

## EDITORIAL

## OPEN ACCESS

**Protest Literature in Assam and Manipur: 'Exploring Possibilities of Comparative Analysis through Dialogue'**Dhurjjati Sarma<sup>†</sup>

I begin this issue's editorial with a quote by Kahlil Gibran:

"They say:

If you see a slave sleeping,

Do not wake him lest he be dreaming of freedom

But I say:

If you see a slave sleeping,

Wake him! And explain to him freedom."

South Asia, particularly the Indian subcontinent, is hard-pressed by the 'grafted' models of democracy amidst the heterogeneous cultural patterns and the ensuing conflicts amongst the diverse socio-cultural groups with vested interests, which are often in opposition with one another. In India, the adequate platform for the articulation of these dissenting voices in a civil society within the democratic framework has not been given sufficient attention in the 'mainstream' literary and political set-up. Obsolete and antiquated occurrences from the graveyard of history are being constantly dug up in order to evince their grievances. Literary productions of antiquary are constantly being resurfaced to endorse such 'voices' from the 'past', thus effecting a heavy compromise with the pertinent socio-political concerns of the present.

In the post-Independence Indian context, the geographical and demographical system of the country has been constantly tempered with in the last sixty-seven years or so. Beginning with

the contentious issue of state re-organisation perceived lately in the formation of states like Telangana, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand, there have also been internecine movements like the Naxalite Movement in Bengal, the Assam Movement and the consequent ULFA upheaval in Assam as well the demand for separate homeland by the Bodos, the Gorkhaland Movement in West Bengal. The blood-clotted soil of these lands has been a fertile ground for the germination of literature of a unique order. Out of this quagmire of tussle and turmoil, poetic voices registering violent gestures of protest have emerged amidst rigorous proscription issued by the establishment.

Protest poetry, in a way throughout the world, has epitomised the nation's voice of conscience. History bears testimony to the fact that the poets of such poetry have always been an anathema to the government, and have contributed greatly towards bringing about drastic transformations in the political systems. The writings of African-American writers have significantly shaped the history of protest literature. Writers like Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes and Claude McKay write in negation of the white supremacy based on racism. While debunking the idea of racism, they assert their identity of being Africans and celebrate it. Pablo Neruda and Gabriel Garcia Marquez have written against imperialism, capitalism and neo-colonialism in South America. In India, Dalit literature also has been a prominent voice of protest as evident from the poems of Namdeo Dhasal.

The situation in North-East India may not necessarily be that of racism, imperialism or of caste-based division, and the reasons for their protests may vary from individual to individual and from community to community, but the elements of protest bring the writings of North-East India on the quest for solutions through a common outburst in literature. The post-Independence scenario of North-East India has

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been besotted with endless ordeals of violence aggravated by the presence of diverse ethnic and socio-cultural groups with vested interests, which are often in opposition with one another. A sense of 'alienation' and perceived 'threat' felt by the people of this region from various quarters is one of the reasons for dissent to the authority. Many of them resort to violence, and some others take up a more peaceful way as manifestations of their nonconformity, of which literature becomes a potent outlet for their anguish.

Irom Sharmila, who has been on an indefinite fast against the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act (Bhattacharyya, 2013), and Megan Kachari, the former publicity secretary of United Liberation Forces of Asom, are two different figures of dissent. Irom Sharmila started to fast from 4th November 2000, exactly 4 days after Assam Rifles personnel randomly shot dead 10 civilians at Malom, some 8 kilometres away from Imphal, as an act of revenge for a bomb explosion triggered by insurgents (Sharma, 2014). Megan Kachari's experience of pain came early in his life, when his entire family was gunned down by unknown miscreants. His mother, a schoolteacher, his elder brother, his sister-in-law and his sister were shot dead on the same night inside their house. His father died of cancer, six months after the brutal massacre of his family. Indira Goswami, the noted Jnanpith Awardee notes that, "Kachari engaged his entire mind over these deaths, once again, through his pen."

Thus, looking into the lives of Sharmila and Kachari, it is evident that one invokes the empathy of the public; the other followed the ambiguous path of insurgency. But when they don their garbs as poets they are bound by 'red ink', and literature becomes a medium where they can articulate their discontent and write as a way to assert their history and identity. Nevertheless, elements of violence always creep in and keep reasserting sometimes against it and sometimes as a means to an end. Elements of violence, in fact, have become a recurrent motif in the literature of post-Independence North-East India. As in the words

of Ningombam Sunita, a Manipuri woman writer, "I don't want war but my pen always tries to write of it."

However, having said all of these, it seems worthwhile to assert that these poems need not necessarily be seen merely through the lens of articulating protest. In fact, they embody a pathos, which often overwhelms almost all other factors, which might have prompted the composition of such poetry at the first place. If we cast a glance over the poetry of Megan Kachari, we would immediately realise the yearnings and longings typical of any human being who had been on deportation or in custody for indulging in anti-establishment activities. It is easy to demonise them, but it would be tough to vouch for the innocence, which flows through their pens. There is an unmistakable zeal towards living a life. Such a thing makes the very genre of Protest Literature problematic. Who is protesting and against what, and most importantly, to what ends? If poetry, on one hand, becomes a vehicle for articulating resistance, at the same time, the metered verses also act as an outlet for channelising pent-up sentiments, which may variously be the pain of separation from one's beloved or the fond remembrances of one's childhood.

As one reads through the poems, the imagery comes vividly, striking as though the poet is speaking to us directly. But Megan remained underground for the most part of his life, and his voice, therefore, has assumed the role of a key signifier in articulating the voice of 'protest'. On the other hand, Irom Sharmila, if I can say so, has been somewhat iconised a figure of protest. In the blurb of the book entitled *Fragrance of Peace*, published by Zubaan, containing twelve poems of Irom Sharmila, it is written in the introduction that "Her unique battle for peace in her strife torn homeland, has become a powerful symbol for all those engaged in fighting for peace in North East India.... This small compilation of her poems in her native language Meiteilon (and Meitei script which is a political act in itself) and English translation, provides a moving account

of the underbelly of one woman's lone struggle for peace." From the perspective of the reader, Irom Sharmila is an example to be emulated. One heard her name being taken regularly in connection with the mass movement initiated by Anna Hazare. But Megan Kachari would have many admirers of his poetry, but not too many supporters for his cause. And this is where one needs to rethink about the category of Protest Literature. There is much more to explore in such poetry apart from the voice articulating resistance. The cause may be won or lost, but what would remain for the posterity is the imagery and evocative power of such metered verses which in some course of time, may suffice to make, if I may reverse the saying, "men out of cowards".

To conclude, Protest Literature has often been subjected to censorship regulations in order to curb its subversive tendencies, which may threaten the hegemonic establishment. But considering its role as an active determinant of the literary history in the literatures of the world and at the same time, in addressing socio-political concerns, an adequate platform should be given for its articulation in both 'mainstream' literary and political set-up. By bringing the poems of Irom Sharmila and Megan Kachari to light, it is hoped that certain misconceptions perpetuated through the agencies of official proscription against their

writings would be brought into light thereby, giving literature the status of an alternative space for dialogue. Moreover, these platforms should contribute in opening up new dimensions in the genre of Protest Literature in India and further contribute to the comparative study of various issues highlighted in the Protest Literature of the country.

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