has nicely presented in a chiseled form, the bucolic set up of the ecology of the land that dates back to the early settlement of different tribes across the fields and hills:

One day they left beyond the dawn towards the woods
The green corn of *jhum* and
Terrain flowers greeted them
They started living in the silent hills
Across the cucumber and *futi* fields.
(Chakraborty, 2003, p. 24)

Again, the mute history of generations of the land—of their struggle, growth and challenge alongside the deterring ills of custom affecting the weaker sections of the society—all this is ably manifest in the

ecology of the place. The following lines taken from a poem by Gombhini Sorokkhaibam is rich in eco-mysticism as well as eco-feminism:

A tree's also just the same-
Will take birth, grow, spring leaves, spread branches will
bear flowers, will hang fruits....
But, it doesn't have the power to say anything.
So I, where no love is bred in hearts,
am a frustrated woman of a society's brutal stage.

(Sorokkhaibam, 2003, p. 262)

In the poetry of Kalyanbrata Chakraborti, one comes across a disquieting conjunction of pity and poetry. In poems like *Before a Trip to Sindhukumar* and *Manirung Reang*, Chakraborti makes a naked exposure of terrorism that is camouflaged by a cultured interpretation prevalent in the civic and academic parlance of the day. Another notable poem *In a Strange Darkness* articulates the trauma of losing one's original, familiar space as a by-product of cash-nexus that runs paramount under the façade of development:

"... it is simply propaganda that the imperialists have
Left our country for good.
Do the commoners want to realize anything beyond
Moneymaking?" (Kalyanbrata, 2009p. 85, pp. 9-12)

The ennui and boredom induced by urbanization in the daily run of life also receives a telling evocation in the works of some other Bengali poets such as Aparajita Roy, Amulya Sarkar, Alope Dasgupta et.al. Notably, the change in the familiar landscape in the works of the poets mentioned are often interfused with the change in the mindscape bred by the trauma of partition among other things. The following extract from the poem *Gone are lamp-lit Nights* conjures up the pallid cover of drudgery spread over the familiar evening and a resultant hazy feeling of nostalgia coupled with a vague fear of an uncertain future and angst for the unwelcome changes in the familiar landscape:

Gone are the lamp-lit eves for long
Only the stifling load-shedding reigns
I grope for the door in vain,
To lock-out an old prisoner of darkness.
(Roy, 2005, p. 31, pp. 1-4, *Translation mine*)
Who would turn again the pages read out!
When some new pages wait to be written?
Whom does the arrow aim at
Declaring war
In words written in fire on the wall,
Shall it set all lapses right?

(L.1-4, 7-8, 10-13. *Translation mine*)

The poem *My Boat yearns to be Ashore* by Amulya Sarkar unravels a poignant account of post-partition violence which has turned the poet's familiar space in the border state, into a cemetery of hopes and dreams. The following extract shows how the epiphany of a "sweet" homeland turns into a nightmare amidst the heart-wrenching cries of the widows, raped women and parents who have lost their wards in the altar of violence and civil war.

My woeful night throbs
Cribbed with enemy tents around
While I cover my body with cactus
Pall my child's corpse with moonlight
Some say it's the spring time of the year
Yet I am caught in midstream all along.
In my yard, now unknown serpents hiss,
The woods murmur the moaning of the raped,
The water of Gomati turns red
With a new spurt of bloodshed
Who is it that covers the *harmadi* cry
With chanting of *Chadipatha*!
Is this the land we dreamt all along,
To be a place my dear, for a sweet home?

(Sarkar, 2005, p. 36, pp. 1-8, pp. 10-13, *Translation mine*)

A stifling awareness of insurgency and violence is further noticed in a poem by Shankar Basu named *Smell of Powder in the wind* where the lamp-lit sky of festive nights in the recent past is found to be covered with the pall of insidious nights that get occasionally split with the flash of guns with the wind carrying ash and the spell of powder. As the poet puts it:

The bestial glare and ecstasy of the night
Breaks the silence of the dozing town
The song of life halts at every beat
Light and blood join hands.....
Will they stop the flow of life?
Won't men again embrace each other
With the protective wrist-band on festive nights?

(Basu, 2005, p. 339, pp. 6-12. *Translation mine*)

The shocking change in the eco-space of the poverty-ridden indigenous people wrought by bloodshed and death associated with terrorism and/or its countermeasures gets a haunting expression in the poetry of Alope Dasgupta. The following extract from a poem *Under a Stormy sky* nicely recaptures the unhappy inroads of urbanity and corruption in the poverty-ridden plight of the subaltern people and

strikingly, nature as if sympathizes with the persona that deplores the loss of sanctity in a life that practically degenerates into a frantic bid for survival even to the exclusion of morality :

e metal sound of bullets often

tears apart the pitch dark of night!

Following a zigzag road, Padmamoni

reaches the syphilitic bed of a recluse pensioner

The sylvan breeze breathes the aroma of little khumpui

and the fumes of gun-mouth.

A fresh oxygen worth 15 rupees

Undresses Padma of her *Pachra* and her shame!

A promise broken, champs the cabbage soul...

fire in the joom burns the mythic Nuyai...

So grave a sin was in store for all! So grave a sin!

Feeling terribly alone under such a stormy vault, terribly alone!

(Dasgupta, p. 2005, p. 47, pp. 4-11, *Translation mine*)

Thus, often it is the ingredients of a sordid reality, the pathos of poverty, compulsion and perversion that set the poetic fancy on fire to have produced such lines as the above.

To conclude, one simply wonders to see how these poets of India's North-east detect in the pretext of chaotic experiences, the text for creative expression and often manage either to diffuse on the familiar objects the transcendent kind of a "light that never was on sea or land" or to rehearse the kinds of consciousness that spring perennial in the human heart across the barriers of time and topography.

[**Word notes:** *Joom/Jhum*- Patches of leveled land on hill slopes used for cultivation. *Nabanna*- New rice after harvest. *Tong-ghar*- room on the mound to keep watch on the *joom*.

Sharinda, Champreng -traditional musical instruments used by the tribal people in Tripura.

Bihu- Assamese Folk song. *Baguramba*- folk dance form.

Uang, Kungkok, Nuayi- Mythical birds in the belief-system of tribal people in Tripura.]

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