Dynamic Representations

Religion and Gender in Northeast India

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PREFACE

Dynamic Representations: Religion and Gender in Northeast India is an interdisciplinary exploration of the complex interrelations between religion, gender, and indigenous epistemologies in Northeast India. Foregrounding the lived realities and cultural specificities of this underrepresented region, the volume critically examines how religious beliefs and gender identities co-negotiate and shape each other in dynamic and often contested ways. Contributors employ diverse methodologies, including ethnography, folklore, theology, literary criticism, and gender studies, to interrogate indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, and cultural taboos.

The book challenges simplistic or romanticized views of indigeneity and religion by tracing the historical trajectories of cultural shifts influenced by Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and indigenous beliefs. It documents how these religions have impacted women's social statuses, often constricting more autonomous roles. Through rigorous analyses of folktales, rituals, queer identities, and customary laws, the essays reveal the paradoxes of patriarchal and liberatory possibilities within tribal cosmologies. This work not only enriches regional scholarship but also contributes to global debates on feminist theology, decolonial knowledge, and cultural continuity, making it a vital resource for scholars and practitioners interested in gender, religion, and cultural life in Northeast India.

This volume emerges from the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) sponsored National Seminar, "Thinking Dynamic Shifts: Religion and Gender in Representations of Northeast India," organized by the Department of English at Tetso College in October 2024. The seminar's intent was to critically engage with the ways religion and gender intersect to shape identities and social structures in the culturally diverse and historically underrepresented region of Northeast India.

The contributors assembled in this book respond to a pressing need for scholarship that moves beyond reductionist and often Orientalist narratives, which have long shaped mainstream perceptions of the Northeast. By centering lived experiences and indigenous epistemologies, the volume foregrounds the dynamic and contested

nature of religious and gendered identities across tribal and non-tribal communities. This academic compilation speaks to ongoing discourses on decolonizing knowledge and acknowledges the complexities introduced by intersecting traditions, modernity, and socio-political transformations.

The diversity of approaches reflected in the papers underscores the interdisciplinary richness of the seminar. Contributions range from literary analyses of folktales and contemporary fiction to examinations of media representation, textile narratives, ritual practices, and sociopolitical activism. Emphasis is placed on understanding the nuanced realities of women's roles and statuses within both indigenous customary systems and the major religions influencing the region—Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and indigenous belief systems. Threads of resistance, resilience, and negotiation illuminate how gender and religion interact as forces of both constraint and empowerment.

A highlight and crucial contextual anchor of the seminar—and this volume—is the keynote address by Smti. Bano Megolhusau Haralu, a distinguished journalist and senior conservation consultant. Her address provides a historical overview of women's evolving roles within religious frameworks in the Northeast and insightfully situates the seminar's thematic concerns within broader societal processes. Her perspectives illuminate the tensions between tradition and reform, community autonomy and external influence, which paint the backdrop for the diverse scholarly interventions presented here.

By documenting these academic inquiries, this collection aspires not only to fill significant gaps in Northeast Indian studies but also to contribute meaningfully to global conversations on religion, gender, and representation. It challenges static notions of tradition and identity by offering analyses grounded in empirical research and critical theory alike. The volume invites scholars, students, and readers interested in the sociocultural fabric of Northeast India to reconsider prevalent narratives and appreciate the complexity of this vibrant region's cultural landscape.

We express gratitude to the ICSSR for its support and to all contributors whose scholarship has made this volume a substantive academic

resource. Thanks are also due to the Department of English and wider institutional community at Tetso College for their commitment to fostering inclusive and critical knowledge production, and to Dimapur Publishing Company for bringing out this book.

- Editors

FOREWORD

At a time when conversations about decolonising knowledge systems are becoming more and more pertinent, this book, *Dynamic Representations: Religion and Gender in Northeast India,* is a timely and meaningful intervention. It brings together a diverse group of scholars whose work deals with tribal epistemologies and lived experiences from one of the most underrepresented regions of South Asia. The primary themes of this book include gender, religious belief, belonging and representation. It offers a nuanced understanding of religion and gender and how these categories negotiate with each other (and often shape each other) in a dynamic yet often contested way. Through diverse methodological research grounded in the everyday lived realities of the people from the region, this critical book brings forth a body of thought and work that is both relevant and urgent.

This book feels especially relevant today, as debates around identity, belonging, and cultural continuity are shaped through the twin pressures of cultural revival and the push for state-led homogenisation project. Bano Haralu's contribution, for instance, reminds us that while the indigenous social systems historically allowed women a measure of negotiation in the community life, over the course of time, these systems were reinterpretated largely through fundamentalist or legal frameworks. By citing examples from the indigenous agricultural practice, such as shifting cultivation and customary legal practices, she provides an anchor for understanding both continuity and breakaway in gendered religious practices.

Methodologically, this book incorporates different ways of thinking. Folklore, ethnography, theology, literary criticism, and gender studies, each bring/add a unique angle to the discourse at large. Some contributions pay close attention to oral traditions and systems of taboo, drawing from indigenous knowledge and lived realities. Others ask what affect theory and queer theory can reveal about systems of knowledge that resist essentialist/fixed/permanent ontologies of identity and selfhood. The volume does not just add to regional debates but makes a broader contribution to how we think about feminist theology, decolonial knowledge, and cultural life more broadly.

Dynamic Representations: Religion and Gender in Northeast India is an engaging book that refuses to romanticise indigeneity or religion. It maps the trajectories of cultural shifts through different times and spaces. The articles on Christianity and Islam show how these religions, which gave women a sense of autonomy at one point, eventually turned into systems that pushed them to the periphery. In doing so, the volume provides a dialectical approach to religion and gender that is rare in existing scholarship on the region.

I shall let the book speak for itself. It is thematically cogent and methodologically varied. From the analysis of symbols in Paite folktales alongside explorations of Poumai Naga customary taboos; a discussion of queer reimaginings in Janice Pariat's fiction, and the layered presence of supernatural folklore in Thongchi's work, the essays in this book are deeply rooted in the specific cultural lifeworlds of Northeast India. It also caters to the region's cultural specificities, drawing on multiple relevant folk knowledge, urging us to look beyond rigid categories.

Together, the contributors challenge these fixed notions of 'tradition', showing how indigenous cosmologies can carry both oppressive and liberatory possibilities.

In sum, *Dynamic Representations: Religion and Gender in Northeast India* is a landmark contribution to studying religion, gender, and indigenous epistemologies in South Asia. It fills a longstanding gap in the scholarship on the Northeast by foregrounding the region's intellectual traditions and placing them in dialogue with global critical frameworks. The book will be a go-to reference for students, scholars, or practitioners interested in how religion and gender shape people's daily lives in Northeast India. More significantly, it invites us to imagine new ways of negotiation with tradition, to see it not as rigid/fixed in time but something that is inclusive and open to contradiction, while keeping the lived experiences of marginalised voices at the centre.

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Women and Religion in Northeast India: Historical Trajectories, Cultural Dynamics, and Contemporary Challenges

- **Smti Bano Megolhusau Haralu**

Excerpts from the Keynote Address delivered by Smti. Bano Megolhusau Haralu, Distinguished Journalist and Senior Conservation Consultant, delivered during the inaugural of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) sponsored Three-Day National Seminar (Blended) on 'Thinking Dynamic Shifts: Religion and Gender in Representations of Northeast India,' organized by the Department of English, Tetso College, Dimapur, on 16th October, 2023, at Lorin Hall, Tetso College

Four main religions have influenced the people of the Northeast: Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and indigenous. All of them seem to have been somewhat positive towards women in their original inspiration without treating them as equal. They had a fairly high status but not equal to men. But as they developed and became rules and regulation based structures, they gave less importance to women than their original inspiration did.

Past Traditions:

To begin with Christianity, the book of Genesis has two different versions for most events: monarchic or priestly that focused on the power of the king or man, the prophetic version that accorded greater importance to equality. In the creation story for example, the priestly version speaks of the woman being created last, as such inferior to man. She is the temptress and has to be subordinate to men. The prophetic version speaks of the woman being created from Adam's rib, "flesh of my flesh" in other words equal or complementary. That sense of relative equality got weak in the Phrisaic rules and regulations that treated the woman as the man's property, whom the man could divorce, though the same law did not apply to men.

Jesus opposed this and said that Moses had allowed it because of the hardness of their hearts. He forgave the prostitute and when wanted to stone her, he asked the one among them who had not sinned to throw the first stone. In other words, men sinned by violating women. The culture of his times would not have allowed him to include women among his disciples. But he had disciples like Mary of Magdala who sat at his feet and listened to him – something that was unheard of in his

times when women were supposed to serve but not hear the prophet's word.

That changed as his prophetic teaching developed into a structure of the church. Paul the first theologian said that the wife should obey her husband. Priesthood and even diaconate came to be limited men who became the administrators of the church. There is a slow awakening today and some Christian denominations allow women's priesthood. Even when they do not allow it, many of their adherents question this situation. More about it later.

Hinduism that came to the Northeast, to Assam in particular, was of the progressive type with Sankardev as its proponent. It was part of the Bhakti movement that upheld caste and to some extent gender equality. For example, it allowed women's entry into the namgarh which was a combination of a community hall and a house of prayer. It was too early to speak of women's equality but a sense of women's dignity was recognized. Slowly women's exclusion entered this society as more conservative Hinduism from the 'mainland' took hold of their society.

The same can be said about Islam. Much is said about Mohammed permitting Muslims to have four wives. It should be viewed in the social context of that society and historical moment when women were treated only as property. So any number of them could be taken in marriage and abandoned at the man's will. Mohammed made a major change in favour of women by restricting the number of wives to four and making divorce somewhat difficult. However, as Islam became a more rules and regulation based religious structure, abuses became the law such as triple talaq and other easy ways of divorcing and abandoning the woman.

With modifications one can say that similar is the situation of most indigenous tribal cultures in which it is difficult to speak of separation between the secular and religious component. Sacredness is attached to the secular component like the customary law and the myths of origin and others like those that accord protection to the sacred spaces and forests. Of importance is the fact of equality (not uniformity) that most tribal cultures have in their traditions. Most of their traditions seem to have kept a somewhat clear distinction between the family and social spheres. The woman took care of the family and production while the

man was in charge of the social sphere and the resource. That made the woman an economic asset and that role was recognized through the customary law that was accorded sacredness. That is different from women in caste societies who were traditionally subordinate to men in every sphere.

An example of this division of spheres is shifting cultivation in which the woman played an important role. In the tradition of most tribes land belonged to the clan or village or tribes and was under the control of clan leaders, all of them men. Before the shifting cultivation season the clan leaders decided on which family would get how much land according to the number of mouths to feed, which family with excess labour would assist which family without an adequate number of workers, and the day before which the steps towards shifting cultivation could not begin. After it, the man of the house chose the plot and performed the religious rites associated with shifting cultivation. At that stage, the woman took charge of production and organised work. Because of this separation between ownership (or management) of resource and production the division of labour in shifting cultivation was more gender friendly than in settled agriculture. In the latter the man owned (individual) land, chose the crops to grow and was in charge of division of labour. He assigned to men what was considered difficult work and to women most back breaking work that involved bending or standing in water for a long time such as planting and harvesting. But the woman had no decision-making power.

What it means is that the woman has some decision-making power as long as land is community owned. Through her role in production she was an economic asset and that conferred on her a higher social status than in caste societies in which the woman is considered a liability and has to pay a dowry to get married. The tribal customary laws that are accorded a sacred status, legitimize this slightly higher social status. One speaks of a relatively high social status, not equality because the woman is not considered equal to men in any tribe, not even matrilineal in which lineage and inheritance are through the woman but they continue to be patriarchal, not matriarchal. The man is has all the social power though the woman has power in the family.

Change Dynamics, Religion and Women:

What the section above means is that in reality religious teachings lay down many just laws but while giving it and organizational and legal structure, religion may legitimize a social process. That is what seems to have happened in the course of history. Social changes have been brought about by religious, economic and social changes, not by religion alone but religion may grant them legitimacy by using them as part of their structure.

To begin with Christianity, as the well know anthropologist, the late Kumar Suresh Singh says, their Christianisation gave the tribes a sense of pride in their identity and history. But the individual ethics taught and the doctrine of exclusive possession of Christ could introduce individualism on one side and the ideology of domination that could confer more power on men who had it and perpetuate women's subordinate status. Western education that the religious leaders introduced further strengthened individualism and desacralised the community. Side by side, the theology of exclusive role of Jesus Christ, desacralised the sacred spaces and the sacredness attached to their community and traditions. The commercial forces that wanted their land and other resources exploited such individualism and desacralisation to get control on their land and other resources for their own benefit.

That had profound impacts on women's role. As stated above, the woman has some decision- making power as long as the natural resources are community managed and she takes care of production and of the family. Individual ownership for which the individual ethics and individual based education prepare the ground and which the commercial forces impose on the community, weakens the little power she had in the community. An example of the process of imposing individualism is commercial plantations like rubber, coffee, tea and oil palm. The official policy demands individual ownership in the name of the head of the family, understood as a man, for loans and subsidies. That takes away from the community and women the little power they had.

Side by side there is identity revival among most communities and religious groups that can take a fundamentalist form. Many tribes, for example, go back to the purity of their customary law in its patriarchal

form. That can go against women since the customary law is reinterpreted in the form of men's social power alone as witnessed in the agitation against reservation for women in the ULBs in Nagaland or the (failed) move of the Khasi tribe to deprive women who marry outside their tribe, of their tribal identity. Sacredness is attached to such moves in the name of the customary law that is revived and reinterpreted to suit and legitimize these changes. It can be called fundamentalist revival which is visible in all religions, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. Fundamentalism is essentially patriarchal and goes against women.

On the other side, education much of it supported by religious, particularly Christian, bodies, has resulted in the awakening of women to their right to equality. As a result, there is a demand for more rights in their society and also religious bodies. In the Churches, for example, there is a demand for women to get a pastor's or priests' role and some churches have made a beginning. One finds similar dynamics of fundamentalism among Muslims and Christians, for example in the demand for the imposition of the hijab and its abolition among Muslims.

These dynamics have to be respected and integrated in the religious ideological and social systems. In the churches, for example, There is discussion about women's priesthood and inclusion in their governance. But a new theology on women's value is yet to develop. Among many tribes there is polarization around the customary law, on whether women should be excluded from all governance according to it or whether the customary law itself should be abolished. But very few have developed new thinking around the customary law and on its reformation to suit the present day society. Both religious and tribal leaders need to rethink their theology and ideology from this perspective and that is a challenge for women in Nagaland.

Locating Women in *Thanghou leh Liandou*: A Paite Folktale

Dr. Chingbiakmaw

Abstract: Paite belongs to a group of tribes including Hmar, Thado, Gangte, and others of the Mizo-Zomi-Kuki group. Today, Paite are found in the North Eastern states of India: Manipur, Mizoram, and Karbi Anglong of Assam, and in the Chin state of Burma, as well as in the Kalay and Kabaw areas, Mandalya, Yangoon, and other places. In Manipur, they are recognised as a separate tribal group. While in other states of India they are recognised as sub-tribes of Mizos and Kukis. Paite society is patriarchal and patrilineal. Man as the head of the family always held a higher status than woman in the family as well as in society. The origin, history, and pre-colonial life of the Paite largely remain unknown due to the lack of historical records in the absence of script. However, they have a rich trove of oral narratives, which serve as important sources to study their historical and cultural past. This chapter aims to study the position and status of women in the folktale Thanghou leh Liandou. It also focuses on the portrayal of women characters in the selected tale which reflects the subordination and dominance of their male counterparts in the old Paite society

Keywords: Paite, women, subordinate, dominance, folktale

Introduction:

The status of women in Paite[1] society in the old days was in the form of subtle discrimination. There was no outright bigotry over women. This is what made early writers on Zo[2] women like N. Chatterji to say, "the status of woman in their society was in no way inferior to that of man and she suffered none of those derogatory and discriminatory treatment as may be found in some of the more advanced societies," (5) even though the traditional Zo society was predominantly patriarchal.

[1] Paite are a community belonging to the Zo ethnic tribes.

[2] Zo is a generic nomenclature used to identify all Chin-Kuki-Mizo-Zomi tribes of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Used interchangeably with Mizo and Zomi in this chapter.

Since their migration from the Chin Hills, the forests and the rough terrain unfavourable for cultivation were found to have a profound effect in shaping the social structure and psyche of the people. And since survival in terms of having enough provisions for sustenance and in terms of protection from enemies, wild animals, and malevolent spirits were considered to be of utmost importance in the old Zo society, men were held in high regard, and thus the structure of the society was a male construct. This ensured that the responsibility fell upon the males to fulfil their role of protecting society in all the above-mentioned aspects. Fulfilment of the male responsibilities in the society resulted in rich rewards of recognition and respect; on the other hand, the female role of being confined mainly to the household to take care of the family did not provide scope for fame, glory, and a status of respect in the society (Zuali, 13).

Moreover, agrarian society worldwide is found to be patriarchal by theorists like, Warren Motley and Briffault. Regarding the evolution of patriarchy, Motley writes:

> Patriarchy evolved when primitive economies passed from hunting and gathering to the pastoral and agricultural stage and men gained predominate economic power. The domestication of animals, and the later development of advanced agriculture, gave men economic strength… (400).

When men started practising agriculture, Briffault asserts that "woman, instead of being the chief producer, become economically unproductive, destitute, and dependent" (quoted in Motley, 6). Since the primary source of livelihood of the old Paite was jhoomming cultivation and protection and survival of the village community were regarded as the most important concerns of the village, men were given the agency through which they could constantly assert their supremacy over women.

The *Haam* (male dormitory) found in the traditional Paite society, unquestionably the most powerful institution, introduced in the first place as a requirement for defence and protection, was a space where a young man underwent their rites of passage to become a Paite man. The inmates were taught useful arts and handicrafts, sports and wrestling, singing and dancing, discipline, and the mores of society. Matters

concerning the defence of the village and enemy raids were planned in this space. It was located at the center of the village, often close to the chief's house, and it was the cultural, communal, and educational center of the village. However, there was nothing of that sort for the young women; therefore, their sole education was at home, where they were taught of the workings of household duties by their respective mothers.

It is safe to say that the whole establishment in the traditional Paite society had overtly and covertly asserted male hegemony over women. Women were indoctrinated to believe in what patriarchal ideology had affirmed. Of the functioning of patriarchy, Gerda Lerner, in her seminal book, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986), wrote:

> The system of patriarchy can only function with the cooperation of women. This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history; ... by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women (217).

As a patrilineal society, the line of descent was strictly based on the male members. Man as the head of the family always held a higher status than woman in the family as well as in society. All productive jobs like clearing the jungles for jhoom, hunting, fishing, and others were done by men, and all those duties considered secondary, like household chores and taking care of the children, were regarded as women's responsibilities. In general, the position of women in the family as well as in social life was subordinate to that of men. Before she married, a woman was owned by her father and after by her husband. A woman did not have any legal claim on the family property except a small share at the time of marriage, which she carried with her to her husband's house. Inheritance of property was strictly by the male members of the family. Lalhmuaka states that women had no voice in the family administration; even if she did, her words were never accepted just because they were the words of a woman. And R.L. Hnuni also asserts that the burden of women in the primitive Mizo society knew no bounds, and they simply had to surrender themselves to these as their lot (quoted in Lalrinawma, 32).

The tale of *Thanghou leh Liandou* is male-centred in a predominantly patriarchal society. The women characters in the tale are marginal characters who play minor but vital roles. They represent the subordinate, voiceless characters who lived under the constant domination of the male folk. However, the space occupied by them is no less important than that occupied by male characters. They are instrumental in showcasing the social and cultural reality of a patriarchal society.

Wicked stepmothers in folktales are universal: *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, amongst others, including *Mauzuang* in Paite. Mauzuang's stepmother often starved her, feeding her with grain husks only. Even when she finally married the Raja, her jealous stepmother called her home on the pretext of preparing a feast in her honour, and killed her by pouring boiling water over her.

Interestingly, *Thanghou leh Liandou* apparently had a wicked mother and not a wicked stepmother. Their mother abandoned them when they were young children. This is unusual and rarely to be found in the folktales of the selected tribe. There were widows like Ngambawm's mother in the tale of *Khupching leh Ngambawm*, who took care of her children after the death of her husband. Thanghou and Liandou's mother left them as young children when they needed her most. Throughout the tale, the exploitation and marginalization of the brothers by others can be seen as the outcome of the cruelty of their abandonment by their mother. Upon closer look, leaving her own children to their own fate may seem "inhuman", however, the inhuman treatment meted by the mother cannot be judged on moral or ethical grounds. She might have been doing it for her survival. Sacrificing one's life for the cause of others has been regarded throughout the history of mankind as one of the most heroic deed a person could do, nevertheless, it is survival that matters at the end of the day.

An important point to be made in this case was the silence of the in-laws. In the traditional Paite society if a man died leaving behind small children, his wife returned to her parents and his children were taken care of by their late father's family. The tale mentions the protagonists' aunt (*Ni*) and also their maternal uncle (*Pu*).

> Their mother covered them with a big tub and ran off with her lover. Hearing their cry their aunt (father's sister) opened the tub…they were not able to overrun their mother and they spent the night on the straw at their uncle's jhum… (Deng,1)

The presence of the maternal uncle and aunt in the tale can be said to be reflective of the social institution still practised, based on kinship relations in the Paite community called *Inndongta*. *Inndongta*, or Household Council is considered by Paite of Southern Manipur as a unique feature of their community. Every Paite household has its own *Inndongta*. It is a formal organisation with recognised functionaries. Households in Paite society are interdependent within the village. Each household has a certain number of invisible strings of relationship to different households. There is a structural relationship of households of blood-related and other selected non-clan members of the village in a corporate manner within the Paite social system. This corporate relationship of several households forms an institutional organisation called *Inndongta*, and its fundamental function is to meet the partial needs of a household of a man (Kamkhenthang, 15). All in all, the primary function of the *Inndongta* is to keep the household intact.

Within this *Inndongta* institution, the *Pu* and *Ni* are more obligated than the other members to see to the welfare of the children of the household to which they are members of the *Inndongta*. The *Pu* can be the maternal grandfather or the maternal uncle. Even after the Paite community converted to Christianity, the *Pu's* blessing is still regarded as necessary for a child to have a successful life. Generally, in a Paite community, a woman is sent off to her husband's home with such a blessing, and a woman married off without *Pu's* blessing is regarded as unable to bring fortune to her in-laws. In the case of elopement, an occasion called "Send-off ceremony" is scheduled where in which the *Pu* blesses his niece or granddaughter. Concerning the *Ni*, she holds the office of "*Tanu*" in *Inndongta*. The office of the *tanu* is traditionally a kinship obligation incumbent upon the wife-receiving household. There is a certain number of *Tanus* graded on the basis of the proximity of kinship and the seniority of married sisters and daughters. In common parlance, *tanu* means daughter; however, *tanu* in the *Indongta* is a married daughter. In case of a household without a married daughter, the office

of *tanu* is held by the father's sisters. The *tanus* are supposed to be available at the disposal of the household.

In the tale, when Liandou asked his *Pu* for a dao to butcher a bear, instead of feeling proud for them, their *Pu* informed the whole village, and they took all the meat, leaving behind the unwanted bones for Liandou and his brother. Moreover, their *Ni*, though it helped them to stop their mother from abandoning them, did not take up many initiatives when the brothers were abandoned and despised.

Also, the above tradition wherein the community looked to the welfare of the needy strongly suggested that their mother did not leave them to suffer alone, rather she left then in the hands of other who were more capable in catering the needs of the brothers than her. Even if there were no relatives to help them, it was the duty of the chief to look after the orphans. In the traditional Zo village community, one fundamental duties of the chief was to look after the wellbeing of orphans. Orphans who had no one to take care of them were taken by the chief as his slaves. The practice of slavery in the traditional tribal societies under study existed for a very long period of time. P.S. Dahrawka (1896-1978), a renowned Mizo folklorist was freed from his servitude in the year 1910. He was then only thirteen years old, and he was taken to be the chief's slave because he was a poor orphan (Thankhumi, xiv). Slaves consisted of different kinds of people. Among them, widows, orphans and others who were unable to support themselves and had no relatives willing to do so were looked upon as part of the chief's household and they worked for the chief in return for their food and shelter. The institution of slavery was practised even after the majority of the Zo converted into Christianity. The duration of servitude was for a lifetime; however, it was possible to be redeemed by payment of a certain amount of money or one mithun, which was likely impossible for a slave. The slaves worked as free labour and in turn they were fed by the Chief. They also lived in slave quarters inside the chief's house. Being a slave was never a desirable position; however, a slave in a way had a secure life. Therefore, the fact that Thanghou and Liandou were left alone shows the failure of a community which was believed to have the welfare of its people as it fundamental responsibility.

Another women character, Tuaitong , the chief's daughter in the tale is an example of a strong woman in the tale. As the chief's daughter, Tuaitong had the right to select a husband of her choice. In those days "the eligibility of young men was measured generally in terms of physique, honesty, diligence, valour and sense of self-sacrifice for others" (Dena, 170). Liandou might have possessed these qualities but to the others he was just a poor orphan. Thanghou and Liandou were aware of their status in the society. They participated in Tuaitong's selection of a husband because it was expected of all unmarried young men in the village to be part of the line-up. She chose Liandou among all the other eligible bachelors of the village. The chief was enraged with her choice and scolded her, "You could have had your choice of the best, but you chose the poorest and the most common of the lot! … you will not be blessed," and with these words, he cut off the finger with which she pointed at Liandou. Subsequently, she was afraid to return to her father's hous,e and she followed the two brothers and remained with them as Liandou's wife.

In the old Zo society, the chief had the power to interfere in his children's selection of spouses. In the Mizo legend of Laltheri and Chalthanga, the chief ordered the killing of Chalthanga, a commoner for falling in love with his daughter, Laltheri. "During that period, the chief had the power to banish or kill a commoner for falling in love with his daughter" (Thanmawia, 111). In the selected folktale, it was not Liandou who pursued Tuaitong but rather Tuaitong herself. Therefore, the chief could not take action against Liandou and instead, he imposed an extreme bride price for his daughter which he thought would be impossible for the brothers to pay. However, the two brothers could pay the bride price without any difficulty, with the help of their hidden treasure. Tuaitong showed her strong and far-sighted personality when she and her husband performed the grand feast-of-merit: "she threw precious beads into the crowds and when she saw her father, she brandished her disfigured hand and called out, 'Father, take a look at the finger you chopped off.'"

In spite of all her courageous conduct, Tuaitong is portrayed otherwise: "secretly knew of their wealth and was in love with Liandou and wished to marry him." This can be considered an example of how patriarchy undermines women in narratives. Her daring decision in choosing

Liandou is portrayed in such a way that makes her look greedy for wealth. The portrayal of women characters in the tale reflects their subordination and the dominance of their male counterparts in the traditional Paite society.

A folktale cannot be compared with realistic literature. The unusual narrative and lack of correspondence with reality are two of the basic characteristics of a folktale. Nevertheless, the unusual narrative is where the higher reality lies. In the tale of *Thanghou leh Liandou,* the supernatural agency or the unusual narrative appears at the moment when the plot reaches an impasse with realistic materials. Liandou was able to provide a daily livelihood for himself and his younger brother Thanghou with his hard work, but this became impossible once he was caught secretly feeding his brother by his employer, and to continue life as a villager, they had to have a jhoom of their own. However, as agriculture is a long-term process, in order for the brothers to do that, they needed provisions that will last until the harvesting season. Therefore, it was impossible for the brothers to cultivate jhoom without the interference of an outside or supernatural force.

At this moment, a supernatural spirit or guardian spirit appears in the form of an old woman in the narrative. She cooked and kept their house when they were busy cultivating their jhoom. The guardian spirit here is a supernatural agency that represents the fictive reality. Fictive reality is a construct of the narrative imagination. Apparently, this fictive reality is the higher, intangible, and philosophical reality of the era in that culture where the folktale originated. According to William James is:

> Reality is the relation to our emotional and active life. Probably, there are numerous orders of realities, each with its own special and separate style of existence. James calls them "sub-universes": the world of sense or physical things (as the paramount reality); the world of science; the world of ideal relations; the world of "idols of the tribe"; the various supernatural worlds of mythology and religion; the various worlds of individual opinion; the worlds of sheer madness and vagary (qtd. in Alfred Schuetz, 533).

If reality, as William asserts means the relation to the emotional and active life, the guardian spirit or the works she did for the brothers are not just make-believe, but rather represent the desire of the narrator who

represents the type to which Liandou and Thanghou belong. This supernatural agency was not just a fantasy but the innermost desire of the marginalized people in the traditional Paite society. The fact that the guardian spirit provided the orphan brothers with food is reflective of the desire of the people of that era, wherein having enough food was one of the most important basic requirements for their survival. This fictive reality is the philosophical reality and not only shows the inner reality of the socially marginalised people, it also serves a pivotal role giving the tale a complete shape. Has the guardian spirit had not been there in the tale Liandou and Thanghou would not be able to enter the social setup and they would not be able to performed feast-of-merit.

The selected folktale states that one day an eagle dropped a snake in the jhoom of Liandou and Thanghou. The snake transformed itself into an old woman. The old woman was very sympathetic towards the brothers and so she kept their house and cooked food for them when they were away. They did not suffer any scarcity of rice for as long as the old woman stayed with them. With her staying in their house and welcoming them with cooked food every evening, the two brothers could easily cultivate their jhoom. However, out of curiosity, one day Liandou spied upon the old woman while she was cooking their food. Liandou saw rice falling from the body of the old woman when she shook herself. Liandou detested the food that fell from the old woman's body. Sensing the situation, she left them saying, "Dear, I will vanish among the chaff in the mortar place, and whenever you need me you can summon me by sacrificing a twisted ankled cock." It is said that the ritual practice of sacrificing animals in the mortar place in the traditional Paite religion was born here.

The fact that this supernatural being, instrumental in the progress of the protagonists' character in climbing the social order, appeared in the form of a woman reflects the vital yet not readily acknowledged position of women in the old Paite social set-up. She fed and performed other necessary chores for the brothers; however, when the brothers were able to sustain themselves, she had to unceremoniously leave them. Therefore, a close reading of the female characters in the tale showcases that those women in the traditional Paite society who exhibit qualities that are outside the preconceived notions attributed for women are considered harmful and deleterious no matter how strong and

sagacious they were. They were limited within the patriarchal conception of women and nothing more.

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Taboos and Gender in Poumai Nagas' Cultural Context

- Paveine Vemai

Abstract: This chapter examines select taboos within the Poumai Naga Tribe to study their relation to rite and ritual, customary law, and cultural norms. It contends that taboos and proverbs form the major backbone of "customary laws" an d that the inculcation of collective fear[1] about their violation is what made taboos and by extension, customary laws tenable. Understanding the role of taboos in the Poumai Nagas' context is vital, for along with proverbs, the taboos function as the principal ideological paradigm of the tribal culture. Taboos and rituals associated with gender, marriage, and sexuality have been focused on in the present research. In doing so, however, the chapter sheds light on the overall Poumai Naga taboos and their cultural, political, and social implications. Because the "Nagas" in general often have shared cultural and social affinity, the chapter also works as a valuable cultural commentary on various tribal groups that come under the same nomenclature. Taboos and cultural norms have been discriminately and selectively discussed to critically engage with the Poumai Nagas' cultural conception of gender and identity.

Keywords: **P**oumai Nagas, Folklore, Ethnography, Taboos, Rites and Rituals, Customary Laws, Gender and Identity, Orality, Cultural Identity.

Introduction

Shared values and standards of acceptable behaviour that members of a society follow are typically referred to as social norms and taboos (Freshtman 139). They constitute a major component of any folklore studies. As the "science of tradition" (Hartland 11), folklore has always been timely and timeless, for its synchronic relevance replicates itself in one way or another across time and generations. As a cultural group, the Poumai Naga tribe is in the transitory phase of "orality" and "literacy." In that some of its subjects continued to be thought of and verbalised in oral culture by persons totally unfamiliar with writing (Ong, 1-2), a culture

[1] Used to meant both respect and fear literally

untouched by literacy[2]. Critically engaging and reviewing folklore and taboos thus becomes vital for any ethnographic study of the Poumai Nagas.

'Taboos' and social norms work as ideological signposts and "behavioural guidelines" that have much impact on people's lives (Freshtman, 139). Poumai folk consider the insights provided by proverbs and taboos as godly wisdom[3]. A taboo is, according to Fred Newton Scott, "a ban, interdiction, of such a character that anyone who touches the object or performs the tabooed act is liable to a penalty" (Scott 361). Taboos are applied to different things: the way we behave, dress, eat, and even our sex life (Fershtman 139). Some of its significance may change over time; some may weaken or even fade away, while others could become stronger and more prominent (Freshtman 140).

Culture is an intrinsic part of one's identity and social worldview. For the making of a society, as Raymond Williams puts it, "is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment…" (McGuigan 2). Any gender and taboo study is but pa art of the larger cultural and identity studies. Since taboos constitute major components of the cultural belief system. It is pertinent and crucial that they be investigated and interpreted critically. The present chapter is unique because it is one of the first attempts to deliberate on the role of taboos in cultural conception and representation of gender.

Poumai Nagas and Taboos

Poumai is one of the major Naga tribes living on the northern border of Manipur, with some of its villages sharing borders with the Nagaland state[4]. The term "Poumai" is believed to have derived from the two-syllable words *'Pou'* and *'Mai',* which is generally translated as 'descendant of *Pou'*. Adopting a particular identity also implies acceptance of the taboos and the social norms associated with this cultural identity[5]. As T.S. Eliot argued about poets and artists having no

[2] Sampson 1980, as quoted in Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy*, 2

[3] See also preface to *Poumai Neu Ea Tsiichi Bvii*,3

[4] Villages such as: Tunggam, Tunjoy, Liyai Khunou, and Laii Shirafii etc.

[5] As quoted in Fershtman, Chaim, et al. "Taboos and Identity: Considering the Unthinkable."p, 141

meaning alone outside of one's relation to past poets and artists, cultural conventions and taboos hold strong ties to an individual's conception of the self and the world around them.

It is then apt to consider how certain customs and practices are replicated, sometimes, even despite their inconvenience and irrationality. While some run their course and become obsolete in the modern and "civilised communities." For the Poumai Nagas, customary laws continue to play an essential role in their contemporary socio-cultural affairs. The necessity to review and analyse it thus becomes of paramount significance.

Th. Ngaopuni Rao's work *Poumai Neu Ea Tsiichi Bvii (Poumai Taboos & Proverbs)* is one vital and comprehensive resource on Poumais' taboos. In his introductory remark, Ngaopuni writes, "Naaneu nou checheyu ludu ngaopeise" (loosely translatable as Taboos/Social norms reveal the right way of life). "Tsiimai chipao hai Rahchi Rahlase" (Old men's sayings are heavenly wisdom and language, 3)). Proverbs and taboos are perceived as godly-inspired and timeless wisdom passed through generations. Without taboos, it is believed a village will be chaotic[6]. The book housed an enormous list of 1515 taboos and 1190 proverbs. Besides them, there are multiple oral taboos and proverbs still undocumented. The richness and importance of interdictions and taboos are clearly visible. However, for the present chapter, it is neither feasible nor desirable to deliberate on all of it; only selected taboos have been reproduced, analysed, and critiqued.

Select Taboos for Men[7]

- It is against the norm for men to scrub their bodies with stone[8] during baths; they cannot escape from enemies.
- It is taboo to eat a chicken's heart; one becomes timid.
- It is against the norm to play Kakah[9]
- During a wife's pregnancy, it is not good to go to war (They can't get victory).

[6] Cf. Th. Ngaopunii Rao, 117, he used hriishise.

[7] Th. Ngaopunii Rao, 52-54

[8] Pumice stone's parralel

[9] Or Zhaolikah/Kaakaayu (cf Ng. Luni p,9-10)

- Before the completion of five days of a child's birth, a husband should not sit, even if he visits a neighbour's house; it is against the norm.
- In the event of divorce, it is taboo for a husband to request his wife to return. (Husband will not live long.)
- Women and men should not wear each other's dresses.
- Taboo for men to eat meat killed by women.
- It is taboo to displease a married sister.
- Men are tabooed/forbidden to handle weaving equipment (Pao 132)

Taboos for Women[10]

- It is against the norm for a woman to shout a war cry.
- It is taboo for a woman to challenge others.
- It is against the norm to lay with a mother who had given birth to the first child before completing 30 days.
- It is taboo to look back at the parental house after moving out for marriage.
- It is against the norm to let men talk first to women.
- A daughter marrying in another village should not be dropped by her mother, for a mother shedding tears is not good.
- It is against the norm for unmarried women to keep long hair.
- It is taboo to have two peihziih (hair buns, symbolising married women) in one house.
- It is not good to pee on the footpath; children will not be beautiful.
- Women are forbidden to handle/touch weapons of battle (Pao 132).
- It is taboo for a woman to cross over a man's leg (Pao 132).

Taboos related to Wife and Husband[11]

- It is taboo to call husband and wife by name[12]
- It is taboo to leak a spouse's secret.
- It is taboo to offer food from a husband's or father's plate.
- During menstruation, it is taboo to lie together.
- It is taboo for the wife to lie on top while having sex.

[10] Th. Ngaopunii Rao (p,55-60)

[11] Th. Ngaopunii Rao (p,72-74)

[12] Z.K. Pahrii used nickname but name is more appropriate as per the Poula quoted here and also the general practise observed

Taboos on Sexuality[13]

- It is taboo to declare one's sexual partner.
- It is taboo to harass women in their sleep for sexual favour.
- It is against the norm to allow a woman to give birth in the village if she cannot identify who impregnated her.
- When a woman asks for sexual favour, it is taboo to say 'yes' right away, but it is not the norm to deny her (he will not have a long life).
- It is taboo to be intimate with another man's wife[14]

General Select Taboos[15]

- It is taboo to work secretly when someone has died (93).
- It is taboo to dig a tomb for one's own family members (95).
- If there is no taboo, the village will face problems (117).
- It is against the norm to have two husbands/wives (125).
- It is taboo to steal an egg (one becomes dumb (136).
- It is taboo to give a higher price for buying something than what was bargained for by someone earlier than you (143).
- It is taboo to refuse someone's request (145).
- It is taboo to take full interest in loan money 148).
- After sunset, it is against the norm to ask for debt (149).
- When one says, "I am sorry," it is taboo not to forgive (154).
- It is more blessed for the one who pays fine than the one who swears (156).

Critical Observations of the Taboos

Some traditions are observed with much solemnity and sacredness compared to others. The word "nuese"[16] translatable as taboo (or literally forbidden), is employed to refer to the serious and culturally revered legacies. "Zhaimoshe" translated as "against the norm", includes generally observed but one that carries less weightage and authority. The difference between taboos and social norms is succinctly noted by Chaim Fershtman and others when they write, "Taboos are strong social

[13] Th. Ngaopunii Rao (p,83-85)

[14] Veikho Kho interviewed January 2022

[15] Most of these taboos are as collected in Th. Ngaopunii Rao's with few minor edits in translation. Only the English translation have been reproduced.

[16] Inclusive of verbal, dietary, and actions.

norms; norms which are sufficiently strong that may be viewed as sacred". Taboos are sometimes referred to as doing the "unthinkable." Even thinking about violating it is considered problematic. The sanctions, associated with taboos, they argued, pertain not just to the behaviour that contradicts it but also include the mere thought or consideration of such behaviours. Thus, 'a taboo is a form of "thought police" that governs not just human behaviour but also its thoughts' (Fershtman 140).

Poumai also used the word "neuse" for taboo instead of "zhaimoshe" (against the norm). It is fascinating to observe how practices without visible reasons are valued, adhered to, and perpetuated by the cultural group. For instance, that it is against the norm for a man to use a scrubbing stone during a shower appears rather comical. One can argue its connection with the inability to escape from the enemies as nonsense. It is amusing and ironic that a man on the verge of entering warfare is discouraged from the usual process of cleaning oneself. The taboo against calling one's spouse by name, similarly, does not have an obvious moral rationale. It perhaps meant to foreground the special and unique bond shared by couples. They are, anyhow, still significant cultural markers. Generally, however, most taboos promote one or two moral prerogatives and with contextual specifics that birthed it. Some of them are discussed in the following pages.

Taboos and Customary Laws

Customary laws concern the practices and customs of the indigenous people and communities. It has been defined variously as: "customs that are accepted as legal requirements or obligatory rules of conduct; practices and beliefs that are so vital and intrinsic a part of a social and economic system that they are treated as if they were laws"; "established patterns of behaviour that can be objectively verified within a particular social setting…"(WIPO,2). How does taboo intersect or contribute to customary laws? What relation(s) do they share? What precedes what from ontological perspectives? These are crucial questions that will need further rigorous investigation and research. One can nevertheless assert and suggestively conclude that taboos are powerful ideological media that serve as the backbone of "customary laws". Not all taboos necessarily get translated into laws, but they work as either useful propelling or filtering rubrics of the manifested laws.

Customary laws are not codified, but they are, as Jelle J.P. Wouters puts it, "capable of truthful oral transmission across generations". Orality, Wouters argued, is what "enables their strategic reinterpretation, adjustment, and change when a community so desires" (p,137). A more fruitful reading of customary laws in the Nagas's context, he writes, is to see it "as the political-moral embodiment of a society's own conception and normative imagination of its social self" (Wouters, 137). According to Seiba Lao[17], customary laws existed prior to Christianity as a reflection of how Poumai Nagas, as an indigenous group, are capable of forging an organised social structure. It was the governing principle that ensured discipline, law and order within society. The entry of the biblical discourse, thus, according to him, "is a re-confirmation of the efficiency of old traditional values".

There are numerous taboos prohibiting and discouraging infidelity in marital relations. Though not all violations are dealt with a penalty, there is customary law against a woman who cannot identify the father of her child. She is to give birth outside the village vicinity. Similarly, if a man and a married woman is caught in a compromising situation, punishment is imposed in the form of Chode Melah[18]. The best ox is butchered at the cost of the guilty man. He cannot bargain the price but unquestioningly accepts the diktat of the village council/authority (Seiba Lao). Similarly, there are customary laws to manage against verbal insults to protect immigrants and marginalised groups of people in the village[19]. Taboos and norms, along with proverbs and past precedents, thus developed the ideological blueprint of customary laws. They serve as guiding principles and latent potential laws that sometimes culminate in material customary laws.

Creative Taboos

The tabooing of consuming chicken's heart is interesting. It appears to have been derived from the general usage of the term "chicken-hearted" where the stereotypes of size and vulnerability have

[17] Interviewed on December 2023, re-interviewed on 10th September 2024.

[18] The best ox is butchered and distributed to the villagers. As a sign of confession and apology for transgressing societal taboo/normative.

[19] An example can be quoted of verbal taboo and penalty against verbal insult, say the usage of "Shehtuhmai"

determined its meaning (synonymous with timidity). The irony, however, is that, while boys and girls are verbally dissuaded, adult men seem to have no need for cautionary warnings against it. The restriction of certain meat parts, such as the brain, eyes, eels, liver, tongues, gizzards, etc from children and "those in the reproductive age," is believed to be based on the logic that they cause premature ageing, greying of hair, and poor vision (Pao,136).

Usually, rare and delicious meat parts are tagged as "nahmai touneuse" (tabooed for children). But as one grew up, we were told that it was because old toothless folks needed soft and tender parts; besides, of course, it was an adult's way of satiating their palate while also effectively managing unruly children. Taboos here served as a creative way of ensuring dietary justice, especially in large families. Another innovative example of tradition promoting good practice can be seen in the taboo: "it is not good to pee on the footpath, children will not be beautiful". The relation between a place of urinal excretion and children's good looks is questionable; nevertheless, it works as an effective motivation to maintain civic sanitation and hygiene.

Taboos and Social Morality

Traditional convention also promotes responsibility and social priorities. In a patriarchal society, certain men rarely stay home and help with domestic chores. Normative, such as restricting men from warfare and dilly-dallying for the first five days of a wife's delivery, secures the bare minimum help and support the wife requires. It is against the norm to live with a mother who had given birth to the first child before completing 30 days to safeguard wives from potentially insensitive husbands. The taboo that prohibits two hair buns (symbolising married women) in one house is poignant. It encourages monogamy, stability, safety, and protection within marriage. That it is taboo to disclose one's sexual partner is beneficial, for discreetness is a way of maintaining respect and confidentiality about one's private and sexual life.

There are ample taboos that reflect how it contributes to promoting morality. The few taboos quoted here are but minimal examples to show how good practices are promoted while harmful and riotous ones are forewarned. The taboo against stealing eggs is fascinating. As Seiba Lao

reflects, "eggs are symbols of innocent life" . It cannot speak or voice against injustice, so it can be aptly applied to anything that is helpless and cannot protect itself, he recounted. This taboo is effectively deployed to warn against stealing in particular and unethical practices in general. Similarly, we have taboos encouraging ethical and moral practices such as forgiveness, generosity, and being considerate towards someone in need.

Patriarchy or Mutual Gender Privileged?

Some taboos perpetuate gender privilege and patriarchal hegemony. An example can be cited of the taboo where a man cannot recall his wife back home in case of divorce,[20] lest he should have a short life span. From a gendered perspective, this can be read as patriarchal privilege— that the taboo does not take into account what role or injustice the husband might have contributed resulting in divorce. And that he is simply exonerated and insulated from any accountability by the deterrent taboo.

Alternatively, however, it is possible to conclude that the husband's culpability in the conflict resulting in divorce is established; the relatives' involvement in reconciling the husband and wife is to deter future dissension. Seiba Lao likewise asserts, "the husband self-initiating return of his wife can be a reflection of his immaturity and arrogance." Involving intermediaries, he argued, would ensure the safeguarding of mutual interest and commitment. They also act as marriage counsellors and witnesses to judge the conflict fairly. This and other traditional practices, therefore, need to be approached in a nuanced manner to derive a holistic conclusion.

Paradoxical practices and taboos are prevalent. While it is against the norm to let men talk first to women, it symbolises their hierarchical relation. Contrariwise, it is considered inappropriate for a woman to approach first in cases of romantic interest. When a woman asks for sexual favour, it is taboo to say 'yes' immediately, but it is against the norm to deny her. It is also taboo to harass women in their sleep for sexual favour. This appears to be a female gender privilege on face

[20] Divorce here is referred to temporary separation not necessarily the usual and final legal separation.

value, yet specific instructions, such as it is taboo for the wife to be on top while having sex, and taboo for a woman to challenge others, reflect the inverse idea. Though it is taboo to declare one's sexual partner in actual practice, men gloat about their conquest and popularity with women.

Gender Role and Proprietorial Norms

Some taboos appear to have been carefully and rationally constructed, while others are mere patriarchal tools of sustaining male headship. In the tabooing of men's handling of weaving materials and women crossing over a man's leg, R. Haba Pao writes, "It is believed to bring bad luck to the owner…during head hunting and animal hunting expeditions…his hands will become cramped easily" (Pao, 132). Traditional weaving is an arduous and tedious process, causing muscle strain and numbness, so it is reasonable that a warrior is discouraged or even forbidden from it. But the idea that a woman crossing over a man's leg brings bad luck seems to be an assertion of masculinity.

The concept of purity and impurity has been linked to reading women as the harbinger of bad luck. Distinct characteristic traits are encouraged in males and females within the Poumai Nagas. Some games are also gender-specific. For instance, Kakah, though a few villages, has no strict restrictions on any gender. It is against the norm for a woman to shout a war cry; women and men should not wear each other's dress; it is taboo for men to eat meat killed by women. These are but a few examples and stereotypes that promote gender role rigidity, and inherent in it is the narrative of male superiority. It is noteworthy to point out how some flawed premises and inconsistent taboos existed. An example is of the taboo that restricts men from eating the meat of an animal killed by women, for that was considered as emasculating him (Seiba Lao). The farce and hypocrisy are revealed when men seem to have no issue consuming chickens and other meat when it is convenient for them.

Conclusion

Taboo and social norms are significant cultural and identity markers. It is important to place and read them contextually for holistic interpretation and application. Some taboos are seriously observed and rigorously imposed; they also function as moral didactics and social guidelines.

They validate proprietorial norms and ensure the sustenance of different practices. Certain traditional practices are gender neutral and morally indifferent, but are valuable as creative reflections and distinctive traits of a culture. Given the non-codification of customary laws, taboos and norms, along with proverbs, are powerful ideological principles that govern customary governance. Thus, though the chapter could not engage with the proverbs of the Poumai Naga tribe, neither could it exhaustively engage with the taboos. It does provide an overview of what vital roles, taboos, and cultural norms played in shaping the Poumai Nagas' worldview. And how taboos intersect with customary laws, creativity, morality, patriarchy, and gender identity.

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The Whispering Woods of West Kameng: Uncovering the Secrets of Thongchi's Supernatural Tribal Tales

- Atlanta Gogoi

Abstract: Northeast India has remained a vibrant locale of unexplored narratives, thriving in its joyous milieu of affinities among people from various ethnicities. The Assamese language has acted as a bridge amongst folks of different tribes and cultures, many forming a pidgin between Assamese and their mother tongue, for reasons of barter and cultural exchange throughout the course of history. The invigorating folktales from the region have acted as carriers of past wisdom and remain to this day massive sources of traditional knowledge promoting sustainable ways of living in harmony with the environment. Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, a prolific writer from the Northeast, has managed to offer peaceful bridges of cultural exchange through his elaborate narratives on the Sherdukpen, Monpa, and Aka tribes from West Kameng in Arunachal Pradesh and has skillfully directed their cultural richness toward a greater audience by administering a natural gothic with a traditional life, offering a vivid coalescence of supernatural fiction with tribal folklore. This study proposes to analyse the supernatural elements in Thongchi's Saba kota Manuh and Mishing, where the gothic serves as a profound medium through which the complex emotional and psychological landscapes of the characters are explored. Using affect theory, these narratives reveal how the supernatural serves as a conduit for exploring both individual and collective emotional landscapes, while also celebrating and preserving the cultural heritage of the communities he portrays. This chapter argues that through his captivating narratives, Thongchi not only revive s the almost extinct tribal tales but also challenges the dominance of mainstream culture, providing a platform for the marginalised voices to resonate.

Keywords: Supernatural, culture, folklore, environment, Affect

Introduction

Assam, situated in northeastern India, has historically been a melting pot of intertribal harmony and communal synergy. The northeastern region boasts a vibrant cultural mosaic, where diverse traditions, societies, and customs converge to craft a rich tapestry of life. This enchanting and

distinct lifestyle has been shaped by the intricate interactions between various tribes and communities. Literature, particularly the novel, serves as a profound medium for exploring this cultural heritage, offering nuanced insights into the human experience. Novels mirror society, reflecting the complexities and intricacies of life and culture. From ancient times to the present, northeastern literature has woven together the narratives of hill-dwelling populations and those from the plains, affording equal significance to each. Through these works, we gain vivid glimpses into the lifestyles, rituals, beliefs, festivals, and socio-cultural practices of regional communities. The literary landscape of the Northeast is characterized by its diversity, with authors skillfully capturing the unique experiences of various tribes and communities. Although the Northeast's diverse inhabitants exhibit variations, a fundamental cultural and structural affinity remains, tracing back to the historic entity of 'Bor Assam'. Assamese novelists have astutely captured the essence of tribal psychologies, delving into the complexities of their social structures, customs, and traditions. The works of these authors serve as a testament to the region's rich cultural heritage, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of its people.

Arunachal Pradesh, often referred to as the "heaven of the northeast," presents a fascinating linguistic landscape. With 26 tribes and sub-tribes inhabiting the state, it offers a unique opportunity for linguistic research. The languages spoken here have roots in the Sino-Tibetan family, reflecting the region's strategic location at the crossroads of Asian cultures. Historically, Assamese played a vital role in bridging the communication gap between the plains and hills, facilitating cultural exchange and influencing literary production. Many tribal writers have consequently created works in Assamese, underscoring the language's role in fostering cross-cultural understanding. This linguistic connection has also enabled the development of a shared cultural identity, transcending tribal and community boundaries. The region's cultural richness is further evidenced by its archaeological heritage. Discoveries in Arunachal Pradesh attest to ancient civilized societies, highlighting the Northeast's significant contribution to India's cultural narrative. The Northeastern region of India, particularly Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, presents a captivating cultural landscape. Through literature and language, we gain a deeper understanding of the region's intricate social dynamics, cultural practices, and traditions.

Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, one of the most distinguished voices in contemporary Assamese literature, masterfully weaves together the cultural and spiritual essence of the Northeast Indian landscape in his works. His writing, imbued with a deep connection to folklore and tradition, offers a profound exploration of human emotions, social dilemmas, and the mystical elements that pervade the lives of his characters. In stories like *Mishing* and *Saba Kota Manuh*, Thongchi taps into the rich reservoir of indigenous beliefs, blending the supernatural with the everyday in ways that evoke both wonder and contemplation. This chapter seeks to examine how Thongchi's narratives, through their intricate interplay of folklore, spirituality, and affect, reflect the complexities of identity, belonging, and the invisible forces that shape life in Northeast India. By situating his work within the broader spectrum of regional and global literature, this study delves into the affective resonances of Thongchi's storytelling and their lasting impact on readers.

Methodology

The analysis adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing affect theory to interpret the emotional dimensions of Thongchi's storytelling. Textual analysis is employed to examine key passages from *Mishing* and *Saba Kota Manuh*, focusing on the use of language, imagery, and narrative structure. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how Thongchi's stories evoke emotions such as fear, awe, and empathy, and how these feelings interact with the cultural and spiritual context of the narratives.

Analysis: Folklore and the Supernatural in Thongchi's Works

The folklore of physical objects includes the shapes and uses of tools, costumes, and the forms of villages and houses. The folklore of gestures and games occupies a position intermediate between the folklore of physical objects and the folklore of ideas. Typical ideas transmitted as folklore are manifested in the customs associated with birth, marriage, and death, with the lesser events of life, with remedies for illnesses and wounds, with agriculture, the trades, and the professions, and with religious life. ... Verbal folklore includes tales of various kinds (marchen, jests, legends, cumulative tales, exemplar, fables, etiological tales), ballads, lyric folk song, Children's songs, charms, proverbs and riddles (Taylor 263).

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The Role of Folklore in *Mishing*

Mishing, a richly woven narrative, masterfully illustrates the profound symbiosis between the people of the Northeast and their natural surroundings. Through the lens of folklore, Thongchi skillfully explores the intricate dynamics of loss, displacement, and environmental degradation, deftly intertwining the threads of indigenous belief systems and the human experience. In the preface to the novel, Thongchi himself quotes on various superstitions and cultural beliefs surrounding the supernatural he grew up listening to and imbibing the essence of, as a child of the Sherdukpen tribe (Thongchi 4). He recalls witnessing an exorcism and sitting by the bonfire on late nights listening to the elders of his village discussing such spine-chilling incidents. The backdrop to Mishing is Thongchi's recollection of such intriguing tales. The plot of his novel surrounds a Sherdukpen folklore on how a traversing soul comes before you in its physical presence to warn you of your own death; this traversing soul is what Thongchi calls "mishing". The story's poignant portrayal of spirits and nature deities, integral to the region's indigenous cosmology, serves as a powerful metaphor for the interconnectedness of human and environmental well-being.

Employing Sara Ahmed's affect theory to decipher folklore reveals the profound role emotions play in shaping cultural narratives, fostering communal bonds through shared sentiments and collective histories. Folklore, with its intricate weave of myths, legends, and oral traditions, serves as a vibrant affective archive, where emotions are not only expressed but also circulated, preserved, and transmitted. As Ahmed posits, emotions "stick" to specific figures, objects, or ideas, influencing how they are perceived and remembered within a community. The stickiness of that surface still tells us a history of the object that is not dependent on the endurance of the quality of stickiness: what sticks 'shows us' where the object has travelled through what it has gathered onto its surface, gatherings that become a part of the object, and call into question its integrity as an object (Ahmed 91). In folklore, these sticky emotions manifest through recurring themes of fear, joy, grief, and longing, often tied to mythical entities, supernatural forces, or ancestral spirits. These emotional attachments forge and reinforce a group's cultural identity, rendering specific emotions integral to the community's self-understanding. Thongchi uses ghostly apparitions and mysterious

occurrences, creating a narrative space where fear and curiosity coexist. The affective dimension of the story invites readers to confront the hidden anxieties and desires that shape human experience, making the supernatural a vehicle for exploring deeper emotional truths.

For instance, the Sherdukpen community's shared apprehension toward malevolent spirits or reverence for a revered deity generates collective sentiments that transcend individual experiences. Folktales about spirits protecting or punishing the land embody the community's emotional relationship with the environment, where the land itself becomes an affective object, bearing the weight of both reverence and fear. Through folklore, emotions are embedded in the cultural fabric, creating a shared emotional topography that defines a community's values, beliefs, and practices. By examining folklore through the lens of affect theory, we uncover the complex dynamics of emotional transmission, revealing how cultural narratives shape and are shaped by the emotions that bind communities together. Thongchi's narrative effortlessly blurs the boundaries between reality and myth, transporting readers to a liminal space where the sacred and the mundane converge. This affective experience ignites a profound sense of empathy, illuminating the tensions between tradition and change, and the precarious balance between cultural heritage and environmental sustainability. By weaving together the vibrant threads of folklore, mythology, and environmentalism, *Mishing* becomes a powerful allegory for the Northeast's ecological and cultural resilience. Thongchi's masterful storytelling not only honours the region's rich cultural legacy but also underscores the urgent need for environmental stewardship, cultural preservation, and sustainable coexistence.

Affective Dimensions in *Saba Kota Manuh*

In *Saba Kota Manuh*, Thongchi delves deeper into the psychological landscape of his characters, portraying their encounters with the uncanny and the unknown. The supernatural elements in this story are not merely plot devices; they serve to evoke a sense of unease and introspection in both the characters and the readers. In the Monpa tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, a unique and profound funeral ritual is practised, where the deceased is divided into 108 pieces and ceremoniously released into the river. This sacred act, considered a holy duty, is believed to confer equal virtue to that gained from a pilgrimage. *Saba*

Kota Manuh masterfully weaves the story of Aau Thampa, a practitioner of this ritual, and his family, including his wife Guichangmu and their mute daughter Rinsim. This poignant novel delves into the rich cultural heritage of the Monpa people, a Buddhist community influenced by Tibetan Buddhism. The narrative vividly describes Buddhist rituals, worship, and the significance of purification through abstinence from liquor, meat, and fish before embracing Tantric Buddhism, as exemplified by the Dalai Lama. The Monpa tribe's social dynamics are intricately portrayed, including their preference for cousin marriages and the prevalence of polygamy. The novel also explores the changing social landscape of the tribe, mirroring the transformations occurring in other tribal societies. The festive spirit of the Northeast region comes alive through the description of Turagya and Lushe, two significant festivals celebrated by the Monpa tribe. Turagya, a winter festival, features a vibrant fair where locals indulge in traditional delicacies like changchang and Arra. Lushe, a 15- to 30-day celebration, showcases the tribe's unique cultural practices. The novel culminates with the poignant funeral rites of Rijomba and Aau Thampa, whose bodies are ritually released into the Tawangshu River, culminating in a supernatural and thought-provoking finale.

Ahmed's concept of "affective economies" highlights how emotions move and accumulate, impacting social structures and power dynamics. In many folktales, emotions like fear or honour are passed down through generations, shaping the community's values and norms. The recurring circulation of such emotions creates a powerful emotional currency that sustains traditional practices and moral lessons embedded in folklore. These tales are not merely stories; they are affective practices that shape how communities feel about themselves, others, and the world around them. The affective economies at work, where words are substituted for each other as 'names' and 'acts' of emotion, certainly do something – they re-cover the national subject and allow recovery for 'civil society', by allowing the endless deferral of responsibility for injustice in the present (Ahmed 120). The presence of the supernatural in *Saba Kota Manuh* serves as a focal point for the community's fears and uncertainties, reflecting deeper anxieties about cultural survival and the erosion of traditional values. These emotions are not isolated but are shared and amplified within the community, creating a collective emotional atmosphere that governs how people perceive the unknown and the 'other.'

Spirituality and Cultural Identity

Thongchi's works often serve as a bridge between the spiritual traditions of Northeast India and contemporary concerns. His narratives emphasise the importance of ritual and reverence for the natural world, reflecting a worldview where the sacred and the everyday are intricately connected. This section examines how Thongchi's stories address the erosion of traditional values in the face of rapid modernisation, positioning spirituality as a source of resilience and continuity. The analysis highlights how this spiritual dimension contributes to a sense of cultural identity that is at once rooted in the past and responsive to the challenges of the present.

Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi's works offer a rich contribution to Assamese literature by preserving the oral traditions and spiritual practices of the region. His ability to bring regional stories into dialogue with broader national and global themes positions him as a key figure in the landscape of Indian writing. This section reflects on Thongchi's place within the canon of Indian literature, considering how his focus on the Northeast challenges the often centralizing narratives of Indian literary discourse. His stories emphasize the cultural diversity of India, offering a counter-narrative to the marginalization of Northeastern voices and perspectives in the literary mainstream.

Conclusion

Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi's storytelling is a testament to the power of literature to evoke the affective and spiritual dimensions of life. His works, particularly *Mishing* and *Saba Kota Manuh*, invite readers to engage with the mysteries of the natural world, the echoes of ancestral voices, and the deep emotions that shape human experience. By integrating folklore and spirituality with a keen awareness of contemporary realities, Thongchi not only preserves the cultural heritage of the Northeast but also enriches the larger reservoir of Indian literature. This chapter has highlighted the affective resonances of Thongchi's narratives, demonstrating how his stories create a space for readers to reflect on their own connections to place, memory, and the unseen. In doing so, Thongchi's work continues to inspire conversations about the enduring power of storytelling in the face of change.

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Beyond Conformity: Reimagining Queer Identities in Janice Pariat's *Seahorse* and *Boats on Land*

- Aditi Ghosh

Abstract: The cultural and political distinctiveness of Northeast India has long shaped scholarly engagement with its literature, especially in relation to identity, ethnicity, and resistance. Within this context, the representation of queer identities has recently gained critical attention, signalling an evolving discourse on gender and sexuality in the region. Writers from Northeast India are actively unsettling heteronormative frameworks that dominate Indian cultural production, and Janice Pariat is a key figure in this shift. Her fiction challenges conventional narratives of gender and sexuality by presenting characters and relationships that exceed binary classifications and inhabit liminal spaces of desire, intimacy, and belonging. In *Seahorse* (2015), the relationship between Nehemiah and his mentor Nicholas introduces a queer dynamic that complicates normative understandings of male intimacy and identity. *Boats on Land* (2012) similarly foregrounds lesbian desire through intimate female relationships embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of the Northeast. Read together, these narratives reposition queer identities within local cultural life and contest external assumptions about the region's gendered and sexual imaginaries, thereby contributing to a broader reimagining of queer subjectivities in Northeast Indian literature. This chapter examines how Janice Pariat's works reimagine queer identities in Northeast Indian literature by challenging heteronormative norms. It shows how her narratives highlight queer experiences in regional contexts, offering insights into queer lives in the Northeast. The chapter argues Pariat's stories disrupt dominant societal assumptions about gender and sexuality.

Keywords: Queer Identities, Northeast Indian literature, fluidity of self, gay desires, lesbian relationships, Que er spaces, Lesbian Continuum, Cultural Implications

Introduction: Janice Pariat's Seahorse

In *The Postcolonial Body in Queer Space and Time*, Rebecca Fine Romanow introduces the concept of the postcolonial body as one marked by movements through non-normative time and space,

reflecting dislocation and fluidity. These movements, she argues, are not just physical but also temporal, challenging the fixed constructs of identity imposed by both colonial and heteronormative histories (Romanow 10). Queer theory fundamentally challenges the notion of stable, fixed identities, arguing that sexes, genders, and sexualities are not innate or immutable. As Annamarie Jagose articulates, queer theory arises from "specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post-structuralist figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions" (Jagose 3). The reworking is crucial to understanding queer space in Janice Pariat's *Seahorse*, where identity and desire are not fixed but continually shifting, refusing the binary categorizations imposed by heteronormative structures. Queer space, as Romanow describes, is a realm where these bodies experience dislocation and transformation, liberated from the linearity of conventional timelines and traditional spatial boundaries. (Romanow 10). In the context of postcolonial queer literature, queer space represents a disruption of the normative structures of time and place, offering a stage for alternative experiences and identities to flourish. This space exists outside the rigid binaries of gender and sexuality, enabling the exploration of identities that resist categorization. Romanow's analysis of the diasporic body suggests that queer space is inherently intertwined with postcolonial histories, as it reflects a movement not only across geographical borders but also across temporal and cultural boundaries (10). Janice Pariat's *Seahorse* can be understood as a narrative that engages with these movements of time and space. In this context, queer space is not only a physical location but also an emotional and psychological state where the characters experience a form of dislocation from societal norms. This study will explore how different types of queer spaces in Janice Pariat's *Seahorse* serve as zones of fluidity and resistance against normative structures of identity and desire. These queer spaces, whether in personal relationships, cultural settings, or emotional landscape,s become sites of transformation, where characters can explore alternative forms of connection, intimacy, and selfhood.

> I first saw Nicholas in a room that reminded me of an aquarium. The lights dimmed, a projector flickering like an old movie reel. Sunshine seeping through the curtains into green semi-darkness. The air cold and muted; somewhere the hum of an air conditioner serving as the underlying rhythm of breath and life. (Pariat *Seahorse* 9)

Janice Pariat's *Seahorse* introduces a liminal queer space, one that exists on the threshold between the familiar and the unknown, embodying a sense of ambiguity and fluidity. The protagonist's description of the room as resembling an aquarium evokes a contained, almost surreal environment where the outside world and its heteronormative structures are temporarily suspended. The dim lighting, flickering projector, and the semi-darkness infused with muted green tones create a space that feels dislocated from the typical flow of time and societal expectation. This intimate space provides an atmosphere where rigid boundaries of identity begin to blur, aligning with the concept of queer space as a zone of fluid exploration. This space becomes a metaphor for the fluidity of desire and identity, setting the tone for the protagonist's exploration of connections that exist outside normative frameworks, allowing for the emergence of queer possibilities. In a way, Pariat establishes queer space as a refuge from heteronormative constraints, an environment where the characters can explore relationships beyond fixed definitions (Pariat *Seahorse* 9). In another context, when Nehemiah states, "In the afternoons, we'd go for walks in the pine forest behind his house," it represents natural queer space, where the boundaries of society fall away, allowing for moments of intimacy and connection that are untethered to normative expectations (15). The pine forest, with its mossy rocks and open, earthy setting, becomes a space of freedom and exploration for Nehemiah and Lenny. Unlike the confined, almost aquarium-like atmosphere of the earlier scene with Nicholas, this outdoor space is raw and unstructured, offering a stark contrast to societal constructs and expectations. In queer theory, such natural, unregulated spaces can symbolize the breaking away from heteronormative control, as Nehemiah and Lenny are free to engage with each other without societal scrutiny. The forest, a symbol of untamed wilderness, becomes a metaphor for the fluidity of their relationship, where the lines between friendship, attraction, and desire gets blur (15).

When Nehemiah says, "I felt it was the promise of a secret between the soul of the dead and me," it evokes a profound sense of intimacy and connection within a transcendent queer space, one that might be referred to as a spiritual queer space (Pariat *Seahorse* 20). This space transcends the ordinary boundaries of life and death, suggesting an ethereal, almost mystical realm where the traditional norms and societal expectations dissolve. The feeling of a secret shared between the

narrator and the "soul of the dead" highlights the deep emotional and spiritual bonds that can exist in these spaces, emphasizing that queer identities and experiences can reach beyond the physical realm (20). Moreover, this spiritual queer space can be seen as a site of healing and transformation. The act of sharing a secret signifies a trust and understanding that fosters personal growth and self-discovery. In this environment, characters can confront their pasts, engage with their grief, and redefine their identities in ways that reflect their authentic selves. It serves as a powerful reminder that queer spaces are not limited to physical locations but can also exist in the emotional and spiritual realms, enabling characters to forge connections that honour their multifaceted experiences. This idea resonates with the concept of queer space as a site of revelation and transformation, where connections are not merely defined by physical presence but also by emotional and spiritual ties. The promise of a secret indicates an understanding that exists outside conventional narratives, allowing for a nuanced exploration of identity, grief, and desire. In this queer space, the boundaries between the living and the dead blur, creating a sanctuary for the exploration of complex feelings that defy societal categorization (20).

> While I was working on somehow getting through my final exams in my last year in school, Lenny took Mihir for bike rides out of town, to all the secret tea stalls he'd shown me. To the forest. The lady at the one-room tea shop called them her butterflies…I met them infrequently between tuition, extra classes, and paranoid parents, I had little time yet when I did, I could sense Lenny was secretly, silently reanimated. They would travel together, it was planned (Pariat *Seahorse* 34).

The social queer space illustrated through the interactions in the tea shop highlights the importance of community for queer individuals. These spaces become crucial for forming connections that affirm one's identity, as they provide a sense of belonging that may be absent in more traditional settings. In this context, Lenny and Mihir find solace and acceptance among the patrons of the tea shop, a space where their relationship can be acknowledged without the weight of societal disapproval. The lady at the tea shop serves as a figure of support, suggesting that queer relationships can find validation in community spaces, reinforcing the idea that love and connection are universally acknowledged, regardless of sexual orientation. The act of gathering in informal spaces like tea shops or cafes often fosters a distinct queer

culture, one characterized by shared stories, laughter, and camaraderie. In Pariat's narrative, these gatherings serve as a backdrop for Lenny and Mihir's explorations of their relationship. The casual nature of these settings encourages open dialogue about identity and desire, allowing characters to interpret their feelings in a supportive environment. Through these interactions, Pariat creates branches of experiences that reflect the diverse ways in which queer identities can be expressed and celebrated. Social queer spaces also serve as sites of resistance against normative societal structures. By forming bonds and community in spaces that exist outside conventional expectations, characters like Lenny and Mihir challenge the status quo. Their choice to engage in activities like bike rides and secret tea stall visits signifies a rebellion against societal constraints, showcasing the ways in which queer individuals can carve out spaces for themselves. In this light, the tea shop becomes a refuge, a place where heteronormative narratives can be subverted, and queer identities can be explored without fear of repercussion. However, the suspicion that normative models of identity are inadequate is reinforced by postmodern perspectives on identity, gender, and sexuality, as articulated by Annamarie Jagose. These frameworks argue that conventional understandings often fail to encompass the complexities and fluidity inherent in queer identities (Jagose 71). As Pariat illustrates through her characters and their experiences, rigid classifications cannot adequately capture the nuances of human relationships and desires. By embracing the multiplicity of identities and the intersections of power and resistance, Pariat's narratives challenge the limitations of normative identity constructs. This argument underscores the necessity of recognising and validating diverse queer experiences that defy simplistic categorizations, positioning them within a broader discourse that prioritizes fluidity and complexity over fixed definitions.

Furthermore, Pariat also explores the conditional and exploitative space while examining the relationship between Nicholas, Myra and the protagonist. By exploiting their emotions and identities for his own gratification, Nicholas creates an environment where genuine connection is replaced with manipulation. This manipulation not only undermines the integrity of their relationships but also exposes the darker sides of queer identities, where individuals can be used as tools for exploitation and subjugation. The nature of Nicholas's relationships with

Myra and the protagonist is highly conditional, as their worth to him is directly tied to how they serve his needs. This conditionality not only reflects an exploitative dynamic but also points to the ways queer identities can be commodified within interpersonal relationships. This underscores the broader implications of how exploitation can impact individuals within the queer community, affecting their sense of self and connection to others (Pariat *Seahorse* 166).

Janice Pariat's Boats on Land:

In the seminal essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, Adrienne Rich introduces the concepts of lesbian existence and the lesbian continuum, expanding the scope of lesbian identity beyond sexual relationships. Rich challenges the narrow understanding of lesbianism, which is often viewed in clinical or limiting terms, and proposes a broader view (Rich 648). Lesbian existence, according to Rich, acknowledges both the historical presence of lesbians and the continuous creation of meaning around that existence. However, it is through the lesbian continuum that she offers a more inclusive framework, encompassing a wide range of woman-identified experiences, not confined to sexual desire, but also including emotional, intellectual, and spiritual bonds between women. Rich argues that this continuum embraces "many more forms of primary intensity between and among women," recognising that deep connections between women have often been overlooked in favour of a heteronormative framework (648). This perspective opens up possibilities for examining narratives that resist traditional definitions of relationships, allowing a space for female bonds to be viewed as queer, even when they are not explicitly sexual. In Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land*, the portrayal of female bonds aligns closely with Rich's concept of the lesbian continuum. Pariat's characters navigate complex relationships that blur the lines between friendship, kinship, and desire. These bonds, often set against the backdrop of Northeast India, challenge the heteronormative expectations placed upon women, providing them with spaces to form deep, transformative connections. Bonnie Zimmerman also provides a deeper layer to understanding of how female relationships transcend sexual bonds and encompass a wide range of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual connections. Zimmerman's exploration of lesbian existence aligns with this broader definition, arguing that lesbian critics challenge

the heteronormative lens of scholarship by uncovering what has historically been hidden or unspeakable, namely, the profound connections between women that shape their identities and creativity. Her work adds nuance to Rich's idea by questioning whether a woman's sexual and affectional preference influences the way she writes, reads, and thinks. This line of inquiry expands Rich's idea of a continuum by suggesting that even within lesbian literary criticism, there is an ongoing exploration of "otherness" that goes beyond mere sexual identity (Zimmerman 451). In this study, two of Janice Pariat's short stories, *Secret Corridors* and the title story, *Boats on Land*, are selected for examination. By focusing on the nuanced connections between women in these narratives, the study aims to explore how Pariat portrays female bonds that resist conventional heteronormative frameworks.

> That morning the world had shrunk to the size of a mole. A small, chestnut-coloured spot to the left of a cupid's bow that dropped elegantly away from a soft and full middle. It was a mouth that made Natalie think of forbidden things, like the forest behind her house, which she wasn't allowed to explore, or the pink roadside ice sticks she'd been expressly instructed not to taste. That morning, the intricacies of chemistry didn't interest her as much as Iba's mouth, and the face to which it belonged, she thought, was just as attractive. Boyish, some said, but not for Natalie (Pariat *Boats on Land* 60).

Janice Pariat experiments with the nuances of female desire and the intricacies of female bonds in *Secret Corridors*, illustrating the fluidity of attraction beyond conventional labels. In the excerpt, Natalie's intense focus on Iba's mouth symbolises a burgeoning awareness of her desires that defy societal norms. The description of Iba's mouth as a "small, chestnut-coloured spot" evokes a sense of forbidden allure, akin to the undiscovered territories of both the physical and emotional realms. Natalie's attraction to Iba sharply contrasts with her mundane school studies, revealing that "the intricacies of chemistry didn't interest her as much," thereby underscoring the depth of her feelings that extend beyond mere physicality. This moment encapsulates Adrienne Rich's concept of the lesbian continuum, emphasising the emotional resonance of female bonds that exist outside the confines of sexual identity.

The forest that Natalie is forbidden to explore represents the societal constraints placed upon her desires, highlighting how the interplay

between yearning and restriction deepens a woman's lived experience.. The phrase "boyish, some said, but not for Natalie" illustrates her rejection of normative gender presentations, affirming that her attraction to Iba encompasses a spectrum of emotional connection that is both intimate and profound (60). This becomes essential to align the concept of the lesbian continuum with the broader understanding of erotic energy as articulated by Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde (Rich 650). This exploration of eroticism transcends mere physical attraction; it embodies a shared emotional and psychic energy that fosters empowerment and connection among women (659). Rich argues that this sharing leads to a rejection of powerlessness and self-denial, which are echoed in the private yet subtle moments between Natalie and Iba as they navigate their desires amidst societal constraints. This act of tenderness signifies not only a desire for physical closeness but also an emotional connection that transcends mere friendship. Iba's exuberance, characterised by her wild hair and shining eyes, embodies the vitality of their bond, suggesting a shared joy that resonates deeply within the framework of female relationships (Pariat *Boats on Land* 67). Rich states, "But as we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence… we begin to discover the erotic in female terms" (Rich 659). In this context, the protagonist's yearning to care for Iba not only reveals her affection but also reflects the empowerment that arises from their connection. These highlight the importance of emotional intimacy in which female bonds serve as a source of strength and resistance against the normative structures that seek to confine women's identities (Pariat *Boats on Land* 67). By intertwining these narratives, Pariat crafts a nuanced portrayal of the lesbian continuum, illustrating how intimate relationships between women can flourish and challenge societal expectations.

Furthermore, in Janice Pariat's title story, *Boats on Land,* the narrative unfolds as a profound exploration of the complex layers of female relationships and the awakening of sexual identity. This is set against the backdrop of Shillong and Chandmari, and the story navigates the interplay between traditional norms and modern influences, allowing for a nuanced exploration of identity, sexuality, and the fluidity of human connections. The narrator and her experience with a girl from Chandmari during a winter holiday visit encapsulate a same-sex relationship. Their bond emerges as a space for exploration and empowerment, enabling them to express themselves in ways that challenge heteronormativity

(Goswami 032). The narrator's reflection on their time spent together as "I can measure our days together by the number of times we went to the river" emphasises the significance of shared experiences, framing their brief interactions in a way that magnifies their emotional depth (Pariat *Boats on Land* 128). By stating that "ten in fourteen days" might seem insubstantial, Pariat challenges conventional notions of time and connection, suggesting that quality transcends quantity. The metaphor of the dragonfly, with its ephemeral existence of only twenty-four hours, powerfully represents the lesbian bond. Just as dragonflies live only for a short time, the narrator's encounter is brief yet transformative, allowing her to explore their identities and emotions in a way that feels timeless (128). This imagery reflects the theme of lesbian continuum, illustrating how even a brief period of bonding can resonate deeply within the psyche of young girls exploring their identities (Goswami 032). As Giti Thadani suggests, the shift from a narrow conception of lesbian identity centered solely on sexual desire to a broader understanding of inter-feminine connections allows for a more inclusive definition of what it means to be "lesbian". This perspective underscores that the bond between women can extend beyond mere sexual encounters, encompassing deep emotional, psychological, and spiritual connections (Thadani 10). In her analysis, Thadani posits that these desires exist along a continuum, suggesting that the expressions of female bonding vary depending on cultural and historical contexts. This aligns with Pariat's narrative style, where the relationships among female characters reflect an intricate tapestry of feelings, often blurring the lines between friendship and romantic desire. For instance, the narrator's relationship with the girl from Assam illustrates a profound emotional intimacy that transcends traditional notions of heterosexual relationships, revealing how female bonds can embody both desire and affection.

In another incident, Pariat examines a moment of vulnerability, where one character inquires about the other's holiday, yet the response is steeped in metaphor and implication. The phrase "I thought of you, your hands, your face" signifies a profound longing and an intimacy that transcends mere friendship, hinting at the complexity of their relationship (Pariat *Boats on Land* 141). The line "And folded them up, our secret lives' represents a conscious effort to conceal their identity, indicative of the societal pressures surrounding their identities. This act of folding away their "secret lives" highlights the struggle many people face today. The

concluding line, "I went to a lake and drowned," serves as a powerful metaphor for the suffocating nature of their concealed emotions, representing both a loss of self and a yearning for freedom. This encapsulates the essence of the lesbian continuum that Adrienne Rich and Giti Thadani discuss, where the intertwining of female bonds extends beyond physical interactions into the realm of shared experiences and emotional depth. Pariat masterfully captures the complexities of these relationships, illustrating how the characters navigate their identities in a world that often marginalises their identity . Through this lens, the story not only explores the intimacy of female bonds but also critiques the societal structures that confine them.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Pariat's *Seahorse* and *Boats on Land* intricately weave themes of queer identity and the complexities of desire, offering profound insights into the experiences of the characters, examining their sexualities within societal constraints. Through the lens of Adrienne Rich's concept of the lesbian continuum, Giti Thadani's exploration of inter-feminine eros, Pariat illuminates the multifaceted nature of female relationships. In *Seahorse*, the exploration of queer spaces provides a nuanced understanding of identity and the emotional landscapes of the characters, while *Boats on Land* emphasises the power of intimate female bonds in shaping one's self-perception and agency. By reimagining these connections and exploring the spaces beyond conformity, Pariat not only contributes to the discourse on queer literature but also challenges conventional notions of identity.

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Power, Prestige and Masculinity: The Impact of Headhunting on Gender Hierarchies in Naga Society

- K Vivikali Hesso

Abstract: The Naga tribes in Northeast India have long been linked to the custom of headhunting—an aspect that early colonial reports tended to sensationalize and portray them as barbaric and savages, but a cultural tradition with profound social and symbolic meanings seems to attach to it. This study delves into the reasons driving headhunting practices among the Naga people by examining its role not just as a tool of warfare but also as a pivotal element in shaping social structures and upholding gender roles within their society. Through an exploration of the functions and traditions linked to headhunting practices among the Naga community, this chapter reveals the role it played in shaping power dynamics and personal identities of Naga men. Moreover, it sheds light on the ignored contributions of women in these frameworks influenced by such customs, despite being excluded from the actual practice. The research in the chapter explores how headhunting went beyond violence to play a role in moulding the social structure and long-standing cultural traditions of the Naga community.

Keywords: Nagas; headhunting; social structure; Gender roles; cultural traditions

Introduction

The ancient custom of headhunting within the Naga tribes has been a topic of intrigue and discussion among researchers like colonial ethnographers, anthropologists and Naga authors for quite some time now. Though headhunting is no longer a practice and was not actively observed during the documentation by researchers in colonial times, its cultural value still holds a place in the collective memory of various Naga groups. In times, academics are promoting the study of headhunting with a word of caution, against making assumptions too confidently, because the motivations behind headhunting were diverse and intricate in nature. It was not just about violence; rather, it served as a means to elevate status and mark the transition into manhood while also reinforcing a chief's prestige or challenging rival tribes for supremacy or

for revenge. It also played a role in ensuring fertility in agriculture or seeking vengeance through planned rituals. Headhunting thus emerged as a symbolic tradition governed by a complex web of unwritten rules and specific cultural norms.

Anthropologists such as Janet Hoskins have provided insights into the nature of headhunting by defining it as a "coordinated and meaningful form of violence where the act of decapitation holds ritual significance and is revered and memorialized." This viewpoint highlights that headhunting was not simply a barbaric act of warfare, but it was a ceremonial tradition intertwined with social and political significance. The discontinuation of headhunting due to interference resulted in a transformation of socio-religious traditions. According to Hoskins, observations (59) modern reinterpretations of these customs are frequently reconstructed retrospectively.

Today's ethnographers and anthropologists are joined by Naga scholars in promoting an examination of these customs and stressing the need to go beyond oversimplified narratives. It is important to understand that headhunting was not an unchanging tradition; its practices differed over time and place, as well as within different social settings. It was intricately linked to power structures and notions of honour and manhood—serving as a means for men to establish their standing and respect among their peers in the community. The social impact of headhunting went beyond men. Influenced gender dynamics in ways that haven't been fully studied yet in literature. Through studying these interactions, this research aims to explore the motivations behind headhunting in Naga society by looking at how it shaped concepts of masculinity, power dynamics, and gender relationships.

This research aims to delve into the motivations behind headhunting practices within the Naga community. How they impact ideas of manliness and societal structure while also influencing gender dynamics within the community's hierarchy. Through an analysis of these aspects in detail, the study aims to add insights to discussions surrounding how violent ceremonies can mold and mirror wider social, cultural, and gender-related power dynamics.

The Cultural Logic of Headhunting: Motivations and Social Functions

Headhunting played a role in Naga society as an important tradition that was deeply intertwined with the social structure and beliefs of the community. Far from being a mere act of violence or bloodlust, it was also a way to maintain order and unity while also establishing status and connections within the community. To truly grasp the significance of headhunting, it's important to delve into its reasons behind it. How these customs influenced not only personal identity but also strengthened shared values among the people.

As David Zou (2005) argues, headhunting was more than just a violent ritual; it was a cultural practice laden with multiple meanings. Zou describes it as "a history, a heritage, a rhetorical trope, a discursive practice, a philosophy, a returning gaze from the other, and a space for contesting masculinity." By framing headhunting in these terms, Zou highlights the intricate layers of meaning embedded in the act—layers that go beyond warfare to touch on identity, power, and social cohesion. The act of head-taking not only established individual honour but also reinforced communal identity and inter-tribal competition, where the ability to protect one's village and dominate rivals was essential for survival.

Moreover, headhunting closely connected with socio-religious beliefs. T Penzu (2009) argues that headhunting was not simply a "random game of killing," but instead a tradition motivated by particular reasons, such as demonstrating one's strength and gaining acknowledgement, within the community. As Penzu points out, heads taken in battle were not considered trophies unless they were identifiable, with the honour of the warrior contingent on the recognition of his enemy. He writes, "Any unidentified head, no glory for the killer; only the identified head, treated as a big thrill" (Penzu 27). This demonstrates how taking someone's head held importance by placing emphasis on the victim's identity rather than just the violent act itself, which elevated the status of the warrior carrying out such actions through established customs and traditions meant to infuse purpose and significance into headhunting practices beyond mere bloodthirst.

Besides being a symbol of manliness and strength, in their culture, headhunting was also believed to hold spiritual and agricultural significance. Naga cosmology was deeply connected to fertility, life cycles, and the natural environment, and headhunting was seen as an essential practice to maintain this balance. J. H. Hutton (1928) explains that Naga religious beliefs were centered around fertility cults, with ceremonies marking the agricultural year. These ceremonies aimed to promote the growth of crops, and headhunting was seen as a way to channel life-giving energy into the soil (Hutton 401). The head of a slain enemy was believed to possess vital life force, which could be transferred to the village to ensure prosperity. Hutton records how the Tangkhul tribe placed heads on stone piles in the centre of their villages, and the Konyaks displayed them on stone tables near the chief's house, in the belief that the life force from the heads would "leak" into the village's stock (Hutton 136). This symbolic act of transferring life energy connected headhunting to the processes of life and death that had an impact on agricultural productivity and the general welfare of society.

Hutton (1936) further elaborates on this concept by noting the practice in Laruri village of the Naga Hills, where the deceased individuals were kept intact until the planting season arrived. Subsequently, their remains were interred alongside the crops to enable the transfer of "soul matter", to the fields, ensuring an abundant harvest (Hutton 137). This custom highlights the aspect of headhunting linking the act of taking a life to the prosperity and endurance of the community. He also further explains how these beliefs originated, saying that primitive men were observers who did not have any abstract terms of speech and only believed in concrete/tangible substances. In the same way, he explains that for the Naga people, life was understood not in abstract terms but as a concrete, tangible essence, often believed to reside in the head. The Naga community viewed life not as a concept but as something real and touchable that they believed was housed in the head region of a person's body. By procuring an enemy's head during battle, the warriors aimed to showcase their supremacy and also secure the well-being of their community by seizing this life essence.

This perspective, Hutton argues might have influenced the belief in the head's significance, as it was commonly seen as where a person's soul or life energy resided. The Ao Nagas, for instance, believed that the

movement of a baby's fontanel was a sign of the soul's activity within the head (Hutton, 1936:137). This belief highlights how significant the head was symbolically, in Naga culture, as it was thought to hold the power to harness and manage life force.

The act of headhunting held importance not only in agricultural contexts but also in shaping social structures and expectations related to gender roles within communities as a whole, according to T.C Hodson (1909). Hodson suggests that headhunting served purposes such, as settling disputes through blood feuds and being a part of rituals linked to agriculture and funerals, which contributed to shaping beliefs about the afterlife (143). A key aspect was the belief that achieving success in headhunting was seen as a sign of maturity and masculinity. A young man's ability to participate in a headhunting raid and return with a head signified his transition from adolescence to adulthood, allowing him to gain respect within his tribe. Hodson notes that success in headhunting was often essential for marriage, as it symbolised a man's ability to protect and provide for his family (Hodson 141). The shift was also associated with an acknowledgement, as noted by S. E. Peal in 1872 when he mentioned that a man who returned with a head ceased being viewed as a boy or woman but instead gained eligibility for village council involvement and elevated social status (Peal 1872).

Beyond shaping individuals' identities, headhunting was a practice that had regulations and norms in place to govern it effectively Temsula Ao (2014) notes that unauthorised killings were strongly condemned by society, and heads taken without proper sanction were considered taboo. These heads would not be honoured or displayed but destroyed (2014:21), which emphasizes the framework that guided headhunting as a sanctioned practice rather than an expression of uncontrolled violence.

Headhunting traditions went beyond killing. It involved strict rules and rituals, as highlighted by Hodson (1909). Warriors embarking on headhunting missions had to adhere to taboos such as being isolated from women and undergoing purification before and after the raid to signify the solemnity of their task as a sacred obligation rather than just a violent act (Hodson 142).

In Naga society's context, headhunting held value beyond mere aggression. It encompassed a multifaceted ritual that played varied roles in social dynamics and spiritual beliefs while also reflecting gender norms of the community. Its significance ranged from validating masculinity and societal standing to ensuring fertility and community well-being. Headhunting was intricately woven into the fabric of Naga traditions with its regulations and ceremonial rituals, underscoring its importance as a meaningful practice rather than a random act of violence. Moreover, the custom functioned within a defined societal framework that showcased the delicate harmony between existence and demise in Naga belief systems. Although colonial intrusion and contemporary influences have phased out headhunting as a practice, its deep impact on hierarchies, gender roles, and shared heritage persistently moulds the Naga sense of self in the present era.

Traditions and authority, in men's culture; Headhunting as a representation of honour

Headhunting among the Nagas was more than a strategy; it held significant cultural value by bestowing authority and respect on the warriors involved in the practice. The homecoming of these warriors after a headhunting expedition was commemorated with rituals unique to each Naga tribe, yet unified in their purpose of enhancing the standing of the warriors and solidifying their bravery within the society. The ceremonies were filled with traditions and tangible gifts to honour the warriors' efforts and commend his bravery appropriately beyond the raid itself, into the community, at shaping legacies of respect that would endure through generations to come.

One way to show prestige in the tribe was by giving shawls and symbolic clothing to headhunters as a representation of their status and achievements. Penzu (2009) in his reflections on the topic, mentioned that headhunters with high rank heads could wear shawls featuring images of human heads during festivals; however, those with lower ranks were not permitted to do so (Penzu 34). This distinction in clothing acted as an indicator of status and hierarchy within the community, where only the bravest warriors were allowed to wear such attire. Warriors were also given titles to honour their triumphs on the battlefield Penzu further writes, "for his victories in battles, villagers gave him great titles" (Penzu

130), demonstrating that headhunting was not just a means of physical conquest but a pathway to social and symbolic power.

Songs and oral traditions celebrated the practice of headhunting alongside titles and attire. Christoph von Furer Haimendorff recounted in his book "The Naked Nagas" the creation of a song called "White Head-hunter " dedicated to him, renowned for collecting four heads from the Konyak Naga Hills in 1939. The song praised the hero's quickness and power by comparing him to elements like the wind and storm: "The sahib came as the wind, as the storm is he over our land; he brings heads to us all, all men give him thanks" (Furer-Haimendorf 200). These songs didn't just highlight individual triumphs. Also preserved the tribe's shared history by immortalising the headhunters actions for upcoming generations.

Additionally, to that point about headhunters receiving recognition and respect that went beyond themselves and had an impact on their future generations as well. According to Penzu (2009), it was common for the titles given to warriors to be inherited by their offspring, and their grandchildren would also be named in honour of the actions of their ancestors (Penzu 130). This tradition of headhunting wasn't about achievements but also about creating a lasting heritage that bolstered the warrior's family line and raised their standing within society.

A further visible mark of a warrior's success was the tradition of tattoos, a symbol of a warrior's triumph in battle. They were specifically earned by those who showcased their courage on the battlefield rather than just for ornamentation purposes, as they served as a lasting testament to the warrior's valour and accomplishments. According to Pusutsu's account in an interview with the BBC, where he mentioned that these chest tattoos were exclusively for the courageous warriors who had claimed victory in battles, he said,

> We brought back heads, and we brought back feet. And warriors were worshipped like Gods. Here the tattoos on my chest, they are not tattooed easily. Only those who have taken heads, only the brave warriors can have these tattoos on the chest… (BBC 2016).

He further explains that these tattoos were thought to guarantee a warrior's position in the afterlife, where souls without markings would be deprived of sustenance and drink. This belief underscores the importance

of the ritual as it signified that taking a head went beyond mere battlefield actions and held deep spiritual significance

The tattoos held meanings for the warriors and were often associated with their animalistic characteristics believed to be possessed by them. For example, those warriors who returned with enemy heads could proudly display a 'V'-shaped pattern on their chests called the "Tiger Chest," a reference to the belief that they became "tiger-like" when stalking and killing their enemies (Krutak, 2020:196). The connection between the warrior and the tiger as a symbol of strength and fierceness emphasized the warriors' position in the community.

Enough men's tattoos symbolized successes; however, women's tattoos, within specific Naga clans like the Konyaks had connections to the achievements and deeds carried out by their male family members. In one of the interviews with an old woman by Lars Krutak mentions how she received tattoos on her body against their will when a male relative claimed a trophy head reflecting that "illustrious heroes dwelled in her lineage". (Krutak 2020:196). The tattoos adorned by these women did not represent their choices. Served as a public display of their family's achievements and highlighted the role of gender, in showcasing status and the gendered dimensions of prestige within Naga culture.

Besides the signs of status and power associated with headhunting practices, in cultures like the Naga tribe's society in India's Northeastern region and Myanmar's Northwestern parts during the early 20th century J.H.Hutton (1928), there was a strong connection between these rituals and traditional beliefs about masculinity and fertility as suggested by Hutton (1928). In this way, headhunting not only elevated a man's social status but also portrayed him as a desirable partner, capable of ensuring the continuation of his lineage. Headhunting quickly emerged as a symbol of masculinity and heroism within the Naga community's fabric, according to historical accounts like John Butler's (1847). In one portrayal of celebration shared by Butler is that of a revered warrior likened himself to forces of nature and animals—such as thunder and lightning or the tiger and hawk—bragging about his might and bravery: "In the world I am the most powerful and courageous; there is none equal to me. I am the greatest of all men" (Butler 160-161). This statement showcases the belief that warriors were anticipated to showcase their strength by

engaging in headhunting activities and then asserting their authority and supremacy within the community structure. These festivities not only celebrated the prowess of the warrior but also reiterated the societal expectations associating manliness with aggression, prowess, and dominance.

Headhunting in Naga society went beyond a tradition. It was a well-organized system that bestowed great power and respect on the men involved in it. By means of rituals and rewards such as tattoos and titles headhunting established a warrior's position in the order and established a model of masculinity that valued strength and loyalty to the community. The influence of these customs lasted for generations, imprinting the ideals of courage and heroism into the heritage of Naga society.

Women's positions within hierarchies. The dominance of masculinity.

In Naga society and other tribal communities alike, a patriarchal system has played a role for generations. This societal structure has been greatly influenced by values of warfare and headhunting, which have historically fostered masculine ideologies. The gender hierarchy that stems from the dominance of men over women has had an impact on the social, political, and economic positions of women in the community. While this system provides women with some degree of autonomy compared to communities in India, it still marginalizes them in aspects such as political influence, property rights, and involvement in societal affairs. The tradition of headhunting, which holds significance, in Naga society, has deepened this gender gap by upholding a male identity that places emphasis on male leadership and bravery while restricting women to traditional household and childbearing roles.

Naga women in the past had some freedoms. Their status was primarily determined by norms that valued activities like headhunting and warfare associated with masculinity. Pou (2015) highlights that while Naga women are believed to have a status in society compared to others... The extent of their freedom is open to debate (164). Naga women did not encounter issues, like dowry and female infanticide, that affected women in other regions of India; however, they were mostly sidelined from influential roles in the economic and political spheres for a long

time. This marginalisation is not an occurrence. Dates back to historical customs such as headhunting, which laid the groundwork for social hierarchy based on male accomplishments.

In Naga society, at the time, women mostly worked in farming and household tasks, which reinforced the hierarchy between genders, and men took part in headhunting activities, having a higher social status than women, even though women's contribution was also vital for the community's survival. According to an article in the American Baptist Missionary Magazine from 1839, "the anarchical state of the country rendered it necessary for men to be always ready for an assault and women to cultivate fields" (286). This distinct division of roles for men and women accentuated the belief that men were seen as defenders and fighters, while women were viewed as nurturers with their often-underappreciated contributions in society at large.

In the Naga society's context regarding women's role significance, their importance is often associated more with their connections to men than their individual accomplishments, as mentioned earlier about the Konyak women's tattoos. Cultural significance portrays how women's tattoo symbolism primarily reflects the exploits and narratives attributed to their family members rather than personal bravery markers. This illustrates how her social standing was not based on her deeds but on the successes achieved by the warriors in her family. This symbolic connection between a woman's markings and the triumphs attributed to headhunters further solidified the belief that women held secondary roles and their worth was predominantly reliant on the achievements made by the men around them.

The traditional gender structure stemming from the practice of headhunting also influenced how women were involved in economic matters, among the Naga people. As Longkumer (2017) notes, Naga women have been doubly marginalized: first by the patriarchal social system and second by the stringent tribal laws that limit their participation in larger social activities and their access to resources (258) This dual marginalization ensured that women were excluded from positions of power, particularly those related to land ownership and leadership roles, which were reserved exclusively for men.

In the past, within a male-dominated society, Naga culture and traditions caused Naga women to face oppression, but in times after colonial rule ended, there have been positive changes, mainly due to the impact of education, according to Easterine Kire (2016). Kire notes that compared to fifty years ago, Naga women now have opportunities, and there are women in various fields today who have received education and excelled beyond traditional gender roles, which were predominantly male-dominated. Changkija (2017) also discusses this shift by mentioning that Naga women are enthusiastically embracing education and making strides in intellectual pursuits as well as to some extent, in the economic realm. Nevertheless, this advancement has sparked opposition, from men who still hold onto beliefs of women being reliant and submissive. The apprehension towards the " Naga woman" as described by Changkija, highlights the conflict between traditional gender norms and the changing role of women in Naga society.

Despite all the progress made in areas of society, Naga women still encounter ongoing challenges that stem from the historical practice of headhunting and the associated traits of masculinity that came with it. The traditions and rules established within the context of a society continue to be predominantly male-oriented, which hinders women's involvement in decision-making processes and economic matters. Although Naga women have seen improvements in education. Are gradually embrace fields traditionally dominated by men the lasting effects of the headhunting era persist in shaping gender dynamics and upholding a position for women in various aspects of their lives. Despite the opportunities that education and modernity have brought to Naga women and the progress made in aspects of their lives, some remnants of the system still linger on as a challenge to their complete involvement in the community's socio-political affairs. The crucial inquiry at hand is how Naga society could harmonise these age values with the ambitions of a cohort of educated and empowered women.

Conclusion

Headhunting within Naga society went beyond violence. It held symbolic value that influenced and maintained the community's social hierarchies and gender roles in a profound manner. It played a vital role in asserting male authority by bestowing power and respect on those involved in the

practice. Headhunting rituals played a role in shaping a type of masculinity that elevated warriors to the highest status in society through practices like granting titles and wearing symbolic clothing and tattoos, while singing traditional songs to honour them. But this practice left a lasting impact, beyond honouring fighters, it also upheld a social hierarchy that marginalized women by limiting their roles to home and farm duties in the Naga society. Even though Naga women were spared from some of the social evils prevalent in other parts of India, their lack of influence in politics and economics highlighted the pervasive patriarchal norms ingrained in their cultural heritage. In today's world, the effects of these customs still linger as they wrestle with the legacies of their history. Education and progress have given Naga women the power to question gender norms and strive for more independence. However, the lasting impact of values from the era of headhunting continues to present obstacles in the quest for gender equality. This study has given an insight into how headhunting was connected with authority, respect, and gender within the Naga community, revealing how these age-old traditions still impact the dynamics of society today.

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Songs of Defiance: Unveiling Patriarchy, Resilience and the Musical Soul in Rima Das's films *Village Rockstars* and *Bulbul Can Sing*

- Subhashree Rakshit

Abstract: In the ancient tapestries of rural Assam, where a dominant patriarchy weaves a seemingly unbreakable chain around the lives of women, there exists a rebellious tune, a whisper of defiance, yearning to be heard. Resonating such notions through evocative narratives, prominent director Rima Das's films *Village Rockstars* and *Bulbul Can Sing* emerge as luminous beacons of hope and transformation. This chapter investigates how the films offer a profound commentary on the effects of patriarchal oppression, challenging the lives of rural women. Falling back on the convergence of melody, gender roles and social restrictions, the chapter further studies the ways in which the young female protagonists harness their creative strengths and redefine the boundaries imposed upon them, thereby orchestrating a symphony of resistance that echoes through the very fabric of their lives. A take on cinematic techniques will also be attempted to provide detailed insights into Das's directorial choices and the tumultuous lives of these coming of age girls. These aspects are analysed by employing the methodology of gender studies, film studies, sociology and cultural studies broadly. Finally, the chapter will try to infer Das's autobiographical contexts and personal recollections that made way into the films, contributing to wider discourses on social change and women's empowerment.

Keywords: Patriarchy, resilience, music, cinematic techniques, gender dynamics

Introduction:

"A woman with a voice is, by definition, a strong woman."

Melinda Gates' words directly drive in the notion as to why women, since time immemorial, have been subjugated and rendered voiceless. Patriarchy fears rebellious women, bold enough to utter their opinions, and all the conventional norms set every time focus on how an ideal woman should be. In the culturally ric h yet often patriarchal landscape of Assam, a state located in the north-eastern part of India, the plight of women unfolds against a backdrop of tradition and modernity, where societal expectations frequently stifle individual expressions. The Femme

First Foundation analysed reports released by the National Family Health Survey, claiming that almost 32% of women in Assam aged 20-24 years got married even before reaching the minimum age of 18 years. This leads to critical conditions faced during childbirth, and in lieu of all these, education is severely compromised. In addition, the school-going girls are expected to distance themselves from their male friends and succumb to the traditional roles of lending their hands in domestic duties as well, sometimes to the extent of suppressing their passions as often beautifully captured by many of the regional movies. The Indian film industry churns out dozens of films belonging to different genres every year, and the audience looks for stories that would pull at their heartstrings and educate them on more socially relevant issues, thereby leading to a change in the near future. *Village Rockstars* and *Bulbul Can Sing* provide justice to this and emerge as crucial artistic responses offering a poignant examination of gender dynamics and the challenges faced by women in pursuit of autonomy.

Methodology:

The methodology for this study employs an interdisciplinary approach, integrating gender studies, film studies, sociology and cultural studies to comprehensively analyze the representation of patriarchy and resilience in these works. Initially, a close textual analysis of the films is conducted to identify and interpret key themes, character arcs and narrative structures that reflect the sociocultural dynamics of Assam.It is then complemented by a feminist lens, scrutinizing how the films portray female agency, identity and resistance against patriarchal constraints. Furthermore, sociological frameworks are utilized to contextualize the lived experiences of women in Assam, examining how these films resonate with or challenge existing social norms and gender roles. Cultural studies broadly provide insight into the broader implications of media representation, exploring how Das's work interacts with local traditions, musical elements, and community narratives, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of cultural identity. This mixed-methods approach not only elucidates the ways in which Das's films serve as vehicles of defiance but also highlight the intricate interplay between art, culture, and social transformation in contemporary Assam, ultimately enriching the discourse surrounding women's rights and empowerment.

Narrative Alchemy: Transforming Structure into Emotion

The auteur theory, developed by two French critics Andre Bazin and Alexandre Astruc focuses on giving the director the sole credit of filmmaking and in this approach to studying films, three premises are considered: the 'technique', 'personal style,'and 'interior meaning'(Devi and Prakash 195). True to this, Rima Das makes sure that the mode of narration in both her films create a profound emotional resonance that invites viewers into the heart of rural Assam. She utilizes a non-linear narrative style, weaving together moments of joy, sorrow and self-discovery, effectively capturing the essence of the protagonists' journey.

Village Rockstars centres around a young girl named Dhunu, whose dream of forming a rock band reflects her yearning for freedom and self-expression. Being the daughter of a widowed mother, she is often caught between her desire to enjoy life like her elder brother and male friends and embracing femininity so as to become an ideal domestic help. She is often warned by the village women to avoid male company and is forced to do odd jobs so as to accumulate enough money for purchasing a guitar of her own. Living in a flood-prone area, for Dhunu and the rest of the villagers, swimming is a survival skill they will need to learn if they are to adapt to the onslaught of monsoon floods (Mukherjee 1138). In the absence of a father figure, Dhunu's mother, though extremely poor and struggling to make ends meet, makes sure that her children get a proper education and strive forward in their lives. Rima Das further captures various shots of Dhunu's predicaments standing in the lap of nature, depicting a liminal discourse between the character and the environment, between thoughts and action, all captured in a second's frame (Mukherjee 1138). Nature's atrocities are well projected in the backdrop of the Assam flood, as while crossing an embankment, Dhunu comments that her father might have been alive if the villagers had constructed an embankment earlier. While traversing the river on a boat with her mother, she once again states that her father would not have been swept away by the flood if only he knew how to swim. Both these instances clearly reveal the emotional connection that she shared with her father and her subtle belief that their condition probably would have been better only if her father were alive.

In contrast, *Bulbul Can Sing* follows the story of Bulbul, a teenage girl navigating the complexities of love, adolescence and societal

expectations. The film is about the everydayness of the shared moments of Bulbul, Bonnie and Suman, whether at home, in school or in the fields. It's about a rare, intimate bond that transcends the man-woman divide. Whether it's a budding romance, the secret date, petty jealousy or Bulbul's shyness that comes in the way of her singing, the problems don't appear to be insurmountable or seem threatening enough to rock their idyll (Joshi). Rooted in the daily rhythms of rural Assam, this film also centres around nature at the backdrop of the themes of feminism, gender, sexual identity and moral policing, in a way causing the tragedy of Bonnie's suicide to be crucial for Bulbul to finally find her voice. "Don't worry. If you listen to people, your life will be ruined. Do what your heart says. Look! There is a rainbow. Look! Up there…Yes! After a long time!" This is the note the wonderful masterpiece 'Bulbul Can Sing' ends on and leaves the viewer with mixed feelings of hope and the fear of the unknown, urging every audience to sing and claim their story as they like(Dee).

Cadence of Courage with Rhythm of Passion:

Music, with its lyrical poignancy often unveils the subtle interplay between masculinity and femininity with exquisite finesse, thereby engendering a profound exploration of the psyche's labyrinthine corridors. *Village Rockstars* portrays Dhunu's determination as palpable, for she gathers her friends to enjoy concerts or practice music despite societal expectations that her focus should be on household duties. Dhunu's biggest supporter is his mother, who doesn't discriminate between her son and daughter and emphasises that both handle domestic duties equally. One of the noteworthy scenes in the film is internalised misogyny as more than the men, the women of Chhayagaon village tend to have a clear vision that as a girl, it's improper for young Dhunu to enjoy male company. They publicly humiliate her, which, however, is retaliated by her mothe,r who bravely defends her daughter, thinking it absolutely fit for Dhunu to live her life on her own terms.

Despite being poverty-stricken, Dhunu's mother encourages her passion for music and, with her little savings, manages to gift her a guitar at the end of the film, something which is hard to imagine in a rural setting where women are trained to remain mute right from their childhood. Thus, in a place unencumbered by the social media debates regarding

women's empowerment, the film shows that a little bit of support and empathy can liberate a girl in the truest sense. When Dhunu starts menstruating, it is celebrated as a function in the village, which once again her mother takes the least interest in. For her, it is more essential for Dhunu to learn swimming and be able to save herself from all atrocities. *Village Rockstars* therefore, tries to tell its viewers that an act of empowerment can be as simple and non-dramatic as treating a girl like a human being and letting her decide her own dreams and happiness(Borah). The fact that she survives the flood and manages to continue her musical endeavours along with her friends acts as a beacon of hope for definite improvement of women from lower strata of society.

The title *Bulbul Can Sing* profoundly encapsulates the theme of the film, serving both as a metaphor and a declaration of the protagonist's journey. The term 'bulbul', a type of nightingale known for its beautiful singing, reflects Bulbul's own aspirations, as her father wishes her to be a singer, and she, on the other hand, leaves the territory completely to her friend Bonnie who possesses a melodious voice. Patriarchal oppression is primarily mitigated to Suman, who is criticised for having female friends despite being a 'man.' He is abused, beaten up repeatedly and the idea that homosexuality can exist and is quite normal is far beyond the understanding of the rustic folks. Bulbul's first attempt at singing in front of the public at her father's request fails miserably, which disheartens her family and increases her guilt. Apart from her friends, Bonnie's mother is the only person she finds comfort in and the three eagerly shared all their feelings with her. Tragedy is, however, struck when the villagers catch Bulbul and Bonnie caressing their boyfriends on their way back home from school. While the boys are less targeted, the girls suffer more and, despite being good students are expelled from their school.

This singular incident changed the trajectory of their lives as Bulbul turns mute with shame and sorrow, and Bonnie, unable to bear the taunts any longer, jumps into the river and willingly dies. The insensitivity of the villagers, most of whom were women, can be noted even after her death as in front of the bereaved mother, they go on discussing how the girl should have controlled herself, the mother's life is destroyed and that she might roam in the surroundings as a wandering spirit. Considering love and attraction to be common human feelings, it is right to say that the elders failed to teach the youngsters correctly, owing to which the

punishment becomes too severe on them. Later on, Bulbul becomes the only source of hope to Bonnie's mother, helping her in her household duties as well as seeking solace in her, something which she never gets from her own mother. As the movie draws to an end, it becomes clear that the same Bulbul who was an introvert and upset at her not-so-melodious voice, sheds all her inhibitions and strives forward to be someone who can sing, meaning can rise above all oppressive forces simply by listening to herself.

Beyond the lens: The intersection of personal experience and fiction

Meenakshi Shedde, a film curator, critic, and South Asia consultant to the Berlin film festival states, "In terms of both the making and consumption of cinema, smaller, digital devices are the future" (Sinha). While making these films, both of which are close to Das's heart for she herself hailed from rural Assam, she incorporates the use of natural lighting which creates a sense of authenticity, bathing the scenes in warm hues. *Village Rockstars* was shot entirely on a Canon digital handheld camera and edited on a laptop with only one assistant, her cousin(Sinha). "The various people from the past who have had an influence on her are visible in her filmmaking, but she uses these techniques to have a voice of her own. Each scene is meticulous, slow,builds on the story or the character and much like Satyajit Ray, Renoir and others, a lot of the stills in the movies are outside, they perfectly showcase the surroundings that she wants to highlight"(Patel). The camera's movement further mimics the spontaneity of Dhunu and her playmates' adventures, which also echoes Das's memory of her own childhood, thereby bridging the gap between personal narrative and cinematic storytelling.

Additionally, the integration of music plays a critical role in the film, serving as both a narrative device and a reflection of cultural identity. The vibrant songs performed by the children encapsulate their dreams and aspirations, creating a rhythmic pulse that drives the story forward. This musicality resonates Das's own connection to her cultural roots, grounding the film in authenticity while celebrating the joy of self-expression. Through the use of natural sounds, like the rustling of leaves and calls of villagers, the filmmaker further crafts an immersive auditory experience that reflects the daily realities of rural life. Interesting even, most of the actors are amateur and from the villages, thereby indicating

that the stories are as much about the characters as they are about the village(Patel).

The use of close-ups in *Bulbul Can Sing* emphasizes Bulbul's emotional depth, capturing the nuances of her expressions during moments of joy and sorrow. These intimate frames draw viewers into her internal conflict, allowing for a more profound connection with her character. Das's personal experiences as a young woman navigating similar societal challenges can be traced, and the film has received a lot of national and international appreciation in terms of awards and fame. The pacing of editing also contributed to the overall mood. In moments of tension, quick cuts heighten the sense of urgency, capturing Bulbul's emotional turmoil. Conversely, slower transitions during reflective moments allow for a deeper contemplation of her desires and fears, inviting the audience to empathise with her journey. While the use of cross-cutting juxtaposes Bulbul's personal moments against the harsh realities of the environment, the inclusion of montages creates a sense of community and collective experience. As her struggle for acceptance deepens, the movie completely grasps the audience and the brilliant thought that went into the making of the film definitely deserves much credit.

Conclusion:

With all due respect to mainstream Bollywood films, it can be said that the regional cinemas often enlighten common people in ways never known before. The most significant reason for this is relatability as filmmakers of such movies draw stories from the downtrodden sections of society, enabling the subalterns to occupy a platform to be seen and heard. Similarly, *Village Rockstars* and *Bulbul Can Sing* showcase in a simple, subtle way the inherent feminist traits and the challenges incurred while fighting against social evils. Malala Yousafzai's vision, "I raise up my voice — not so that I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard … we cannot all succeed when half of us are held back" (Yousafzai), finds resonance here as the protagonists undertake tumultuous journeys for a more liberated rural community. The main aim is always to consider women equally important as men, which this chapter addresses via a thorough examination of the films. Along with celebrating the courage to pursue one's dreams in the face of adversity, the films will forever resonate as a powerful testament to the

transformative power of art and the enduring spirit of youth, leaving a lasting impact on viewers.

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Exploring Queer Identities in Assamese Literature: Heterotopia, Resistance, and the Liminal Spaces of LGBTQ+ Narratives

- Apurv Shahi

Abstract: The concept of identity has evolved and expanded from Descartes' cogito to the postmodern era, including fluidity and acquiring new aspects. Identity continues to be a significant rhetorical tool for those who do not identify as heterosexual. Butler's concept of gender as performative has played a crucial role in the discussion of LGBT individuals who challenge the assumption of obligatory heterosexuality. Examining the environments in which non-heteronormative individuals exist is crucial for comprehending their actual experiences. This research aims to comprehend the intense and disruptive nature of liminal and alternative locations by using the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia. Additionally, they serve as locations where resistance and transgression occur. The production areas of Assamese literature are mostly influenced by the heterosexual ideology, which has hegemonic control. Non-heteronormative individuals are found in marginalized and peripheral places, without a clearly defined role. Queer tales originating from Assam exemplify a novel trajectory in this respect. The works analyzed by Moushumi Kandali, Aruni Kashyap, and Panchanan Hazarika explore how narratives from Assam depict the actual experiences of the LGBTQ+ community. These narratives also examine the geographical aspect of same-sex desire and how they address the existential validity of non-heteronormative individuals in shaping their sense of self.

Keywords: Identity, Descartes' cogito, Postmodern identity, Fluidity, Rhetorical tool, Non-heterosexual, Butler, Gender performativity

Amidst the profusion of discourses on identity, the postmodern perspective characterizes it as 'in flux,' while the Butlerian concept of gender fluidity and performativity has enabled queers to adopt a flexible identity that transcends the gender binary. The word 'Queer' serves as an umbrella designation for many sexual and gender identities that deviate from heterosexual norms and conventions. Queer studies originated as an academic field in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It presented a political stance of both solidarity and opposition that contested dominant heterosexual narratives and rejected the subordination of

sexual minorities. Initially, the word 'queer' refer red only to the lesbian and homosexual community; however, it has now expanded to include any non-heterosexual individuals who confront and contest normative standards. The concept of 'identification' has used as a rhetorical tool for non-heterosexual individuals. These tools stimulate a debate that interrogates the politics of power and domination. As 'queer', each person experiences distinct lived realities. Nonetheless, acknowledging one's sexuality, disclosing that sexual identity publicly, forming connections with others from a similar group, and confronting social pressures are prevalent experiences among queer individuals.

The LGBTQ identity is influenced by experiences of rejection, abjection, and subjection by the prevailing patriarchal power system. Marginalized, queer individuals favor flexible expressions of gender and sexuality by challenging the erroneous concept of forced heterosexuality. They embrace the plasticity of corporeality and sexuality while contesting hetero-patriarchal oppression. Nonetheless, the bodies of queer individuals provide a possible locus for the denial of identity according to the standards dictated by a heterosexist society. Heteronormativity, by its oppressive mechanisms, compels queer individuals to endure subjection and marginalization. This thus traumatizes marginalized individuals as they navigate their existence inside a homophobic culture. As a result, individuals who exist outside the binary framework find their identity residing in a liminal space

The liminal area offers individuals the chance to reconfigure their identity and to challenge prevailing societal norms. The identification of LGBT individuals, unencumbered by society established rules, allows the liminal zone to empower them to reconstruct and negotiate their identities. This highlights the plasticity of LGBT identity. Anzaldua (2002) asserts, "This liminal space of identity can be 'unstable, unpredictable, precarious,

Similarly, queer individuals experience a feeling of alienation when entering the defined realms of the gender binary. They traverse their identities, and as a result of this continual navigation, a permanent place cannot be established. This transition into new realms presents a novel epistemic horizon that empowers the LGBT community, granting them unique knowledge and authority. However, the relevant inquiry is, how is

a queer place delineated? According to Ebmeier and Bovermann (2018),

> A queer space is any space that enables its occupants to perform queerness. Such a space allows for the visibility of queerness. . . Instead of inverting hierarchies and enacting a reversal of the normative order, these places attempt to negotiate and perform alternatives (288)

Therefore, the queer space is shaped by sexual minorities and it "allegedly facilitates the visibility of sexual subcultures that challenge and disrupt the dominant heterosexuality that underlies their marginalization and exclusion" (Oswin, 2008, p.90). Foucault developed the notion of heterotopias, providing a new dimension to the spatial debate about societal space use. In his 1967 lecture "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," Foucault characterized heterotopias as locations that are both 'existing' and 'non-existing,' situated between the realms of the real and the utopian. These are areas that are marginalized, locations that exist externally while being interconnected with all other locales. In *The Order of Things* (1966), Foucault characterized heterotopias as discursive, existing solely within language; however, in "Of Other Spaces," he depicted heterotopia as a tangible space for bodies, exemplified by "counter sites" such as asylums, prisons, gardens, colonies, cemeteries, brothels, and boats. Heterotopias promote a restructuring of the social framework, serving as a crucial counter-hegemonic site of resistance. In her 2009 article "Queer Heterotopias: Homonormativity and the Future of Queerness," Angela Jones elucidates.

> Queer heterotopias are material spaces where radical practices go unregulated. They are sites where actors, whether academics or activists, engage in what we might call a radical politics of subversion, where individuals attempt to dislocate the normative configurations of sex, gender, and sexuality through daily exploration and experimentation with crafting a queer identity. (47)

Queer heterotopias provide a refuge for non-heteronormative persons to establish their own environment, allowing them to exist and navigate in an empowered manner, liberated from all forms of marginalization and domination.With the advent of spatial literary studies, researchers have explored the depiction of places in the many intersections of fiction and reality. Queer individuals have been systematically denied

representation and excluded from several recorded realms in history and literature. In predominant literature and many mediums such as cinema and theater, LGBT individuals are systematically marginalized, mocked, and humiliated. Hence, these representations of gay individuals prevail in the consciousness of the heterosexist society. Butler's concept of gender performativity challenges the ontological foundation of the heteronormative gender system, asserting that this disciplinary authority renders queerness as deviant. However, the relevant inquiry is what constitutes normalcy or nature? Who determines what is considered normal or natural? This concept must be considered while discussing LGBTQ individuals. The significance of queer tales lies in their exploration of identities, environments, and lived experiences. Thus, examining the environments inhabited by non-heteronormative individuals and its literary depiction is essential for comprehending their lived experiences. Literature is intricate and may examine the multiple lived realities of LGBT individuals while elucidating the politics behind these experiences.

However, the critical inquiry here is how queer places are represented and reclaimed in literary works. Have there been any initiatives to provide alternate locations for individuals within the LGBT community, since they are excluded from traditional binary gendered environments? To contest the heteronormative conception of space, the literary portrayal and reclaiming of queer places are imperative. In conventional fiction, the gay character exists on the margins, in the interstices. Queer narratives may contest the perceived naturalness of prevailing heteronormative discourses by creating opportunities for a revised comprehension of gender and sexuality. Queer narratives may integrate these intangibilities into the social fabric and promote awareness for good change.

In Assamese literature, heterosexual ideology predominates the dominant knowledge creation of places. Non-heteronormative individuals inhabit interstitial areas and are unable to assert a particular positionality. Queer tales from Assam provide a relevant contribution in this context. They depict the actual experiences of LGBT individuals. These tales signify a new trajectory in the development of an inclusive society. Therefore, a thorough examination of these tales is essential. Queer narratives may contest the heterosexual spatial arrangements seen in mainstream narratives and hegemonic socio-cultural practices of

society. Rather than subverting hierarchies and reversing the normative order, these locations seek to discuss and implement alternatives. These accounts illustrate the emergence of queer spaces and identities as arenas of contestation and resistance, accompanied by a recognition of diversity. The texts analyzed are the fictional tales by Moushumi Kandali, Aruni Kashyap, and Panchanan Hazarika. In these tales, the narrators convey a queer aspect of identity and the societal settings they inhabit while articulating their experiential realities. The struggle for recognition and societal acceptability is an enduring challenge for those living at the margins of the social framework.

Moushumi Kandali's tale "Tritiyattar Golpo" (A Tale of Thirdness), released in 2007, is a distinguished work including a gay topic. The narrative has a queer professor as its protagonist, detailing the pain, social rejection, suffering, and isolation he experiences, as well as his efforts to confront cultural conventions and his quest to dismantle gender stereotypes. All these concerns are depicted in a dramatic narrative in which the professor is perpetually drawn to the concept of thirdness. This tale illustrates the societal rejection of the LGBT identity, characterized by derision, torment, targeting, marginalization, and the invasion of personal sanctuaries. The narrator describes the alteration in the Professor's look as he internalizes homophobia and conforms to societal expectations, resulting in a transformation of his visage.

> ...his face would look like the digital conversion of Tutankhamen's death mask. Was it a face or death-in-wings? Faces change according to variations in context. And we have to wait for life to teach us this simple, common truth, practically known to everybody. (Phukan 284)

The professor's face metamorphosis reveals the suffering and humiliation experienced by LGBT individuals, while also serving as a form of resistance against the dominant patriarchal metanarrative. It illustrates how non-heteronormative individuals are compelled to adhere to societal dictates. This text examines Butler's concept of gender performativity, defined as the "stylized repetition of acts" necessary to attain a certain gender. Continuous performance of certain socially created bodily actions establishes a particular gender identity in accordance with socio-cultural norms. The Professor's nonconformity has resulted in his donning the metaphorical mask of Tutankhamun. The

symbolic mask of Tutankhamen worn by the Professor symbolizes resistance, serving as a stiff obstruction to the many conventions dictated by heterosexual society. Nonetheless, his inner essence metamorphosed him into his authentic self, whereby he chooses to identify as a lady, a dancer, and a mother. The narrator observes his fluid identity manifested as he transforms into a seductress on stage, prompting an exclamation.

> I saw a braid flow out of your head, two breasts bloom on your masculine chest, breasts firming in eager anticipation of touch. . . you had generated such an incredible phenomenon- three doors on three sides— on the right, door of the known, on the left, the door of the unknown, and in between, there was another door — the door of perception- you had advanced, slowly, to the third door in the middle- on you walked—oh, that was the first time I had seen you — and on the same day, I had seen two of your faces… (Phukan 285)

The Professor said, "One day you will witness my third visage." This prompts the narrator to interrogate his fixation on "thirdness":Consequently, the professor's fluid identity, transcending social confines to a third realm, becomes an act of transgression that enables the expression of his fluid gender. Chris Jenks defines transgression as "to exceed the boundaries or limits established by commandment, law, or convention; it is to violate or infringe…[a] reflexive act of denial and affirmation" (2). For the gay community, transgression is an act of contesting the heterosexual power system while also reclaiming their own territory. It is a transitional area that promotes essential reorganization.

The work attacks stereotyped concepts of gender identity in accordance with patriarchal conventions, advocating for gender flexibility. The concept of motherhood has been scrutinized. Motherhood is not only contingent upon being a woman. The narrator asserts,

> Oh, how uselessly are we trapped in our stereotyped definitions— we think motherhood is only for women. But motherhood is only a concept— who says it is defined by gender, physicality? One does not require a womb to be a mother—all one needs is a womb of sensitivity and emotion. That is why that scrap of life sleeps in his lap—born to him—Mahadevi grows in his womb of emotion. (Phukan 289)

The narrator presents mothering as a counter to the repressive structure of patriarchy. An intervention in the institution of motherhood must start by interrogating the fundamental categories of experience and power (Kawash 979). Therefore, the professor's desire to envision Akka Mahadevi and to own her as his progeny is realized, although in a symbolic sense. The last phrases provide the narrative its final impetus.

> Third! Third again! Third —third— third— why was he so obsessed with the third number — the number three? He preferred a hotel room with the number 3. He was fond of cubism. His favourite story was "The Third Bank of the River". Shivas's third eye. The three dimensional representation — the reality of the third world. . . (Phuka 285)

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> One day, one day Mahadevi will tell the people around her– pour her heart out to the trees and earth and wind– "You see

> that man–sailing away in the boat in solitude on those deep water–he is my mother…@ (Phukan 290)

The narrative seeks to highlight the concept of gender fluidity, asserting that individuals may assert their identity via performativity. Subsequent to Enders, Angella Okawa (2015) asserts:

> In a world that prefers binary identity, those whose identity lives in this in between space feel pressure to claim one end of polarity and reject the other. Rather than being a transitional space, the liminal is, for these individuals, a permanent home. (3)

The metaphor of navigating the river towards the third bank represents the protagonist's voyage to a queer space that serves as a liberated, alternative realm where dominant hetero-sexist discourses no longer govern bodies and identities. This is a queer heterotopia where people may investigate and engage with their wants. For Foucault, the boat epitomizes heterotopia since it exists in a movable condition, being both tangible and transient, and eluding monitoring. According to Foucault (1986),

> Boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea. . . The boat has been for our civilization the greatest reserve of the imagination. (27)

Foucault posits that heterotopia has the capacity to provide alternatives to the prevailing spaces that govern social structure. Within the heterotopic confines of the boat, the Professor may envision departure and the exhilaration of sailing away. In this context, loneliness intertwines with a feeling of camaraderie, and the present becomes temporally diverse with an anticipated future.

Aruni Kashyap's narrative "His Father's Disease" (2019) recounts the experience of Anil, a homosexual individual living with his mother at the peak of insurgency issues in Assam. Initially, Anil is seen engaging in a sexual relationship with his lover, and upon discovering his homosexual status, his mother Neerumoni is unable to accept it. She lamented, believing that 'he had inherited his father's affliction.' (page 118) She saw a homosexual relationship between her bisexual husband, Horokanto, and her brother, Nilambor. Thereupon, she associates Anil's homosexual inclination with her husband's bisexuality and asserts that it constitutes a disorder. This prevalent negative view about the LGBT community adversely impacts their mental health, leading to self-isolation and a life

in secrecy. Anil's design of an outhouse represents an architectural environment, a heterotopia, where LGBT people occupy, characterized by intimacy and comfort. All forms of discrimination, including homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny, are strictly banned. Foucault discusses the move from 'heterotopia of crisis' to 'heterotopia of deviation.' (1986, p. 25) Anil has a crisis at home, where his mother constantly criticizes him, leading to a sense of confinement and distress in his living environment. Accordingly, he transitions to the outhouse, symbolizing the heterotopia of deviance. The confined area of the outhouse serves as a liberated environment for Anil. The home may serve as an environment of homophobia, as seen by his mother's rejection of his homosexual identity.

Therefore, this tale reveals the illusion of a secure household. Individuals within the LGBT community see the domestic environment as a site of scrutiny and regulation. Anil encounters a dual paradigm, being both acquainted with and proximate to the locus of power due to his political engagement and his role as the village headman. Conversely, he is made to feel alienated from the majority due to his sexual orientation. His homosexual status has been revealed and used to compel his exclusion from the public sphere. This narrative examines the sexual dynamics inside this queer space, its capacity to confront mainstream environments, and the resulting liminality. Anil's sexual relationship with Promod, the effeminate young guy and Anil's sexual companion, illustrates this sensuous interplay inside the confines of the outhouse. Anil's sexual encounters with Gurmail reflect his engagement with the mainstream milieu. The ultimate incineration of the outhouse and Anil's suicide characterize the outhouse as a liminal location that is transient and not permanent. Anil establishes a setting for transaction inside the confines of his homoerotic desire shown in the secluded area of the outhouse. The outhouse serves as a symbol for the sexually stratified domestic environment.

Anil's positioning inside these locations renders his identity uncertain, unstable, and yet undeniably there. This social non-acceptance obstructs the gay community in asserting their queer identity. They experience alienation and seek a positionality while being in the interstices. According to Shinsuke Eguchi (2011):

> Prior to coming out, individuals must have access to information about homosexuality and gay identity. The social stigmatization of homosexuality is a barrier for individuals in the process of adopting homosexuality as a way of life. (40)

This societal stigmatization compels Anil to conceal his homosexual status, prompting him to construct the outhouse as a sanctuary for emancipation. This may also serve as a method of resilience to confront the challenges of heteronormativity and the societal stigma associated with his LGBT status. Although Anil never communicated his physical demands to his mother, he eventually disclosed them to her at the end.

> He had built that house to carve a space of his own. It had implicitly told his mother what his 'male needs' were. And now, in front of the burning house, he was telling her that he loved Gurmail. (131)

Anil saw his mother wailing and uttering incomprehensible words, prompting him to enter the ablaze home, while neighbors awakened to an unpleasant odor of charred human flesh. The suicide or self-destruction under social pressure is a tragic but severe reality among the LGBT community. Rod Cover (2012), using studies conducted by numerous organizations, including queer activists and medical experts, asserts that they

> …effectively re-figured sexuality-related suicide as a social fact in Durkheim's terms by suggesting that social intolerance and homophobia were internalised, thereby leading to self-hatred and self-destructiveness...It brought an epistemic shift of opinion from the idea that homosexuality was essentially abnormal, instead introducing the ways in which a number of factors were causal in the suicides of gay men, including shame resulting from blackmail and exposure, pressures around coming out and closetedness, isolation and ostracism (38)

In consequence, Anil's suicide stems from the societal shame linked to his homosexual nature. His disclosure to his mother, a symbol of the heterosexual societal framework, is met with her persistent refusal to acknowledge his homosexual nature, culminating in the incineration of the outhouse, a place embodying many possibilities and experiments. The outhouse is not a communicative space. It is a physical place that is both essential to and detached from the social order. The destruction has obliterated all his aspirations for personal space and identity.

Anil's apathy in the electoral process and his persistent dread of assassination compelled him to remain indoors. Anil's resistance of accessing the public realm highlights his liminality and challenges the legitimacy of the prevailing social order. The traumatic events, such as Anil's incarceration and the assassination attempt on his life, profoundly affect his internal landscape. He enters a heterotopia of crises. His suicide may be characterized as a heterotopia of deviance, as he ventures beyond life and all forms of constraints. Therefore, his death might also be seen as an act of resistance. Anil opts for a drastic method of subverting the ruling order, ultimately resulting in his own demise.

Panchanan Hazarika's short story collection *Andharotkoi Udaax Botahotkoi Swadhin* (Depressed than darkness, freed than the wind) has several narratives that depict the lived experiences of LGBT individuals. He seeks to illuminate the cultural pressures, shame, violence directed at the gay community, as well as the politics of exclusion, loneliness, and rejection that queer individuals endure. In "Sironton," he illustrates the rejection of Violina, a lesbian girl, by her classmates. As students of Gender Studies studying Third Wave Feminism, these buddies are unable to accept her. This reveals the hypocrisy of heterosexual culture. Queer individuals confront the politics of exclusion and are unable to assert an equitable presence in mainstream discourses. Their visibility is mocked, prompting opponents to advocate for a transition from the politics of visibility to the politics of recognition, which respects identity based on gender, sexuality, and other identifiers.

Hazarika's narrative "Joloj Jibon" (Fluid Life) illustrates the malleability of personal identity. The narrator reflects on his mutable existence, the several identities we harbor, the body's necessities and yearnings, and his quest for life's reality. He perceives himself as adrift in these intricate frameworks. Upon his friend's assertion that the inability to openly express one's sexuality may contribute to suicidal tendencies, he objects. He yearns for a vibrant river where his dynamic existence may embrace him. The water body serves as an alternate environment that both shapes and contests the protagonist's identity and feeling of belonging. Thus, the area he yearns for is an unconventional environment that would provide him comfort, serving as a secure haven to examine his sexuality and fluid identity. This place is an ambiguous realm, a transient and variable zone regulated by chaotic forces, where the protagonist

may thrive. This performance demonstrates a confluence of spatial and fluid identity development.

The titular narrative from the anthology Andharotkoi Udaax Botahotkoi Swadhin(Depressed than darkness, liberated than the wind) 2020 recounts the tale of Chandrabala, an enlightened and progressive mother, together with her three offspring: Uddipta, Lopa, and Ujjiban. The mother is deeply engaged in her children's life, assisting them in resolving their issues and supporting them when confronted with challenges from their father or society at large. Upon discovering her son Ujjiban's declaration of his homosexuality, it was akin to a tempest for her. She endured several stages of examinations and challenges. The mother reflects:

> Ujjibon is attracted only towards men— she possesses the required sensitivity and awareness to accept this truth. But Ujjiban is not a character from a story or a film. He is her son, the son of her own flesh and blood. He is the son of her and Uttam's. (90)

Ujjiban's homosexual status is apparent in his demeanor and mannerisms. He gets mocked by his peers and educators at school. The school's public area fails to instill a feeling of belonging in him. The household environment is also not suitable for him. Uttam's father admonishes him, commanding him "to conduct himself as a boy, given that he was born a boy." Thus, Uddipan lacked a reassuring environment in which he could express his sexuality. He consistently lives inside the confining, regulatory environment. His relationship with the Art instructor offers him a free environment, enabling him to emerge from his shell and embrace his true self. According to his mother,

> Uddipan became very close to this man who is double his age. She found it surprising. Yet, Debaparasad, the Art teacher could bring him out of the cocoon of loneliness-depression-self-absorption. And she is ever grateful to him. (92)

Hence, Uddipan's experience in the metropolitan metropolis of Delhi provides him with the essential independence, resulting in a profound shift of his whole self. He transforms from an inexperienced human into a self-sufficient and bold person. He comprehends the dynamics of

heterosexual power politics and recognizes that his homosexual identification is as inherent as any other gender identity. Binnie (1997) critiques the socially created concept of heterosexuality, asserting that "Space is not naturally authentically 'straight', but rather actively produced and (hetero) sexualised." (223)

The concept of inclusion and acceptance is often denied to LGBT individuals by society. Due of their nonconformity to heteropatriarchal standards, they are marginalized and isolated. Liminal spaces might be reappropriated and reconstructed to provide environments where individuals can express their sexuality and gender identity. The experiences in Urban Delhi provide Ujjiban the necessary acceptance and environment, enabling him to emerge from his concealed existence and openly disclose his sexuality to his mother. The establishment of a heterotopia compels the heteronormative society to acknowledge queer bodies and sexualities as legitimate in their own right. Ujjiban's mother embraces his sexuality with confidence. She informs him:

> Ujjiban! I belong to a different era. You belong to a new era. But who will understand you if not me? I am your mother…. Is there anything that a mother does not understand? However free, rebellious emancipated a time could be, is not the time born out of a womb of old time? Doesn't the hand holding the progressive light that herald the new time born from the darkness of the womb? (94)

Chandrabala trembles with a desire to escape the grip of antiquated customs and aspires for a future characterized by gender equality. A shift in the thinking of individuals is requisite for this kind of societal transformation. Social transformation happens gradually. Literature may serve a crucial function by fostering awareness and eliciting empathy and sensitivity in individuals. These existential facts illuminate the complexities of queer individuals' lives, and we may anticipate a future when individuals of all sexual orientations coexist together under the same sky.

The geographical positioning of queer individuals inside mainstream society has altered its direction in current queer studies discourse. Academics have developed novel viewpoints about the concepts of queer identity and place. Kath Browne (2006) contends that queer

encompasses more than the LGBT community and should be seen as more than only "an overarching term that describes sexual 'dissidents'" (p. 886). Brown asserts that 'gay' or 'lesbian' places often do not challenge the established norms of sexual identity politics. It should expand the norm without violating or contesting it. As a result, queer Brown signifies "functioning outside the powers and controls that impose normativity." (page 889). She asserts that queer investigations must challenge the principles of inclusion and include radical re-evaluations, reconfigurations, reconceptualizations, and remappings that might transform bodies, places, and geographies. (page 888). Brown asserts that queer geographies must transcend categories such as hetero/homo and man/woman to surpass normativity, hence rendering space flexible. This flexible concept of space would undoubtedly herald a new global order in which the prevailing power structure would dissolve, paving the way for a new age in which queer individuals may assert their own subjectivities. The locations they inhabit will surpass existing geographical limitations and provide them the identities they aspire to in the future.

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A Comparative Study of Select Naga Textiles with Special Reference to Phom and Chakhesang Tribes

- Ketousieno Prescilla Khamo and Lenity B. Aventh

Abstract: Nagaland is a diverse yet cohesive ethnic state consisting of seventeen major tribes and sub-tribes that all come together to live in peace and harmony as one whole community. This results in an amalgamation of various expressive cultures and traditions that are unique, special, and exclusive; this is in reference to lifestyle, cuisine, oral lore, and many more. One prominent way of differentiating a tribe from the other is through our rich and artistic textiles and woven wear that have been an integral part of our culture and tradition since time immemorial, such that it has been passed down to us today by our forefathers and ancestors. Like any traditional attire, the Naga traditional attire is exceptional and distinct in terms of the colours, textures, designs, spirit, and values interwoven into it. Each Naga tribe has their own unique and significant meanings and symbols. In this paper, attempts have been made to examine and analyze the features, similarities, and differences of select textiles from the Phom and Chakhesang Naga tribes.

Keywords: Textile, Traditional Attire, Symbols, Folklore, Phom and Chakhesang

Naga Textiles:

If one was asked to point out a defining trait that makes Nagaland stand out from the rest as a state and as a society, there would be a plethora of answers. Some would answer the food, some the geographical location, others the folklore and ample amounts of tales and myths that surround the community and most, if not all, would answer the traditional attire, the textiles and woven wear of the seventeen major tribes (and sub-tribes). Nagas as a community contain visually aesthetic textile and traditional attire; however, it goes beyond the ocular and explores the underlying context and symbols that contribute to the value and our identity as a whole. This is in relation to status, the folklore, the virtues, prospects and norms followed by the people of the Naga Hills. Such is the significance and importance of textiles th at contribute to the identity building and keeping of the community. Some tribes are

simplistic in their appearance, while others lean more toward the intricate side, yet both carry equal weight of meaning and motif, for example, the Phom and the Chakhesang tribes of Nagaland.

The Phoms are an ethnic Naga tribe that resides predominantly in Longleng district. Their origin is widely debated and ambiguous; however, it is usually said to have three theories regarding its root. The first is based on the folklore of a beautiful woman named 'Bhumla', which translates to *lady of the clouds*. According to the legend, the Phom people are said to be direct descendants of her offspring. The second narrative entails the colonized name given by the British government, 'Bhum', meaning cloud. The third theory concerns a banyan tree or rubber tree which is derived from the word 'Bham'. The British men noticed the trees in every main village entrance, therefore asked about the trees in curiosity, getting the response 'Bham', lost in translation, eventually resulting to 'Phom'- the colonized version of this word.

The Phom Nagas as a tribe demonstrate simplistic and homogenous patterns with much uniformity in the color palette as seen in their textile. One primary example would be the pigments they choose to embed into their woven wear such as the dominant red, black and white. They also give much importance to one's status, wealth and achievements, which is boldly reflected in regard to the worth of their traditional attire. We will observe this as we study the traditional attires in detail.

The following information about the Phom textiles mentioned below has been collected via first-hand interview and secondary sources. Due to personal commitments, the interviewee wishes to remain anonymous; however, the anonymity of the interviewee does not negate the validity of said information collection for this paper. With that said, we look into the textiles. The first attire that we will look into is the Phom shawl, namely 'Henyiü Toknyiü' or 'Manpa Ashak'. This shawl worm by men is predominantly red in colour with thick white lines and thin black and white lines embroidered on it. As for the duration of making one shawl it takes approximately two to three hours for completion. This shawl was said to be acquired by individuals who performed the feast of merit at least four or five times; it symbolises honour and prosperity of one's status. The length is approximately 7ft and 5 ft in breadth. The motifs include the

red band that symbolises the slaughtered animal's blood taken as sacrifice during the feast of merit, as well as the abundance of the family's wealth *(Pong-ly-hai-ei moo üphü lappü)*. The black band really the hardships that they go through to perform this feast or also the very desire to do so *(Moo üh-hen shingvaishi nyakkei ken-ei dao dukpu/moo üh-henshing tak-ta hakapü lappü)*. Lastly, the white band depicted the happiness gained after the feast *(Manshu lenpükü mongongpü lappü)*. The patterns show the milestone they have achieved in performing the feast of merit. However, this shawl today is commonly worn by all the Phom men as their traditional attire.

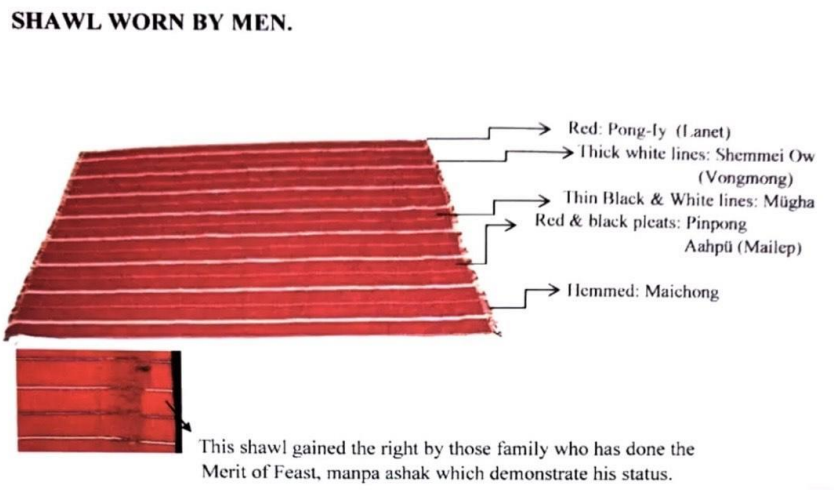

Fig. HenyiÜ ToknyiÜ/Manpa Ashak

The next textile is a wrap-around worn by the Phom women. It is known as the 'Shaka Shüngnang', which back then, was seen as a status symbol worn traditionally by the wives and daughters of the rich and wealthy men. It is approximately 64 inches in length and 40 inches in breadth, and the material used is of cotton fibre. A design as complex as this required a lot of knowledge in the very craftsmanship itself; therefore proved uneasy for the everyman to weave it in a whim, resulting in its

high value and price. The horizontal and parallel patterns symbolise the leg tattoos of the women, which were common among the youths back then, before the advent of Christianity. The pattern is horizontal with narrow black and white lines woven throughout the dominant red band. The motifs comprise of the black band that represents hardship *(Moo moohenshing nyo-ei nang-ei dao dükpükü lappü)*, the small white band represents the river Brahmaputra *(Teilao yungkong e-pü),* the white lines that represent the decorated houses of the rich men *(dohiaan pin-pü),* the central red band that symbolizes blood, the cucumber seeds pattern that shows prosperity and progress *(daa-ei she-ei tai-hen lappü)* and the bamboo machang, which stands for abundant possessions *(sehmmei am-ei pee-kan ow)*. Similar to the men's shawl, it has now become a common traditional attire for all the Phom women.

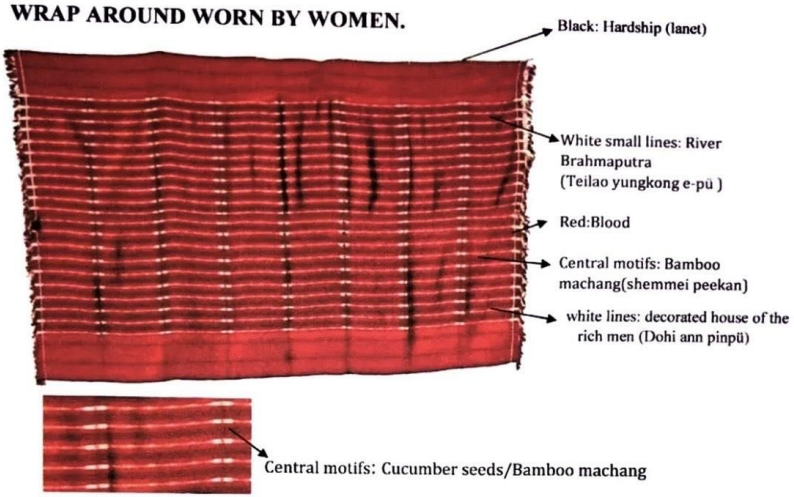

Fig. Shaka Shüngnang

The third traditional attire is known as 'Homlu athen' or 'Mein-püp athen'. These are headgears worn earlier by men exclusively between the head-hunting warriors with pride and dignity, which came along with the privilege of wearing ornamented attire to portray their status. These

headgears are adorned with cane woven in conical patterns coupled with wild boar's tusks *(meila fa)* on the sides, bear's fur *(temko),* eagle's feather *(alang mom),* greater Drongo racket tail *(apah mei),* hornbill feathers *(ou vaung shao),* red cotton yarn *(miü)* and an orchid stem called Dendrobium chrysotoxum was used. The headgears represented the head of a rooster and its perfection, showing boldness, bravery, power, status and prid,e which depicted the masculinity of a man. In the present day, it is commonly worn by men during occasions or events, especially for performing traditional cultural dances.

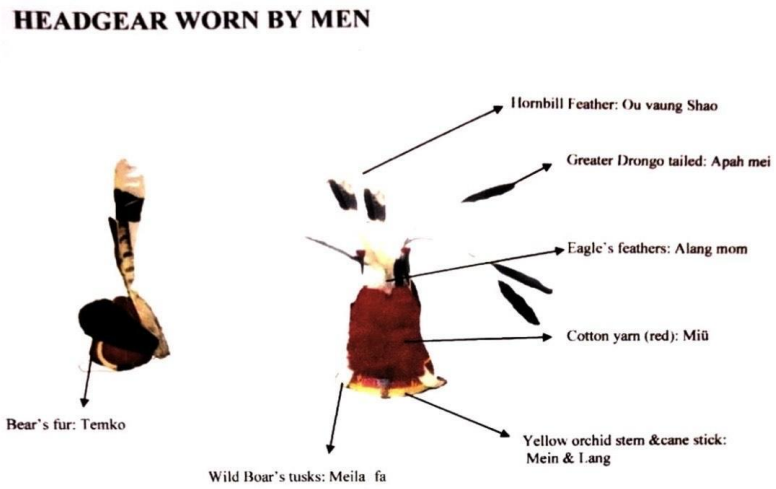

Fig. Homlu athen/Mein-püp athen

The next observation we make is the headbands worn by the womenfolk called 'Shedang: Müghen and Langnyiü'. There are two versions of folklore behind their origin. The first story can be traced back to a mountain called Mt. Yingnyiüshang where the Phom people originated from, thus holding its significance. It was said that a widow from the mountain defended and safeguarded a plot of her land as she bravely

fought against the rhinos that attacked her and her land. Upon seeing her bravery and valour, the villagers gifted her with the headbands to show gratitude and honour her; they also tattooed her legs. Since this incident, the Phom women began to tattoo their legs thus began the tradition of tattooing the legs of women who come of age. She was also given the title of a warrior *(Ham-nyiü or Nyiü-baü)*. The second folklore takes place in a village called Pangti; one da,y a woman sat there, weaving and was abruptly attacked by an enemy who tried to harm her, but fortunately, the enemy slipped on the floor, off of the corn beads. The brave woman took this opportunity to kill the enemy. She was then honoured with the headbands as a sign of a courageous warrior *(Ham-ow)*. These headbands were the highest honour bestowed upon women who entered the prime time of their womanhood *(L-dung kü shüpü or yow-ou-pü)* and were worn together. These were both woven with red colored cane sticks and a yellow orchid stem called the Ruellia *brevifolia*. The designs in 'Müghen' included central motifs such as the cucumber seeds and the Naga bamboo machang that represented prosperity. 'Langnyiü' symbolised the idea that every wearer of this crown should strive to shine like a pole star and glow bright and also the moon, to bring happiness to all of humanity.

HEADBAND WORN BY WOMEN.

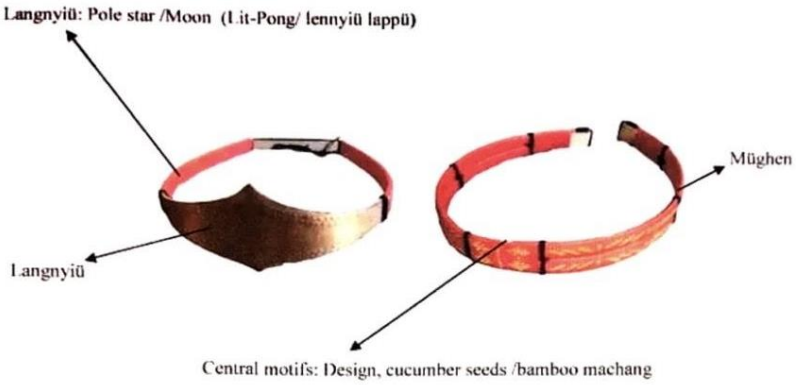

Fig. Shedang: Müghen and Langnyiü

Finally, we have the 'Lak-Ngeih', which is the beautiful bronze spiral bangle worn by the Phom women belonging to a rich and wealthy family, as it demonstrates the family's abundance of wealth. This ornament was earned by travelling far beyond one's residence and was worn around the wrist during auspicious occasions. The bronze metal was usually brought from the Mon area, and it weighed around 250 grams with approximately 15 cm in height. The folklore surrounding this ornament also traces its roots back to Mt. Yingnyiüshang where it was presented to a widow by her family. As she left her home, she waved back to her family, who recognized the ornament around her wrist shining so brightly. That is when the women began to wear the bangle as well as a sign of safe-keeping and protection, and to let their loved ones know they are looked after by nature and the universe. Now with this, we transition into the second part of our research paper- the Chakhesang textiles.

Fig. Lak-Ngeih

The Chakhesang tribe is an ethnic Naga tribe that primarily resides in the Phek district, although as of today, many have taken to living in other districts as well. The tribe's name has an interesting back story as it is an amalgamation of three separate words put together, the words being 'Chakrü', 'Khezha' and 'Sangtam', which were meshed together to form the word 'Chakhesang'. This is not to confuse the individual as the Sangtam community is an altogether different tribe in itself but the reason they are included in the official name of the Chakhesang tribe is because there were some villages in and around the Chakhesang community at the time who spoke the Sangtam dialect especially in and around the Meluri division as well as Kiphire (which some still reside to date). The Chakhesang community can be divided into three sub-tribes- the Chokris, the Khezhas and the Poumais. All three sub-tribes carry differing, rich and artistically dramatic lore and meaning behind their textiles, such examples have been explored in this paper.

The first textile is the shawl of merit and honour called the 'Thüpikhu' in Chokri, the 'Thsüketsura' in Khezha and the 'Hapidasa' in Poumai dialect. This shawl is not an ordinary shawl that an individual can simply wear around; it is one that must be earned by performing the merit of feast at least two or more times. It is a symbol of high respect, status, wealth and dignity. The story of how this shawl came into existence is of an intriguing one. It is believed that a Chakhesang lady came up with the idea of designing a shawl for her brother, who was performing the feast of merit as a gift. Therefore, it is considered taboo for families without daughters to weave this shawl as it must be woven in one day's time in coordination with the preparation of the merit feast. This shawl is very intricate and detailed in nature, as we see from the image below, of which all these patterns and designs have their individual meaning and indicate a variety of things, for example, the elephant and mithun on the traditional attire symbolizes strength and abundance, grit and power. It stands for prosperity, wealth and generosity. The animal heads on the textile symbolizes the animals that were sacrificed for the feast and the heads that decorate the entrance of the houses after said feast has been performed. The celestial details ,such as the star, the moon and the sun stand for happiness and a sense of fulfilment and eternity. Just as these celestial bodies shine and sparkle, so may the individual who wear this garment. The peacocks signify the external beauty of the feast and the host, the flowers signify the coming together of everyone in peace

and harmony, the butterfly talks of elegance and swiftness, while the pleats in between speak of the milestones and achievements after the hardship has been faced and overcome. This traditional attire is worn both by the males and females with little difference in their design for the latter gender. Today, there are two ways one may acquire this benevolent attire- the first being to hold Christmas feasts for the village during the festive season or to achieve something great, one that benefits the individual and her/his community.

Fig. Thüpikhu/Thsüketsüra/Hapidasa

The second traditional attire this paper observes is the shawl 'Samakhü' in Chokri, 'Chutsüra' in Khezha and 'Metisa' in Poumai dialect. This particular shawl is worn both by men and womenfolk, but again with a slight difference in their design. It is a textile worn by mediators and peace-keepers of the Chakhesang community, not restricted to a certain gender as it is worn by both men and women although for women, there are minute changes in design. The words 'Sa' and 'Ma'

come together to form the word 'Sama,' which translates to 'forgive and forget the wrong done to each other' and 'let no more people die' which is why this shawl is usually worn to funerals as well. Interestingly enough, this same shawl is worn around to perform exorcisms and cast out evil spirits in unclean areas.

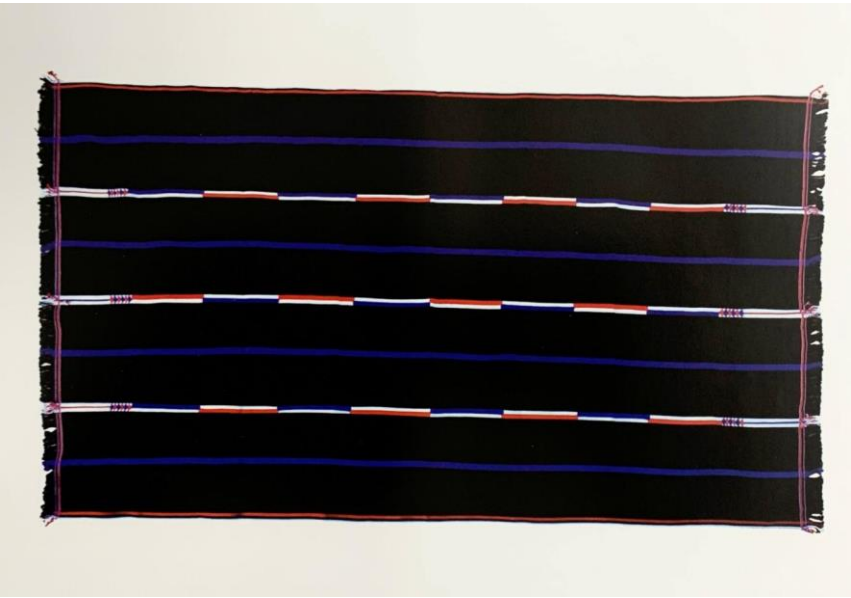

Fig. Samakhü/Chutsüra/Metisa

'Rira' (for the men) and 'Rura' (for the women) are the two next traditional attire being observed. As one might notice, this textile is one of fthe ew that have a homogenous name for the tribe as a whole. It is commonly worn by the youths and men - this shawl specifically was designed by Ms. Kewekoloü and Welhipeü, it made its first appearance at a competition in the year 1984 (3rd Kuzhathede Youth Brigade), securing first position, leading to its officiation in the year 1986. The large red bands signify the blood that has been shed by our forefathers and

ancestors while the black dashes are symbolic of tribute and tax *('Khezahanuo khrou')*. The endless struggle and strife with reality and the hardships that life brings forth have been depicted through the large black bands and the narrow red band,s while the small green lines signify the victory that follows; the designs in the middle serve as the central devis,e which is of the tools and equipments such as spears, daos or machetes and animal bones, etc. The meaning remains somewhat the same for the women, however, the Rura is predominantly white and embroidered with eru (direct translation of the Khezha word 'bone' which can also mean wealth and prosperity) instead of the spears which represent light, happiness and a sense of calm and peace, especially in reference to the coming and the advent of Christianity. The Rura is a shawl that can be paired with a wrap-around called the Rumenie. It is worn most often as a set piece, but can also be worn separately.

Fig. Rira

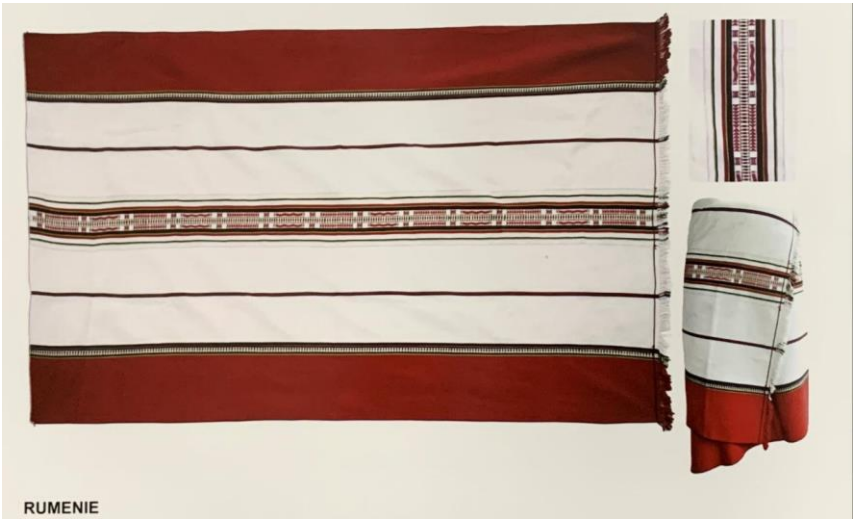

Fig. Rura and Rumenie

Moving onto the ornaments and adornments, the headgears of the Chakhesang men- 'Piphü' for Chokri, 'Tsükha' for Khezha, 'Pido' for Poumai which is the headgear made of bear's hair topped with the feather of a hornbill bird, the other kind is the 'Pila' for Chokri, 'Ramhi' for Khezha and 'Roleh' for the Poumai again, made of similar materials but this is adorned with three hornbill feathers rather than one. The last kind of headgear for the menfolk is the 'Pila' for Chokri, 'Ralou' in Khezha and 'Tsüla' in Poumai dialect is a bamboo headgear that spreads out wide, almost emulating the spreading of a peacock's feathers and has green, yellow and red bands colored across it. These headgears were worn by warriors back in the day and the rich and wealthy but overtime, it has become tradition for all menfolk to wear these headgears during festivals, events or cultural celebrations.

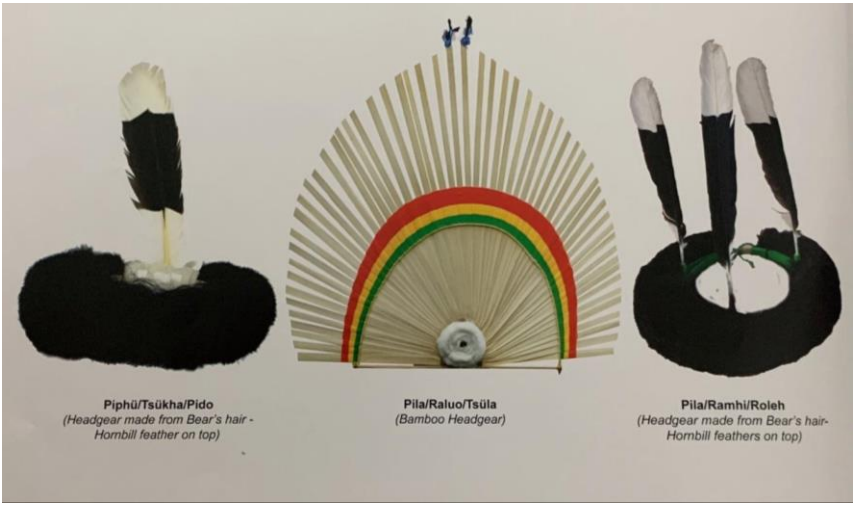

Fig. Chakhesang men's headgears

The armlets and bracelets for the women are of many; the brass armlets were usually worn by wealthier women, those who had class and status, as opposed to women who wore the aluminium armlets, who were ordinary women of common social standing. These bracelets and armlets were worn daily and usually did not pose as a bother during working hours, although, just like that of the Chakhesang headgears for men, these ornaments have also lost their mundane use and are only worn during cultural and festive events.

Fig. Bracelets/Armlets

Findings:

The Phom and Chakhesang tribes have both displayed an abundance of affluent and prosperous textiles and attire. As observed, we not only see the similarities that bring the tribes together but also the differences that set them apart from one another. This is in reference to their colours, motifs, symbols, folklore and design, such as the feast of merit and its importance. We see that in both the Chakhesang and the Phom tribes, the feast of merit is a revered undertaking; it is an action and a display of not just wealth but of honour, of dignity and a sign that lets the community know that they are loved and taken care of, and this extends to the women's wear as well. The womenfolk display demure and elegant means of courage and bravery, from physically fighting off enemies to doing so in the spiritual realm as well. The way both communities respect and adhere to its socio-economic importance

speaks volumes about how much they honour and revere culture and tradition. These are some of the similarities we come across, as well as in their colour schemes, with the use of reds, blacks, whites and the headgears and the hair and feathers of animals. The textiles highlight the importance of all the dignity and honour that comes with said attire, especially with the mention of hardships and bloodshed. Some traits that are seen in the Phom textiles and attires that are not present in the Chakhesang community would be women's headgear, which is not a common attire in the womenfolk of the Chakhesang tribe as well as the deep meanings embedded into their woven wear in regards to folklore. We also see that the Phom tribes have inculcated (rarely as much today but specifically in the olden days) the habit of tattooing of the skin which is again, not something the Chakhesang tribe embeds in their culture or at the very least, there is no record of this.

Conclusion:

Beyond what one may see, Nagaland is a community that is not homogeneous in its culture and tradition, as all tribes have differing lifestyles and heritage. Within the identity of being a Naga lies the integrity of one's own tribe and belief system that helps shape the tribe's community as a whole. This is what makes Nagaland a unique and exceptional state. There is so much more to explore, learn and strive for; so much more to observe, keep and preserve in special reference to our traditional attires, textiles and folklore, along with everything else, as this is what makes up our identity. This is our integrity, this is what we must protect, and preserve and one thing we must not allow it to die away. This paper has therefore tried to bring light to the fact that although we as Nagas, as 17 major tribes, all differ and diverge from one another, so do these very differences bring us together in harmony through our mother roots. That no matter how diverse and separated we may seem to others and one another, our core values and principles all stem from the same soil and land and most importantly, the same heart that keeps our culture and heritage alive.

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Evolving Portrayals of Women in Assamese Advertisements: From Domesticity to Empowerment

- Najima Begum, Ananya Baruah, and Rita Saha

Abstract: This research investigates the evolution of gender roles portrayed in Assamese advertisements, with a focus on the transition from traditional depictions of women as domestic confines to contemporary representations of empowered individuals. Drawing inspiration from Judith Butler's theory of gender as a performative act, the study posits that advertisements serve as a significant platform for constructing and reinforcing gender norms. Employing a content analysis methodology, this research will examine a corpus of Assamese advertisements spanning a few decades. The analysis will focus on visual and textual cues, including character roles, storylines, and product endorsements, to identify patterns and shifts in gender representations. The study will analyse ads from digital, print, and broadcast media to identify patterns and shifts in gender representations, exploring how these portrayals contribute to broader societal discussions on gender equality. Furthermore, a comparative analysis of language usage will be conducted to assess the evolution of gender sensitivity in these advertisements. While basing it on frameworks of feminist media studies, the study aims to uncover how these advertisements contribute to the broader discourse on gender equality in Assamese society. By exploring the interplay between traditional and contemporary gender roles in advertising, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between media, culture, and gender.

Keywords: Assamese advertisements, gender representation, women's empowerment, media analysis, gender equality.

Introduction: The Changing Face of Gender in Assamese Ads

The way advertisements portray gender roles significantly influences societal norms and perceptions. As a medium, advertising not only reflects cultural values but also shapes them, offering a platform for the reinforcement or subversion of stereotypes. In Assamese advertisements, the representation of women has undergone a profound transformation from domesticity to empowerment. Earlier advertisements in the region

largely conformed to traditional gender norms, often relegating women to the role of homemakers. However, recent advertisements depict women as strong, independent, and empowered individuals, signalling a societal shift toward gender equality.

Judith Butler's theory of gender as performative wherein gender is not an inherent identity but is constructed through repetitive acts serves as a theoretical backbone for understanding these changes. As Butler argues, "Gender is not something one is, it is something one does" (25). Advertisements, as visual and performative texts, play a critical role in shaping and reshaping these gender performances. This research seeks to analyse the evolution of gender portrayals in Assamese advertisements through the lens of Butler's theory, alongside feminist media critiques by bell hooks (1981) and Sut Jhally (1990), who suggest that media can serve as both a site of oppression and liberation .

Methodology: Decoding Ads-One Frame at a Time

This chapter adopts a content analysis approach to examine the changing gender representations in Assamese advertisements. The methodology involves analysing both visual and textual elements across a wide spectrum of ads-television, online platforms, and print media. The focus is on identifying patterns in the portrayal of women and assessing how these patterns align with broader societal changes.

I. Sample Selection

Advertisements from major brands in Assam were chosen to ensure a diverse and representative sample. The selected ads span categories such as food, technology, personal care, and household products, providing a comprehensive overview of gender representation in Assamese media. Particular emphasis was placed on widely aired or circulated ads, ensuring that the sample reflected the types of messages consumed by a broad audience.

II. Analytical Tools:

a) Visual Analysis: Drawing from Sut Jhally's work, which argues that visual culture significantly influences public perception, this research analyses

the imagery, character positioning, and symbolic gestures in advertisements. For instance, the portrayal of women in domestic spaces versus professional spaces serves as an indicator of evolving gender roles (Jhally, 1990).

b) Textual Analysis: The language used in these ads also provides critical insights into gender dynamics. By examining dialogues and scripts, particularly the use of inclusive language or gendered metaphors, this study tracks shifts in tone and expression. The portrayal of women as 'nurturers' in early ads contrasts with their portrayal as 'leaders' or 'decision-makers' in more recent ads, reflecting changes in societal expectations.

c) Narrative Structure: The storylines within advertisements often reveal underlying power dynamics. Advertisements were categorized based on whether women were depicted as passive or active agents within the narrative, paying attention to how much autonomy they exhibited.

III. Theoretical Framework

Butler's theory of gender performativity was employed to analyse how these advertisements 'perform' gender roles. The portrayal of women as homemakers or as leaders reflects not just cultural expectations but performative acts that reinforce or disrupt these norms. Additionally, bell hooks' feminist critique of media was used to examine how these portrayals either challenge or sustain patriarchal values (hooks, 1981).

IV. Coding System:

A coding system was established to identify key themes, such as:

- Empowerment: Ads where women take on leadership roles or exhibit independence.
- Traditionalism: Ads that reinforce conventional gender roles, especially in domestic settings.
- Shared Domesticity: Ads where men and women share household responsibilities, signalling a shift toward gender equality.

Gender Dynamics in Assamese Advertisements: A Data Analysis

Advertisements are a powerful medium that shapes public perceptions and influences societal norms, often reflecting prevailing gender dynamics and cultural values. In Assamese media, gender roles have traditionally been depicted through a conservative lens, portraying women as confined to domestic spaces and responsibilities. However, a more progressive narrative has emerged in recent years, with advertisements challenging these traditional norms by offering more empowering representations of women.

This data analysis examines specific Assamese advertisements to explore the shifting gender dynamics in media portrayals. By analysing advertisements such as WhatsApp Application, Sunrise Chicken Curry Masala, Sunfeast Marie Light, Sunfeast Mom's Magic, Maggi Noodles, and shopping mall Job, this study identifies patterns of change in how women are represented in both domestic and professional contexts. It sheds light on the evolving perception of gender roles, examining whether these shifts reflect broader societal trends toward gender equality or are isolated instances of progressive representation.

The analysis is divided into multiple advertisements that provide insight into how gender dynamics are constructed and deconstructed within the Assamese advertising landscape.

A. *In the advertisement for the 'WhatsApp Application':*

Scene 1: A Tamil family is watching cricket with their Assamese daughter-in-law, who doesn't understand Tamil. While the rest of the family enthusiastically shouts 'Wada pucha' during the game, she feels left out because she doesn't know what it means. Realizing this, one of the family members explains the meaning to her so she can join in their excitement.

At that moment, the mother-in-law creates a WhatsApp group called 'Learning Assamese,' where the entire family begins practicing Assamese together.

Scene 2: In a later scene, the family is again watching cricket and excitedly shouts 'tamma marise.' The daughter-in-law, filled with joy and emotion, laughs and gently corrects them, saying, 'It's tamam marise,' which means 'hitting hard' in Assamese. Everyone shares a laugh together.

The ad portrays an intercultural Tamil-Assamese family dynamic, emphasizing a shift in the traditionally patriarchal expectation that the daughter-in-law must adapt to her husband's cultural and linguistic environment. Instead, the family collectively embraces Assamese, showcasing a modern, progressive understanding of family roles where cultural adaptation is mutual. The act of the mother-in-law creating a WhatsApp group for learning Assamese is particularly symbolic, as it shows that cultural assimilation is no longer a one-way process. It also speaks to the power of technology in bridging cultural gaps and reinforcing family unity.

This advertisement subverts the conventional patriarchal model, where the wife's role was to adapt, both linguistically and culturally, to the husband's family. By having the entire family learn her language, the ad is not only promoting gender equality but also highlighting the importance of preserving linguistic diversity within families. In this context, the act of learning Assamese becomes a symbol of acceptance and inclusivity, reflecting broader societal changes where women's identities are recognized and celebrated, rather than being subsumed into their marital families. This shift also subtly critiques the historical expectation of linguistic and cultural conformity, proposing a model of partnership and equality that values both cultures equally.

Video link: https://youtu.be/_ITEkhvlNQc?si=IRMNNGgDROcL1McD

B. In the advertisement for 'Sunrise Chicken Curry Masala'-

In the advertisement for 'Sunrise Chicken Curry Masala,' the following scene is depicted:

A small, pleasant family consisting of a husband, wife, and young daughter is visited unexpectedly by friends for lunch. The wife becomes slightly frustrated with her husband upon the sudden arrival of the guests,

to which the husband responds charmingly, noting that everyone has contributed a dish. The wife, initially upset, directs her husband to prepare a meal immediately. The husband, pleased to assist, proceeds to cook chicken for the guests and serves everyone.

In this ad, the husband takes on a traditionally female role of preparing food for guests, presenting an alternative family dynamic where domestic tasks are shared equitably. The wife, initially portrayed as frustrated by the sudden arrival of guests, is seen directing her husband to prepare the meal. Her leadership role within the household is evident, which contrasts with older representations of women as solely responsible for domestic duties. This ad also normalizes men's participation in cooking, which reflects a broader social shift toward gender-neutral domestic roles.

The act of cooking in the advertisement is not portrayed as a chore, but as a meaningful contribution by the husband, thereby dismantling the deeply entrenched association between women and kitchen work. Historically, the kitchen has been viewed as a space where women's roles are confined, often reinforcing stereotypes that limit women's societal roles. By having the husband take the lead in meal preparation, the advertisement makes a broader statement about the reconfiguration of family structures and the breakdown of rigid domestic roles. It promotes a more collaborative approach to household management, wherein both partners share responsibilities. This reflects a growing recognition of women's leadership within the home and men's ability to engage in tasks previously deemed 'feminine,' fostering a narrative of shared responsibility and respect.

Video link :https://youtu.be/fKBfG7on93k?si=aWogQK6dTTlHhsAJ

C. *In the advertisements for 'Sunfeast Marie Light Rich Taste'-*

The advertisement illustrates women's empowerment by addressing and challenging stereotypes about women's driving abilities.

In the advertisement, a family consisting of a husband, wife, and daughter embarks on a long drive on a fresh morning. They stop for tea, during which the husband serves tea while the wife and daughter play

together. As the wife enjoys her tea and a Sunfeast Marie Biscuit, she requests to drive for the rest of the journey. The husband, smiling supportively, hands her the car keys.

In the next scene, the wife is shown driving the car. When she hesitates and applies the brakes abruptly, the husband encourages her to continue and provides guidance. With his support, she improves her driving skills and eventually drives confidently. The advertisement concludes with a voiceover stating 'ek nɔ tun arambhɔ ni,' which translates to "A New Start."

The depiction of the wife driving the car is a direct challenge to the stereotype that driving is a male-dominated activity. By portraying the husband as supportive, the ad highlights the shift toward equal partnership in relationships. Driving, often symbolically associated with control and authority, is redefined here as an empowering activity for women. The husband's encouraging attitude further promotes the notion of male allies who support and uplift women as they navigate roles traditionally dominated by men.

Driving is often used as a metaphor for independence, agency, and freedom. In societies where women's roles have historically been restricted, the act of the wife confidently taking control of the vehicle is a powerful symbol of gender equality. It suggests that women are not only capable of performing roles traditionally held by men but can also excel at them with support and encouragement. This ad serves as a commentary on the importance of partnership in dismantling gender biases. The husband's role as a mentor and cheerleader challenges the notion that men must assert dominance in traditionally male roles, presenting a healthier model of masculinity that involves supporting rather than competing with women. This empowerment narrative speaks to a broader societal change where women are increasingly recognized for their capabilities, and men are seen as partners in this progress.

Video Link: https://youtu.be/aPCNeaKZfXw?si=fDrgzMTReWPHvtay

D. In the Advertisement of 'Sunfeast Mom's Magic'-

In the advertisement for 'Sunfeast Mom's Magic,' the gender dynamics are portrayed through a dialogue between a woman and a basketball coach. The scene unfolds as follows: a woman presents biscuits to the coach and inquiries about her daughter's recent rejection from the basketball team. The coach responds by attributing the rejection to the game's requirement for height, suggesting that the decision is based on physical attributes rather than potential.

The woman then offers the coach a cookie, prompting him to comment on its taste. She uses this moment to make a broader point about evaluation and potential. The woman argues that one cannot fully understand the value of something without trying it, and she applies this reasoning to her daughter's situation. Her assertion is that, just as the coach judged the cookies only after tasting them, he should also reconsider his judgment of her daughter, advocating for an opportunity based on merit rather than initial impressions.

The interaction between the mother and the coach in this ad provides a deeper critique of how women are often underestimated based on physical attributes rather than potential. The mother's conversation with the coach uses food as a metaphor to illustrate a broader social truth: judgments based on surface-level perceptions often overlook deeper abilities and talents. Her ability to influence the coach's decision reflects women's growing role in advocating for fairness and equity, challenging traditional authority structures in decision-making processes.

The metaphor of the cookie serves as a powerful tool for the mother to assert her daughter's right to be evaluated fairly. In the context of sports, where physicality is often prioritized, this ad challenges the bias that equates height with ability. The mother's calm yet assertive confrontation with the coach represents the growing presence of women in spaces of influence, where they are increasingly advocating for merit-based opportunities. The ad also critiques the broader societal tendency to undervalue women, suggesting that women, when given the chance, can challenge stereotypes and create opportunities for others. This portrayal of women as active agents in reshaping societal norms resonates with larger feminist movements that seek to dismantle

patriarchal structures that limit women's opportunities based on preconceived notions.

Video Link: https://youtu.be/PiTCFJ-rKpM?si=8LZJ47XD--whwE0J

E. In the advertisement of 'Maggi Noodles'-

In the advertisement for 'Maggi Noodles,' the gender dynamics are illustrated through an interaction between a young boy and his mother. The scene depicts the boy cooking Maggi noodles in the kitchen and subsequently serving it to his mother. Upon receiving the dish, the mother, surprised, inquires whether the Maggi is intended for her. The boy responds by highlighting his observation that, during her periods of exam-related stress, his mother would often skip meals, demonstrating care and concern for her well-being.

The boy cooking Maggi for his mother upends the traditional mother-son dynamic, where the mother is typically expected to care for her children. Here, the child takes on a caregiving role, reflecting changing attitudes towards gendered domestic responsibilities. By showing a boy cooking for his mother, the ad normalizes the idea that men and boys can also participate in nurturing and caring activities, which have traditionally been seen as feminine.

This ad reflects a generational shift in how domestic roles are viewed, particularly the expectation that caregiving is a woman's responsibility. By portraying the son as caring for his mother's emotional and physical well-being through cooking, the advertisement pushes back against the notion that men are less nurturing than women. This narrative reflects changing familial roles in contemporary society, where both men and women share in the tasks of caregiving, whether for children, parents, or spouses. This shift is part of a broader social reimagining of masculinity, where men are encouraged to express empathy, care, and emotional intelligence without fear of compromising their gender identity. The ad's subtle commentary on generational learning suggests that younger generations are more willing to break free from traditional gender constraints, embracing a more inclusive and equitable approach to family dynamics.

Video Link: https://youtu.be/tmwl-FgEUH4?si=pdCtOLu1Q10pQQg4

F. In an advertisement of 'Shopping Mall Job' in Assam-

In the advertisement, a notable observation is the use of a picture depicting a young woman shopping in a mall alongside a job advertisement that is stated to be open to both male and female applicants. This visual choice implies a particular emphasis on attracting female candidates for roles within the mall.

By featuring a woman shopping at a mall in a job advertisement open to both male and female applicants, this ad promotes gender diversity in professional roles. It breaks away from the tradition of associating women solely with domestic or service-oriented positions, and instead, reflects the growing opportunities for women in sectors like retail, corporate jobs, and customer service.

This advertisement signals a shift in how women are perceived in the professional world. Historically, women were often confined to roles that reinforced their domestic identities, such as advertisements for cleaning products or household appliances. However, by positioning a woman in the context of a job advertisement, this ad implies that women are now being recognized for their professional capabilities in a range of sectors. This change not only challenges the stereotypical portrayal of women but also encourages a more diverse workforce. By inviting both male and female applicants, the advertisement advocates for a gender-inclusive hiring process, reflecting a broader societal trend toward workplace equality. It sends a message that women can occupy roles beyond the home, thereby contributing to the dismantling of gender hierarchies in the labour market.

All these analysed advertisements demonstrate a clear shift from traditional, patriarchal depictions of gender roles toward more progressive, equitable representations in Assamese media. This shift is particularly evident in the way household duties, professional roles, and societal expectations are reimagined. Where women were once predominantly shown as caregivers confined to the home, they are now increasingly portrayed as active, independent individuals capable of influencing and shaping their environments.

Furthermore, men in these ads are depicted as supportive partners rather than dominant figures, suggesting a shift toward egalitarian relationships both within the household and beyond. The subversion of traditional gender roles in these advertisements reflects a growing societal push for gender equality and inclusivity, making these ads not just commercial messages but also cultural commentaries.

While there are still remnants of stereotypical portrayals-especially regarding beauty standards and the occasional overemphasis on women's domestic roles-the overall trend in Assamese advertisements points toward a more gender-inclusive future. As media continues to evolve, advertisements will likely remain a key player in redefining societal norms and further advancing the cause of gender equality.

Results: From Kitchens to Boardrooms-Women on the Move

The analysis reveals a notable evolution in the portrayal of women in Assamese advertisements. While earlier ads predominantly emphasized traditional gender roles such as women being the primary caregivers and homemakers more recent advertisements depict women in empowered roles, challenging long-held stereotypes.

i. Traditional Representations:

Early advertisements, such as those for household products, typically reinforced the image of women as the central figures in the domestic sphere. These ads frequently depicted women performing tasks like cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing, often in isolation from professional or social roles. This aligns with Butler's idea that traditional gender roles are reiterated through repeated acts: "Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990, p. 140).

ii. Empowerment Through Shared Roles:

More contemporary ads have begun to challenge these norms. In the advertisement for Sunrise Chicken Curry Masala, for example, the husband takes on the traditionally female role of preparing food for guests, illustrating a shift in gender expectations. The wife's leadership role

in assigning the task to her husband further disrupts traditional power dynamics. This reflects hooks' assertion that media can be a space where gendered power relations are negotiated and redefined: "The media can be an influential force in shaping how we think about gender, both reinforcing and contesting traditional norms" (hooks, 1981, p. 47).

iii. Breaking the Stereotypes:

Advertisements such as those for WhatsApp Application and Sunfeast Marie Light go a step further in presenting women as decision-makers and drivers of change. In the WhatsApp ad, the Tamil family's willingness to learn Assamese for their daughter-in-law breaks the traditional expectation that a woman must conform to her husband's cultural norms. The portrayal of women correcting and teaching men in this context challenges the long-standing assumption that women must 'adapt' after marriage. Similarly, the Sunfeast Marie Light ad, where a woman confidently takes control of driving, defies the stereotype that men are inherently better drivers. This shift towards portraying women as empowered, independent individuals is central to Jhally's argument that advertisements can serve as a fable of excess, subverting societal expectations by reimagining gender roles (Jhally, 1990).

iv. Language and Empowerment:

The use of language in these advertisements has also evolved to become more gender-inclusive. Earlier ads were rife with gendered language, often referring to women in diminutive or patronizing terms. Recent advertisements, however, showcase a noticeable shift, with women being addressed as equals or leaders. The rise of phrases like 'You can do it' or 'Lead the way' in ads reflects broader cultural changes in how women are perceived. As Butler notes, language is a powerful tool in constructing gender identities: 'Language sustains the power of gender norms over time, but it is also the medium through which those norms can be resisted and reimagined' (Butler, 1990, p. 33).

Discussion: Performing Power—How Ads Reflect Society's Shifts

The results of this study demonstrate a clear progression in the representation of women in Assamese advertisements, mirroring larger societal shifts toward gender equality. This evolution aligns with Butler's concept of gender as a performative act, where repeated depictions of empowered women in media gradually reshape societal norms. By showcasing women in roles of authority, independence, and partnership, these ads challenge the traditional narratives that confined women to the domestic sphere.

bell hooks'framework is particularly useful in understanding how these changes reflect broader feminist movements. As hooks argues, The presence of women in media is not enough. It is the nature of their presence and the roles they play that truly determine their empowerment' (hooks, 1981, p. 90). The increasing diversity in the portrayal of women in Assamese adsfrom caregivers to leaders reflects a nuanced shift in their media presence, one that promotes an egalitarian view of gender roles.

However, while there is significant progress, certain stereotypes remain. Many ads still focus on physical beauty and domestic tasks, suggesting that while gender roles are evolving, some traditional expectations are harder to dismantle. The media's challenge, therefore, lies in balancing empowerment with authenticity, ensuring that women are not merely performing empowerment for the sake of a brand's message, but are truly depicted as autonomous and capable individuals.

Conclusion: The Future of Gender in Assamese Media

In conclusion, the transformation of gender portrayals in Assamese advertisements marks a significant cultural shift toward more inclusive and empowering representations of women. Through the lens of Judith Butler's performative theory and bell hooks' feminist critique, this research highlights how media can serve as both a mirror and a catalyst for societal change. By dismantling traditional gender roles and promoting a more equitable portrayal of women, Assamese advertisements are playing an essential role in advancing the discourse on gender equality.

As the advertising industry continues to evolve, future research could explore the intersectionality of gender with other identities, such as class and ethnicity, to further understand how different groups are represented in media. The path forward for advertisers will involve not just challenging gender stereotypes but also embracing a more holistic and inclusive approach to representation.

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The Role of Rituals and Symbols in Visual Representations of the Supernatural in Northeast Indian Art

- Nitin Vishwakarma and Dr Dushyant Dave

Abstract: The present paper is an attempt to explore the intricate relationship of rituals, symbols, and the supernatural as reflected in the art of Northeast India. This region comprises eight culturally diverse states steeped in rich traditions of mythology, folklore, and oral history that have deeply influenced its artistic expressions. Such traditions are further instilled by the depiction of supernatural themes, where art functions to act like a bridge between the two planes of physical and spiritual worlds. This paper will gaze through several forms of art, including textiles, carvings, and installations of contemporary times. It showcases modern-day artists who have conserved these cultural elements by describing them all over again and recalibrating them in their own creative ways. Noted artists to be mentioned are Wanphrang Diengdoh, Temsuyanger Longkumer, and Neelim Mahanta, who merge traditional techniques with modern aesthetics to converse between past and present.

Keywords: Northeast Indian Art, Rituals, Symbols, Colour Symbolism, Cultural Heritage

Introduction

Northeast India—the region with eight major states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura—stands as the region with great cultural diversity. A region that houses different ethnicities, languages, and traditions engenders a rich tapestry of cultural heritage. The active oral traditions of the region create common myths, legends, and folklore that heavily configure cultural identity among the people living in the area. Deep supernatural themes have been central to the people's narratives and have influenced their deep influence on rituals, symbols, and artistic expressions in the region. Art, for Northeast Indian communities, is very inseparable from daily life and ritual practice. Much more than an aesthetic expression, art is a powerful tool to connect with the spiritual world. It may be expressed through intricate weavings of textiles, carving totems, making masks, or painting murals; whatever the art, it is a frequently ritualistic act. For instance, the traditional Shawls of the Naga tribes, known as

"Tsungkotepsu," are not just garments to them, but are essential to safeguard the owner from evil spirits and keep him closer to the ancestral spirits. This deep connection of art with rituals and the supernatural is a characteristic feature of North-East Indian Art, which depicts an identity with that unique culture and its dynamism between beliefs, aged and contemporary expressions in art (Baruah). By analysing specific artworks, rituals, and symbols, this study provides a deeper understanding of the role that art plays in the spiritual life of Northeast Indian communities, as well as how these artistic traditions have evolved over time. The study will also highlight the contributions of notable artists from the region who have continued to explore these themes in their work, blending traditional motifs with contemporary styles.

Historical Context of Northeast Indian Art

North-East India has undergone several socio-economic-political changes since time unknown. The picture of North-East India standing today is different from what it looked like in its antiquity. Before the invasion of forces of colonialism, the art of Northeast India was deeply entwined with the animistic and tribal beliefs for which the region stood. Art was created to function with religious as well as functional purposes by the Naga, Khasi, Mizo, and other indigenous communities inhabiting Northeast India. There were ritualistic masks, totems, and carvings that were infused with spiritual meanings (Datta-Ray 45-47). The documentation of the Northeast social and cultural past started only during the British era in the form of monographs and census data. Therefore, to reconstruct the past of the North-East, historians have had to fall back heavily on oral traditions like folk tales, folk songs, myths, and legends, and study the symbolic representation of rituals and traditions in the form of festivals and fairs (Misra 102). The advent of colonialism brought significant changes to the region's art, particularly with the introduction of Christianity, which often discouraged traditional practices (Baruah 83). However, post-colonial revivalism has seen a resurgence of interest in traditional art forms, with artists and cultural practitioners reclaiming and preserving their indigenous heritage. Artists like Biren Singha from Assam have been instrumental in this revival. Singha's work often incorporates traditional Assamese motifs while also addressing contemporary themes, creating a fusion that reflects the complex identity of modern Northeast India (Singh and Das 21).

Rituals and Symbolism in Northeast Indian Culture

Rituals are part of the Northeast Indian artistic expressions, through which communities communicate with the divine and supernatural. Many rituals, from festivals to everyday practices, open a large window to the cultural and spiritual life in this region through visual art (Dutta 67). It is believed that the Puranic, Mahabharata, and Ramayana epics all refer to Northeast India. Many tribes inhabiting these states claim this lineage and continue the practices and rituals that have been passed down to the present day (Baruah 114). The myths are still reinforced by the mythology associated with these regions. For example, Rukmini, Lord Krishna's wife, is considered an ancestor of the *Idu Mishmi* tribe of Arunachal Pradesh (Kumar 193). Similarly, the *Bodo* tribe in Assam believes they are descendants of Bhima's wife, Hidimba (Goswami 85). Sharma points out that rituals are not mere religious performances but are imbibed within the social structure and mostly represented through an evolved visual art form like paintings and sculptures. Similarly, the Bihu festival of Assam is presented with its folk-dance forms and representative agriculture practices (Sharma 112-134). In addition, Choudhury reflects on Ambubachi Mela in Guwahati, celebrated in reverence to the goddess Kamakhya, which is a theme of local art that reflects the ritualistic spiritual nature of the event (Choudhury). In Manipur, Meitei et al. discuss Lai Haraoba, where rituals enacted through dance and music find living expression in art, thus reflecting the deep spiritual moorings of the community (Meitei et al.). The Moatsü festival of the Ao Nagas—when, through the hands of an artist, a traditional celebratory riot is brought into sculpture, encapsulating symbols of unity in community. According to the witch doctors of the hamlet, the Moatsü festival reads out good and bad days for the people and the village (Culture and Heritage | Mokokchung, Nagaland | India). The tribes in Nagaland, like the Konyak, Ao, Yimchunger, Sangtam etc., craft a wooden drum known as the "Log Drum" and it can be categorised under idiophone ("Naga Log Drums and The Stories They Tell"). These art forms were not used for decorative purposes. The people treated the medium as one who held spirits, ancestors, and deities. Most of the time, the forms used in this form of art were bold, abstract and stressed on mystic over the representative factor behind the content (Deka, 2021).

Literature Review

In any discourse concerning Northeast Indian art, one easily identifies a close relationship between visual representations and rich traditions of culture in this area. Some of the past studies focused on the imperative of understanding symbolic language in art as a proper way of communicating the cultural context. *"The Khasis" by P.R.T. Gurdon:* This ethnographic study provides a detailed account of the Khasi people's customs, beliefs, and art forms, emphasizing how their religious practices and rituals are intertwined with their artistic expressions (Gurdon). *"Myths and Legends of the North-East Frontier of India"* by Verrier Elwin: Elwin's work documents the rich oral traditions of the Northeast, including the supernatural elements that are central to the region's folklore. His analysis of these myths provides a foundation for understanding their visual representation in art (Elwin). " *People's Art of Northeast India*" edited by S.K. Chaudhuri: This anthology explores various tribal art forms from Northeast India, with particular attention to how symbols and rituals are depicted in visual media. The book provides a broad overview of the artistic traditions of the region and their connection to spiritual practices (People's Art of Northeast India).

Cultural and Artistic Context

In Raghuvir Sinha's *Religion and Culture of North-eastern India*, one gets an entire view of the various cultural practices that are followed in this region. It is with an emphasis on rituals and symbols as central to everyday life and creative expression that she points out the fact that ritualistic practice and artistic creation go hand in glove to understand the themes that belong to the supernatural genre of art in Northeastern India (Sinha). B.Pakem's *Nationality, Ethnicity, and Cultural Identity in North-east India* is a complex exploration of ethnic identity in the region and how supernatural beliefs are interwoven with the cultural fabric. According to Pakem, symbols and rituals provide an important hold on ethnic identity and cultural continuity, mostly manifesting themselves through visual art forms (Pakem).

Symbolism and Supernatural Themes

Symbols represent the essential element of the expressed art in Northeast India, as it is the source of complex cultural narratives and conjectures

regarding the supernatural. Baruah observed that the same symbols—like the lotus, serpent, and other geometric miscellaneous patterns—symbolized different interpretations of spiritual beliefs and practices in the region (Baruah 45-67). The supernatural is characterized by gods, spirits, and mythological creatures. According to Dutta, the supernatural usually takes the form of a "confluence of the realistic and fantastical elements to be created as a new visual language and register" describing the region's mythological heritage (Dutta 289-310). In the book *Art and Ritual of an Indian Tribe*, Jyotindra Jain has focused on the role of art in tribal rituals throughout India, referring mainly to the communities of Northeast India. He provides in-depth insights into how rituals and symbols are harnessed in view of invoking and representing supernatural entities, which is the central motif running through numerous traditional arts of this region (Jain). Similarly, the mythology and rituals of Northeast Indian tribes are examined by Longchar in *The Tribal Religious Traditions in North East India*, regarding how these very elements are visually represented in their mythology and rituals. His work is focused on symbolic language used in the visual arts to depict supernatural beings and phenomena. He has presented a detailed analysis of the visual codes and motifs used to represent them (Longchar).

Contemporary Perspectives

Meghali Goswami's *Visual Art of Northeast India* explores the evolution of art in the region, noting how traditional symbols and rituals continue to influence modern artistic practices. Goswami discusses how contemporary artists reinterpret these elements to address current social and cultural issues, thereby maintaining the relevance of supernatural themes in their work (Goswami).

The Role of Rituals in Northeast Indian Art

Rituals play a very important role in Northeast Indian culture, for they are the mediums between the physical and spiritual levels. They are done to please different gods, spirits, and other unseen powers, and are conducted for the well-being of the community. For instance, the Hornbill Festival of Nagaland is a festival of dance, music, and visual art that has been performed with the objective of summoning the presence of ancestral spirits (Longkumer 58). The Wangala Festival of the Garo people in Meghalaya is a harvest festival that comprises dances, songs,

and graphic art forms prepared in paying homage to their deity, Misi Saljong (Mawrie 83). Art forms such as these, designed for rituals like this one, often carry symbols referring to protection, fertility, and plenty (Baruah 95). Scores of such rituals are depicted in innumerable artworks executed by Riti Academy of Visual Arts, Meghalaya, under the able guidance of artist Sikkim Prasad, thereby proving that art is equally very important in retaining cultural memory (Nongkynrih 67). Thangka paintings from Sikkim form the vital teaching aids portraying the life of the Buddha, numerous influential lamas, and other deities and bodhisattvas. A thangka often represents a visual manifestation of some deity. The ritualistic nature of these festivals is very evident in the art of this region, with motifs symbolising fertility, protection, and prosperity (Bhattacharjee 107).

Fig.1 Sikkimese Thangkas
Source:https://artsandculture.google.com

Fig. 2 Paintings from Riti Academy of Visual Arts, Meghalaya
Source: Riti Academy of Visual Arts

Ceremonial Objects: Rituals among the Naga tribes are complemented by intricately carved wooden figures and masks, which are believed to possess spiritual power and are thereby associated with communicating during ceremonies with the spirit world. These objects, usually visually depicting the design through stylisation of human and animal figures, represent this community's beliefs in the interrelationship between the human and supernatural levels of existence (Chaudhuri 45-47).

Textiles and Costumes: Textiles and dresses are probably the most dominantly identifiable cultural aspects, and each ethnic group has its own designs and colour combinations. Different motifs and designs of textiles have a relationship with the rituals and religious life of the people of North-East India (Das 122). The design of Kokyet, a traditional Meitei men's headdress, is derived from the two horns of the ancient Meitei deity Pakhangba, who could transfigure into many different divine forms. It is used in different Meitei cultural ceremonies, festivals, occasions, etc. It is not only worn by common people but also, and more significantly, by royalty. It is the sacred, protective symbolic image of Sidaba, the traditional Meitei religion (Sanamahism) deity (Singh 89). In Assam, the Sattriya dance, the classical dance form based on Vaishnavism, uses extravagant clothing with much symbolic significance. The choice of colours, patterns, and materials in these costumes thus evoked the presence of each different deity, making the Mahari temple dance always a different dance live through the performance. These representations of their spiritual essence are also highlighted by the Assamese textiles and art occupations of these representations as their appearances in visual form (Sarma 145).

Fig. 3 Figure of a Maiba wearing a Kokyet.
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/

Fig. 4 A traditional Sattriya dance costume.
Source: https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Sattriya

Sacred Spaces: The Khasi people refer to the sacred groves as "Law Kyntang," meaning the dwelling places of deities and spirits. Through visual motifs, these groves are then depicted in Khasi art by trees, birds, and other celestial objects (Nongkynrih 54). In this regard, the preservation of such spaces, along with their artistic representations, shows community reverence for nature, acting to interface the physical and spiritual worlds (Khongsit 89).

Symbols in Visual Representation of the Supernatural

Northeast Indian arts often depict a wide array of supernatural beings, ranging from beneficent ones to maleficent ones. For example, Nagas believe that spirits inhabit nature, like in trees, rivers, and mountains, as "Terhünyi." They are typically regarded as protectors of the places they inhabit, and rituals are carried out during such occasions in those places to please them (Longkumer 73). Such beings are depicted in masks, sculptures, and paintings with exaggerated features and vivid colours that bring out their supernatural character or identity (Ao 145). In Manipur, for example, the Meitei religion is based on the deity of Sanamahi. The representations of this god in artwork are, however, so many, with the most general depicting the god as a guardian of the home, surrounded by fertility symbols and other emblems that signified prosperity among these people in society (Singh 108). Other common symbols include the hornbill, which symbolizes strength and longevity, and the mithun, which is a partially domesticated bovine symbolizing wealth and social status (Singh 45). Colours are also used symbolically; for example, red usually symbolizes life and vitality while black represents the unknown and the mystic (Baruah 78). It is the "Kalpavriksha," or the wish-fulfilling tree, in the works of Neel Pawan Barua, which occupies the centre of many rituals and symbolizes the ties binding the human, animal, and divine (Deka 93). It is through the works of Bamboo Artist Wanphrang K. Diengdoh from Meghalaya that one comes across how his installations bear out the interface between the supernatural and ordinary, using this very bamboo medium to express the intangible aspects of Khasi spirituality (Nongkynrih 112).

Animal Symbols: The Mithun, a semi-domesticated bovine, is a prominent symbol in Naga culture, representing wealth, power, and spiritual blessings. In Naga art, the Mithun is frequently depicted in carvings, textiles, and ceremonial items, symbolizing not only material prosperity

but also the community's spiritual connection with the animal (Chaudhuri 53-54).

Mythological Figures: The Pakhangba, a mythical serpent-dragon from Manipur, is a powerful symbol in Manipuri culture. Representing protection and divine authority, the Pakhangba is a common motif in Manipuri art, appearing in manuscripts, pottery, and dance costumes. The visual representation of Pakhangba in these art forms reflects the community's belief in its role as a guardian spirit (Elwin 124-127).

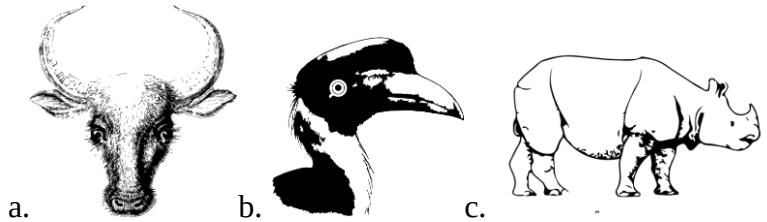

Fig. 5 Animal symbols a.Mithun b. Hornbill c. One-horned Rhino

Fig. 6 Mythological figures a. Pakhangba b. Tekhumiavi c. U Thlen

Cosmic Symbols: Cosmic symbols like the sun, moon, and stars are in prevalent in the art of the *Apatani* tribe belonging to Arunachal Pradesh. This form gets depicted through mural art, which the tribe uses in rituals to invoke the blessings of celestial deities (Tayeng 132). The *Apatani* art represents such symbols, which constantly remind the community of its relationship with the cosmos and the supernatural elements controlling it. According to the lunar calendar, the *Chavang Kut* is celebrated by the Mizo people after the harvest (Lalchungnunga 87). The moon is also

recorded in the traditional art of these communities and normally symbolizes the relationship between the earthly and the holy, guiding agricultural practices, and marking important life events (Zama 45). In Manipur, the "*Sanamahi*" deity is depicted with intricate patterns and motifs that symbolize the cosmic order. The style is typically detailed, with a focus on symmetry and balance, reflecting the belief in harmony between the spiritual and material worlds (Singh 103). Ratan Thiyam from Manipur, who is primarily recognized for his influence in theatre rather than visual arts, has had a significant impact on cultural representations, including the use of rituals, symbols, and themes from Manipuri culture (Sahai 58). In contrast, the art of the Khasi people is more abstract, using geometric shapes and bold lines to represent the unseen forces that influence their lives (Nongkynrih 72).

Cosmic Symbol	Tribe/Region	Cultural Significance
Sun	Apatani, Nyishi (Arunachal Pradesh)	Symbol of life, growth, and prosperity; honoured in agricultural festivals like Dree
Moon	Mizo (Mizoram), Manipuri (Manipur)	Associated with fertility, femininity, and the passage of time; guides agricultural and religious practices
Stars	Khasi, Garo (Meghalaya)	Seen as ancestors or spirits offering protection and guidance; symbolic of continuity and connection to the divine

Table 1. Cosmic Symbols and the cultural significance

Contemporary Interpretations

In contemporary Northeast Indian art, traditional rituals and symbols continue to influence artistic expression. Modern artists from the region often blend traditional motifs with contemporary styles, creating new visual languages that reflect both their cultural heritage and the changing world around them. One can instantly think of the association of Pakhangba and other mythological figures within the abstract paintings of Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh, a contemporary Manipuri artist who creates a discourse between tradition and modernity. His work epitomizes how contemporary artists redo traditional symbols to explore new spiritual and cultural themes (Elwin 143-145). Rajkumar Chandrajitsana Singh, popularly known as R.K.C.S., is an artist of note from Manipur who contributed to the visual arts by assimilating within his paintings some of the traditional symbols and themes. He is best known for painting the Ras Leela, which forms an intrinsic part of the state's Vaishnavite culture as a classical dance drama. In its visual presentation, full of symbolic gestures, costumed and set, it betrays the hallowed spiritual and cultural traditions of Manipuri society. Ras Leela itself is a dramatic enactment of certain episodes from Krishna's life, coloured with local interpolations and artistic expressions (Singh 203-205).

Neel Pawan Baruah is one of the most important contemporary artists from Assam who contributed a lot to the world of visual arts and found numerous inspirations in Assamese folklore, culture, and especially Vaishnavite traditions. Born in 1936, Baruah himself is very close to the socio-cultural heritage of Assam, and this can be vividly reflected in his works, most strikingly focused on the relationship of the material and spiritual realms and aptly portrayed by the symbolism of natural elements, gods, and mythological stories (Baruah 67-69). Nilamani Phookan has been a principal influence in modern Assamese literature. Some of his poems are known for their vivid imagery, intense connection with nature, and the profound depth reached in the quest for the human condition. Phookan's work is heavily influenced by symbolism and modernist movements, and he stands among the most important literary figures in Assam (Dutta 145). Much of Ayangbe Mannen's work represents his Naga heritage; in ways, tradition meets the modern context of art. His paintings and mixed media works display the engagement between tradition and modern life in Nagaland (Mannen

102). Sidhharth Kam Deuri's work is much influenced by his Assamese heritage and often involves elements of folklore and nature. His visual style oscillates between realism and elements of abstractness, which lends to a powerful narrative in layers,s peaking of the many layers of Assam's complicated cultural landscape (Deuri 87). Mo Naga's work can be seen as a marriage between traditional designs of tattoos from the Nagas and those of modern-day designing. He is one of the many significant representatives in the larger cultural revival of tattooing by the Nagas, a certain aspect of the Nagas' identity and heritage (Naga 118).

Much of Norbhu's art envelops such issues as spirituality, identity, and the natural landscape of the Himalayas. His works are typical of their meditative character and the use of traditional Tibetan motifs relocated within modernity (Norbhu 75). Onen Atsongchanger's works were typical of intricate detailing and deep engagement with Naga folklore and traditions. Most of his paintings are what he considers to be "interpreted scenes of Naga history, rituals, and everyday life that blend the traditional and modern facets of their culture" (Atsongchanger 56). Thokchom Sony mostly works with landscapes and the cultural life throughout Manipur. He intends to capture the essence of the region through his lens. The intricacies and beauty in complexity that Manipuri culture embodies are frozen into these photographs (Sony 132). In his work, Thej Yhome particularly dwells on the tension between the traditional Naga culture and contemporaneity. His application of a wide array of media in expressing an idea often combines the traditional symbols associated with the Nagas and modern means and techniques of art expression (Yhome 63).

Interplay of Rituals, Symbols, and Supernatural in Art

1. Function and Purpose of Artwork

Much of the art in Northeast India is a dual purpose of being a religious artefact and a record of culture. Ritualistic artwork, such as "Naga shawls" or "Apatani totems," is not only for decoration; it allows the owner to converse with the spirit world as well (Elwin 98). Art pieces are said to possess power, and an individual invokes this power during rituals to gain protection, fertility, or guidance from the supernatural realm of existence (Mills 65). Imli Sunep is a contemporary artist and photographer from Nagaland who works on Naga culture and identity. In that regard,

Sunep's contributions have been very important in capturing and interpreting Nagaland's cultural heritage. His exhibitions attract interest in their depth and authenticity in that they expose audiences to a genuine understanding of the Naga society (Sunep 34). His art is a depiction of the evolving identity of his community, where he attempts to uncover the existence of age-old traditions with modern-day influences (Kikon 142).

2. Spiritual and Cultural Connections

Symbols and rituals depicted in art are not separate entities but part of a larger story of culture that involves community history, beliefs, and values. The art serves as a memory source of collective memory, thus sustaining stories of the ancestors, deities, and supernatural events that modelled the identity of the region (Baruah 56). Bishnu Prasad Rabha was also famously known as the "Kalaguru," which translates to "Guru of Art" in English, a polymath who played an instrumental role in Assam's cultural renaissance. His paintings speak of life and struggles of the common people, nature, and socio-political issues during his time (Deka 78). His style fuses the traditional Assamese motifs with modern techniques, integrating what is uniquely different and culturally significant (Goswami 112).

Fig.8 Installation art by Temsuyanger Longkumer. Source: https://alchetron.com/Temsuyanger-Longkumer

Fig.9 Mural painting by Neelim Mahanta. Source: www.instagram.com/mahanta_livingart

Temsuyanger Longkumer is an interdisciplinary artist from Nagaland who creates visual art (Fig. 8) that draws on traditional belief systems, rituals, and stories from the Ao Naga people. He does so through a diverse representation of the socio-cultural traditions in ethnic societies and their link with communities of the microbial world to our world (Kikon and Longkumer 89). An artist based in Arunachal Pradesh, Neelim Mahanta dwells on the ritual of Losar—the arrival of the Tibetan New Year—celebrated by the Monpa tribe. His street art and mural work (Fig.9) do justice to the ritualistic dances, traditional attire, and symbolic offerings, which are its features that underline the deeper spiritual bonding of the tribe with their lineage and their gods (Mahanta 56). Manipuri multimedia artist Laishram Meena Devi inlays traditional symbols into modern styles, generating a unique blend of cultural heritage with contemporary expression (Devi 47).

Fig.10 Artist Sonal Varshneya art on archival paper.
Source:
https://www.newindianexpress.com/

Fig.11 Mural Artwork by Amitabh Kumar.
Source:
xxlcollective.com/artist-amitabh-kumar

The works of Sonal Varshneya (Fig.10), in collaboration with Northeast Indian artists, use traditional symbols in the context of a modern aesthetic to express the supernatural elements in their folklore, creating artwork befitting and bridging cultures (Varshneya 112). Amitabh Kumar's mural art (Fig. 11) mostly draws from myths and symbols flowing in Northeast India. His large-scale works bring out the rich cultural narratives in the region and their supernatural elements to a larger audience in

ways that were not possible earlier on (Kumar 78). Rajkumar Chandrajitsana Singh is a well-known artist from Manipur with interests in the mythic narratives of *Khamba Thoibi*, a legendary love story central to Manipuri culture. His art captures the romance and the supernatural elements that the tale is filled with by often placing its protagonists in ethereal landscapes (Singh 54). The story of *Usha and Aniruddha* (Fig.12) is a major narrative extracted from the Mahabharata into Assamese culture. The daughter of King Banasura, Usha, loves Aniruddha, the grandson of Lord Krishna. This story has been celebrated in Assamese culture by art, literature, and performance mainly through *Ankiya Naat* (Fig.13) and various forms of artistic expression (Goswami 136).

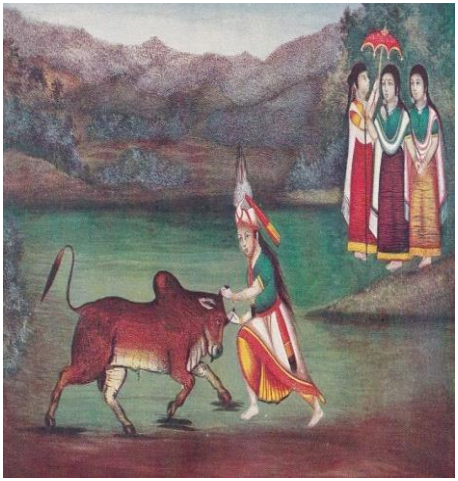

Fig.12 Bhudro Singh, Mythic narratives of Khamba Thoibi.
Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khamba_and_Thoibi

Fig.13 Ankiya Naat

Source: www.atributetosankaradeva.org

3. Integration of Modern and Traditional Techniques

It is common to see contemporary artists combining these techniques of tradition with modern styles, giving way to different representations of the supernatural, allowing fresh interpretations of beliefs and practices that are age-old. Filmmaker and artist Wanphrang Diengdoh is a mixed-

media artist from Meghalaya who engages with traditions of Khasi mythology and their place in modern life. Much of his work is focused on the U Thlen, a serpent mythologically symbolizing eternal strife between good and evil (Diengdoh 102). Temsuyanger Longkumer of Nagaland marries this ancient traditional Naga technique of wood carving with modern sculptural forms. His installations make visible these ancestral spirits and deities, marrying this ancient craft skill with contemporary artistic genres in expressive, multi-dimensional works (Longkumer 89).

Conclusion

In Northeast Indian art, the supernatural finds a deep rooting in the cultural practices and beliefs of the region and their artistic manifestations. The different communities that inhabited Northeast India have always used art as a means for aesthetic expression, but primarily as a medium for spiritual and cultural continuity throughout history. The artistic tapestry, full of rituals, symbols, and mythological narratives that they have put out, gives evidence of a rich heritage where the boundaries between the physical and spiritual worlds are blurred. The interweaving of the supernatural with the everyday, independent it manifests a worldview wherein art does not exist in separation from life. It functions as a keeper of collective memory and as one medium by which to invoke and engage the spiritual realm. Many contemporary artists in this region continue to draw upon this rich cultural legacy, very often merging traditional techniques with modern styles in attempts to reinterpret age-old beliefs and practices. Much of their work has also revealed how such traditions can still hold contemporary relevance in a modern world and how supernatural themes that underpin much Northeast Indian art can be adapted and transmogrified to speak to contemporary problems and sensitivities. Hence, they not only help in preserving their cultural heritage but also ensure the evolution of this culture towards higher realms, which resonates among newer audiences across the region and the world. In this sense, the art from this region is truly dynamic, a product of a group where the supernatural is not an object but an intrinsic part of the cultural tapestry.

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Representing Substance Abuse in Indigenous Communities: A Comparative Study of Jack Davis's *The Dreamers* and Anungla Zoe Longkumer's *The Many That I Am: Writings from Nagaland*

- Tokhuo Humtsoe

Abstract: Indigenous civilizations have always had a close relationship with hallucinogens. Substances that provide what one would call a "high" or substances that act as stimulants have been popular among indigenous civilizations. The *ayahuasca* vine consumed in certain tribes of the Amazon is one such example, often used with ritualistic ties. Today, the use of alcohol and substances that are inorganically produced, such as processed tobacco in the form of cigarettes, has seen a drastic rise in these communities, leading to a plethora of negative effects; substance abuse has become a major issue among the marginalised communities. This chapter attempts to study the representation of substance abuse and to bring to light the cause and devastations of substance abuse that lie beneath the shadows of tradition, trauma, escape and pleasure of the Aboriginals of Australia and the Nagas from Northeast India. The chapter exploring Jack Davis' *The Dreamers* and select stories from Anungla Zoe Longkumer's *The Many That I Am: Writings from Nagaland*.

Keywords: Hallucinogens, Indigenous civilization, substance abuse, negative effects, Aboriginals, Nagas

Psychoactive Substances and the Marginalized

Psychoactive substances affect how the brain works and cause changes in thoughts, mood, emotion, feeling and or behavior. Substances as common as coffee fall under this umbrella term alongside alcohol, nicotine, marijuana and similar chemicals.

The Ayahuasca (hallucinogenic drink made from the stem and bark of the tropical liana *Banisteriopsis caapi* and other botanical ingredients), also commonly known as the "tea" is a psychedelic used by the ancient Amazonian tribes for ceremonial and ritualistic purposes. The Aboriginals from Australia have also indulged in psychedelic drugs known as the *pituri* or *mingkupla* as a stimulant, and the Nagas from India are known for their famous varieties of rice beer, often associated with ritualistic

celebrations. All these substances have mind-altering effects in common, some more intense than others. The use of such psychedelic inducers may be linked to the lack of information and initially attributing it to the forces of nature and gods, with properties that cause hallucinations and relieve the user from stress, it may be easily confused for divine intervention, and so before the integration of valid scientific research it could have very easily been regarded as the gift of mystical elements.

Aside from the supernatural elements, the lives of the indigenous people, who are very much involved with physical labour such as hunting, gathering, agriculture, would often turn to these substances for relaxation purposes. Alcohol, present in the rice beers, acts as a very mild sedatives that help relieve sores and aches from the day's labour. In addition, psychedelics also have mood-improving properties to some extent, and so when the major source of entertainment revolves primarily around socializing, psychedelic inducement becomes a very probable option.

The use of psychoactive substances among the indigenous civilizations has seen great shifts, going from organic and traditional recipes to the inclusion of modern substances that are inorganically created. And because the mentioned civilizations come from substance integrated societies, the advancement of modern concoctions have borne their fangs harsher than the rest of the world. Failing to mitigate the shift has been crucial in propagating these adverse effects, however, the use of such substances has been so integrated into the lives of the people that it has become too common to actually be considered a serious issue, which in itself has become a very dangerous predicament today.

Substance Abuse in the Marginalized

Substance abuse is a term used to define the excessive use of any drug in a manner that inhibits the natural mental capacity of the user, making it detrimental to the self and society. Substance abuse is often associated with addiction and/or substance dependence. Substance abuse can be traced to many underlying factors; it could be because of the individual's genetics. *Learn Genetics*, a free website of the University of Utah, states that the "susceptibility to develop substance dependence and substance abuse can be hereditary, meaning that it can pass from a parent to a child". Other factors may include emotional

and personal predicaments such as depression, anxiety, and environmental stress.

Marginalized communities all around the world go through the mentioned factors, if not including the genetic factors; factors such as depression, anxiety, ostracization and environmental stress are very evident in these communities, mainly because of the nature of the treatment towards the marginalized, the term "marginalized" serves as proof on its own.

Aboriginal and Torres strait islander Health Performance Framework released a statistic on substance abuse, it stated that 29% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from the ages of 15 and over have been reported using narcotic substances in the last one year, this is an increase of 5 % since 2008. Cannabis and methamphetamine were the two most used drugs in the community as of 2017. Another earlier census indicated that 17% of indigenous Australians above the age of 15 faced detrimental issues due to drug-related problems. Additionally, over the course of 10 years, i.e. 2009-19 the age-standardised rate at which hospitalizations happened due to drug use increased from 3.4 to 8.1 per 1000 indigenous Australians.

In Nagaland, Rupin Sharma, IPS Director General of police revealed that around 30,000 opoid users use an estimate of 550 crore in the state daily, additionally Martha R Ritse IAS Secretary of Social Welfare informed that there are 6,24,000 substance users were identified in the state while also stating the stigma drug users face which can further motivate substance use (Department of Information & Public Relations, Web). Drug use has also been associated with the rise of HIV positive individuals in the state, especially in the younger population.

Substance Abuse in Jack Davis' *The Dreamers*

Jack Davis' 1982 play *The Dreamers* captures the essence of substance abuse caused by the marginalization of the aboriginals in the New World. In the play, characters such as Peter, who is just eighteen years old indulge in alcohol as though he had been a frequent drinker his whole life, similar traits are seen in both his father Roy and Worru and ol Aboriginal man, uncle to Dolly, Roy's wife. The play centres the lives of

these characters of the Wallitch family who are now facing racial differences in South Australia as they struggle to navigate and cope with the changing times. Worru is,as mentioned, an old Aboriginal who is nearing his end days and is adamant to not let go of the ways old, but finds it very difficult to adjust and so finds solace in the pleasures of alcohol.

Elijha, who is referred to as Cousin Eli, also comes to the bottle as he struggles to find his identity in the modern world. Eli is against the system, believing that it is unfair towards the marginalized, i.e., the aboriginals, and is depicted to have a black eye from a physical altercation from the start of the play. Eli uses alcohol as a way to dull his physical pain and also his humiliation, and the feeling of being helpless. Roy's character is also very crucial in understanding the invasive nature of substance abuse, he finds solace in drinking from the fact that he is an unemployed father, as seen at the start of the play, where his wife, Dolly asks him to go and look for a job so they can afford a better home. Roy's behaviour also influences Peter, his so,n who also frequently indulges in drinking.

The Wallitch Family feels out of place in modern Australia, finding it to be a dilemma between choosing the modern life and letting go of their past of to embrace the nature of their roots, however both options appear to be detrimental, the try their best to balance and in doing so finds alcohol as a substitute for the outlet for all the displacement they feel.

Substance Abuse in Anungla Zoe Longkumer's *The Many That I Am: Writings from Nagaland*

Similarly, in another marginalized community, Anungla Zoe Longkumer's anthology *The Many That I AM: Writings From Nagaland* talks about alcoholism in a parallel vein. The short story by Abokali Jimomi in the same book is titled *Vili's Runaway Son.* It portrays the life of a poor mother Vili whose son has dropped out of his academic pursuit and hangs out with people who indulge in marijuana and cough syrups. They would often resort to stealing so that they can afford their dose of the drugs. This eventually led to her son joining an underground faction, where he ended up stealing a rifle that caused his father to be taken in and condemning his mother to scrap in two lakhs just to free his father. In addition, the father was also a cough syrup addict, making Vili carry

most of the financial burden. Both the father and the son turn to narcotics to escape from the harshness of reality.

Both the cases from the works of Jack Davis and Abokali Jimomi from Anungla Zoe Longkumer's book displays narcotics used as a coping mechanism to the life of a marginalized minority, the similarities of the the stories from across the world does not stop and alcoholism or drug use but the living conditions of the users, they are ostracized by virtue of their status, race or financial standing, in most of the cases substance abuse seem to be a way to nullify the pain of living a marginalized life at the cost of degrading their own life and the lives of those around them.

The Marginalized and Coping Mechanisms.

Albert Bandura's *Social Learning Theory* suggests that all learning occurs through observation, imitation, and modelling, meaning that learning begins before real hands-on experiences. He proposes that learning takes place either from direct social interactions of through the behavioural experiences of other individuals. (McLeod Web). For example, if a football was given to someone who has never played football but has seen the game, would somehow know what to do with the ball indicating that, although not proficient, the individual has some knowledge acquired from modelling, then the individual would likely imitate kicking the ball and modelling it on someone they have observed playing football.

Bandura's model however, suggests that mere exposure to experience does not guarantee that the individual will pay attention and for the individual to imitate the experience, it must capture the observer's attention so much so that they accept that it is worthy to be imitated, followed by storing these imitations and observations or behaviors in symbolic forms. And so, for active learning to commence, one must be interested in the observed, imitate it, create a symbolic significance in the mind, and then reproduce the behavior deliberately (McLeod Web).

Bandura's Learning Theory applicability in this discourse shines when considered with the light that falls upon the undeniability of how this theory affects the marginalized. The majority of the marginalized societies have ties of substance indulgence in their rituals and daily lives it

becomes a source of experience that is observed over and over aging with each generation; however, with the advent of technological development the traditional values take a back seat, but the narcotic practices remain as symbolic forms in the ideology and become integrated behaviours. These integrated behaviors often need the motivation to stay relevant and so without traditional purposes these behaviors attach themselves to the next defining feature of the marginalized, i.e., being marginalized - with modern civilization taking over the reality of being outcasts, discriminated, displaced and being marginalized becomes the motivation for substance indulgence but indulging in narcotics doesn't solve any of these issues leading to substance abuse. This phenomenon is a form of coping mechanism - the marginalized use psychoactive substance to cope with the issues raging in the community.

Conclusion.

Many marginalized groups face the dangers of substance abuse motivated by the nature of the environment around them and the traditions that propagate and encourage the use of narcotics, but with the advancement of scientific research, it is now evident that overuse and dependence on the said substances are sure to lead to detrimental lifestyle and relationships. Today, the evils of substance abuse have surfaced to new light but still many groups still sludge in the shadows of depression, anxiety, displacement, identity crisis and pain that instigates the use of such narcotics as a form of escape.

The most efficient and possible way to combat this evil is to realize that overusing narcotics, in fact anything is poisonous and so raising awareness of substance abuse specifically in the marginalized groups along with taking steps to integrate and accept these groups into the society of the world.

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The Changing Faces of Meira Paibis

- Dwaipayan Sinha and Pratyusha Raychaudhuri

Abstract: Meira Paibi, a group that translates to women as torch bearers, has often been looked at through various lenses and is ever-evolving in their role in the society. The popularity of this community comes from its justice-seeking attribute, wherein the group has stepped up as its local judge, jury, and executioner after suffering at the hands of its vices such as alcoholism and substance abuse to name a few. Established in 1977, this community was formulated as a stand against human rights violations especially against women. In light of the 2023 violence that raged across Manipur, a deeper understanding of the communities and the study of its actions, keeping in mind the historical background would be the first step towards the distant dream of peace. While sharing a border with Nagaland, Assam, and Mizoram, all of whom have seen little participation of women in the political decision-making process previously, how then does this group stand out? Has the scenario of women's participation truly changed in the political sphere of Manipur with its focus on the Meira Paibi, and local communities and contexts? This chapter shall attempt to delve into the understanding of women empowerment in the Indian context with the exclusive context of the Meira Paibi community throughout history. In carrying out this research, qualitative research methodology will be used to study the role of the Meira Paibi. Newspaper reports, previously conducted research findings in the area, and government data shall be used to analyse the research question. Does the Meira Peibi group then truly represent as UNICEF has claimed to fall under the umbrella understanding of women empowerment? An investigation of the evolution and cultural significance of Meira Pabi in Manipur shall thus be undertaken.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Manipur, Meira Paibi, Violence, Gender, Political participation.

Introduction

In general, the northeastern region is often portrayed as being plagued by various socio-political instabilities. Some of the issues can be categorized as economic underdevelopment; deep racial divide

between the region and mainstream; ethnic rivalry; state and non-state armed conflict; conflicting power relationships between different political units as well as the question of occupancy over native lands. These sister states however are diverse from one another and also within individual states in matters of ethnicity, religion, linguistics, and politics. The population of Manipur is approximately three million with its sex ratio standing at 987 females per 1000 males as per the Census of 2011. The three major communities inhabiting Manipur are the Meitei, Naga, and Kuki-Chin-Zo tribes and the dominant religions seen in practice are Hindu-Vaishnavaite, Christianity, Islam (Meitei-Pangal) and Sanamahi (indigenous faith). Geo-politically, Manipur is divided into 16 administrative districts divided amongst valley and hill regions. The valley region is populated predominantly by the Meitei community whereas the Naga and Kuki-ChinZo tribes inhabit the hilly regions. The women torch bearers of Manipur known as the Meira Paibis belong to the Meitei community and their functioning is primarily confined to the valley regions which encompass about 10% of the total land area.

The Role of Women in Public Life:

The public presence of women in Manipur has been prevalent since before the colonial rule and hence cannot be viewed purely as a product of agitation against patriarchal structures nor against colonisation. The role of women has been integrated in the agricultural setup. From the time of plantation up to the sale of the produce in the markets, their presence has played an important role in marking leaders of the community and such participation is a matter of pride amongst the Meitei society. Amongst these women, the grassroot women-led movement of the Meira Paibi was born. Their public presence may be viewed as a form of empowerment and yet, amongst society, it has been considered as an extension of the women's private presence in the familial for looking after the family and providing basic economic stability. One can trace the presence of women historically in the public sphere to the Burmese-Manipuri War of 1817 and the following seven years of devastation. It is argued that the War led to a declining male population as it was the duty of menfolk to go war. This propelled the role of women into maintaining families beyond their households.

Women Empowerment and its Political Understanding:

What then is political participation in this context? The traditional school of thought is of the belief that when the public involves itself in the decision-making process of the governing body is counted as political participation. This would include a set of duties and rights that includes formal political activities, for example, voting or joining a political party. These theories rest entirely on the lawful nature of political participation. As represented by the data below, the status of women in terms of political participation right from India's independence is very low. The Indian Constitution gives equal voting rights to all falling within the Universal Adult Franchise, but the representation of women in the Parliament or State Legislatures do not match the numbers needed for equal representation.While women are slowly making their way into State Legislative Assemblies as elected members (MLAs) the progress is indeed slothful and yet there is hope. The table below shows the realities of Women empowerment in Manipur, going by the traditional understanding.

Serial Number	Election Year	Number of Elected Male	Number female Contested	Number of elected Female
1	1967	30	-	0
2	1972	60	3	0
3	1974	60	3	0
4	1980	60	8	0
5	1984	60	5	0
6	1990	53	7	1
7	1995	60	11	0
8	2000	59	11	1
9	2002	59	7	1
10	2007	60	12	0
11	2012	57	15	3
12	2017	58	-	2
Source: *Election Commission of India Report*				

Non-traditional ways of political participation – The word 'influence' aptly defines what is believed to be political participation and hence empowerment by this school of thought. Political participation here can be seen as an activity with the basic intention of influencing government decisions- either directly during the development or implementation of

public policies and laws or indirectly. This is where the Meira Paibis fit in, with their choice of participation being protests, peaceful and armed. Their role in society can be accredited to the contribution they have made to end alcoholism and drug abuse in the state as well as standing up to human rights violations such as sexual violence and abuse by those in power.

The Rise of the Meira Paibi:

Women and the governing forces of Manipur have, at most times, not engaged as legitimate adversaries; there is the state that exercises near monopoly to establish peace and legitimatizes the use of violence by deploying armed forces and women who challenge the laws and actions of the state in contrast. The state has also categorized women participating in protests as 'linked with insurgents'. However, to the Meira Paibi, their movement is a legitimate exercise that they are compelled to participate in for familial wellbeing, establishing societies free from exploitation and abuse, and state violence. Such engagement compels one to explore the components of protest and violence, wherein state-sponsored violence is deemed justified as opposed to civilian.

Historically, women's resistance against colonial rule in Manipur manifested in organized protests known as "Nupi Lan," occurring in 1904, 1939, and 1940. The first Nupi Lan emerged in response to the state's reliance on male labour, while the second arose from a critical rice scarcity. These events marked significant moments of collective action against the colonial state.In the late 1950s, as insurgency intensified and allegations of human rights abuses by the state surged—particularly under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act—the Meira Paibi's iconic protest against sexual violence further solidified their status as legendary figures in the struggle for justice.The AFSPA gives special powers to armed forces personnel in areas classified as "disturbed areas" to use force, arrest, occupy and destroy property, and more, to maintain law and order. It has been in effect in Manipur since 1958.

Membership in the Meira Paibi movement is typically voluntary; however, during times of crisis within the state, at least one woman from each household is required to participate. Local gatherings take place in designated 'meirashangs' (huts), where members discuss their strategies

and plans in an organized fashion.In cases of what the people deem to be a wrongful civilian arrest, they quickly mobilize to police stations or military camps to assist the victims or inquire about missing individuals.Following numerous incidents of oppression, discrimination, and extrajudicial killings by military personnel, the Meira Paibis have vehemently opposed the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). Their resistance has included organizing public meetings, engaging in negotiations, blocking roads, and staging hunger strikes. Stepping into the early 2000s, their activism has increasingly focused on women and children-centric issues who are often the first victims of conflicts. They have helped bring the nation's spotlight with their protests to the rampant abuse of power, sexual harassment, and rape that occur but do not receive justice within the system.A prominent case that drew public attention was that of Thangjam Manorama in July 2004. She was said to have been abducted by personnel from the 17thAssam Rifles, a unit of the Indian Army. Her body was later discovered bearing signs of torture, sexual abuse, and gunshot wounds. This tragic incident prompted the Meira Paibis to formulate a more assertive response. They organized protests that included torch-bearing parades and a bold demonstration at the Assam Rifles battalion, where twelve members publicly stripped as a form of protest. Many feminists considered this form of naked protest as an epistemic point of reclaiming women's agency. Their actions served as a powerful medium for expressing their demands and resistance, using their bodies to symbolize the profound unrest and indignation they felt toward the special privileges granted to AFSPA soldiers.

Aside from the abovementioned reasons, the ongoing episodes of ethnic violence, while not entirely unheard of, stem from decades of mutual mistrust among communities, compounded by successive governments' neglect of legitimate grievances, unequal resource distribution, lopsided political representation, and a significant governance shortfall. While there exists a degree of agreement among the majority of Meiteis and Nagas regarding their shared origins, the Kukis are often regarded as outsiders. However, the Kukis assert their indigenous status in Manipur, a claim vigorously challenged by the Meiteis. The historical narrative of the 'Anglo-Kuki War,' frequently invoked by the Kukis to substantiate their indigenous identity in Manipur, is subject to dispute and scepticism among the Meiteis. This intricate interplay of narratives underscores the

complexity of defining and understanding the notion of "Manipur" within its multicultural and multiethnic context.

Since the 1960s, a plethora of militant factions has surfaced in Manipur, each purporting to champion the diverse demands and grievances of their respective ethnic constituencies. Notably, the Kukis and the Nagas have been steadfastly advocating for their own sovereign territories, a cause inherently at odds with the Meiteis' steadfast commitment to safeguarding the territorial integrity of the state.

Events of 2023 and its History:

The recent outbreak of violence originated from a directive by the Manipur High Court, urging the state government to deliberate on granting Scheduled Tribe status to the Meitei community, the predominant populace in Manipur. Such status would afford them constitutional protection and broader access to government benefits, including reserved seats. This plea for recognition had been a longstanding request from the Meitei community. However, there were apprehensions that this decision might exacerbate ethnic tensions, especially with the Kuki and Naga indigenous groups. Indeed, following the court's pronouncement, the All-Tribal Students Union of Manipur organized a protest rally on May 3. Violence erupted the same day with reports of the burning of the Anglo-Kuki War Memorial Gate. Subsequently, Kukis retaliated by setting fire to several villages inhabited by Meitei communities in Churachandpur, provoking reprisals from the Meitei, who allegedly torched various Kuki settlements in the Imphal Valley region, resulting in multiple casualties.

The Meitei community has long sought inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe (ST) list, a demand dating back to 1981 when then Chief Minister of Manipur, Rishang Keishing, brought it up in the State Legislative Assembly. However, internal dissent hindered progress on this front. In 1995, the community was designated as Other Backward Class (OBC), while subsets like Chakpas and ThoubalKhunous were recognized as Scheduled Castes (SC) since 1956. Despite these designations, the demand for ST status persisted, gaining momentum with the establishment of the Scheduled Tribes Demand Committee of Manipur Valley (STDCM). They submitted a memorandum to Governor

Gurbachan Jagat in November 2012 and met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in July 2013 to reinforce their plea. Following this, on 29 May 2013, the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs requested the Manipur government to submit formal recommendations, along with updated socio-economic surveys and ethnographic reports. However, the state government did not respond. In April 2022, the Meitei Tribal Union (MTU) renewed their appeal, submitting a representation to the Union Tribal Affairs Ministry. Despite forwarding the letter to the Manipur government in May 2022, there was no response. Consequently, in 2023, MutumChuramani and seven others from the MTU petitioned the High Court, seeking a writ of mandamus to compel the Manipur government to address the Union Ministry's letter. The High Court eventually issued an order in response to this writ petition.

The High Court order is, however, not the only point of conflict between the Meiteis and Kukis. Some specific government initiatives by the Biren Singh-led government have caused rage and discontent amongst the Kuki population. The Manipur government has alleged that large-scale Kuki illegal migration from Myanmar is taking place. The anxiety among illegal migrants from Myanmar has reached such heights that the government reportedly halted the Free Regime Movement (FMR) with Myanmar and apprehended 410 individuals labelled as 'illegal migrants' from Myanmar. Additionally, the Biren Singh administration continued its land survey of reserve forests, protected areas, wetlands, and wildlife. In the course of this survey, the state government pinpointed encroachers and issued eviction notices to them. Due to the forcible nature of some of these evictions, confrontations arose between villagers and forest and police officials. The efforts to remove 'illegal encroachers' from Myanmar have sparked tensions among the Kukis, who view the Chin refugees from Myanmar as part of their own tribe, known as the Chin-Kuki tribe. Moreover, the Manipur government initiated a 'War on Drugs' campaign in 2017, particularly targeting the hills of Ukhrul, Senapati, Kangpokpi, Kamjong, Churachandpur, and Tengnoupal districts where large-scale illegal poppy cultivation was rampant. However, the Kuki community perceives the forceful eradication of illicit poppy cultivation and the subsequent arrests of villagers as a threat to their livelihood, as the promised compensation from the state government never reached the affected cultivators. The protests by the Kukis against such government measures have angered the incumbent government, which believes

that the Kuki militant organisations are behind organizing the protests and are carrying out illegal activities.

On March 10, 2023, the Biren Singh administration made the decision to pull out of the tripartite Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with Kuki militant organizations. This independent withdrawal has not only caused dissatisfaction among the Kuki community but has also raised doubts about resolving the Kuki militancy issue in the state.

The Kukis, on their part, have been demanding a separate homeland for decades. They believe that the Meiteis have not given them their fair share in political power and have actively sought to keep those areas populated by the Kukis underdeveloped. The central issue lies in the significant spatial disparity between the Meitei community and the Tribespeople. Despite comprising 53 percent of the population, the Meitei community feels marginalized as they occupy only 10 percent of the land in the valley. They contend that their situation is worsening as Tribespeople purchase land and settle in the valley, while Meiteis are unable to do the same in the hills due to constitutional protections afforded to Tribespeople under Article 371(c). Additionally, the Meitei community asserts that their land is being encroached upon by various 'outsiders,' including illegal migrants from Bangladesh and Myanmar, and people from other regions of the country. They argue that obtaining Scheduled Tribe (ST) status is crucial to preserving their ancestral land, tradition, culture, and language.

Conversely, Tribal communities oppose the Meitei community's demand for ST status, citing Meiteis' dominance in the state, with 40 of the 60 legislative seats held by them. They point out that the Meitei language is already included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution and argue that Meiteis enjoy a superior educational, social, and economic status compared to Tribespeople. Consequently, granting ST status to Meiteis would potentially result in them monopolizing government jobs and benefits previously designated for Tribespeople, and could lead to the appropriation of Tribal land, as Meiteis would be exempt from restrictions on land ownership in the hills. The Kukis have also been embroiled in violent conflicts with the Nagas in the past. The Meietis are against the Kukis even having a Kukiland Territorial Council as they believe it would give rise to secessionist tendencies.

Conclusion:

The Meira Paibi movement in Manipur has been historically significant in advocating for women's rights and justice. Women residing in areas affected by disruptions of such intensities naturally have a distinct understanding of civilian peace-building and responsibility as compared to those who observe such conditions from a safe distance. Critics have targeted the Meira Paibis during the ongoing violence in Manipur for not embodying a "peaceful" and "nurturing" role amidst conflicts, outraged at the changing gender roles and power equations. This criticism on its own is problematic as it reinforces the stereotype of women as passive participants and fails to recognize the varying lived experiences of northeastern women. Such critics also fail to see the nuanced layers of the current conflict, with the intersectionality of ethnicity, reservation, and other factors coming into play.

However, recent instances of violence against women from other communities raise critical questions about the movement's alignment with the principles of true empowerment. At its foundation, feminism aims to dismantle oppressive structures while promoting equality and respect for all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds. When women engage in acts of violence against others, particularly those from different communities, they undermine the solidarity necessary for a meaningful resistance against patriarchy and systemic injustice. Such actions perpetuate cycles of discrimination and violence, thereby weakening the feminist narrative that seeks to unite women in collective struggles against human rights abuses.

Moreover, utilizing violence as a means of asserting power contradicts the core principles of empowerment, which should prioritize dialogue, support, and mutual understanding. This challenge is particularly pronounced in a community that has endured decades of state-sponsored violence, leading to a troubling replication of oppressive behaviour. True empowerment must involve uplifting all women and recognizing the intersectionality of their experiences, rather than resorting to aggression as a means of asserting dominance.

Historically, successive governments in New Delhi have overlooked the unique challenges and aspirations of the Northeast, which has intensified

feelings of alienation among Manipuri communities. This ignorance and indifference have further deepened existing grievances, contributing to ongoing discontent and sporadic outbreaks of violence. Addressing these issues is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and equitable society in Manipur. Additionally, the prolonged neglect by both state and central governments has exacerbated the situation in Manipur. This neglect raises pressing questions about the feasibility and design of a healing process for affected communities. The prevailing animosity and resentment threaten to entrench divisions, making it imperative that accountability is established—not only at the individual level but also within the broader systems tasked with ensuring the security and protection of citizens. More recently, in April 2022, the AFSPA was revoked from areas served by 19 police stations. These developments reflect an evolving approach to security and governance in Manipur, raising important questions about the implications for civil rights and community relations in the region.

Women's empowerment must encompass all women, irrespective of their community affiliation. Only through this lens can the feminist narrative effectively flourish, focusing on the shared struggle for equality and human rights for all individuals.

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