VOLUME 4 | NORTH EAST CELL, HINDU COLLEGE

HORIZON

TALES FROM OUR HOMELAND

6 ACCLAIMED GUEST WRITERS

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS

11 TRAILBLAZING PERSONALITIES FROM THE NORTH EAST





HORIZON

TALES FROM OUR HOMELAND

VOLUME IV
EDITION 2024-2025

ISSUED BY
NORTH EAST CELL, HINDU COLLEGE,
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

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Published on 6th June, 2025

Note from the Principal



I extend my heartfelt congratulations to the North East Cell of Hindu College and the editorial team on the release of their annual publication, *Horizon*. We are proud to have such a vibrant and committed society that actively promotes diversity and inclusivity. Their continued efforts to celebrate our rich and unique cultural tapestry are truly commendable.

I believe that admirable efforts have been put into the compilation of the magazine. The process behind the magazine has been an endeavor that has strengthened teamwork and commitment. I am confident that readers will find this collection of thoughtful and inspiring contributions both enlightening and enriching.

I hope the hard work and vision demonstrated by Team *Horizon*, under the guidance of their faculty advisor, Sh. Ginminlen Touthang, will inspire everyone to work towards a more inclusive and diverse future — both within and beyond the College.

Best wishes,

Prof. Anju Srivastava,
Principal, Hindu College



Note from the Faculty Advisor

"Unity finds its deepest meaning in diversity, not in sameness – for it is difference, not uniformity, that makes harmony meaningful"
— Paraphrased from Rabindranath Tagore

The North East Cell of Hindu College stands as a vibrant space for academic and cultural engagement, embodying the college's ideal of unity in diversity. It is a platform where cultural expression and shared identity converge, fostering a spirit of fraternity that binds us beyond differences. As the Faculty Advisor, I take immense pride in witnessing the dedicated efforts of the North East Cell — under the leadership of the Student Council and its members, with the invaluable support and guidance of our Principal, Prof. Anju Srivastava. The Cell has excelled in cultivating this spirit of fraternity through a series of thoughtfully organized events and activities, both on campus and online, during the academic session 2024–25. This aligns with the very essence of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), which emphasizes instilling awareness of India's rich diversity, heritage, and traditions while strengthening unity.

It is heartening to see the larger Hindu College community engaging with the affairs of North East India, showing genuine concern and solidarity with students from the region. Even small steps in this direction contribute to the greater goal of fostering national unity and integrity, as envisioned in our Constitution's Preamble.

The Cell has had a dynamic and impactful academic year, celebrating the unique culture of North East India while addressing

pressing social issues through innovative events, campaigns, and meaningful dialogues. Most importantly, it has fostered a deep sense of belonging, not only among its members but also within the wider college community. As the Faculty Advisor, I feel privileged to witness the passion and commitment with which the students honor their roots while building bridges across cultures. It is particularly special to serve in this role during the 125th anniversary of Hindu College — a milestone that makes this journey even more significant and memorable.

This fourth edition of *Horizon* is not just a magazine; it is a reflection of the hard work, creativity, and resilience of the North East Cell family. It carries stories that celebrate heritage, diversity, inclusivity, and artistic expression, showcasing the immense talent of our students.

I extend my sincere appreciation to the Student Council, the Editorial Team, and all the contributors whose articles and artworks have brought this magazine to life. My heartfelt gratitude also goes to our Principal, Prof. Anju Srivastava, for providing the North East Cell with the space and encouragement to express the rich cultural diversity of Northeast India.

With the release of this magazine, let us continue to celebrate diversity — not just as an idea, but as a lived and shared reality.

Warm regards,

Sh. Ginminlen Touthang,
Faculty Advisor,
North-East Cell, Hindu College

An Introduction by the Editor-in-Chief



Dear Readers,

Every time I travel back home, I look forward to the mesmerising sight of the Brahmaputra. As the plane traverses the breadth of the mighty river in its descent towards the Itanagar airport, the sight of its shimmering waters embraces me with a warm welcome. The little geographer in me gives a jump of joy. There are the breath-taking blue hills of Arunachal on the horizon. Countless tributaries emerge from the hills and thread through the Brahmaputra plains to meet the braided river. In the distance, the snow-capped Himalayas stand tall as the guardians of the valley, and beyond that, I can imagine our very Brahmaputra flowing eastward as the Tsangpo under the Tibetan skies. Homecoming, for me, is incomplete without this sight.

And I cannot help but think, every time I fly back home, of how the river had once been a great riddle for the British administrators. The east-flowing Tsangpo in Tibet disappeared into the unbreachable Himalayan mountains near Arunachal, from where various tributaries reemerged again to form the west-flowing Brahmaputra. The British officers were puzzled. Were the Tsangpo and the Brahmaputra the same?

There was no way of telling. Tibet had forbidden entry to the British, and the tribes of Arunachal were "hostile" to them, making any attempt at British exploration next to impossible. So, until the 19th century, the upper reaches of the river remained shrouded in

mystery, myths, and lores.

A young, illiterate tailor from Darjeeling named Kinthup was tasked by a British officer, Harman, in 1880 to map the river as a spy disguised as a monk. He was to enter Tibet from Sikkim and trace the Tsangpo till the point where it flowed into Arunachal. Once there, he had to throw specially marked wooden logs into the Tsangpo. So, if the wooden logs were found flowing in the Brahmaputra, it would prove the rivers to be the same.

Kinthup's journey, though, would be full of misadventures. He got sold twice as a slave, and had to escape and take shelter in a monastery. But through it all, he remained determined and finally accomplished the task and returned to India in 1884, four years after he had started. But alas, by this time Harman had left India, and no one had been appointed to observe the woods in the Brahmaputra. Kinthup's journey was forgotten in the pages of history. Without pen and paper, he had just had his memory to record his adventures. So, people hardly believed his tales.

In 1913, two British officers named FM Bailey and Henry Morshead carried out another exploration of the Brahmaputra, as part of the Abor Expedition of 1911— which was, in turn, a punitive expedition against the Abor tribes and to dominate a "trouble state" in the Mishmi hills of Arunachal Pradesh. Bailey and Morshead's exploration finally proved conclusively that both the rivers were the same. In his report in the Geographical Journal, his view laced with stereotypes as it was, Bailey would use terms such as "savages" and "wild tribes" to describe the people of Arunachal.

Indeed, there are different journeys we take — of homecoming, of venturing out to find greener pastures, of exploration, and also of one on a route to our roots. There are also different ways of looking at the North East — an insider's perspective and an outsider's.

Horizon is also a journey that we take. It is a journey of homecoming. A journey in which we look at the North East through our own point of view. It is a platform where we tell our stories in our own voices. It is also where we unlearn and debunk the stereotypes associated with the region. It is an attempt to forge a bridge between the North East and the rest of the country, between the insider and the outsider perspectives. But, above all, *Horizon* is a journey of connecting back to our roots, in which — as Easterine Kire tells us in her interview — we must learn to take absolute pride (Pg. 28). The newly introduced tagline for the magazine, **"Tales from Our Homeland"**, captures this very vision.

But, what goes into the making of such a heartfelt magazine? Well, there's much fretting about writing, editing, designing, proof-reading, rushing to meet deadlines and facing rejections, of course. But, it's also about finding comfort in the stories from our home, stories which we carry with us, no matter where we go. Stories which lie in a homely dinner cooked and shared with friends, old and new, in this far-away city. Or, in the *kaji nemu tenga*s brought to you by a friend on their recent visit home. Or, in connecting with a fellow person from the North East at a book event. Stories which lie in the aromatic lanes of Humanyunpur's Northeastern neighbourhood (Pg. 92), or perhaps, in coming together to celebrate the region's rich heritage in a cultural fest on college campus (Pg. 240). It is these stories that have guided our vision in ideating and compiling this edition.

And perhaps, nothing captures the entire experience of working on a project like this, better than Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's witty and humorous story, *Mini Anthology* (Pg. 15). From endless mails to imploring friends to write and contribute something, here's a tale that remarks on the trials and tribulations of being the Editor-in-Chief.

Our sincere gratitude to Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Dr. Easterine Kire, Rashmi Narzary, Anannya Nath, Thangjam Hindustani Devi, and Dr. Achingliu Kamei for enriching the magazine with their invaluable contributions.

While Dr. Kire's poem emphasises on our right to tell our stories, Dr. Kamei's poem speaks about the predicaments of young people who migrate to cities like Delhi in search of greener pastures. Rashmi Narzary's story is about resilience, co-existence, communal harmony and festivity, while Anannya Nath translates Chandana Pathak's satire on the intersections of politics, gender, and woes of the common people in Assam. Thangjam Hindustani Devi retells a spooky folktale from Manipur, that is sure to remind you of listening to your grandparents' bedtime tales.

Through these writings, we hope that our readers get an introduction to the rich literature of the region, and that they would cultivate the interest to read more of it. Special thanks also to Jompi Ete, for contributing her beautiful illustration for the cover.

Keeping in mind our young readership, we have featured a whopping eleven exclusive interviews in this edition. Be it wildlife conservation or aviation, civil services or animation, cooking or writing, singing or dancing, filmmaking or entrepreneurship, we hope that the stories and journeys

of these trailblazing personalities from the North East can be an inspiration for the youth to follow their dreams and their hearts. I am grateful to Dr. Easterine Kire, Dr. Purnima Devi Barman, Aranyak Saikia, Rajni Basumatary, Srijani Bhaswa Mahanta, Anong Singpho, Santa Sarmah, David Yambem, Avantika Haflongbar, Paiva Ramai, and Minerva Wahlang for taking out the time to share their journeys with us.

I must take this opportunity to also highlight our queer narrative section, *Sama Vesita* (Nepali for "All Inclusive") — which has been our attempt to bridge the dearth in queer literature from the region since the last two editions. The experiences, challenges and triumphs of queer individuals from the North East are often overlooked or remain unrepresented. When I got in touch with Zhemo to tell her that we have approved her piece (Pg 147), she told me that this was the first time she had contributed a write-up in a magazine. We are pleased that we have been able to provide a space where queer voices from the region can be shared and heard.

It takes a tribe to accomplish an endeavour like this, especially when it's a bumper edition of 260 pages. Kudos to the editorial team and fellow contributors. This edition of *Horizon* would not have been possible without you.

Finally, I hope you enjoy reading the magazine as much as we loved putting it together. May reading this edition take you on a journey to our Homeland.

Happy reading!

Best wishes,

Niloy Kurmi,
Editor-in-Chief

Note from the Editor-in-Chief



Dear Readers,

Absolutely nothing excites me more than being able to share with you the 4th Edition of *Horizon*, previously known as *The North-East Indian*. This Cell has been a home away from home and this magazine is an ode to all the life changing experiences that this family has given me.

Horizon is not just an attempt to bridge the gap that is often experienced by North-Easterners in other parts of the country, it is an amalgamation of: stories that we grew up with being reiterated to us, instances and experiences unique to us, and above all, stories and journeys that inspire us to be who we are and what we aspire to be. Team *Horizon* attempts to amplify the voices that were hardly heard. We make space for people to speak for themselves because real diversity is not just representation, it is also about respect, recognition and the willingness to learn.

I would also like to mention that none of this would have been possible without contributions from our guest writers, student contributors and other personalities who have ever so gracefully agreed to share their stories with us. I would also thank the editorial team and the design team from the bottom of my heart, for being a part of the painstaking but rewarding, procedure of compiling the magazine.

My sincere gratitude to our Principal Prof. Anju Srivastava and our teacher Coordinator Prof. Ginminlen for providing the North East Cell with this platform.

And finally, thank you to our readers for engaging and growing with us. I hope these stories leave you inspired, challenged, and above all, connected to the beautiful mosaics of humanity.

Warmly,

Debangshi Das,
Editor-in-Chief

Note from the President



Dear Readers,

The first time my name appeared in *Horizon* was in the 2023 edition. It was a brief mention in the "Achievers" section for securing the third prize in a poster-making competition organized by a university committee. I had submitted my name, unsure if such a small achievement would make it to print. But, to my immense joy, it did — right alongside the far more lauded accomplishments of other Cell members. That tiny, printed mention gave me a sense of pride and belonging which I still carry with me.

Now, as I write this President's Note for the 2025 edition of *Horizon*, my name will appear in its pages once again — for the second, and perhaps, the last time. As I put pen to paper, I can't help but reflect on the journey between those two mentions — a journey of three fulfilling years spent with the Cell, working alongside some of the most creative, committed, and compassionate people I've ever met.

But, this issue of *Horizon* is not just about my journey. Through the special feature *NEtym through the Years*, you'll read deeply personal reflections from our former Presidents and executives — voices that shaped the Cell over the years. Their words capture the warmth, growth, and legacy of this unique community.

This edition also celebrates the incredible works of our student writers, staff contributors, guest voices, and even renowned authors. Carrying forward the magazine's tagline of *Tales from Our Homeland* we've featured interviews with inspiring individuals from diverse fields — from cuisine and aviation to literature and music. As you skim through their stories, you'll find that success is often stitched together by quiet, enduring support: warm hugs at just the right time, a mother's saree gently wiping away tears, and the unspoken wisdom shared during evening walks with our grandparents.

I hope that as you turn these pages, you feel the emotions we felt while creating them — pride, nostalgia, hope, and above all, a deep sense of connection.

Best wishes,

Mrinav Murari Mazumder,
President, North East Cell

In this issue . . .

6 ACCLAIMED GUEST WRITERS

15 **FICTION**
A MINI ANTHOLOGY
Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

27 **POEM**
THE RIGHT TO STORIES
Easterine Kire

39 **FICTION**
SINGING A SPRINGSONG
Rashmi Narzary

64 **FICTION**
PRETTY
Chandana Pathak
translated by Anannya Nath

74 **POEM**
CONCRETE SAVAGE
Achingliu Kamei

69 **FOLKTALE**
MEMO AND THE DEMONESS
Thangjam Hindustani Devi












Spotlight
11 exclusive interviews!

28 **WORDS FROM A MASTER STORYTELLER**
Easterine Kire

48 **NATURE ABOVE ALL**
Dr Purnima Devi Barman

77 **THE SKY IS LIMITLESS**
Minerva Wahlang

102 **BEYOND THE CANVAS**
David Yambem

130 **IN PERFECT RHYTHM**
Srijani Bhaswa Mahanta

156 **A UPSC SUCCESS STORY**
Aranyak Saikia

172 **MELODIES OF MEMORY, SYMPHONIES OF SUCCESS**
Paiva Ramai

190 **HERITAGE IN EVERY THREAD AND TASTE**
Avantika Haflongbar

197 **BOLLYWOOD RHAPSODY**
Anong Singpho

216 **A CULINARY ODYSSEY**
Santa Sarmah

226 **DIRECTOR'S CUT**
Rajani Basumatary

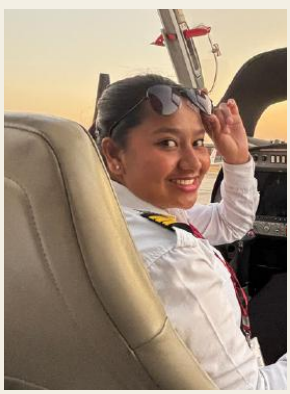
Pg. 3 Principal's Note *Pg. 4 Faculty Advisor's Note* *Pg. 6 Editorial*

Pg. 11 President's Note *Pg. 252 Activity Report* *Pg. 254 Achievements*











TRAVELOGUE
84 **A TRIP TO DZUKOU**
Nayanisha Bhattacharyya

SPECIAL FEATURE
92 **FLAVOURS OF SAFDARJUNG**
Somecson Yengkhom

SPORTS
111 **HOOFPRINTS OF A HOMEGAME**
Team *Horizon*

POEM
119 **HUMAN GAMES IN THE PERIPHERY**
Dorothy Bhuyan

HERITAGE
122 **UNMASKING MAJULI**
Asmi Gayan

SAMA VESITA
143 **3 QUEER POEMS**
Aaron Kharkamni

SAMA VESITA
147 **ECHOES OF MY TRUE SELF**
Zhemo

FOLKLORE
151 **LESSONS ON COURAGE AND WISDOM FROM THE MIZO HILLS**
Jonathan H Vanlalzuata

POEM
162 **THE BROTHER I KNEW**
Soumyaditya Deb

TRADITION
164 **NUPTIAL HUES & WEDDING TUNES**
Bishakha Gogoi

CULTURE
177 **WEAVES OF INDIGENEITY**
Hamiron Timung

FESTIVAL
202 **FESTIVE FERVOUR**
Lonia Gumja

HISTORY
208 **REMEMBERING WORLD WAR II IN NORTHEAST INDIA**
Paone Mark

ART & CULTURE
230 **LIVING ROOT BRIDGES**
Dorothy Bhuyan

SPECIAL FEATURE
240 **NETYM THROUGH THE YEARS**
Concept: Niloy

POEM
250 **KANGLA**
Mayanglambam Sania

DON'T MISS!

NEtym through the years

Pg. 240







"WITTY. HUMOROUS. A MUST READ!"
— *Horizon News*

VOLUME IV 15

Recently, my colleague and I completed the editing of *Deluge: Stories from Northeast India*. It was a challenging task, to say the least, but also enormously fulfilling, especially when a multi-national publisher accepted the manuscript and decided to publish it in two volumes.

Relaxing, after we had finally submitted the edited manuscript, strangely, I kept thinking not about the many wonderful stories and charming characters in it but about the many writers we had encountered who were not a part of it. Some of them, in particular, still make me laugh out loud now and then. Wouldn't they make a diverting mini anthology if I should tell their stories? Let's see.

The first person to give me a rude shock was Fadiba (obviously not her real name), a woman writer who had just brought out her debut novel. The novel did not receive much critical attention, and the few reviews that I read had only shredded it with the iron claws of mockery and scorn. Yet, oddly, it was also shortlisted for a major national award. Thankfully, it did not win. It would have been a bad joke.



Having read the disparaging reviews we were not too keen on including anything by the author, but since she is from the region, we thought we might as well give her a chance to prove her calibre. I called her, introducing myself, explaining our project, and politely requesting for a short story. I put her on speakerphone so my colleague would also hear.

Without so much as a word of greeting, she asked, "How much are you paying?"

I said, "Umm . . . This is actually a labour of love for us. It's not a contracted project. No publisher has asked us to do this. We are doing it on our own, although two of the biggest publishers in the country have already shown very keen interest . . ."

"How much can you pay?"

"As I said, this is a labour of love . . . We don't have any money to pay anyone right now. We thought . . ."

But she was not concerned with what we thought. In a tone that clearly told me what a presumptuous pest I was, she said, "Then I cannot give you any story! I don't contribute without payment!



Sorry!"

And she disconnected.

My colleague was shocked. She could only repeat, "What?! What?!"

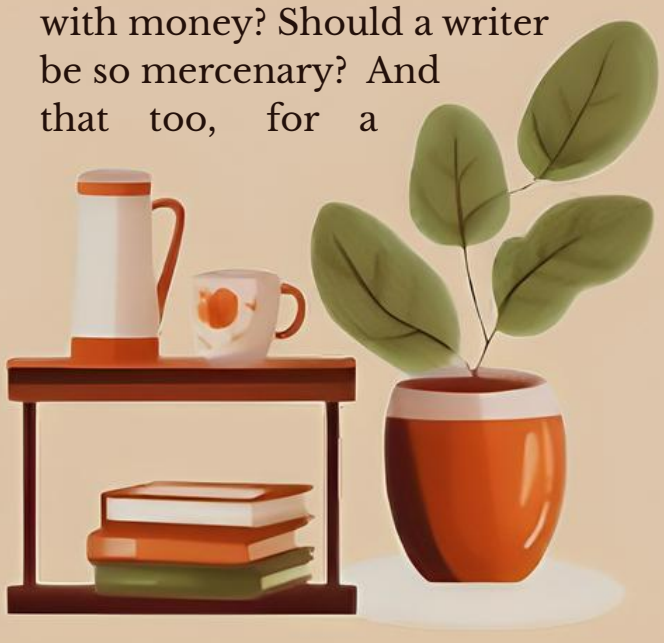
"God!" I exclaimed, too surprised to say anything more.

My colleague became quite hot. "Who is she to behave like that?" she demanded. "She has brought out only a single book, and she thinks of herself as what, one of the greatest in India?"

"God, but what if everybody demands money from us?" I asked. "We might have hatched the idea, but without the wings of goodwill, how will it fly?"

My colleague was still upset. "How can people behave like that?" she repeated.

"That's what a shortlist can do to a bad writer," I replied. "But say, why should she measure her importance with money? Should a writer be so mercenary? And that too, for a pittance?"



Then, the lighter side of the incident struck us, and we began laughing, genuinely enjoying the opportunity to have found someone like her.

"This is very interesting," I said, recovering my spirits. "Let's call another."

Another was a writer, writing in a regional language. He was a big man in the small world of his literature but hardly known outside that world. But I supposed he didn't know that. We only came to know about him because one of his translated stories was published in some anthology. We thought the story was not too bad and decided to sample more of his stuff.

He had a deep, booming voice. A real macho man, I thought. Putting him on speakerphone, I introduced myself, telling him my name.

"Hmm!" he responded.

I explained our project to him.

He said, "I'm in Russia now. Call me again after I have come back!"

"When will that be?" I asked.

Ignoring me, he enquired, 'What book is this? Again?'

'Oh, it's an anthology of short stories

from the Northeast . . .”



“Hmm. Publisher?”

“We don’t know yet, but Penguin and HarperCollins have shown keen interest in it. It will be the most comprehensive anthology of short stories from the region so far . . .”

“Hmm,” he interrupted me. “I have also published a collection of short stories . . . in English . . . by a famous publisher . . .”

“What famous publisher?” I asked innocently.

Ignoring my question, he said, “It will be released by a very famous writer — Mr Ruskin Bond! Do you know Mr Ruskin Bond?”

People have told me that I’m too quick to anger. Like granite, flying sparks when hit just a little bit. This guy has an ego like a puffed-up pig’s bladder! I will prick it with the pin of sarcasm.

Imitating his deep voice, I said, “Mr Ruskin Bond? What do you think? Do I know or don’t I know? Or should I know only of one Bond — James Bond?”

Amazed, he said, “You don’t know of Mr Ruskin Bond?! He is the most famous novelist and writer in India! In the world even! He will release my book! In Mussoorie! You call me back when I return to Guwahati!”

With that, he disconnected, and we laughed and laughed and did not stop laughing till we parted in the evening.

My colleague once told me about a writer friend she met at a literary function in Delhi. After being ignored by a few luminaries at the function, her friend loudly said, “People don’t know what a big writer I am. When they come to know, they feel humbled and try to fawn over me.”

We never called him back. We did not want to fawn over him.

There was one more character as mercenary as Fadiba, the first one. She was not a creative writer but had translated a few well-known authors from her community. We’ll call her Thena.

When I called her, Thena was very excited about the project. “Gosh! Just the thing I need!” she gushed. “You know, I have translated scores of the best short stories by the best writers of my community. How many can you publish? I



will send you eight! Now, now, I will send."

Happy with her enthusiastic appreciation for our project, I thanked her profusely. My colleague, who had heard everything, said, "God, I feel so good! See how different she is from the likes of Fadiba!"

Thena kept her word. We proceeded to read and edit the stories. They were indeed wonderfully moving stories, but we had to struggle so much with the translations — they were like a path full of nettles and brambles. Thena was not as good a translator as we had thought. After days of grappling with the translations, we called her, informing her that we loved the stories and had decided to use all of them.

"Good, good!" she gushed. "And how much will you pay me?"

"*Haa*? What's that?" I asked, stupefied.

"Payment! How much will you pay me?"

"Oh, I thought . . ."

"How can you think anything like that? Translators have to get paid, no?"

As with Fadiba, I started talking about how the anthology is a labour of love, but she cut me short. "No, no no! This will not do! Writers, translators, editors, all of us have to be paid! And a good sum, too! Publishers are behaving like extortionists . . ."

"That's it, you see? We don't have a publisher yet. What if we share our editors' fee with you? Will that . . . ?"

"No, no, no! I don't want your money! I want the publisher to pay me and pay me well!"

"What to do? We don't have a publisher yet."

"In that case, I will withdraw all my stories! Except one, since you said I would get a contributor's copy!"

For the second time, I said, "Haa? Withdraw?"

"I'm taking back all my stories except one."

When I was a kid, I was given a fistful of marbles by a much older boy for giving his love letter to a girl whom





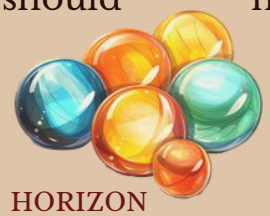
he fancied.
Later, feeling his loss too acutely, the boy came with some of his friends to ask me to return the marbles. When I refused, his friends held my arms while he tried to retrieve the marbles from my pockets. I kicked and bit and struggled, but finally, the boy got his marbles back. But not the girl, because I told her about his real intention towards her. One day, I even taunted the boy, from a distance, "No marbles, no girl, Rubberman!"

What Thena was doing reminded me of that childhood incident. She had given me a fistful of stories only to take them back. However, this time I did not struggle. I only said, "Take if you must. What to do?"

My colleague said, "God! And I thought she was so generous!"

"Perhaps I should blame myself for not clarifying things."

"No! She is the one who should have clarified! She should have told us they were not for free!"



"Anyway," I soothed her, "she is still giving us one."

Much later, I wrote to inform her that a multi-national publisher had accepted our manuscript. I requested her to formally send us a written permission for the story she had allowed us to use. To my utter surprise, she raged and ranted by return mail and ended by saying, "I told you I would withdraw all my stories! Why are you still pestering me?"

When I reminded her that she had given us one of the stories, she said, "I'm taking it back also! Anthology of stories from the Northeast, indeed! I despise the word Northeast!"

When my colleague read the email, she was livid with rage. "What kind of behaviour is this? She gave and then took back everything except one! And now, she is taking back even that! What will we do? We have no stories from her state! And all because she doesn't like the word 'Northeast'? What's wrong with it?"

The Northeast is, of course, a much-misunderstood and much-abused word! For instance, "it is not the homogeneous province it is made out to be by many. Its seven states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, are inhabited by such an assorted conglomeration of peoples, with such a melange of cultures,

languages and religions that it would be simply an injustice to make any generalised statement about them." And yet, if we are in a region called the Northeast and write from it and about it, I don't see what else we can do apart from explaining as I have just done.

"What a lousy person!" My colleague was saying again. "Write, write something cutting, will you?"

I thought for a while. I found her whimsical arbitrariness detestable, too, but what cutting remark would I write to a woman? Finally, I decided to send her this brief note: "Dear Thena, I'm so sorry to have lost your stories. Working with you has been an enlightening and rewarding experience. Enlightening because we have learnt so much more about human nature, and rewarding because your withdrawal made us look harder for another translator. I'm happy to tell you that now we have found a better one, indeed, an excellent one, whose English is impeccable, whose motives are altruistic and whose manners are much more ladylike . . ."

And we did find such a translator. How lucky that monopoly cannot have a stranglehold on things literary.

Another translator, whom we shall call Gretma, was also the cause of much trouble for us. We were frantically looking for good stories and translators from a particular community when someone recommended Gretma to us. Like Thena, Gretma also readily sent us two stories, which she had translated earlier. Because the stories were previously published elsewhere, they were well enough edited. My colleague and I gave each other the thumbs up.

Then, one day, Gretma called us and said, "Hi, can I also send you my own story?"

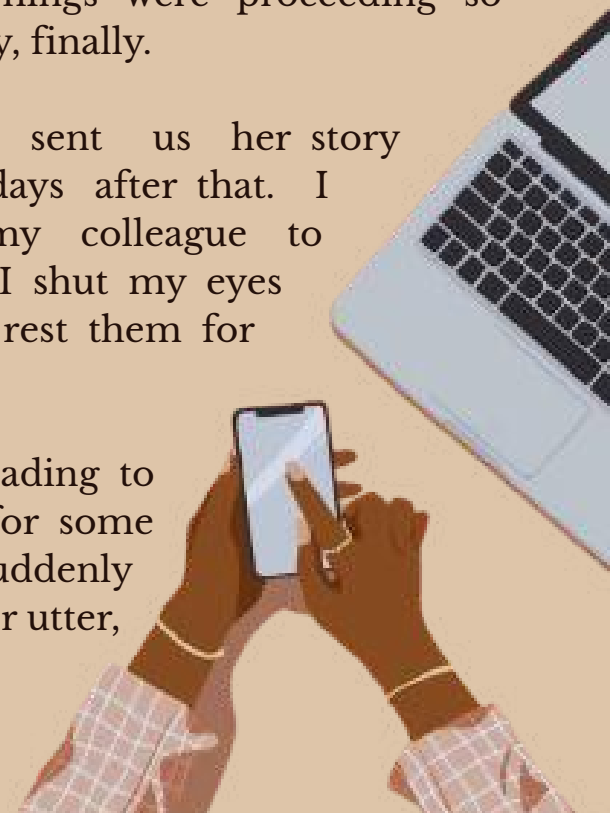
"Oh, you also write?" I asked happily. "Please do, please do! We are so happy to get more stories from your state. When are you sending?"

"I'm still giving it the finishing touches," she replied. "I'll send it as soon as I'm done."

My colleague and I high-fived each other. Things were proceeding so smoothly, finally.

Gretma sent us her story a few days after that. I asked my colleague to read as I shut my eyes tight to rest them for a while.

After reading to herself for some time, I suddenly heard her utter, "What?!"



Opening my eyes, I also cried, “What?”

“Is this a story or what? And what kind of language is this? She is a teacher, isn’t she?”

I started reading. It was not a story at all. I would say an ill-written school essay if I were considerate.

With a heavy heart, I called Gretma. “Hi,” I said. “I’m calling about your story . . .”

“Ah! Did you like it?”

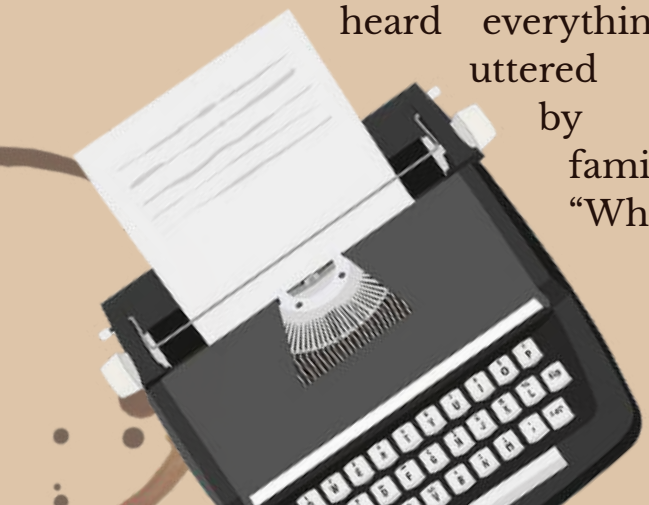
“Ehh, ehh, it still needs to mature, you know?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, her tone becoming aggressive.

“Umm, I mean, it still needs some time to be ready . . . our publisher will not agree . . .”

“So you are rejecting it? In that case, I’m withdrawing my translations as well!”

Because I had put Gretma on speakerphone, my colleague heard everything and uttered her by now familiar, “What?!”



Gretma heard and said, “Yes, I’m withdrawing my translations! If my story is not good, then how, how can my translations be good?”

I felt like saying, “Because they are not yours,” but only said, “What to do? We need to exercise strict quality control. We are answerable to our publisher.”

“And how can you insinuate that I, a professor, cannot write? Anyway, it has been nice working with you! Goodbye!”

I have come across many professors who cannot even speak. But why quarrel with her? “It has been nice for us too,” I said, although it was anything but.

“God!” my colleague cried. “Such funny people!”

For a time, we were quite disheartened. But people have told me I can be as resistant as a weed. My colleague, too, is a strong woman. There and then, we started calling people from Gretma’s state and happily found a first-rate translator after a few days.

A friend from Gretma’s community nicely summed up Gretma’s behaviour. She said, “Who would do a shameless thing like that, na, Ap?”

After Gretma, we encountered another odd character. He was actually a very close friend of mine. Earlier, he used to help me quite a lot with this and that. This time, too, he promised me many translated stories from his state. But he never did. Every time I called him, he kept promising to help soon. Fed up, I said to my colleague, "Let's forget him."

"But why does he keep promising if he is not helping?" she wondered.

To that, I said, "He's a person who can never say no but can never do yes!"

We had a good laugh and immediately tried to get in touch with the wife of a famous author, whose works have been converted into movie hits, and so on. The friend who gave us her number told us that she was the only surviving relative of the author.

I called the lady, putting her on speakerphone as always. When she said, "Ello!" I began speaking to her in English, trying to introduce myself. But she cut me short, saying, "Hindi *me bolo*!"

"Hindi?' I yelped.

"*Haa*!"

I don't know much Hindi; how could I discuss copyright permission with her in Hindi? I asked my colleague to speak to her in Hindi or Assamese.

She refused. "No, no," she said, laughing, "you talk. I want to hear you speak in Hindi."

I began speaking to the lady very slowly. "*Mei*, Professor Ap, *hu*. North-Eastern Hill University *se* . . . *Mere* Hindi *samaste hai?*"

"*Haa*!"

I breathed a sigh of relief. She understood. I ploughed on. "*Hamlog, kahania ka kitab,* Northeast *se*, compile *karte hai . . . Samaste, na?*"

"*Haa*!"

"*Aap ka* husband *ki kahani bhi, use karte hai, hamlog . . .*"





Suddenly, she interrupted me, her voice quite aggressive, "*Toh*?"

"*Toh, is kahani keliye, aap ke* publication permission *chahiye* . . ."

"*Mei kui kahani, fahani, malum nehi! Meine* phone *aur mat karo*!"

Saying that, she disconnected, and we were left crying, "What?! What?! What was that?"

And we burst into resounding laughter, holding our stomachs and running onto the terrace because we felt our laughter would suffocate us otherwise.

A long time after that, I began feeling quite sorrowful. There is a story in our anthology about a wife taking revenge on her dead husband, a writer, by making a bonfire of all his manuscripts. What if the same fate awaits us? I began to feel pity for ourselves.

I voiced my fear to my colleague. "What if our spouses also do the same to us?"

But that only sent her into another long fit of laughter.

The next day, we had a look at our contents page.

"We need one or two more Khasi stories," my colleague observed.

I agreed. I said, "Apart from the writers we have chosen, there is another whose short stories, I think, are passable in English."

"Call him."

I called, putting him on speakerphone. When he said, "Hello!" I introduced myself: "Hi, Bah So and So! Bah Ap here!"

"Ap, Who?"





"Ap Jutang . . ."

"Who?"

The line was absolutely clear. I said again, "Ap Jutang Shadap."

"Who?"

Feeling insulted, I decided to ring off before I exploded. "It's okay, it's okay," I said and disconnected.

My colleague stared at me open-mouthed. This time, she could not even say, "What?!"

Later, she asked me, "Why did that fellow behave like that? Doesn't he know you or what? But who would not know you in Shillong?"

It would be impossible for him not to know me. We belong to the same society of Khasi authors. We have met several times and have participated in many literary programmes together.

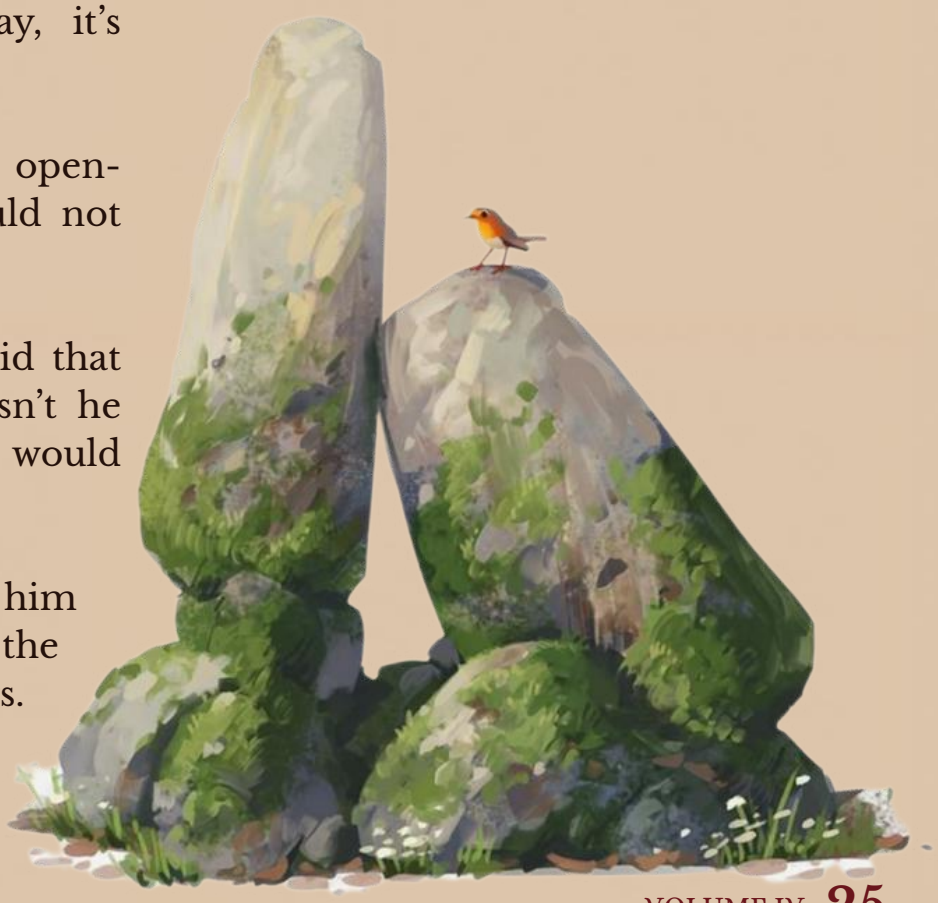
"He knows" I replied. "And to the best of my knowledge, he has no reason to hold a grudge against me."

Then why did he say, "Ap, who?"'

We have a *phawar* limerick in Khasi that says:

Ooooo!
U langtylli langteh,
Uba teh hu mawbynna,
Nga phah kylli pham treh,
Pha duh ei ka deng khoila,
Hoooi kiw! . . . Hoooi kiw!

(Sturdy grass, grass to bind,
Bound to a monolith,
I sent an offer, you turned it down,
To wear the earrings,
you lost your chance.)



These are indeed cases of missed opportunities, and all because of what?

One day, an acquaintance told me at a funeral gathering, “I’m sorry, Bah Ap, please don’t mind! But I don’t like writers, especially famous writers . . .”

“Why?” I asked.

“Swollen heads! Like jackfruits!”

Unfortunately, this seems to be true of some of the friends we have encountered. Our labour was sweetened, however, by the courteousness of some of the best-known writers from the region. When we wrote to them, they were only too happy to contribute. They even said they were “honoured and delighted” to be a part of the book. Theirs was the sweetness of oranges:

golden orange
sweetness
to the pith.

We will remember them with gratefulness. The others, we will remember with great delight.



Winner of the Shakti Bhatt Prize 2024, **Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih**, born in Sohra, Meghalaya, writes poetry, drama and fiction in Khasi and English. His latest works include *The Distaste of the Earth* (longlisted for the JCB Prize 2024), the critically acclaimed epic-length novel *Funeral Nights* (published in the UK and the US in 2024), and *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends*. He is the co-editor of *Late-Blooming Cherries: Haiku Poetry from India* (India’s first English-language haiku poetry anthology) and *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India*. Some of his other awards include the Northeast Poetry Award (2004), the Veer Shankar Shah–Raghunath Shah National Award (2008), a Tagore Fellowship (2018), etc. He teaches literature at North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.





THE RIGHT TO STORIES

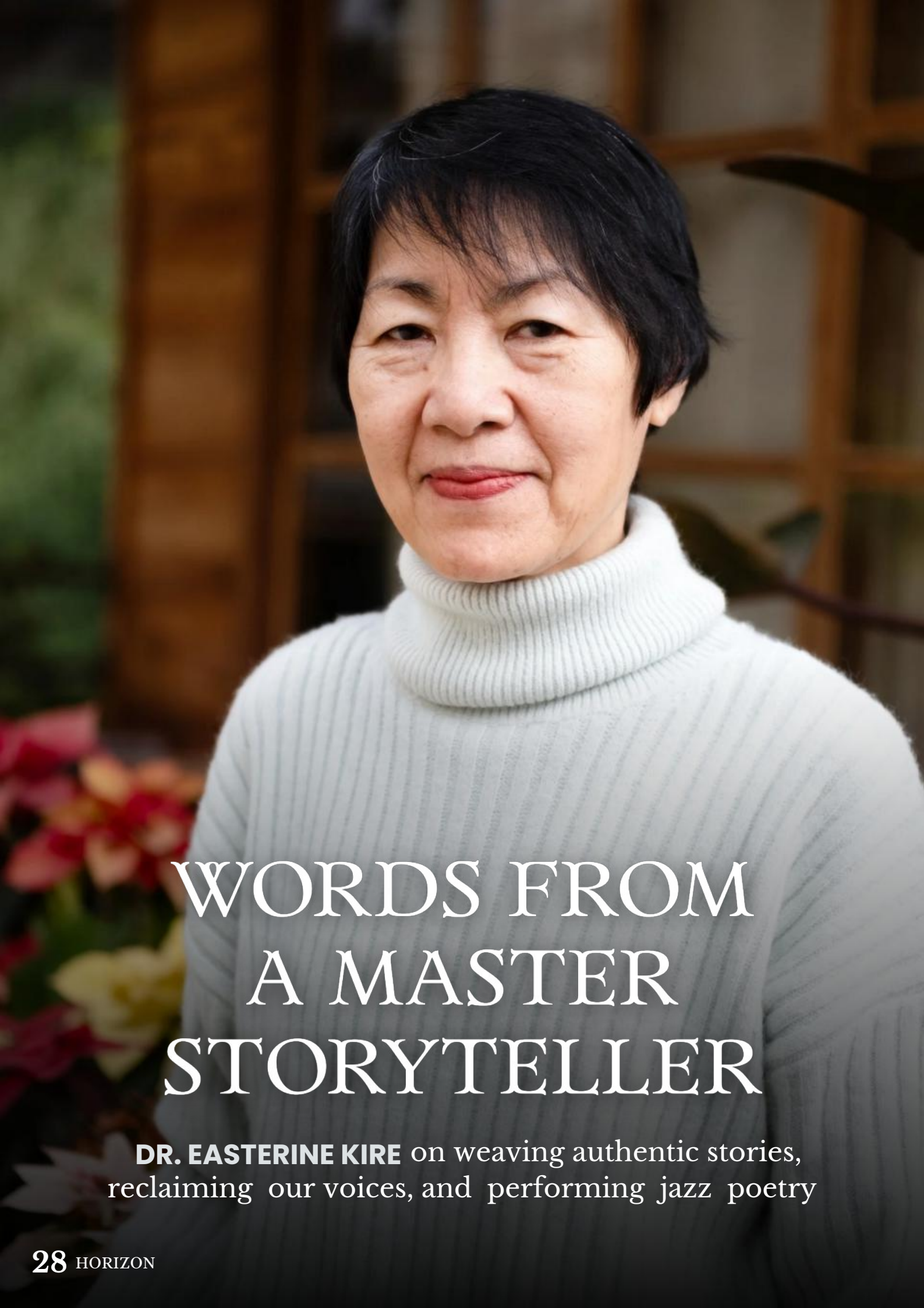


EASTERINE KIRE

In the spaces that I call home
Where tigers roam the hill-heart
And deep, deep in those woods
Lives the son of the man
Who became a bear.
In the skies that cover
The spaces that I call home
Sky-husbands appear in the night skies
Looking, looking for earth-wives.
Tree, rock, bird, flower
Every river has a name
Every mountain holds a story
Every story a right to be told.

(First published in
European Constitution in Verse*)*





WORDS FROM A MASTER STORYTELLER

DR. EASTERINE KIRE on weaving authentic stories, reclaiming our voices, and performing jazz poetry

"Do not ever view the Northeast as missing out. Take pride in who you are, where you come from and the beautiful cultures you belong to, the God-given cultures that value human life most of all."

"[We must] see the Northeast as its own centre. We are not the margins of other states or other cultures," says Dr. Easterine Kire, who has recently been awarded the prestigious 2024 Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *Spirit Nights*. An inspiring and renowned writer from Kohima, Nagaland, Dr. Kire's literary efforts have made major contributions in shaping contemporary Naga literature. She is a firm believer in the idea of celebrating our own indigenous culture, while resisting stereotypes which are generally attached to the region. Her novels, poetry and other writings call for an exploration of the human values that are to be found in our traditions.

Dr. Kire has won multiple awards, including the Free Voice Award from Catalan PEN, the Hindu Litforlife Prize and the Bal Sahitya Purashkar, among others. *Freerain* is her latest book which explores themes of nostalgia, nature, and hope through 74 poems.

Upon completion of her under-graduate study in Shillong, followed by a journalism course in Delhi, she earned her doctorate in English literature from Savitribai Phule Pune University. Born to Angami parents, Easterine Kire has written a wide range of writings including novels, poetry, historical fiction, and children's literature. A distinctive quality of Easterine Kire is her ability to blend Angami sentences and sayings directly into the English narrative, providing her readers a flavourful experience. Now settled in Norway, she continues to address political history and violence that is projected whilst also bringing out the tradition and culture of Nagaland.

In this insightful interview with *Horizon*, she shares her journey as a writer, her thoughts on the significance of oral traditions, and the process of creating literature deeply rooted in Naga culture.

Q. Every author has their journey that propels them to write. And behind this very journey is their story. So, our first question is what moved you to write, the very event

Interview Questions: Himanshu Medak and Aditi **Additional Text:** Paone
Author Photograph: Zhazo Miachieo

that led you to pick up the pen and eventually winning the most prized award in literary circles of India – the Sahitya Akademi award? Did you always aspire to be a writer? Tell us about your childhood inspirations. What were your favourite books as a child?

I have to answer your questions backwards :) My favourite books in childhood were any form of stories, be they fairytales by Hans Andersen, Greek mythology, Abridged versions of Shakespearean tales by Charles and Mary Lamb, etc., and a popular series of Catholic children's books called *Bedtime Stories*. I loved stories in any format actually. My generation also had the great privilege of 'living books' in our grandparents who would tell us stories every evening around the fireplace.

I cannot remember a defining moment in time – an event that gave birth to my writing life. But I consider my writing as a continuation of a journey that started when I became a reader. I loved reading as a child, and began writing poems just after high school. For me, reading and writing are two sides of the same coin. It was at university that I was introduced to the African novelists and their books really inspired me to believe in writing novels on Naga life and history.



Q. Northeast India is often perceived as the 'periphery'. What are your thoughts on this narrative? Do you think we should resist these labels, and how important is it for us to construct our own 'centre'?

Without hesitation, do resist these labels of 'periphery', 'marginalised' and other labels similar in meaning to these. In our younger days (meaning when we were university students), there was a period when we were enamoured by these terms and saw ourselves as twice marginalised, being tribal and female. But it has been many years now since I have discovered the negativity attached to these labels and the ideology behind them. It encourages people to see themselves as victims. And victimhood always

produces movements that are inarguably destructive. In 2017, I used the phrase 'recentring the centre' while speaking at the ICFAI university, Mizoram. It is a phrase that friends in Goa picked up on and agreed with vehemently. The thought behind it is to see the Northeast as its own center. We are not the margins of other states or other cultures. Even geographically and politically, and definitely metaphorically, it should be unacceptable to view a people's group as the margins of another people's group. Be very cautious about adopting majority narratives. Investigate it, peer at it from all sides and do not accept it if it does not ring true of your situation. Do not ever view the Northeast as missing out. Take pride in who you are, where you come from and the beautiful cultures you belong to, the God-given cultures that value human life most of all.

How do we construct our own centre? By treasuring the unique knowledge that is contained within our indigenous cultures, by taking pride in our indigeneity, by finding value in our languages, our stories, our oral wisdom, and the ways of our tribes. (Simply stated, it is about putting back value in the things that were devalued by the outsider who did not understand our culture). Because these cultures can always be found as life-affirming; because they situate worth in human lives, regardless of gender. There are so many treasures found in our Northeast cultures, but this one, by far is inarguably, the most beautiful – the value we put on human life.

How do we **construct our own centre**? By treasuring the **unique knowledge** that is contained within our indigenous cultures, **by taking pride in our indigeneity**, by finding value in our **languages**, our **stories**, our **oral wisdom**, and the **ways of our tribes.**

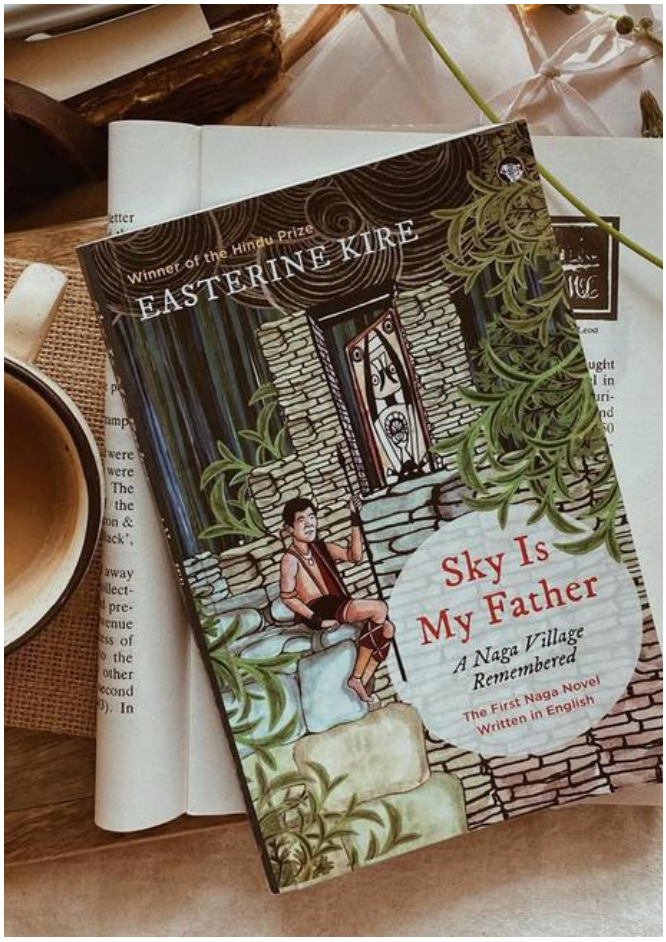
Another thing to resist is stereotyping and being stereotyped. In big cities, there is a tendency to stereotype people from the Northeast. Emerging from that, there is such a great tendency in university circles to view our writing through certain stereotypes. This predisposition prem-tivises and exoticises our writing, neither of which render a proper understanding of literature from the Northeast. Resist this vehemently.

Q. Your novel *A Naga Village Remembered* was the first English-language novel by a Naga writer, and *Kelhoukevira* was the first book of Naga poetry published in English. What are your thoughts on

the oral traditions of the Naga people and their evolution in written form?

Oral traditions of the Naga people and their evolution into written forms? Let me answer that by telling you about the making of my first novel. I was translating documents on village history that also contained cultural information. I spent many sessions with oral narrators collecting information and transcribing it. At the end of it, I had a collection of unwritten history with me.

The idea of writing a novel was born because of all the historical and cultural knowledge I had accumulated in these exercises.



Reflecting upon it, we have not done anything very different from other cultures whose written literature has also issued from their oral origins. Our written literature has indeed evolved, (to use the word you supplied) from traditional storytelling. But writing being an art form, I always feel the need to explain that imagination plays an integral role in the writing of my stories. I don't simply transcribe folktales and present them as novels. They are used as seeds. Once they start sprouting, it is up to the novelist to direct the path they will take and the lives they will lead.

I want to add that not every book I write on the spirit world is based on a folktale. I find it annoying when book reviewers stereotypically call my books, 'based on a folktale.' In these three books that are inspired by folktales – *Son of the Thundercloud*, *Don't Run My Love*, *Spirit Nights* – you will find that the genesis of the story is a folktale but after that, the characters live their own lives and the writer's imagination totally takes over. That is the difference between writing and the oral. I have more to say about oral tradition lower down.

Q. How do you navigate writing in English while ensuring it remains rooted in Naga culture? How do you make English 'our own'?

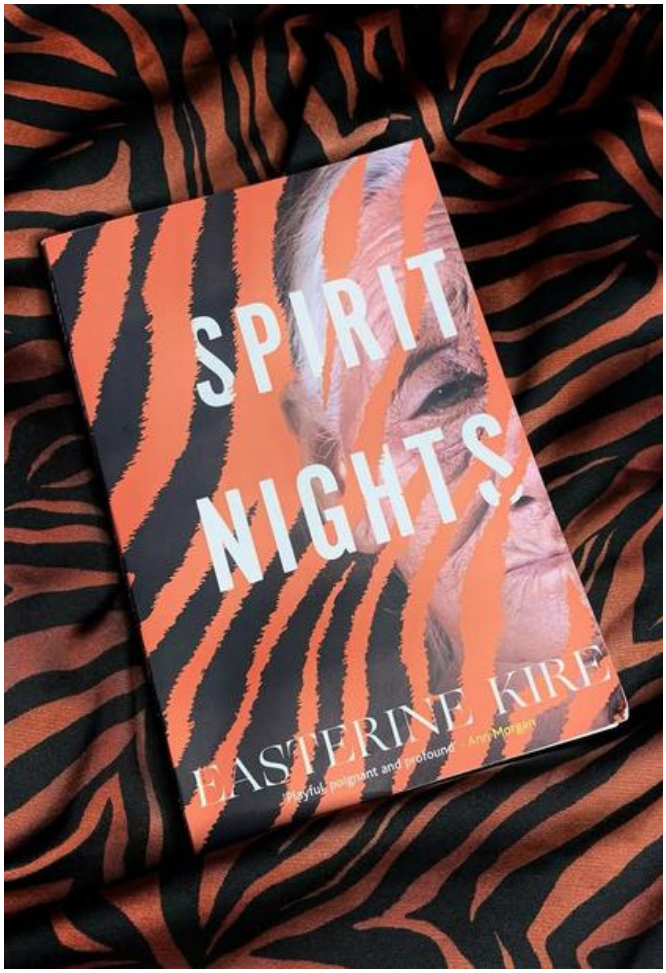
You must be very much aware of

'the other Englishes', meaning the English language as spoken or written in the former colonies. All the different countries of the Commonwealth managed to bring their own native inflections to the English they speak and these inflections appear in creative writing, in stories and novels. In my books, the Naga characters are speaking in their own language, in Tenyidie, but I write it in nativised English. So it is really Tenyidie wearing a European waistcoat and I can bend this odd language to convey cultural experiences that are intrinsically Naga. And it is a Naga aesthetic I am trying to convey. English has been acknowledged as the most malleable language because of this quality. And certainly when I nativise the English language, I am abusing it, but in a non-violent manner and for a creative purpose.

Q. Oral traditions are a vital part of our cultural heritage. How do they shape contemporary literature from the Northeast?

I can only speak for myself and not for other writers from the Northeast. Whatever I imbibed from my orally transmitted culture has been deposited deep within me. It is part of my DNA. I draw from it when writing about situations and circumstances that demand cultural intervention.

Q. Could you share insights on how



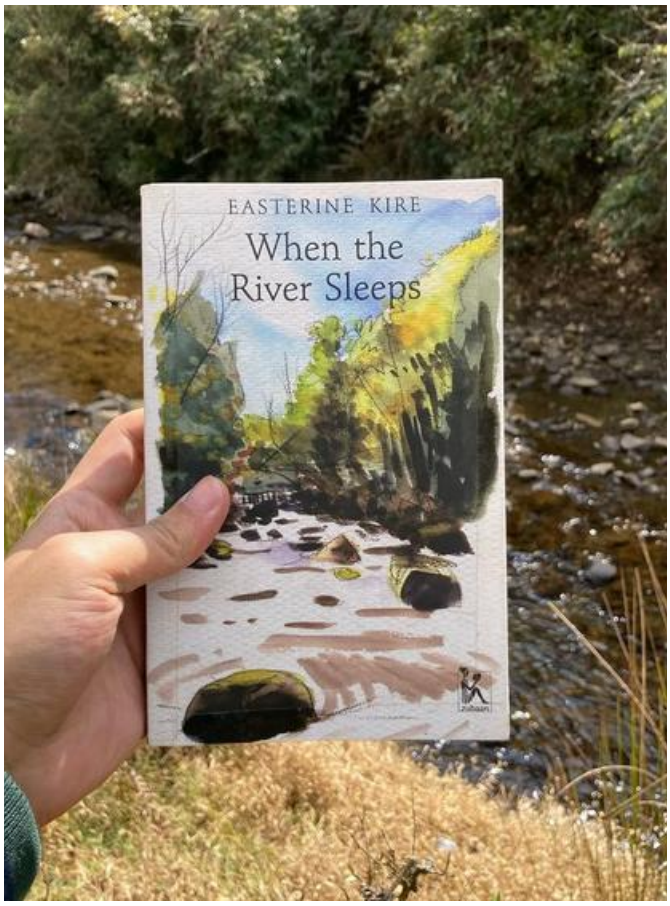
***Spirit Nights* weaves Naga folklore into your narrative?**

As I stated before, my stories combine imagination and traditional lore. I collected the stories of darkness from the Chang Nagas, the Rengmas and the Khiamniungan. I like your use of the word 'folklore'. Folklore refers to lore of the folk, the collective wisdom of the people. Every Naga tribe has its own store of community wisdom and it is the guideline by which people live their lives. The story of *Spirit Nights* is based on sudden darkness falling on a number of villages where one person from one village is destined to bring about deliverance of the regions in darkness.

Plunging the village into darkness and imagining people living their lives in darkness day in day out was a big challenge. So many things that are taken for granted in the light of day are no longer possible in the village world. The darkness is spiritually symbolic besides being a physical reality. Many problems and conditions surface as a result of the abnormality of the darkness. To solve them, the village leaders have to draw from folklore, from folk wisdom and apply it. At the heart of folk wisdom is spiritual wisdom. Thus, there is almost always an answer in our lore for the trials of life. Sometimes, it is not a call for action but a call for quiet and truthful reflection. There is a profundity in folk wisdom that we can draw from. Folk wisdom never discards the reality of the spiritual world, and it is this that they access to gain deliverance.

Q. Your novel *When the River Sleeps* (Hindu Prize, 2015) beautifully explores the spiritual landscape of the Naga people. Could you walk us through the creative and research process behind writing this novel?

Thank you for enjoying *When the River Sleeps*. I wrote this book about a hunter and his solitary life in the forest. I have hunter friends who have told me their experiences of hunting in virgin forests that were spirit-infested. These hunters always brought back amazing stories of spirit encounters. We, Tenyimia, have implicit faith in the existence of a spiritual world parallel to the natural world in which we live. The main creative process was to create a forest world where suspension of disbelief could be achieved. The next step was peopling the forest world with beings that we are familiar with from hunter's stories, such as Chükhieo, the guardian of wildlife, were tigers, Kirhupfümia, and demon possessed wild animals. Unclean forests do exist in geographically identifiable areas and these areas are shunned by humans. The creatures of the unclean forest are a figment of my imagination but I am sure they exist somewhere because if you can imagine it, it means it exists, even if in another dimension.



The research part of the book included collecting hunter etiquette from my son (who is a hunter), botanical names of many of the edible and poisonous herbs as well as medicinal herbs that are found in our forests for which I received generous help from a Naga botanical expert.

Q. Your literary journey spans sharp political novels like *Bitter Wormwood* and *A Naga Village Remembered,* to children's literature. What inspired you to venture into writing for children?

Children's books give a lot of space for the imagination to roam wild. I love that aspect of it. At the same time, it demands that there should be logic, even if it is its own kind of logic. When I write children's books, it allows the child in me to come out to play. Another reason for writing children's books on Naga themes was to let our children learn in a fun way about the amazing culture that we have of the log drum and its significance and the beauty of folk dancing.

Q. Many of your works delve into historical fiction. What draws you to this genre, and how do you balance lived experiences with storytelling?

When I wrote my first novel in 2003, it was difficult to find any substantial information on Naga history in school books in Nagaland. I felt very sad that generations of young Nagas would grow up never learning about their own history. I started writing my first novel on a historical battle using the format of the novel. I did that because my experience as a university teacher taught me that young people preferred to read a novel rather than a textbook. If they could read their history in novel form, they enjoy it more and are more likely to learn it better. That was the conviction with which I started writing historical novels. I wrote historical novels on Naga events at a time when very little material existed where our history was told from the insider's perspective. So that was one of the reasons I wrote my Naga-centric novels. I should also add that if personal stories are included in the telling of historical experiences, the telling is so much more enriched.

My historical novels cover periods that are significant for us:

A Naga Village Remembered (Sky is My Father): The last battle of resistance

> I felt **very sad** that generations of young Nagas would **grow up never learning about their own history.** I started writing my first novel on a **historical battle** using the format of the novel.

against the British imperial power in 1878-1879.

Mari: The Japanese invasion of India via the Naga Hills in 1944.

Bitter Wormwood: The birth of the two new nations of India and Burma and the fate of the Naga Hills from 1947.

A Respectable Woman: A post-war novel about life after the war in Kohima. It is about the rebuilding of the bombed town and the restoration of normal life. It spans life in Kohima from the late forties till the nineties.

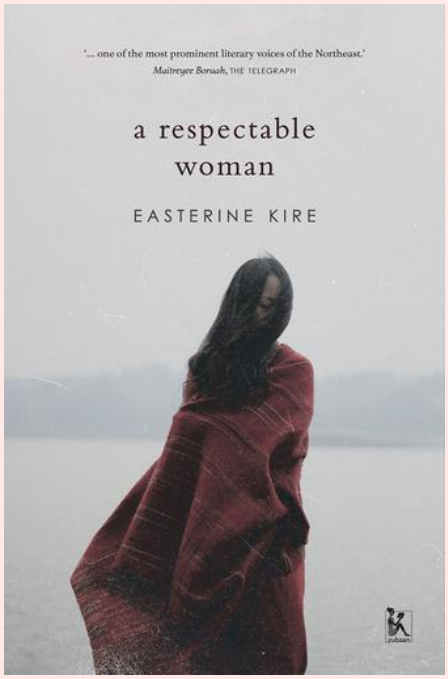
A Terrible Matriarchy: spans the sixties and the seventies and eighties.

Q. We noticed that the mention of 'Jazz poetry' comes about and around you in every article, and frankly, we are fascinated. The combination of the Jazz rhythm along with the deep exploration of poems is a heavenly mixture in itself. Could you enlighten us on how this attraction towards jazz and its fusion came about in your poems and also, how one exactly writes or performs Jazz Poetry?

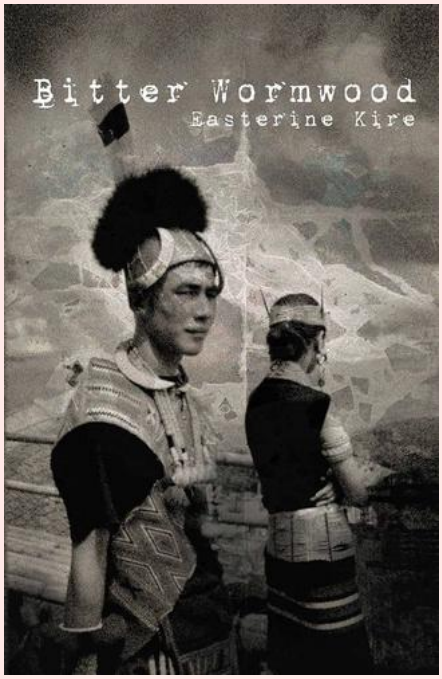
Ah jazz poetry . . .

This was a project we tentatively began on a summer afternoon many years ago with a saxophonist and a drummer. We used some poems I had written specifically to be performed as jazz poetry. So, it is free jazz and improvisation by the musicians who created sounds to accompany the text.

From that summer project where we toured a number of cities, I experimented with other jazz









musicians and each performance has been very satisfying. I doubt that jazz poetry can be taught. I wouldn't try it. But I did notice that musicians were fascinated by certain sounds or words in the poems. Norwegian has many words with a harsh 'g' sound. One of my poems brings that out and the drummer played around with that. The saxophone is a lovely instrument for evocating soulful oceanic sounds for poems about the sea, for example. It gave a mournful quality to a sea poem of mine that was balladic in nature.

Q. As a musician, do you see a common thread that connects your music and your literary work? How do these creative pursuits influence each other?

I think it is possible to say that a work of literature comes with its own music, and many works have a lot of inner music in them. I am not a musician. I am a lover of music. I used to write songs for my students as a teacher. Nowadays, I use music to calm me, and I find the right music uplifting.

However, when working with musicians, I often hear the comment that they were moved by certain words or phrases and the way

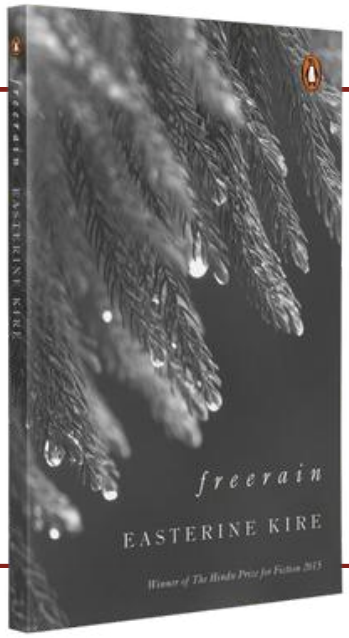
they were put together in poetry. This, then, inspired them to set those poems to music. There is a jazz band here that is about to complete work on a music album of 16 of my poems. I am just grateful for all these opportunities along the way.

Q. Finally, do you have any piece of advice for budding writers?

The best advice I can give is: Take it easy. Write and set aside what you have written. Edit, edit, edit. Don't rush off to publish. The worst enemy of good writing is haste. Use real editors if you can afford it. Your friends are not your editors. Your publisher is not your editor. Editing is a profession in itself and every manuscript can improve from it. Don't be lazy. There is no such thing as a lazy writer. Writing is hard work, damned hard work. The rewards are not financial, but emotional and spiritual. Writers in India still do not receive much money by way of royalties. But the satisfaction that a well written piece gives to one cannot be measured in terms of money.

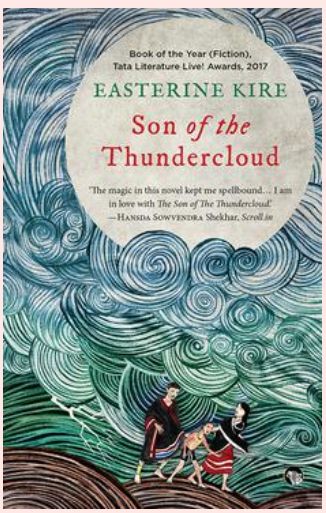
LATEST BY EASTERINE KIRE

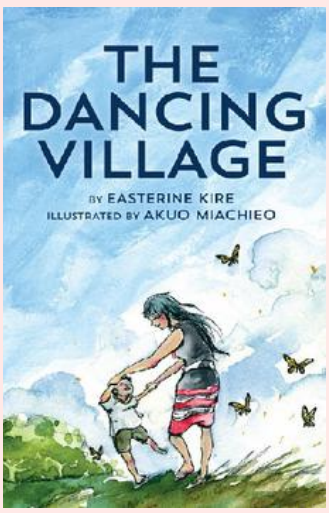
Freerain is Easterine Kire's latest poetry collection. Gentle and thoughtful, these carefully crafted poems evoke many different emotions: joy, wonder, nostalgia, loss and hope. While many of the poems are rooted in Nagaland, its traditions and its geography, a number of them speak to universal themes and concerns.

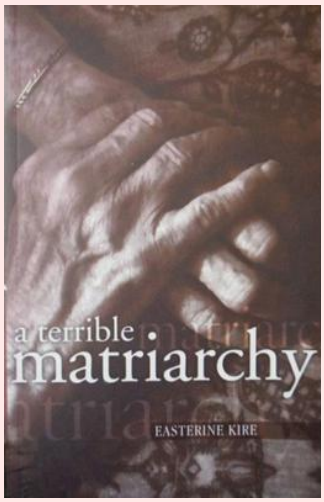


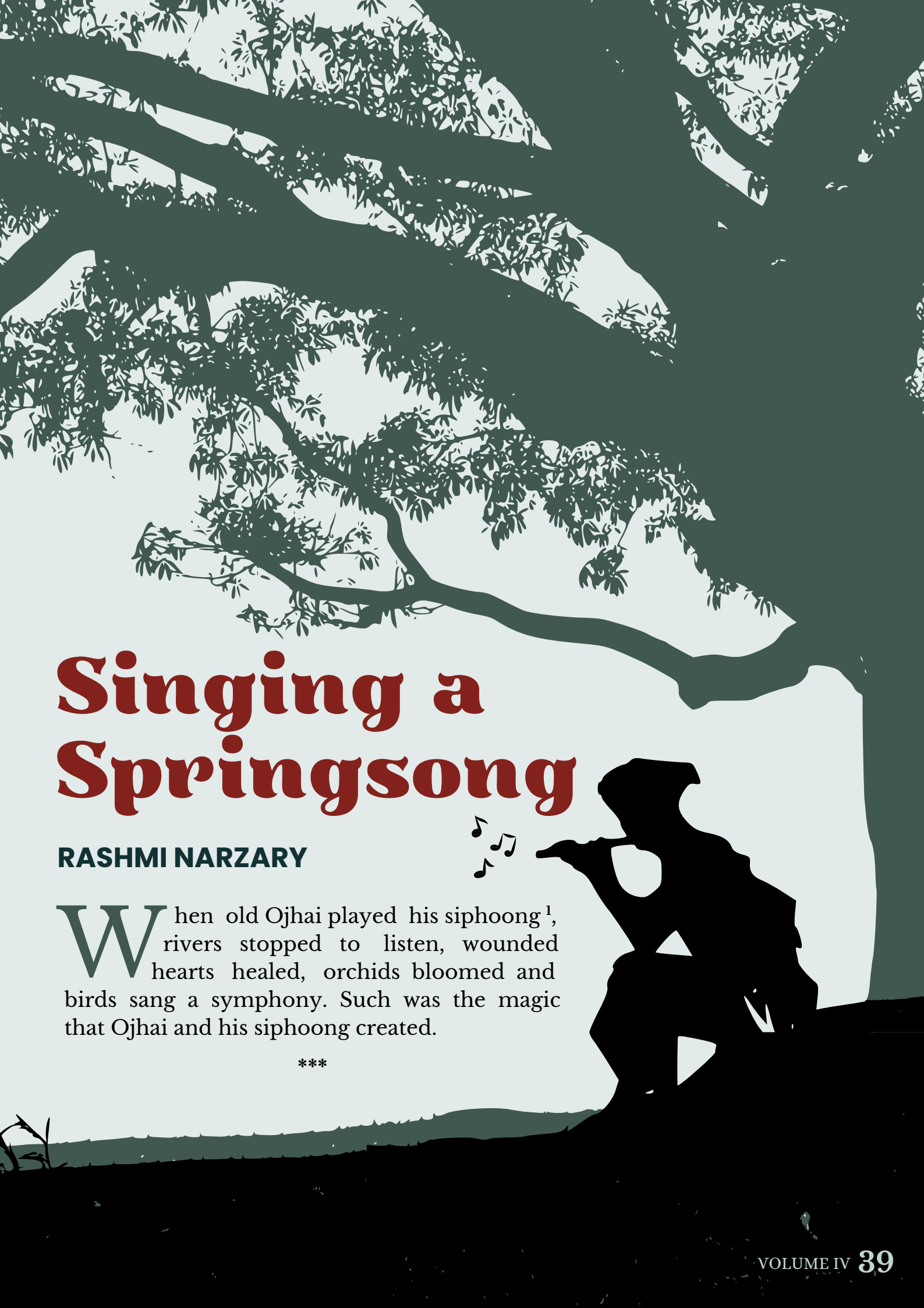
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Singing a Springsong

RASHMI NARZARY

When old Ojhai played his siphoong [1], rivers stopped to listen, wounded hearts healed, orchids bloomed and birds sang a symphony. Such was the magic that Ojhai and his siphoong created.

***

That year, though, spring was to be parched, lonely and songless in the village of Madlagami. The rains hadn't arrived, and the pandemic strangled springsong. So Ojhai sat forlorn, missing the gaiety of *bwisagu* [2].

During one such lonesome moment, Ojhai chanced upon the little Santhal boy in the yard across his. He had seen him before but never really noticed him. Tiny and malnourished, he lay on a charpoy in the shades of the tamarind tree in their small, unfenced yard, patting a goat that suckled her kids. A dog lay with its chin on his feet. There didn't seem to be anyone else in the house, which was a paltry shed of a storm-bent tin sheet over reed walls. A few hens clucked about, pecking at ants on the dry, sun-baked ground. It surprised Ojhai that he saw this place everyday but had never really noticed it, until then.

When the boy saw Ojhai, he sat up and grinned. He was wearing only a small loincloth around his waist and a holed vest too large for him. Ojhai grinned back. His heart went out to the boy.



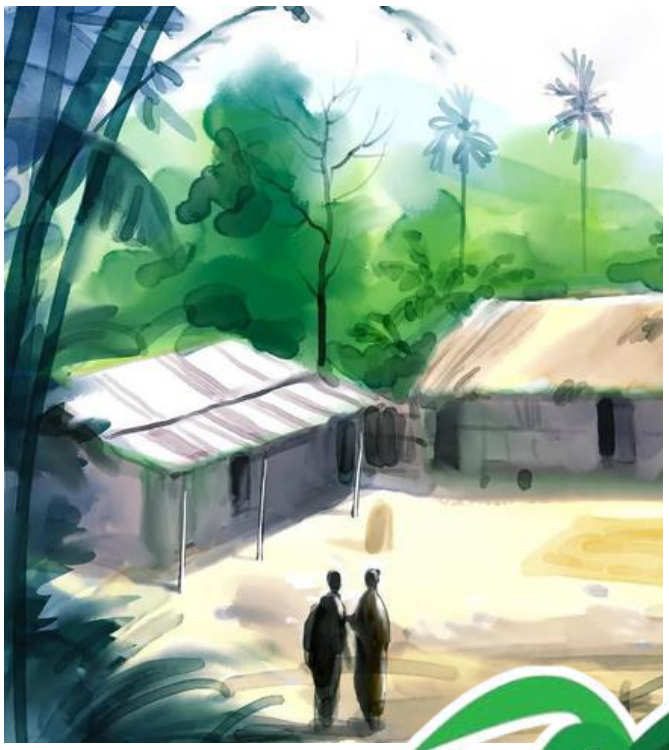


Illustration: Amalendu Kaushik

"Had your meal, son?" Ojhai shouted.

The boy shook his head.

"Not hungry?"

The boy nodded.

Ojhai asked no further.

"What's the name?" Ojhai shouted instead.

"Jugnu!" The boy replied.

He then held up the dog and shouted, "Batloo!"

Jugnu's liveliness made Ojhai smile. The boy went into the house and, bringing out a banana, shared it with the goat.

“Where’s your mother?” Ojhai asked.

“Gone, to bring rice.”

“You didn’t go?”

“It’s far, at Khiden’s school.”

Their conversation was a blend of Bodo and Santhal, which made Ojhai fondly recollect those times long ago when there was harmony between the Bodos and Santhals. But since the Bodo-Santhal riots, the two communities had swiftly and sadly drifted apart. Ojhai lost many friends in that mayhem, Jugnu’s grandfather Marcus being one. Now as Jugnu spoke in fragmented Bodo and Santhal, Ojhai gathered that Tara had gone to the Haldibari Primary School to collect a relief package.

“And your school?” Ojhai asked.

“I don’t go to school.”

The boy, Ojhai noticed, was big enough to go to school. Seven maybe. Or eight.

“Why?”

Jugnu flapped the edge of the loincloth he was wearing. “I don’t want to go in this. I’ll go when mai manages to get me a pair of pants.”

Ojhai swallowed a lump in his throat.

The sun was scorching and it was past midday. Ojhai’s daughter-in-law, Bibari, was weaving gamsas [3] in her loom. She got up, put two eggs and a few rice-cakes laced with coconut, which she prepared for bwisagu, into a bag and walked to the fence, beckoning Jugnu. He ran towards her as she held out the bag. “Eat, ok child?”

As he took it and looked in, his eyes lit up with joy like fireflies. Jugnu. Maybe that’s why Tara named him Jugnu.



How Bibari longed to hold him long and tight to her bosom! But the health-workers had advised 'social distancing'. She didn't understand how loving a child could pose a threat.

As Jugnu ate, Ojhai began whistling into his siphoong, letting a soothing lethargy cascade out into Madlagami's heat and dust. What magic those notes had! The heat began to mellow and the dust, to settle! While Ojhai played on, Jugnu slowly slid down on the charpoy and laid his head on Batloo's back, letting one arm hang down to feel the mother goat near him. He licked up the last morsels of the rice-cake from his fingers. Ojhai played on softly, lulling the child to sleep. Even Batloo did not pull away from under Jugnu's head. The goat hunched on her knees, watching from under the charpoy. They all let the sleeping child be.

"No wonder," Ojhai thought, "Tara didn't think she had left her child alone."



Photo: Alongbar Basumatary



Soon Tara appeared in the distance, a heavy sack on her head, but her steps brisk on her chafed feet. She didn't look like she had managed a pair of pants for Jugnu. Her saree was draped like a skirt and topped with a man's faded shirt. Maybe the saree was torn halfway, which was why she had wrapped it that way. It pained Ojhai that it took a pandemic for him to notice this adorable little child and his weather-beaten young mother, in a yard full of life, yet in dearth.

Gradually, it became a routine for Ojhai and Jugnu to be in each other's company, each from his own yard. The rains hadn't yet arrived, nor was the disease retreating. How Ojhai missed ushering in bwisagu! On afternoons when he felt too melancholic to even play his siphoong, Jugnu would stand up on his charpoy and shout, "Hoi siphoong! Not playing today?"



Illustration: @nirjuraj art

He had so much life in him, so much to give, despite having so little. Ojhai could never refuse him. So he took the siphoong to his lips and Jugnu would listen and play around in his own yard. Then when he slowed down and came with Batloo to sit on the charpoy, Ojhai knew it was time to switch tunes, to a lullaby. And the child would gently drop his head on Batloo and fall asleep. While all over the world people searched for ways to battle the pandemic, Ojhai realized he had so much to garner in his own backyard.

Once when Ojhai didn't see Jugnu and didn't hear his voice either, he began to panic. *Might Jugnu have fallen sick?* Just then, Jugnu emerged from behind their house, his tiny hand held lovingly by Tara. Relief swept through Ojhai. He just realized how beautiful a bond had grown between him and Jugnu, age notwithstanding.

"What's it now?" Ojhai shouted.

"Corn!" Jugnu answered, running towards the fence. "Mai had sown some corn. But with no rain, they won't sprout." He climbed the charpoy, helped Batloo up with him and said, "Mai was digging up for yam roots."

"Found any?"

Jugnu shook his head. "Fresh tender curls of *dhenkia* too won't grow without the rains. How I love to eat them! Even the wild taro and arum

are fast getting exhausted. Mai says if the rains don't arrive soon, I'll get to eat only rice and salt."

Tara no longer found daily-wage work because of the lockdown. Some shops did have a measly stock of groceries, but Tara had no money to buy them.

"Had your meal today?" Ojhai asked. Jugnu nodded, but added, "Mai hasn't."

"Why?"

"There was enough only for one. Batloo or her."

In the shade of the hut, Ojhai saw Batloo eating from a leaf.

Bibari had just then put in some rice and potatoes in a bag and put it across the fence.

"Jugnu!" she called, "Carry this to your mai."

The boy immediately skipped to the fence, followed by an entourage of pets, picked the bag and ran into the house, calling his mother. When he came out, he had something in his hands, which he held above his head for Ojhai to see. "Why! Now isn't isn't that a serja [4] !" Ojhai exclaimed.

Ojhai's heart pounded. He knew whose that was.

"Mai says my grandfather used to play this."

Notes of the broken serja resonated through the corridors of Ojhai's memory. So many bwisagus he and Marcus had danced the *bagurumba* [5] together. And then the riots happened. Like the pandemic, the riots too had throttled the gaiety of bwisagu many years ago, driving a wedge between two beautiful people. Those too were bwisagus when people stayed indoors for fear of their lives. Ojhai's reverie broke with Jugnu's call.



Photo: Alongbar Basumatary

“Mai said she kept it carefully so that I may play it someday. She said it held memories, that it was the only thing in the house for me to connect with my father and grandfather.” He paused and asked Ojhai, “You understand connect?”

“Now what is connect?” Ojhai asked, amused.

“Connect,” Jugnu explained, taking his right palm with the left and placing it gently above his heart, “is this!”

“Connect, yes!”

While the little boy touched his heart in his yard, it filled Ojhai’s to the brim back in his own yard across the path. “Your father played that for you?”

“I don’t remember him, mai says I was still suckling at her breast when the spirits took him away.” He looked down at the serja, “Can you mend this? Then maybe you and I can play together, abou?” he asked enthusiastically, “You, the siphoong and I, the serja?”

That day, for the first time, Jugnu addressed Ojhai thus. Abou. Grandfather.

“Why not!” Ojhai’s voice quivered, “That will be the happiest bwisagu ever!”



Photo: Alongbar Basumatary

“Yes!” Jugnu laughed, jumping down the charpoy. And holding the broken serja aloft, he began cavorting in glee with Batloo, singing a bwisagu song. He paused to shout, “Abou! Whistle your siphoong!”

“Righto!” Ojhai shouted back, dancing into the courtyard. Seeing Ojhai’s zest, his son brought out the drum and began playing with gusto. As an angry sun’s last rays sank, Ojhai changed his siphoong’s tune to cajole the skies to quench the parched earth’s thirst. So soulful was the tune that it evoked the full-throated song of a cuckoo pleading with the skies in harmony with Ojhai’s siphoong, to show mercy and let down the rains. Pleading for Tara

and Jugnu. And for all those for whom each full meal was a festival in itself, so much more looked forward to than bwisagu.

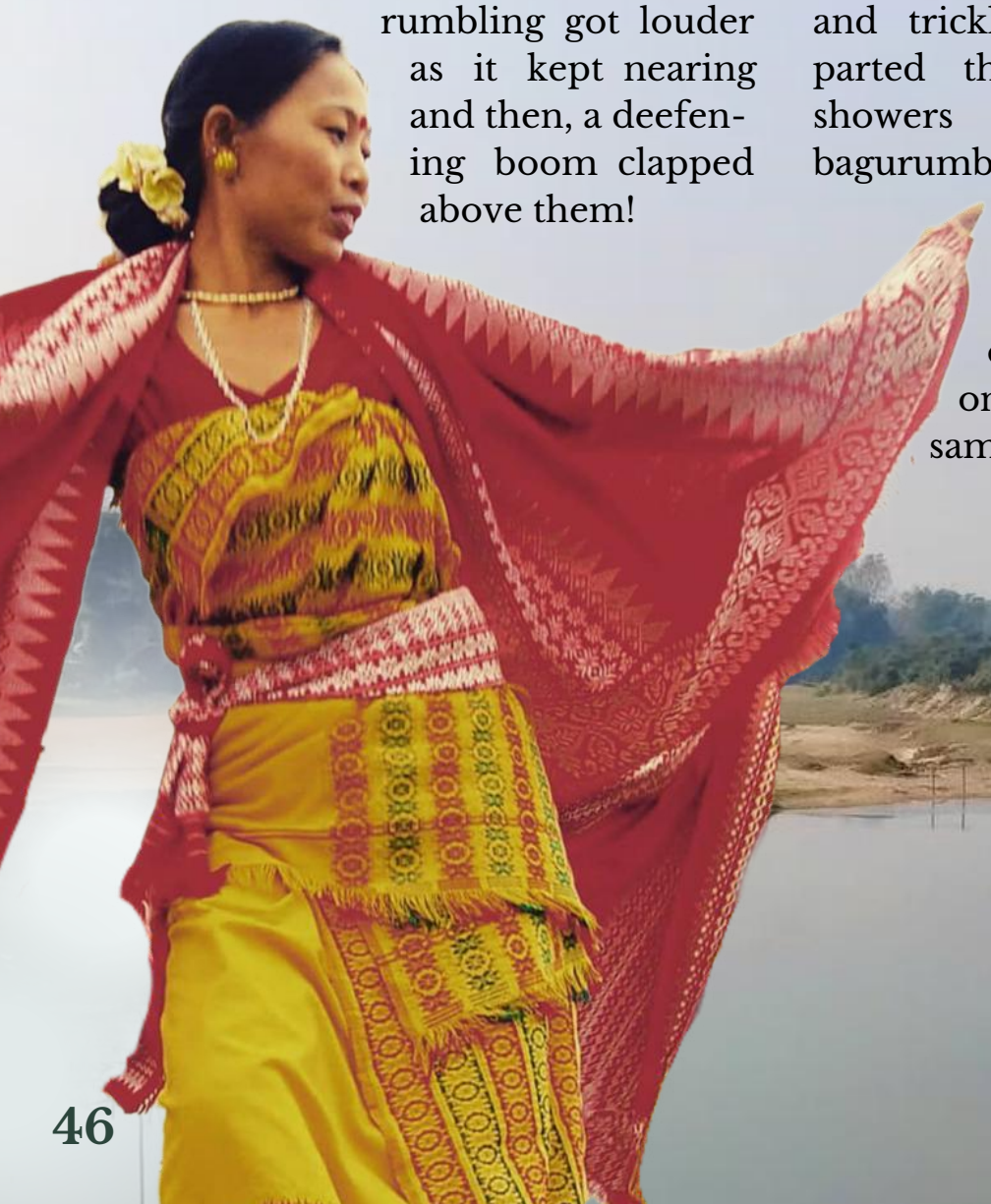
The combined passion of the booming drumbeat, the siphoong and the cuckoo set such a racing pulse through the whole of Madlagami and the skies above that even the heavens began to tremble. Soon, roaring drumbeats began to vibrate from all around the village. Suddenly, Ojhai heard the roar of something other than drums. He thought he heard the heavens shudder. The sound was approaching from afar. The rumbling got louder as it kept nearing and then, a deefening boom clapped above them!

Ojhai jumped with joy. “Thunder!”

Without realizing Ojhai began playing a tune of deep gratitude, in anticipation of his pleas being heard. So moving was the melody that it tore through the stubbornness of the skies and at last made them weep. And heaven’s tears fell on the scorched earth to quench her thirst. That same instant, bwisagu arrived at Madlagami!

“Rain! Rain!” Jugnu jumped with delight.

Bibari ran out into the courtyard. Large drops of rain fell on her face and trickled down her lips. She parted them, to taste the first showers of spring. Strains of bagurumba rose from separate courtyards all over Madlagami and came together to unite under one sky, to fill the air as one voice, singing the same ode.



To Spring! Every family remained in its own courtyard but their spirits embraced to celebrate the New Year, singing and dancing as one, though apart.

Wild with joy, Jugnu's voice rose above the clatter of rain and drum, singing bwisagu songs with the Bodos.

"Bagurumba, hai bagurumba!"

For the first time since Ojhai had begun noticing Jugnu and Tara, he saw her happy. Swirling with Jugnu, she cried tears of joy. Her corn would now sprout. The *dhenkia* would sprout tender curls and there'd be new stalks of arum and taro. Bibari danced in her courtyard, Tara danced in hers. Two people, in two yards, but the song they danced to was the same. Of spring! Of rejuvenation! The little boy they both loved was the same, as was the rain that soaked them.

Ojhai knew, among the voices that floated through the rain singing a springsong, his friends had theirs too. From their own yards. Bibari had finished weaving the gamsas, she would gift one each to her husband and Ojhai. And a special, small one to Jugnu.

And springsong filled the air, defeating desolation!

(This short story was first published in English and Japanese in the Asian Literature project "YOMU".)



GLOSSARY:

[1] **Siphoong:** Flute, in Bodo
[2] **Bwisagu:** Bodo New Year
[3] **Gamsa:** knee-length costume Bodo men wrap around the waist
[4] **Serja:** four-stringed musical instrument
[5] **Bagurumba:** traditional bwisagu folksong of Bodos.



Rashmi Narzary is a fiction writer, translator, creative writing mentor and an independent editor. She is a recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award for children's literature in English and the Prag Prerona Award 2020 for her contribution to literature. Rashmi is also Joint Secretary of the North East Writers' Forum, an umbrella organization of writers from India's Northeast. Her work is being taught in universities and researched for doctoral thesis and has been translated into other Indian and foreign languages. *An Unfinished Search* and *Whistles of the Siphoong* are two of her latest books.

nature above all



A heartfelt
conversation on conservation with
DR. PURNIMA DEVI BARMAN
the only Indian woman featured in
the *Times* Women of the Year List 2025

"When women get united, when the whole community comes forward for a good cause, everything becomes possible. Owing to our consistent effort, today we have been able to change people's perception of the bird. Every day, indeed, was like a new birth for me."

Once told that it would take her another lifetime to change people's perception of the greater adjutant storks, she has today successfully given the species a new leash of life and brought them back from the brink of extinction. Once ridiculed for trying to incorporate local women's participation in the conservation effort, she now leads an all-women army of 20,000 members. Once mocked for her community-based model of conservation, today conservationists across the world have adopted her model.

Meet wildlife biologist and conservationist Dr. Purnima Devi Barman, the only Indian woman featured in *Time*'s Women of the Year List 2025. Barman's greatest achievement, though, is the realisation of her lifelong dream and mission: that is, to change the people's perception of the greater adjutant storks, which were once considered an ill omen in the society. "This dream of mine is very big," she says, "I want to bring a change in perception not only in Assam but the whole world."

And indeed, today she has placed the bird on the global map.

Locally known as "Hargila", people would dismiss them as mere scavenger birds, and often destroy their nests and cut down the trees on which they built their nests during the breeding season. This made the greater adjutant storks a highly endangered species, with only 450 left in the region when Barman first started her mission in 2007. The dream of saving this bird from extinction was planted in her own eyes, but she realised the power of community engagement and harnessed it to bring her dream to fruition. She formed a team of local women to rescue the birds and spread awareness about their conservation. Today, the population of Hargila has increased to over 1,800, and her Hargila Army comprises more than 20,000 strong women.

Her name has now become synonymous with Hargila conservation – people know her as their beloved Hargila *Baideo* or Stork Sister, the messenger of the Hargilas.

Interviewed and transcribed by Niloy Kurmi

For her work, Dr. Barman has been honoured with multiple awards and recognitions, including the 2024 Whitley Gold Award as well as the 2017 Whitley Award, the 2022 Champions of the Earth Award (the United Nations' highest environmental honour), and the 2017 *Nari Shakti Puraskar* (the highest civilian award for Indian women). Most recently, she has also been awarded an honorary doctorate degree by the Assam Agricultural University in April 2025.

Barman's love for Nature developed very early in childhood. She fondly remembers the time spent with her grandmother and reminisces about how growing up in a small village in Assam, Nature was an inseparable part of their lives. She shares more about her childhood, her work, her challenges as a woman conservationist, and how we should reshape our environmental awareness and education programmes, in this exclusive interview with *Horizon*.



Q. Congratulations on your recent achievement of making it to the *Time*'s Women of the Year list 2025. How does it feel to get global recognition for the movement which once started in the small village of Dadara?

Firstly, thank you so much for inviting me for this interview in your magazine. I am really honoured to be here. Being recognised by the *Time* magazine as among the 13 most influential women in the world, is indeed a very rare recognition for me. It's a huge honour for not only me, but our work and the entire community. It is a victory for wildlife, in fact.

Both Dadara, where we have been working for the conservation of the greater adjutant storks, and the village of Pub Majir Gaon in Kamrup district, where I grew up, are small villages. Life in the village

> The *Time*'s honour is the epitome of **women empowerment** for me . . . this honour is a **victory for every girl** like me who hails from a **small village** and has **big dreams** in her eyes.

has never been without difficulties. We didn't have many facilities growing up. Rather, we used to rely on Nature. So, it is towards Nature that I am most grateful for enabling me to reach where I am today.

The *Time*'s honour is the epitome of women empowerment for me. Coming from a rural area, I had never imagined that one day I would be able to achieve this. Even the people back in my village – at least those who are able to grasp the value of this honour – are surprised. Girls in villages have to face so many taboos and stereotypes. Be it stepping outside the household or dreaming big, they have to overcome so many obstacles. So, this honour is a victory for every girl like me who hails from a small village and has big dreams in her eyes.

Q. We plant the seeds of our dreams during childhood. As you just mentioned about your growing up years, what has your childhood been like, especially your connection with Nature? Who did you look up to as your inspiration during childhood?

During my childhood, my biggest role model was my grandmother, my *Aita*. I was very close to her. My father was a soldier and he kept getting posted to various places. So, my childhood days were spent with my mother and my two siblings. Owing to the frequent transfers of my father and the not-so-good health of my mother, it was very difficult for them to raise three kids. So, they had to leave me under the care of *Aita*. I was too young to understand at first, and when I did, I was uncontrollable. Even though I adjusted with *Aita* well, I would frequently throw tantrums. I used to be a naughty child (laughs). I was soon admitted to a school, but here



Dr. Barman being awarded the 2024 Whitley Gold Award



too, I would cause trouble and often play truant.

So, *Aita* would take me along with her to the paddy fields. She would even feed me lunch there. Just like how parents today show their phones to their kids while feeding them, *Aita* used to feed me by showing me the various birds in the field. She would fondly make rice balls and tell me, "See, this stork here would come and take this *ladoo* away now." And as I was captivated in wonder, she would prank me into eating it (laughs).

Aita was, in fact, also a storyteller. Our folk songs are replete with mentions of birds such as kites and and storks, and she would often sing these songs to me. *Aita* was also the one who taught me how to plant and nurture tree saplings.

I still remember that there used to be a huge *kadam* tree in our house yard. Interestingly, the tree also sheltered the nests of a few storks, although I cannot recall what species of storks they were. The seeds of the *kadam* tree would fall down and form a carpet on the ground, and I would start my morning by gathering and playing with those seeds. *Aita* would tell me that Krishna himself had taken shelter in a nest there, that the birds were none other than Radha and Krishna, and that it was them throwing the seeds down from the tree.

As our village was on the banks of the Brahmaputra, we used to face floods too every year. My childhood was, thus, intrinsically connected with Nature, and my grandmother played a great role in deepening this love for Nature.

Aita was, in fact, also a **storyteller**. Our **folk songs** are replete with **mentions of birds** such as kites and storks, and she would often **sing these songs** to me.





Q. From being considered a bad omen to placing the Hargila bird in our art, culture and tradition, yours is also a cultural movement. How do you see the link between culture, community and conservation?

Culture, community and conservation – these are actually not separate, but parts of a whole. I always tell people during my talks, seminars and campaigns that we ourselves are Nature. But, unfortunately, today we have detached ourselves from it. As the celebrations of Bohag Bihu are underway presently, we can take it as an example. Be it the *kopou phool*, or *jetuka*, or even our weaves and handlooms, we can find Nature ingrained in all of our Bihu symbols and traditions. The 'tak-tak' of the handloom, in fact, reminds me of the sound of Hargila.

I am often invited to various student-oriented programmes and sessions here in Assam. The talk is delivered, the slideshows and presentations are shown, and the session comes to an end. But once the event is over, I often observe the same kids playing with their slingshots and hitting the birds for fun, even though the session itself was on caring for birds.

Instead of bookish sessions and route-learning, if we make our culture a part of our environmental education, if we design awareness programmes where we integrate our very traditions, then it becomes much easier for people to grasp it. Many root problems can be solved through this.

Environmental and wildlife conservation on the field is very different from what is taught to us in textbooks. We may study about the environment in our schools and

universities for marks and exams, but when you actually come forward to work towards it on the ground, it is altogether a different experience. The practical and the field knowledge becomes the most important.

I would like to take this interview as an opportunity to convey a message to every youth, every student, and every parent: In order to truly safeguard the environment, you will have to go to the field and learn through practical work. Set an example and lead others by it, that's my earnest request to all.

Q. How do you see the role of women in the conservation effort? What made you decide to primarily engage local women in this effort? Also, as a mother of two daughters, what values of motherhood did you draw upon during your journey?

As I said, nothing is just about textbooks and bookish knowledge. When you go to do fieldwork, the field itself becomes your guide and a repertoire of knowledge.

When in 2007, I got a call about the cutting of a huge tree that had

We may **study** about the environment in our **schools and universities** for **marks and exams**, but when you actually come forward to **work** towards it **on the ground**, it is altogether a **different** experience.



Hargila nests and I had to rush to its rescue, I was also the mother of twin babies. I was so busy taking care of my newly-born children that I hardly had time to think of anything else. Besides motherhood, I was also juggling with my PhD then, but I was not able to go for field visits because I had to look after my children. Although my PhD thesis was on storks and wetlands, I was not very aware of the ground reality of these storks. Whatever knowledge I had, was only through my PhD study.

Then, one day, someone called and informed me that a huge *kadam* tree with Hargila nests was being cut. This reminded me of the *kadam* tree of my childhood, which was very close to my heart. Coincidentally that tree was also cut when I was still a child, and I had almost gone into a trauma. It seemed to me that the same cycle of events was unfolding, and I couldn't but rush immediately to save the tree.

When I saw the tree being felled, and its trunk and branches lying on the ground, I felt like someone of my own relation had been hurt. And then, I saw the helpless Hargila chicks among the fallen branches, some dead, some alive. Filled with grief and anguish, when I tried to stop the man who was cutting down the tree, I was severely reprimanded by him. He said that the birds are a bad omen, that they are carriers of diseases, and



> My motherhood **ignited** me and I **questioned myself** at that moment: how could someone call these **innocent birds** a **bad omen**?

that they will bring doom and bad luck in our lives.

At that moment, I felt as though he was not cursing the chicks but my own twin kids. My motherhood ignited me and I questioned myself at that moment: how could someone call these innocent birds a bad omen? This became my lifelong dream: to change people's perception of this bird. And this dream of mine is very big – I want to bring a change in perception



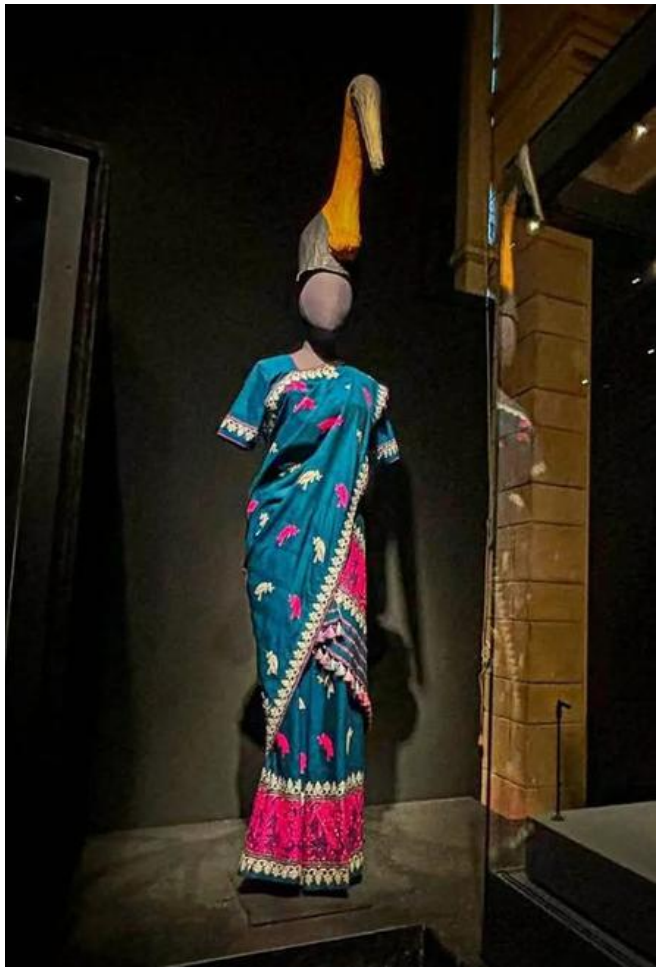
not only in Assam but the whole world.

Being a woman and mother myself, the struggles of these birds resonated deeply with me. For us, humans, we organise the *panchamrit* ceremony or baby showers to celebrate motherhood. But when the Hargila birds breed, their nests are destroyed, their trees are cut down, and they are killed – how different is that? I realised then that if we, women, could organise baby showers for Hargilas too, we can play a great role in creating awareness and changing people's perception. The women of our homes, our mothers, our grandmothers, ensure peace in the household by praying and lighting an earthen lamp. Likewise, I realised, women too can start the initiative of conserving the storks. That's why I started organising *pitha*-making competitions in Dadara to mobilise the women and make them more aware about the bird.

I believe, if the storks are to be seen as beautiful rather than ugly, we need to first make them a part of our cultural traditions, our attires, and our fashion. And when it comes to incorporating an element into our culture, only women can take









Top: Barman with the Hargila Army
Right: *Mekhela Sador* with Hargila motif on display at the Natural History Museum in London.
Left (Top): *Gamosa* with Hargila motif

the lead in forging this connection and bridging the gap. What started with baby showers, community *naam kirtan*s, folk songs, *pitha*-making competitions, has gradually turned into this huge all women-led movement on conservation.

Q. In a society dominated by men, it is not easy to stir a revolution as a woman. But you mobilised an entire army of women. Personally, what were the setbacks or challenges that you had to face because of your gender?

I still remember that a few prominent wildlife biologists had once told me, "Purnima, you cannot change the fate of a species. Its perception is determined by our ancestors. It will take you another birth to change it." But I thought the contrary: even if it took me another birth, I was determined to put all my effort into each day leading to that next birth.

Initially, many conservationists would ridicule me and my efforts. When people call it a bad omen, I feel they are actually ridiculing me. Being a woman conservationist, when I used to organise awareness campaigns in the villages, the local people used to laugh at me, saying, "Oh, you have only come for the birds". They would also tell me, "We cannot sacrifice our homes for your bird, can we?" When I used to call the women for the *panchamrit* ceremony, they would question and mock my intent.

> . . . even if it took me **another birth**, I was **determined** to put **all my effort** into **each day** leading to that next birth.

Sometimes, in order to save a Hargila chick that had dropped from its nest, I have had to request a villager for their vehicle. During the rescue efforts, people would point out that the birds are filthy and would eventually infect me.

I would think to myself then, that my challenges as a woman are nothing compared to what the storks face for mere survival every day. This is how the change began, slowly but certainly.







When women get united, when the whole community comes forward for a good cause, everything becomes possible. Owing to our consistent effort, today we have been able to change people's perception of the bird. Every day, indeed, was like a new birth for me. With hard work and consistency, we can achieve everything in our lives.

Q. You recently tied up with a school in France to promote your community-based model of Hargila conservation. What lessons can the international community learn from our indigenous knowledge systems and our local grassroots movements in the North East?

Our community-based model of conservation has today travelled across the world. Many wildlife conservation movements perform baby showers now, inspired by our *panchamrit* ceremony for the Hargilas. Those conservationists who used to ridicule our model, have themselves now adopted it. I didn't know if this model would be successful; rather, I had only one mission and I knew if we were to save the Hargilas, only we, the people, could do it. So, it is necessary to work with the community. Back then, I didn't know that people would appreciate this community model so much. Everyone used to follow the conventional models of seminars and project work. Now, many conservationists around the world have started working with women while also providing them

livelihood.

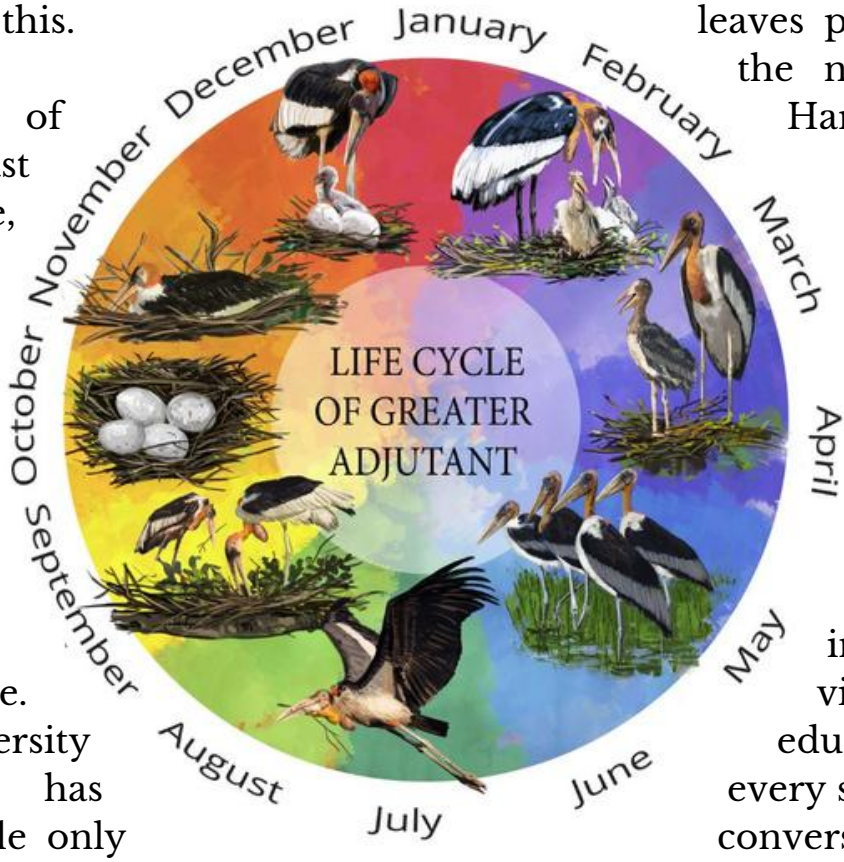
Speaking of the North East, our cultures and traditions are so strong. Our *mekhela sador*, for instance, is a tool for our Hargila conservation. I wear the *mekhela sador* with the Hargila motif to seminars and conventions all over the world. I changed my own looks and told myself that this is how I will always go to spread my message. I cannot take my laptop everywhere, but I can wear the *mekhela sador* wherever I go and can use the motif to introduce people to the bird. No matter where I am – be it on a flight, or a community awareness programme, or a school event, or in an altogether different country – I find that I am able to explain a lot via this.

The cultures of the North East are very diverse, deeply rooted, authentic and attractive. There is a lot we can learn from it. In fact, students can do a lot of research and study our culture. We are a biodiversity hotspot, which has become possible only through our rich culture.

So, indeed, it is a pleasure to work with students from France. I feel really great that they have adopted our community conservation and the people's model, inspiring the kids to form the next Hargila Army. Just before this interview, I was, in fact, chatting with them via video conferencing.

In these virtual classes, I incorporate lessons on topics such as the birds, their natural history, and how we can impart environmental education through poems and paintings, and so on. Since today's session took place during Bohag Bihu, I also tried to incorporate our Bihu traditions into our class. I give them examples such as how the trees are changing their leaves presently, but the nests of the Hargilas are now vulnerable to dropping down.

This is how I've designed their course. We can integrate environmental education into every season, every conversation, if we want. Today, not just



THE HARGILA CALENDAR

France, in fact, I get calls from across our country. Schools and colleges organise campaigns and plays almost every day to promote our Hargila conservation story. All these fill me with lots of hope.

Q. Developmental projects often clash with environmental conservation. We saw it in the case of Digholi Pukhuri, where the government wanted to cut the trees without a second thought, just to build a flyover. Most recently, we can take the example of the forests near Hyderabad Central University. What in your opinion, is the right way in which the state can balance both conservation and development?

I believe, and always say, that Nature is above us all. We can call it development only when we are able to protect our natural resources. This should be our first priority. Policymakers, local people and communities should come on a single platform and work hand-in-hand. When a people's movement can stop a policy, as in the case of Dighali Pukhuri, it stands as a true example of people's power. The UN and other top international organisations are urging collaboration as the key. It is now high time that local stakeholders, including policymakers, work together to develop strong policies to save our heritage.

In many areas, local people do support tree felling, without realising its consequences. So, we need to create a lot of awareness. When they themselves become aware of its value, no one can touch their resources. Before taking up a





. . . through my **20 years of research**, I have learnt that the Hargila is a **very resilient** bird. They have now started **adapting** and **relocating** to new places . . .

project in any region, it must be ensured that a proper Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is carried out.

Sometimes, I am not able to fall asleep when I think of these development projects and the harm they cause to the environment, the Hargilas, and other animals and birds.

At the same time, through my 20 years of research, I have learnt that the Hargila is a very resilient bird. They have now started adapting and and relocating to new places and building new colonies for themselves. At times, people ask me, "*Baideo*, there were once Hargilas here, but why aren't there any now?" I find their question itself absurd, and I reply to them, "How will there be Hargilas here? People have now built shopping malls and eight-storey buildings here. We have destroyed our wetlands. The Hargilas won't come here anymore. If you want to find Hargilas, you will have to go to their new habitats."

We cannot always blame the government. Yes, policy-making has a big role to play, but at its core, conservation is a team effort. Recent efforts, such as the increase in the number of national parks, are commendable. But we also need to consider rural and unprotected areas, which too are biodiversity hotspots. Policymakers must develop an action plan for these areas too.

The *New York Times* recently recognised Assam as the fourth best

place to travel to in 2025. I would like to request the state to take this opportunity to promote our rich biodiversity as well.

There have been talks to open a wildlife or environmental research centre here in Assam. Most people outside the region are now aware of the rich cultural and natural heritage of the North East. That, indeed, is very good. But if we open wildlife and biodiversity research centres here, our local students can also learn a lot from it and can build a career in researching this diversity. At the same time, students from outside the region can also come here and contribute to it.

If we build such scopes and action plans involving the youth and the students, who are our future generation, we can surely address these pressing environmental issues.

Q. Lastly, what will be your message to all youngsters, who will be the future caretakers of this planet, its species, and the environment?

My message to the youth is always the same: let us fill our eyes with dreams of nurturing our Earth. Let us open our ears and hear Nature's song. Let us use our hands to nurture the trees and not to cut them.

Be consistent, be optimistic, and be innovative in whatever you do. Be creative and try to break the

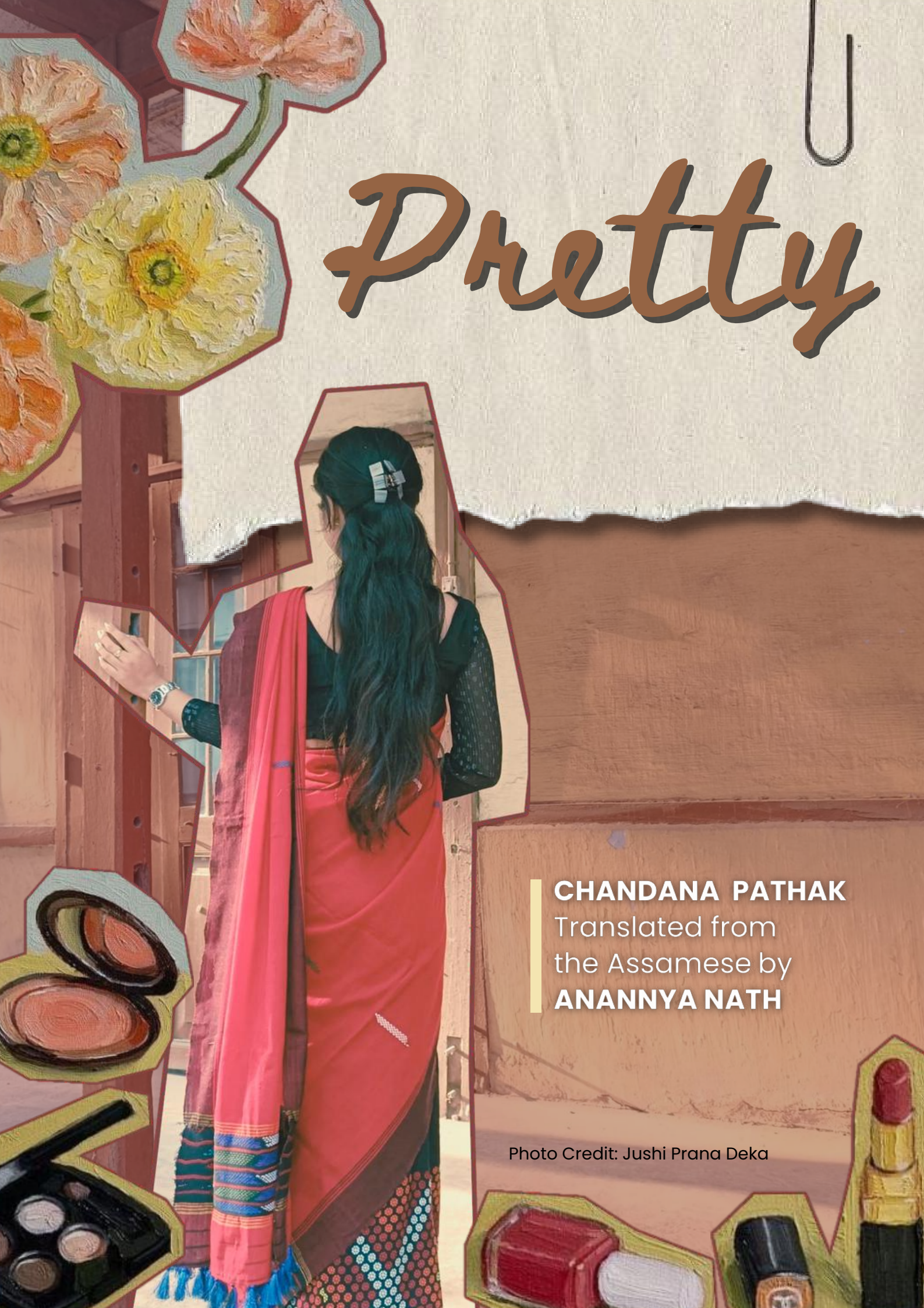


taboos and stereotypes around you. Always try to think out of the box.

Also, remember, you need not be a conservationist by profession to work for Nature and wildlife, although it is very good if you make it a full-time career. But even if you are in a different profession, no matter which, please keep the spirit of conservation alive in your heart always, and do the needful for Nature.

Finally, I would like to say that if everyone gives a voice to each species or river or wetland, like how we have given it to Hargila, our Earth will become a beautiful place to live in.

Pretty



CHANDANA PATHAK
Translated from
the Assamese by
ANANNYA NATH

Photo Credit: Jushi Prana Deka

The chaos coming from Horeswar's house is jarring. He is, it turns out, thrashing his eldest kid — a daughter — with a thick, bamboo stick. The beatings are unbearable and the girl retches in pain. Her screams aided with her father's rage have transformed the house into a pandemonium. The younger children cower next to their mother, weeping in fear. The mother is equally helpless. She does not comprehend the reason for her husband's sudden outburst. She tries to protect her daughter from getting hit, coming before her enraged husband herself. The house trembles under the echoes of its residents, each screaming for different reasons.

Everyone in the village knows Horeswar to be the quiet kind. He never raises his voice, let alone beat someone. In fact, he never replies even when insulted. If at all he feels angry, he merely mumbles away his frustration. That is all there is to his personality. This nature extended to times when his wife nagged him about their fiscal crises. Whenever she starts her harangue, he calmly drinks a glass of water from the pitcher and walks out of the house. When he senses that his wife's anger has abated and the wind in her face has softened, he comes back, humming the tunes of some popular *lokgeet*. The couple has three children. Two of



them — the younger boy and the girl attend the lower primary. His eldest daughter is in high school.

Before today, his kids have never seen him scold them. Never mind scolding; he has never even raised his voice at them, ever.

How did that change today?

In his rage, Horeswar resembles Shiva performing the frightening *tandav*. His anger is loud and far-reaching for it manages to reach most houses in the village. Hearing the commotion, everyone in the neighbourhood rushes to his house. The *gaon-burha* Kanaklal and the teacher Jogen Sutradhar barge in. "What are you doing?" they roar and snatch the stick from Horeswar's hand. They pull the girl away and send her away from the room.

The quiet descends slowly. Once the situation alleviates, the two gentlemen make Horeswar sit between them. They both share glances, scared to make the first

move. In the end, the *gaon-burha* asks, "What is this Horeswar? What did *aaijoni* do to turn you inside out? Should you beat a girl her age this mercilessly? She is almost an adult now. Tsk Tsk."

The flickers of Horeswar's anger are still fresh, like those in a hot furnace, and at any given moment can turn into an inferno. He is still brash and agitated when he replies to the village headman's question. "You are asking me, *gaon-burha kai*? She is treading a dangerous road and will take us all down with her. Not only will she die of hunger, but she will leave us to starve too. Today, I will teach her . . ."



Photo: Jushi Prana Deka

> You are asking me, *gaon-burha kai*? She is treading **a dangerous road** and will take us all **down with her**. Not only will she **die of hunger**, but she will **leave us to starve** too.

Horeswar abruptly stands up and almost runs towards his daughter's room when the school teacher Jogesh intervenes, stopping him. He is equally indignant with Horeswar's recklessness and shouts at him. "What madness is this? What is wrong with you? Calm down. Tell us everything. Why did you feel the need to raise your hand at her? At least if we understand your reason, we might offer a solution."

"How do I calm down, master? How will you understand? Only I know what is inevitable. If I had bequeathed anything from my ancestors, it has been the art of ploughing. The plough has been our only saviour. But after the floods washed away our farmland next to the hungry river, we have very little land left to work on. The remaining land offers no sustenance throughout the year. These past six months I have been frequenting the panchayat member's house, begging

him for the BPL card. He had even assured me that this time, they would issue one in my name. I thought that the little yield I get from the land and anything that shall come from the BPL card would somehow help keep the kitchen fuel running throughout the year. Yet, as the saying goes: one can barely do according to one's will. Problems are inevitable. And this girl, this stupid girl, is proving to be my fishbone now. It seems she will be the reason for us not getting the card."

The clarification explains nothing. Nobody understands anything. The *gaon-burha* breaks the silence. "Uhu, did not get it, Horeswar. We understood nothing. How can she come in your way of getting the card?"

"What is there to understand anymore, *gaon-burha kai*? This girl does not know that her family is poor. Or even if she does, she does not act the part. You know what she does? She applies colours on her face – those powders that turn the cheeks golden. She buys lipsticks and paints her lips red."

> This girl **does not know** that her family is **poor**. Or even if she does, she does not **act the part**. You know what she does? She **applies colours** on her face!

Failing to understand the correlation and almost irritated at his lecture, Jogesh asks with palpable frustration, "What? How are they connected?"

"Yes, they are. There is a connection. Why, have you not heard the chief minister saying – even the newspapers have written and the TV channels are also publishing the same news. Yesterday, *bupai* Jatin read it out to me. He quoted the chief minister's word for word. He had said that just by looking at how



well women dressed one could tell whether they come from rich or poor families. Master, do our panchayat members not read or watch news that they will pay no attention to such detail? If he sees my daughter walking around wearing lipstick, will he listen to my requests or remind himself of the chief-minister's statement? All I can say is, this girl and her desire for looking pretty will be the end of me. I am sure that I will not get the card anymore."

Hearing his explanation, most of the people gathered in the house break into a laugh. The others sit speechless. The *gaon-burha* and the master sigh in unison, looking at each other.

(This short story was originally published in the monthly Assamese magazine, Saatsori *in the month of April, 2015 and later included in Chandana Pathak's short story anthology,* Livology *(2021). The Assamese title is* Lipstick.*)*

GLOSSARY:

1. **Lokgeet:** songs composed and sung by people from a community, very specific to their culture.
2. **Gaon-burha**: Assamese terminology for the village headman.
3. **Kai:** Acronym for 'kokaideo' meaning 'brother' in Assamese but also generally used to address a male older than oneself.
4. **Aaijoni**: an affectionate term for a young girl.



Chandana Pathak is an Assamese writer and poet. She is the recipient of the 'Gariyoshi Chandra Prasad Saikia Short Story Award'. Pathak has two collections of short stories, *Antir Goli* (2013) and *Livology* (2021) and a novel, *Panthasala* (2022) to her credit. Her stories and poems often appear in several Assamese journals. Besides being a writer, Pathak is also a lyricist. She lives in Barpeta, Assam with her family.



Anannya Nath holds a Master of Arts in Literature from Tezpur University. She is currently working as an Assistant Professor of English in Biswanath, Assam. Her short stories, poems and translations have appeared in *Scroll.In*, *The Chakkar*, *Small World City*, *The Pinecone Review*, *Yearbook of Indian Poetry* (2023), *Muse India*, *Monograph*, *Rhodora*, *Gulmohur Quarterly*, and others. She was longlisted for the Mozhi Prize, 2023 for translating Lakshminath Bezbaroah's Assamese short story, *Madhoimaloti*, into English, and shortlisted for the BWW Short Story Award (The RK Anand Prize), 2024.

MEMO AND THE DEMONESS

A Manipuri folktale retold by
THANGJAM HINDUSTANI DEVI

A long time ago, near a quiet village in what's now Manipur, lived Hingchabi, a demoness.

She used to lurk about in a thick bamboo grove on the edge of the village, waiting for young children who wouldn't listen to their parents and wander into the bamboo grove after sunset. But lately, she had been hungry as children of the village would make sure to be home before sunset, like their parents and grandmothers. She had to rely on hunting small animals in the bamboo grove to quell her hunger, but it wasn't as satisfying to her as eating young children. Therefore, at night, she used to go to the village and lurk about to see if she could catch any unwary child.

One evening, Hingchabi was out and about in the village when she came by Memo's homestead. She scrambled atop the big mango tree in the yard, and listened to the goings on, her super sharp ears perked up. "What's this? Is that Naocha, Memo's younger brother, and Benao, the youngest girl, crying

Pictures: Goutamkumar Oinam & Pinterest

for their mother? Hmm, let me wait a little longer, I may be in luck today!" Hingchabi thought.

"*Cheche*, when is Mother coming back? I am so hungry!" said Naocha, the ten-year-old boy to his elder sister. Memo, all of twelve, said, "Oh she must be on the way! Don't worry she will be home soon!"

"Mother! Mother! I want Mother!" wailed Benao, the three-year-old youngest sister.

"Mother will be home soon, come now, both of you, let's get inside and start the fire in the *phungga*, the hearth," said Memo and took her siblings indoors, shutting the front door behind her. Memo was a little worried. It was already dusk and it would be dark soon. Mother was usually not so late coming back home after selling her sweet *hamei* at the market in Pheidinga. Her heart pounding, she quickly started the fire in the *phungga*, put a pot of water to heat up, and sat her siblings down by the fire.

She then lit the lamp and put some hot charcoal from the *phungga* in the earthen *kambi*, then added some powdered *mekruk* (frankincense) to the charcoal. She took the lamp and the *kambi* and offered her evening prayers, as was the practice in every home in her village. "Oh Laiingthou, please keep my siblings and my Mother safe!" Memo prayed with all her heart. She then quickly proceeded to make a simple dinner of rice and *kangshoi*, a vegetable stew, and came out to put a lamp on the verandah for her mother. It was now dark, and she was getting afraid. "Mother, I wonder where you are, whatever has happened?" she said aloud before going indoors.

Hingchabi heard all this from her perch on the mango tree. She then flew towards Pheidinga to see if the children's mother was on the way back. She had often seen the children's mother, as she used to pass by the bamboo grove with her wares on the way to Pheidinga. After noticing that no one was walking towards the village, Hingchabi flew back to the mango tree in Memo's yard, pleased as a cat who had just licked up all the cream. She waited a bit before using her powers to take on the guise of Memo's mother. She then called from the yard, "Memo, Naocha, Benao! Mother's home!"

"Mother! What took you so long! Dinner's ready! Shall I serve it?" gushed Memo. "No dear, I feel so full, why don't you all eat instead?" lied Hingchabi, the thought of eating human food revolting her. After dinner, Hingchabi, posing as the children's mother with her powers, took them to bed and lulled them to sleep.

"Chomp, chomp! Chomp chomp!"

Memo woke to chomping sounds in the middle of the night. “Mother, what are you eating?”

“Oh, just a crunchy lotus stem that I got home from the market?”

“Can I have one too?”

“Here, have this!” said Hingchabi. Memo nearly took a bite before she realised with horror that it was but the little finger of her little sister Benao! This thing beside her wasn’t her dear Mother but a human-eating demoness! With difficulty, Memo muffled her gasp and held back her tears. Memo knew she and Naocha had to get to safety fast! The nearest place she could go to was a mile away, so she had to make sure to get a headstart!

“Naocha, Naocha, wake up!” Memo woke her brother up. “We have to go pee.”

“All right, *Cheche* . . .” mumbled the obedient little boy, opening his sleepy eyes. Grabbing his hand tight, she got off the bed, and said, “Mother, we have to go pee.”

“Oh alright! Don’t take long! Here, tie this rope around your waists, so that you don’t get lost in the dark!” Hingchabi said, taking out a long rope.



“Yes, Mother!” Memo took one end of the rope, while Hingchabi held the other end. While Hingchabi was still engrossed in her feast, Memo ran outside with Naocha following her on her heels. She then tied the rope on the big wooden pillar on the verandah, which supported the roof. Grabbing Naocha’s hand, she quickly made a hole on the side of the big earthen pot of water in the yard. Pleased to hear the water trickling, hoping that it would fool Hingchabi, Memo and her younger brother ran as fast as their little feet could take them, running, running, running towards their neighbour’s house, which was a mile away . . .

“Aren’t you done yet?” boomed Hingchabi’s voice behind them?

“No Mother!” Memo replied, running past the bamboo gate.

Hingchabi could hear the tinkle of the water from the pot in the yard and, mistaking the sound to be that of the children peeing, went back to her feast.

“Aren’t you done yet?” said Hingchanbi again after a long while, her voice loud in the stillness of the night.

“No Mother!” Memo replied, her heart pounding, happy to see the light from their neighbour Abok Cha’s home in the distance.



Illustration: Alyssa Pachau

They had covered half the distance between their home and their neighbour's house now.

Hingchabi could still hear the tinkling of the water from the pot in the yard, and mistaking the sound to be that of the children peeing, she went back to sleep, her stomach full. Memo and Naocha had just reached the gate of Abok Cha when Hingchabi woke up with a start. She didn't hear the sound of the water any more, as the water had all drained out of the pot by this time. "Memo! Naocha! Aren't you done yet?" boomed Hingchabi, but she got no answer, as the children were beyond earshot now. They had been running for a long long time, "It's Hingchabi, run, Naocha, run!" sobbed Memo, every now and then.

Memo quickly took off the topmost bamboo pole of Abok Cha's gate, hoisted Naocha atop the middle one and scrambled into the gateway, calling, "Abok Cha! Abok Cha! Please open the door!" at the top of her voice.

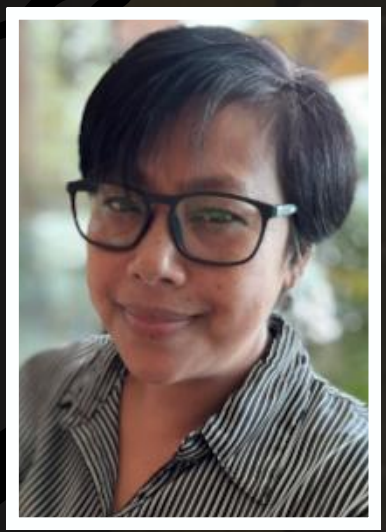
Meanwhile, at home, hearing no reply from the children, nor any other sound, Hingchabi tugged as hard as she could at the end of the rope which she had been holding tight. As she tugged with her might, the thick wooden pillar of Burma teakwood holding up the roof snapped into two like a



twig and the roof and the walls came crashing down on Hingchabi. You remember, don't you? Smart Memo had tied the rope to the very same pillar before running to safety. But Hingchabi was a strong demoness and she rose from the ruins of the house, cackling, "*Achacha*! *Lakcheida*! How dare you trick me, you bad children!" she thundered. She flew up and surveyed the land with her shiny demoness eyes that could see in the dark and she spied the children running from Abok Cha's gate towards the house. "You just wait!" she screeched and rushed towards the children.

"Abok Cha! Abok Cha!" screamed Naocha and Memo from the courtyard, their tired little feet hurting, their mouths dry, their little hearts pounding so much it hurt. Abok Cha woke up with a start and peeked out to see the children trying to climb up her verandah. Surprised to see the children at the unearthly hour, Abok Cha flung the front door open to see Hingchabi hot at their heels, reaching the gate.

"Memo! Naocha! Hurry inside!" Abok Cha said, helping the children inside. She had just closed the door when Hingchabi reached her yard. Abok Cha quickly and loudly chanted the protective prayer that sealed her home from evil and Hingchabi couldn't lay a hand on the children anymore. Memo and Naocha had made it to safety and Hingchabi had to go back empty-handed.



Thangjam Hindustani Devi is a linguist by training and an online advertising specialist by profession. A former corporate executive, she has a PhD in Linguistics and maintains a blog about Manipuri folktales at http://magickalmusings-thangjam.blogspot.com. She lives in New Delhi with her husband Satyajit, their daughter Jessica, a couple of stray cats and some plants who all supported her immensely during the writing of *Feathers, Fools, and Farts: Manipuri Folktales Retold*. She has also translated Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi's *Europagi Mapao* from Manipuri into English (to be published).

CONCRETE SAVAGE

DR. ACHINGLIU KAMEI

In an oasis of compassion
Child of paradise
Flying with the butterflies
Chasing the rainbow
Healthy roots of ancestors
Nourishing tiniest buds, tendrils
Yellowed leaves, wilted branches, crooked
Regenerated, unconditionally

Honourable Savage

House integrity, character, loyalty, substance
Belonging
'Savage' jungle laws comprehensible
Systematic, just, compassionate

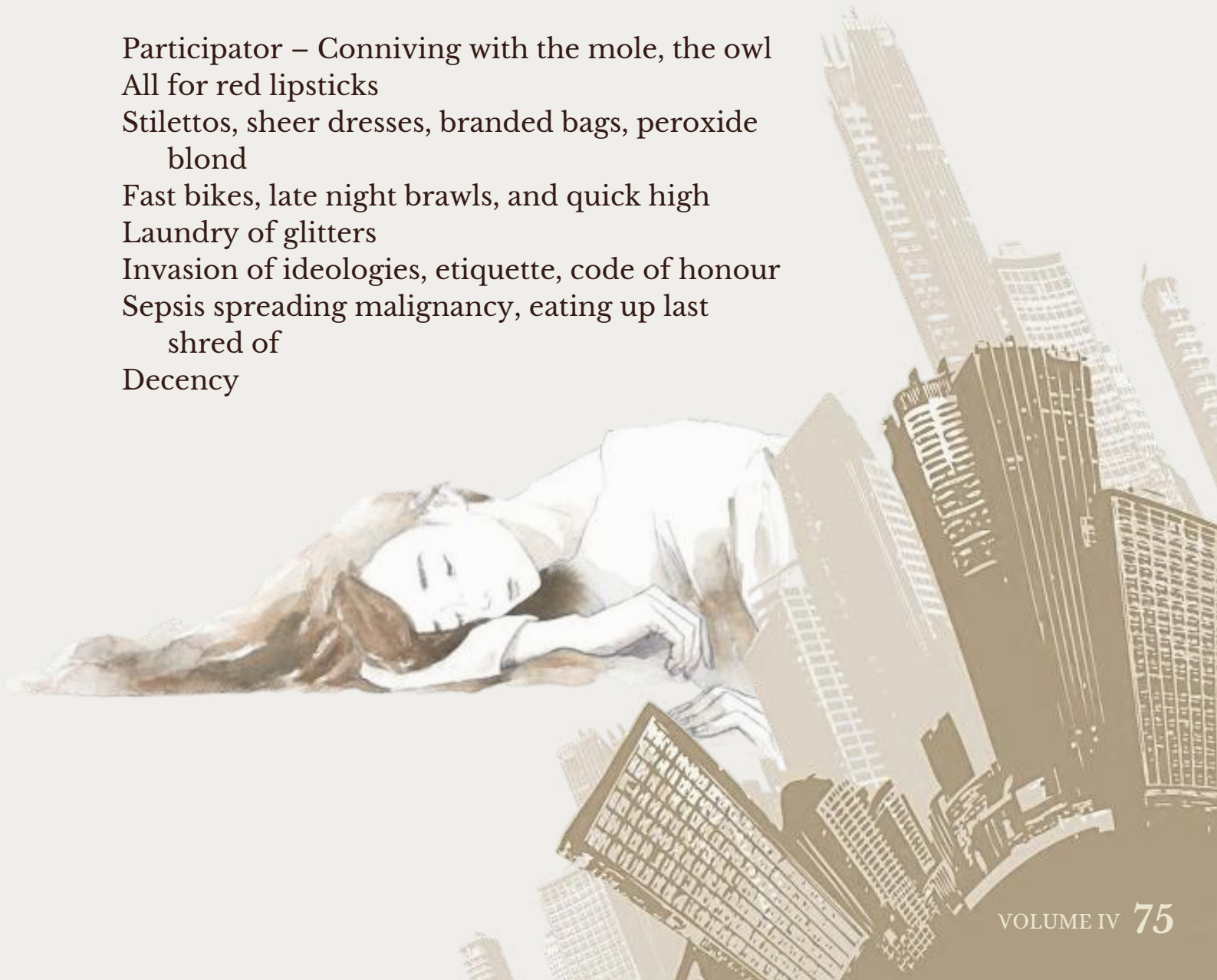


In search of greener pastures
Thrown in the ‘concrete jungle’
Transition, corrupt
Young in the city
No angel to guide
Groping in the dark



In the thick of things
Fed by lures of garish lights
Psychedelic fantasies
Enticed by the musk, the swirling of schemes
Tentacles of tradesmen of a different kind
Selling moral integrity, honour, loyalty
Engulfing innocence

Participator – Conniving with the mole, the owl
All for red lipsticks
Stilettos, sheer dresses, branded bags, peroxide
blond
Fast bikes, late night brawls, and quick high
Laundry of glitters
Invasion of ideologies, etiquette, code of honour
Sepsis spreading malignancy, eating up last
shred of
Decency





Venereal sore in every part of character
Profanity the order of the day
Decay compromised morality
Infestation complete
Serenity, Sanity a graveyard away
The coffin holds fame, riches

Child of darkness
Your 'Savage' jungle awaits your return.

***

I return to the land of my birthplace, my land. My placenta was buried here, threading my connection to the land — the proof and covenant of my belonging and acceptance. The seed of love for my land was sown with rituals and ceremonies when my placenta was buried on my land. Praise the hands and the souls that hold me. Praise the elders, praise the song, the day, and the river. Praise the mother, praise the beginning and the earth. Restore the ruined songs and chants; restore the rhythm of dance and laughter. I returned to stay.

Call of the placenta
Makes me return – Always
To my land

(*The poem* Concrete Savage *was first published in* Songs of Raengdailu: A book of Poems. *The haiku was first published in* Roots and Wings: A book of Haiku, Senryu and Haibu.)



Dr. Achingliu Kamei is a trailblazing academic, author, and ultra-runner. She got her PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University. As a distinguished Associate professor at the University of Delhi, she weaves together literature, education, and endurance sports. With eight published books, including the acclaimed *Songs of Raengdailu* and *Roots and Wings*, Dr. Kamei has made significant contributions to the literary world. Her work has been recognised nationally and internationally, with two poems selected for the NEP 2020 English Syllabus and her book chosen for study at the University of North Carolina, Asheville, USA. Her work *The Cowries and other poems*, an illustrated children's poetry book, is due for publication in April.

the sky is limitless

MINERVA WAHLANG on soaring high as a young aviator from the region



"It's a long cherished dream for all of us. So, when you finally make it to the skies, it truly feels very liberating."

Minerva Wahlang was fifteen when she first traveled on a plane. She reminisces that she was excited to find out if she would be scared because she had heard of many people having a phobia about flying. But, as the plane took off, she remembers that she actually enjoyed it. She was thrilled by the emotions she felt on that first flight.

Cut to a few years, and Minerva has soared high as a successful licensed pilot from Meghalaya at the very young age of twenty-two. She recently completed her training at an aviation academy in Madhya Pradesh, marking a significant milestone in her aviation career. Very few youth venture into the field of aviation in the North East due to a lack of awareness and guidance – a problem that Minerva faced too. But she was undeterred. "I never wanted to take up a monotonous job. I really wanted to travel the world so that I can see places," she shares about her passion for flying. Her journey is an inspiring reminder that when you are determined and work hard for achieving your dreams, the sky's indeed the limit.

Team *Horizon* caught up with the young aviator for an exclusive interview where she shared valuable insights for aspiring pilots, while also reflecting on her journey and the challenges that she had to face.

Q. What inspired you to become a pilot? Was the inspiration there from early childhood?

I wouldn't exactly say that aviation was my childhood dream. As a child, I used to be quite fickle-minded and had a lot of things going on in my head. At one point, I wanted to be a doctor, but at other times, I thought I would prepare for the UPSC. It was only when I reached the 9th standard that I started taking it more seriously, as I had to soon choose a stream for my 10+2. My parents advised me to go for the science stream, because it would be easier for me to switch to arts or commerce later, if I wanted to, than the other way round. I went for it and decided to keep my options open.

But a few months into my 11th standard, I realised that the moment you take up science, you are either

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Interviewed and transcribed by Niloy Kurmi
Interview Questions: Niloy, Paone, Aryan, Vanshika

expected to prepare for NEET or JEE, neither of which seemed like my cup of tea. By then, I had already started considering aviation as an option at the back of my mind. But, here in the North East, as there is no counseling for the same, I didn't have anyone whom I could enquire or seek guidance from regarding this.

So, I started reading and researching a lot about aviation on my own. I read articles and followed pilots who were vloggers on Instagram and YouTube. On one such occasion, when I was scrolling through Instagram, I saw a post of a lady pilot celebrating Mother's Day. And it really moved me. Gradually, as I read more, I got more inspired, and, eventually, I found my true calling in aviation.

Q. What does flying mean to you? When you are high up above the clouds, how does it feel? Is it a cathartic experience?

It is, indeed, a very satisfying experience. For every aviator, or anyone who has decided to walk on this career path, it is something that they have chosen after a lot of consideration. Everyone has had to face their share of struggles. It's a long cherished dream for all of us. So, when you finally make it to the skies, it truly feels very liberating. To be up there, among the clouds, and watch the world grow tinier, it feels as if you have taken off from all your problems. It makes me feel that I am not bound by anything, and the sky feels limitless, full of possibilities.

Q. Could you give us an overview of what pilot training looks like?

To get a Commercial Pilot License (CPL), the requirement here in India is 200 hours of flying. Out of these, 100 hours should be Pilot-in-Command (PIC) hours, and the

> To be up there, **among the clouds**, and watch the world **grow tinier**, it feels as if you have **taken off** from all your problems.



remaining hours comprise dual hours with your instructor as well as instrument flying. Out of the 200 hours, I flew over 185 hours on the single-engine Cessna 172, and 15 hours on a multi-engine Diamond DA42. With multi-engine aircrafts, one has to always fly with an instructor or a co-pilot, but after our solo release, we could fly a single-engine aircraft alone, without an instructor monitoring us. Initially, we would always fly with an instructor and learn different lessons, one at a time, until we got our solo release. So, this is the gist of what the overall training looks like.

Q. What is one of the hardest skills that you've mastered during your aviation journey?

The most difficult part of the training comes with the landing. Your instructor won't give you a solo release until you have learnt to land the aircraft safely and confidently. I have noticed that some people have had to leave training because they found the landing part hard. Well, people have different paces of learning. So, while some can learn it early, others may take time with it. Instrument flying is also another skill that I found a bit tough to master, as it involves a lot of procedures and calculations. But, eventually, one gets better at it with practice.

> The **most difficult part** of the training comes with the **landing**. Your instructor won't give you a solo release until you have **learnt to land** the aircraft **safely** and **confidently**.

Q. What is one aviation rule or principle that has stuck with you?

Actually, I have learned a lot of things from this training, and they are not exclusive to aviation alone. In real life too, they have definitely helped me grow as a person.

Firstly, I learnt to never be overconfident. After certain hours of flying, you know, many people, especially students, may become overconfident and not follow the SOPs religiously. We must remember that these SOPs have been prepared after a lot of studies and research analysing various accidents and the mistakes made by pilots and the aviation industry as a whole.

Secondly, we should never play with the weather. Weather is a contributing factor in a lot of incidents. If you have second thoughts about taking off in a particular weather, it is always better to not take the risk.

And thirdly, one learns a lot of patience in the aviation industry. You will have to be patient in



various stages of the training and even later, while applying for jobs.

Q. What were your biggest challenges in pursuing a career in aviation, both as a woman and as a person from the Northeast?

As I mentioned earlier, coming from the Northeast, my biggest challenge while pursuing this career was the lack of counseling. I had no one around to guide me, so I had to start everything from scratch – whether it was about finding flying schools where I could apply or researching medical fitness requirements, ground paper and licenses. If I had known someone with experience in this field, it would have been helpful, and I would have avoided a lot of mistakes in this journey.

Apart from this, I have faced obstacles common to all aspiring pilots, regardless of their gender. But fortunately, I have had the most supportive people around: my parents, my relatives, the people I met at my flying school, including my instructors, all of whom were really good.

> . . . my **biggest challenge** while pursuing this career was the **lack of counseling**. I had no one around to guide me, so I had to start everything from **scratch . . .**

Q. Do you think the representation of women in piloting roles within the aviation industry is quite skewed?

Here, I would like to point out that India has the highest number of female pilots in the world. So, yes, even though the representation is less, things are certainly changing and evolving.

If you ask why the representation is rather skewed, I think it's mainly because of the demanding nature of the job. Unlike a nine-to-five job, as a pilot, you won't have a fixed or routine job or lifestyle. Plus, you will be away from home. So, your priorities and commitments will change. The time you give to your home or family will change as well. That's why it is important to understand what one really wants from their life. It's all about a personal choice.

> . . . India has the **highest number of female pilots** in the world. So, yes, even though the representation is less, things are certainly **changing** and **evolving**.

Q. Most of our parents are skeptical about non-traditional careers due to their life experiences. How has been the support from your parents, and what advice would you give to the youths who face similar concerns?

As a career, I would say it is definitely a promising and fulfilling career. But one must remember that it is also an expensive one. So, it is important that you are financially strong.

From my parents, I have gotten both the financial and emotional support that I needed. That's the only reason I have been able to be accomplished in this field at such a young age. It was not my dream alone, but theirs too. They have provided me with immense moral and emotional backing throughout the journey.

Q. After one completes the 12th standard, what is the process of joining a flying school?

So, after your 12th standard, you can directly apply for the CPL course. You do not need to be a graduate. It is compulsory to have Maths, Physics and English as your subjects in your 11th and 12th. But I have also had friends who were not from the science stream. In this case, if you are from an arts or commerce background, you can also study these subjects in a certified or recognised open school.

After this, you will have to look for a flying school and also clear a few subjects of your ground paper. Ground paper would include subjects like meteorology, navigation, air

regulations, radiotelephony as well as technical subjects related to the aircraft you will be flying. You can be flying and also be clearing ground papers simultaneously, but what I usually suggest is that you clear the ground papers first. And after that one can look for good flying schools in India or abroad, and then, complete the required flying hours.

Q. Now, a "just for fun" question. Aviation geeks are usually divided between Boeing fans and Airbus fans. Which of the two are you a fan of?

I think I am going to be very diplomatic with this question (laughs). I actually like the aircrafts of both companies. Although I used to be a Boeing fan — I still am — but over time, I have developed a likeness for Airbus. Airbus is also technologically more advanced, making it easier to fly. Boeing, on the other hand, is usually preferred by pilots who want to get a more manual feel of flying the aircraft.

Q. What do you feel about the job market in aviation, especially with the industry projected to grow immensely in the coming years?

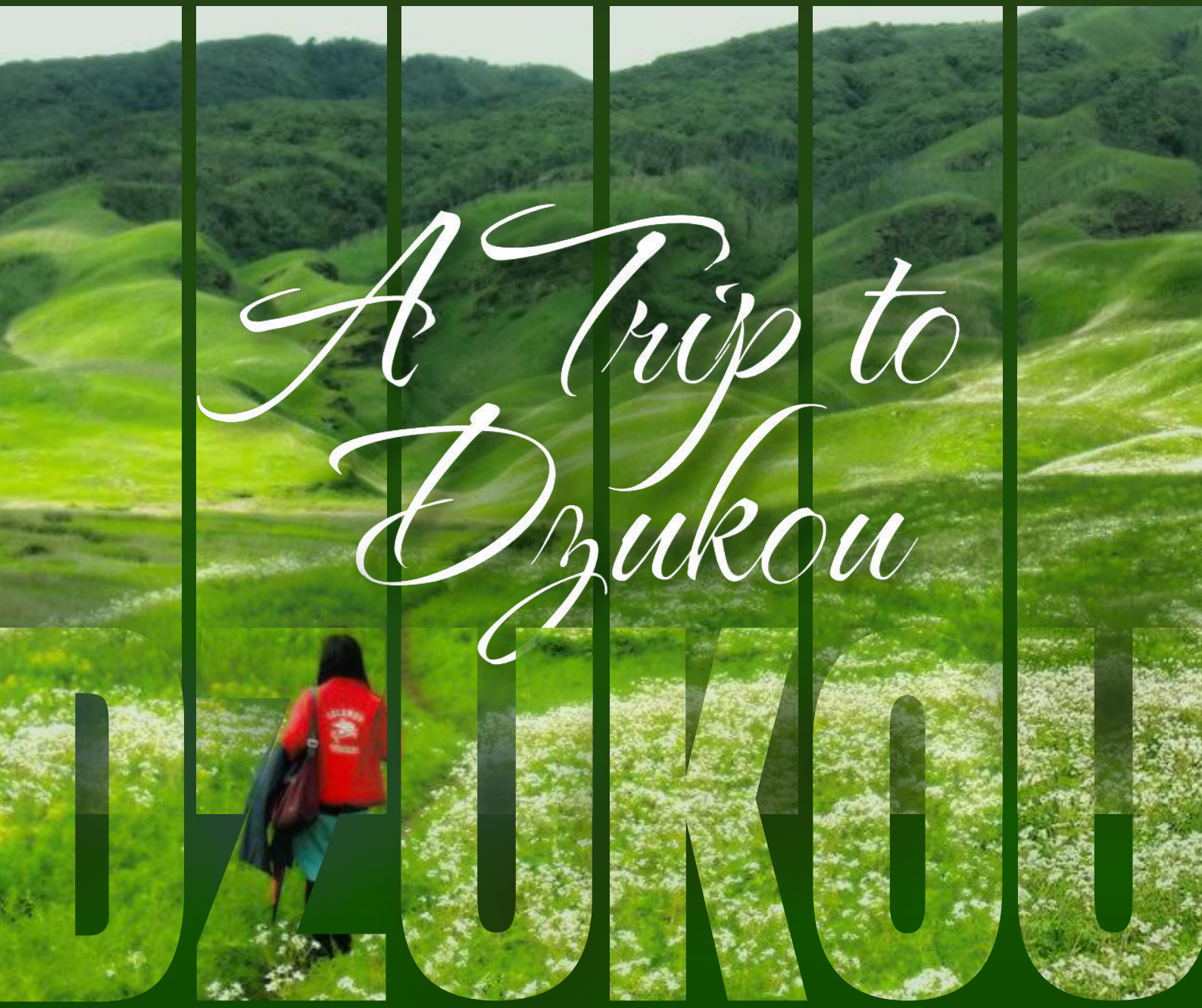
I think there are enough job opportunities. But you will also have to consider the number of people applying for the same post, which is immense. So, yes, more jobs are coming up, but there is also tough



competition for a post. But, with time, effort and patience, you will definitely make it.

Q. As our last question, if you could go back in time, what would you tell your younger self during times of uncertainty?

There have been times in this journey, when I felt I might have to give up because of certain obstacles. So, to my younger self, I would say that it's just a phase and that you will be able to get through it. As I am still applying for jobs, even now, things are not certain. I'm a spiritual person. So, I remind myself that the One who has brought you this far, will guide you farther as well. It helps keep me grounded in times of uncertainty.



A Trip to Dzukou

NAYANISHA BHATTACHARYYA travels to the dazzling hills of the Dzukou valley

It was when the steep climb finally drew to a close that the thick jungles parted to reveal the striking image of the Dzukou valley — vast, treeless, undulating knolls covered in a carpet of green. These rolling mounds of greenery stretched beneath a cerulean sky, and the sound of little rivulets and streams pleasantly interrupted the silence of untouched nature, like tinkling chimes. It felt as if I had suddenly stepped out of the earthly realm to something entirely fantastical. It was easily the most surreal experience I've had the privilege to live through.

The trail was yet not at its end, of course. Reaching the Trekker's Point

itself was an experience, involving an extremely bumpy ride from our base camp that may have displaced a few jaws and discs, following which our large group — a gaggle of excited students led by local guides — had to huff and puff through a one hour climb of sheer inclines, with a dash of wet rocks and moss to keep the adventure extra high and our lives on a tightrope. Finally, however, the grounds levelled to an extent. The track spiralled and curved leisurely now, a relief for our exhausted legs. But the journey would take a few hours more until we reached our camping point where we were supposed to stay overnight.



Photos: Nayanisha

Since the path was now fairly simple and straightforward, our long line of amateur trekkers seemed to break off into smaller groups, each walking at their own pace. I found myself with two other girls, hiking silently in companionable silence. I'd put on my earphones, and Dire Straits' "Walk of Life" softly drifted into my ears.

As we marched —often taking breaks of a few minutes to gather our breath —I had the chance to truly grasp the stark, mysterious beauty of this place. There was a desolate feel to the place. What we had come to hear was that in the Angami tribe's dialect the term 'dzukou' meant 'soulless and dull'. The name might be the result of the valley's unsuitability for agriculture. Nonetheless, I did not relate to that image. It felt living and breathing to me, alive with its rich flora, yet somehow isolated and forsaken. It was perhaps the grey-trunked, bare trees with arthritic branches that reached to the skies, like the imploring fingers of a dying man, that augmented this jilted feel in the air. Trees did not seem to inhabit the valley, yet there were several portions here and there, where these seemingly dead trunks appeared. I wondered if they were

actually dead, and if so, what had caused them to die?

The Dzukou Valley has often been nicknamed the 'Valley of Flowers'. It is especially famous for the native Dzukou lily with its vibrant pink petals. But the blossoms had not yet coloured the landscape. That is a phenomenon of the monsoons, around July specifically. That is also the time when the roads become much more slippery and threatening.

> The Dzukou valley has often been nicknamed **the Valley of Flowers**. It is especially famous for the **native Dzukou Lily** with its vibrant pink petals.

The winter season — which was roughly when we made our visit, at the beginning of October — is much more trek friendly.

The winters, however, can be threatening to the valley's ecosystem for a different reason: wildfires. Fires have been known to ravage Dzukou, straining the environment and ecology of the place. And more often than not, these cases of fires could be attributed to anthropogenic causes—all it takes is one carelessly discarded cigarette to start an inferno on the bamboos that predominate its slopes.

Another problem that concerns the Dzukou Valley is the ethnic strife over its ownership, between the Nagas and the Manipuris, particularly the Angami people of Nagaland and the Mao people of Manipur. This valley overlays the borders of both the states, and unfortunately faces an ongoing inter-tribal dispute. However, this hasn't stopped the inflow of tourists, as Dzukou continues to rise in popularity as an offbeat retreat away from the hustle and bustle of city life.

Insofar as the nationality of the tourists are concerned, it witnesses mostly domestic tourists from around the country as the lack of mainstream advertisement hinders its popularity among foreign tourists. In our journey through its meandering trails, we mostly came across locals and Indian tourists; many appeared to be enthusiastic vloggers as well as seasoned travellers.

We had used the Nagaland side to make our way into Dzukou, but tourists can use routes accessible from the Manipur side as well.





Photo: Goutam Raj Thwdam

This valley **overlays the borders** of both the states, and unfortunately faces an ongoing **inter-tribal dispute**. However, this hasn't stopped **the inflow of tourists . . .**

Kohima, the capital of Nagaland, is closer to the valley, and has two base camps at Viswema and Jakhama. The latter was where we stayed the night before our trek to Dzukou. To get to Kohima itself, we had to hop on an overnight train to Dimapur, from where buses leave for the capital. Moreover, if you visit around December, you get to additionally make a stop at the Hornbill Festival of Nagaland, a tremendous cultural extravaganza that celebrates the Naga culture.

The sun was high on the sky when we finally made it to our camping spot. Our tents were already arranged by our tour company. We quickly divided into groups of three, and grabbed a tent for ourselves. It's always been such a fun experience for me to sleep in a tent. It was cozy somehow, despite only a thin layer of mat separating the hard, cold earth from us.

We hung about for a while, eating our packed lunches and exploring around. There were quaint wooden houses with sloping roofs built here, serving as a kitchen, and some bathrooms for arriving explorers. The most fun bit was interacting with the locals. The people there were some of the warmest I've met, with ready, although a bit shy, smiles. There was, however, a language barrier, but most of them could catch English. Moreover, since our team of visitors was mostly Assamese, which is quite similar to the Nagamese they spoke, we could talk and engage with them.

As evening descended, the sky transformed into dazzling hues of yellow, burnt sienna, and deep reds. Shadows grew longer, and the place seemed to take on a mysterious mien. As the sun retired, our guide led us through a route that seemed to entirely cower underneath looming, tall grasses, their shadows dancing, whispering strange incantations in the wind. The path led us to a small helipad. The space was empty for now, and a gentle breeze engulfed us as we spilled onto it. The sight was perhaps even better

> As **evening descended**, the sky transformed into **dazzling hues** of yellow, burnt sienna, and deep reds.

from here, an unobstructed view of this unreal geological formation that seemed to belong to a different space and time. We lay spellbound and transfixed under its presence.

Our tour leader decided to do a fun activity. We came to learn that one of our guides was a *Zumba specialist* of all



Photo: @dhrubazaan

things! And thus, no matter how ridiculous it sounds, began a light-hearted session, in which we copied —or attempted to, at the very least— what the Zumba lady was trying vainly to teach us. Most of us simply burst into fits of giggles and unfortunately, refused to take it seriously. What did strike me was that despite hours of trekking, a lot of us still seemed to have the energy to pull off a random dance-slash-exercise session, that too in the middle of nowhere! But that's just how it is with friends, I suppose. We suddenly have infinite stores of energy to draw from, and any sort of embarrassment is only a trivial feeling to be pushed to the corner of our minds.

Another member amongst our guides turned out to be brilliantly handy with the Dapo (an eight - pointed fabric star that you can throw and spin in the air). It was the first time I'd seen anything like it, and was left gaping. All of us wanted to try our hand at it. It turned out that I was particularly bad at it, but so were most of us fortunately.

Finally, after taking our fill of pictures, we made our way back. It wasn't a long journey, perhaps only around twenty or thirty minutes if I recall correctly. By now, the sun had entirely disappeared. It seemed as if dark ink had seeped into the fabric of the heavens. We switched on our torches, and stumbled our way through, and made it back safely.

If Dzukou's lushness had captivated me before, it was now the clear night sky which arrested me. Our eyes widened when we finally took notice of the magic that had enveloped us from above. A sky littered with stars. An impossibility. A mirage. Perhaps there were constellations hidden among this chaotic, blinding celestial clutter, but I couldn't tell them apart. Stars weren't a common sight for city eyes. But here they were scattered like haphazardly spilled glitter, each one calling for our attention. It baffled me, and I remember feeling so small against the vastness of this dark, jeweled expanse.

If **Dzukou's lushness** had **captivated** me before, it was now the **clear night sky** which arrested me. Our eyes widened when we finally took notice of the **magic that had enveloped us** from above.

Shivers crawled down my spine as the temperature dropped considerably with the sun's disappearance. I put on a few more layers of warm clothes, and made my way to the bonfire that we'd lit a little distance away from where the tents had been set up. It wasn't a big flame, only small, licking fingers of fire that warmed us as we gobbled up our



our simple, but hearty, dinner of rice, lentil curry, and potato fries.

Since most of us were terribly exhausted from the entire day's activities, we decided to retire to our tents quickly. Besides, other groups that were camping for the night were starting to get drunk and rowdier. We were advised to not wander around, especially since it could be easy to lose directions in the night. Cozying up in our warm sleeping beds, we fell asleep to the sounds of crickets chirping.

Dawn seemed like a gleaming line of pearls against the surging, wave-like hills when I crawled out of my tent, sleep eluding me. Crisp air tickled my skin, and I breathed in deeply, trying to inhale and etch this memory on my heart. There were a few more stragglers awake, and we sat down on some wooden benches built on an outcrop with some safety fences at the edges.

It wasn't long before the entire camp was awake and buzzing; our group was hurrying about packing our stuff as we needed to make our way down soon. The return journey was shorter, but perhaps riskier. There was a particular instance where one member of our group nearly slid down the sides. Fortunately, nothing ill-fated happened, as the victim's neighbours were quick to react and lurch to her rescue. I didn't happen to witness this accident, but when I heard about it later, it did give me the chills. The rest of the trek went smoothly, and we reached our

starting point in no time.

After a long break, we conducted a short cleaning drive around the Trekker's Point. The Dzukou Valley is supposedly a plastic free-zone, and it is clean and pristine for the most part, but there are spots that have suffered littering and pollution caused by tourists, perhaps inevitably so. We tried to clean up this small space as best as we could, even though it was only a tiny portion of the entire valley.

With that, we got into our waiting Sumo SUVs, and so began our return ride to our base camp. I settled down on the backseat, and as we rattled up and down the jarring path, I looked back once again at the old ratty signboard that pointed to the Dzukou Valley. I felt my heart swell with a feeling I couldn't name. Perhaps it was disbelief of all the sights and sounds I'd experienced, but mostly it was gratefulness to have been a part of this beautiful journey.

Nayanisha Bhattacharyya is an undergrad student at Hindu College, pursuing a degree in History Honours. Apart from being an avid reader, she dabbles in writing every now and then. She's also deeply interested in the fine arts, and always enthusiastic for new learning opportunities.





FLAVOURS OF SAFDARJUNG

SOMECSON YENGKHOM explores the aromatic lanes of Delhi's Northeastern Neighbourhood

Additional Text: Malsawmsanga Rokhum
Photographs: Rasraj Thoudam and Sadiah Almas Hussain

A WALK DOWN CULINARY LANE

It has been more than a year since I came to Delhi, yet every time I walk through the lanes of Humayunpur in Safdarjung enclave, a profound sense of belongingness envelopes my entire self — as if I have been instantaneously transported back to my home in Manipur.

All the familiar-looking faces strolling in the neighbourhood evoke fond memories of the vibrant *keithel* scenes from my hometown.



The enticing aroma of indigenous delicacies being prepared using fermented ingredients sourced from the hills, seeps through every corner of the street from every household and high-profile restaurant. The peculiar feeling of relief that comes along with the very sight of the people and the whiff of local cuisine might be the closest thing to home one can find in the heart of this bustling city.

> . . . **each time** I walk through the lanes of **Humayunpur** in Safdarjung enclave, a **profound sense** of **belongingness** envelopes my entire self . . .

Humayunpur is an urban village in the heart of South Delhi, essentially inhabited by the Jat community. The Jats owned the farmlands in the surrounding areas, which was taken over by DLF (Delhi Land & Finance) in the 1960s and was developed as Safdarjung Enclave.

Humayunpur has now become a home to migrants coming from the Northeastern states of India for education or work, further fostering a sense of familiarity here as tenants. This population influx coincided with the call centre boom of 2004-2006 in the country, which resulted in creating one of Delhi's most sought-after food hubs.

The area is known to have gone through a drastic transformation since 2005. The rapidly growing population of young North-eastern and Tibetan migrants changed the clothing and eating habits of the locality. The alleys of this sub-locality are now dotted with small restaurants and cafes serving Tibetan cuisine and food from the Northeast Indian states. Moreover, the numerous grocery shops selling items like *Yongchak* (Stink Bean), *Soibum* (fermented Bamboo shoot), *Ngari* (fermented fish), King Chilli, *Axone* (fermented Soybeans) and so on, provide a sense of cultural familiarity amidst the social alienation of the national capital.

> Humayunpur has now become **a home** to **migrants** coming from the **Northeastern states** of India for education or work . . .





A HOMELY PLATTER

The rise of Northeastern and Himalayan culinary culture in the capital can be traced back to a handful of restaurants, including the Rosang Café (2002-16) owned by a Manipuri lady named Mary Lalboi. The name Rosang, meaning 'God's gift' in the Paite language, was chosen to reflect the café's mission to offer the most authentic dishes from the eight Northeastern states. Despite its closure in 2016 due to various logistical challenges, the café's short-lived success paved the way for the development of notable dining venues in Humayunpur, including Freedom Corner (2005), Yo Tibet (2008), Mizo Diner (2014), Hornbill Restaurant (2015), The Categorical Eatpham (2015), and Oh! Assam (2017), among others.

THE CATEGORICAL EATPHAM, initiated as a cloud kitchen in 2013 by Ashok Mutum and Poirei Yambem while juggling with their 9 to 5 jobs, has distinguished itself as a premier destination in Humayunpur, offering authentic dishes, snacks, and beverages from Manipur.



Their Manipuri thali features a substantial serving of rice, boiled seasonal vegetables, a bowl of *eromba* (a spicy preparation of mashed vegetables and fermented fish), *ooti* (a Meitei-style dal made with soaked yellow peas, chives, and cooking soda), and a main dish typically consisting of fish or meat curry. The menu also includes a selection of traditional snacks such as *pakora thongba* and *singju* (a local spicy salad), along with refreshing drinks like roselle iced tea and *heimang* (sumac) tea.

Initially catering primarily to the Northeastern community, the restaurant gained traction through the support of the owners' friends and family, as well as through word-of-mouth promotion on social media platforms like Facebook. Mutum, in a conversation with our team, noted that social media and YouTube channels, such as *Curly Tales*, played a significant role in boosting their business alongside other local restaurants.

The owners believe that the emergence of "Northeast food hubs"





Top: Ashok Mutum and Poirei Yambem in conversation with the author

in the city is a reflection of the local residents' willingness to experience and try indigenous cuisines. "Without being preachy, we normally let the food do the talking," Ashok Mutum politely responded when asked about debunking the myths centered around Northeastern delicacies.

Over the years, the owners have observed that the people of the mainland have become accustomed to the taste of regional dishes, which they were once hesitant to try owing to the pungent and fermented smell of the ingredients. For instance, Mutum revealed that customers usually ask them not to put *ngari* in their food orders due to its overwhelming smell, but when they serve *eromba* or *kangsoi* (a traditional Manipuri vegetable stew made with fermented/smoked fish), the customers cannot distinguish the taste nor smell of *ngari*. Hence they are able to take delight in the Manipuri cuisine.

THROUGH THICK AND THIN:
A NORTHEASTERN SOLIDARITY

Another Northeast-oriented restaurant in Humayunpur which has gained widespread recognition is **OH! ASSAM**, established in 2017 with the initiative to include authentic Assamese cuisine in Humayunpur's budding indigenous culinary scene. Owned by Rubi Brahma, the Axomiya restaurant was started along with a friend, taking over an old space which used to be Eatpham before its grand outlet.







Brahma noted that the backstory of her restaurant is a testament to the mutual friendship between almost all the owners of restaurants catering to the Northeastern crowd in Humayunpur. A deep and strong network of support appears to be prevalent among the community of restaurant owners in the urban village. The trials and tribulations of venturing into the same "risky business" (as termed by both Brahma and Yambem) underscore the importance of the communal relationship in addition to a shared pursuit of delineating the indigenous culture.

> . . . the **backstory** of her restaurant is a **testament** to the **mutual friendship** between almost **all the owners** of restaurants . . .





All the restaurant owners emphasized on the unavailability of certain ingredients such as *Kaji Nemu* or *Chhauhchhi* (Perilla seeds), posing a significant obstacle in the otherwise successful business. Ingredients have to be sourced from the native region due to which the amount gets tripled when it reaches the capital. In order to ensure the authenticity of the dishes served on the platter, the owners are inclined to cover the high expenses of food items from the vendors in the city.



Top Left: Rubi Brahma, in conversation with the author at her restaurant







AT YOUR CONVENIENCE

Speaking of vendors, the shopkeepers running convenience stores have significantly populated the urban village over the years. They sell seasonal local vegetables such as stink beans, culantro and *likok* (bitter eggplant) alongside Burmese snacks like rice-cakes, fish/meat pickles, and canned mackerel in tomato sauce. . In addition to selling homegrown vegetables and imported goods, the stores have ready-to-eat meat dishes prepared in the indigenous manner.

The oldest convenience store of the lot is the **ASHA TANGKHUL STORE** , which is located right across The Categorical Eatpham. Owned and run by Mangkung Asha Tangkhul and her family, the store has been ensuring the culinary needs of the residents of Humayunpur since 2011. In one way or the other, Asha Tangkhul Store can be regarded as the flagbearer of the rise of Northeastern culinary culture in Safdarjung Enclave.

IN ESSENCE . . .

"The Humayunpur we see today was not the case five or six years back," Mutum observes. And rightly so, the emerging food market in Humayunpur not only signifies a growing population of migrants from the Northeast in the city, but also a rising appreciation and acceptance of the culinary traditions which were once deemed too exotic.

From mostly catering to friends and family to battling the unsparing turbulent times of the COVID-19 pandemic, these restaurants have come a long way, and they continue to uphold age-old culinary traditions in the city. The opening up of new places like Chak-khum and Yong's Kitchen hints towards the expansion of the area to encompass new culinary experiences while also fostering a more diverse and inclusive environment in the years to come.













Beyond the Canvas



Meet
DAVID YAMBEM
a visual storyteller from Manipur representing indigenous culture through animation



"In my opinion, the act of promoting our cultural heritage via visual media results in a more lasting impression on individuals, rather than solely relying on verbal communication."

"A love letter to my birthplace" is what David Yambem likes to call his latest film, *April*, which has recently been selected to premiere at numerous international film festivals including the 16th Ciné-court animé in Roanne, France, and the Monstra Animation Short Fest in Lisbon. He believes that visual representation plays a pivotal role in promoting heritage, and says it is important for people beyond the Northeast to acquaint themselves with its unique culture and traditions.

True to his words, David's works are rooted in the town of Kakching, Manipur, where he grew up, nourishing his love for illustration and painting. He went on to graduate from the prestigious National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, and has worked on many projects such as music videos of prominent Indian artists like *DIVINE* and *Bloodywood*. His recent short film, *April*, is a project sponsored by an animation boutique based in Bangalore called Plankton Collective.

As an illustrator and cover designer for various publishing houses, David has also illustrated a number of children's books, including the works of Sudha Murty and Ruskin Bond. His latest work, *All-Time Favourite Nature Stories* by Ruskin Bond, won the Best Children's Book (Popular Choice) award at the 2024 Crossword Book Award.

David belongs to a new generation of graphic artists from the region who are giving a new leash of life to its cultural heritage. *Horizon* caught up with this young artist for an exclusive interview where he talked about his inspiration, his films, and his journey as a visual storyteller.

Q. Can you recall any childhood memory which had a huge impact on your career path?

I can't seem to recall any particular childhood memory which had a significant impact on my profession. But I did grow up ardently loving arts, and I drew quite a lot. I would attempt to recreate so many things after watching *M.A.D*, a DIY art and craft show which used to air on the *POGO* TV channel. I think the show may have laid out the groundwork

Interviewed By: Somecson Yengkhom

and paved the way for me in one way or the other.

Q. Could you kindly tell us more about your graduate animation film *April*, the significance of the title, and the creative process behind it?

April is my graduate short film, which I've submitted to a number of foreign film festivals and has been officially picked up for the Ciné-court animé in Roanne, France, and the Monstra Animation Short Fest in Lisbon under the foreign student category. The story follows a young woman taking a brief break from her urban life and returning to her hometown in Manipur. It essentially aims to provide a glimpse into the rural life of the Manipur valley, so you may view it as a travelogue. At the same time, it showcases the region's authentic culinary tradition, debunking the myth that Northeastern cuisine only consists of meat.

The film holds great personal significance for me because it happens to be a love letter to my birthplace. As far as the movie title is concerned, the protagonist comes back to her home in the month of April. Therefore, I found it to be quite apt and aesthetically pleasing at the same time.



Q. How does it feel to be able to represent your native culture at international film fests?

It truly is a blessing to be able to represent our native culture at an international level, be it a small, independent festival or a big, major one. I believe it is extremely important that people beyond our region acquaint themselves with our unique and beautiful culture, even if it's only a small fraction of it. And I hope my directorial project is able to ignite a conversation and spark curiosity among the masses.

Q. *April*, indeed, does a commendable job of displaying the indigenous way of life on the screen. As an artist hailing from the region, to what extent do you think art and animation play a role in preserving and promoting the Northeastern cultural heritage?

In my opinion, the act of promoting our cultural heritage via visual media results in a more lasting impression on individuals, rather than solely relying on verbal communication. The visual aspect definitely offers an immersive experience, leaving the audience with an appetite for our cultural offerings and, inevitably, yearning for more.



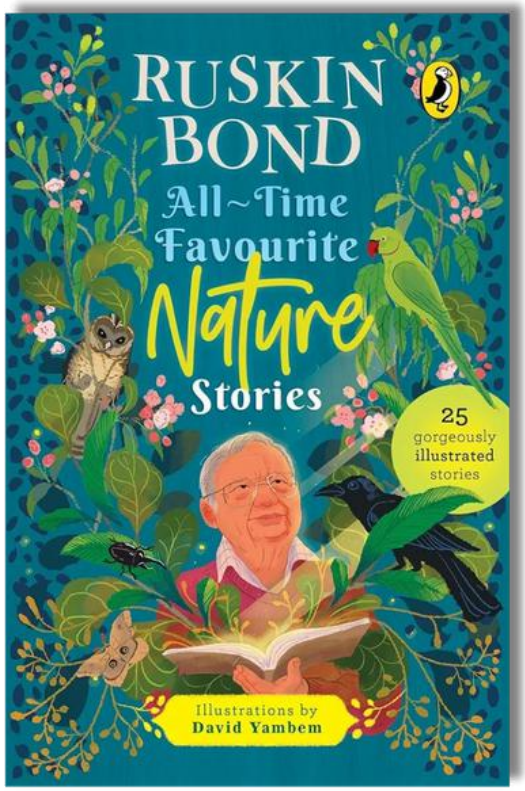
Therefore, I believe artistic works, especially visual media, can sometimes assume a crucial role in safeguarding our cultural legacy.



Q. Chaoba Thiyam of *SIYOM* served as the music composer for *April*, and you also contributed to the visuals of his production, *Naoshum*, a song dedicated to the victims of war and global conflict. Tell us more about this collaborative journey and experience.

I absolutely adore Chaoba Thiyam's folk music and whenever I think of music that would complement my filmography, his music typically comes to my mind. He had shown great interest in a collaboration when I presented him a draft of the short featuring *SIYOM*'s music. He was kind enough to allow me to use his music and even offered to assist me in mixing and mastering the sound for the short film. Following that, we have been working together to make visuals for his songs centered around the global conflict. And I believe that visuals add another layer and extra emotional weight to the music, which hopefully makes the message we wish to relay a bit clearer.

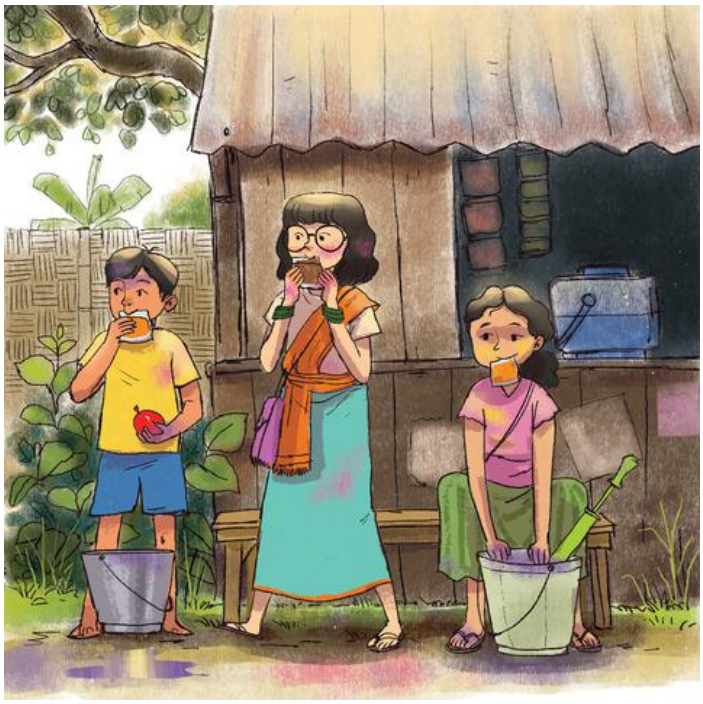
Q. Not only is your career in animation thriving, but you were also recently honoured with the Popular Choice Award in the category of Children's Books at the 2024 Crossword Book Awards for your illustration credit on *All-time Favorite Nature Stories* by Ruskin Bond. How was your experience working with a great literary figure like him?



I find myself deeply honoured to have been blessed with the opportunity to contribute to the bibliography of Ruskin Bond. I was privileged enough to accept the Popular Choice Award on his behalf. The experience I had while working on the acclaimed book was nothing short of special. Each of the short stories was captivating enough for me to be able to vividly visualize the details in my imagination, and I felt obliged to pour my heart and soul into this project. I remember taking the time to read the entire book before the visual development process began, which was a clear departure from my usual routine where I typically read the lines of the manuscript where the visual descriptions to be illustrated are highlighted by the editors.

Q. In our society, children are normally encouraged to pursue a career in the field of STEM rather than the arts. Was there any setback in your career choice from the end of your family members?

I consider myself very fortunate that my family supported my career choice right from the very beginning. And luckily enough, I happen to have relatives who are alumni of the same design school I went to. Given their experiences and stable careers, they offered to assist and explain the career prospects of my field of study to my parents, which seemingly cleared whatever doubts they appeared to have.



Q. Throughout your career, what kind of challenges or obstacles or racial prejudice did you encounter?

I would say my design school boasted quite a vibrant community of diverse individuals from various regions, fostering a rich cultural tapestry while nurturing creativity. These individuals undoubtedly became the most enriching aspect of my entire college experience. While I did not personally experience any racial prejudice, I was well aware of its prevalence in the environment.



Speaking of my academic journey, it was marked by both challenges and exhilaration. Adhering to strict deadlines for each assignment always created constant pressure, but the pursuit of excellence was rather exhilarating. I was no stranger to sleep deprivation due to the demanding nature of the curriculum. What I deemed most crucial, as it necessitated utmost caution, was operating industrial machinery since many accidents had occurred in the past while handling it. But the most arduous aspect of my studies was group work, where coordinating tasks and managing diverse perspectives could prove to be mentally taxing. I suppose academic challenges including anguish, frustration, and pressure were inevitable and integral to my college life. But, to be honest, I would not dare to trade my college experience for anything. To sum it up, my time at the institute was highly enjoyable and enriching.



Q. Is there a particular work of art or an artist whose works have been the major influence in your career?

I have looked up to a lot of extremely talented folks over the years. And every single one of them motivates me and keeps me going despite the fact that they keep changing from time to time. I can think of so many great animators in the industry right now, but one visual artist that I keep coming back to is Jocelyn Charles. I am completely smitten by his works. I find his distinct style, which is often associated with funny, deadpan and eerie settings while maintaining the aesthetic, to be incredibly cool.

Q. What is your dream project? And if you were ever given the opportunity to work with anyone in the industry, then who would it be?

My dream is to be able to work on an animated feature film or a television series. I wish to be a part of any project that is on the level of animated works like the *Spiderverse* movies, *Love Death + Robots*, Studio Ghibli films and so on. A bit delusional for me, but I can always dream :) I would also love to work under Joseph Bennett's direction who is known for *Scavengers Reign*, a science -fiction animated series available to stream on Netflix.

Q. As an insider, tell us about the bigger picture of the contemporary Manipuri art scene, which is now beginning to get more exposure than before through platforms like Instagram.

Although I cannot provide an in-depth analysis of the contemporary Manipuri art scene, I can definitely observe the emergence of digital arts, animation, and exceptional visual effects (VFX) in the state. I have come across a plethora of remarkable works, and I am very optimistic that this trend will significantly contribute to the growth and development of the entertainment industry in Manipur in the near future. Social media platforms, notably Instagram, have also expanded the opportunities for artists and designers to promote their work. By providing support and fostering connections, these platforms have opened doors to numerous opportunities, including exposure and recognition.



Q. Considering an emerging trend of animated media towards celebrating inclusivity and diverse cultures and characters all over the world, do you feel a similar sense of responsibility or moral obligation to represent your indigenous culture and identity authentically in your works?

Not necessarily, so to speak. In my opinion, one can always take creative freedom in terms of representation and yet be mindful of it. One ought to carefully consider the sentiment of the concerned people and try not to overstep – and that is ultimately the real challenge. That being said, it largely depends on the purpose of the work.

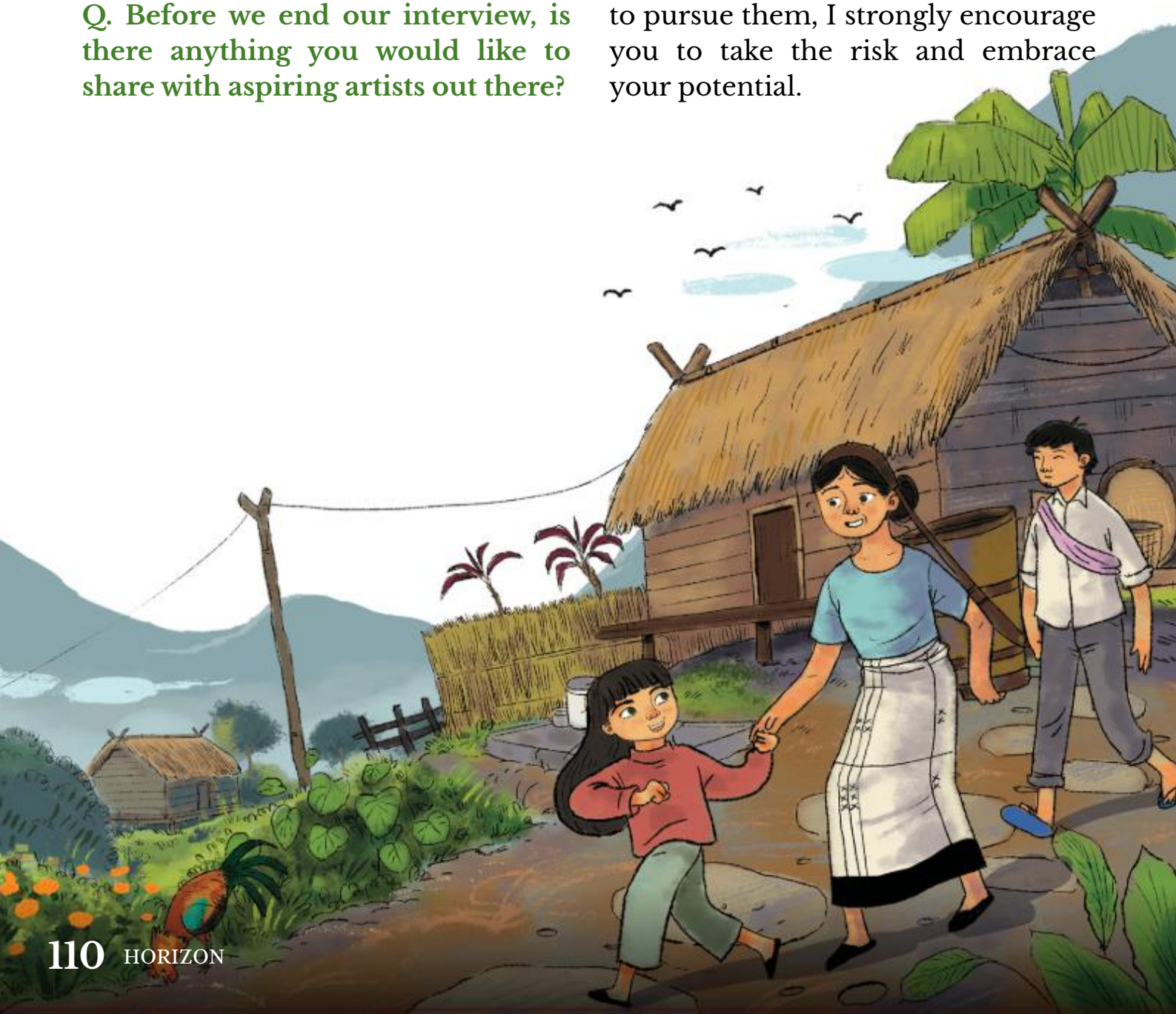
Q. Although our country boasts an abundance of artists and storytellers, the animation film industry in India appears to be lagging behind in comparison with the global market. What do you think the key challenges of the industry are?

Despite the presence of exceptionally talented and skilled individuals in the country, many of them opt to work on Hollywood projects as the majority of film production companies in India mainly prioritize profit-making. In

other words, the box office business is prioritised over artistic films like animated projects. Additionally, the audience's preferences also play a significant role; over 80% of Indian viewers favor a specific storytelling style which is normally adopted by commercial cinema. Nonetheless, independent filmmakers are increasingly producing exciting and ambitious animated films. This encouraging trend, I assume, marks the start of a promising future for Indian animation.

Q. Before we end our interview, is there anything you would like to share with aspiring artists out there?

Regrettably, I feel incompetent to offer any advice in this area. Human creativity is a captivating and enriching aspect of our lives, and it is crucial to nurture and develop it. There are numerous avenues through which creativity can be channeled into fulfilling careers that not only benefit individuals but also contribute positively to society. Although it is quite unfortunate that the cost of studying design remains a significant barrier for many aspiring professionals, yet if you have artistic capabilities and the financial means to pursue them, I strongly encourage you to take the risk and embrace your potential.



Hoofprints of a Home Game

From a divine origin to an international sport, the sporting spirit lives on in the land of Sagol Kangjei, reports Team *Horizon*.

Manipuri men riding ponies, charging excitedly with their mallet at the spot where the ball lay. The scene stunned Lieutenant Joseph Ford Sherer, who was in the opposing team and so was trying to defend the ball from the Manipuri players. He found himself in quite a fix on his pony, as he realised that they would not stop their charge, even if it meant running into him. The Manipuri men, however, were carrying leather shields attached to the saddles and girth, and thus prepared to face any injury – even death, which was not uncommon in the game.

While it might have appeared savage and disrespectful to the young Lieutenant, it was a regular part of the game for the Manipuris. With very few rules regulating it, the game was naturally fast and aggressive. For Sherer, it was too late a realisation. And defeat seemed inevitable. As the Manipuri players wheezed past him



for the ball, he was hit and sent spinning with his pony to the ground. Bruised and surprised, he had not expected such a humiliating defeat when he had challenged the Manipuris in their own game.

Despite this humiliating defeat of the British lieutenant in the 1850s, what he described as a savage, wild and peculiar game of the Manipuris would soon travel to Britain and gain popularity among its elite classes. But for the humble Manipuris, it remains their beloved Sagol Kangjei, a sport that is very close to their heritage and history, an ancient game played by the Gods themselves, which went on to give birth to what we today call the modern polo.

"HOCKEY-ON-HORSEBACK": POLO'S ROOTS IN MANIPUR

Manipuri polo is today considered one of the world's oldest sports, with some historians claiming it was first played around 3100 BCE in the ancient Meitei kingdom of Kangleipak. According to *Kangjeirol*,



Subika painting is an age-old art form of the Meitei community from Manipur. This painting style is almost at the brink of extinction. Artist **Dr. Sapha Yumnam,** Assistant Professor at the Department of Fine Arts, Manipur University, is working to promote and preserve this painting style. *The above is a Subika painting of Sagol Kangjei by Dr. Sapha.*

an ancient script on Sagol Kangjei, King Ningthou Kangba introduced the sport during his reign (1405-1359 BCE). The first recorded polo match was played in 33 CE between the friends of King Nongda Lairen Pakhangba. Later, in 1605 CE, King Khagemba formalized new rules for the game, leading to its continued legacy.

The Guinness Book of Records acknowledges Manipur as the birthplace of polo in its 1991 publication. In his book *A Viceroy's Notebook*, Lord Curzon too talks about his visit to Manipur and the discovery of the game by the British. Sherer, then a young lieutenant and adjutant of the 44th (Sylhet) Regiment of (Bengal) Native (Light Infantry), is believed to have been the first Britisher to play the game in its native form during his service on the North East Frontier. He would later write about the humiliating defeat he suffered in the hands of the local players in a British sporting magazine, while also describing the game as it was played in Manipur.

In 1859, he and Captain Robert Stewart, the then Superintendent of Cachar, founded a European polo club at Silchar, Assam. Five years later, Sherer and his team of seven Manipuri men, nicknamed "The Brothers", took the sport outside North East to Calcutta for an exhibition, where it immediately became very popular. Sherer and



Lieutenant Joseph Ford Sherer, with his bearers, in Manipur, 1861

Stewart went on to establish the Calcutta Polo Club in 1862, which today is the oldest existing polo club in the world. Sherer, perhaps, would have never imagined that his humiliating defeat in Manipur would eventually lead him to earn the title of the "Father of Polo".

While the Manipuris called the sport "Sagol Kangjei" (*Sagol* meaning horse and *Kangjei* meaning the hockey stick), the name *Polo* itself was coined by Captain R.B. Pemberton when he first saw the game being played by the English planters at the Silchar Club. Pemberton found the game similar to the game of hockey



like the many British officials who had previously referred to it as "hockey-on-horseback" in their records. Pemberton noticed that the wooden ball was referred to by the Tibetan word "pulu", and it was this term which was anglicised and adopted for the sport's name.

Historically, Sagol Kangjei was one of the three forms of hockey played in Manipur, the others being field hockey (*khong kangjei*) and wrestling-hockey (*mukna kangjei*). All classes of people played the game in Manipur, from commoners to kings — to have a pony was all that was required to be able to participate in the game.

The traditional Sagol Kangjei is played between two teams of seven players each, referred to as the northern team and the southern team. The playing field originally used to be a narrow street but gradually developed into the rectangular shape measuring approximately 210 yards (190 metres) in length and 100 yards (91 metres) in width. Players have to strike the ball with their mallets, and goals are scored when the ball crosses the end line, as there are no goalposts.

But the British have since codified the rules of the game, and fixed the number of players to eight, four on each side. The "war-like" display of the game that Sherer had to

encounter in his first ever match was discarded. For instance, traditionally, any player could gallop and hit the ball when it was in the air. Players were also permitted to carry the ball, though that allowed opponents to physically tackle players when they did so. While Manipuris found it to be a heroic display of sportsmanship, the British found it dangerous and injurious. With modifications like two goal posts on either side of the field, and sidelines and goallines, Sagol Kangjei became much more methodical in its modern rendition.

In England, where the game was introduced by the British cavalry regiment who returned from India, it further became a game of aristocracy and royalty, played by the elite classes. Thereafter, it gradually spread to other parts of the world, and the rest as they say, is history.

A DIVINE WINGED-HORSE AND ITS DESCENDANTS

Beyond its significance as a sporting tradition, Sagol Kangjei is deeply intertwined with the cultural and spiritual identity of the Meitei people. Lord Marjing, whose mythical abode is located atop the hill of Heingang Ching, is the God of horses, polo, sports and war in Sanamahism, the indigenous religion of Manipur. According to the legends, he is believed to have invented the game of polo.

This legend can be traced back to the creation myth of the Manipuris as narrated in the ancient manuscripts called *Puyas*. When the Almighty Atiya Sidaba



decided to create the Earth, he assigned the task to his two sons, Asiba and Apanba. While Asiba was entrusted to create land and various life forms, Apanba was assigned to create human beings, who would eventually rule Earth.

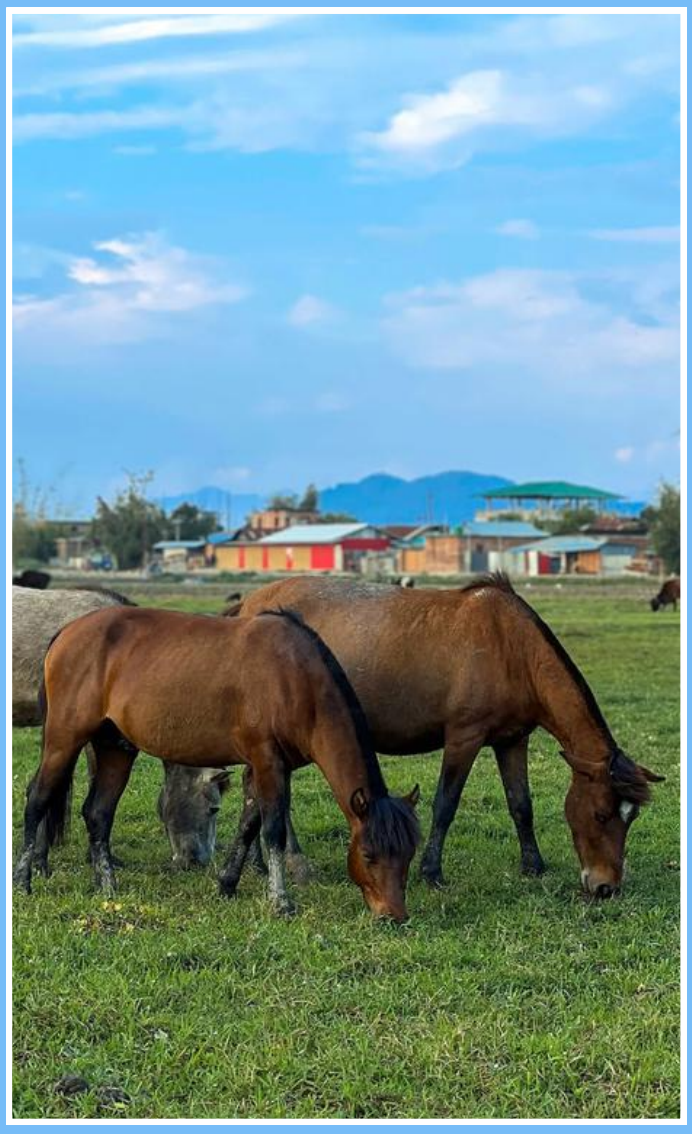
Asiba detested the idea of humans ruling the land that he had painstakingly created. So, he ascended to the moon and sent the winged horse, Samaton Ayangba, to foil Apanba's attempt at creating humans by repeatedly destroying them.

The Almighty Atiya Sidaba finally decided to interfere and prevent Asiba from ruining Apanba's efforts. Atiya, thus, created Lord Marjing to stop the destruction caused by Samaton Ayangba. Marjing successfully trapped and tamed the winged horse, thereby ensuring the unhindered creation of humans. Lord Marjing is, thus, said to be the first to ride a pony. And the relationship between Marjing and Samaton Ayangba is considered the perfect man-horse relationship.

The sturdy, agile Manipuri ponies, used in Sagol Kangjei, are believed to be the descendants of Lord Marjing's divine winged horse, Samadon Ayangba. Hence, the game is traditionally played on the back of these Manipuri ponies which are endemic to the state. They had also been used by the Manipuris since time immemorial for rituals, wars, and sports.

Unfortunately, in recent times, the population of these divine descendants has been declining due to urbanisation, which leads to lack of proper grazing ground, and habitat loss. As per a survey, the population of the pony dropped from 1,898 in 2003 to around 500 in 2014.

The British had seen great potential in the pony and, with the growing popularity of polo back in Europe, had exported them in large



quantities. This led to a decline in the pony's population in the state during the colonial period. After independence, insurgency and political instability further led to a negligence of the game of Manipuri polo. As polo clubs declined, so did the requirement of the ponies.

Today, efforts are being made to conserve and revive the breed, ensuring that the legacy of Sagol Kangjei continues to thrive for generations to come. For example, the Manipur Horse Riding and Polo Association (MHRPA) was set up in 1977 to revive polo so as to aid the pony's survival. The Tourism Department of Manipur too promotes the Sagol Kangjei in the Sangai festival to ensure the survival of the polo ponies.



BREAKING BARRIERS: MANIPURI WOMEN IN POLO

Manipuri polo was traditionally considered a sport of the men. Historically too, there is hardly any record of women participating in the sport. Even in modern polo, the sport remains largely male-dominated. However, the women of Manipur are slowly beginning to break barriers. At present, three-fourths of the country's female polo players come from the state, and two of the 26 polo clubs in the state are run by women. Besides, Manipur now boasts five professional women teams.

L. Somi Roy, a cultural conservationist and the grandson of Manipur's former monarch Maharaja Churachandra, has been one of the advocates for women's polo in Manipur. In an endeavour to conserve the endangered ponies, he decided to bring global attention by inviting women's polo teams from abroad.

Under his guidance, the Manipur Statehood Day Special Women's

Polo Tournament was held in 2016. It became India's only international women's polo tournament.

Roy believes that as the birthplace of modern polo, Manipur should try to become the home of women's polo in India. "About 40-45 percent of polo players in the world are women. So we are catching up. It's pretty gender free as a sport, so it puts them on the level of men when they play," Roy told IANS in an interview.

Most of the Manipuri players come from a humble background. Women players have to also face inequalities such as inaccessibility to the same facilities that are enjoyed by men teams. Women teams are also not sent for national games like the men's team. However despite these challenges, the women of Manipur are determined to rewrite tradition and shatter stereotypes that polo is a sport for men, and that it is a privilege of the rich.

IN ESSENCE . . .

In Manipur, Sagol Kangjei is not just a pastime; it embodies the valour and heritage of the Meitei people. Today, Manipur is home to two of the world's oldest polo grounds, which stand as living testament to the sport's deep historical roots. The Inner Polo Ground or the Manung Kangjeibung is an ancient polo ground located within the historic Kangla Fort in Imphal. The nearby Imphal Polo Ground or the Mapal Kangjeibung is recognised as the oldest polo ground in the world. It continues to be a hub for polo enthusiasts and a symbol of Manipuri heritage.

Further, the state's dedication to preserving this traditional sport is evident in the establishment of the Marjing Polo Complex. Located atop Lord's Marjing's sacred abode, Heingang Ching, where the local polo players come to light candles before a game, the construction of a complex featuring the world's tallest statue of a mounted polo player, is thus the ultimate tribute to Manipur as the birthplace of modern polo.



Text: Niloy, Maurice and Aryan

This poem sings of the terrors committed by the AFSPA occupation in regions of Manipur; the date or time period is not specified, as the violations still remain fresh in the memory of the people. It is written from the perspective of a young man who lost his mother and his sisters to the violations of AFSPA. He writes of his frustration, thirst for vengeance and anger to his deceased mother, using the metaphor of games to describe the situation in the region.

HUMAN-GAMES IN THE PERIPHERY



DOROTHY BHUYAN

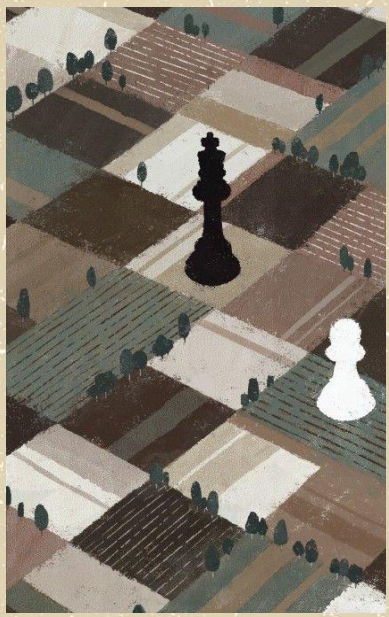
Dear mother, I hope you're safe up there,
the land has turned into a human chessboard,
and the pawns are sacrificed by the impunity
of the unseen kings and queens —
The clock is ticking, yet stays the bloodshed,
the crimes against my sisters and mothers
remain unchecked.

I drank the water of the imphal valley,
why do I then thirst?
Will the thirst be quenched only
when the 'knights' withdraw their rusted swords,
when my sharuk slits their throat
and I drain their blood on my skin
Will then, my thirst quench?

But why should violence be met by violence they ask,
But it is in the harrowing moans of my sisters
in which they bask,
their legs split open in the polluted air
and their hair dragged through crimson dirt,
their unfiltered wails and the blood
that flows down their skirts,
their guts twisted and their flowers mutilated,
their youth spat upon,
and their dignity defecated.

Oh, and have you heard of the children?
The children massacred in ruthless sight,
oh who talks of their half-grown hands
and their unconscious plight,
Plight? What a child has to know of
such heavy words?
Or what a child has to know about
ammunition and swords?
What a child has to know about
military conquest and exploitation,
at an age they lose their lives,
lose their dreams, their volition?



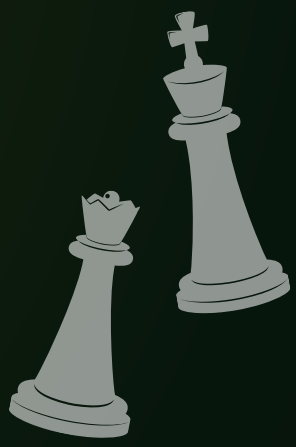


Dear mother,
The land has turned into a rubik's cube
However, its drenched in blood,
And the colours are difficult to tell apart too,
It's red all over, like an army man's dream,
Weren't they sent to protect us!
or only to manufacture our screams?
to sell them to the devil up there,
the king of half-humans, a faith ensnared,
a bullet pierced through the skin
of the warrior-kind,
is met with consequences,
horrifying, in a magnitude of a thousand
more times.

How many more torn breasts be laid down
as sacrificial mounds,
How many more martyrs be sang about,
How many more lives taken,
how many more virgins and mothers be broken,
down to each atomic molecule, to each branch of
their nerves,
to each drop of blood in their veins,
and till each shred of their clothing
is destroyed, snatched and made into
A flag of victory by the "law" of silent chains.

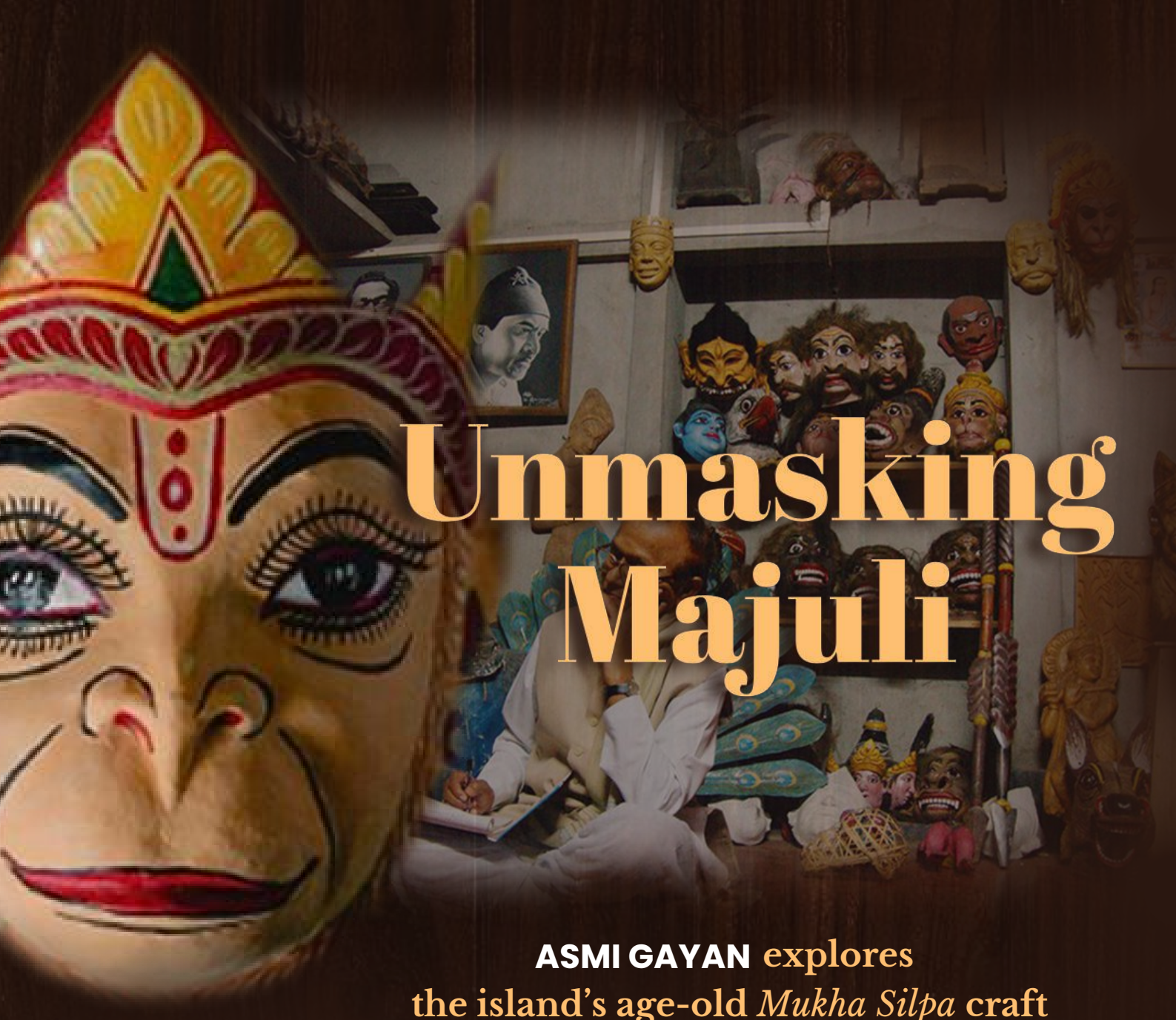


Dear mother, I hope you're safe up there
Are you greeting the ladies that make their way
    to heaven everyday?
Do you sing of your tale of martyrdom,
    do you remember your kin,
Do you wish for justice restored,
a call to end the bloodbath that reeks of
    rotten skin?



The land is filled with angst, dear mother
soon, shall it turn into a game of tag,
yet we won't let them chase us again,
As we tear apart their soiled hands
and break their backs,
hunched with the weight of innumerable crimes,
let there be justice restored,
As we take back the honour of the land —
    As I shall promise you in this rhyme.

Dorothy Bhuyan is a second-year English Honours student at Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi. A passionate writer and editor, she has had her work published across various Delhi University publications and beyond. With a deep love for storytelling, she takes on diverse writing and publishing projects, exploring the power of words to inspire, challenge, and connect.



Unmasking Majuli

ASMI GAYAN explores the island's age-old *Mukha Silpa* craft

Majuli, the ever-enchanting cultural capital of Assam since the 16th century, is known to be the world's largest river island. This majestic island traces its formation from the river Brahmaputra on the south and Kherkutia Xuti, an anabranch of the Brahmaputra joined by Subansiri river on the north. With its unique blend of tradition and ecological significance, Majuli is considered to be a place of rich cultural heritage in Assam. A distinct cultural feature of Majuli is its *Satra*s. Srimanta Shankardeva, the propagator of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam, established *Satra*s from early 16th century as religious centres or monasteries to promote Neo-Vaishnavism, a monotheistic branch of Hinduism that focused on ritualism and devotion to Krishna through mass listening and singing of His deeds and names in the form of *Kirtana*. *Satra*s are, therefore, an integral space for neo-Vaishnavism, a place for religious sitting, recitation

and explanation of the *Bhagavata Purana*, one of Hinduism's eighteen major sacred writings.

Soon, *Satras* evolved as socio-religious and cultural institutions that patronized the traditional music, dance, art, and literature of Assam. The first ever *Satra* was established at Belguri by Shankardeva himself by planting the Bilva tree in 1494 AD. Belguri is now a sacred abode of more than 22 such *Satras*. The monks of these *Satras* have been safeguarding the ancient forms of music and dance, which include the most renowned *Bhaona*, a form of religious theatre, and *Sattriya Nritya*, a form of classical dance. The establishment of the *Satras* bridged the gap and made performing arts more accessible to the masses.

The **first ever Satra** was established at **Belguri** by **Shankardeva** himself by planting the **Bilva tree** in 1494 AD.

Shankardeva introduced the theatrical performances of *Bhaona*, which propagated Vaishnavite philosophy to the masses in the form of performing arts bestrewed with dance, drama and songs. *Satriya Nritya*, an obbligato to *Bhaona* or *Ankia Naats* (literally, One-Act Play) narrates the religious and mythical stories through graceful expressions of hands and face. Sankardeva, henceforth, is said to have introduced *Mukha* (literally, mask) in *Bhaona* for the portrayal of expressions and





Sankardeva is said to have **introduced** *Mukha* in ***Bhaona*** for the portrayal of **expressions** and **mythological characters** . . .

mythological characters like Garuda, four-headed Brahma and Lord Shiva, when he staged his inaugural play *Cihna Yatra* in 1468. Samaguri Satra, which was established by Sri Sri Chakrapani, the grandson of Shankardeva, is renowned as the centre of its centuries-old mask-making tradition. The unique practice of mask-making has paved the way to gain global recognition because of the efforts of *Satradhikar*s (literally, religious head) of Samaguri Satra to preserve the splendor of this dying art form.

Based on the shape and structure of the masks, they can be distinguished into two types, viz, *Loukik* (Wordly) and *Oloukik* (Supernatural) masks. *Loukik* masks represent characters from the worldly land, while *Oloukik* masks exemplify characters with supernatural and mythological attributes. Brahma, Ganesha, Gaduda, the ten-headed Ravana, Putana, Kumbhkarana, etc. are a few of the many characters represented in the *Oloukik* masks.

The *mukha*s comprise biodegradable







raw materials like *jaatibah* (bamboo), cane, potter's clay (*Kumar maati*), cow dung, jute fibre, cotton cloth, sola pith and natural colours. The crafting of the masks begins with carving out the character's face, upon which a frame is then built. After this, special mud is dug out from the deep soil of the Brahmaputra and is mixed with cow dung, which is then smeared on the bamboo frame. The process is followed by the draping of a thin muslin cloth around the frame. After it is dried in the sun, the mask receives its grandeur with strokes of natural paints derived from leaves, roots, and barks of the tree

STEPS OF MASK-MAKING:

1. A bamboo frame is built to form the character's face.
2. Mud mixed with cow dung is smeared on the frame.
3. The craftsman carves out the features of the face using the mixture.
4. The mask is dried in the sun.
5. The artist's strokes of natural paint bring the mask to life!







embedded upon it.

The mask-making tradition in *Sattriya* comprises three types of masks, each serving distinct purposes within the performances. The *Barmukha* or the Great Mask is crafted in two parts: the head and the torso. It covers the whole body, accentuating the visual appeal of the theatrical performance. Mostly used during *Raas* festival, the next type of mask is better known for its flexibility and dynamic movements. *Lotokari Mukha* or the Hanging Mask, which mostly depicts mythological characters such as Putana, Taraka, Maricha, Subahu and others, allows greater mobility for the performers. These are smaller than the *Barmukha,* but they also include the head and torso as a part of the costume. Lastly, for enhanced facial expressions and portrayal of vivid character representation, the *Mukh Mukha* or the Face Mask covers only the face of the performer.



These handicrafts sustain the livelihood of the local communities of Assam while also reinforcing its cultural significance. They are also considered sacred as there is a belief that disrespecting masks invites bad omens. Hence, they are worshipped by the performers before wearing them. Earthen

lamps and incense sticks are lit in front of them when they are kept in the *Namghar* (prayer hall).

Samaguri Satra has been making masks for 350 years now, but the tradition of mask making is now witnessing its death door due to a lack of its appreciation and use in *Bhaonas*. Hemchandra Goswami, the *Satradhikar* of Samaguri Satra acted as an emancipator of this dying art form by experimenting with new techniques of movement of the jaws of the artists to provide a realistic enactment of expressions of mythological figures.



Hemchandra Goswami, the *Satradhikar* of Samaguri Satra acted as an **emancipator** of this dying art form . . .



His innovations like *Lutukori Mukha* and puppet-like flexibility marked a revolution in the mask-making culture of Majuli, and led him to secure the fourth highest civilian award of India, the Padma Shri, in 2023. The movable masks were welcomed by a large number of audiences. The weight of the masks was reduced, which made it easier for the actors to wear them. Made with bamboo, cloth and a mixture of cow dung and earth, the masks now weighed 500 grams, unlike the earlier wooden masks that weighed in several kilos.

The commercialization of masks results in the accreditation of mask artists. It now has various adaptability in festival decorations, meetings and house decors which expands its utility beyond performances. However, even after global recognition such as the display of Majuli's masks in London's British Museum during an exhibition called "Krishna in the Garden of Assam", the artists still emphasise the traditional aspects of mask making in Assam. These masks can only be bought at Samaguri Satra to prevent commercialization and retain its authenticity. Recently in 2024, the *Mukha Silpa* or the mask-making craft received the GI tag for its rich artistic endeavors and cultural significance. These recognitions provide a trademark by protecting its uniqueness, reputation and artistic legacy of the region that has been passed down from generations.



Asmi Gayan is currently pursuing her undergraduation in Sociology from St. Xavier's College, Kolkata. Her main interests lie in singing and listening to alternative rock every now and then. You will always encounter her strolling down unknown lanes of the city and capturing moments in her camera to search for the obscured meaning of life.

GOLDEN HARVEST



timeless traditions of Assam's Rural Heartland

Photograph by
Himashmita Sivam

This is a photograph depicting a simple rural setting of Assam. As Assam is a state with agriculture as its backbone, most of the people, particularly in the rural areas, start their day with household chores related to agriculture or food crops. This image shows two women sitting in the courtyard of a traditional village home, engaged in the age-old task of clearing grains. Dressed in simple *sador mekhela*, their hands move in rhythmic coordination as they winnow the harvested grains using large bamboo sieves.



in perfect rhythm

SRIJANI BHASWA MAHANTA

on following her passion for music and Sattriya dance, and using it as a tool for storytelling and resistance.

"In my heart, I always knew the world of performance was where I truly belonged . . . I exist for performance and storytelling. That's where I come alive. That's who I am."

From discovering rhythm in ticking clocks and blaring bus horns to telling tales through song, dance, and music videos, Srijani Bhaswa Mahanta has always been aware that performance was where she was meant to be. A trained Sattriya dancer, actor, singer, and director, Srijani applies a rare sensibility to her craft — one influenced by both tradition and the very personal. Born to a Sattriya artist-father and a poet-mother, art wasn't simply around her, it was within her.

Over the years, she has emerged as one of the most compelling creative voices from Assam — unafraid to speak, sing, and move through stories of identity, love, resistance, and belonging. Whether it's a reinterpretation of a timeless Bhupen Hazarika classic or her deeply intimate song *Aador* celebrating queer love, Srijani's art speaks in perfect rhythm, blurring boundaries between genres, geographies, and generations. Her latest song and music video is *Mou Bihu.*

In this exclusive interview with *Horizon*, she speaks about her love for Sattriya, following her passion, the inspiration and message behind her songs, her college and university days, and a lot more.

Q. How did your passion for Sattriya Dance and music grow? What encouraged you to be a trained Sattriya Dancer and pursue a career in the music industry?

As a child, I would often find myself dancing to sounds that barely qualified as music— things like the ticking of a wall clock, the blare of a bus horn, the wail of an ambulance siren, or the chime of a mobile phone ringtone. It was as if my body instinctively knew how to find rhythm in the world, even in the most unexpected places. My parents noticed this early on and believed it was something worth nurturing. They thought I should get proper training to help shape what they saw as a natural gift. That's how my journey into the world of Sattriya began. Sattriya, being an umbrella art form, opened many doors for me. It isn't just a dance form — it's a convergence of music, literature,

Interview Questions: Mousam, Vanshika, Niloy
Additional Text: Pritish Parashar



fine arts, and storytelling. As I grew more involved, I found myself drawn to all its dimensions. To me, they were all connected, all part of one living, breathing tradition.

Q. Who are your childhood role models? Which songs did you grow up listening to?

Bishnu Prasad Rabha has been the one constant role model in my life, from childhood all the way to now. Others came and went, depending on what I imagined myself doing at different points in time — which changed often. I grew up immersed in the musical legacy of Assam's Bhakti movement, especially the soulful strains of *Bargeet* and *Ghosa*. That was my early soundscape. Alongside that, I found joy and inspiration in the voices of Jayanta Hazarika, Dipali Barthakur, and Zubeen Garg — each one brought something unique and comforting to my world. As I grew older, my father introduced me to The Beatles, The Carpenters, Norah Jones, and other artists whose sounds I embraced eagerly. Somewhere along the way, I also discovered opera — and in its grand, emotional sweep, I found an unexpected kind of peace.

Q. In your previous interviews, you have mentioned that your father was a Sattriya dancer while your mother was a poet. So, were you clear that you wished to pursue this industry? Or did you face moments of doubt?

My father grew up in a traditional Sattriya environment — performing *Bhaona*, playing the *Khol*, and being

deeply immersed in the cultural life of the *Sattra*. Yet, he eventually chose a different path, joining the civil services and becoming an IPS officer. My mother, on the other hand, was a student of Assamese literature, often lost in her own quiet universe of words and stories. In my heart, I always knew the world of performance was where I truly belonged. But making decisions about life and work isn't always a solo act. There were many voices — at home and outside — encouraging, even insisting, that I prepare for the UPSC exams and become a bureaucrat. But I knew, in my bones, that it wasn't for me. There are people who are truly built for that kind of life — I have never felt like I'm one of them. I also have this peculiar tendency: when I'm working on an academic paper, I start imagining myself as a professor. It's like my mind temporarily becomes what I'm engaged in. It confused me for a long time. But after all the internal battles, I finally asked myself the most important question: what is it that I truly want? And the answer has always been there, quietly waiting. I exist for performance and storytelling. That's where I come alive. That's who I am.



Q. How did you juggle between pursuing academics from JNU and DU, and following your passion for music and dance? What advice would you give to budding artists and students experiencing such a challenge?

I'm not a student at either institution right now, having completed my MPhil from JNU in 2023. But when I was, I often got asked how I managed to balance academics and performance. The truth is, I never really saw it as a matter of juggling. It was more about planning — scheduling my calendar in a way that allowed space for both. At Lady Shri Ram College, I was actively involved in the music and dance societies, which were vibrant and full of activity.

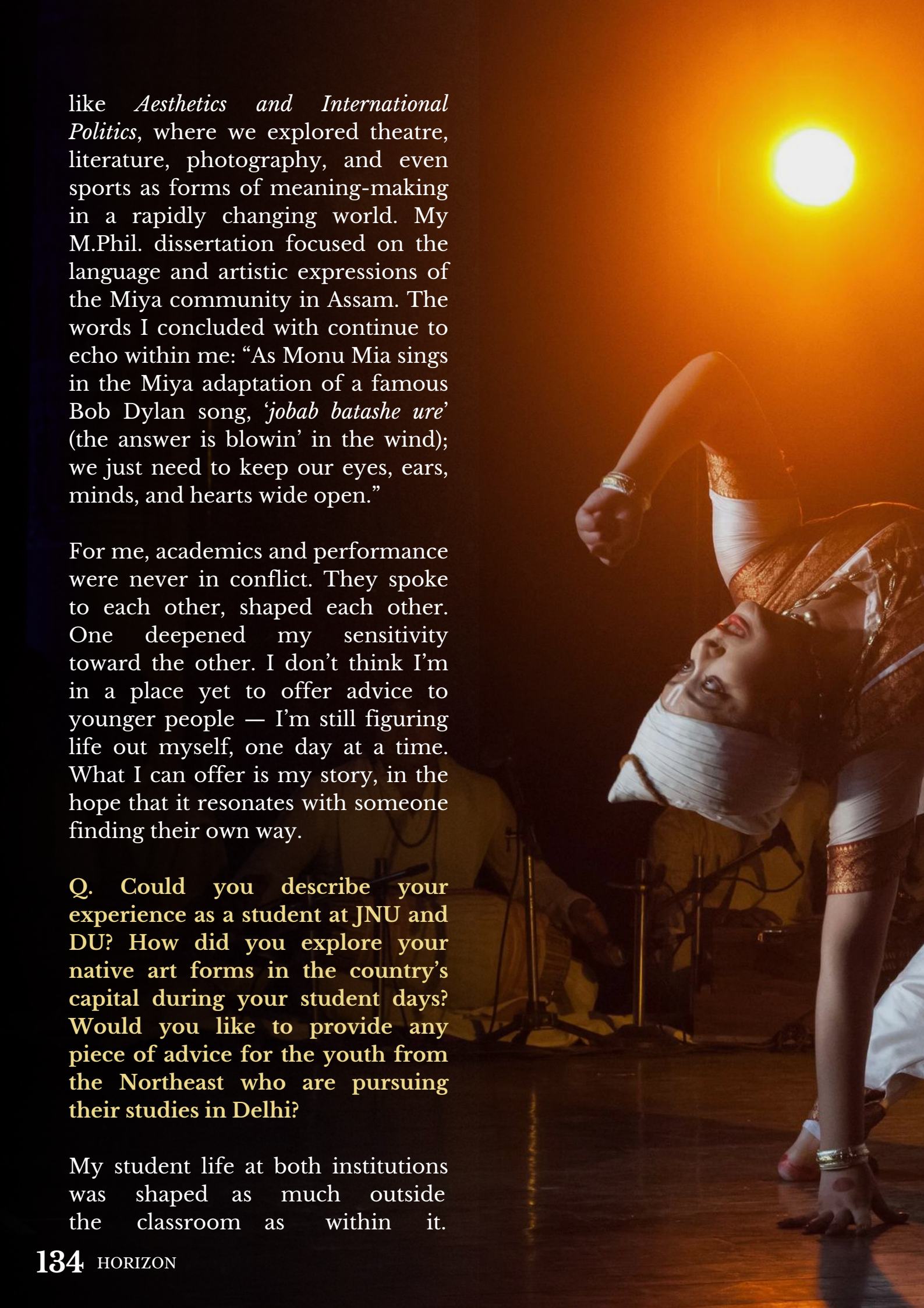
At JNU, I encountered a different kind of creative engagement in academics — through optional courses

like *Aesthetics and International Politics*, where we explored theatre, literature, photography, and even sports as forms of meaning-making in a rapidly changing world. My M.Phil. dissertation focused on the language and artistic expressions of the Miya community in Assam. The words I concluded with continue to echo within me: "As Monu Mia sings in the Miya adaptation of a famous Bob Dylan song, '*jobab batashe ure*' (the answer is blowin' in the wind); we just need to keep our eyes, ears, minds, and hearts wide open."

For me, academics and performance were never in conflict. They spoke to each other, shaped each other. One deepened my sensitivity toward the other. I don't think I'm in a place yet to offer advice to younger people — I'm still figuring life out myself, one day at a time. What I can offer is my story, in the hope that it resonates with someone finding their own way.

Q. Could you describe your experience as a student at JNU and DU? How did you explore your native art forms in the country's capital during your student days? Would you like to provide any piece of advice for the youth from the Northeast who are pursuing their studies in Delhi?

My student life at both institutions was shaped as much outside the classroom as within it.



After moving to Delhi, I was met with an avalanche of new ideas and ways of thinking that began to slowly but profoundly reshape my worldview. A spirit of inquiry, of questioning accepted knowledge, took root in me — nurtured first by LSR and deepened further at JNU. It's something I'll always remain grateful for. Although Sattriya was officially recognised as a major Indian dance form by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 2000, it remained relatively unknown — even within the larger dance fraternity. I remember during college, some of my society seniors were surprised, even disappointed, that I didn't wear *ghungroo*s during rehearsals. I had to explain that in Sattriya, unlike in most other classical dance forms, *ghungroo*s are not a part of the traditional *aharya* (costume and ornamentation). For me, dance has always been more than movement — it's embodied culture. Through her body, a dancer weaves together literature, music, poetry, costume, textile, social values, economics, history, painting, sculpture, and belief systems.



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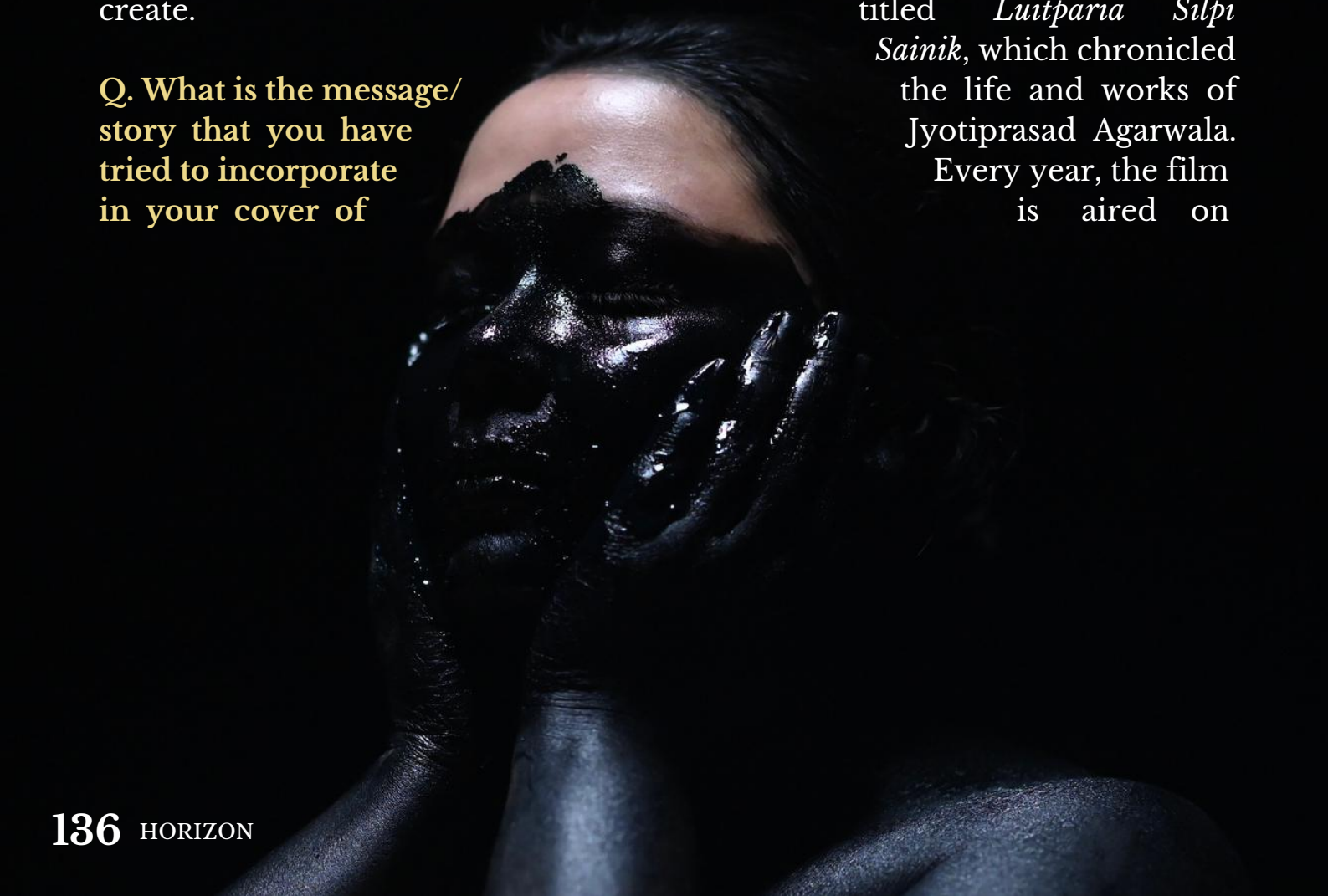
Because Sattriya is shaped by a very specific spatiotemporal context — rooted in the Vaishnavite monasteries of Assam — I believed my practice of the form could become a communicative window that would help my peers comprehend a 'lesser known' geography, history and tradition. Over the years, I conducted several lecture-demonstrations in places like the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts. I also had the opportunity to teach a co-curricular course on Sattriya as visiting faculty

faculty at Ashoka University for a semester—where nearly 80% of my students were non-Assamese. It was heartening to witness how art, when shared with openness, can foster curiosity and build understanding across unfamiliar cultural landscapes. Just one small thing I'd like to share with students from the Northeast who are currently studying in Delhi: you might come across people who are unaware, or who carry strange, sometimes misplaced ideas about our cultures. Instead of letting that turn into frustration or silence, try to open space for dialogue. Speak, share, explain — make your voice heard. You never know whose understanding you might shift, or what connections you might create.

. . . you might come across people who are **unaware, or who carry strange, sometimes misplaced ideas** about **our cultures**. Instead of letting that turn into frustration or silence, **try to open space for dialogue**. Speak, share, explain — **make your voice heard**. You never know whose understanding you might shift, or what **connections** you might create.

Q. What is the message/ story that you have tried to incorporate in your cover of Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bhupen Hazarika and Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Xokhi He*? What was the inspiration behind recreating it?

When I was around three years old, my parents, Swapnali and Bhaskar, made a documentary film titled *Luitparia Silpi Sainik*, which chronicled the life and works of Jyotiprasad Agarwala. Every year, the film is aired on



Doordarshan to mark Silpi Divas, and it's also available on YouTube. Most of the people interviewed in the film are no longer with us, and I believe it's a must watch for anyone wanting to understand the cultural and political impact of the legend's life and times.

One of the highlights is Dr. Bhupen Hazarika reminiscing about his association with Agarwala and crooning *Xokhi He* while highlighting the global musical influences apparent in the song's tune and composition. The song was originally recorded in 1936. After all these years, the lyrics spoke to me in a way that had nothing to do with their original context. I had been struggling with poor mental health for a long period of time, and I found that the words began to mirror my own inner turmoil. I felt compelled to create a visual representation of the song — a way to tell my own story through its music, as it resonated with me on such a deeply personal level. The visual imagery I created was born from the battles I fought with my

> In *Xoxhi He* . . . the **visual imagery** I created was born from the **battles I fought** with my **inner demons** — the feeling of wanting to **silence myself**, of wanting to **simply disappear**.



inner demons — the feeling of wanting to silence myself, of wanting to simply disappear. It was a reflection of that quiet chaos, a struggle between wanting to be heard and wanting to fade into nothingness.

Q. We loved your recent song, *Tita Kerala*. Could you tell us what inspired the song and the message you have tried to convey through it?

Tita Kerela was born out of all the harsh words and words of support I received from strangers on social media in response to my artistic and political expressions. There was hate, but there was also an overwhelming amount of love that was showered upon me. The English translation of the refrain –



Tita Kerela was **born out** of all the **harsh words and words of support** I received from **strangers** on social media in response to my **artistic** and **political expressions**.

"Bitter melon pales in bitterness beside the harsh words that slip from your tongue. Honey can never match the sweetness that flows from the kindness you've spun" – captures the essence of the message I wanted to convey. Life is short. What remains of you when you're gone? A pile of dust, the end of your physical form. But what endure, what truly stay, are echoes of your words and ways. It was, at its core, a heartfelt call for kindness. Constructive criticism and thoughtful engagement are essential for growth, but spiteful, sexist comments about one's body, weight, skin colour, or other personal traits are harmful and should be avoided at all costs. I designed the music video as a one-take piece to capture the constant movement and chaotic flux that define the mindless hatred we often witness on social media. Public memory is fleeting, and the targets of hate are always changing. In contrast to this rush to hurl insults, introspection and thoughtful engagement have better chances of leading to meaningful change and better outcomes for all.

Q. How personal was the song *Aador* for you, and how was the experience of working on it? We would also love to know your opinion on how it will help queer representation in Assamese media and entertainment where it's been mostly non-existent since its inception.

In our society, queerness is synonymous with 'abnormality'. Any identity which is not considered 'normal' or 'ideal' is very conveniently othered by people and institutions through both everyday and extraordinary forms of violence. The reason why I feel so strongly against such oppression is both personal and political. As a student of the social sciences, I've been trained to be critical of knowledge that has been largely accepted by society as natural and given, and to act in solidarity with groups that have been at the receiving end of discrimination and exclusion. *Aador* may also be seen as an expression and celebration of my own bisexual identity. The public reaction to *Aador* has surprisingly been very positive. Surprising because even before the song's release, I had readied myself for some harsh comments. The song and the music video, however, received a lot of love from different sections of society. It was very

> *Aador* may also be seen as an **expression and celebration** of my own **bisexual identity**. The public reaction to *Aador* has surprisingly been very **positive**.



heart-warming to realise that a lot of people are now open to challenges to their embedded ideas of love and affection and of how people 'should ideally be'. There were a couple of stray comments labelling my work 'propaganda' that was aimed at corrupting young minds. But it is with the hope of changing such perceptions that I am committed to continuing my work in the field of performance arts. While things have improved marginally, the reception and acceptance of queerness are still far from adequate. There have been increasing efforts by several organisations and groups to raise awareness about and normalise all kinds of sexual identities and orientations but these efforts have remained limited to city-spaces and universities. Awareness initiatives need to reach a more diverse age-gender-space-class network in order to be effective. Jargons should be discarded and things need to be explained through accessible language and techniques. Institutional support from the government is also of immense importance.

Q. How do you stay creative when feeling uninspired or overwhelmed?

I don't feel the pressure to remain creative during times when I just can't. But creativity is a strange thing — it can be nurtured even in moments of despair, sadness, confusion, or lethargy. You don't always need to be at your highest energy to create. There will be times when you don't feel like reading a book, watching a film, listening to music, or even meeting people. You might just want to lie in bed and do nothing. Yet, sometimes, the very act of 'doing nothing' can unexpectedly spark some wild ideas in your mind. It's important to let yourself feel everything deeply — to let your emotions affect you. You never know when creativity will strike. It flows continuously; it's always there, waiting to hit you when you least expect it.

. . . **Creativity** is a **strange** thing — it can be **nurtured** even in **moments** of despair, sadness, confusion, or lethargy.





Q. As someone who has been in the artistic field for quite a while as an actress, vocalist, dancer and also as a director, where do you think the Assamese entertainment industry is lacking? What changes would you like to bring about through your work?

To be completely honest, I don't yet see myself as an insider in the 'industry' for several reasons. However, having worked with people from within it, I can say there are several issues that persist — ranging from work ethics, the quality of imagination and craftsmanship, to artistes' remuneration, work hours, and the honouring of contracts (if they exist at all). That being said, I remain hopeful. With the arrival of some promising new talents in writing, direction, cinematography, and other fields, there's potential for things to improve. However, given that projects often involve substantial financial investments, the entire network of financing and production needs a comprehensive overhaul. Additionally, state support for the arts remains an area where Assam is noticeably lagging behind, and it's something that urgently needs attention. I don't believe I have the responsibility or the capacity to change these issues on my own. My focus is simply on working honestly and doing right by my team throughout the entire production process. I hope that by continuing to create with integrity, I

can contribute in some small way to positive change.

Q. Finally, do you have any piece of advice for budding creative artists?

Read, watch, listen, and engage as much as you can. You've chosen this path, so you must face every challenge with courage and unwavering resolve. There will be moments of doubt, but remember, staying true to your heart and your mind is non-negotiable. Trust in your voice, trust in your vision, and let nothing deter you. There's a reason you exist in this space. Please don't lose sight of that.

LISTEN TO SRIJANI'S LATEST SONG *MOU BIHU* ON YOUTUBE. CLICK BELOW:



LISTEN TO SRIJANI'S SONGS:
Click on the Song Covers



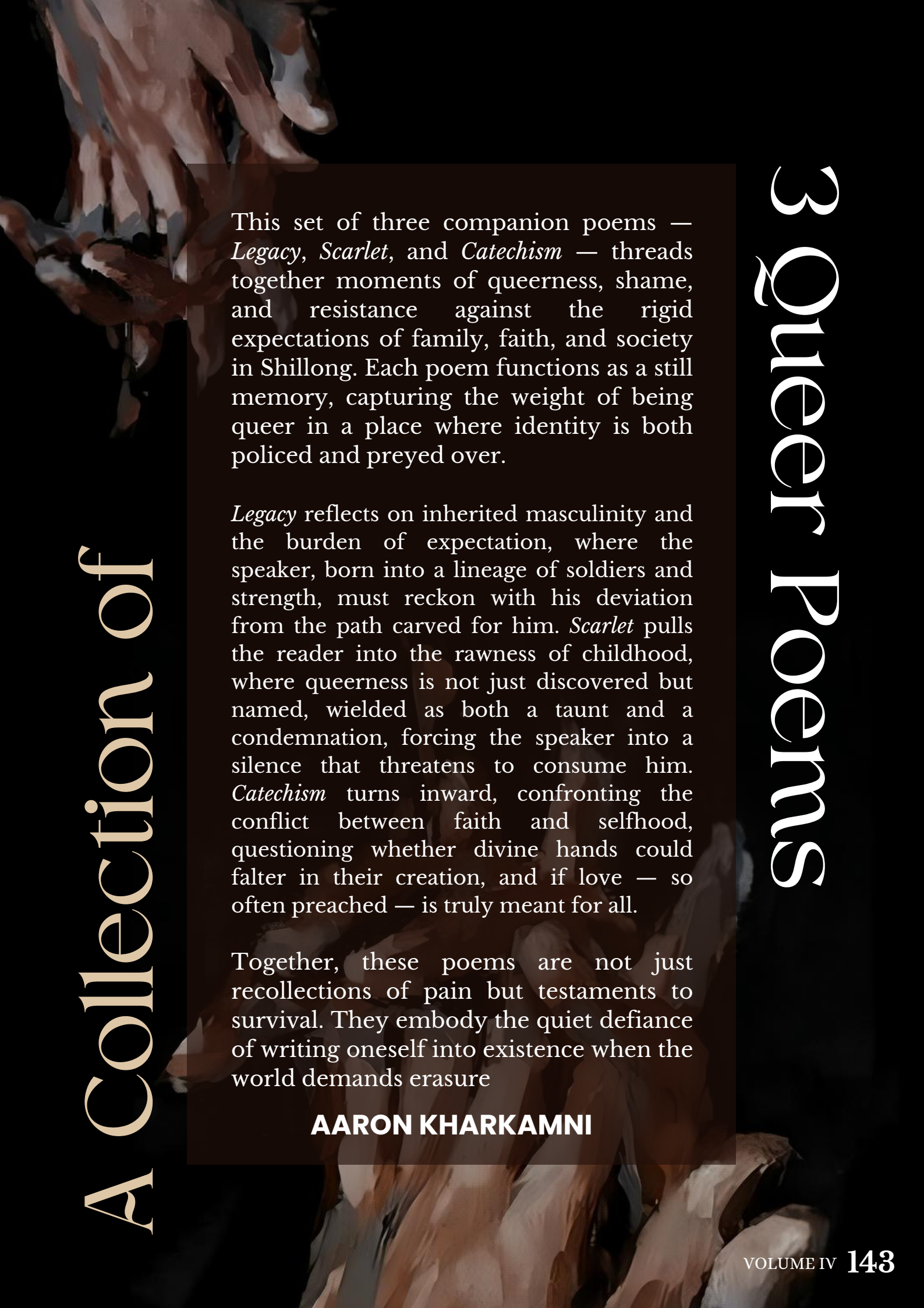
Tita Kerela



Xoxhi He



Aador



A Collection of 3 Queer Poems

This set of three companion poems — *Legacy*, *Scarlet*, and *Catechism* — threads together moments of queerness, shame, and resistance against the rigid expectations of family, faith, and society in Shillong. Each poem functions as a still memory, capturing the weight of being queer in a place where identity is both policed and preyed over.

Legacy reflects on inherited masculinity and the burden of expectation, where the speaker, born into a lineage of soldiers and strength, must reckon with his deviation from the path carved for him. *Scarlet* pulls the reader into the rawness of childhood, where queerness is not just discovered but named, wielded as both a taunt and a condemnation, forcing the speaker into a silence that threatens to consume him. *Catechism* turns inward, confronting the conflict between faith and selfhood, questioning whether divine hands could falter in their creation, and if love — so often preached — is truly meant for all.

Together, these poems are not just recollections of pain but testaments to survival. They embody the quiet defiance of writing oneself into existence when the world demands erasure

AARON KHARKAMNI

Legacy

I was born in Woodland, in the bone-chill of February,
under the dim hum of hospital lights —
a son, a banner, a bloodline's bright sword.
They cheered, my mother tells me, years later,
tugging my blanket up to my throat.
"You were difficult," she says, her voice a flat line,
"I almost lost you. A needle saved you."

My grandfather, a soldier, mapped my life like a battle plan.
A Catholic school — where boys stood straight as bayonets,
where grass, shaved close, knew no rebellion.
I would run, strike, conquer — feet against the ball,
not the earth-soft press of a choir's wooden floor.
He saw me in his own image —
not the dark shape I would later cast.

Twenty-five years, and I stare into his absence.
Would he curse my name, twist it in his mouth
like a bitter leaf?
Would he clutch the medals at his chest,
knowing I chose poetry over country,
a choir robe over a soldier's gear?
Would he call me half a man,
a hijra, a wound,
a name best left unspoken?

But he is dust now,
his wishes, nothing but wind-whispers in my ears.
And I, still standing,
my weapon a pen,
carving my own name into stone.

Scarlet



Happy Valley — how happy it was,
Or so they said.
My mother with her quiet hands,
My father with his prayers,
My brother with his boyhood —
All of it ordinary,
All of it stitched neat,
Except for me,
A thread pulled loose.

Fourth grade. Gay.
It clung to the walls,
To the desks, to the sky,
To my ribs — tight, choking.
The boys said it first,
Said it fast,
Said it sharp,
Like a match against bone.

Hijra.

It stung like piss on an open wound,
Rotting, spreading,
My body a thing to be dissected,
Examined, spat upon.

Catechism

God's hands — Mother said —
carved the hills, the valley streams,
and me, in His blessed image.
She whispered it like scripture,
her breath warm with psalms.

In the village, love was a hymn,
echoed in pews, in clasped hands,
in the stern eyes of Father Principal,
who taught us fear wrapped in
silk robes.
God's love, he said, was not for boys
like me.

I learned early —
the word sin was shaped like
my mouth,
like my wrists, like the way I stood,
a shadow stretched wrong at sunset.

To be a man was to swallow softness,
to carve myself into something hard,
to sever my wrists from the way
they bent,
to make my voice stone.

At night, my prayers unravelled:
Did you make me wrong?
Did your hands falter?
Did your breath slip —
and shape me into something
unspeakable?

The church bells rang answers.
I listened.

Aaron Kharkamni is a writer and poet from Shillong, Meghalaya. His work explores themes of identity, queerness, faith, and the complexities of belonging in the Northeast. Through poetry, he seeks to capture the unspoken, turning memory and experience into acts of quiet resistance. His writing has been featured in other online platforms like *House of Poetry* and *The Inde Post*.



Echoes of my True Self

Self Discovery & Acceptance

ZHEMO reflects on the struggles of growing up queer in small town Mirik

During my childhood, we often played a game of make believe, where we would pretend to be parents, mimicking household activities like cooking, cleaning, or taking care of kids — a simple, imaginative game of pretend. I remember how amazing I used to feel when I got a masculine role to play with my friends. I would often pretend to be the husband of one of my friends. So, while playing that character, we would sometimes engage in more affectionate behaviours. It took me quite a while — probably years — to realise the reason behind it. It wasn't an instant realisation, but as I slowly got to know myself, I could connect the dots.

And so, life is quite a journey, I must say. I am in my early 20s now, and am writing this to share some

amazing learnings and experiences as a queer woman. My name is Zhemo, and I am from a small town called Mirik, located in the beautiful hills of Darjeeling. I am proud to be a part of this community that thrives on acceptance and embrace. A community where you do not need to pay for its membership, a culture where you feel more than welcome – a culture left unspoken for a lot of years, but one that has had its existence forever.

As a child, I always knew I would love to love a woman. I would think to myself – if I were a man, I could treat her better, but sooner or later I realized that you need not be a man to treat her better. You are enough. A person knows their potential, and so did I.

> As a child, I **always knew** I would **love to love** a **woman**. I would think to myself – if I were a **man**, I could treat her better, but sooner or later I realized that you **need not** be a man **to treat her better**.

But insecurity played a great role in the realization of my identity – I became quite defensive about my looks and my body shape. Oh, how, being a girl, I had to manage to look pretty! Certain comments would really hit me – "You are too thin", "Too thin is unapproachable", "Your face is unapproachable", "Behave like a girl", "Well! You have no butt!"



Girls should be this, and girls should be that. The worst part is that all these comments did not come from strangers, but from people I knew. I am a sensitive person, and I could never fully express my feelings, my potential, or my identity; it was self-pressurizing and not really my true self. I started dating men to be "more like a girl".

The men I dated were amazing people and accepting of my attraction to women. For all those years, I considered myself 'bisexual', but sadly, I couldn't truly understand why I kept yearning for something more. I remember the last guy I dated was very accepting of my sexuality. It could have been a happy ending, except it was not. I found myself longing for more, and there were several times when I questioned, "Why am I feeling this way?" I couldn't understand what was missing. Eventually, I reached a point where I felt like I wasn't being fair to myself. I knew I needed to accept that I could be happier, and

so could he. We eventually ended our relationship on good terms, and I'm so grateful for the opportunity to unlearn and learn more about myself. All of these experiences pushed me to understand myself better and appreciate the importance of self-discovery.

In my hometown, homosexuality was not really talked about. It was seen as a hindrance to some extent. So, I never really understood the importance of talking about it or focusing on it, when it was the root cause of many issues that I had to face. I am sure a lot of people have similar experiences. In comparison to now, it was difficult then to come out of the closet even if one were quite clear about their identity and choices in life. It must have been suffocating.



The first gay pride in Darjeeling was held in December, 2018 so it was quite news in all the nearby towns, including mine. People in my town are still disapproving to some extent when it comes to homosexuality. They are more familiar with gay men, so we can see a selective acceptance in the society.

I do feel that there must be more gender and sexuality awareness in schools, especially by making sociology a mandatory subject, which it is not in our region. I took sociology as a general education subject in college, and got to learn more about 'Gender & Sexuality' and social roles. I began to feel more accepted and valued, and since then, I've started focusing on my life choices and how they affect me. If I had been provided this education during my school days, I would not have had to struggle with my emotions to understand my own identity. It could have been so much simpler and easier.

I always felt that my true personality was more masculine, and I often felt unconfident wearing very feminine clothes. I had to make the necessary changes to feel comfortable. If only I had learnt this years ago, it could have prevented many of the struggles I faced. I do not regret the

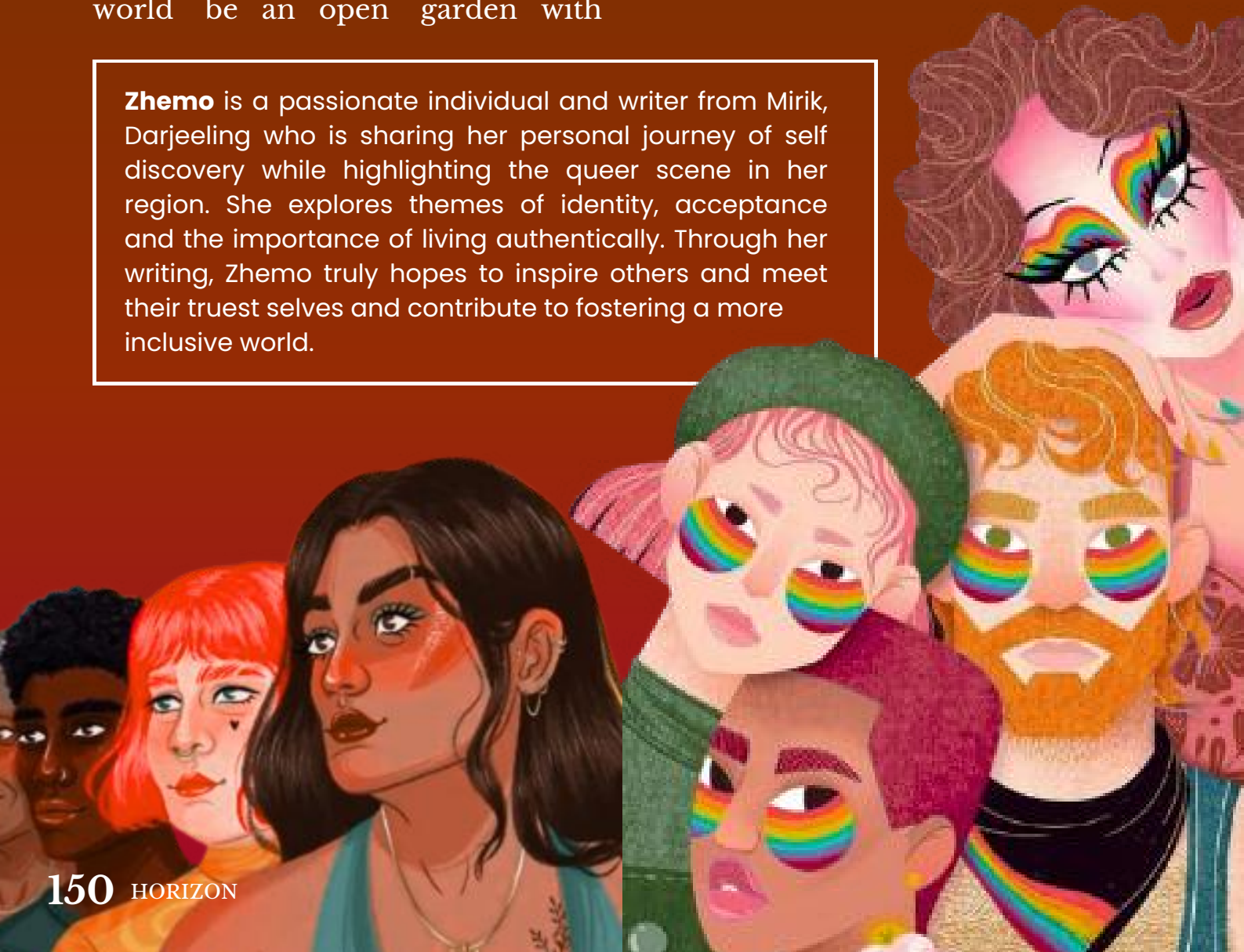
The first gay pride in **Darjeeling** was held in **December, 2018** so it was quite news in all the nearby towns, including mine.

struggle I had to face, and I no longer feel insecure now that I have embraced my androgynous fashion style. This isn't just my story — it could be anyone's.

Now, times have changed and society is more accepting and understanding about homosexuality in general. I am happy, I'm sure, we all are – for this courage, blessing and this little achievement. I hope in the near future we can raise our voices to focus on these issues more and to educate people about it, so that the coming generation does not have to deal with something called the "closet" in their mind. Let the world be an open garden with different varieties of flowers, flowers that are so rare and pretty . . . Let us accept Nature and embrace this freedom to live authentically.

After years of contemplation, questioning myself more than a hundred times, and preparing for the battles I have had to face, I now know where my anchor perfectly drops, and where my happiness lies. I do not need to put in an effort to look like a pretty girl or to feel like one, because I have realised that I am who I am, with or without anyone's validation. And so, now I can also tell you exactly how it feels when *a woman loves a woman.*

Zhemo is a passionate individual and writer from Mirik, Darjeeling who is sharing her personal journey of self discovery while highlighting the queer scene in her region. She explores themes of identity, acceptance and the importance of living authentically. Through her writing, Zhemo truly hopes to inspire others and meet their truest selves and contribute to fostering a more inclusive world.



Lessons on Courage and Wisdom from the Mizo hills

JONATHAN H VANLALZUATA
recounts the bravery of a Mizo Warrior

"Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear — not absence of fear."
— Mark Twain

In a world where fear infests the minds of many, courage to them speaks volumes. So much so that timeless heroic figures who embodied courage have been celebrated and adorned with the highest admiration. They have ushered mankind the inspiration to defy the toughest of all odds. This is true for every society that has existed across the continents.

From the dawn of civilization, courage has been a crucial part of all major philosophical discussions. The most well known to us comes from ancient Greece. Philosopher Aristotle believed courage to be a virtue — to him, courage meant knowing what to fear and having an appropriate response. From a much modern take, C.S. Lewis describes it as not simply one of the virtues, but



the form of every virtue.

Another virtue of equal essence is wisdom. If courage is the undefiable will, then wisdom is the lantern that guides it. Wisdom, as we know it, is not simply knowledge but a deeper understanding of things. Traditions all across places have often associated it with humility and compassion. But, because most people grapple to truly understand it, many acts of wisdom may not abide by popular norms — sometimes even making them look stupid and foolish. Such wisdom may put to the test the true endurance of courage in times when it is demanded.

So can someone move back from facing the odds but still be courageous? Does courage mean to face fear at all times? Could wisdom overcome this notion?

The hills of Mizoram may hold an interesting answer.

The story and folklore of a Mizo warrior from the Mizo Hills profoundly shed light on this discussion. The name of *Pasalṭha** Chawngbawla (pronounced as *Pa-sal-thra Chongbol-a*), a revered heroic figure from the southern part of today's Mizoram, still rings a bell with the locals, who up till today draw lessons and inspiration from his great deeds.

Pu Chawngbawla, in oral records, is

> The name of **Pasalṭha Chawngbawla** still rings a bell with the locals, who up till today draw **lessons and inspiration** from his **great deeds**.



* *Pasalṭha* means a *Warrior* in Mizo

said to have been a man of integrity, selflessness, humility and utter bravery. According to various sources, he lived during the early 19th Century and had his home at Khawthlir village (*Kho-thleer*; presently near Lunglei town, Southern Mizoram).

While being lauded for his courage, Chawngbawla was also highly regarded for his humility. Traditions have him say that whenever narrating some of his frightful experiences, he would immediately make remarks such as: "Oh how scared and afraid I was". For someone of his stature, the ability to easily speak this way while recounting his stories to the community, deeply reflects the place of importance that humility along with courage holds in the Mizo society.

Pasalṭha Chawngbawla's stories are full of such examples of acts of bravery, ranging from sometimes protecting their community livestock from deadly beasts, to defending the village from intruders at other times.

One such time around the mid 19th Century, a full-scale civil war between the North and the South broke out in the hills. Every capable man engaged in the battle and attacks. Chawngbawla's squad had moved to Sialhmur (*Siyal-hmur*, present-day Tlangpui) preparing for an invasion. But their attack failed, as the residents got to know in advance of their attacks and so, they



Illustration: VL Ruata Pachau



Photo: Mamuana Betlu

a **full-scale civil war** between the North and the South broke out in the hills. Every **capable man** engaged in the **battle and attacks.**

they had abandoned their village. Nghatebaka (pronounced as *Ngha-te-bak-a*), the *Pasalṭha* (i.e. warrior) of the village, witnessed the attack on his way back home. Furious, he began chasing the enemy forces, pushing them out. During which, *Pasalṭha* Nghatebaka unveiled great warfare mastery, flawlessly throwing spears.

This was a pivotal point in the story where the brave Chawngbawla had to flee away for a while. During this break, some of his own men said to themselves, "We wished Chawngbawla was here", not realizing that he was still with them. However, interestingly, Chawngbawla responded by saying, "Run!! even Chawngbawla can not be himself anymore." But this seemingly cowardly move would later turn out to be one of his greatest strategies to come back. Sometime later, after waiting on a way, at the right time he shot his great adversary *Pasalṭha* Nghatebaka dead, creating his legacy. On that day those who refused to flee fell. Although both Chawgbawla and Nghatebaka projected courage, Chawngbawla's timely move led him to ultimate triumph.

This fine Mizo story infused with history and legend perfectly encapsulates the Mizo take on Courage and Wisdom. It strikes the balance between being courageous while also being wise enough to take chances. The old Mizo ethos greatly revered these virtues and through such timeless stories offered us a different perspective from a much humbler source which is not part of day-to-day, larger-than-life discussions.

> This **fine Mizo story** infused with history and legend perfectly encapsulates the **Mizo take on Courage and Wisdom.**

Today *Pasalṭha* Chawngbawla's remains rest at Pukpui, Mizoram where his people have erected a monumental stone in his remembrance. His legacy lives on in the minds of the Mizo people.

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Jonathan H Vanlalzuata is an undergraduate student of History at Hindu College. Though new to writing, he sees it as a meaningful way to express and refine his thoughts, while also providing a platform for indigenous narratives.

A UPSC Success Story

ARANYAK SAIKIA on cracking UPSC thrice, and carrying Assam in his stride



"I began preparing seriously for UPSC in the final year of my MPhil. The journey had its share of highs and lows . . . but I pushed through by working on my weak areas. The key takeaway was the importance of perseverance and consistency."

If you ever need reminding that grit, humility, and intelligence can go hand in hand, then meet Aranyak Saikia. A civil servant who hails from Assam and possesses a piercing economic mind as well as a heart dedicated to civil service, his journey is an inspiration for many. An alumnus of Delhi University, he has walked the corridors of St. Stephen's College, pursuing his Bachelor's degree in Economics, and went on to do both his Master's and MPhil from the Delhi School of Economics.

What's great about Aranyak is that he cracked the UPSC examination thrice, finally achieving an All-India Rank of 59 in 2019. Before he became an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer, he has served as an Indian Police Service (IPS) officer in Karnataka, as an Assistant Secretary at the Ministry of Commerce and Industry in Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), and as an Assistant Commissioner in Nagaon, Assam.

But Aranyak is more than just an administrator. He is an economist, a columnist, a published author in Assamese, and a sports enthusiast. His pieces appear regularly in many prominent newspapers such as *The Economic Times, The Indian Express, The Print, DNA India, The Assam Tribune,* and his own blog site. *Mrityur Saud Aru Anyanya Galpa* is his latest book in Assamese.

In this exclusive interview with *Horizon*, Aranyak talks about his childhood, his journey through UPSC, and what keeps him going. He also shares his thoughts on the Northeast, student life, and advice for young people chasing their dreams.

Q. Tell us about your childhood. Who were your childhood inspirations? What were your hobbies and favourite childhood books?

I grew up in a place called Ulubari in Guwahati and studied at Don Bosco School up to Class 12. My childhood was simple — I would go to school in the morning and play in the

Interview Questions: Hamiron Timung and Pritish
Additional Text: Pritish Parashar

evenings. My biggest inspirations were undoubtedly my parents. Apart from them, several of my school teachers left a lasting impact on me. They shared fascinating stories and introduced us to global leaders like Barack Obama, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, and Albert Einstein. These leaders influenced my worldview and shaped my thinking.

I was primarily interested in sports — football, badminton, tennis, and the occasional game of hockey. During vacations, I would read and write, often penning short stories and articles for newspapers. I also explored painting and music, but writing and reading remained my primary interests.

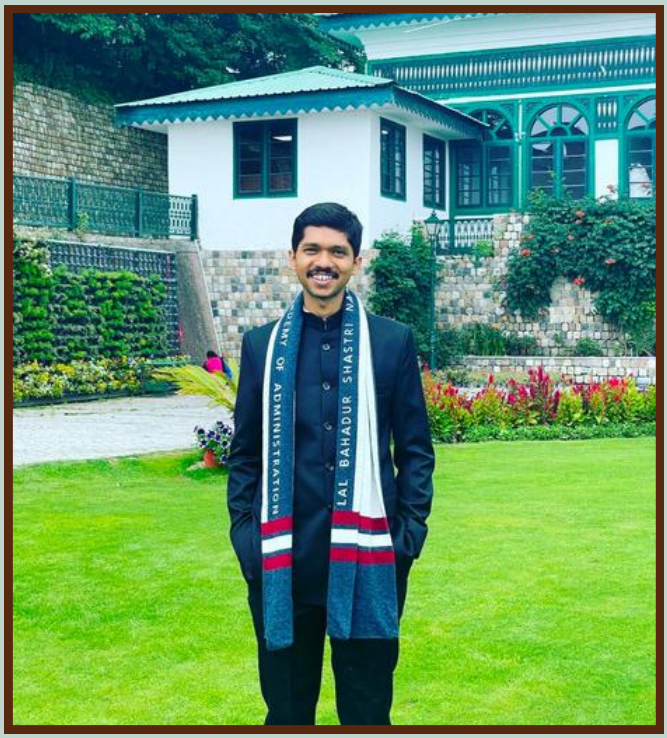
Q. What inspired you to join the civil services and how was your journey?

Initially, I had no plans to join the civil services. My focus was entirely on academics. After Class 12, I joined St. Stephen's College in Delhi for a degree in Economics Honours. I then completed my Master's from the Delhi School of Economics and joined the MPhil program there. However, due to personal reasons, I could not pursue a PhD abroad and stayed back in India. It was then that I decided to appear for the UPSC examination. My academic exposure to India's socio-economic and political issues motivated me to work directly on the ground to bring meaningful change.

I began preparing seriously for UPSC in the final year of my MPhil. The journey had its share of highs and lows. I started by understanding the syllabus, referring to recommended materials, and creating a disciplined schedule. With

> The **journey** had its share of highs and lows. I started by **understanding the syllabus**, referring to recommended materials, and creating a **disciplined schedule.**





only a year to prepare, time management was crucial. There were moments of doubt, but I pushed through by working on my weak areas. The key takeaway was the importance of perseverance and consistency.

Q. Looking back, how did your time as a Delhi University student shape your subsequent journey to become a bureaucrat? What key experiences and insights have influenced your perspective, and are there any notable lessons or transformations that stand out to you?

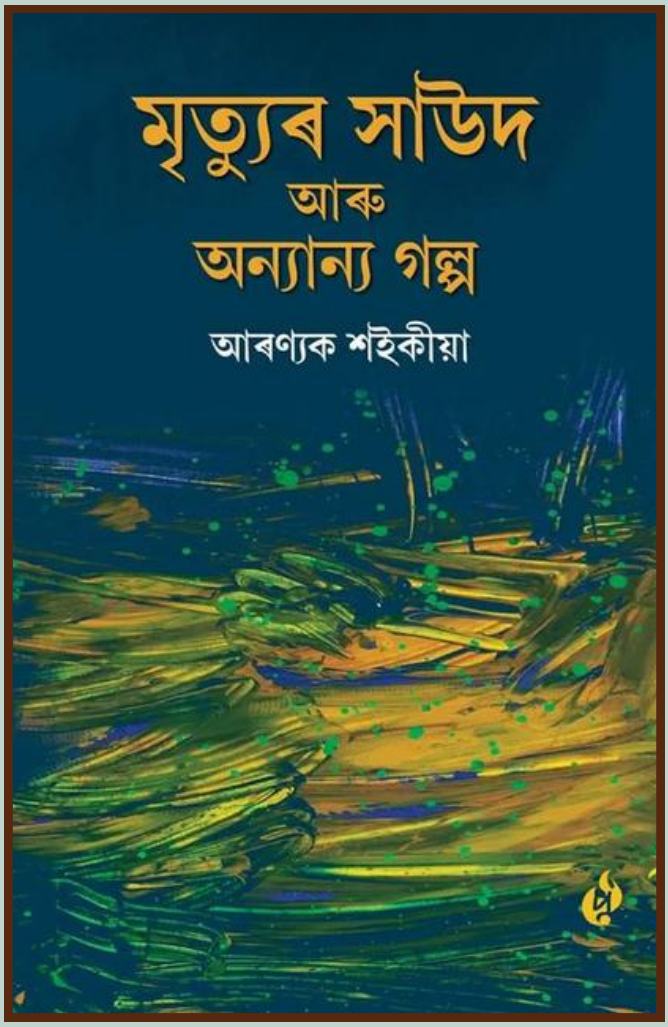
My time at Delhi University was transformative. The professionalism and dedication of both professors and students left a strong impression. There was a relentless pursuit of excellence, both in academics and extracurriculars. This ethos helped shape my attitude towards bureaucracy, where decision-making must be rooted in research, strategy, and professionalism.

Q. Despite your demanding role as an IAS officer, you have managed to nurture your passion for writing, consistently contributing to various dailies and magazines. Can you share the story of how you began writing, the significance it holds for you and how do you balance it now with your administrative duties?

I began writing around Class 3 or 4, inspired by the books I read. Over time, my style evolved. By the early to late 2000s, I began writing frequently — both creative pieces and articles in English and Assamese newspapers. Writing is my chosen form of self-expression. It helps me analyse situations critically and become a more thoughtful individual. Even in my professional life, the stories and subjects I encounter provide ample material for reflection and writing.

> Writing is my chosen form of **self-expression**. It helps me analyse situations critically and become a more **thoughtful individual.**

Q. What according to you is the best way to manage your time between college academics, extracurriculars and civil service preparation for



students who plan to pursue this field?

Time management is essential, especially during student years. I recommend creating a structured routine, dividing 12 to 16 hours into dedicated slots for academics, extracurriculars, and other commitments like UPSC preparation. Stick to your timetable consistently. It becomes a habit over time. It's also crucial to tailor the schedule to your strengths and weaknesses.

Q. The North East lags behind mainland India in terms of development. What steps can be taken to address this gap?

The Northeast is developing rapidly and is on track to match other parts of India. Infrastructure — roads, railways, and connectivity — is being significantly improved. Education and healthcare have also seen increased investment. For example, Assam now has many more medical colleges and private universities. Investors are showing growing interest in the region, signaling a promising future. Therefore, I think

> . . . it is only a **matter of time** before we can **shed ourselves** of the **'backward' tag** that we were once labeled as.





it is only a matter of time before we can shed ourselves of the 'backward' tag that we were once labeled as.

Q. How do you see the culture of the North East as compared to other states or regions of India?

The Northeast is a mini-India, rich in linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Despite occasional issues, people coexist peacefully. It would be unfair to generalize it into a single 'Northeastern culture'. Each community is unique, and what unites us is our openness and inclusivity. Most traditions here are gender-inclusive and receptive to new ideas. We are well-positioned to integrate with broader Indian and global cultures.

Q. Lastly, what advice would you like to give to the young people from the Northeast, especially aspiring civil servants, who wish to contribute to society?

To all students from the Northeast — "Dream Big". Opportunities are vast and increasing. In the past few years, more and more students from the region have cleared the civil services exam, creating role models. You could be the next. Stay determined, work hard, maintain professionalism, and never give up. Even if you face failures, perseverance and hard work will eventually lead to success. Once you reach your preferred aim in life, do not stop. Keep on pushing and your success becomes the best contribution to the success of this region and society. Also, please be compassionate and try to help people in need.

The Brother I Knew

SOUMYADITYA DEB

According to the Assam Accord, the cut-off date for identifying foreigners in Assam is March 25, 1971. While the movement and the Accord did sensitise the local Assamese population of their own rights, it also brought about a rallying call against illegal East Pakistani/Bangladeshi immigrants. But what about the Bengalis who have been a part of this land for generations, who have called this their motherland and grown up with the people around them? Minds blinded by hatred, every Bengali seemed like an enemy in this political slurring; regardless of the cut-off date. This poem reflects the story of such a young Bengali man, who grew up with his friend, an Assamese; whom he deemed as his brother. Now, his brother stands in front of him, ceasing to recognise him as his friend – which forces the young man to question the indifferent hatred around him.

Beneath the banyan's sprawling shade,
We carved our names on its ancient bark.
Two boys who laughed, who ran, who played —
Unbroken bonds, a single spark,
Now dimmed and lost in shadows dark.

You called me "brother," strong and sure,
Our hands entwined like roots below.
Through storms, through droughts,
    we would endure,
But now your words like arrows show
A heart once kind turned cold as snow.





The harvest fields we walked as kin,
Each stalk a story, each grain our song.
Yet whispers now crawl under skin,
They say I've dwelled here far too long —
This land I've loved, where I belong.

Did you forget my father's toil,
His hands that bled for the same red clay?
Or how my mother kissed this soil,
And taught me prayers at break of day?
Does lineage wash my past away?

You stand there, friend, with fire in eyes,
A stranger cloaked in borrowed hate.
What poisoned you with these cruel lies?
What shifted love into this state,
To twist my fate, to close the gate?

I hear your words, but not your voice;
Your mouth speaks rage, but your soul is torn.
Am I not still your rightful choice,
The boy with whom you shared the morn,
Before this wall of hate was born?

Look past my name, my blood, my line,
And see the child who once was near.
Your heart and mine once did align,
But now you wield this blade of fear,
And carve away what we held dear.

So tell me, friend, beneath this sky,
Does soil know borders, rivers blame?
I'll wait until your hate runs dry,
Until you speak my given name,
And call me "brother" once again.

Foreground Photo: Lachit Bordoloi, along with his friend, who were arrested from Roha College during the Assam Movement (Facebook)

Soumyaditya Deb is a law student currently pursuing a BA LLB (Hons) at Symbiosis Law School, Pune. His academic interests lie in the intersections of constitutional law, human rights, criminal law and white collar crimes. He is also a passionate debater and likes to spend his free time watching series and documentaries related to crime.





Nuptial Hues & Wedding Tunes

BISHAKHA GOGOI catalogues an Assamese wedding through the community's traditional wedding songs

Locked in a cosy corner of India, connected to the main-land by a 22 kilometre-long corridor and blessed with a wide variety of flora and fauna, my geographically diverse Assam hides within it a beautiful culture of amalgamation. A major factor that keeps this amalgamation of indigenous culture alive are weddings.

Every society, every tribe in India has its own unique wedding rituals carried on from one generation to the other. The concept behind marriage is the same everywhere. The fact is that society requires order. All rules and laws are made to ensure that society runs in a smooth way. Human codependency, which started in a primitive way of protecting themselves by staying in a group, has now trickled down to monogamous relationships for building a family. Society provides the consent of raising a family

through marriage, or in other words, it provides the consent of a sexual relationship between two partners through marriage.

The Assamese word for "wedding" is *Biya*. One unique aspect of the Assamese community is the celebration of *Tuloni Biya*. It is the celebration of the first menstruation of a girl marking her entry into womanhood. There is also *Bhekuli Biya* or wedding of the frogs, which is conducted as a prayer for rain to prevent drought during the agricultural season. *Bhekuli Biya* is becoming extinct but in many villages still untouched by modernity, the practice is still seen.

The third type of wedding in Assam is the *Bor Biya*, in which two people are socially recognised as husband and wife. The wedding is a blend of simplicity and elegance. It has pre-wedding as well as post-wedding celebrations. The Assamese wedding is an amalgamation of Vedic rituals and tribal culture, which makes it even more beautiful.

The wedding kicks off with the ritual of *Jurun*. On the day of *Jurun*, *amdali* or mango leaves in strings are tied to the head of all the doors of both the groom's and bride's houses, as it is believed to ward off all the evil energy from the house and bring luck for the newlywed. *Jurun* must be over before noon. So, the women from the groom's house start early for the bride's house, carrying with them the main wedding trousseau, jewellery and make up accessories along with *xendur* (sindoor), coconut, yogurt or *doi*, two earthen pots filled with rice, a big fish, *tamul paan* (areca nut and betel leaves – things without which any Assamese ceremony is incomplete), *haldi* (turmeric), urad dal, etc. Both the turmeric and the urad dal are used for bathing the groom and the bride on the day of the wedding. Once there, the bride's mother warmly welcomes them at the gate with a *xorai* (a bell metal plate with a stem) which also has *tamul-paan* covered by a Gamusa (a traditional Assamese cloth).

*Ayoti*s or those who sing *Biyanaam* or wedding songs, hold a special place in Assamese weddings. The *Biyanaam*s are the creation of the women of the common peasantry. Nobody knows of their origin, but the way they hold up the grief and voice of the women makes them very unique. *Biyanaam*s describe everything that revolves around the domestic life of women – reference to rituals, the pain of leaving the natal home, sexuality, and domestic behavior, among others. In *Biyanaam*,



the groom and bride are referred to as the conjugal Gods and Goddesses like Ram-Sita, Shiva-Parvati, and Krishna-Rukmini.

At the centre of the *pandhal* or the tent, the groom's family places a mat, and a lamp is lit as the women make ululation and sing *Biyanaam* creating a divine ambience:

"Ulai aha aai deo, o soshi,
Murot kapur loi
Otopore roi asu, o soshi,
Tumi aha loi."

(Come out my shy moon,
with a veil on your head.
We have been waiting
for you to come, for a long time.)

The bride arrives with a *sador* covering her face and is made to sit by the side of her mother-in-law. Then begins the custom of *Tel diya*, wherein the mother-in-law first applies oil on the parting of the hair through a ring, as is the custom, and then the sindoor to symbolise the start of wifehood. After the *Tel diya* ceremony, the bride is made to wear the ornaments gifted by the groom's family as the *Ayotis* sing:

"Marar olongkar thuwa kati kori,
oi raam,
Deutarar olongkar thuwahe
Raam e di pothaise, bisitro olongkar,
oi raam
Haat e jure kori luwahe."

(It is now time to keep
your maternal ornaments aside
Keep aside the ancestral pieces too,
my dear
Ram has sent you a new set of ornaments
Bow with folded hands and accept them.)

Here, one can see a reference to the groom as Lord Ram.

The *Ayotis* sing *Biyanaam* one after the other and some of them are heart-wrenching:

"Table r fuldani ful hojai thua,
moromor aideo ki lage kua,
Aku muk nalage, hokolu ase,
jiori kaltu ghurai muk lage."

(Put the fresh flowers in that flower vase,
tell us what you need for your wedding.
I don't need anything; if possible, give me
back my youth when I was free.)

This *Biyanaam* is shaped like a conversation between the *Ayotis* and the Bride. The transition of a girl into a wife brings with it lots of responsibilities. The woman loses her freedom as she becomes bound by household duties and services to her husband. The *Biyanaam* shows the deep desire of women to get back to the life before marriage when they were like free birds, pampered by their parents. The flowers in the vase are symbolic of the girl who is now going to be separated from her loved ones and natal home, just as a flower is uprooted from the soil, and be sent

to another home, where she will live till death, just like the uprooted flower that is placed in the vase.

"No mah, doh din, gorbho t loi
Marai jonmo dile hoto dukh loi
Tulisil marai pothali kula t
Kenekoi eriba bidai bela t?"

(Nine months, ten days
your mother carried you in her womb
She brought you up with so much love,
How are you going to leave her
on the day of your bidai*?)*

This hits as an emotional pang in the hearts of all the women, as they all leave behind their dearest mothers, just to obey society's rules on marriage.

Coming back to the rituals of *Jurun*, the *sador* of the main trousseau made of *paat* silk, is placed on the head of the bride and the other *mekhela sador*s are stacked on the *xorai*. The bride has to touch all the objects brought from the groom's family. These are then divided equally, and half is taken back by the groom's family. The bride then seeks blessings from the people present.

The wedding day starts with the *Pani-tula* or the ritual where family members of the bride and the groom collect holy water from the nearby ponds or lake or well in earthen pitchers or brass pots called *kolosi*.



As the women set out, with the *dhuliya*s beating the *dhul* at the front of the procession, the *Ayoti*s sing:

"Pani tulibole, uluwa
Doiboki kakhote kolosi loi he
Hubhakhyan milise, ayoti ahise,
hobe Jamunaloi jau he."

Here, there is a mention of *Doibaki* or Krishna's mother, and Yamuna, showing Assam's link to the mainland culture. This *Biyanaam* is basically a call to the Groom and Bride's mothers to get ready to collect the water as the auspicious moment has arrived.

This holy water is used for the ceremonial bath of the bride and the groom which signifies the purification of their body and soul before moving on to a married life. Simultaneously the ritual of *Doiyan Diya* is carried on as a bowl of curd is

sent to the bride, who eats half of it, and the rest is sent to the groom. This is believed to increase love.

After the ceremonial bath or *Nuwoni*, the groom heads to the bride's house. He is received at the gate with great jubilation. It is followed by the fun-filled *Dora Oha* ritual where the groom is blocked with a long bamboo from entering, and the girl's side playfully demands money. After some haggling and negotiations, the groom is welcomed by the girl's side and the bride's mother performs an *aarti* and offers him a plate of honey, sweet and curd for prosperity. The bride's sister washes the feet of the groom, and her brother lifts the groom and carries him to the *mandap*.

Another characteristic of the Assamese wedding is the *Juranaam*, where the bride and the groom's side tease each other over silly things. However, this should not be categorised as body-shaming and is meant only for fun.

For example, the groom side's *Ayotis* would sing:

"O mon hendur, koina re bhayektu
Gatore endur."

The bride's brother is being teased as being similar to a rat because of his appearance. The bride's side would sing back:

"Tamulore dhokua, tamulore dhokua
Doraghor r lora bur mithai e re lubhiya."

The boys on the groom's side are being teased as too ravenous for sweets.

Meanwhile, *Panchamrit* (made of curd, ghee, honey, milk and sugar) is offered to the bride, and she is carried by the maternal uncle to the *mandap*. Both bride and groom sit near the sacred fire or *Hom*, while the priest chants prayers. The father of the bride performs *Kanyadan*, and the Bride's brother hands over puffed rice or *aakhoi* to the bride which she offers to fire.

"Aakhoi diya, aakhoi diya
Morom r bhai
Aji r pora tumar baideo r
Gotro singi jai."

In this *Biyanaam*, the brother is being told to pass the *akhoi* to his sister, whose *gotra* is changing forever from that day to that of her husband. It shows a close connection to the vedic rituals. The next ceremony, *Saptapady*, is also similar to Vedic ritual wherein the bride and the groom walk seven times around the fire, each round standing for a wedding vow. Then, the bride walks on seven *paan* or betel leaves praying for good luck and prosperity for the next seven lives. However, the neo-Vaishnavism sect observes the ceremony differently without the

fire ritual. The Ahoms follow the Shan tradition, while the other tribal communities follow their own traditions.

The *Ayotis* also teach the bride her responsibilities through *Biyanaam*:

"Nilakoi akakh t, rongakoi beli,
Kenekoi solaba lukor ghor khoni
Uthibo lagibo kukurar dak t,
Lobogoi lagibo barohni hatot
Koribo lagibo hokolu kam,
Rakhibo lagibo bonkho r maan."

Here, the bride is being told that now the responsibility of maintaining the groom's household is hers. She has to wake up early every day and do all the work; only then will she make her family proud.

The *Biyanaams* originated hundreds of years ago, so it has some patriarchal tendencies.

The bride and groom exchange garlands and take vows amidst the chanting of mantras. The groom gives *xendur* to the bride amidst conch shell sounds and is followed by the couple taking blessings from the elders, which is called *Maan Dhora*. To break the ice between the couple, games are played, like hiding their rings in a basket of rice. As the laughter and joys carry on, there arrives the painful moment of *Bidaai*. The *Biyanaam* during *Bidaai* moves everybody to tears. Even a stone-hearted person feels the pangs of pain as the *Aiyotis* sing:

"Ou ghos r kumol kuhi, bhatou pori khai
Deutai puha moinajoni uri gusi jai."

This *Biyanaam* shows the pain the father feels as his daughter, whom he had brought up with so much love and care, is now leaving the house and is going away





"Aidoe nakandiba, dhoirjyo dhoriba
Paliboi lagibo jonmo moron vivah."

The bride is being consoled that everybody has to go through three stages of birth, death and marriage.

The bride throws rice back as a homage to the house that fed and took care of her for so many years. The bride then goes to the house of the groom where she is welcomed by the groom's mother. The *Ghor Gosoka* ritual consists of the bride stepping into the house after placing her feet in a bowl of milk. She enters the house after breaking an earthen lamp or *saki*. And then, after giving her a round of the groom's house and feeding her a little curd, she is escorted back to her natal home for the following day's rituals.

The next day the priest tells the bride and groom the stories of Khuba and Khubi (Shiva-Parvati, who are considered an ideal couple), and then they seek blessings from the elders. After 8 days, *Athmongola* is celebrated in the bride's house where they are served with a lavish lunch, which puts an end to the wedding celebrations.

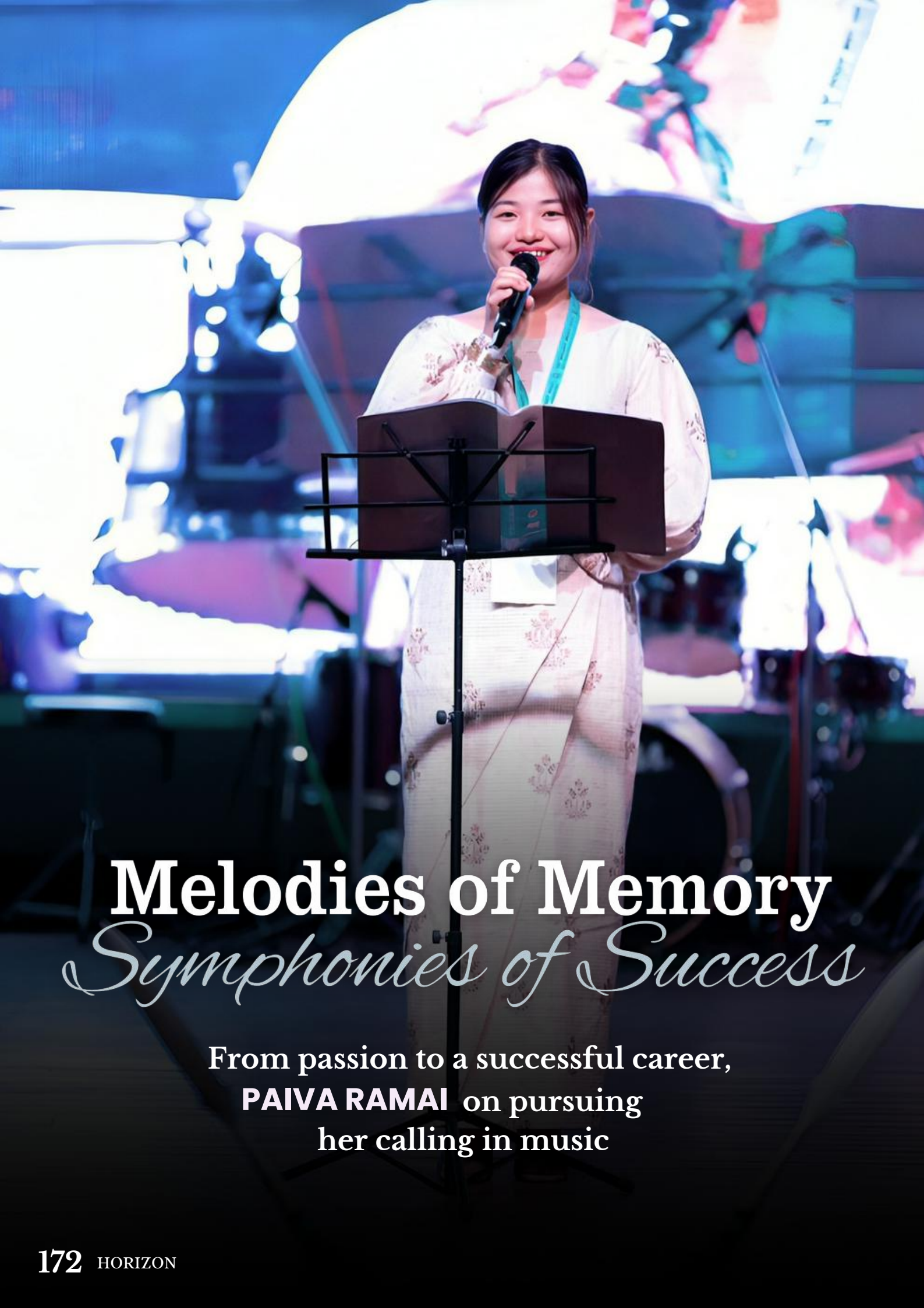
There is no question of dowry in an Assamese wedding. Every ritual

shows respect and love to the women; here, no gift is considered greater than a daughter leaving her home, by the groom's side. Northeast India is heaven for women as it truly celebrates women, not just as idols but as humans; where the birth of a daughter is celebrated just like a son.

Assamese weddings have always been simple, but time has brought changes. The youth has started imitating North Indian traditions like *Sangeet*, and families seem to be competing to show how lavish their weddings can be.

Changes are good as long as it does not distort our own culture. However, in contrast to increasing Bollywood music in weddings, there seems to be the extinction of our beautiful *Biyanaam* or Bihu *geet*s which are integral in our culture. We must remember that before accepting anything that is not our culture, we must ensure the survival of our own. People without their culture or roots are people without an identity in this vast world, just like an uprooted tree that waits for its slow decay.

Bishakha Gogoi hails from Duliajan, Assam, and is currently pursuing her Bachelor's in History at Hindu College. When not being mentally harassed by her obnoxious roommate, she finds time to pen out poems and sometimes (upon much imploration by *Horizon* editors), takes out time to write a piece on her region.



Melodies of Memory
Symphonies of Success

From passion to a successful career,
PAIVA RAMAI on pursuing
her calling in music

"I had to stay determined and prove that music is more than just a pastime, it's my future."

Growing up in a background where music is often seen as a hobby rather than a serious career, Paiva Ramai, belonging to the Poumai Naga community, has defied odds to establish herself as a singer and music educator.

After graduating from Maitreyi College, Delhi University, she went on to pursue a degree in both Western Classical and Rock & Pop vocal from Trinity College London Board. With unwavering support from her family whilst nurturing her childhood passion, she progressed to obtain the Grade 8 Trinity Rock & Pop Vocals and the Grade 8 Trinity Classical certificates. She also served as a soprano at the Delhi Chamber Choir.

Her performance in various platforms such as the Urban Climate Film Festival, Autumn Festival: A Prelude to Hornbill Festival 2022, and the North East India Choral Competition, all of national and international recognition, serves as a testament to her passion for diverse music genres.

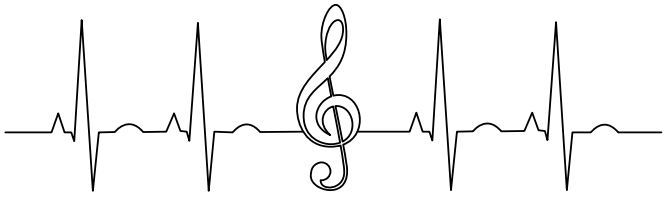
Her journey is an encouragement to trust one's calling and persevere through all uncertainties, while never losing the joy of the passion. In doing so, she proves that one can be successful in crafting one's very own symphony of success.

Horizon's engaging interview features her journey as she shares valuable insights highlighting the significance of embracing one's passion.

Q. Could you tell us about your childhood? How did your interest in music begin?

I have vivid memories of my grandpa, even in his later years, humming and composing songs with my grandma, often cooking by the fireplace nearby. They were always encouraging me to sing, whether it was in church or during Christmas gatherings, and I recall the pure joy of performing for a candy reward.

As I grew older, my love for music deepened, and now, my parents, both music enthusiasts, continue to nurture that passion. After a long day at work, my dad unwinds by



Interview Questions: Paone and Aditi

playing a piece on his guitar, filling our home with music and creating a comforting atmosphere. It's a beautiful tradition that's been passed down, connecting the past and present in a melody of memories.

Q. Who was your role model growing up? How did they shape your identity as a musician today?

My mom was my biggest role model. She loves music a little too much, and her passion was contagious. Growing up around her enthusiasm made me appreciate music deeply and shaped how I explore and connect with it today.

Q. What does it take to defy conventional expectations and pursue a career in music despite being told it's 'just a hobby'?

Though I come from a family of music lovers, music wasn't seen as a real career, and at first, I felt the same way. But my family pushed me forward, believing in me even when I had doubts. Overtime, my passion grew, and I knew I couldn't ignore it. I had to stay determined and prove that music is more than just a pastime, it's my future.

> Though I come from a **family of music lovers**, music wasn't seen as **a real career** . . . But my family pushed me forward, **believing in me** even when I had doubts.

Q. You have expertise in both rock & pop and western classical music. What inspired you to pursue these diverse fields?

My interest in diverse music genres comes from a deep appreciation for how different styles express emotions and ideas uniquely. Exploring western classical and contemporary music has given me a well-rounded perspective and a richer understanding of music as a





whole. I'm continuously learning and exploring new musical forms, embracing the richness that each genre offers.

Q. Could you tell us about your time in DU? How did you explore your interests during your college days?

My time at DU was vibrant and enriching. I fondly remember walking to college with friends, sharing our favourite songs, and having conversations during breaks on the campus. These memories are etched in my heart. One of the highlights was the opportunity to perform at the NES DU festival, which was an unforgettable experience.

Q. What was the instant you knew you had to pursue music as a career? What was the reaction from your music network?

I was always a fervent lover of music but never considered it seriously until my university days. Seeing so many passionate musicians chasing their dreams, a thought struck me, why not me? While not everyone in my network supported my decision, the few who did were more than enough to push me toward my dream.

Q. What are the challenges that you think people from the North East face in the music industry?

In the North East, music has often been seen as a hobby rather than a serious career. Many face financial constraints, and elders traditionally encourage government jobs for stability. However, in recent times, this mind-set is shifting, and there's a growing positive outlook toward music as a viable profession.

Q. What was the most intimidating performance you've ever had? How did you overcome it?

The most intimidating performance for me was when I was invited as a guest artist at the North East Choral Competition. The sheer number of people in the audience shook me to the core; I could feel my hands trembling. But in that moment of fear, I reminded myself why I fell in love with music in the first place. I took a deep breath and once I started singing, the fear melted away.

I fondly remember **walking to college with friends**, sharing our **favourite songs,** and having **conversations during breaks on the campus.**



Q. What differences do you notice between your own education experiences to that of your students? According to you, to what extent do modern issues affect today's learners as compared to earlier students?

Music education today is very different from what I experienced. While we relied more on traditional learning and self-discipline, students now have endless digital exploration but also more distractions. Social media creates pressure for instant success, sometimes overshadowing the true essence of music.

Q. According to you, which achievement are you most proud of?

One of my proudest achievements is deciding to pursue a career in music education. I am passionate about sharing the knowledge I've gained over the years and shaping the next generation of musicians and artists. It brings me great fulfillment to nurture their talents and inspire their musical journeys.

Q. What is one thing you wish you knew earlier in your journey? Can you share one lesson that has made a lasting impact in your career?

One thing I wish I knew earlier is that self-doubt is part of the journey, but it shouldn't hold you back. A key lesson that has stayed with me is

> One of my **proudest achievements** is deciding to pursue **a career in music education.**

consistency and focusing on the right thing, true growth happens when you trust your passion and keep pushing forward no matter the obstacles.

Q. As a music educator, what is one piece of advice that you always give to your students? Any suggestions or tips you would like to give our readers who want to pursue their studies or career in music?

I always tell my students to stay patient and stay true to your sound. In anything, growth takes time, and comparison can be your biggest enemy. Focus on constant learning, perform and practice as much as you can, and most importantly never lose the joy that made you fall in love with music in the first place.





Weaves of Indigeneity

HAMIRON TIMUNG explores the motifs, meaning, and materiality of Northeast India's handloom textiles

Through various intricate techniques, threads are interlaced to create fabrics, a craft that has been essential to human civilization since its inception. Initially driven by practical needs, humans have woven functional fabrics to adapt to their environments. Over time, weaving evolved to become a powerful medium for artistic expression, showcasing human creativity and aesthetic flair. Hence, the history of textiles reveals a dialectical relationship between cultural progress and the development of humankind itself.

India boasts an incredibly rich storehouse of traditional handloom textiles, deeply grounded in folk and natural elements. The Northeastern states of India are no exception to this. Northeast Indian states produce a great variety of textiles and ornamental accessories which are unique in their visual impact. In the present scenario, textiles constitute the second largest economic sector in Northeast India, which is second only to the agricultural sector. It will not be an understatement to say that almost all tribal families, especially women, are engaged in weaving not only for household consumption but to earn a livelihood and to help to run family expenses and, in turn, move towards economic self-sustenance.

For the varied communities in Northeast India, textiles are not simply clothes but are repositories of world views, meanings, and narratives. The textiles embody much of the community's ideologies, values and beliefs in tangible form; they are also imbued with political importance. The textiles of tribes of Northeast India are certainly related to their belief system which got their ontological legitimacy from their lived experiences. It is generally believed by them that the clothes they wear, and the accessories they use, carry a deep symbolic meaning.

Weaving is deeply ingrained in the



Shamilami Shawl, Nagaland

cultural fabric of various tribes in Northeast India. For the Ao Naga, men only wear clothing woven by their wives, highlighting the significance of weaving in their personal and domestic lives. Moreover, tribes in the region perform rituals to ward off bad luck, such as using nettle leaves to purify new items or removing a thread from newly woven cloth before selling it.

The importance of weaving is further emphasized by the Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh, who believe that its absence is a punishment in this life and the afterlife. Similarly, the Meiteis believe that weaving entails a cosmic connection. Each tribe has its unique rituals and beliefs surrounding weaving, reflecting its integral role in their lives. Among the Ao Naga, women's weaving activities are restricted during the agricultural season, but they can spin yarn for later use, this demonstrates the intricate balance between weaving and other aspects of their lives. In the Chakhesang tribe of Nagaland, the Shamilami shawl holds spiritual significance, indicating the wearer's elevated ritual status. This prestigious garment is reserved for Chakhesang Nagas who have earned the honour of hosting the esteemed Feasts of Merit ceremony, a traditional practice showcasing a person's growing wealth and prosperity. Those who have hosted this







Top & Centre: Idu Mishmi motif and shawl **Bottom:** Manipuri woman spinning yarn



ceremony are distinguished by their elaborate and intricately patterned attire (Horam, 2021).

SYMBOLIC EXPRESSIONS: LANGUAGE OF MOTIFS IN TEXTILES

Textile designs and motifs constitute a conduit for the creative expression of weavers, especially as they mirror the community's past, worldview as well as expressions of 'modernity.' All motifs are more than just decorative items but have an independent cultural value, with each piece of cloth serving more functions than just clothing persons or families. Every cloth represents the crafted or written stories and aesthetic traditions of their weavers.

Among the **BODOS OF ASSAM,** traditional clothing and the motifs embedded in them hold great significance. For women, the Dokhona is a key part of their attire, typically featuring a bright yellow base with two distinct styles: one features stripes in orange, red, and green, while the other showcases intricate floral motifs, sometimes arranged in a crab-like pattern called Khangkhrai. For men, the Fali is a versatile cloth used as a loincloth or towel, often in plain green. Another important textile is the Aronai, a narrow cloth draped around the neck, traditionally in yellow and green. This textile has become an emblem of Bodo identity, often gifted as a mark of respect and honour to friends, elders, and

dignitaries. The Bodos skillfully create intricate designs on these clothes, known as Agors.

According to Bodo legend, two sisters, Asagi and Bwisagi, are credited with creating these designs. The story goes that while Asagi was weaving, Bwisagi spotted birds flying overhead and described them to her sister, inspiring Asagi to instantly replicate the birds as Agors on the fabric. Agors can be categorized into four main types: animal designs, floral patterns, natural objects, and man-made objects. Some specific designs include Farwo megon Agor, which resembles a pigeon's eyes. Agor Gubwi is a traditional Bodo Dokhona flower design. Hajw Agor is a mountain-inspired design, while Jong Agor is a spearhead-shaped motif.

NAGALAND's sixteen tribes each boast unique Naga shawl designs, rooted in rich cultural heritage. While the history of weaving in these tribes remains undocumented, fascinating myths and tales abound. For instance, the Ao Naga tribe attributes the origin of their weaving tradition to Longkongla, a mystical woman inspired by celestial forces to create distinctive clan identities through weaving. Similarly, the Yimchunger Nagas believe that spinning and weaving skills were imparted by spirits, shrouding the craft's origins in mystery.

The Naga shawl's captivating motifs, symbolizing courage and strength, are unique to specific clans or tribes. Featuring simple yet powerful designs, including stripes, swords, and animals, these shawls are





Left: Bodo woman weaving
Right: Aronai motif



typically rendered in bold red, white, and black hues. In Nagaland, the Mithun (Drung ox) holds a revered status as the state animal, once sacrificed in cultural rituals by high-ranking tribesmen. This sacrifice earned them the privilege of donning a prestigious shawl adorned with a Mithun motif. The Rungu spear, wielded by Naga warriors and hunters, symbolizes bravery and protection of their land and dignity. Meanwhile, hornbill feathers are a deeply respected and powerful symbol, used by all Naga tribes as majestic head decoration, exuding an air of mystery and strength. Over time, Naga shawl designs have evolved, incorporating new colours and motifs. Contemporary versions blend traditional and modern elements, with some shawls even featuring Christian symbols, reflecting the changing cultural landscape.





Top: Mithun Head and Rungu Spear Motif; **Centre:** Ao Naga Shawl Mithun Motif; **Bottom:** Ao Naga Shawl





Top: Nyishi woman weaving
Bottom: Nyishi Gale Attire

The traditional handloom of **ARUNACHAL PRADESH**'s Nyishi tribe is locally known as Rubung Ruekio. It is a loin loom operated by a single weaver. This ancient practice is an integral part of Nyishi culture, with women weaving various traditional garments like jackets, mufflers (Tona), and Gale. The Gale, a vital cultural attire, is a traditional lower garment worn by women, crafted from materials such as Eri silk, Muga silk, wool, cotton, and beads. Intricate motifs like Bump, Dumping, and Jinjab, accompanied by symbolic designs, adorn these handmade textiles. One notable motif is the Madoli/Putu/Digla design, featuring a diamond shape with various colour combinations. This motif symbolizes the majestic Putu mountain and is crafted by the Hill Miri tribe (also known as Mising) of Kamle district. The design is specifically used in creating the

Jekum Gale.

Traditionally, Nyishi women weave motifs directly into the Gale fabric. Alternatively, some motifs are embroidered onto a plain Gale using needles. Nyishi Gale's nomenclature is based on the motifs woven into the fabric. Women typically create two types of Gales: *a)* Single-motif Gales, such as Pomo, Dumping, Juhu, and Luch. *b)* Multi-motif Gales, featuring combinations like Muko-khum, Luch, Putu, Dumping, and Juhu. The Jekum gale, crafted by the All Nyishi Women Association (Name-acham), is a unique blend of four motifs: Muko-khum, Luch, Putu, and Pomo. This Gale symbolizes unity and cultural heritage, representing all Nyishi tribes across Arunachal Pradesh. Notably, the Pomo Gale is the oldest and most traditionally valued, while the Dumping Gale holds special significance for the Rikampada dance performed during the Nyokum festival.

Patterns and ornamentations vary depending on the occasions for which they are worn. While patterns and motifs can enjoy transposition across communities, they are often adapted to fit the local repertoire and carry symbolic meanings related to social status and *rites of passage*. Different kinds of textiles are customized as per occasion and requirements. This creates a demand for indigenous textiles used in rites and rituals, providing sustainable income for the tribal communities in Northeast India. Additionally, to give traditional tribal textiles a more contemporary flair, weavers are nowadays creating blended products that are a curious mix of modern and traditional designs. With the advent of neoliberal market production, weavers today are bound to engage in experimentation as they recognize the need to produce textiles that resonate or appeal to modern consumers and adhere to current-day ideas about aesthetics,



Nyokum Festival

in order to continue subsisting on weaving and retain their relevance in this global market.

UNDERSTANDING MATERIALITY: TEXTILES OF RESISTANCE

Theorists like Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Arjun Appadurai (1986), and Daniel Miller (1998) have argued that materiality – the physical properties and presence of objects – is not just a reflection of social structures, but also influences and constitutes them. Analysis of the 'paths and uses' of objects reveals the politics behind their circulation and focuses on objects' agency and unveils the socio-cultural and political systems objects emerge from. Historically, material culture, including clothing has served as a site of resistance and confrontation, particularly in colonized societies. The Khadi movement, led by M.K. Gandhi during India's anti-colonial struggle, illustrates the strategic use of clothing as non-violent resistance. This movement gained significant moral support and influenced the development of India's khadi and local weaving industry (Bayly, 1986; Tarlo, 1996). In the context of Northeast India, Dolly Kikon (2009) observes how the Naga 'body' and traditional attire have become potent symbols of resistance against the state. Nagas are reclaiming and reappropriating the colonial-era stereotypes of being 'naked' and 'savage', which persisted through the post-independence years with the postcolonial Indian state engaging with such discredited representations, reinforcing distorting meanings about the Nagas. According to her, the Nagas are increasingly using their bodies and wearing traditional attire during





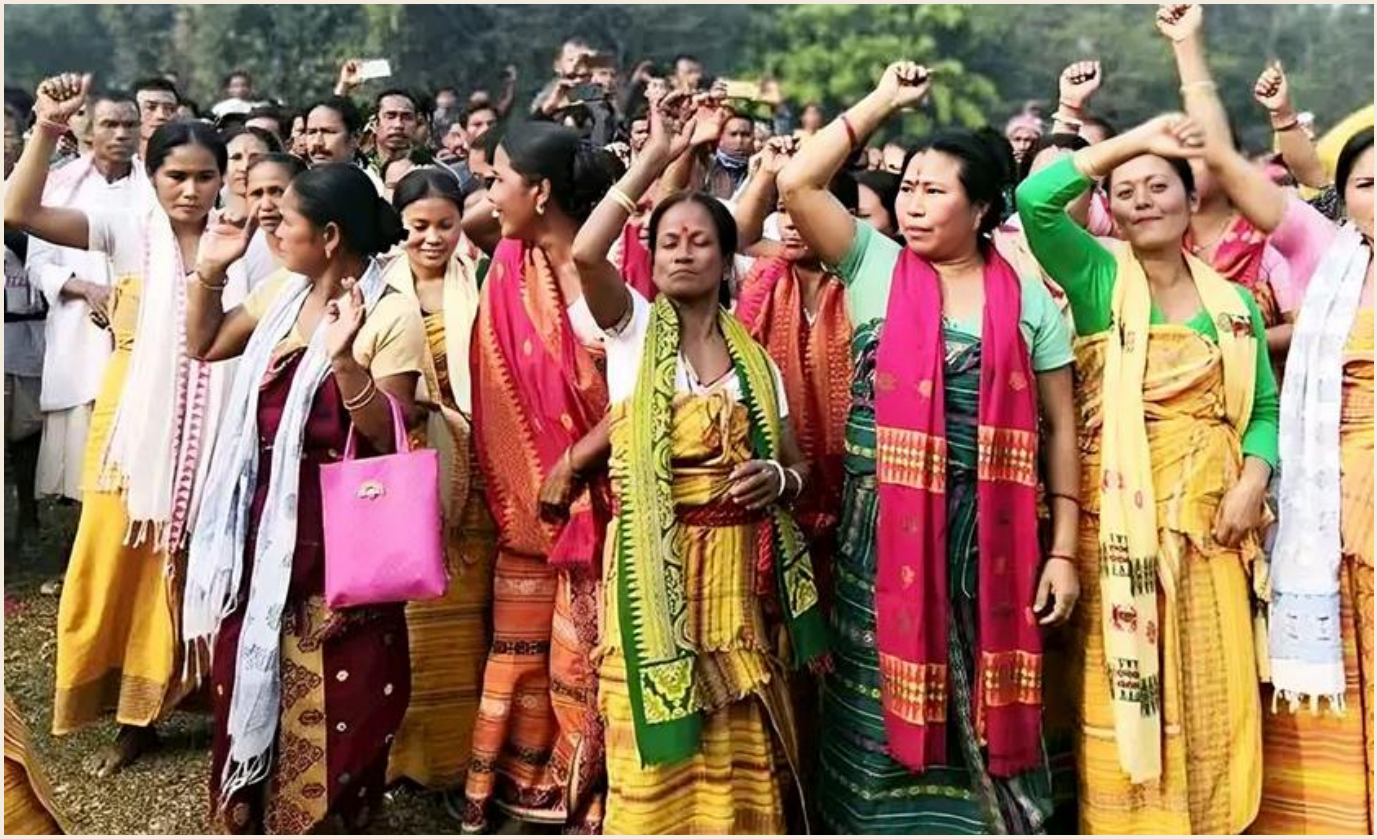
Gamosa used as a symbol of resistance during Assam Movement **(Left)** and Anti-CAA protests **(Right)**



protests and demonstrations as a strategic method of asserting their own identity, indicating how textiles have become significant objects and mediums that annunciate political views and opinions.

According to Benedict Anderson (1983), nations are perceived as imagined communities, meaning that they are not natural or primordial entities but are rather modern socio-political constructs whereby material symbols can play a significant role in shaping this national identity. Assam remained in the grip of an organized mass agitation, namely the Assam Movement, for a long duration of six years which finally came to an end with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985. During this period, the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) leveraged the Gamosa, a traditional woven hand towel that is functionally and metaphorically an identity trope of Bihu culture, to unify the diverse population and rally support against threats to demographics and citizenship. AASU leaders flagged the Gamosa as a powerful symbol, wearing it as a badge of courage and presenting it to elders, to evoke emotions and collective pride among the people of Assam (Moral, 2021). Even during the 2019 CAA protests, people did choose to identify themselves with the same clothing symbol. Hence, Gamosa has a long and contested association with the imagination of Assamese nationalism.

In a similar vein, we can argue that the act of weaving is intrinsically linked to this 'idea of nationhood.' Bodo nationalism depends largely on the preservation of indigenous



cultural elements in both tangible and intangible forms. The Bodoland Movement, which started in the year 1987, marked a significant turning point for Bodo women, as they became actively engaged in socio-political activities and transformed their traditional handloom practices into commercial enterprises as Bodo leaders created a surge in demand for traditional attire, including Aronai, in a bid to counter majoritarian cultural representation. This led to a significant increase in production, prompting the establishment of weaving operations to meet the growing market demand.

In recent times, the use of fashion as a form of protest and political resistance is gaining momentum among the youths of the region. The incorporation of traditional textiles and attire has emerged as a vital aspect of religious, cultural, and social gatherings in urban centres like Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai, and Chennai which utilize these traditional elements to enhance their cultural visibility in these cosmopolitan settings. Northeasterners living in these Indian metropolitan cities often decry being recognised as a stranger within the country, both in their phenotypic image and the dress that defined them. A nation that teems with more than a billion people needs to recognise the differences and learn to coexist with them and cast the idea of India out of the mould of a monolithic sameness.

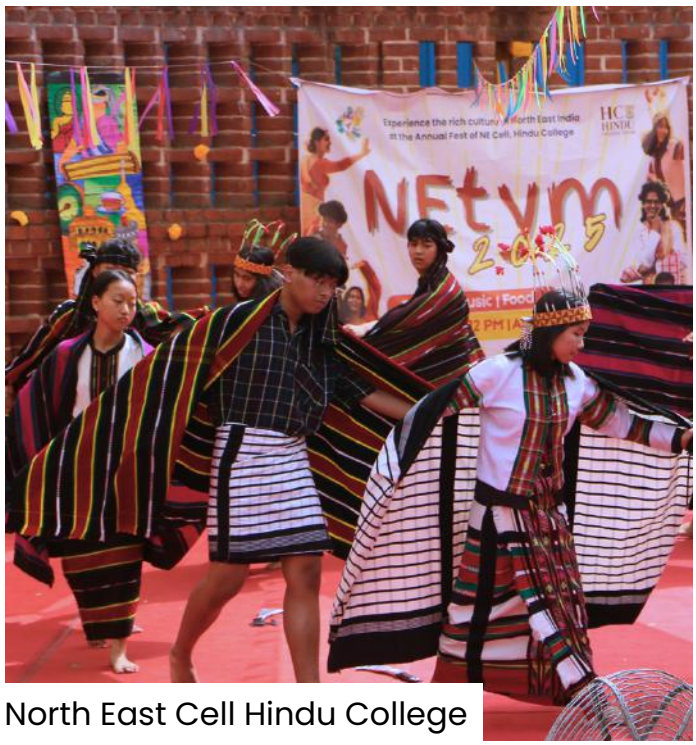
In Delhi, for instance, most colleges and universities have a 'Northeast Society', which serves as a collective

representation of students from Northeast India. These societies host various events throughout the year, with March and April being peak festival seasons. Annual Northeast Fests are organized in individual institutions, occasionally resulting in two or more events on the same date. These festivals provide a platform for cultural expression and visibility, where participants showcase their ethnic heritage through traditional attire. We can contextualise this phenomenon within the region's history of political protest and resistance, where fashion is now serving as a new means of communication and a site of power negotiation. The dress is seen as a symbol to affirm a sense of a distinct cultural identity that is often in conflict or running parallel to dominant identities and norms prevalent in other parts of India.

IN ESSENCE . . .

Handloom textiles possess a profound symbolic value, extending beyond their practical uses to convey rich social and cultural meanings. As Weiner and Schneider (1991) note, the versatility of cloth in terms of construction, colour, and pattern allows for virtually boundless expression and communication. Clothing can communicate complex messages about the wearer's values, ideology, complex moral and ethical issues of dominance and autonomy, opulence and poverty, continence and sexuality. In the culturally rich and diverse region of Northeast India, textiles serve as a vibrant reflection of the complex interplay between culture, geography, and socio-political contexts. Each community boasts its unique folklore surrounding the origins of clothing





NEtym 2025, the annual fest of North East Cell Hindu College

and weaving, transforming textiles into living narratives that embody the history, traditions, and stories of entire communities. Every intricately crafted cloth represents a testament to the artistic expression, cultural legacy, and collective memory of its weavers, with each motif and design holding a special significance that reveals the community's cultural identity, myths, and historical experiences. In today's postmodern world, these textiles have emerged as serving as a new site of resistance, a means of asserting selfhood, in the face of postcolonial experience and cultural imperialism.

Hamiron Timung is a second-year undergraduate student of Sociology at Hindu College. His academic interests primarily lie in Social Stratification and Exclusion, Indian Higher Education, Indigeneity, and Northeast India. Currently, he is working as a research assistant on a college-funded project entitled 'A Socio-political Study of Environmental Migrants in Delhi NCR: A Gendered Perspective.'

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heritage in every
THREAD & TASTE
AVANTIKA HAFLONGBAR
on weaving culture, cooking stories,
and keeping traditions alive

"It is the simple gift of life that is celebrated every day in the villages. The community that helps you thrive. The land that gives you food. The nature that protects us all. The guardians of the forests. The artisans who create from their hands and take as little as possible from nature."

Her viral thali challenge reels on Instagram beginning with her charming Dimasa greeting of "*Juthai*, everybody", have won hearts. Each platter of her daily thali challenge has captivated food lovers, culture enthusiasts and casual scrollers alike. But Avantika Haflongbar would rather call herself an "accidental food vlogger". Guided by passion, determination and purposeful intention, she wears many hats: Avantika is a social entrepreneur, revivalist of cultures, and weaver of culinary stories. From Dima Hasao's colourful fabrics to the aromatic flavours of the Dimasa cuisine, she has become a powerful champion in reviving and honouring indigenous culture.

A Jamia Millia Islamia alumna, Avantika worked in the social sector for more than a decade in Delhi before coming back to her roots in Haflong, Assam. There, she started ROOHI, a brand that came together with Dimasa craftswomen to give new life to traditional weaves. Her love for cooking with indigineous flavours ran so deep that it brought her to the MasterChef India competition Season 8. There she showcased all the attractive flavours of the North East on a national platform. But Avantika's influence doesn't just end at textile and cuisine. She is the force behind the Big Bang Festival, a fest of music, art, and culture, as well as the owner of Haflong Cloud Kitchen, which brings genuine Dimasa flavours to customers. She keeps the region's heritage alive through home-made food and hand-made clothes.

In this exclusive interview with *Horizon*, Avantika discusses the need to preserve indigenous art and craft, her entrepreneurial experience with ROOHI, being a food vlogger, and why cultural festivals such as the Big Bang Festival are important. She also speaks of her personal experiences from her stay in Delhi, how food kept her connected to home, and her advice for young people from the North East.

Q. What do you think young individuals from the North East can do to preserve their unique art and craft?

Interview Questions: Mousam Patir
Additional Text: Pritish and Niloy

Firstly, preserving art and craft isn't just about protecting the past – it's also about making it relevant. We have to make art and craft a part of our daily life. We should wear, use, and promote indigenous handloom and crafts. We own the right to make them functional and fashionable.

Q. What inspired you to start ROOHI? Could you tell us about your experience as an entrepreneur with ROOHI? Have you faced any challenges?

My inspiration came sheerly from my love for handloom. My late mother Protima Haflongbar used to be a government employee and she'd wear beautiful sarees and Dimasa handloom to work. I'd always wish to own them all, wear them and showcase them to my friends. ROOHI was purposely born out of my earnest desire to help the Dimasa weavers in our Dima Hasao region who are so talented in their ways of weaving or making handcrafted jewellery. I only wanted to help by being the connection between consumers and our local artisans, and create this umbrella for sustainable livelihood. ROOHI is nothing without our craftswomen!

Being a social entrepreneur comes with its own share of challenges. I've worked tirelessly since 2015 with the weavers and artisans across Dima Hasao district. Due to the hilly terrain, my travels to these remote villages start off as challenging but end up forging the most memorable and heartfelt human connections. They motivate me to create more beautiful work and share their beauty with the rest of the world. The only issue I face now is that I'm working on my own. I do not have a big team to assist me. I travel to the villages, give them the orders, procure them, assess them, make videos of them, post them online, take orders and ship them away.



Avantika with ROOHI clothing's Dimasa Rigu Rikhaosa handwoven set.

> ROOHI was purposely born out of my **earnest desire** to **help** the Dimasa weavers in our **Dima Hasao region**

Q. How did your interest grow in food, and how did that interest eventually lead you to making content online?

I am an accidental food vlogger. I used to post content on Dimasa handloom and my ROOHI earrings which were handmade and colourful. But one day, I decided to shoot a random fermented fish chutney with tomato and onion. To which my husband remarked, "No one is going to watch this simple chutney video of yours". I wasn't demotivated because I had no expectations from the video. But in a matter of a few days, the video did go places and became viral. This provided a moral boost and I never stopped since then.

Q. Why is the Big Bang Festival important to you, and how do you think it helps local artisans and craftsmen?

The Big Bang is not just a festival for us. It is the beautiful connections that we have made with the people whom we met along the way, especially the villagers. It is the simple gift of life that is celebrated every day in the villages. The community that helps you thrive. The land that gives you food. The nature that protects us all. The guardians of the forests. The artisans who create from their hands and take as little as possible from nature. They build houses from the wood and bamboo that are grown in the forest. Their houses radiate earthiness. It is bare yet complete.

. . . in a matter of a few days, the video did **go places** and **became viral**. This provided a **moral boost** and I **never stopped** since then.



Avantika's thali challenge on her Instagram page



Some organic vegetables from Avantika's village farm

The focus of the Big Bang Festival is to shift the focus to the ordinary. To learn that village is the future. It is the place where we can seek to learn from the villagers who have kept the traditions alive.

Q. It has, unfortunately, become quite a norm among the mainstream Indian community to question and ridicule North East Indian cuisine. How do you personally deal with such situations and what advice would you like to give to young individuals who come across such situations while living away from home?

I've had my share of trolls who comment on every single video saying that even dogs wouldn't eat the food that I eat. It used to bother me and demotivate me and I would argue with them online. Then I realised, I am soon going to be forty and tackling people online wasn't the best choice. I concentrated on all the positive comments, kept creating and learning in the process.

To learn that **village is the future.** It is the place where we can **seek to learn** from the villagers who have kept the **traditions alive.**

Q. As someone who spent more than a decade in Delhi, did you ever






some indigi neous dishes






use food as a way of coping with the feeling of longingness for home?

Yes, of course. In the initial part of my life that I lived in Delhi, I had food in the hostel, which was interesting as well as a learning experience, but it could never satisfy my yearning. My soul longed for simple home food. Once I moved out of the hostel to a rented apartment, I took to eating home-cooked meals. I cooked a lot. I visited my friends from other parts of North East India and got introduced to the diversity of food that we have in our region. That's when I can say that my food palette was reset. Exploring different kinds of dried vegetables and dried meat, and different ways of cooking the same kind of food, I was fascinated and

kind of hooked to learn more. Fermented fish was quintessential and my parents would send me loads of greens and vegetables from home. Me and my friends would thrive on these items. We had learnt so much cooking by then.

Q. Please share an anecdote as a host at the Big Bang Festival.

The food at the Big Bang Festival was curated by me. I watched a group of young cooks step into the chaos of a live food stall for the first time. We crafted the menu rooted in our Dimasa indigenous flavours, but facing a crowd eager to taste our creations was a different challenge altogether. We started with nervousness and a few fumbled orders but soon the rhythm of cooking and serving took over. It was more than a food stall; it was a moment of transformation.

Q. Could you share a peek into the Dimasa community and their lifestyle through your childhood experiences?

Growing up in a Dimasa community, Bushu Dima (post-harvest festival) was the time of the year when the entire village came alive with dance and music. I remember the rhythmic beats of the Khram (drum) and the aroma of freshly brewed rice wine, Judima, in the air.

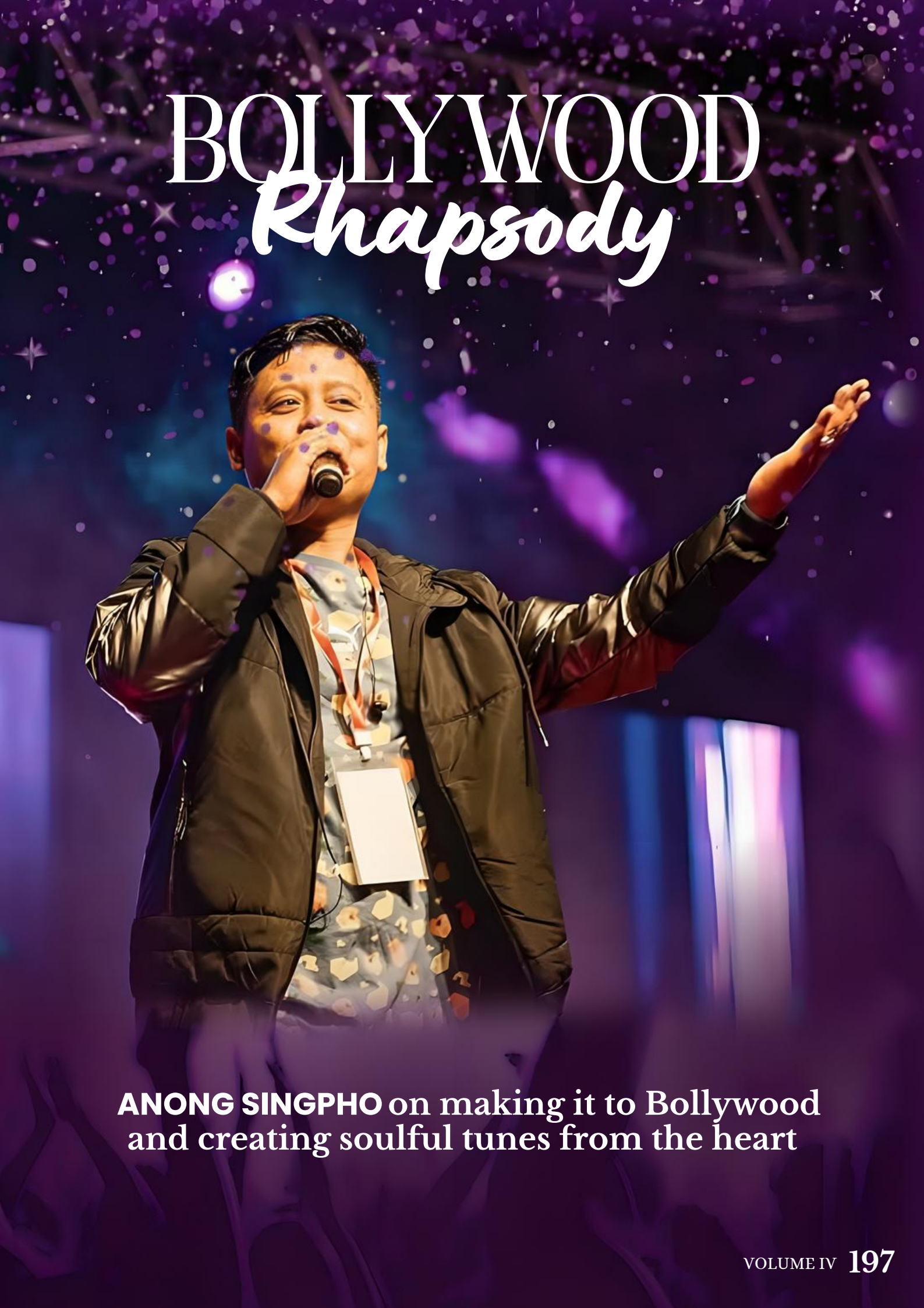
Q. Your content shares a lot of food made with local vegetables and ingredients which are found only in Northeast India. If there is one dish that you'd want to make as a comfort food if you were a student away from home, what would it be?

The one dish that I'd make would be rice thali with daal, khar, crunchy aloo bhaji, and some leafy greens :)



Cooking indigenous flavours

BOLLYWOOD *Rhapsody*



ANONG SINGPHO on making it to Bollywood and creating soulful tunes from the heart

"My songs are all based on life, love, and struggle. I want to convey things that can be expressed only through music, and that listeners can relate to."

Hailing from Arunachal Pradesh, Innao Nongong Singpho, widely known by his stage name Anong Singpho, has risen to fame as the first Bollywood playback singer from the region. Born in Miao Singpho village, this singing prodigy went on to debut with his music single *Laut Aao Maa* in collaboration with Zee Music in 2021, which has now garnered over 14 lakh views on YouTube.

Anong inculcated an interest in singing since his school days, and credits his elder brother for teaching him how to play instruments like the drums and the guitar. He grew up performing at school functions and showcasing his talent on social media, which eventually caught the eye of the major Indian music label, Zee Music.

From being a fan of Bollywood music to becoming the first Bollywood playback singer from Arunachal Pradesh, Anong's story inspires many others and paves the way for more such collaborations. His journey proves that talents can lead to extraordinary achievements even from remote regions, which are mostly overlooked by the mainstream media.

In this exclusive interview with *Horizon*, Anong talks about his childhood and his Delhi University days, his journey, and his songs.

Q. Who have been your childhood inspirations? Did you always dream of becoming a singer, or did this journey unfold naturally along the way?

KK, Kishore Kumar and Mohit Chauhan were my inspiration. I grew up listening to their songs. Songs like *Yaaron*, *Dosti*, *Dooba Dooba* were some childhood favourites, and they left a mark on me. To be honest, I never thought or had a dream of becoming a singer. Instead, this journey unfolded naturally when my friends and family made me realise that I can actually sing. So, I trusted them and the process that was revolving around me.

Q. Talking about childhood, you used to perform in your school functions and learnt to play the drums and the guitar from your elder brother. How have these

Interview Questions : Naku, Tanay

experiences shaped your journey? Are there any memorable anecdotes?

Yes, actually there was this incident way back during my school days when I was late for the class one day and as a punishment, my teacher asked me to sing in front of everyone, knowing that I was a shy and introverted person. From then on, I started performing in every school function.

As for learning to play from my brother, I grew up seeing him playing these instruments. So there had always been a curiosity to learn from him. I requested him and he taught me accordingly.

Q. Tell us about your days in Delhi University. Did you face any hardship while navigating your passion and studies here?

I really miss my university days, when I used to sing around in college events, whenever I got the opportunity. It was tough staying there for me as I had to travel daily on the metro to reach the university from my room. Besides juggling with going to college, I used to take my guitar in the evenings and go to studios for scratch recordings.



Q. How did you feel when you got an opportunity to collaborate with Zee Music?

I started posting my videos on social media from 2016, and I never ever imagined in my wildest dream that it would reach such a wide audience and that I would get an opportunity to sing for a Bollywood music label!

Q. What were the challenges you faced during your journey to Bollywood from the Northeastern region?

Starting the journey from the remote North East region to the

mainland was quite tough as there are so many talented singers there, and for me the hard work was twice and I feel lucky that I was picked for a reason out of the millions. I am still cherishing what I have become. It was an awesome experience working with all those professional crew. I understood how the production works and how much effort it takes to release a finished product in front of an audience. This is helping me in every project that I am making.

Q. We loved listening to your songs, *Safar* and *Yu Saalai*, both of which are strongly rooted in Arunachal Pradesh. Do you plan to write more songs in your mother tongue?

The song *Safar* has a very deep story which I wrote, composed, and sung from my heart during the COVID-19 pandemic. This song was a hope to every listener in the form of storytelling. Moreover, I am glad that *Yu Saalai*, a love number, has also garnered so many listeners abroad, mostly in Southeast Asia .

Yes, I have recently already released a regional audio *Myit Hkrum Manau* on all streaming platforms. Many more are yet to come.

Q. Your latest song *Saajna,* featuring an LGBTQIA+ couple in the music video, was a bold and beautiful choice. What was the inspiration behind it? Were you concerned about how some traditionalists might react? How did you prepare



to approach any potential criticism?

I was ready to take the criticism, and I wanted to break the stereotype and show viewers that it is fair and normal for every person to choose their partner without any fear of discrimination. Therefore, the viewers must adapt to the reality and accept it.

Q. What keeps you inspired to write such heartfelt and beautiful songs?

My songs are all based on life, love, and struggle. I want to convey things that can be expressed only through music, and that listeners can relate to. I just want my music to be the voice of my emotions.

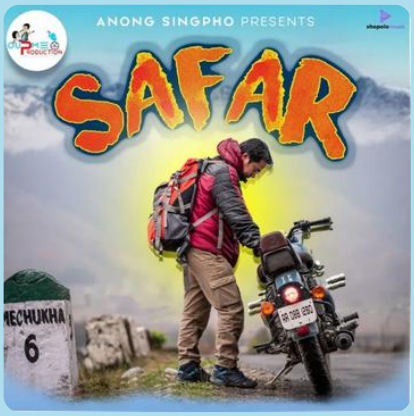
Q. What piece of advice would you like to give to individuals from the Northeast who aspire to make it into the music industry, especially Bollywood?

Keep hustling, keep creating originals, work hard, and one fine day you will get your result.

LISTEN TO ANONG SINGPHO'S SONGS:
Click on the Song Covers



Laut Ao Maa



Safar



Saajna

FESTIVE FERVOUR

LONIA GUMJA documents the Chalo-Loku festival of the Nocte tribe





Arunachal Pradesh, home to 26 major tribes and over 100 sub-tribes, is a land rich in cultural heritage and traditions. The Chalo Loku festival is one of the most significant cultural celebrations of the Nocte tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Deeply rooted in the traditions and agricultural practices of the community, this festival embodies the essence of unity, prosperity, and gratitude towards nature. Over the years, Chalo Loku has evolved from a village-specific observance to a centrally recognized festival celebrated annually on November 25th in places such as Khonsa, Deomali, and Itanagar, where the Noctes have a considerable population.

THE NOCTE TRIBE: An Overview

The Nocte tribe is one of the major tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh, with ancestral connections tracing

back to various regions of Myanmar. Their society is highly organized, with a distinct socio-cultural structure that has stood the test of time. The term *Nocte* translates to "village man" or "resident of a village". The Noctes are further subdivided into different groups based on geographical settlements and cultural affinities, including Kotey Nocte, Jaro Nocte, Ollo Nocte, Hakhun Nocte, Khappa Nocte, Hawa Nocte, and Pho-Lamlak Nocte.

Linguistically, the Nocte people speak a language that belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group. With a population exceeding 100,000, they primarily inhabit the Patkai Hills of Tirap and Changlang districts in Arunachal Pradesh. Additionally, a hundred families migrated to Assam in the 1800s and now reside in Pontuan, Naharkatia. Known for their chieftainship, administrative prowess, salt trade, flintlock rifles, woodcraft, and unique cultural traditions, including their past headhunting practices, the Noctes hold a significant place in the history and heritage of the region.



MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF CHALO LOKU

In the Nocte dialect, the term *Chalo* is derived from *chh* (paddy), while *Loku* is derived from *Lofe* (to drive out) and *Rang-Ku* (season), meaning "to drive out the old season of the year". The festival marks the end of the harvesting season, signifying prosperity and the arrival of a new agricultural cycle. In some Nocte villages, it is celebrated in July or August, while others observe it post-harvest in October or November. The exact date is determined by village elders based on lunar cycles.

During Chalo Loku, the Noctes invoke the blessings of Almighty Joban and their ancestors for good crops, health, prosperity, and communal harmony. The festival fosters love, unity, and brotherhood among the people, strengthening social bonds.

RITUALS AND CELEBRATIONS

The festival spans three days, each with unique rituals and significance:

Day 1: Phaamlamja

The first day involves the collection of food and drinks, particularly the slaughtering of animals such as buffaloes, pigs, and chickens. Local rice wine, known as *jumin*, is also prepared in advance. Unlike other ritualistic slaughterings, no religious rites are performed on this day, as the main focus is on preparing food for the following days of celebration.

Day 2: Chaamkatja / Taamkatja

This is the most significant day of the festival, marked by communal engagements and prayers. The day begins with welcoming guests and friends, followed by a gathering at the *chaatam*, a sacred location generally situated on the outskirts of the village. Here, led by the village chief, prayers are offered for the well-being of the people and agricultural prosperity. Traditional log drums are beaten continuously, signifying the commencement of the main event. After the prayers, a grand feast and cultural performances follow, fostering a sense of togetherness and joy among the Noctes.

Day 3: Thaanglangja

The third day is a post-festive celebration. In the morning, the chief and his council members perform an ancient ritual of reading omens by breaking eggs (*wosok-wasok*). Based on these omens, they select jhoom (shifting cultivation) plots for the upcoming agricultural year. The *chinlit* ceremony also takes place on this day, where individuals visit their maternal uncle and aunt's house to receive sacred ginger (*chinlit*). This practice symbolizes blessings for health and protection. The villagers then visit each other's homes, share food and drinks, and finally gather in the courtyard of the village chief to perform traditional dances.

DANCES AND COSTUMES

Chalo Loku is also a time for vibrant traditional performances, showcasing the rich heritage of the Noctes.

War Dance



The war dance is a dynamic and energetic performance where men reenact battle actions using traditional weapons such as guns, swords, spears, and shields. This dance reflects the tribe's valor and warrior spirit.



Chalo Dance

The Chalo dance is a traditional community dance performed during the festival, open to people of all ages. It symbolizes unity and integrity within the tribe. Participants move rhythmically to the beats of traditional instruments, dressed in their cultural attire.

Traditional Attire

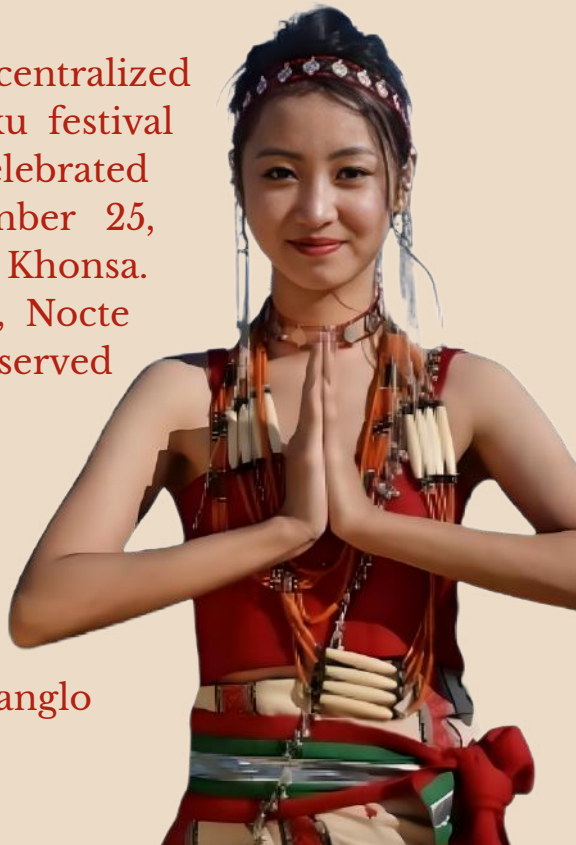
Men typically wear a loincloth styled like an Indian dhoti, adorned with feathered headgear and various ornaments. Women wear blouses paired with cotton skirts and accessorize with traditional jewelry, including armlets, anklets, necklaces, headbands, and earrings. The attire reflects the tribe's artistic craftsmanship and cultural identity.

PREPARATIONS FOR CHALO LOKU

Preparations for Chalo Loku begin months in advance. Community service plays a crucial role, with villagers engaging in activities such as clearing inter-village roads, making traditional rice wine, and preparing festival attire and ornaments. Young people gather firewood, leaves, and other necessary materials for the festival, while men procure livestock. Folk dance and music rehearsals take place weeks before the event. Cultural stalls and pavilions are set up, ensuring a well-organized and festive atmosphere.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND EVOLUTION

The first centralized Chalo Loku festival was celebrated on November 25, 1968, in Khonsa. Previously, Nocte villages observed individual harvest festivals under different names, such as Ranglo



Chalo and Ronghuan. Recognizing the need for a unified celebration, the first Chalo Loku committee was formed in 1968, with Shri Wangpha Lowang as President and Shri Wangkap Lowang Rajkumar as Secretary. The Chiefs of Namsang and Borduria, two of the most influential Nocte villages, served as patrons.

Although the term *Chalo Loku* signifies the harvest and transition to a new agricultural cycle, over time, it has also gained cultural and social importance, not only among the Noctes but also in the broader tribal community of Arunachal Pradesh.

In Essence ...

Chalo Loku is more than just a festival; it is a celebration of life, heritage, and community spirit. Rooted in agrarian traditions, it continues to be a symbol of Nocte identity and cultural pride. As modernization progresses, the festival serves as a reminder of the tribe's historical legacy and the need to preserve its rich traditions. Today, Chalo Loku stands as a beacon of unity, connecting generations and reinforcing the values of togetherness, gratitude, and cultural continuity.



Lonia Gumja is presently working as a Research Assistant at the Tribal Research Institute under Department of SJETA, Govt. Of Arunachal Pradesh. She hails from Daporijo in Upper Subansiri District, Arunachal Pradesh. She did her Masters degree in Anthropology and is currently pursuing an MA in History.

LOVE AND HONOUR FOR THE ELDERLY



The Sammi Honah (also known as Simmi Honam / Gaatur/ Himi Donam), often referred to as the "Last Supper", is a practice primarily observed by the Tani group of Arunachal Pradesh. It is a heartfelt celebration of respect and gratitude towards elderly parents, praying for their longevity and well-being. The essence of Sammi Honah lies in the children's devotion to their aging parents. It is grand feast organized within the village, where families, relatives, and neighbours gather to honour the elderly parents.

The feast is mostly held by the sons, ensuring that their parents are properly celebrated and respected. The event is not just a solemn occasion but a joyous celebration filled with merrymaking, communal bonding, and prayers. During the celebration, elderly parents distribute gifts among the children, grandchildren, family, and friends, symbolizing their blessings and love.

A significant part of the tradition involves the priest chanting prayers for the long life and good health of the aged parents. These rituals are deeply rooted in indigenous spiritual beliefs, emphasizing the role of ancestors and the divine in ensuring a prosperous and harmonious life. The gathering serves as an opportunity for younger generations to acknowledge the sacrifices and wisdom of their elders while strengthening community ties.



Text: Lonia Gumja

REMEMBERING WORLD WAR II IN NORTH EAST INDIA

BRITAIN'S FORGOTTEN BATTLES IN KOHIMA AND IMPHAL

PAONE MARK highlights a forgotten narrative through the perspective of North East India



Amidst the bustling streets of Kohima and Imphal stand the war memorials that hold the forgotten chapters of World War II. Fought between March to July 1944, the monuments, history and graveyards now hold the sacrifices and triumphs that resulted in the halt of the Japanese force.

While the British, the Japanese, and the indigenous population viewed the war through distinct lenses, the narratives of the people of the North East are often overlooked. For instance, it is considered "Britain's Greatest Battle": historical documentation and personal accounts laud their soldier's triumphs, valour and selflessness. The Japanese, on the other hand, viewed it as a humiliating defeat – the war claimed the lives of thousands of their soldiers, influencing their post-war reflection. Consequently, war tourism emerged as a way to remember the conflict. However, these tours prioritized the narratives of the twin battle, marginalizing the local histories. The Indian state, meanwhile, sought to integrate the North East into the framework of Indian nationalism through nationalistic commemoration and historical accounts.





Top: India Peace Memorial, Imphal
Bottom: Kohima War Cemetery

In December 1941, the Japanese forces pushed through East Asia, culminating in the defeat of the British and Indian forces in Burma and the latter's withdrawal into India. In the spring of 1944, Japan initiated Operation U-Go, an offensive aimed at North East India,

> "We saw **abandoned trenches** and **destroyed villages**, and as we moved forward, the **smell of death** was **everywhere** . . ."

On the Article Cover: A member of the Worcestershire Yeomanry views an amusing roadsign beside an ancient standing stone at "Stonehenge Camp" on the Imphal to Kohima road. The sign reads "Worcester, 5100 miles & No Way Out" and "Tokyo, 2,800 miles & Way Out", November 1944.

with the strategic goals of impeding Allied reinforcements and establishing a forward base within India.

The outnumbered British Indian forces at Kohima relied heavily on air-dropped supplies, engaging in bitter fighting despite being besieged. “We saw abandoned trenches and destroyed villages, and as we moved forward, the smell of death was everywhere,” said the 22-year-old Captain Robin Rowland of the Punjab Regiment as he attempted to relieve the 1500 soldiers who had held out for weeks against the outnumbering Japanese force.

The Japanese had attacked Imphal in early March 1944. However, following the counter-offensive launched by the Allies, they had to retreat from Kohima by June 1944 because of heavy casualties and



Map of British India and Burma


British soldiers search through long grass for Japanese snipers while covered by a Bren gun team.

insufficient supplies. With nearly 60,000 dead and wounded, they were forced to plan a return to Burma.

The valuable knowledge of the terrain possessed by the Nagas significantly aided the British. Mr Sosangtemba Ao recalls, “The Japanese bombers were flying every day dropping explosives. The sound was deafening and there was smoke after each attack. It was distressing.” Despite having worked for the British for two months earning a mere rupee daily, Mr Ao held strong admiration for the Japanese soldiers, who did not fear death and would resort to suicide rather than surrender.

Known locally as *Japan Lan*, signifying the War of Japan, World

World War II stands as the most devastating conflict recorded in history. By January 1941, rumours of war had preceded the actual battle in Manipur. The local prophecy about *nongpok thong hangba*, i.e. "the opening of the eastern gates", promised liberation from colonial rulers by the armies from the east. The Imphal-Koirengei airfield camp was set up to accommodate the waves of refugees navigating towards Manipur on their passage towards Dimapur and Silchar. Cities were destroyed and there were civilian casualties as Imphal was bombed for the first time on 10 and 16 May 1942. Following April, the Japanese forces attempted to attack the Imphal grounds from multiple directions. In response, the Allied forces fought relentlessly, ultimately repelling the Japanese back into Burma, resulting in a significant defeat upon them.

The Battle of Red Hill, also known as Point 2926, was one of the most intense battles of the Imphal campaign, thereby securing its importance within the narrative of World War II. It was during this battle that the attempt of the Japanese to invade British India and their advance through Asia was halted.

Decades later, in 2013, the *Second World War Imphal Campaign* was founded by Mr Rajeshwor and Mr Arambam Singh in an attempt to recover the remains of the 'forgotten war'. "Searching for a person's remains is like looking for a needle in the proverbial haystack," states Mr Rajeshwor as he highlights the



"The **Japanese bombers** were **flying every day dropping explosives**. The sound was **deafening** and **there was smoke** after each attack. It was **distressing**."

A C47 Dakota dropping supplies at Pallel in Manipur, 1944









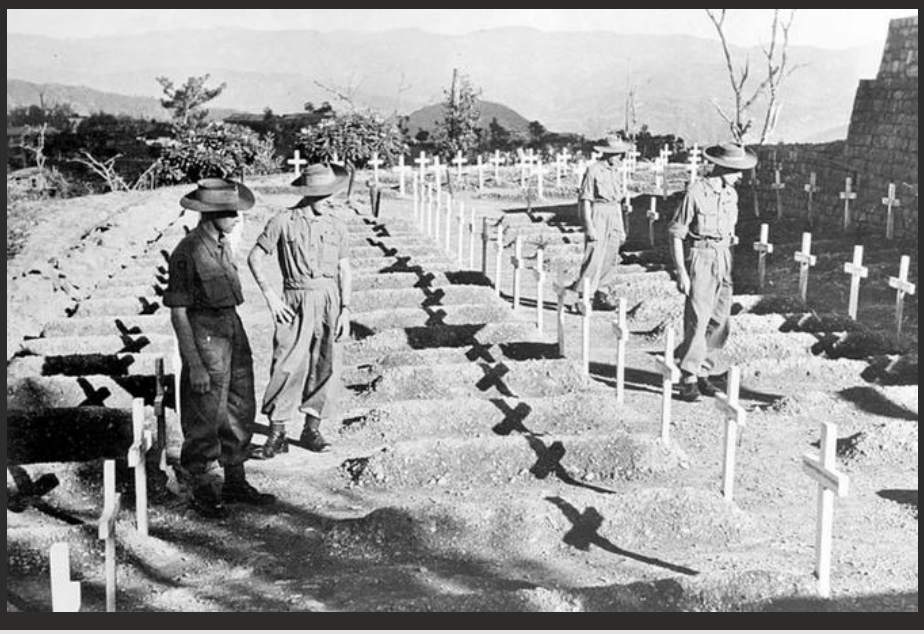
Left Top: British troops inspect captured Japanese ordnance, Imphal, 1944; **Left Bottom:** British troops; **Right Top:** FSD Hill on Kohima Ridge where some of the fiercest fighting of the battle took place; **Right Bottom:** An M3 Lee tank crosses a river north of Imphal

challenges in recovering the lost individuals. Their dedicated team, driven by the fulfilment that comes from alleviating the families burdened with grief, has been rigorously searching for their remains.

Fought between British and Japanese forces from April 4 to June 22, 1944, the Battle of Kohima played a crucial part in the Burma Campaign. The war demonstrated the disastrous potential of human destruction through advanced technology.







Left Top: Inspecting an abandoned gun on the Tiddim Road, Imphal, 1944;
Bottom: Men of the Royal West Kent Regiment pay silent tribute to comrades who fell in the Battle of Kohima in 1945;
Right Top: Sosangtemba Ao, who lived through the War, remembering the Battle of Kohima

For Japan, the siege of Kohima was necessary to secure Southeast Asia, but for the British, its defence was essential to protect the Indian subcontinent.

The Nagas faced significant hardships during the war. "They were willing, indefatigable, cheerful and amazingly gentle," recounts Bisheshwar Prasad, describing how Nagas served as guides, interpreters, porters, spies, stretcher-bearers, and trench diggers, with some even sacrificing their lives. The British extensively relied on the information provided by the Nagas. Many Nagas

> (The) **Nagas served as** guides, interpreters, porters, spies, stretcher-bearers, and trench diggers, with some even **sacrificing their lives**.

joined the British Army to fight against the Japanese. Many Naga villages were destroyed in the fighting.

Initially, the Japanese paid for supplies with Japanese yen and forged Indian rupees. However, they subsequently ill-treated the Nagas, taking their food, livestock, and household goods, destroying cooking pots, and committing brutal acts including killings, rape, and torture against the Nagas. This ill-treatment by the Japanese and the corresponding efforts by the British to provide relief and support to the Nagas, resulted in fostering a sense of loyalty towards the British.

Although the war had scarred the lives of the Nagas, it inevitably led them to understand the importance of education to overcome their isolation from the world. Designated as "enemy territory", the British Indian government denied compensation for the affected regions and would only accept responsibility for damages solely inflicted by the Allied army.

The Imphal Peace Museum at Maibam Lotpa Ching in Manipur was established by Japanese organisations to honour the battle. In 1967, the Indian government further contributed by building a memorial to pay tribute to the INA, i.e. the Indian National Army, Subash Chandra Bose, and the local recruits during the war. In-depth cultural studies have been conducted in the region to collect local wartime experiences, which will eventually contribute to the development of local narratives.

Although the battle is considered to have "changed the course of the Second World War in Asia", it failed to capture the public imagination in the way that other battles in Europe and North Africa had. Despite being



View of Kohima Ridge after the Battle

described as “the forgotten war”, it was voted as Britain’s greatest battle following a debate at the National Army Museum in London. Robert Lyman narrates, “Great things were at stake in a war with the toughest enemy any British army has had to fight”. There have been minimal efforts made in the subcontinent to emphasise the significance of the battle which claimed the lives of thousands of soldiers. “One of the reasons I think was that India’s leaders were too busy dealing with the effects of transition and partition initially,” explains Charles Chasie. The post-war narratives centered on the Indian Independence movement, overshadowing the battle in the North East. While the rest of the nation rejoiced in its independence, the Manipur and Naga Hills were bitterly frustrated by countless compensation petitions rejected and financial losses from the war. With the integration of Manipur and Naga hills into the Indian Union, numerous historical narratives were finally incorporated into the framework of the national Indian history.

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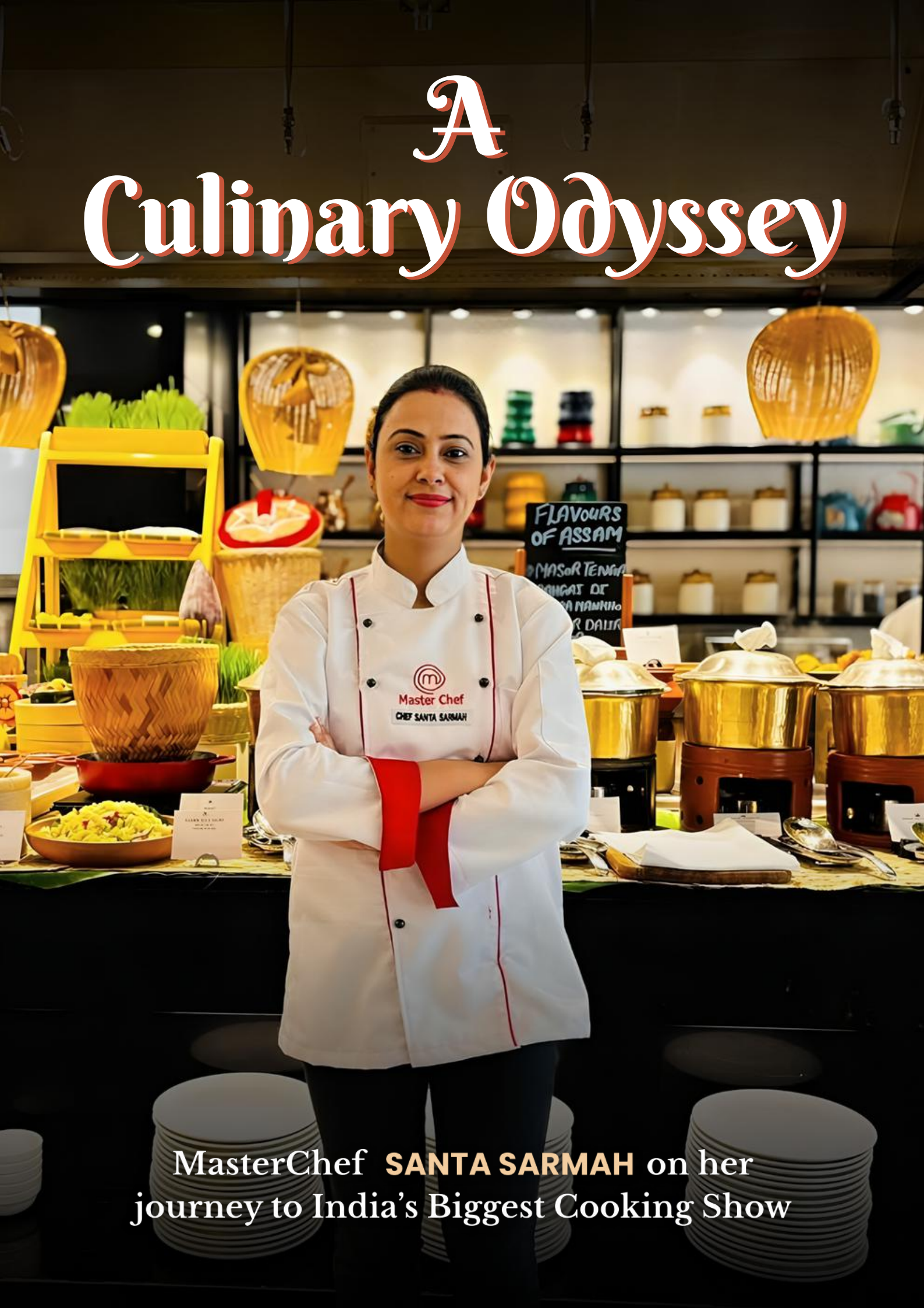
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Right: Molungkimong villagers conducting memorial service at a WW-2 fighter plane crash site on the crash anniversary; **Left:** Gurkhas, fighting in the British troops, open fire during an attack near Pallel, Manipur

A Culinary Odyssey



MasterChef **SANTA SARMAH** on her journey to India's Biggest Cooking Show

In the vibrant world of Indian cuisine, where each region tells its own flavourful story, Santa Sarmah has emerged as a soulful storyteller of Assamese flavours, one dish at a time. Born and raised in Amlighat, Assam, her roots are deeply embedded in the state's rich culinary heritage.

Santa Sarmah was the 1st runner up of MasterChef India 2023. Sarmah was also the winner of Rengoni Grihini Superstar Season 2. From the comfort of her own kitchen to a platform like MasterChef India, Santa transitioned from a self-taught home cook and baker to becoming one of the finalists of India's biggest cooking show. She defied many odds in her culinary journey and earned the moniker of "the fearless Gorkhani" at the MasterChef show. Her aim is to highlight the authentic Assamese Cuisine to the world.

Santa's passion for cooking is an ode to the culture she represents so dearly. And her determination to put Assamese cuisine on the world map, is an inspiration for many. Read along, as she talks about her love for indigenous food, her childhood, her experience of competing at MasterChef, and the challenges she has had to overcome, in this exclusive interview with *Horizon*.

Q. How have your family traditions or your parents influenced or shaped your culinary style and the way you connect with food?

I will have to begin from my childhood to answer this. My mother was one of the best chefs I knew.

> Santa Sarmah was the **1st runner up** of **MasterChef India** 2023.

Those were the days when people didn't have ovens to bake cakes or electronic beaters to make cake frosting. And yet, *Ma* would never allow us to have any store-bought items. Be it biscuits or cakes, she would make everything at home for us. She would sometimes use sand for baking and whip the cream by hand. So, I grew up observing all these.

We used to live in a colony, where even small good news would occasion big feasts and merry-making. The feasts would be prepared by *Ma*, together with some other neighbourhood women. But since *Ma* was a very good cook, she would often be invited by various households to prepare the feast for a certain occasion. After finishing her work at home, she would often go and offer her help to our neighbours. It was a community marked by unity and harmony.

And then, when I was around 6 years old, *Ma* passed away. So after that, it was just the three of us at home. Now, it was *Deuta*, my father, who

had to cook our meals. My maternal grandmother, *Aita*, would visit us often, or sometimes she or *Deuta* would take us to her house to spend the holidays. *Aita* was a Vaishnavite, so she refrained from consuming ginger and onions. But I was surprised to observe how, even without these items, she was able to dish out the most delicious recipes!

Also, when *Ma* passed away, one thing we realised was that we could not bank on a househelp for long. So, it was *Aita* who first taught and introduced me to cooking. She didn't want us to bank on anyone. She wanted to make sure that we were able to feed ourselves whenever we felt hungry.

We also had a few Bengali neighbours back then, who loved us a lot and sometimes invited us to have a meal. I used to love their cuisine. That has also influenced me a lot. Besides, I had my own Assamese and Nepali cultures which I got to experience first-hand.

Back then, I had no idea that one could make a profession out of cooking. But as I grew older, I gradually learnt about courses like hotel management and food technology. As I had studied in an Assamese medium school, I had a phobia about English. So, I doubted a lot if I would be able to excel in a career like hotel management without a proficiency in English.



Although this doubt and phobia eventually didn't let me pursue this career, I kept the dream of becoming a chef alive in me. But then again, I had no one who could guide me at that time.

So, this is how I would say I developed my love for cooking in my early years.

Q. What do you like the most about your profession?

The title of "chef" brings with it many responsibilities and duties, including professionalism and discipline. While every chef is a cook, not every cook can be called a chef. A chef is required to know the skillful management of a professional kitchen, such as its set-up, the distance that should be maintained between two chefs, the size and height of the gas stove, and so on. Hence, there lies a difference between a chef and a homecook.

Sadly, even though we have progressed much as a society, certain narrow-minded people don't show you enough respect when you call yourself a cook. But when I call myself a chef, the title itself brings a lot of respect and responsibility with it. I really like when people appreciate me as a chef, and not just a cook. Plus, I don't believe in being the kind of chef who orders the staff to manage the kitchen. Besides managing the staff, the chef also has to look after the whole kitchen. When I go to different places and represent my cuisine at grand hotels, I never hand over the kitchen wholly to the staff. I always make sure that I am the one guiding and preparing the dishes, because it is me who knows how my dish has to be presented more than anyone else. So, I really enjoy being in the kitchen.

Q. Assamese cuisine is not very known in the world, but you have successfully showcased it on both national and global levels. What are your expectations regarding the future of Assamese cuisine?

To give you an example, when we talk of South Indian food, the most common items that come to our mind are Idli and Dosa. We fail to realise that there are many other varieties of dishes in South Indian cuisine. Likewise, people used to see Assamese cuisine through a stereotypical lens: that it consists only of greens.

People today are extremely familiar with Indian dishes like Litti Chokha and Butter Chicken. I wish people develop an intimate knowledge of Assamese cuisine in a similar way. I wish that every restaurant or hotel has at least the Assamese thali in their menu.

Recently, I learnt that Chef Ranveer Brar has introduced our Assamese Til Chicken (chicken with black sesame seeds) in his Dubai restaurant. I think this is definitely a great achievement for not only Assamese cuisine but also me, because I had prepared Til Chicken in three different ways during my MasterChef journey. I feel great that I have been able to play an influential role. People used to have no idea about Masor Tenga (tangy fish curry), but via MasterChef, they got to learn about it. Yet, I believe, our Assamese cuisine has a long way to go.

A positive impact of social media is that today many food influencers

People today are **extremely familiar with Indian dishes** like Litti Chokha and Butter Chicken. I wish **people develop an intimate knowledge of Assamese cuisine** in a similar way.

have emerged from the state. That's a great thing, as earlier preparing authentic Assamese food in reels wasn't really a trend. But, it is also important to note that although half of these influencers authentically show Assamese cooking, the other half sometimes present the same in a wrong way. So, it should be our responsibility to maintain and put forward the authentic dish.

These days, there might be a fusion of dishes like Idli and Sambhar, but people knew what authentic Idli and Sambhar was, before this trend of fusion emerged. Similarly, there's no point if we don't show the world what the real Aloo Pitika (an Assamese mashed potato dish) and Pitha (traditional Assamese rice preparation, made during Bihu) are before putting forward a fusion variant. People should first know the authentic way to cook Assamese food rather than first trying to create a fusion dish. I have also seen many people calling Assamese food tasteless. So, we should try our best to break all such stereotypes. If you are a food influencer, it should be your responsibility to influence people in the right way. That's my expectation of the future of our cuisine.

Q. What part of Assamese cuisine did you try to highlight in the MasterChef competition and continue to do so even now through your social media handles? What part of the cuisine do you wish people knew more about?

There are some differences in the food culture of upper, middle and





lower Assam. For example, duck is prepared differently in upper and lower Assam. Similarly, mutton fat is cooked with Mati Maah Dali (Black Lentil Dal) in lower Assam, but again it is cooked differently in Upper Assam. Even though such differences exist in terms of the region's geography, I believe we should work unitedly, irrespective of these differences. As Assamese people, we should all try to take forward the Assamese cuisine as one.

Today, people know about some indigenous ingredients like Khaar (an Assamese alkaline-based dish), bamboo shoot , Bhut Jolokia (ghost pepper), etc. In the past, Masor Tenga was prepared without onions, because onions came very late to Assam. Instead, a herb named Ponoru was used. Garlic and onion were never used in the tangy curry. Variations in the recipe do exist among different communities. If I take the example of the Nepali cuisine, we use garlic while cooking fish with Outenga (elephant apple). But, in Assamese cuisine, garlic is not used for the same recipe.

So, I want to highlight the authentic recipes of the various dishes of Assam. I don't want to only showcase these dishes by fusing them with modern renditions. Fusion can happen only when people become fully aware of the actual dish first.

Q. Besides Assamese, which cuisine is your personal favourite?

Apart from Assamese cuisine, I personally love Bengali food, because you can find many similarities between Assamese and Bengali cuisines. Besides, Maharashtrian food has also influenced me a lot. The way they prepare Bengan (Brinjal) ka Bharta is very similar to our Bengena Pitika. I love their cooking techniques like the usage of garlic and natural spices, their method of roasting, and so on.

I like North Indian cuisine as well. However, I don't have much knowledge regarding South Indian food. But I am trying to learn the micro cuisines of South India. Like I mentioned earlier, it is not limited to just Idli, Dosa and Sambhar.

And, of course, how can I forget about my Gorkha cuisine? (laughs). So, these are my favourites.

Q. How did you tackle the pressure in such a high stake competition? How did you manage your time, as there were time boundaries during the competition?

First of all, I am a housewife, and I feel proud to call myself one. The job of a housewife is one where there's no salary and rest despite the 24X7 working hours. As housewives, we always ponder about what to cook next. So, is this a job of any less

pressure? While preparing the meals, we need to consider everyone's likings and expectations in the family. So, I think the strength of handling such pressure and situations is within every housewife and woman.

Besides, I have always been good at managing time, even in my home. And I have always followed the rule of "Clean as you go" in my own kitchen. It means that as you cook the dish, you also need to clean the counter and the utensils. Living in a joint family also made me good at multitasking.

I believe time management is very essential at every stage of life, not just in a competition like MasterChef. Everyone should try to finish their everyday tasks within their specified timeframe.



When it comes to dealing with pressure, it is actually a mind game. I am a very nervous person, but I never let others see through me that I am afraid. During the competition, no matter how nervous I was, after making the dish I would take it to the judges confidently, while consoling myself that my dish was the best. I would put my heart and soul onto that plate. And since it was my big dream to represent Assamese cuisine on a large platform like MasterChef, with every episode, as my dream turned into reality, my desire for success increased. That really boosted my confidence and gave me strength to handle the pressure.

Sometimes the shooting hours could stretch very long, while only a limited time was given to us for preparing the dish. It would take time to fix the cameras, do the make-up, and prepare the dialogues. Sometimes the shoots could even stretch to 16-17 hours.

So, at times when, after such long hours of shooting, the dish of that day didn't meet the mark and I ended up in the danger round, I would feel a lot of pressure within me. At those times, thoughts like what if I got eliminated in the next round would constantly come to my mind. Homesickness also hit me at times and I would feel like giving up. But, at the end of the day, my strong determination helped me to

overcome all these hurdles.

Q. What are the similarities and differences between your own kitchen and the MasterChef kitchen?

There are a lot of differences as my kitchen is not as well equipped as the MasterChef kitchen. In my home, I have cooked with both firewood as well as biogas. Sometimes, when the biogas got over, I've had to fix a gas cylinder, too. Recently, we observed my mother-in-law's death anniversary. For the ceremony, we were preparing food in a big burner, but when we ran out of fuel, we had to fix something else. I think the real pressure comes in such situations where you have a responsibility to feed hundreds of people.

Since my kitchen is not well equipped, I needed some time to get accustomed to the MasterChef kitchen. I feel most at home in my own kitchen despite the lack of all the high-tech equipment. My own kitchen holds a special place in my heart as this is where I had started my journey. Nothing can be compared to the pleasure of cooking in my own kitchen and feeding people.

The MasterChef kitchen was like a temple for me as I had dreamed of it for a very long time. I would pray to Agni Devta every day at the MasterChef kitchen before I started my cooking for the round.

Q. You have got an opportunity to work with chefs like Vikas Khanna and Ranveer Brar. How was your experience?

I have had the experience of multitasking since I belong to a joint family, as I have mentioned before. But I have noticed that such Michelin star chefs have mastered the art of how to plan and divide their work, since a dish contains various components. When we cook in our home, we tend to use every utensil, but I have learned from them how to finish my cooking in a clean step-by-step way within a limited space and time slot.

> The **MasterChef kitchen** was like **a temple for me** as I had dreamed of it for a **very long time**.

And it is not that a chef should know only how to cook. A chef has to also know how to make the dish presentable. Whenever a chef represents their food around the globe, they also describe it. So, a chef should also have the ability to explain the dish. You need to be able to connect the dish with yourself. I have learned this skill of connectivity from Chefs Vikas Khanna, Ranveer Brar and Garima.

And to observe such great chefs and their cooking was in itself a great achievement for us.

Q. Is there a festival that excites you the most because of the unique flavours and culinary traditions associated with it?

My most favourite festival is definitely Magh Bihu. Since it is Bhogali Bihu or the festival of feasting, a variety of dishes are available and prepared during the festival. I have always been connected to this festival since childhood, as I grew up in a colony. *Deuta* would bring hay and show us how to make the Meji (a structure made with hay and straw wrapped around a bamboo frame) and Bhelaghor (a temporary hut-like structure built in the fields).





The night would be spent in the Bhelaghor, while we feasted on roasted meat and meat cooked in bamboo tubes – dishes that I am still very fond of. So, all these memories make Magh Bihu very special to me.

The next festival would be Dol Utsav or Holi. I really like Durga Puja as well since it has great importance in our Gorkha culture. During Durga Puja, we cook a special mutton recipe with skin in our villages. I really enjoy these traditional rituals of Durga puja. There's also a special recipe known as Pakku, which is basically a slow cooked mutton recipe. It used to be traditionally served to guests with Chira (flattened rice). So, these are some festivals which are really close to my heart.

Q. Have you found yourself tweaking a recipe according to the likes of the people you are feeding? If so, how have you still maintained the authenticity of the dish?

I have tried fusion dishes in

Masterchef out of necessity. When I decided to make Poita Bhaat (a fermented rice dish) in the finals, the food team advised and pressured me to make it in a different way with a twist, rather than sticking to the authentic style. But doing so would compromise the actual flavour of Poita Bhaat. So, I did give the recipe a modern twist by using smoke. I smoked the dry bamboo shoot and used it to flavour the dish. Since I had to prepare a three course meal within three hours, I knew I would not be allowed to use rice fermented overnight. Hence, I had to try a new way. I added the mustard oil in a different way too, along with using burnt onions. I also presented the different Pitikas in a modern way.

So, I think we can use modern elements while presenting the dish, but the flavours should not be compromised. If you are making Til Pitha, for instance, and don't use Til, then the soul of the dish won't remain intact. I had prepared tea foam at MasterChef. I also tried making Tekeli Pitha using dark chocolate and coconut, instead of Til, because the bitter flavour of Til is quite similar to dark chocolate. In this way, I have incorporated different ingredients with a modern touch while maintaining the integrity of the authentic flavours.

Q. Do you think being true to a culture specific recipe is important and people should stick to rigid structure of cooking it, or do you like people adding their own twists to it?

There can be two ways of answering this. If you say that you want to have authentic Assamese cuisine, then I cannot add any twist to it. But if you say that you would like to try Assamese food with a "Santa Twist", then yes, I can try to twist the recipe. I have tried presenting Assamese and Nepali food in a modern way in various places, but I have never changed the true flavour profile of the dish. I had prepared Assamese Til Chicken Sushi in the MasterChef audition with Bora Saul (a variety of rice grown in Assam) rather than using Korean rice, but in doing so, I maintained the flavour of Til Chicken

Q. Lastly, what advice would you give the young generation who are eager to explore Assamese cuisine?

My advice would be to cultivate a proper knowledge of Assamese cuisine first. Recently, I saw someone using turmeric while making Khaar. While it can be their own twist or version, they should not promote it as authentic Assamese cuisine, as turmeric is never used in Khaar. So, learn and relish the pure Assamese dish first, and then you can add your own twist and style to it. And secondly, I would advise everyone to stay connected to their roots, while making progress in life.

Director's Cut



RAJNI BASUMATARY on depicting culture and the pain of violence on the silver screen

"Years of my **pent-up anger and resentment**, not directed at anyone in particular, **got released to a great extent** after making *Jwlwi: The Seed* and *Gorai Phakhri*."

How does one make a film on patriarchy without casting men? Director and actor Rajni Basumatary's latest critically-acclaimed Bodo language film, *Gorai Phakhri (Wild Swans)* has the answer. With a completely all-women cast, set in the lush green landscape of Assam's Bodoland Territorial Region, the film explores the lives of women recovering from decades of armed conflict between the state and the separatist groups. It premiered at the Vancouver International Film Festival in 2023 and has been screened in several film festivals since.

For Rajni, filmmaking is a cathartic experience, allowing her to share the trauma of insurgency, of which she has had a firsthand experience. She was born into a Bodo family in the town of Rangapara in Assam. She grew up in the politically violent times of state insurgency and the rise of separatist groups, which impacted her family and childhood, and has left a mark on her film career. Her 2019 film, *Jwlwi: The Seed*, written, directed, produced and also acted by her, is inspired by her own lived experiences of the turbulent period. The film went on to win several awards, including the 8th Assam State Film Awards for Best Actor (Female) and the Best Film in Other Language category.

Rajni received her undergraduate degree in Assamese literature from Handique Girls College, Gauhati University. Following which, she moved to Delhi in 1995, and began directing corporate films. In 2004, she wrote and produced the screenplay for *Anuraag*, an Assamese language romantic drama film,



which was critically acclaimed at its time of release. She made her directorial debut with the Assamese feature film *Raag: The Rhythm of Love* in 2014.

In this exclusive interview with *Horizon*, Rajni shares how cinema is a powerful way to preserve cultures and traditions, how it can be a medium through which filmmakers deal with their own grief and feelings, and how sharing stories allows one to find some closure.



Q. The Northeast is rich in diverse traditions and cultures. How do you think cinema can help in preserving and promoting these traditions?

Cinema is a very powerful tool to nurture and preserve cultures and traditions. In our region in particular, our culture has been passed on through oral medium. In my view, for various reasons, whether it's due to the variations in human understanding and skills of the communicator or the onslaught of this "30 seconds reel" age, cultural traditions get deviated and even diluted. When the members of the older generations will no longer be around, then there may not be anyone to retell our stories forever. Capturing them through cinema will keep our cultural traditions alive.

> When the **members of the older generations** will no longer be around, then there may not be anyone to **retell our stories forever**. Capturing them through **cinema** will **keep our cultural traditions alive**.

Q. What role has your personal background played in shaping your journey as an artist and storyteller?

More than glory, traumatic experiences equip one to tell deeper stories about the intricacies of human relationships, suffering, and pain. I believe I am who I am today as a storyteller because of the past experience of my life and the lives around me.

Q. Both your recent films *Gorai Phakhri: Wild Swans* and *Jwlwi: The Seed* have strong social themes. Both portray the long-lasting impact of insurgency on families and communities. What inspired you to tell these stories?

I lost several family members – some from immediate family and some from extended family – during the separatist movements in the region. The fight was between the state and the non-state actors, but normal families were impacted deeply. When violent happenings hit you and your loved ones, you are scarred and shell-shocked for years. You need to find ways to come out of the trauma. Years of my pent-up anger and resentment, not directed at anyone in particular, got released to a great extent after making *Jwlwi: The Seed* and *Gorai Phakhri*. Especially in the case of *Jwlwi*, when I saw the audience weeping after watching it, I felt like, "Now you know, how much suffering and pain one went through".

Q. What message would you like to share with aspiring young filmmakers from the Northeast?

I would ask them to remember that while training makes a skillful filmmaker, the training doesn't necessarily have to be by fancy film schools. You can identify a couple of masterful filmmakers and assist them in a few films. Watch good films, write, read and travel. After this, there's no reason why you wouldn't become a sensible filmmaker.

Interview Questions by
Pritish And Maurice

When **violent happenings** hit you and **your loved ones**,
you are **scarred** and **shell-shocked** for years.
You need to **find ways to come out** of the trauma.









Living Root Bridges

DOROTHY BHUYAN writes about identity formation and cultural perseverance in Northeast India

"Stone-people,
The polyglots,
Knowledgeable
In birds' language
And animal discourse.
The students,
Who learned from ants
The art of carving
Heads of enemies
As trophies
Of war.
Stone-people
The romantics
Who believed
The sun can sulk
The moon can hide
And the stars are not stars
But pure souls
Watching over bereaved hearts."

– Temsula Ao, *Stone-People*

The aforementioned lines by Temsula Ao stand as a testament to the very heart of Northeast India's heritage. The people here are inextricably connected to their histories — often erased and seldom remembered in the mainstream Indian discourse on heritage and

culture. And I write today, speaking of the hills that I've called home, tracing how art and culture have played a pivotal role in the shaping of our identity and in preserving our culture. The humanness of our culture is marked by the fact that the people and the art are merged into one — this inextricable connection is what gives this feeling of oneness to the legacy of art and culture in the land amidst the hills. The oneness of the art and the artist binds the craft to its roots, provoking strong emotions of patriotic valour and a feeling of unending awe.

The Northeastern region of India is a treasure trove of unseen beauty and landscapes, comprising the eight states of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Nagaland. From intricately woven textiles to delicately crafted bamboo handicrafts, the region is a tapestry of vivid artistic expression, with each thread weaving the identity of every state and its indigenous communities, crafts, and traditions. These traditions go centuries back, and indeed, the passion of the people has kept them alive even in times when indigenous crafts and art forms are often on the verge of extinction.

As we understand, art and craft serve as the custodians of a region's history of identity formation and cultural timeline. Therefore, this essay will play a critical role in tracing the role of art and craft in preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of Northeast India. In this essay, we will delve into various types of arts and crafts from the region and how they actively play a role in shaping and preserving its culture.

THE HANDLOOMS OF HISTORY: SUBALTERN VOICES AND IDENTITY MARKERS

The eight states of Northeast India are renowned for their unique and vibrant attire and textile production. Muga silk is a specific kind of silk produced in Assam. The uniqueness of the textile and the closed practice of creating it have bestowed the textile with international recognition. In addition to that, eri and mulberry silk are other examples of such meticulous creations birthed out of the handlooms of Assam.

Textiles can often be identity markers in tribal regions, where traditional handwoven fabrics signify cultural motifs and identities. For example, Ao and Angami shawls are indigenous Naga shawls associated with the respective tribes. They feature specific motifs and color schemes that give them their distinctive look, a tradition followed by Kuki and Tangkhul tribes as well. Furthermore, Manipuri *phaneks* and *innaphi*s, as well as the Assamese











Clockwise from Left Top: Muga Cocoon, Phanek, Innaphi, Mekhela Sador Muga silk

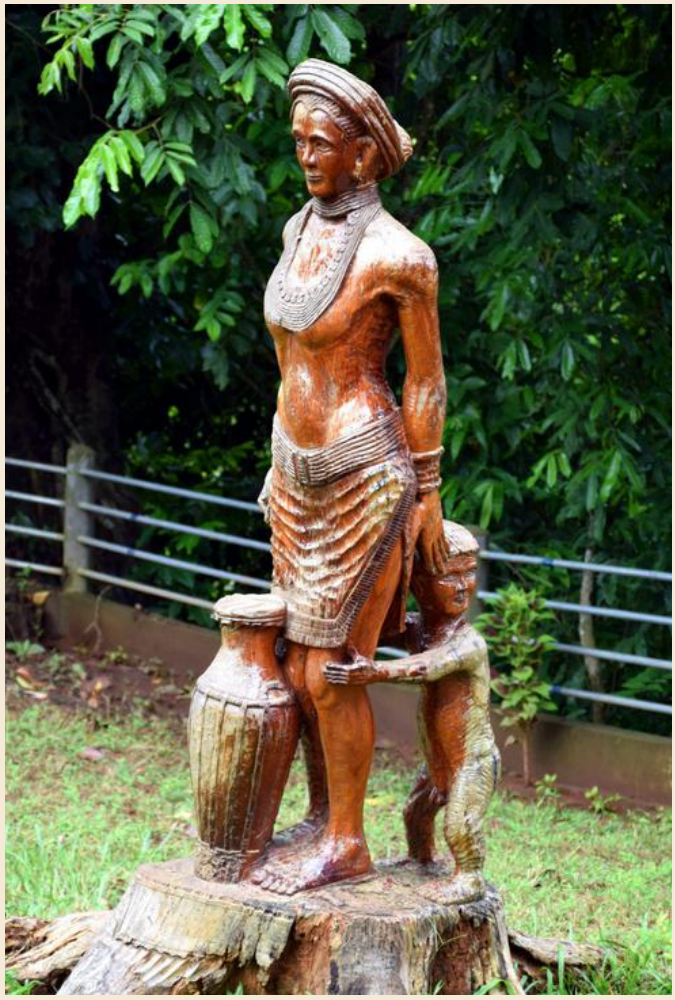
mekhela chador, are traditional attires that feature motifs customized to the state and its vast array of flora and fauna — becoming a screen to symbolize tribal identities, natural motifs, and folklore scenes.

Textiles play an important role in heritage preservation, as these attires have served as aesthetic markers of the various Northeastern tribes and communities for ages. Moreover, they provide a livelihood to millions of women who still practice the craft of bringing these beautiful fabrics to life. Thus, the process of identity formation of womanhood in Northeast India is indissolubly linked with the textile industry.

These textiles, in themselves, narrate the story of thousands of women from rural villages, such as Sualkuchi in Assam; these villages rely primarily on their textile industry, exports, and produce to garner revenue. The textile industry provides financial autonomy and entrepreneurial expertise to the women involved, empowering them and their skills through the craft.







Anti-Clockwise from Left Top: Bamboo craft of Assam, Brass and Bell craft of Assam, Wood-carving from Aminda Rangsa Art Village, Meghalaya

FROM HANDS TO CRAFTS: CUSTODIANS OF HERITAGE

Historians use the term "culture" to describe the enduring material tradition of a particular region—from pottery to paintings to jewelry, culture comprises it all. It is culture, therefore, that provides a distinct identity to a region and its people.

One can see it via the metaphor of a rainbow, each strand of color depicting an individual culture — different yet beautiful in its own right — forming into the larger picture of the rainbow. The rainbow itself would be incomplete without even one of its colors.

Handicrafts play an important role in preserving the allure of a culture while simultaneously narrating the very story of its origin from the stewards of the craft. The states of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura are highly regarded for their cane and bamboo crafts, such as furniture, baskets, and mats, among others — creating utilitarian masterpieces that are visually pleasing in their own right.

Brass and bell-metal craft is widely popular among all the states as well.

The state of Meghalaya has its own distinct tradition of making black pottery, while Sikkim is widely known for its woodwork carvings for monasteries, temples, and homes, as well as handmade papers used for religious scriptures and manuscripts. Woodwork is a common craft in Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland as well — often used to create figurines, masks, and household items.

Additionally, in the *Satra*s of Majuli, Assam, there is a special craft of creating masks out of clay, wood, or bamboo for traditional *bhaona* performances.

As we can see, handicrafts narrate the story of the states' origin and history. Preservation of handicrafts becomes a big step in preserving the heritage and culture of the entire region. The creation of these crafts is done in the most eco-friendly manner. The people of the Northeast region have always lived in harmony with nature, worshiping it as well as coexisting with it. The eco-friendly practices of creating these handicrafts via the sustainable and ethical production and procurement of natural raw materials, combined with the sturdiness and longevity of the crafts, stand as a testament to the communities' historical service and homage to Mother Nature.

The creations are a maneuvering of natural products turned into man-made pieces of art that are both aesthetically pleasing and sustainable.

FINE ARTS AND FERVOUR: RETELLING STORIES THROUGH VISUAL ART.

The fine arts of Northeast India reflect the culture, beliefs, and history of the region, thereby contributing to the distinct identity of the region as well as serving the function of tourist attraction and revenue generation for the communities that are keeping the craft alive.

Traditional paintings of Assam are of a religious and mythological nature, and some of them are found in the *Satra*s of Majuli. These are depicted in paintings or on manuscripts and temple walls, which contain the religious doctrines of Vaishnavism, and Assamese folk tales. They play a pivotal role in preserving culture, as scholars and common people alike visit these locations to learn the history and study them. Thangka paintings in Sikkim are used as meditation aids and religious symbols for the monasteries. These complex creations not only hold religious messages but also help the state earn money through tourism and the export of art.

The people of Manipur are particularly fond of dance-drama forms such as Ras Leela, which depict stories from Vaishnavism through exaggerated costumes, music, dramatics, and choreography. These performances are closely associated with festivals and rituals and thus help to strengthen cultural identity. These Ras Leelas become a reflection of the faith and popular religious and cultural beliefs of the people — often serving as a parallel practice of the mainstream form of Hinduism and Hindu mythology. This goes on to show how different cultures personalise faith, scriptures, and religion to create an intersection of mainstream religious currents and regional popular culture.

Fine arts in Nagaland include body art, which is a form of tribal tattooing and symbolic body painting that narrates stories of courage, ancestry, and spirituality. Displayed during festivals such as the Hornbill Festival, they serve to keep the Naga tribes' heritage and history of bravery alive, singing the cries of a warrior.

The fine art traditions of the Northeast region are like historical museums that help in retelling the stories of culture and identity formation of the region and thus, illustrate its history. They preserve folklore, rituals, and mythological stories, thus passing them from one generation to another. For example, the tattoos of Naga tribes are the symbol of the early generations, the stories of spirit, and the positions of prowess. The Ras Leela of Manipur serves as the dance-drama aspect of Vaishnavite culture. These art forms also capture historical identity; for instance, the rock carvings of Tripura illuminate people with knowledge of the history of civilization in the area.







Through these ways, art traditions become an embodiment of pride among the various tribes and communities while at the same time creating an interface that allows the perceptions of these cultural motifs in the region to remain fresh and relevant as the region modernizes — while still birthing a historical sense and patriotic vigour in the hearts of the people.

CINEMA: A CULTURAL RENAISSANCE

When I hear the word "art", it takes my mind to everything I can see and everything I can perceive — everything that has the power to evoke strong feelings in me. Therefore, last but definitely not least, I'd like to draw your attention to the undying art of cinema. Relatively new and unquestionably contemporary in nature, cinema and visual art of the region help in tracing the modern history of identity formation of the area and its subsequent preservation through cameras, tapes, and reels (not the Instagram feature).

One can say that cinema is the successor to the living tradition of theatre and dance-drama in the region, existing parallel to *Bhaona* and Ras Leela. As one understands, visual media is more than a mere aesthetic pursuit of capturing everything beautiful to the eye — rather, one can understand it as a process of writing a story with stills, narrating it with shots, and directing it with frames. The film culture of Northeast India has been a poignant marker of its cultural preservation. The stories of the region, the conversations and living habits of the people, the humdrum of everyday life in the different states

and communities — are all retold by the people, for the people of the region, through the medium of entertainment and mass media.

While pioneering cinemas of pre-independent India focused on mythological and historical tales that everyone knew and heard growing up, the post-independence wave of cinema in the region was highly inspired by Italian Neorealism — often depicting the raw, mundane lives of people and their day-to-day struggles, often providing a space for socio-political commentary. The cinema of recent times reflects the living habits, traditions, humour, changes, modernization, and popular culture of the region.

Although relatively nascent in comparison to other cinema industries of India, it has turned into a strong platform to represent the culture and history of its people and region. Every state adds to this heritage through movies that depict traditions, myths, and current affairs of the state.

The film industry of the Northeast was initiated in Assam, where the first film, *Joymoti* (1935), was shot by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala. It depicted the story of liberation and pride of Assam by retelling the tale of Ahom Princess Joymoti and her husband Godapani. Films such as *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai* (1987) won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film — the thematic assertion revolves around the plight of the farmers in Assam's countryside. While reflecting on its social issues, it retains the authentic view of Assamese life.

The film industry in Manipur started with the movie *Matamgi Manipur* in 1972, which set the motion for the state. Additionally, movies that followed, such as *Imagi Ningthem* (1981), received critical acclaim, as they explored family and social dynamics. The socio-political issues of the region, such as insurgency and identity crises, are often reflected in Manipuri cinema, which acts as a reflection and documentation of its culture and history.

Looking at the tradition and culture of Nagaland, the Hornbill International Film Festival has been a window for directors to share the native theme of tribal bravado, folklore, and modern issues that persist.

Sikkim and Meghalaya are relatively new to filmmaking, but they employ the medium to present the region's stunning landscapes, religious practices, and concerns about the environment, thereby highlighting the relationship between nature, culture, and the present.

The films created in the ambit of

the subaltern geographical region of the Northeast give us a social and, most importantly, a political insight into the lives of the people of the region as they actively document our folklore, our oral history, and pass it down to generations to come. For cinema, one has seen itself as not only a link to the past but also as a contemporary force employed for reconstructing culture and historical and subaltern narratives, creating regional pride and promoting the identities of the Northeast region in the globalized and modernized world.

LIVING TRADITIONS: IMPORTANCE OF CUSTODIANS OF CULTURE

In conclusion, as Temsula Ao wrote, we are long seen as "Stone-People" by the world on the other side of the hills, often exploited and rarely remembered for who we are. Thus, we take from our ancestors, our immediate surroundings, our patron Gods and our war cries. We speak the language of the birds — of freedom, and we learn from ants — lessons on resilience and strength, carrying the heads of enemies as trophies of war. Our heritage and culture, locked in the arts and crafts by the custodians of the same, are a reflection of our long history of identity formation as marginalized communities in the Grand Indian Scheme of Things, and of course, any form of social, cultural or







Left Top: Thangka Painting, Sikkim
Left Bottom: Larnai Pottery of Meghalaya
Right: Traditional Tatoos of Konyak tribe of Nagaland

political discourse. It is instrumental for the people of the land to appreciate the art and the artists that keep the spirit of our ancestors and their aspirations alive — taking it further out in the world. It is important to retell the stories of the people who were long denied any listeners to their tales, any sympathisers to their woes or any audience to their achievements. Currently, North Eastern Handicrafts and Handlooms Development Corporation (NEHHDC) is dedicated to promoting indigenous art and crafts of the Northeast Region. Thus, it is evident that art and crafts play a crucial role in doing the same — Reflecting the Perseverance of our culture, even in the face of alien invaders and continuous exploitation, and the Resilience of our art that echoes the voices of the people.

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Author(s): M.P. Ranjan
Source: India International Centre Quarterly , December 1984, Vol. 11, No. 4, DESIGN: TRADITION AND CHANGE (December 1984), pp. 95-104
Published by: India International Centre

NEtym through the years

Concept: Niloy

When April comes, the Cell finds itself on the edge.

There is excitement and enthusiasm, but also nervousness and stress. The Union Core holds its breath. Venues are to be booked, sponsors to be contacted, performances to be prepared, and decorations to be done. And, amidst all these hullabaloo, there comes a moment when you take a pause. You find the Phagun breeze carrying a whirlwind of emotions: of get-together, of celebrations, of the rhythmic tunes and melodies, and the vibrant dance steps. It's at this moment that you find a sense of belonging, and a memory forming, one that you know you will look back upon later in life. And, as you breathe a sigh of relief, you realise that it's time for NEtym.

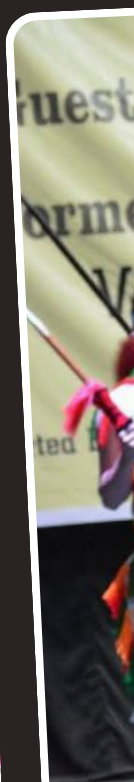
Every year, new members have come into the nest of NE Cell, and old members have passed out. But, as the years roll by, what has remained constant is the popularity and vibrancy of NEtym. For 14 years, the annual cultural fest of the Cell has brought smiles and colours to the campus of Hindu College, while weaving a tapestry of love, unity and togetherness.

***Horizon* brings you a special feature, where the former Presidents of the Cell recount their memories of organising the fest.**

Read on to take a walk down memory lane . . .







Spring sounds like the arrival of NEtym: the sound of Bihu songs in the amphitheatre, the hustle and bustle at the food stalls, and most importantly, the laughter of the Cell amidst all the chaos.



My time at Hindu College remains one of the most cherished chapters of my life. And a defining part of this chapter was my involvement with the North East Cell. From being an active member to eventually serving as its President, the Cell gave me a platform to engage with some of the brightest minds from our region.

A particular highlight was our annual festival, which brought together students from every corner of India, united by a shared love for culture and community. One of the most rewarding experiences was witnessing the warm reception our culture received. Through dance performances, food festivals, music sessions, and storytelling, we found people responding with genuine curiosity and enthusiasm. It wasn't just about raising awareness — it was about fostering friendships and mutual respect

My time at the Cell and the college gave me a treasure trove of memories and lessons that I will carry with me always.

– Mrinal Koijam, President 2014-2015










THE NORTH EAST CELL, HINDU COLLEGE
PRESENTS
NETYM'13
Co-Sponsor
In Association With:
NRL
FURTADOS


2013


2013


2014


2015


2014


2015


2014


2015



It's surely been a long time, and I'm glad and immensely thankful to the present members for taking the initiative to reach out to us and give us an opportunity to share our experiences. NEtym, the annual North East festival of Hindu College, since its inception, has been a widely celebrated event in our college.

During my Presidency, the executive members and an entire organization team led the fest, and made countless efforts to make it a great success. With team spirit and commitment, and through ups and downs, I remember that all of us made fond memories and learnt immensely from the experiences we gathered.

— **Riddhi Mahanta, President 2016-2017**













Dignitaries at NEtym







TOP RIGHT:
Arnab Goswami,
Editor-in-chief of Republic TV,
CHIEF GUEST - NEtym 2013

TOP LEFT:
Shri Conrad Sangma,
Former Chief Minister
of Meghalaya,
CHIEF GUEST- NEtym 2017

RIGHT CENTRE:
General Joginder Jaswant Singh,
22nd Chief of
the Army Staff of India
CHIEF GUEST - NEtym 2014







In my first two years of college, as a fresher and then as a General Secretary of the Cell, I could observe that the North East Cell was one of the liveliest and most celebrated societies on campus. I was immensely grateful that a forum which embraced you wholeheartedly and made you feel at home, existed in the college. And NEtym stood out as a fest which was all about celebrating our region. It was an event that even non-Northeastern students looked forward to eagerly.

However, in my final year, as the President of the Cell, and along with my team of executives, we decided to do something different to ensure an even larger audience and wider engagement. We announced a variety of competitions with prize money, which included dance, debate, photography, fashion show, PUB-G, and rap battle competitions – all executed perfectly in a single day. We had eminent personalities as judges for these competitions.

With a large turnout of participants and an even larger audience, we were able to achieve a remarkable feat– our Netym was the grandest event conducted by any society in our college, witnessing the most activities and footfall that year, coming second only to Mecca!

With lessons learnt, memories made and moments relished, our NEtym will forever be etched in my heart; and that I was given the responsibility to head this event would go down with me as the most remarkable achievement of my college life.

— Swaraaj Singh, President 2018-2019







Lockdown setbacks . . .



NEtym is one of the most exciting times for the members of the NE Cell — so everyone should make the most of the fest, jump into the dances, and enjoy all the shows!

Sadly, NEtym 2020 and 2021 never happened because of the COVID-19 pandemic. But since then, the juniors of the Cell have revived and brought it back every year with even more zeal and vigour — adding a fresh feather to the Cell's cap each year! Hope you all continue to have the best time, and get to try the yummiest cuisines.

— **Sampretty Rajkhowa**, President 2020-2021



NEtym has to be the most anticipated fest in Hindu after Mecca. For me, NEtym is filled with nostalgia. The pandemic snatched it off our plates for two years, but organising and witnessing it unfold once again, as the President of the Cell in my third year was an experience of a lifetime!

I clearly remember how the campus was filled with people from far and near in thousands. For the first time post lockdown, the college felt real. The large crowd made it feel like a college fest in itself, and not just a society fest. That itself stands testimony to the popularity of NEtym. For us students from the NE, Darjeeling hills and Ladakh, NEtym is homecoming, and it will always be!

— **Shrikant Thokchom**,
President, 2021-2022



Writing this piece makes me feel like I'm back with the cell, and that brings me immense pleasure. For me, NEtym is a true festival. After missing out on the festivities back home and then getting to experience NEtym, it became something that outlived my time on the campus. What makes NEtym truly exceptional is the way it brings people together. It transcends the boundaries of mere entertainment and becomes a celebration of identity, heritage, and belonging.

From the excitement in the air as the first performances take place, to the shared joy of indulging in delicious traditional food, to the friendships that are forged throughout the planning and execution of the fest, it's an experience that leaves a lasting impact on everyone involved. It will always be a home away from home for all its members.

— **W. Rolin Singh**,
Co-President, 2022-2023

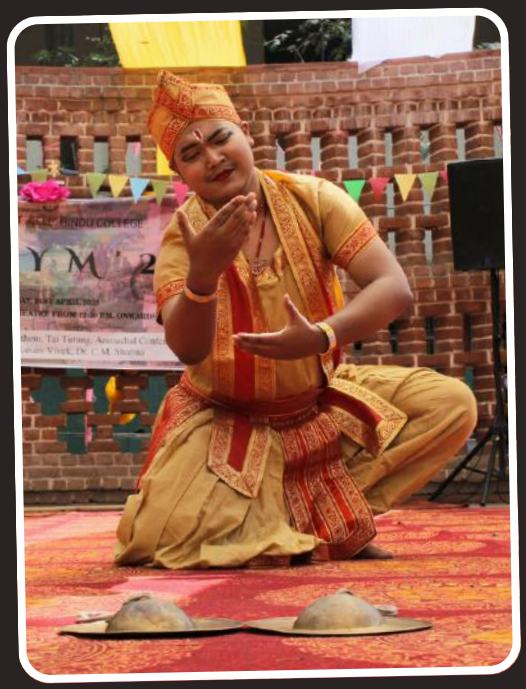
. . . and revival

What would Spring sound like?

— **Himasweeta Sarma**,
Co-President, 2022-2023

As someone who eagerly waited (and still waits) for spring every year, I often wondered — what would spring sound like if seasons had sounds? Would it sound like the melody created by the rustling of newborn leaves against the early summer winds? Or would it be the morning birdsong, or the afternoon crickets' croak? While my mind debates and rummages through the countless 'or's, back in spring 2022, I came across a name: NEtym. Sounds simple. But I never knew that this name would stay with me forever.





Spring '22: Shrikanth Thokchom, President of the Cell for the year 2021–22, informed the council about organizing — or more specifically, re-introducing — NEtym after the COVID-19 pandemic. With most of the council members, including myself, having reached our second year without ever seeing an offline festival (or in DU terms, a fest), the task looked Herculean. What are we supposed to do?

WAIT. You're telling us there will be actual people attending the fest and not MS Teams profiles? This isn't possible at all. Also, you're saying we'll be the first fest in DU after the pandemic? The stakes were high — but so was our motivation to organize a fest never to be forgotten. And well, where there's a will, there's a way, right? Fast forward to 22 April 2022: I stand in front of 2000+ people, hosting the event of my dreams. I could hear the giggles in the crowd, I could hear the homesickness in the crowd, I could hear emotions in the crowd.





Spring ’23: With great power comes great responsibility – Rolin, my co-President, and I felt it when we had to start preparing for NEtym ’23. The stakes were high, as always, but so were the expectations, given last year’s success. After sleepless nights, endless hunger strikes (metaphorically), and hours of brainstorming, we drafted a plan — not of throne succession, but of what turned out to be one of the best memories of my life. NEtym’23 remained true to its commitment of excellence — and excellence in entertainment. This was a hit as well.

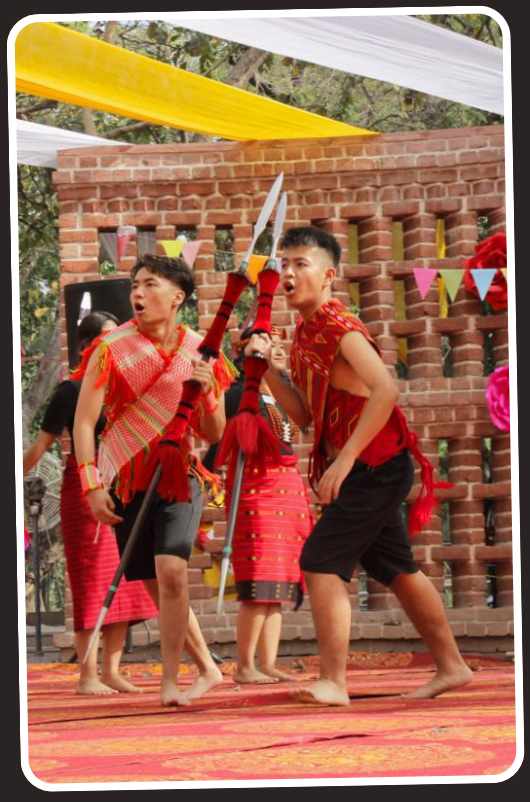


Spring ’25: I currently sit in front of my laptop at 8:13 pm, writing this piece filled with nostalgia after my workday. Now, when I look back at NEtym ’22 and NEtym ’23, I realize I’ve found the answer to the question that’s been bothering me for years.



Spring sounds like the arrival of NEtym: the sound of Bihu songs in the amphitheater, the hustle and bustle at the food stalls, and most importantly, the laughter of the Cell amidst all the chaos — that’s the sound of spring for me.

What’s your sound of spring?







NEtym. Even the name itself feels like a burst of memories and feelings on my tongue. Three years, three NEtyms, and each one was nothing short of fun, love and memories.

NEtym wasn't just a fest; it was a home. From helping with decor as a fresher to leading NEtym'24 as the President, it's been such a rewarding journey filled with learning, chaos, and so many unforgettable memories. In this chaotic city of Delhi, I found a place where I belonged through NEtym. It wasn't just a part of my college experience; it is a part of me, and I will cherish it forever.

I genuinely hope that the juniors and all the batches who will come after us find the same sense of belonging here, and that the North East Cell continues to feel like home for them too. I hope they experience the joy, the chaos, and the magic of NEtym just like we did.

— **Esther Rongpipi** , **President, 2023-2024**









So, what's your NEtym memory ?

Write to us and help us build our NEtym Archive!



KANGLA

MAYANGLAMBAM SANIA

The Echo of Manipur's Pride

Within the walls, the echoes ring
Of the deity once worshipped,
Of the kings who once reigned,
Of Meitei Warriors, brave and wise,
Who defended land and legacy with ease.

The sacred throne, the dragon's might,
The palace shines in golden light,
The Pakhangba's [1] spirit bestowing
the courage
With which men confronted savages.



Through war and time, it stood the test
Yet stands still, a shrine so sacred.
The valiant spirit of perseverance guards the land
With cultures so rich and stories grand.
The soft breeze still hums the melody
Of Manipur's strength and unity.

No chains can break, no time can erase
The pride that lives in Kangla [2],
A symbol so bright, of grace and past,
A beacon across time held high, weaving a tale so vast.

Oh! Kangla, our heart, our soul,
Your tale of glory shall be told.
Still a symbol of pride untold,
Kangla's tale will forever be bold.

[1] **Pakhangba** is a primordial deity in Meitei mythology and Sanamahism, the indigenous religion of Manipur. Pakhangba is depicted as a serpent or a dragon with the antlers of the sangai deer.
[2] **Kangla** was the ancient capital of Manipur. From the first century A.D. Kangla was the most important centre of administration, socio-economic and religious activities. Over time, it evolved into a formidable fortress, which came to be known as the Kangla Fort.

Mayanglambam Sania hails from Manipur and is currently pursuing her undergraduation in Chemistry at Hindu College. She describes herself as a small town girl who loves to express her thoughts and feelings through pen and poetry.

ACTIVITY REPORT

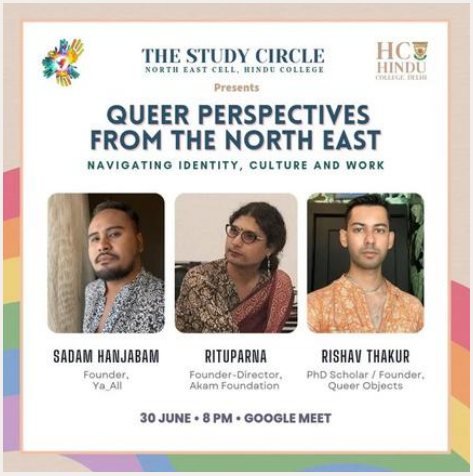
The North East Cell of Hindu College began its academic year with a Pride month-special session titled "**Queer Perspectives from the Northeast: Navigating Identity, Culture and Work**" on 30 June 2024, featuring speakers **Sadam Hanjabam**, **Rituparna**, and **Rishav Thakur**. The online session, organised under the Study Circle vertical of the Cell, explored how queer individuals resist societal norms and navigate professional environments.

To commemorate World Indigenous People's Day on 9 August 2024, the Study Circle hosted an online session on "**Centering Indigenous Epistemologies From North East India**". **Dr. Pauthang Haokip**, Professor at JNU's Centre for Linguistics, and **Dr. Raile R. Zipao**, Associate Professor of Sociology at IIT Bombay, led the session.

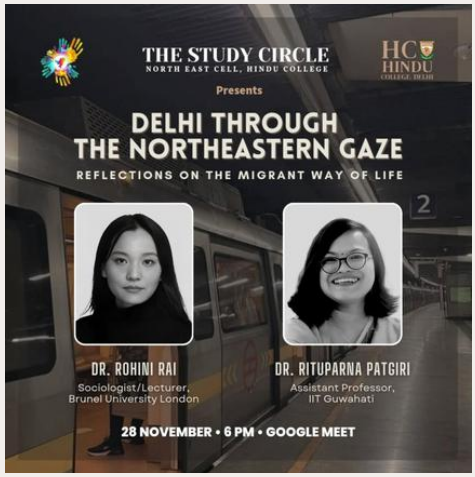
On 17 October 2024, the Study Circle organised a **special screening** of the critically acclaimed documentary *Andro Dreams*, directed by national award-winning filmmaker **Dr. Meena Longjam**. The film portrayed the journey of an all-girls football club led by an elderly woman in the remote village of Andro in Manipur. The screening was later followed by a **virtual Q&A session with Dr. Longjam** herself via video conference.

To conclude the odd semester activities of the Study Circle, a session on "**Delhi through the Northeastern Gaze: Reflections on the Migrant Way of Life**" by **Dr. Rohini Rai**, Lecturer at Brunel University of London and **Dr. Rituparna Patgiri**, Assistant Professor at IIT Guwahati, was organised on 28 November 2024. The session delved into the complex intersections of racialisation, migration, and urbanisation in Delhi, focusing on the experiences of North East migrants.

The academic sessions and lectures were interspersed with activities aimed at bonding, fun, and outings. On 13 October 2024, for instance, the Cell hosted its **freshers' meet**, titled **Sparrows in the Sky**, to welcome the new members to our "NEst" and to officially start the academic activities with them.







The even-semester activities kick-started on 17 January 2025. The Study Circle collaborated with the North East Cell of Lady Shri Ram College to organise a **special screening** of animator and visual storyteller **David Yambem**'s short films **Chingthrao** and **April**, followed by an interactive session with him.

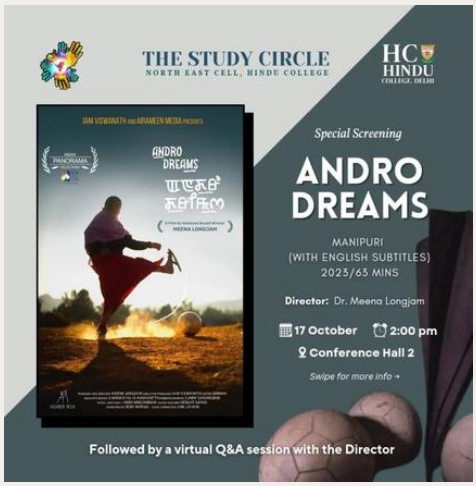
On 17 February 2025, the Cell showcased a glimpse of its vibrant culture with an ethnic fusion dance performance during the 126th Founders' Day Celebrations of the College. Additionally, the members also set up a stall for the display of the cell's activities.

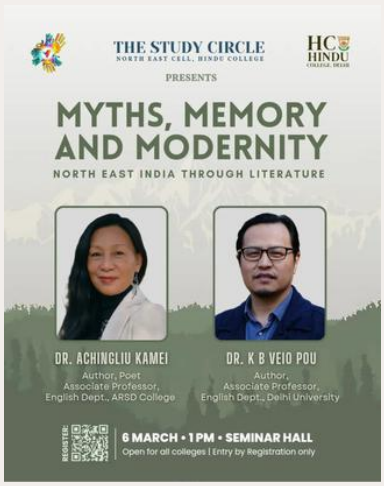
To wrap up the academic year, the Study Circle organized a session titled "**Myths, Memory and Modernity: North East India through Literature**" with **Dr. Achingliu Kamei** and **Dr. K B Veio Pou**. Both speakers delivered insightful talks that set the stage for an engaging discussion on contemporary literature from the region.

The **Social Media vertical** of the Cell takes immense pride in its reach, proving to be trendsetters at many times. In order to carry forward this legacy, two reel series were produced this session. The **Destination NE Reel Series** saw collaboration with travel vloggers from across North East India to showcase both well-known and lesser-known tourist spots of natural beauty in the region. The **GI Tags of North East Reel Series** highlighted the unique handicrafts and food items of the region. Additionally, the popular infographic post series "**Festivals of the North East**" was also continued.

With 6 academic sessions, fun activities, dance performances, and social media growth, the North East Cell, Hindu College, thus, had a very eventful year. It shall continue to celebrate the vibrant cultures of the region, both on campus and beyond.







ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE CELL

The North East Cell, Hindu College has performed well in many of the inter-college cultural and sports activities organised in various colleges across Delhi University in the academic session 2024-2025.

Our team bagged the **1st prize** for **group dance** (Bihu) during the **Udyanchal Fest**, organised at Daulat Ram College. This was followed by another **1st prize in folk song** competition category (for Mizo folk song) at **ARA**, the annual cultural fest of NE Cell, ARSD College. Our Cell also secured the **1st position** in **Legends and Lore Folk Song Competition** organised by the NE Cell of Gargi College.

The sports calendar commenced with the **NSUI Sports Meet** on 23rd and 24th October 2024, where our athletes demonstrated competitive spirit. The **women's tug of war team** emerged victorious at the Meet, securing the Champions trophy.

At **Arathlon**, a volleyball tournament hosted by ARSD College on 29th and 30th January 2025, our **women's volleyball team**, competing in collaboration with ARSD, displayed resilience and teamwork, finishing as **runners-up** and claiming the **Silver Medal.**





In the **Unity Cup**, organized by Motilal Nehru College on 9th and 10th November 2024, the **women's football team**, in collaboration with ARSD College, put up a remarkable performance, reaching the Semi-Finals.

The NESSDU Sports event saw many triumphs by our members across multiple categories:

1. Men's Tug of War: **Silver Medal**
2. Women's Tug of War: **Silver Medal**
3. Men's Arm Wrestling (65-75 kg category Left hand): **Gold Medal**
4. Women's Arm Wrestling (60-70 kg category Left hand): **Gold Medal**

On 30 March 2025, the **Shirui Lily Trophy** proved to be one of the most successful tournaments for our team. The **men's football team** were **Runners-Up**, while the **women's football team**, competing alongside ARSD College, dominated the tournament and became the **Champions.**











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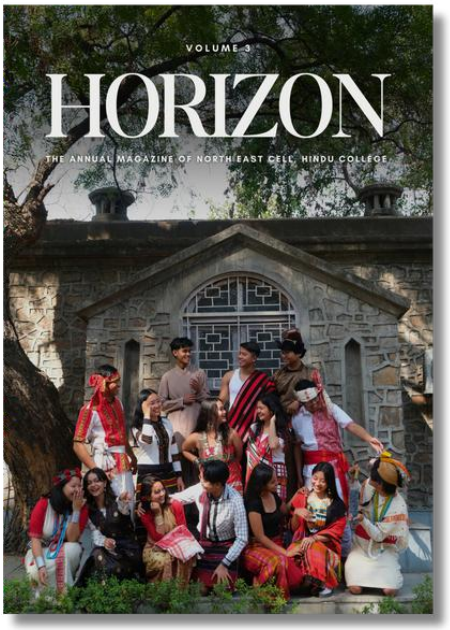




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