

BEGC-132
Selections From Indian
Writing: Cultural
Diversity

Block

3**Marginalized Voices**

UNIT 1**Dalit Voices** **5**

UNIT 2**Dalit Voices - Poetry** **17**

UNIT 3**Literature from North East India** **29**

UNIT 4**Literature from North East India–Poetry** **40**

EXPERTS COMMITTEE

Dr. Anand Prakash

Dr. Hema Raghavan

Dr. Vandita Gautam

Dr. Chinganbam Anupama

Prof. Ameena Kazi Ansari

Mr. Ramesh Menon

Dr. Nupur Samuel

Dr. Ruchi Kaushik

Dr. Ipshita Hajra Sasmal

Dr. Cheryl R Jacob

Dr. Chhaya Sawhney

Prof. Neera Singh
Director (SOH).

IGNOU FACULTY (ENGLISH)

Prof. Malati Mathur

Prof. Nandini Sahu

Prof. Pramod Kumar

Dr. Pema Eden Samdup

Ms. Mridula Rashmi Kindo

Dr. Malathy A.

COURSE COORDINATOR

Prof. Malati Mathur
School of Humanities
IGNOU, New Delhi

BLOCK PREPARATON

Course Writer

Dr. Chinganbam Anupama

Block Editor

Prof. Malati Mathur
School of Humanities, IGNOU

PRINT PRODUCTION

Mr. K.N. Mohanan
Assistant Registrar (Publication)
MPDD, IGNOU, New Delhi

Mr. C.N. Pandey
Section Officer (Publication)
MPDD, IGNOU, New Delhi

December, 2019

© Indira Gandhi National Open University, 2019

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced in any form, by mimeograph or any other means, without permission in writing from the Indira Gandhi National Open University.

Further information on Indira Gandhi National Open University courses may be obtained from the University's office at Maidan Garhi, New Delhi-110 068 or visit University's web site <http://www.ignou.ac.in>

Printed and published on behalf of the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi by Registrar, MPDD, IGNOU.

Laser Typeset by : Tessa Media & Computers, C-206, A.F.E.-II, Okhla, New Delhi

Printed at : Nutan Printers, F-89/12, Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-1, New Delhi - 110020

BLOCK 3 MARGINALIZED VOICES

This Block will acquaint the learner with Dalit writing and Writings from North East India. It will deal with the question of Dalit aesthetics, discuss the changes that have taken place over the years in the Dalit movement and offer learners the opportunity to acquire a fair understanding of Dalit writers' use of language, imagery and form. The North East region is geographically as well as culturally and linguistically different from the so-called mainstream India. There is a tendency to view people from this region as exotic and homogenous. By introducing the learner to the various trends in the writings from the sister states in the North East, it will facilitate a better understanding of its literature.



UNIT 1 DALIT VOICES

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Excerpts ‘Dalit Sahitya - The Historical Background’ by Eleanor Zelliot
- 1.3 What is Dalit Literature?
 - 1.3.1 B.R. Ambedkar and Literature
 - 1.3.2 Discussion of the text
- 1.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.5 Glossary
- 1.6 Aids to Activities
- 1.7 Unit End Questions
- 1.8 References and Suggested Reading

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall try to understand Dalit Literature by reading an essay by Eleanor Zelliot: ‘Dalit Sahitya: the Historical Background’. By the end of the unit you should be able to answer certain fundamental questions on Dalit literature like, what is Dalit literature? Why does one need to study Dalit literature? What is the difference between Dalit literature and other literature? What are the **aesthetics** of Dalit literature and the various changes that have happened in the course of the Dalit movement?

Words given in **bold** throughout this unit are explained in the **Glossary** at the end.

Activity 1

Before we begin, briefly jot down what according to you is Dalit literature. Compare it with what you read later in the unit and at the end in Aids to Activities.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The word Dalit literally means broken people. In the Indian caste **hierarchy**, the position at the lowest rung is known as the untouchable or the Dalit. They lived (and many of them still live) a precarious existence, rejected, discriminated against and abused by the upper caste. They were forced to work in degraded conditions, denied the right to acquire land and rendered almost to an inhuman state. Thus, the literature born out of this suffering, injustice and inequality is a narrative of agony and protest. Protest and resistance become a way of expression in Dalit literature.

The medium of expression in Dalit literature is poetry, autobiographies and short stories. There is also a pertinent question on whether Dalit literature can only be written by Dalits since Dalit literature as mentioned above, is an expression of

the lived experiences of discrimination and oppression. Can non-Dalit writers and their works (if it relates to Dalits) be considered as Dalit literature? Perhaps the difference lies in sympathy and empathy. Despite this debate, one cannot deny that many prominent non-Dalit writers (like F M Shinde, included in this course) have contributed significantly to Dalit literature.

Activity 2

From what you have read so far, what do you understand by the term Dalit?

Though the beginning of the Dalit movement/literature is associated with Maharashtra, today it has spread to different parts of the country where caste and class has been a medium to oppress a section of society. As the caste system is a harsh reality in India, injustice and suffering born out of this system is a fact one cannot deny. Thus, Dalit literature is a voice of resistance against the marginalisation, oppression and discrimination faced on a daily basis in different areas of life by a major section of the society. One needs to be extra sensitive while dealing with the aesthetics of Dalit literature.

1.2 EXCERPTS ‘DALIT SAHITYA - THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND’ BY ELEANOR ZELLIOT

Eleanor Zelliott was a professor of History at the University of Minnesota USA with social and cultural history as her areas of special interest. She worked and published extensively on the Dalit movement including Dalit and Buddhist conversions. *From Untouchable to Dalit* (1996) is one of her well-known books.

Now read the following excerpts and make notes as you go along in order to get more out of the discussion that will follow:

The Dalit Sahitya (literature of the oppressed) movement in Maharashtra seems to be unique – not in the phenomenon of former Untouchables writing literature, but in the quality of writing, its variety, its aesthetic considerations, its sense of being a movement, its ties to social action, and in the serious attention it receives as a school within the Marathi literary traditions. Parallel movements in Dalit writing have now appeared in the neighbouring states of Karnataka and Gujarat, and Dalit Sahitya may someday be an all-India movement.

The meaning of Dalit in Hindi and Marathi is ‘ground down, depressed’. And is now used by politicized Untouchables in preference to any other **designation**. The term is one of pride - Untouchables have been oppressed by others; there is nothing inherently wrong with them. Their insistence on the use of Dalit has been recognized officially, and the state governments of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh have issued orders that Dalit be the term used, rather than **Harijan**, Scheduled Caste, or Untouchable.

Dalit creativity in all its phases is closely tied to the movement begun by the **Mahar** caste before the turn of this century. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar came to dominate this movement in the 1920s, and its current achievements and stance, as well as the predominantly Buddhist belief of the movement’s members, are due to his shaping...

The **Mahars**, a large Marathi-speaking caste now eighty percent Buddhist, and disclaiming caste, had a traditional role of ‘inferior village servant,’ as the British called them. They constituted about nine per cent of the population of the Marathi speaking area in Western India, and are found in every village throughout Maharashtra. Their traditional work was to serve the village as watchmen, removers of dead cattle, messengers, i.e. all-purpose servants but with some very important duties. They also were traditionally the singers, dancers, comedians and drummers of the folk drama e.g. Tamasha. Along with the other untouchable castes in the area, **Mangs and Chambhars**, the well and temple were closed to them, and their living quarters were removed from the village proper. Before the 19th century, the only recorded voice of the Mahar was that of Chokhamela, a 14th-century poet-saint within the devotional religious tradition called Bhakti. Although beloved by other poet saints, Chokhamela lived as a traditional village Mahar.

Although many of Chokhamela’s poems sing of the glory of God **Vitthal** and meaning of devotion, some do protest against untouchability. Others acknowledge social inferiority and find comfort in religious equality, such as this **Abhanga**, which is very popular today:

The sugarcane may be crooked but its juice is not

Why are you deceived by the way things look?...

Chokha may be ill-shaped, but not his God Vitthal,

Why are you deceived by the way things look?

... Between Chokhamela and the beginning of the modern movement, there is no literature other than remembered **legends** and **myths**. The first document of the new movement, however, is not only a full-blown **indictment** of the caste hierarchy sanctioned by **scriptures** but also bears with it a poem of protest. The dominant figure in this early period was Gopal Baba Walangkar, an ex-soldier and a Mahar, who started a newspaper, publicly challenged caste Hindus about their treatment of Untouchables, and petitioned the British Government to allow the **recruitment** of Untouchables into the army, a practice which had been stopped about 1890...

Within ten years of Walangkar’s **petition**, a whole generation of leadership had sprung up, urging those Marathas who had left the village for work in the mills, on the railroad, on the docks, to educate themselves and to organize to gain strength. While Walangkar and other early leaders were from the Bombay and Pune areas, Nagpur also formed a strong part of the movement. Kisan Fago Bansode left a small volume of poetry along with his work for newspapers, libraries, conferences...

Twenty years after Bansode and the equally important leader from Pune, Shivram Janba Kamble, began their work, a leader arose who was much better educated, even more capable in spreading a modern message of equality, one who could spread the movement far beyond the Mahar caste. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) was a distant relative of Walangkar and took pride in the army background of Walangkar and his own father...

He was not only by far the most highly educated Untouchable in India, he probably held more degrees than any Brahman in the Maharashtra area. He represented all the Untouchable could hope to be, he remained identified with his people, and

he was extraordinarily competent in securing rights from the British Government as it began to **democratize** its parliamentary structures in India...

Ambedkar's political work, which was the base of the movement, must be given short shrift here as a subject too complex for easy generalizations... The **vital** concern with political, however, maybe be seen in the development of the Dalit Panthers, an organization founded in 1972 by writers to protest both **atrocities** against Untouchables in the villages and the ineffectiveness of the Republican Party founded by Ambedkar just before his death in 1956...The founders of the Panthers, Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale, were poets, committed both to literature and to 'literature as a weapon' against social injustice. The head-line years of the Panthers, 1971-73, may also be said to mark the true beginning of the Dalit Sahitya movement, although individual writers had appeared earlier.

Another era of Ambedkar's leadership, that of religious conversion may be just as important a factor in the development of Dalit Sahitya as education and politics...

The **Buddhist conversion** came almost thirty years after a great '**satyagraha**' for water at Mahad in 1928, an event which many use as a poetic image for protest, and after years of fruitless attempts at temple entry. It came after it became clear that independent India's new Constitution, which Dr. Ambedkar helped frame as Chair of the Drafting Committee, could outlaw untouchability but not remove the idea of pollution and hierarchy from hearts and minds. Chokhamela's protest from within the system, Bansode's critical love for Hinduism, were rejected as no longer adequate for men and women who wanted social and **psychological freedom**...Baburao Bagul, a major short story writer, dates the beginning of Dalit Sahitya from the Buddhist conversion of 1956...

Within two years of the conversion, the first major figure in Dalit Sahitya, Shankarao Kharat, published a book of short stories; *Bara Baluetdar* appeared in 1958. In it each of the servants of the traditional village, including the Mahar 'inferior village servant,' to use that telling British phrase, is the subject of a gentle character sketch. Kharat now has two dozen or so books to his credit, including an edition of Ambedkar's letters and a history of the Buddhist conversion. But his main thrust is the description of the life of the Mahar and of other lowly people in the traditional village. His writing is sad but not too bitter, **descriptive** rather than analytical. A different style appeared soon after Kharat with Baburao Bagul whose short stories are much more forceful, often based on city life, more realistic in their description of violence and **vulgarity**...

In late 1960s, the trickle of Dalit writing became a flood. The highly regarded journal *Marathwada* featured Dalit writing in a 1969 issue. By November 25, 1973, the *Bombay Times of India* could give over a special *Times Weekly* issue entirely to Dalit poetry and stories, translated into English...

It is with (the Dalit Panthers) that Dalit poetry becomes one of the most important strands in recent Marathi literature... Namdeo Dhasal (1949-2014) was Defence Minister, J.V. Pawar (1944) was General Secretary, Arun Kamble (1952) and Arjun Dangle were **ardent** young members of that first group...

Other poets emerged outside the Panther group...Daya Pawar (1935-1996) not only published poetry but wrote a somewhat fictionalized **autobiography** which

he titled *Balut*, the name of the arrangement by which the Mahar in the village performed his traditional work. *Balut* was widely praised and was very influential, and the writing of autobiographies is now an important feature of Marathi literature, not only among Buddhists but also in other Dalit groups. Tryambak Sapkale (1930) published *Surung* (Explosion) in 1976, and immediately won the poetry prize in Marathi for the year. Waman Nimbalkar (1939-) published his first, romantic poem in 1959, but by 1973, he titled his Dalit poetry collection *Gaokushabaheeril Kavita* (poetry from the outskirts of the village)...

The most recent trend in the ever-changing field of Dalit literature is the increasing importance of women poets. Hira Bansode (1939-)... (is) a feminist as well as a staunch Ambedkarite. Mina Gajbhiye (1957-) died after composing a number of very moving poems... Women have also entered the biographical field, and two Buddhist women with marginal education have published their autobiographies in Marathi...

New language, new experiences, new sources of poetic inspiration, new entrants into a field previously dominated by high-castes — these are all non-**controversial** accomplishments of Dalit Sahitya. There is, however, much controversy. Critics have asked: Can there be Dalit literature, or can there only be literature, regardless of subject? Can only Dalits write Dalit literature? Can educated ex-Untouchables whose lifestyle is now somewhat middle class be considered Dalit? Those in the Dalit school would say: Yes, there is Dalit literature. Only Dalits can write it because only they have experienced the social as well as the economic problems of the lowest of castes. And when educated and no longer poor, they not only remember their childhood, they also suffer from the idea of pollution which remains strong in the Hindu mind, and they identify with their village brothers and sisters who are still subject to **outrageous** treatment when they claim their full human rights.

1.3 WHAT IS DALIT LITERATURE?

‘Dalit Literature is not simply literature ... Dalit literature is associated with a movement to bring about change... at the very first glance, it will be strongly evident that there is no established critical theory or point of view behind them; instead there is new thinking and a new point of view.’ (Dangle, 1994)

Arjun Dangle, the Marathi Dalit writer, editor, activist says that Dalit literature is marked by ‘revolt’ and ‘negativism’ since it is closely associated with the ‘hopes for freedom’ by a group of people who, as untouchables, are victims of social, economic, and cultural inequality (Mukherjee, 2018).

By now we have seen that ‘Dalit literature’ is not written for entertainment or as a reflection of emotions and feelings but with a ‘purpose’. The ‘purpose’ is to expose the age old exploitation on the basis of ‘caste’ in India and resist such atrocities while at the same time assert the identity of the marginalised and dispossessed people. Thus, Dalit literature is a literature of commitment. Through literature, the Dalits became a ‘speaking subject’ whom the upper caste Hindus have tried to suppress for decades. As Dalit literature is committed to upliftment, it is revolutionary and transformational in nature; it is also political. The claim that Dalit literature is revolutionary and transformational is not based on the fact that all Dalit writers adhere to a radical ideology, such as socialism or Marxism.

It rests on the view that, inasmuch as transforming the condition of the Dalit and challenging caste is a revolutionary cause, a literature that is entirely dedicated to this cause is, by definition, radical. (Mukherjee) It is considered that the 'radicalism' comes from the Dalit leader Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's ideas and thinking.

Activity 3

Why do we need to read Dalit literature?

Thus, what Dalit literature presents is a rejection of tradition (a tradition that suppressed them) and an authentic experience of 'Dalitness'. Often, the representation is found to be 'not pleasant' as it is unflinching in its portrayal. We find violence, conflict, death - at the same time sharing, warmth, struggle in its true nature, without romanticising it, in Dalit literature. The language is stark, direct, detailing most of the time, the humiliation, wretchedness, miserable condition of life and more. Dalit literature not only rejects the traditions of the mainstream literature, but also aesthetics and language.

As we have heard that Dalit literature represents the authentic experience of the Dalits, the popular mode of narrative is life writing (autobiography, biography).

We know that Dalit literature rejects the mainstream 'language'. Thus, the minute details of every day struggle are written in a language that is opposed to the upper caste 'language' which is refined and proper. Thus, the language in Dalit literature is often crude and uncivil. This authenticates the lived experience of the Dalits.

By now, we have a fair idea of what Dalit literature is, how it is different from the mainstream literature, its use of language and the difference in terms of literary aesthetics. For a quick reminder, let's check the points we have discussed so far.

- Dalit literature is a movement to bring about change.
- Dalit literature is written with a 'purpose'.
- It is 'committed' to the exposition and assertion of authentic Dalit experience.
- It rejects the tradition, aesthetics, and language of the 'mainstream' literature.

1.3.1 B.R. Ambedkar and Literature

B.R. Ambedkar remains the most powerful leader of the Dalits and the revolutionary Dalit Panthers' movement started following his thoughts and action, his ideas and messages. His conversion to Buddhism gave hope to thousands of downtrodden Dalits to free themselves from a religion and its caste system that had bound them in mean tasks and inhuman conditions. In order to fully understand the atrocious caste restrictions, we must take a look at the manifestation of the caste system. (Limbale)

- 1) Heredity: The child belongs to the same caste as the parents.
- 2) Marriage Restrictions: Marriage outside one's caste is prohibited.
- 3) Profession: Taking up the work of another caste while giving up one's paternally inherited profession is banned (which means that if your forefather had been a tanner - a person who makes leather from dead animal skin -

there is no option for you or the future generations of your family to choose any profession other than that of a tanner. So a cleaner will always remain a cleaner - and not just him/her but their entire line of future generations. Now we see the inhuman restrictions that have been exploiting the Dalits for ages as they were always given what was considered as the dirtiest jobs from the very beginning.

- 4) Dietary Rules: Distinction is made not only between vegetarian and meat based diets but even the touching the food and water of the people seen as inferior, and from a different religion is prohibited (here we might remember the Mahad march (1927) led by Ambedkar to a public tank to fetch water. Animals were allowed to drink water from the tank but not a Dalit. If by chance a Dalit touched a water source, it had to be purified by conducting certain rites.
- 5) Hierarchy: Some castes are regarded as upper and others lower (now go back to point number 1, and see how a person born in an upper caste keeps enjoying the upper hand for generations whereas the lower caste-born is stuck in the oppression for generations).

Thus, Ambedkar's fight against the exploitation of the cruel caste system, his work, his struggle to bring social equality for the oppressed people became an inspiration and an awakening for the Dalit society and Dalit writers. You might have noticed that Dalits greet each other with the words 'Jai Bhim'. It is none other than a mark of respect for the inspirational figure, Bhimrao Ambedkar who brought self respect and dignity into the lives of many downtrodden.

In the field of literature, Ambedkar's stand is realistic. He openly rejected the *Manusmriti* as it fosters inequality. He said '*Manusmriti* is not acceptable to us, given its endorsement of inequality. Why should we not burn such a text?'. And in actuality, he burned the text in public. Literature according to him should be accountable to society and humanity. Thus, Dalit literature inspired by Ambedkar's humanism has 'humanity' at its core. Dalit literature is about freedom and liberation of human beings. As inequality is a fact among human beings in caste society, rebellion becomes an integral part of the Dalit literature.

1.3.2 Discussion of the Text

Eleanor Zelliot says that Dalit Sahitya in Maharashtra is unique in terms of its quality of writing, its variety, its aesthetics and its relation to social action and politics. Dalit literature has become a school within the Marathi literary tradition and has spread to other states like Karnataka and Gujarat.

The word 'Dalit' which means 'ground down, depressed', 'broken people' is an accepted, recognised (officially) term which is preferred by **politicised** Untouchables other than any other designation. The term is one of 'pride', it is accepting oneself since there is no denying that untouchables have been oppressed by others.

Activity 4

Why do you think that the term 'Dalit' is a matter of pride?

The Dalit movement, which was led by one of the most prominent leaders, Dr. B R Ambedkar in the 1920's, has close association with the movement begun by

the Mahar caste in Maharashtra. The Mahar caste, whose traditional work were to remove dead cattle, act as village watchmen or all purpose servants, were not allowed to live in the same village with the other caste Hindus. They were also not allowed into the temples. Such discrimination can be seen in poetry as far back as in the 14th century, of the poet-saint Chokhamela, who lived as a traditional village Mahar. Though his poetry sings mostly of the glory of god, some are a protest against untouchability.

According to Zelliott, there hasn't been much literature from Chokhamela to the beginning of the modern Dalit literary movement other than legends and myths. In the early period of the movement, Gopal Baba Walangkar, an ex-soldier, a Mahar played a significant role in the momentum of the movement by starting a newspaper, publicly challenging caste Hindus about their discrimination of untouchables and petitioning the British Government to allow **recruitment** of untouchables into the army. Following Walangkar, many Marathis united and educated themselves to gain strength. Another important leader who came after Walangkar is Shivram Janba Kamble, an educated leader who spread the modern message of equality far beyond the Mahar caste.

Activity 5

What was the Mahar movement?

The most important leader of the Dalit movement, a distant relative of Walangkar, a highly educated 'Untouchable' was Dr. BR Ambedkar. He represented all the untouchables, identified with his people and played an important part in the democratising the parliamentary structure on India.

Zelliott talks about Ambedkar's political work and the religious conversion to Buddhism (1956) under his leadership which became important factors in the development of Dalit Sahitya. The concern with politics may be seen in the development of Dalit Panthers, founded in 1972 by writers to protest atrocities against untouchables. Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale, both poets and founders of the Panthers were committed to literature and 'literature as a weapon' to fight for social justice.

Another major figure in Dalit Sahitya is Shankarrao Kharat, who came after two years of the religious conversion. Although his writing talked about the suffering of the Dalits, his was not a forceful voice. But writers who came after him started writing more powerful, more realistic descriptions of violence and vulgarity.

Activity 6

Who were the Dalit Panthers?

By the 1960s, many writers had joined the movement and a large number of literary works was produced. Notable writers were Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar, Arun Kamble and Arjun Dangle. Eleanor also talks about the increasing importance of women poets in Dalit literature. Some important names are Hira Bansode, Mina Gajabhiya, Bama etc.

The essay concludes with some poignant questions that critics have asked, 'Can there be a Dalit literature?'; 'Can only Dalits write Dalit literature?'; 'Can educated

ex-Untouchables whose life style is now somewhat middle class be considered Dalit?’ The answers from the Dalit School is, YES, there is a Dalit literature and only Dalits can write Dalit literature as they have gone through the experiences of suppression and discrimination. Now we might like to remember that there are known non-Dalit writers like F M Shinde who have contributed to Dalit literature. Thus, it is a debatable question and answer as well. Regarding the last question, even when educated and no longer poor, one will always remember one’s childhood experiences and suffer from the mentality of caste Hindus who display prejudice on the basis of caste. One will also look out for those less fortunate who are denied equality and humanity and claim the basic right everyone deserves.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have read the essay by Eleanor Zelliott, ‘Dalit Sahitya - The Historical Background’ and have learned what Dalit literature is. You have also understood the origin of the Dalit movement and its relation to literature. We have discussed various factors that contributed and shaped the current movement that we see today. We have also learned that there is the need to look at the aesthetics of Dalit literature with sensitivity and understanding.

1.5 GLOSSARY

Abhanga	: short narratives sung in between narration of stories.
Aesthetics	: philosophical theory of what is beautiful.
Analytical	: relating to logical reasoning, examining things carefully.
Ardent	: passionate, enthusiastic.
Atrocities	: wicked or cruel act.
Autobiography	: account of a person’s life written by self.
Buddhist conversion:	in 1956 nearly half a million Dalits joined Ambedkar and converted to Buddhism.
Chokhamela	: poet-saint of Mahar caste in 14th century India.
Controversial	: giving rise to controversy or public disagreement.
Dalit Panthers	: A social organisation founded in 1972, 29th May to combat caste discrimination
Democratize	: introduce a democratic system.
Descriptive	: serving or seeking to describe.
Designation	: the word of words by which someone or something is called and classified or distinguished from others.
Disclaim	: refuse to acknowledge
Docks	: enclosed area of water in a port for the loading, unloading, and repair of ships.
Entrant	: candidate; applicant
Harijan	: Mahatma Gandhi popularized the term for communities traditionally considered as untouchable which is now considered as derogatory and is no longer in use.

Hierarchy	: a system in which members of an organisation or society are ranked according to relative status or authority.
Indictment	: a formal charge or accusation of a serious crime.
Inherent	: in the nature of something
Legend	: a traditional story regarded as history, but not authenticated.
Mahar	: an untouchable community in Maharashtra.
Mangs and Chambhars	: Untouchable communities in Maharashtra
Manusmriti	: (The Laws of Manu) is one of the most authoritative Hindu Law Books which was a foundational work of Hindu law and jurisprudence in ancient India for at least 1500 years. In contemporary times, many consider <i>Manusmriti</i> as outdated and archaic as several laws of Manu justify oppression of women and lower castes.
Myth	: a traditional story involving supernatural beings or events.
Outrageous	: shockingly bad or excessive.
Petition	: a formal written request typically signed by many people appealing to authority.
Politicize	: give a political character to something
Predominant	: present as the strongest or main element
Psychological freedom	: ability to structure your own life through managing your emotions and applying your free will.
Recruitment	: the action of enlisting new people in the armed forces.
Sanction	: official permission or approval for an action.
Satyagraha for water	: it was a Satyagraha led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on 20th March 1927 to allow untouchables to use water in a public tank in Mahad, Maharashtra.
Scriptures	: the sacred writings of a religion.
Strand	: an element that forms part of a complex whole.
Tamasha	: Marathi theater involving song and dance
Vital	: important.
Vitthal	: Hindu deity worshipped in Maharashtra, considered as a manifestation of God Vishnu.
Vulgarity	: state of being vulgar or offensive.

1.6 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: The word Dalit literally means broken people. In the Indian caste hierarchy, the position at the lowest rung is known as the untouchables or the Dalits. They live a precarious existence, rejected, discriminated and abused by the upper caste.

Activity 2: Dalit literature is literature by/for the Dalits. It is born out of the suffering, injustice and inequality meted out to a certain section of the society. It is most of the time a narrative of agony and protest. Protest and resistance thus become a way of expression in Dalit literature.

Activity 3: As the caste system is a harsh reality in India, injustice and suffering born out of this system is a fact one cannot deny. Dalit literature is a voice of resistance against the marginalisation, oppression and discrimination faced on a daily basis in different areas of life by a major section of the society. One needs to be extra sensitive while dealing with the aesthetics of Dalit literature.

Activity 4: Dalit means ‘broken people’ and accepting the ‘term’ as one’s designation means accepting the fact that one has suffered at the hands of an unjust society. Thus, it becomes a matter of pride in embracing your own self and asserting one’s identity.

Activity 5: The Mahar movement was a movement under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar where his followers converted to Buddhism. It rejected the religion of the caste Hindus, which followed the principles of hierarchy and inequality. By embracing Buddhism, Mahars belonged to a religion that stood for egalitarian values and equality. This helped them to gain self-respect and esteem on the one hand and to protest against the religion of the upper castes on the other.

Activity 6: Dalit Panthers was founded by Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale, who were both poets and committed to using literature as a weapon against social injustice. It was an organization founded in 1972 by the writers to protest against the injustice done to the Untouchables in the village and the ineffectiveness of the Republican Party founded by Ambedkar just before his death in 1956. The Dalit Panthers organisation is considered as a marker of the true beginning of the Dalit literary movement.

1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Why was the protest of Chokhamela and Bansode considered inadequate in the later phase of the Dalit movement?
- 2) Write a short note on B.R. Ambedkar’s contribution to the Dalit movement.
- 3) Why does Dalit literature reject tradition?
- 4) Why do you think the literature of the Dalits is ‘committed’ to the Dalit experience?
- 5) Write a brief note on the aesthetics of Dalit literature.

1.8 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

- 1) Ambedkar, BR. 2003. *Ambedkar: Autobiographical Notes*. Introduction by Ravikumar. Pondicherry: Navayana
- 2) Anand, Mulkraj and Zelliott, Eleanor, (eds). 1992. *An Anthology of Dalit Literature (Poems)*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, pp. 1-6, 18-19.

- 3) Appendix II, Dalit Panthers Manifesto, (Bombay 1973) http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/14528/15/15_appendicies.pdf
- 4) Bama. 2000. *Karukku*. Translated by Lakshmi Holmstron. Chennai: Macmillan
- 5) Dangle, Arjun, (ed). 1992. *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Marathi Dalit Literature*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman
- 6) Ilaiah, Kancha. 1996. *Why I am not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*. Calcutta: Samya.
- 7) Limbale, Sharankumar. 2018. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History Controversies and Considerations*. Translated by Alok Mukherjee. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited.
- 8) Manu Smriti www.britannica.com/topic/Manu-smriti
- 9) Omvedt, Gail. 1994. *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- 10) ——— [1995] 1996. *Dalit Visions. Tracks for the Times/8*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman.
- 11) Vyam, Durgabai and Vyam, Subhash. 2011. *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, New Delhi: Navayana.
- 12) Zelliott, Eleanor. 2000. 'Sant Sahitya and Dalit Movements.' In Meera Kosambi, ed., *Intersections: Socio-cultural Trends in Maharashtra*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman

UNIT 2 DALIT VOICES - POETRY

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Dalit Poetry
 - 2.2.1 The Dalit Panthers Movement
 - 2.2.2 Aesthetics and Dalit Poetry
 - 2.2.3 Dalit Women Writers
- 2.3 Text - F M Shinde: 'Habit'
 - 2.3.1 Reading the Poem
 - 2.3.2 Interpretation
- 2.4 Text - NT Rajkumar: 'Untitled Poem'
 - 2.4.1 Reading the Poem
 - 2.4.2 Discussion
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Aids to Activities
- 2.7 Unit End Questions
- 2.8 References and Suggested Reading

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is the poetry section of the Block on Dalit Voices. The two poets that we will take up for detailed discussion in the unit are FM Shinde and NT Rajkumar. After reading the unit you will be able to:

- comment on the two poems critically
- grasp the aesthetics of Dalit poetry
- have a fair understanding of their use of language, imagery and form

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit you studied the various nuances of Dalit literature, its beginnings, various factors that shaped the literary movement and the aesthetics pertaining to it. You also read that poetry has been a major mode of expression and it serves as the voice of protest and resistance. In this unit we will take up two poets and try to understand and interpret the poems. We will try to locate these poems and what they signify in the larger picture of Dalit literature.

2.2 DALIT POETRY

'A poem is a fictional, verbally inventive, moral statement in which it is the author rather than the printer or word processor who decides where the lines should end.' (Terry Eagleton)

Terry Eagleton defines a poem as a moral statement yet he clarifies that 'poems are moral statements then, not because they launch stringent judgement according

to some code commands but because they deal in human values, meanings and purposes.’ Thus, morality has to do with ‘behaviour’ not just ‘good behaviour’. ‘A poem is a fictional...statement’ - here, we might like to clarify that fictional doesn’t primarily mean ‘imaginary’ but it can be ‘fictionalized fact’. It can have an original context, experience which is fictionalized to use in a wider frame. We can look at the following lines by Robert Frost to understand the above statement better.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep
But I have miles to go before I sleep
But I have miles to go before I sleep

The poet might have created this fictional journey of a traveller passing by the woods and his hesitation to stay and appreciate the beauty of nature as he has miles to go before he sleeps. But we can also locate the lines of the poem in the fact that modern men have less time to spare for the beauty of nature in the rat race where everyone is competitive. The lines also talk about human behaviour, choice etc. By now, you have fairly understood the nature of poetry in general. We have to remember that poetry may/may not feature rhyme, metre, rhythm, imagery symbolism etc.

Now that you understand the general definition of poetry, let us try to locate Dalit poetry in this context. First of all, what is Dalit poetry? Poetry written by Dalits, about Dalits, for the Dalits, which portrays their pain, anger, sorrow, poverty, humiliation etc. can be termed as Dalit poetry. As Dalit poetry expresses the social evils endured by all the Dalits, it tends to take the form of a collective expression. Limbale says, ‘a unique feature of Dalit literature is its collective aspect. The experience described in Dalit literature is social, hence, it is articulated as collective in character. Therefore, even when the experience expressed in Dalit literature is that of an individual, it appears to be that of a group. For this reason, it is alleged that there is no individual in Dalit literature.’

As the experiences of most of the exploited and the oppressed are common, the poetry that reflects those experiences of suffering can be seen as univocal. Suffering is one common aspect of Dalit poetry. We have read in the previous unit about the caste system in which the Dalits are oppressed and rendered inhuman and so it is but natural to see suffering and pain as part of creative output. According to the laws and rules of *Manusmriti*, Dalits could not own property, jewellery, could take food only in clay utensils, not own cattle other than donkeys and dogs, should have an ‘inauspicious and crude name’ (Limbale). Such inhuman commands were ‘supposedly’ created by God and therefore Dalits were supposed to accept it and not rebel against it. These were the circumstances in which Dalits lived. Thus the earliest form of Dalit poetry (like Chokhamela’s songs) talks of finding solace in God and his creation. But the modern Dalit poets have traversed far - from seeking solace to transforming the suffering and pain into a form of rebellion, thus giving it the shape of rejection and revolution. Modern Dalit poems, post the Dalit Panthers movement are a revolt against the inhuman system and unequal social order and demand freedom. In order to understand modern Dalit poetry, we will have to look at the movement called the Dalit Panthers movement.

Activity 1

Why does writing by Dalits take on the form of collective expression?

2.2.1 The Dalit Panthers Movement

As already recounted in the previous unit, the Dalit Panthers was a social organisation founded on 29th May 1972, by writers to protest atrocities against the untouchables in Maharashtra. Namdeo Dhasal, JV Pawar, Arun Kamble were the founders of the movement which was inspired by the Black Panthers Movement in America against the social/racial discrimination against African-Americans in the mid 20th century. The Dalit Panthers advocated the ideology of B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule and Karl Marx. The movement led to a boom on the literary front where a lot of revolutionary Dalit literature flooded the scene (mostly written in Marathi). We can say that the movement led to The Renaissance of Dalit literature. Now let us take a quick look at some points of the Dalit Panthers manifesto published in 1973:

“Who is a Dalit?... members of scheduled caste and tribes, neo Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion... The struggle for emancipation of the dalits needs a complete revolution. Partial change is impossible. We do not want it either. We want a complete and total revolutionary change. Even if we want to move out of the present state of social degradation alone, we will have to exercise our power in economic, political, cultural fields as well.”

We might also keep in mind that the translation of Dalit poetry in English mostly from Marathi happened with the publication of *An Anthology of Dalit Literature* edited by Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot (the introduction part of which we have read in the first unit) and *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* edited by Arjun Dangle in 1992. The English translation has helped in making the genre of Dalit poetry a pan Indian phenomenon. Today the movement of Dalit poetry has spread to many parts of the country and has helped to awaken people from different social strata and thus contributed to Dalit literature.

2.2.2 Aesthetics and Dalit Poetry

“Introduced into the philosophical lexicon during the Eighteenth Century, the term ‘aesthetic’ has come to be used to designate, among other things, a kind of object, a kind of judgment, a kind of attitude, a kind of experience, and a kind of value.” (Shelley, 2017)

Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy that delves into the discussion and appreciation of beauty, taste, and the nature of art. Aesthetics also concerns itself with creating and appreciating all things that are beautiful or impart pleasure to the senses. The understanding of beauty in terms of aesthetics means the beauty is judged by the reason for which something is considered beautiful. The act of reasoning the nature of beauty requires application of concepts and understanding of rational principles.

Poetry as a more refined form of various genres of literature must have some aesthetic appeal. But when we talk about Dalit poetry, is it appropriate to look for an aesthetic appeal that is found in the traditional or conventional notion of beauty? As we have read in the earlier section, Dalit literature rejects the traditional and conventional aesthetics, and one would fail to appreciate Dalit literature if one is stuck with the age old yardstick. Here comes the role of sensitivity and an

understanding that a literature born out of anger and humiliation is bound to be loud and aggressive. In most Dalit poetry, the tone and language is direct, unfiltered and hard hitting. Limbale says ‘pain or suffering is the basis of aesthetics of Dalit literature. Will readers be distressed or angered or will they be pleased by reading the pain and revolt expressed in Dalit literature? It is a literature that is intended to make readers restless or angry’. (Limbale, 2018)

As we have read earlier, Dalit poetry deals with anger and pain, the everyday assault on the basic rights of a section of people and such poetry becomes much more than art, it becomes political. Dalit poetry challenges the form of dominance prevalent in a caste-ridden society and it exposes what this dominance does to people.

We have to remember that the ideology of BR Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule inspired Dalit poetry. Thus, in order to understand and appreciate such poetry, one needs to recognise these sources of inspiration. The second step is to deconstruct the traditional notion of beauty. As Limbale says ‘the beauty of an artistic creation lies in its expression of world consciousness or other worldliness’ according to the traditional theory of beauty. Such a statement espouses the theory of spirituality. But ‘Dalit literature rejects spiritualism and abstraction, its aesthetics is materialist rather than spiritualist’. The aesthetics of Dalit poetry is based on reality and thus the claim that it is materialistic and not spiritual. The purpose of Dalit literature is to awaken ‘Dalit consciousness’ in the readers; thus it has to be grounded on lived experiences and reality of the exploited. It is committed to the upliftment of the downtrodden, it seeks freedom. One may say what can be more beautiful than freedom?

Limbale says, ‘the three values of life - equality, freedom and solidarity - can be regarded as constituting the essence of beauty in Dalit literature. The aesthetics of Dalit literature rest on: first, the artists’ social commitment; second, the life-affirming values present in the artistic creation; and third, the ability to raise the reader’s consciousness of fundamental values like equality, freedom, justice and fraternity. (Limbale, 2018)

Activity 2

Why would it not be right to judge the aesthetics of Dalit writing by traditional notions of the term?

2.2.3 Dalit Women Writers

It is also important to have an understanding of the contribution of women writers to Dalit literature. So far we have understood the prejudices against the Dalits and their grief and agony reflected in the literature. One might also begin to think of the position of women, specially Dalit women, in such a social standing where women suffer more than their male counterparts in society. Thus, Dalit women are marginalised on many levels and their suffering is multifold. In their writings we can see what it means to be a Dalit woman. Their entry into the literature and literary field was quite late as education was denied to them. Only from the 1970s onward can we see the first generation of Dalit women writers who were the direct followers of BR Ambedkar. From this beginning to contemporary times, women writers have traversed a long journey. Their writing not only talks about the social inequality but gender biases in a patriarchal society.

Eleanor Zelliot has emphasized the importance of women writers in Dalit literature who have been contributing to the momentum of Dalit literature that started from Ambedkar. Some of the Dalit women writers are Shantabai Kamble, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Aruna Gogulamanda, Meena Kandasamy among many more.

Excerpt from Apologies For Living On - Poem by Meena Kandasamy

i ran away in the darkness
 nothing beacons me more than the
 prospect-of-solitude-and-the-caress-of-a-million-stars
 i ran into the arms of the ravishing night
 nothing pulled me back: not even the memories
 of-love-i-had-once-known-&-stolen-kisses-savoured-for-so-long.
 i ran until terror stopped my tracks
 for, trembling i turned and saw that the moon was
 another-immodest-ogler-and-lecherous-stalker.

Activity 3

What do you think is the theme of the poem?

2.3 FM SHINDE: 'HABIT'

F M Shinde is a very prominent Marathi poet with 24 collections of poems. His first book, *Juloos*, was a proclamation of the birth of a writer who empathized with the agony of the underprivileged. His other books include *Fakira che Abhanga* and *Aai ani ittar Kavita*. His contribution to Marathi literature has been recognised by the three State Government Awards conferred on him. Shinde is adept not just in poetry but also in prose and his book *Dilli se Dilli* is a complex political satire. Shinde is also the Chairman of the Theatre Censor Board, Government of Maharashtra. He taught Marathi in Deogiri College in Aurangabad for several years.

Habit

Once you are used to it
 you never afterwards
 feel anything;
 your blood nevermore
 congeals
 nor flows
 for wet mud has been slapped all
 over your bones.
 Once you are used to it
 even the sorrow
 that visits you
 sometimes, in dreams,
 melts away, embarrassed.

Habit isn't used to breaking out
in feelings.

(translated from Marathi by Priya Adarkar)

2.3.1 Reading the Poem

Once you are used to it/you never afterwards/feel anything :

The poet says if you get used to something, you do not feel anything afterwards. The Dalits who have got used to oppression and subjugation stopped feeling anger/humiliation after the prolonged suffering.

your blood nevermore/congeals/nor flows :

congeal: solidify . The blood in the body solidifies, it stops flowing. The lines signify how a person is rendered lifeless metaphorically, where his blood stops flowing in his body, making him unable to feel hurt, anger, pain etc.

for wet mud has been slapped all/over your bones:

Comparison with the process of making clay/mud statues. Once you are habituated to suffering and subjugation, you stop feeling any other emotion; you become lifeless like a clay/mud statue.

Once you are used to it/even the sorrow/that visits you/sometimes, in dreams,melts away, embarrassed. :

The lines reflect on how one is not free to feel even sorrow. The Dalits have become so passive after years of suffering that they cannot even feel sorrow.

Habit isn't used to breaking out/in feeling.:

Once you are used to something, when it becomes a habit, it is very difficult to break away from it. One becomes inert and passive without any protest or resistance.

2.3.2 Interpretation

F M Shinde seems to focus on the passivity of the suppressed Dalits in this poem. As the title says, it becomes a 'habit' to suffer, not feel anything - pain or anger - as the oppressed are rendered lifeless like mud/clay statues. The caste hierarchy of Hinduism has made the one belonging to the lowest strata, the untouchables - the Dalit - suffer and tolerate injustice and discrimination for ages. The poet points at and condemns this system of suffering that has made the Dalits habitual to it and foregrounds how they suffer without any protest or resistance. The poem indirectly serves as a provocation to rebel against the perpetrators.

The poem is written in very simple, unembellished language yet the emotions expressed are strong and intense. The tone is not of direct rebellion but it condemns the agency which perpetuates injustice and discrimination on the basis of caste.

As we have read in section 2.1, the Introduction to this unit, Dalit poetry deals with the suffering and pain of the exploited. The poem 'Habit' exhibits that pain which has settled in the mind of the oppressed over a long period of time. The poem exposes the helplessness of the situation and the state of helplessness acts as a catalyst for a rebellion and revolt that is much needed. The poem seems to

be saying that one should not get habituated to inhuman living conditions and one should get out and seek freedom.

Imagery

Habit: when one becomes used to something, it tends to become a habit. If one is habituated then one tends to see things as normal even when they are not. By using the imagery of 'habit' the poet delves into the suffering and exploitation which, according to the poet, have become a habit for the Dalits. After ages of subjugation and oppression, the Dalits may have considered suffering as normalcy and they suffer without any protest or resistance.

Mud/clay statue: the poet uses the imagery of a mud/clay statue to delineate the lifeless and dehumanised condition of the Dalits. The poet says that one habituated to humiliation and suffering becomes passive without any voice of protest. The blood stops flowing and one becomes a mud/clay statue.

Activity 4

Comment on the significance of the imagery in the poem.

2.4 N T RAJKUMAR: 'UNTITLED POEM'

Rajkumar is one of the more popular Dalit poets and has been published in both mainstream Tamil literary publications as well as Dalit publications. The poems of N. T. Rajkumar are articulate protests against the caste and class oppression that Dalit men and women have been experiencing for ages. His choice of subject in the poems in which he details the ancient injustices done to Dalit women and draws connections to the present was, by his own admission, deliberate, personal, and ultimately political. He belongs to the Kanniya caste of people traditionally associated with magic and exorcism within rural Tamil culture and his earliest memories are of searching for herbs in the forest, and of walking behind his father, carrying the materials needed for ceremonies. He delights in his intimate knowledge of the ways Dalit women, who have all died violently, have been made into deities. 'Our gods are jungle gods,' Rajkumar argues. In the Tamil poems of N. T. Rajkumar, the references to the regional folk religion require not simply an understanding of the various names of the mother goddesses he lists but an easy sense of comfort within the folk culture described.

Dancing kobra eyes
twist into the body
striking at a corner
of the soul
asleep, sticking one's tongue out
on those full-moon nights

Drunk with the saliva
sucked from the dripping mouth,
my poisonous poetry
scattered like
fragrant flowers.

Frightened
 to smell them alone
 you bring to your aid
 those soaring birds of prey.
 Denying Shiva this time,
 standing on the power of the
 god of anger,
 I tease the kites.
 Ask them, are you well?
 You fly away,
 disappear in the distance
 like a dot.

I cannot touch
 the shadow of your wing.
 I will be born
 again and again.
 As a devil,
 a ghost,
 as Kali,
 and Isaki.

As the vengeful furies
 I will terrorize you and follow you-

(translated from Tamil by Anushiya Sivanarayanan)

Activity 5

Make a note of the images used in the poem. What do you think they mean?

2.4.1 Reading the Poem

- 1) Dancing kobra eyes / Twist into the body / striking at a corner / of the soul / asleep, sticking one's tongue out / on those full-moon nights

Agitation of the oppressed, the oppressed identifies with the Kobra and its need to strike. The soul is no longer asleep, but has woken up and is ready for revenge.

- 2) Drunk with the saliva / sucked from the dripping mouth, my poisonous poetry / scattered like
 / fragrant flowers, / Frightened / to smell them alone / you bring to your aid / those soaring birds of prey.

Continuing with the imagery of 'kobra', the poet says that his poetry has taken the poison from the dripping mouth of the 'kobra' and it is scattered like fragrant flowers. The oppressors are afraid to smell these flowers and enlist the help of 'soaring birds of prey'. The poet seems to indicate the surge of Dalit poetry and criticism of it by the oppressors due to fear.

- 3) Denying Shiva this time / Standing on the power of the / god of anger, / I tease the kites. /

Ask them, are you well? / You fly away, / Disappear in the distance / like a dot

Denying mainstream and religious narratives, the poet invokes the name of god Shiva who is an embodiment of anger. The poet uses the symbol of the kite to signify the freedom of the oppressor. The oppressed cannot even touch the shadow of the kite which is flying freely in the sky. The poet says the kite is flying away not only because it is free but because it is afraid of the revenge of the oppressed.

- 4) I cannot touch / the shadow of your wing / I will be born / again and again /
As a devil, / a ghost, as Kali, and Isaki./ As the vengeful furies / I will
terrorize you and follow you –

The poet says that he will not give up his fight. He will seek revenge against oppression in other forms even after his death.

2.4.2 Discussion

The poem is a strong voice of protest and rebellion against the exploitation of the Dalits by the caste Hindus. In the first unit, you read about using “literature as a weapon” by the Dalit Panther, so here is an example of that. This poem can be seen as a weapon to fight the oppression faced by Dalits. It becomes an expression of anger and resulting desire to exact revenge for the suffering. This poem is not subdued in tone but loud and direct, asserting the vengeful soul for all the pain and suffering it has gone through. This voice becomes representative of not only an individual but the condition of all Dalits.

We have read in the previous unit that Dalit literature is collective in aspect. There is no individual Dalit literature for the individual experience becomes the representation of a collective experience. The suffering and pain is a reflection of many years of oppressed generations. In this poem we see this suffering and pain giving way to anger and frustration, making it a poem of rebellion and revolution. The poet calls his poem ‘poisonous poetry’ that will take revenge for the oppressions and exploitations that they have suffered for years.

Imagery

Animal Imagery

The poet uses the image of a cobra to delineate the anger and frustration of the oppressed. The cobra has a desire to strike its victims with its poisonous fangs - likewise N.T. Rajkumar likens the soul of the oppressed Dalits to the agitation of the cobra wishing to strike and destroy the oppressors with ‘poisonous poetry’. The ‘poisonous poetry’ will serve as a way of revenge for the ages of oppression in terms of social, individual, and even literary traditions.

The poet also uses the imagery of ‘birds of prey’ like the eagle, kite, vulture, for the oppressors. The oppressor, frightened by the power of the protest by the oppressed might call for more aid (i.e. more oppressors). So they would come in the form of birds of prey. Remember the connection between both - the cobra and bird of prey. They are eternal enemies where the bird of prey may even have an upper hand in terms of a fight. But the poet seems to be saying that the cobra will no more fear the birds of prey.

Gods

The poet mentions certain gods in this poem. Shiva, Kali, Isaki, as well as the devil and the ghost. Both Shiva and Kali are known for their power of destruction. We have to remember the association of the 'cobra' with god Shiva as well. The poet dissociates the 'cobra' from Shiva and uses it as a medium of protest whereas 'Denying Shiva' might signify his 'denial of mainstream cultural and religious narratives'. He also uses god Isaki (not part of the Hindu pantheon) and local deities to bring in the marginalized narratives. (See glossary for more details).

Isaki : The Genesis of Isaki is described in the following lines by NT Rajkumar:

...Lusting after women and gold
 he married the dancer with lies of love
 then stoned her to death
 amid the thorns
 of the cactus field
 You are my witnesses, she cried
 to the cacti as she died.
 The dark-blue goddess of the cactus fields
 Demands blood-filled rice
 transmogrifies into the midnight
 goddess Isaki.

(Excerpt from untitled poem translated from Tamil by Anushiya Sivanarayanan)

Kite

The poet uses the symbol of the kite to signify the freedom of the oppressor. The oppressed cannot even touch the shadow of the kite which is flying freely in the sky. The poet says the kite is flying away not only because it is free but because it is afraid of the revenge of the oppressed.

Activity 6

Examine the tone of the poem.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have read and understood various aspects of Dalit poetry, its ideology, commitment, and purpose. We have also read and examined the sensitivity required in understanding the aesthetics of Dalit poetry. We have read and studied different poems by FM Shinde and NT Rajkumar in English translation and examined the various themes, perspectives, and the tone that make up Dalit poetry.

2.6 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Since it describes the experiences of an entire community and not that of an individual alone, Dalit writing is to be seen as the articulation of collective expression.

Activity 2: Dalit writing is concerned with felt experience that is full of pain, humiliation and suffering that is expressed frankly and graphically. Applying the traditional standards of aesthetics and beauty would not serve the purpose.

Activity 3: The poet expresses her desire for freedom and ends with the realisation of what living in a patriarchal society means.

Activity 4: The imagery used in the poem (habit, clay statue) exposes the helplessness, pain, suffering, grief, and humiliation of the Dalits and the need to break out of their passivity..

Activity 5: NT Rajkumar uses the image of the cobra to delineate the anger and frustration of the oppressed. The cobra has a desire to strike its victims with its poisonous fangs. Likewise N.T. Rajkumar compares the soul of the oppressed Dalits to the agitation of the cobra desperate to strike and destroy the oppressors with the 'poisonous poetry'. The poet also uses the image of 'birds of prey' like the eagle, kite, vultures, for the oppressors.

Activity 6: This poem is not subdued in tone but loud, direct and aggressive, asserting the vengeful soul for all the pain and suffering it had gone through.

2.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Examine the tone and language of the poem 'Habit'.
- 2) Analyse the significance of the title of the poem. Why does the poet call it 'habit'?
- 3) What do you find in common with the two poems discussed in this unit?
- 4) The two poems were written in different languages. What does their theme and treatment say about the Dalit experience?

2.8 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

- 1) Ambedkar, BR. 2003. *Ambedkar: Autobiographical Notes*. Introduction by Ravikumar. Pondicherry: Navayana
- 2) Anand, Mulkraj and Zelliott, Eleanor, (eds). 1992. *An Anthology of Dalit Literature (Poems)*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, pp. 1-6, 18-19.
- 3) Anushiya Sivanarayanan. Translating Tamil Dalit Poetry. *World Literature Today* May–August 2004, pp 56-9.
- 4) Bama. 2000. *Karukku*. Translated by Lakshmi Holmstron. Chennai: Macmillan
- 5) Dangle, Arjun, (ed). 1992. *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Marathi Dalit Literature*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman
- 6) Eagleton, Terry. *How to Read a Poem*, Blackwell Publishing, 2007, pp 1-8
- 7) Frost, Robert. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42891/stopping-by-woods-on-a-snowy-evening>
- 8) Ilaiah, Kancha. 1996. *Why I am not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*. Calcutta: Samya.

- 9) Limbale, Sharankumar. 2018. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History Controversies and Considerations*. Translated by Alok Mukherjee. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited.
- 10) Omvedt, Gail. 1994. *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- 11) ——— [1995] 1996. *Dalit Visions. Tracks for the Times/8*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman.
- 12) Shelley, James, “The Concept of the Aesthetic”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)
- 13) Vyam, Durgabai and Vyam, Subhash. 2011. *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, New Delhi: Navayana.
- 14) Zelliott, Eleanor. 2000. ‘Sant Sahitya and Dalit Movements.’ In Meera Kosambi, ed., *Intersections: Socio-cultural Trends in Maharashtra*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman



UNIT 3 LITERATURE FROM NORTH EAST INDIA

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Excerpt from Introduction to *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from the North East India* by Tilottoma Misra
- 3.3 Discussion
- 3.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.5 Glossary
- 3.6 Aids to Activities
- 3.7 Unit end Questions
- 3.8 References and Suggested Reading

3.0 OBJECTIVES

Literature from North East India is a less explored area in terms of studies of Indian literature as the North East region is geographically as well as culturally and linguistically different from the so-called mainstream/mainland in India. There is a tendency to exoticise and at the same time homogenise the people and culture and by large the literature of the place. This unit will briefly introduce various trends and genre of literature of the sister states in the North East. By the end of the unit you should be able to gain a better understanding of the literature of the place.

Words given in **bold** throughout this unit are explained in the **Glossary** at the end.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

When we think of the North Eastern part of India it remains a place less explored and distinct from the rest of India. From this lack of knowledge one tends to homogenise the sister states as a single entity with perhaps Assam as the representative of all the states. We will discuss in this unit how every state, every ethnicity has its own distinct history as well as culturally marked identity which is reflected in the literature of the place. We will also see amidst the differences, the shared commonality of the people as each of them bore the influx of different cultures and events (colonialism, Hinduism, western education, Christianity) which shape the literature of the place.

The Northeast comprises 8 states - Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura also commonly known as the eight sisters (after the addition of Sikkim). Some of the well known writers from the North East are Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Nabakanta Barua, Robin S Ngangom, Nilamani Phukan, Thangjam Ibopishak Singh, Kynpham Singh Nongkynri, Mona Zote, Chandrakanta Mura Singh, to name a few. Birendranath Datta explains the different communities of people in the North East India as follows,

‘From the cultural point of view, the population of this region could be divided into three categories:

Those tribal communities living in the rather distant hills more or less isolated and free from the impact of Sanskrit or other organised cultures (except in the case of tribes with Buddhistic connections).

Those tribal groups, both in the hills and the plains, who have retained their tribal group identity but who have been acculturated in various degrees as a result of living in close proximity or contact with the non tribal Sanskritized majority or through the impact of Buddhism or Christianity or Islam.

Those societies which are more or less fully Sanskritized where the population is wholly (as in the case of the Meiteis) or substantially (as in the case of Assamese) made up of erstwhile Indo Mongoloid stocks. Local Muslims of this region, although not Sanskritized from the religious point of view, are culturally a part of this milieu.’ (Misra 2011)

Activity 1

Why would it be wrong to club all the North East states into one homogenised group?

3.2 EXCERPTS FROM INTRODUCTION TO *THE OXFORD ANTHOLOGY OF WRITINGS FROM THE NORTH EAST INDIA* BY TILOTTOMA MISRA

An **intense** sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the **negotiation** with ‘other’ cultures is a **recurrent** feature of the literatures of the seven north-eastern states. Each small community or **linguistic group** has responded through its oral or written communication to the encounters with the **majoritarian cultures** from either mainland India or from outside the borders of the country, in its own **distinctive** manner. The main waves of **cultural invasion** that have **wrought** significant changes in the literary world of the region originated in the **Bhakti Movement**, followed by the various **Reformist dispensations** of the nineteenth century, colonialism and the Christian missionary activities that accompanies it, and the new culture of development that has become a part of the global culture. Each of these encounters resulted in different forms of resistance as well as **appropriations**. The clash of cultures has often led to the loss of traditional forms and the **adoption** of new cultural **icons** that threatened the existing ones. While there have been attempts at **reviewing** and **critiquing** one’s own society and culture in the light of the new ideas that have invaded the region from time to time, yet whenever the **xenophobic** fear of the ‘outsider’ has seized a community, a tendency to retreat into the **cocoon** of cultural isolation has been quite evident. In Assam, Manipur, and Tripura, this process of cultural **intermixing** began long before the advent of colonialism. **Shaiva, Shakta, and Vaishnava** forms of Hinduism together with Buddhism and Islam spread their distinctive influences in the region, while the **Tai-Ahoms** who entered Assam from the east and ruled the country for almost 600 years till the advent of the British in 1826, made **immense** contribution towards the creation of a **syncretic** culture in the region. It is significant that the literature of the pre-colonial period

in all these three kingdoms was deeply rooted in the wonderfully mixed cultural life of their respective societies. Colonialism, however, **superimposed a Eurocentric concept** of modernity derived from the **enlightenment** on the literature of the region, thereby creating a **rupture** between the past and the present. The Christian missionaries took the lead in ushering in a print culture by establishing printing presses and bringing out textbooks, books on grammar, and Christian literature and journals in the local languages. The **standardization** of the Assamese language that took place as a result of this encounter, however, led to the marginalization of the other spoken dialects of the language, thus creating a distance between the oral and written. This **interference** with what a recent historian has termed the '**robustly polyglot character**' of the pre-colonial administration of Assam, helped the colonial administrators to cope with the problem of managing the **bewildering** and mind-boggling **heterogeneity** of speech which they encountered in the colonial province of Assam which constitutes most of what is called the 'North-East' today. The initial attempt of the British to impose a standardized form of Bengali to serve as the **vernacular** of Assam, met with stiff resistance from the Assamese **literati** of the time who received unexpected support from the American Baptist missionaries. The creation of a standardized print language in Assam was, therefore, the result of a joint effort by the missionaries and the Assamese intellectuals schooled in the **metropolitan** culture of Calcutta in the nineteenth century. This language, which emerged as the medium for the new literary creations of the nineteenth century, contained elements from many existing speech practices of the various **indigenous** communities of the region as well as from Persian, Hindi, Bengali, and other languages of the neighbouring communities with which the pre-colonial rulers of Assam used to carry on political and commercial intercourse. The modern Assamese language has, therefore, been termed as a 'philosopher's paradise' because of the heterogeneous elements **mobilized** within its structure.

The Assamese language in its various oral forms has also served as the **lingua franca** amongst many of the hill people in the neighbouring states of Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. But these oral forms of the language have remained as **pidgin** languages and are, therefore, termed as 'non-language' even by the speakers who use these forms of the language for communicating with people from neighbouring tribes. It may be noted that before the advent of identity politics amongst the various ethnic communities in the region whose mother tongue is not Assamese, the writers from the different communities used the Assamese language as the medium for creative writing. This resulted in the language acquiring distinctive characteristics because of the **infusion** of elements **peculiar** to the culture of the different indigenous communities...

... Of the three generations of writers of the post-Independence period included here, a significantly large number of the younger writers are writing in English. A variety of reasons may be cited for this **phenomenon**. Many of them have had the privilege of being educated in English-medium schools and they are more capable of handling that language rather than their mother tongues. This new band of writers writing in English is bound to grow in number because most of the hill-states of the region have adopted English as the official language, thus ensuring that it would be the first language of the new generation of literates and it would be used to the best advantage both in the professional as well as in the academic arena. While whether the English language would be able to replace the regional languages in creative writing maybe a contested question, it is a fact

that some of the best writings from the North-East have been produced in **acquired languages**, including English. Moreover, given the small sizes of the **linguistic groups** to which many of the writers belong, it is understandable that the aspiring writers should choose to write in a language through which they can reach out to a wider reader base. Indeed, many of the writers writing in English have reaped the benefits of acquiring a worldwide audience through national and international forums. Reflecting on this phenomenon, Nigel Jenkins, a Welsh scholar who has edited a collection of Khasi poetry in English and Welsh, has expressed the hope that the Khasis would go back to their own language after the ‘purging of the clutter’ that is under way at present. He says: ‘It is a painful fact of literary life for certain young writers that although Khasi is their everyday medium, they are not sufficiently confident in the language to make poems in it. This real or imagined incapacity is largely the fault of an education system which **obliges** secondary school pupils to abandon their native tongue and matriculate in English. In contrast, a completely different view has been expressed by Salman Rushdie who finds no reason to be **apologetic** about the choice of the English language by Indian and diasporic writers. Commenting on the status of the Indian writers ‘working in English’, he says: ‘English is the most powerful medium of communication in the world; should we not then rejoice at these artists’ mastery of it, and at their growing influence? To criticize writers for their success at “breaking out” is no more **parochialism** (and parochialism is perhaps the main vice of the vernacular literatures).’...

... The lack of first-rate translations of Indian literature in vernacular languages has been mentioned by most editors who have compiled anthologies of Indian writings. Though the efforts of Sahitya Akademi and some other institutions in collecting and publishing Indian writings in translation is **laudable**, yet many areas have still remained untouched. Despite the claims of some scholar that ‘in India we keep translating every moment of our active life’ and that much of the pre-colonial literature in India was founded on translations of the epics and the puranas, it is sad that some of the best writings in the Indian languages can be read only by the readers who belong to the same linguistic community as that of the author.

Most of the communities from north-east India can pride themselves for possessing a **vibrant** storytelling tradition. The culture of the ‘face-to-face communities’ which is distinguishable from the abstract nature of social relationships in the ‘modern’ world, is a distinguishing feature of the oral and it has continued as the dominant influence on the literary creations from the region. After the introduction of print culture into the region during the colonial times, collecting, re-telling, and printing the folklore of the different communities became an important part of the colonial **ethnographic** agenda of mapping the region for more effective administrative control over the bewildering variety of races than the British encountered here...

... The sense of being denied fair representation in the great Indian civilizational **discourse** or even in the nationalist discourse, has deeply affected the emerging literati of many of the regions of north-east India in the post-Independence era...

...The ‘seven sisters’ of the North-East which had only marginal historical links with each other in the pre-colonial times, had their doors open towards South-East Asia, eastern Bengal, Bhutan, and Tibet – regions with which they shared boundaries and lively commercial and cultural contacts. It was only after the partition of the sub-continent that the region became totally **landlocked** with

almost all the doors closed except for a narrow corridor that kept it linked with India. This geographical isolation has led to **erasures** and marginalization on multiple levels, the effect of which is clearly discernible in the writings from the region...

Activity 2

What do you understand by cultural invasion?

3.3 DISCUSSION

About the author : Tilottama Misra was born in 1947 in Shillong, Meghalaya where she had her early education. She did her graduation from Calcutta University, completed Masters from Delhi University and Ph.D. from Guwahati University. She taught English literature in Indraprastha College Delhi University and English Department Dibrugarh University from where she retired as a professor in 2007. Her published books include *Literature and Society in Assam: A Study of Assamese Renaissance 1826-1926*, Guwahati, 1987, two novels *Swarnalatha* 1991 and *Louhitya Sindhu* 1997 and *Ram Navami Natak - The Story of Ram and Navami, A Translation of Kunavaram Bharvad Ram Navami Natak*, New Delhi, OUP, 2007. She was awarded the Ishan Puraskar by Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad in 1995 for her novel *Swarnalatha*. She has also edited two volumes of the *Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India, Poetry and Essays, and Fiction*.

When we look at the literature of North East India, one common aspect that is evident in them is the awareness of the people of the region of the “cultural loss and recovery” that happened with the negotiation with “other” cultures. By other cultures, we mean the different cultures from mainland India or outside India which came in contact with the region over a long period of time. The small communities and the linguistic groups that comprise the North East region have responded to the encounter of cultures in their own ways whether in written or in oral narratives. Some of the main encounters of other cultures with the native culture of the region are the Bhakti Movement, Hinduism, Christianity, Colonialism, Euro-centric concepts etc.. These interactions over the years have been met with both resistance and appropriations. Nevertheless, these clashes led to the loss or threat to existing cultures as well as emergence of new cultures by adopting or adapting with the aforementioned encounters. Thus, one may find in the region the tendency to retreat into a cultural isolation whenever there is a threat from the outsiders which is not surprising considering the cultural onslaught that the place has gone through over the years.

In the states of Assam, Manipur, and Tripura the **intermixing** of culture happened earlier than the other states with the advent of Hinduism, Islam and in some parts, Buddhism. Much later, the wave of colonialism came to the region and with it came Western education and Christianity. In the pre-colonial period in the three kingdoms one can see the mingling of **indigenous** culture with the foreign cultures, which impacted the literature of the region. It may also be noted here that these three kingdoms are the only communities in the North East India with their own script while the rest of the region used Roman script. With colonialism, the region was introduced to the western concept of modernity. The Christian missionary introduced print culture by bringing out textbooks, Christian literature,

and journals in local languages. In Assam, this encounter led to the standardization of Assamese language. This process led to the “**marginalisation**” of other oral dialects of the language. The standardized language that came out has elements of speech of other indigenous communities as well as Hindi, Persian, Bengali, in short, giving it a heterogeneous structure. Various dialects of oral Assamese language can also be seen in the neighbouring states like Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland.

Activity 3

What was the effect of the print culture brought in by Christian missionaries?

English as a Medium of Creative Expression

We can see that many young writers from the North East India used English as a medium of their creative expression, specially in the post colonial era. Reasons behind this phenomenon can be perhaps adoption of the English language as the official language in many regions of this part of the country as well as the result of preference for English medium schools. Another reason for choosing English as a medium can be to reach out to a wider audience or readers since the North East, as we have discussed, is made up of small yet different linguistic groups. English will also give their writings a wider exposure through national and international readership. One must also keep in mind the debate whether a person can produce “creative work” in an acquired language. This debate has been an ongoing topic not only in relation to North East literature but in literature in other Indian languages too.

Another important issue that one must keep in mind is that of translation. In India (being a **multilingual** country) translation plays a very important part on the literary front. Though efforts are made by organisations like the Sahitya Akademi, there are even now works of literature that can be read only by people from the same linguistic group as the writer.

Oral tradition

The North East region of India has a rich oral tradition. Even with states with written scriptures as mentioned earlier, orality is no less important than the written narrative. In fact, one finds the **intermixing** of orality with a written form of the language in many of the communities. Oral tradition means having a system of communication where knowledge, ideas, art, cultural and traditional values are received, stored and shared or transmitted orally from one generation to the next. The transmission is through spoken words - that is through speech or songs. Thus, it may be in the form of folktales, ballads, prose, poetry etc. and the North East region has a vibrant story telling tradition. One can say that the literature of the region is influenced by this still-alive tradition of storytelling.

However, after the introduction of print culture during the colonial time and the resulting marginalisation of the oral dialects of some communities, there has been a gap in the past and present identity. There has been an increased effort to reclaim the original identity by re-telling, recreating the past through the oral tradition in literature. Misra says, ‘collecting and printing the oral and written literature of one’s own community also became a part of the nationalist agenda of identity assertion. People whose history and civilization had been pushed to the margins as not conforming to the norms of the Eurocentric concept of

modernity, took up the task of recreating the past and reinventing tradition so as to represent the present as a stage in the continuous process of marching from the past to the future. Amongst many indigenous communities of Africa and America too there has been a resurgence of conscious attempts to adopt elements from their own oral tradition in order to create a modern literature of their own which would resist the colonial project of denial of history or literature to the colonized. But Temsula Ao whose own writings display a sensitive blending of the oral and the written claims that the ‘new literature rich with indigenous flavour’ that is being created by the modern storytellers and poets from the North East does not seem to have a political agenda like the postcolonial literature that is emerging in Africa and amongst the native Americans in recent times.’ (Misra 2011)

Activity 3

What could have made young writers from North East decide to choose English as a medium of creative expression?

Literature and Politics

One cannot deny the fact that some parts of the North East region are plagued by social, political and insurgency problems and ethnic clashes. These problems not only hinder the development of the region but destabilize the daily lives of the common man. Tension between the government and various mushrooming insurgency groups in neighbouring states and neighbouring countries, problem of immigrants, issues of representation of the North East (political or otherwise) in the nationalist discourse etc are some of the burning issues in the North East region. Thus, the literature of the post-independence era by North East writers tends to be political. Sanjay Hazarika says ‘India’s North East is a misshapen strip of land, linked to the rest of the country by a narrow corridor just twenty kilometres at its slimmest which is referred to as chicken’s neck. The region has been the battleground for generations of sub-national identity confronting insensitive nation-states and their bureaucracies as well as of internecine strife... it is a battle that continues, of ideas and arms, new concepts and old traditions, of power, bitterness and compassion.’ (Misra 2011)

Violence, terror, blood, death etc are some common themes/imagery found in the literature of the region. Another aspect of North East literature is seeking identity. As we have discussed in the earlier section of this unit, various encounters with Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, colonialism etc have redefined the small ethnic groups through adaptation and appropriation over the years. Thus, in the literature of various sub-groups of the North East, one may see a reclaiming of the past and a questioning of the present identity.

The North East region has recently featured in many agendas of the political as well as economic strategies of the country. Being geographically and hence physically isolated, the cultural, linguistic as well as racial differences from the rest of India have led to multiple layers of marginalization of the region. Perhaps, this is one common thing that all the different communities of North East share and it is very clearly seen as well in the creative expression of the writers of that region.

3.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have had a glimpse into North East India and seen how its culture and literature have been shaped and moulded by various historical, political, cultural, economical, as well as religious interventions. Like the political map of the North East, it is a difficult task to draw the literary map of the region. Each creative expression from the sister states tells a distinctive story of the people and the place. We need to research further in order to understand properly, the literature of the North East.

3.5 GLOSSARY

Acquired language	: the second language other than the native tongue.
Adoption	: the action or fact of choosing to take up, follow, or use something
Affinities	: a spontaneous or natural liking or sympathy for someone or something
Apologetic	: regretful
Appropriations	: the action of taking something for one's own use, typically without the owner's permission.
Bewildering	: confusing or perplexing
Bhakti Movement	: The Bhakti Movement was a Hindu religious movement of the medieval period that believed that Enlightenment was obtainable by everyone. The movement advocated that a personal expression of devotion to God is the way to become one with Him. Mira, Kabir, Mahadeviyaka etc. were the saint poets of Bhakti Movement.
Bilingual/Multilingual:	speaking two languages/speaking multiple languages
Chauvinistic	: feeling or displaying aggressive or exaggerated patriotism
Cocoon	: envelop or surround in a protective or comforting way
Connotation	: an idea or feeling that a word invokes in addition to its literal or primary meaning
Critiquing	: to review or discuss critically
Cultural invasion	: The invasion of a culture by outsiders, who may try to help or change the indigenous culture. The Cambridge dictionary defines cultural imperialism as one "culture of a large and powerful country, organization, etc. having a great influence on another less powerful country."
Diaspora writer	: a writer who has moved away geographically from his/her original birthplace.
Discourse	: written or spoken communication or debate
Dispensations	: exemption from a rule or usual requirement

Distinctive	: characteristic of a person, things etc. which distinguishes it from the others.
Emotive	: arousing or able to arouse Intense feeling
Enlightenment	: a European intellectual movement of the late 17th and 18th centuries emphasizing reason and individualism rather than tradition
Epics and the puranas:	long poems, typically one derived from ancient oral tradition, narrating the deeds and adventures of heroic or legendary figures or the history of a nation eg, Ramayan and Mahabharat
Erasures	: removal
Ethnographic	: The branch of anthropology that deals with the description of specific human cultures, using methods such as close observation and interviews
Eurocentric concept	: Reflecting a tendency to interpret the world in terms of European or Anglo-American values and experiences
Heterogeneity	: the quality or state of being diverse in character or content
Icon	: a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol or as worthy of worship
Immense	: extremely large or great, especially in scale or degree
Indigenous	: native, originating naturally from a particular place
Infusion	: The introduction of a new element or quality into something
Intense	: extreme, strong feeling
Interference	: the action of interfering or the process of being interfered with.
Intermixing	: to mix together, become mixed together
Landlocked	: almost or entirely surrounded by land; having no coastline or seaport
Laudable	: deserving praise
Lingua Franca	: A language that is adopted as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different
Linguistic Group	: group of languages related by descent from a common ancestor
Literati	: well-educated people who are interested in literature
Majoritarian cultures:	majoritarian is constituting a majority. Cultures pertaining to the majority group would be majoritarian culture.
Marginalisation	: The process whereby something or someone is pushed to the edge of a group and accorded lesser importance.

Metropolitan	: characteristics of the metropolis, in terms of culture , sophistication etc.
Mobilized	: make something to move
Negotiation	: discussion to reach to an agreement
Obliges	: make (someone) legally or morally bound to an action or course of action
Parochialism	: a limited or narrow outlook, especially focused on a local area; narrow-mindedness
Peculiar	: particular, special
Phenomenon	: a fact or situation that is observed to exist or happen, especially one whose cause or explanation is in question
Philologist's paradise	: a good place for a person who studies literature and language. Where enough material is available.
Pidgin	: A grammatically simplified form of a language, used for communication between people not sharing a common language. Pidgins have a limited vocabulary, some elements of which are taken from local languages, and are not native languages, but arise out of language contact between speakers of other languages.
Recurrent	: repeated
Reformist	: a person who advocates gradual reform rather than abolition or revolution.
Reviewing	: careful examination of something, formulation of a judgment, and statement of the judgement
Robustly polyglot character	: perhaps having the character of a large number of languages
Rupture	: disturb, break
Shaiva, Shakta, Vaishnava	: different school of Hindu form of worship of gods and goddesses, Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, Durga, Kali, Parvati etc.
Standardization	: the process of making something conform to a standard
Superimposed	: placed or laid over something else, typically so that both things are still evident
Syncretic	: the combination of different forms of belief or practice
Tai Ahoms	: Tai-Ahom are a Tai people of Assam, Arunachal, and some in Kachin State who are the descendants of either the Tai people who reached the Brahmaputra valley in 1228, or the local people who joined them over the course of history
Vernacular	: the language or dialect spoken by the ordinary people in a particular country or region

Vibrant	: full of energy and enthusiasm
Wrought	: shaped
Xenophobic	: dislike of or prejudice against people from other countries

3.6 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Cultural invasion is incursion into a culture by outsiders, who may try to help or change the **indigenous culture**. The Cambridge Dictionary defines cultural imperialism as one “culture of a large and powerful country, organization, etc. having a great influence on another less powerful country.” Some of the instances of Cultural Invasion in the North East region are the Bhakti Movement, Reformist movements of the 19th century, colonialism, and Christian missionaries etc.

Activity 2: Print culture was brought into the North East region by Christian missionaries through the publication of textbooks related to the Bible. They started to publish religious material in the local languages that led to a Standardization of specific dialects. The process of Standardization led to the Marginalisation of other oral dialects of the Indigenous communities. One example that can be cited is the Standardization of the Assamese language.

Activity 3: Writers from the North East region perhaps choose English as their medium of creative expression because of the universal appeal of the language as English would give them a wider readership nationally and internationally. Also, English is the most acceptable official language in the North East region. English also works as a bridge between the various linguistic groups of the North East region.

3.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Name a cultural invasion that happened in the North East region according to your understanding of the text. In what ways has this invasion brought about changes?
- 2) Why are the oral forms of Assamese spoken in the neighbouring states of Assam considered as non language?
- 3) What is the importance of translation?
- 4) What is oral tradition? Why does the writer say that the North East has a vibrant storytelling tradition?
- 5) Do you think that literature can be political? Write your answer with reference to the essay that we have discussed in this unit.
- 6) Do you agree with the writer when she says ‘the sense of being denied for representation in the great Indian civilizational discourse or even the nationalist discourse has deeply affected the emerging literati of many of the regions of North East India in the post independence era’? Give reasons for your answer.
- 7) Write a brief note on your understanding of literature from the North East region.

3.8 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

- 1) Baruah, Sanjib (ed). *Beyond Counter-insurgency: Breaking the Impasse in North East India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2000
- 2) Bhattacharjee, Sukalpa and Rajesh Dev (eds). *Ethno-narratives: Identity and Experience in North East India*, New Delhi, Anshah Publishing House, 2006
- 3) Chandra, N. D. R. and Nigamananda Das, *Ecology, Myth and Mystery – Contemporary Poetry in English from North East India*, New Delhi, Sarup&Sons, 2007
- 4) Datta, Birendranath, “North East India and its Socio-Cultural Milieu” Misra, Tilottoma, *Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India, Poetry and Essays*. New Delhi, OUP, 2011
- 5) *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*
- 6) Ed. Aggarwal, S Kailash, *Dynamics of Identity and Intergroup Relations in North East India*, Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1999
- 7) Gill, Preeti (ed). *The Peripheral Center – Voices from India’s North East*, New Delhi, Zubaan, 2010
- 8) Misra, Tillotama (ed). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India: Poetry and Essays*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2011
- 9) Misra, Udayon “Peasant Consciousness as Reflected in the Oral Literature of Assam: A Study of Two Assamese Ballads.” Misra, Tilottoma, *Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India, Poetry and Essays*. New Delhi, OUP, 2011
- 10) Ngangom, S. Robin, Nongkinryh Kynpham (eds). *Dancing Earth, An Anthology of Poetry from North East India*, New Delhi, Penguin Publication, 2009
- 11) *Oxford English Dictionary*
- 12) Singh, Ch. Manihar, *A History of Manipuri Literature*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 2003
- 13) Verghese, B.G. *India’s North-East Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, New Delhi, Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2004

UNIT 4 LITERATURE FROM NORTH EAST INDIA –POETRY

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
 - 4.1.1 Poetry from North East India
- 4.2 Text – ‘Hijan Hirao’
 - 4.2.1 Reading the Poem
 - 4.2.2 Interpretation
- 4.3 Text – ‘Colours of Truth’
 - 4.3.1 Reading the Poem
 - 4.3.2 Interpretation
- 4.4 Let Us Sum up
- 4.5 Aids to Activities
- 4.6 Unit End Questions
- 4.7 References and Suggested Reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will try to have a glimpse of the plethora of poetry from the North East. The two poems we are going to discuss belong to different eras. The first poem ‘Hijan Hirao’ is from the time when colonialism, Hinduism, Christianity etc. had not reached Manipur (and largely the entire NE region). In this poem we can take a peek at the time and lifestyle of that period reflected through literature in the oral tradition. The second poem is from Meghalaya by a contemporary poet and it will give us a voice from today’s world speaking about what has transpired from the time of the coexistence of men and nature to urbanisation, modernisation, political and economic growth that the region has seen and the ensuing problems faced by the ‘sisters’. By the end of the unit, you will have a fair understanding of a few aspects of poetry from the North East of India.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

We have read about the literature of North East India in the previous unit and by now we have understood that it is very difficult to categorise North East literature into one general group. The same goes for the poetry of the region as well. Other than being written by people from a geographically identified space (the eight sisters) the commonality and homogeneity of the region or regions tends to be a myth. We know that the North East comprises a number of different ethnicities, histories, cultures and politics. Thus, we can only try to map the poetry of the region by gaining insight into the history of each community. Having said this, a few commonalities can still be seen in terms of treatment of nature, rootedness, orality and identity as the region has some shared history. The popularity of English as the medium of expression is a unique feature in North East literature. The possible reasons for this choice have been discussed briefly in the previous unit.

Activity 1

Why is it difficult to put the literature of the entire North East under a common fold?

4.1.1 Poetry from North East India

Now let's look at some of the aspects of poetry from the sister states of North East India.

We will begin with Assamese poetry as Assamese literature more or less dominates and influences the rest of the North East region. Assamese poetry can be understood by way of the different phases of evolution it went through over the course of history. We will try to look at the poetry of each sister state in various phases to have a better understanding. The pre-independence period Assamese poetry was marked by romantic trends and mysticism. Patriotism was yet another aspect like it was in the rest of Indian poetry of the pre independence era. The post independence phase is dominated by poets Nilmani Phookan, Nabakanta Barua and Hiren Bhattacharya. The shift from romantic idealism to a more realistic socially and politically conscious stance is a remarkable change we see here. The influence of Anglo American and modernist poetry with the lingering presence of the elements of Indian classics is another aspect of post independence Assamese literature. The poets explore the themes of human existence in the modern world post World War II conditions, violence, conflicts of urban life etc. The language and style are modern, abstract, symbolic and laden with folk and the myth. Some of the younger poets are Nilim Kumar, Jiban Narah, Anupama Basumatari, Anubhav Tulasi, Aruni Kashyap etc.

The journey of Manipuri poetry is also somewhat similar to that of Assamese poetry and we can try to understand it by looking at the faces of Manipuri literature through the ages. Manipur is a Hindu dominated state, Hindus being the majority of the many communities that reside here. Before the advent of Hinduism around the 18th century, the poetry of the region was marked by the beliefs and ways of life of the ancient pre-Hindu faith. Heroism, close affinity with nature, myths and folk elements mainly make up the poetry of this phase. After the advent of Hinduism, the poetry can be seen influenced culturally as well as linguistically with elements of Hindu epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The next phase came with western education and philosophy that accompanied the British colonisers at the end of the 19th century. The first modernist wave in the field of poetry can be seen during this period, specially in the first half of the 20th century. The poetry is marked by patriotism and romantic idealism very similar to the Assamese poetry of that time. Lamabam Kamal, Hijam Irabot, Khwairakpam Chaoba, Ashangbam Minaketan etc are notable poets of the period. The post independence Manipuri poetry embraced a realistic approach to life, society, and politics. Discarding romantic idealism, poets would speak more about the disillusionment of the post-independence political predicament of the modern man, corruption, violence etc. Elangbam Nilakanta, Thangjam Ibopishak Singh, W Ranjit, Yumlebham Ibomcha Singh etc. captured the consciousness of the time in their poetry. Surrealistic post-modern style and technique can be found in the form and the theme of the poetry of this period. Another theme is the clash of the insurgents with the state/central government and how the people are caught in the crossfire of the ensuing violence Some of the contemporary Manipuri poets are Saratchand Thiyam, RK Bhubonsana, Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi Devi, Gambhini Devi, Robin S Ngangom etc.

Writing came much later in the case of Naga literature. Since Nagas have a strong oral tradition, literature was to be found in the oral form. With the coming of Christian missionaries and subsequent use of and adoption of the Roman script, the first book was published in 1880. The initial written literature mainly revolves around translation of the Bible and moralistic stories. The post independence literature is marked by displacement, conflict and confusion over the transition from a rural to an urban way of life, violence stemming from armed insurgency, disillusionment etc. One very important element in the poetry is that of the storytelling tradition that comes from the oral culture of the place. Some of the poets are Temsula Ao, Easterine Italy, Monalisa Changkija etc.

Mizo literature - like Naga literature - is heavily influenced by the oral tradition. The poetry is marked by the presence of the musicality of the rich Mizo folk songs. The Mizos have also adopted the Roman script from the Christian missionaries. Written Mizo literature is new as compared to the other states, but the modern literature specially poetry, explores the anguish of the people over urbanization, trauma of violence from militancy, distortion of the traditional ways of life etc. Notable poets are Mona Zote, Lalrinmawii Khiangte, Cherrie L Chhangte etc.

The Khasis from Meghalaya also have a rich oral tradition and absence of a written script. The British missionaries introduced the Roman script and it became the medium for written Khasi literature. The only written literature of the 19th century revolved around the Bible and Christianity but later poets started a trend in Khasi poetry to explore and capture the rich folk traditions, myths and legends of the place. Some of the important poets are Soso Tham, Jeeban Roy, Desmond Kharmawphlang, Esther Syiem, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih etc.

Activity 2

What do you understand by oral tradition? Put down your thoughts and compare them to what is said later in this unit.

Tripura is one of the three states from the North East India which has its own written script. You may have noticed that many states in the North East do not have written scripts and they have adopted the Roman script. Assam, Manipur (meitei), and Tripura are the only states with written scripts. Literature from Tripura is heavily influenced by the neighbouring Bengali literature. In fact, Bengali literature dominated the region before 'kokborok' the indigenous language became official after much struggle. Many modern contemporary poets are trying to reclaim that indigenous identity by exploring myths, legends, and the oral tradition by using the kokborok language. Important poets from Tripura are Chandrakanta Mura Singh, Pijush Raut, Bijoy Kumar Debbarma, Jogmaya Chakma etc.

The writers from Arunachal Pradesh also explore myth and folklore to strike an equilibrium between the past and the wave of modernization, constant destruction of forests and virgin lands in the face of urbanization. Most writers express the predicament of the people who have lost touch with their ancient roots and are confronted with the new world of existence in the urban spaces. The medium of expression is mainly English. The poet Mamang Dai has explored roots, traditions to issues of women to name a few themes in her poetry.

It is indeed a taxing endeavour to try to grasp an understanding of the literature of such a diverse region. In the next section we will read two poems from different time periods as well as community and linguistic groups.

4.2 HIJAN HIRAO

At dead of night
 The mother who begot the tree
 And the mother of all giant trees,
 The queen of the hill-range
 And the mistress of the gorges
 Took the tall and graceful tree
 To her bosom and wailed:

“O my son,tall and big,
 While yet an infant, a sapling
 Didn't I tell you
 To be an ordinary tree?
 ...
 The king's men have found you out
 And bought your life with gold and silver.
 ...
 At daybreak, hacked at the trunk
 You will be found lying prostrate.
 No longer will you respond
 To your mother's call
 Nor a likeness of you
 Shall be found,when I survey
 The whole hillside.
 Who shall now relieve my grief?”

(Extract of poem translated from original Manipuri by Ch Manihar Singh)

4.2.1 Reading the poem

The poem says that in the dead of the night, that is midnight, the spirit mother of the forests and hills, who is considered as the queen and the mistress of the hills and the gorges comes and clasps the ill-fated tree to her bosom. The tallest tree has been chosen by the kingsman for making a grand boat and is to be cut down in the morning. The mother spirit wails and reprimands the tree, reminding it of how she had told it - when it was a mere sapling - to grow into just an ordinary tree. But because it did not heed her advice and grew so tall and strong, it attracted the fancy of the king and its life had now been bought with gold and silver. The mother then imagines what will transpire in the morning - the tree would be hacked down and only the trunk would remain. He would not answer to the call of the mother any more. The mother then says that there won't be any one as great as the slain son and laments, wondering how she will get relief from the pain of separating from her son.

Activity 3

Think about how has nature been portrayed in the poem ‘Hijan Hirao’ and jot down your observations.

4.2.2 Interpretation

The poem is an extract from a longer poem called ‘Hijan Hirao’. Hijan Hirao is a variation of Hichal Hilao which can be explained as hi – boat, chal – construct, lao – to shout. In essence, Hichal Hilao can be interpreted as a song sung during the construction of a boat. The long narrative poem is considered as one of the earliest poems of Manipur. It is associated with the local festival of Manipur call Lai Haraoba and the poem is meant to be sung as a part of rituals during the festival.

It tells the story of an incident that is believed to have happened in 400-600 AD during the reign of king Hongnem Luwang Ningthou Punshiba of the Luwang dynasty. The story goes like this: one day when the king was taking a stroll by the river Singtha, he saw small insects crossing the river using twigs and dry weeds. This gave him the idea of building a mighty boat. He ordered his artisans to find the biggest and the tallest tree of all from the forest and cut it down to make the grand boat. When the king’s men found the tallest tree by the hillside, they performed the customary rituals before felling the tree. As it was believed that the trees and the forest have spirits, the woodcutters put their axes on the tree overnight and prayed for permission to fell it. The part of the poem that we have here talks of the night before the tree was cut. In the night, the mother spirit of the forest and the hills comes to mourn the loss of her child. The poem here is the cry of the mother for the child who is to leave her.

As we have discussed earlier, the poem is part of a ritual and is meant to be sung. However, as we only have a translated version of the song, the musicality and the rhythm of the words are lost. The translated poem reads like a narrative and the simple language used by the translator makes it an easy read.

The poem explores the universal human emotion of mother and child. The suffering and misery of the mother at the impending doom of her beloved son and her wail and cry of pain is captured in this part of the poem. We can also see human greed in the poem as exhibited by the king’s artisans who wanted the tallest tree to make the boat. The mother spirit of the forest had warned her son, the tree, when he was a mere sapling not to grow too tall as it could attract envy. What she feared came to pass as the tree was earmarked to be cut down because of its great height.

The poem also explores and reflects on the close proximity of humans and nature in the North Eastern part of India, specially Manipur. The artisans perform certain rituals before the felling of the tree. The ritual involves invoking the spirit of the tree and putting an axe on the trunk of the chosen tree overnight. The priest performing the ritual would then ask the tree for permission to cut it and the tree spirit can give a hint by moving the axe during the night if it doesn’t want to be cut down. This ritual speak of the belief and acceptance that trees have spirits and there is respect for such beings with souls in order to lead a harmonious existence.

Oral Tradition

We have already discussed oral tradition in relation to the North East literature in the previous unit. Oral tradition means having a system of communication where knowledge, ideas, art, cultural and traditional values are received, stored and shared or transmitted orally from one generation to the next. The transmission is through spoken words that is, speech or songs.

J.A. Cuddon says that “poetry and stories belonging to such a tradition are composed orally, or made up by the poet or the storyteller during a performance according to preconceived formulae and themes...Oral composition usually relies on an established framework of storytelling whereby the stories are wellknown in their basic outlines and passed down through generations of singers or bards...Oral poetry played an important role in the social life of a people or community, expressing its collective worldview, its system of religion, its moral values, its history, and its dreams for the future. Many literate cultures have looked to oral traditions in order to consolidate their identity as a distinct people. Numerous post colonial authors have drawn on oral traditions to develop a mode of writing that is not wholly dependent on the culture of the colonizer.”

4.3 THE COLOURS OF TRUTH

A siesta phone call
oozes friendly warnings.

Insurgents have grown
incredibly urbane, these days.
The question is, must we subterfuge
to shield a pedagogics stooge?

I close my eyes
turn towards the sun.

The colour I see is
disgorging blood.

I close my eyes
shade them with my palms.

The colour I see is
life-erasing black.

These are the colours of destiny
of immutable truth
and the colours also
with which warring pawns
are daily decorating our towns.

- Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih

4.3.1 Reading the Poem

A siesta phone call/ oozes friendly warning : perhaps a phone call made to warn the poet about the (mis)deeds of the insurgents that are mentioned in the later part of the poem. Siesta is nap time in the afternoon, a time when one takes rest. Here, it might imply that there is no resting time at all.

Insurgents have grown/ incredibly urbane, these days./ The question is, must we subterfuge/ to shield a pedagogic's stooge? : The poet says the insurgents have become urbane that is courteous. Maybe they would call before making certain (sometimes financial) demands. The poet raises a question in the second part. Must we trick ourselves to shield or defend a well-taught puppet who is acting on someone else's bidding? The poet might be raising the question of a common man's perspective of the situation of a society structured by people with power.

Subterfuge-trickery, deceit to obtain something.

Pedagogic-related to teaching methods. (In this context, “well-taught” would be a better phrase).

Stooge-one who allows oneself to be used for another's profit.

I close my eyes/turn towards the sun./ The colour I see is/disgorging blood./I close my eyes/shade them with my palms./the colour I see is/life-erasing black.: The poet mentions two colours – red, the colour of blood when he turns towards the sun with closed eyes and black when his palm blocks out the sun. Red, with its allusion to blood, signifies violence and black signifies death.

These are the colours of destiny/ of immutable truth / and the colours also/ with which warring pawns /are daily decorating our towns. : The poet says that both the colours are the colours of destiny and immutable truth. While the red of blood signifies life, black signifies death. Life and death are the colours of destiny as well as truth. But the poet ponders over how these two colours are pawns in the hands of the warring parties who paint the town with these colours everyday. In the last lines, the poet expresses how the common folk have to deal with life and death daily because of the clashes created by those who have power.

Activity 4

How do the colours red and black heighten the impact of the poem ‘The Colours of Truth’?

4.3.2 Interpretation

About the poet

Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, born on 4th April 1964 in Cherrapunji, Meghalaya, is a poet, short story writer and translator of the Khasi tribe. He teaches English literature in North Eastern Hill University (Nehu). He has been conferred the Fellowship of Outstanding Artists 2000 by the Government of India. He has won several awards for his contribution to literature - namely, North East award in 2004, Veer Shankar Shah Raghunath Shah National Award etc. His works have been published widely and he has 12 publications in Khasi and 7 in English besides translation and edited volumes. He writes in both English and Khasi and his works have been translated into Hindi and Bengali as well as into Welsh and Swedish.

Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih's poems explore the existence of people in the shadow of the menace of uneasy political as well as social situations. His poems thus have a political edge to them. His style of writing draws from a number of literary and cultural references and the mode of writing ranges from political to lyrical. He believes in poetry that is relevant and addresses the time and the place, yet his poetry is universal in its treatment of themes.

Insurgency:

Like other states of Northeast India, Meghalaya also has its share of insurgency issues. Meghalaya was part of Assam till its separation as a different state in 1971. Different factors from integration to a distinct Indian state, failure of a national consciousness due to ethnic (Khasi, Garo etc) issues led to the rise of various separatist movements. Recently, the state along with the rest of the north east states which are beset by insurgency problems have seen a decrease in the rate of insurgency related violence and clashes. But the area is not unfamiliar with the chaos and confusion arising from the parallel government (state and non-state) which is common to most of the sister states.

The poem 'The Colours of Truth' captures the trauma of the people and place burdened by the disturbance of the militancy movements. The poem talks about the politics of the powerful and their pawns that are like puppets doing the bidding of the masters. They live a violent life and they also become agents of that violence that perpetually plagues the normal day to day life of the ordinary people. The common folk who are witness to the chaos and violence are caught in the confusion and are unable to lead a normal life without any disturbances. The question is: whose side should the common man take in the war that the place/town has become so familiar with? It can be said that most North Eastern states inflicted with insurgency have ordinary people who may have sympathized with the militants' cause at some point of time. But the constant upheaval of the routines of daily life, the question of ideologies and fraction among groups have led to a certain degree of distrust and disillusionment. The poem seems to address this very sensitive issue. Nongkynrih believes that poetry should be conscious of issues and address the situation, condition of its time. The poem is a very good example of his writing with a political edge. The poem reveals the predicament of the people habituated to violence and death and their coming to terms with/ negotiating such an existence. The inevitable question of trust within the framework of such an existence is at the core of this poem.

The poem is originally written in English, in free verse with six stanzas of alternate two and four lines except for the last stanza with five lines. It does not follow any rhyming scheme or meter yet it is full of imagery that is appropriate to the theme of the poem. When one looks at the title of the poem - the colours of truth, one may start to wonder whether truth should have any colour or whether it should be transparent. If truth has a colour, should it be considered truth any longer - is the question. Now, in the poem, the poet mentions two colours, one is the colour of blood and the other is black. The colours - red that is the colour of blood and black - are used by a number of poets from Northeast India. Red, signifying violence and bloodshed, is to be seen in plenty in the area. The poet says, "I close my eyes turn towards the sun the colour I see is disgorging blood". In the next few lines the colour that the poet sees is black, "I close my eyes shade them with my palms the colour it is life erasing black". So black becomes the colour of death which erases life. The poet calls these two colours the colours of

destiny, of immutable truth. If we look at red or blood, it also signifies life. Blood is the ultimate life source or the fluid that carries life. Thus, life and death is the colour of destiny. Yet these are the colours that the warring pawns are decorating the town with. It signifies how the agents of power (state or non-state) have control over these two colours and the common folk are rendered mute witness to the daily violence and chaos.

Activity 5

How appropriate is the imagery used in the poem?

4.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have discussed in detail two poems from different time periods and have tried to understand the difference in the execution of the poems as well as the style of poetry. We have also looked at the various forms and themes as well as the undercurrent of politics and violence in the poetry of the sister states of North East India. We have tried to locate the commonality as well as the uniqueness that identifies the sister states as a whole yet, at the same time marking each as a distinct entity.

4.5 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: It is difficult to put the literature of the entire North East under a common fold because the North East is not a homogeneous place as it is generally misconceived. Each state has a history of its own, its growth as a community and the different problems that it faces is unique to it.

Activity 2: Oral tradition means having a system of communication where knowledge, ideas, art, cultural and traditional values are received, stored and shared or transmitted orally from one generation to the next. The transmission is through spoken words that is speech or songs.

Activity 3: The poem ‘Hijan Hirao’ explores and reflects the close proximity of humans and nature in the North East part of India specially Manipur. The artisans perform certain rituals before the felling of the tree.

Activity 4: Through the use of these colours, the issues of life, violence and death are brought out without the necessity of very graphic descriptions. Both colours are striking and intense and the reader can picture a canvas painted with just these colours. By bringing in these stark and primary colours, the poet is able to heighten the impact of his words.

Activity 5: The imagery is appropriate because it evokes both life and death. The violence and uncertainty that dogs these societies is reflected in red – the blood that nourishes as well as the blood that is spilled – and in the ultimate erasure – the blotting out of life in darkness, symbolised by black.

4.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What are the common strains in the literature of the North East?
- 2) Discuss the importance of oral tradition in the literature of the North East.
- 3) Write a brief note on the poetry of North East India.
- 4) Comment on 'Hijan Hirao' as a poem that reflects environmental concerns.
- 5) What is the central theme of 'The Colours of Truth'?
- 6) Why do you think that the English language is a common medium of creative expression in the North East region of India?



4.7 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

- 1) Aggarwal, S Kailash (ed). *Dynamics of Identity and Intergroup Relations in North East India*, Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1999.
- 2) Baruah, Sanjib (ed). *Beyond Counter-insurgency: Breaking the Impasse in North East India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2000.
- 3) Bhattacharjee, Sukalpa and Rajesh Dev (eds). *Ethno-narratives: Identity and Experience in North East India*, New Delhi, Anshah Publishing House, 2006.
- 4) Chandra, N. D. R. and Nigamananda Das, *Ecology, Myth and Mystery – Contemporary Poetry in English from North East India*, New Delhi, Sarup&Sons, 2007.
- 5) Datta, Birendranath, “North East India and its Socio-Cultural Milieu” Misra, Tilottoma, *Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India, Poetry and Essays*. New Delhi, OUP, 2011.
- 6) *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*
- 7) Gill, Preeti (ed). *The Peripheral Center – Voices from India’s North East*, New Delhi, Zubaan, 2010.
- 8) Misra, Tillotama (ed). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India: Poetry and Essays*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2011.
- 9) Nag Sajal. “Resistance Verse” Ed. Bhattacharjee, Sukalpa and Rajesh Dev, *Ethno-narratives: Identity and Experience in North East India*, New Delhi, Anshah Publishing House, 2006.
- 10) Ngangom, Robin S, “Poetry in the Time of Terror” Chandra, N D R *Multicultural Literature in India: A Critical Perception*, New Delhi, Sarup Book Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2009.
- 11) Ngangom, S. Robin, Nongkinryh Kynpham (eds). *Dancing Earth, An Anthology of Poetry from North East India*, New Delhi, Penguin Publication, 2009.
- 12) Singh, Ch. Manihar, *A History of Manipuri Literature*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 2003.
- 13) Syiem Esther “Social Identity and Liminal Character of the Folk: A study in the Khasi Context” Misra, Tilottoma, *Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India, Poetry and Essays*. New Delhi, OUP, 2011.
- 14) Verghese, B.G. *India’s North-East Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, New Delhi, Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2004.