

The Context of *Witness Poetry*: Conflict and Sustainable Development in Manipur**Yumnam Rocky**Department of English
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Carolyn Forche's *Poetry of Witness* is a tradition of writing that records historical experiences of atrocities. It is a poetic expression which is evidentiary in nature and it is a readerly encounter of extremities which had happened in the past. It is according to Forche 'an attempt to understand the impress of extremity upon the poetic imagination' (Forche 5). For her, the term is a poetic ushering for those who resist and survived war, violence, exile or political imposition.

India's North East regions have been marred by violence and insurgency. Any peace building process in these regions are met with myriads of challenges. Clad with natural beauty, wilderness and its rich cultural heritage these regions are home to millions of faunae and floras. However, in spite of their rich natural and cultural resources, these regions remain unexplored and less connected to the mainland. On the other hand, the concept of sustainable development is not a new experience in these regions. Unfortunately, its ideas remain a façade. According to Amartya Sen, sustainable development relies on the inalienable rights for people to decide for themselves and thrive in their environment where they are born with. However, the people in disturbed areas of north east are far from enjoying their rights to fulfil their basic human entities. The excessive military presence, insurgency and violence and the imposition of Arm Forces Special Powers Act darkens all hopes and aspirations.

Poetry from these regions usher voices of survival and narrates the stories of how people survived and resist the prevailing culture of violence. The Manipuri poet, Robin S Ngangom asserts the need of the north east writers to write with a sense of immediacy and urgency. The poet also writes that north east writers cannot simply play with their words for aesthetic fulfilment. Rather they have to write with a sense of acceptance and commitment to tell the truth even though the path to it is violent and risky. Therefore, the attempt of this paper is to explore Robin's art of witness and its context in the disturbed areas of his state. the paper also explore the challenges towards Sustainable Development in the conflicted regions

Keywords : Poetry of Witness, Sustainable Development, Conflict, Violence, Sense of Urgency.

Sustainability connotes an idea of enhancing and nurturing a healthy social, cultural and economic system that nourish human development. This development according to Amartya Sen, centres around the potential to endorse freedom and self-esteem, thereby foregrounding the ability of an individual in achieving the kind of life one has reason to value. For him, "a fuller concept of sustainability has to aim at sustaining human freedoms, rather than only at our ability to fulfil our felt needs". (Sen 6) Human freedom is an inherent right that can empower an individual to take decisions and the liberty to define and pursue one's dream. It includes the freedom to fulfil one's felt needs and the ability to choose the

kind of life one wants to live for.

In his book, *Development as Freedom* (1999), Sen argues that money and material goods are essential in lives only to an extent that these entities avert people from certain deprivations. Freedom is one such entity which can unchain people from deprivations, and elevate them to improve the qualities of lives, promote growth and inclusive development. Freedom therefore, is an awareness that acknowledges the innate qualities of an individual and their abilities to fulfil basic needs. These abilities to fulfil basic needs depend on how an individual gets access to natural resources and uses them for a favourable growth and development. This development according to Sen, lays the foundation for democratic ideals and promotes social, political and economic development. Sen noted that development is meant “to expand the freedoms enjoyed by the members of the society. But freedoms depend also on other determinants, such as social and economic arrangements, as well as political and civil rights (for example, the liberty to participate in public discussion and scrutiny” (3)

However, these concerns on freedom and self-esteem that lays the ground for social, political and economic development, remain inconspicuous in many of the conflicted regions of North East India. Marred by insurgency and the culture of violence, these regions have been witnessing volatile socio-political order which hampers every aspiration of peace and development in the regions. Literature has been pivotal in mirroring the cultural lost and the immeasurable amount of changes that are brought by the intrusion of militaristic cultures in traditional lives. Several writings from these regions, have been echoing against the collective trauma and cultural uprootedness engendered by the gun culture. This chapter, therefore, examines the bottlenecks to the road of sustainable development in the conflicted regions of North east India, especially in the state of Manipur, thereby comprehending the complex milieu of cultural uprootedness, cohesive identities and collective aspirations of traditional lives. In exploring these nuances, the witness writings of few selected poems will be discussed. Marred by violence, rampant insurgency, corruption and ethnic clashes, Manipur has been the battleground of dubious conflicts on many fronts. The deep divide between hill and valley people aggravated the social tension. The insurmountable cases of human right violation and the fear havoiced by the draconian law, Arm Forces Special Powers Act (1958), and the overwhelming presence of military activities uprooted normal lives irreparably. KS Subramanian in his case studies of Manipur states that “cases of arbitrary detention and torture are routine in Manipur. In almost all these cases denial is the key word in the lexicon of the security forces. The claims of the victims are silenced with fear of reprisals or they are left to persist with their own versions and protest or agitation is ignored by the authorities to be forgotten in due course.” (Subramanian 88)

Arm forces Special powers Act has drawn the scholarly attention of many writers across the country. The imposition of this Act in the disturbed areas of Northeast regions has caused immense hardships to traditional lives. The misusing of the powers under the provision of this act has aggravated the security concerns and dismantle any affinities with the security forces, thereby exacerbating their counterinsurgency policies. “The imposition of the AFSPA in September 1980 and the militarization of State policy that followed, have led to an unprecedented crisis of governance in the state, which has given rise to the unprecedented protest fast of Ms Irom Sharmila starting from November 2000” (14) MS Prabhakara opines that Arm Forces Special Power Act (1958) “is a truly nasty and terrifying piece of legislation and it is according to him the major cause of all social unrest in the state. (Prabhakara 228)

Peace Building Process and its Challenges

The state has been under the grip of conflict emanated by insurgency and ethnic secessionism. Many policies were introduced by the Central government with the cooperation of state governments in curbing insurgency and conflicts. Various initiatives, economic and infrastructural schemes were introduced in building peace, and development in the region. The Ministry for the Development of the North Eastern Region (DONER) and North East Council has been closely monitoring the development prospects, including conflict management in these regions. The Government of 'India approved the North East Special Infrastructure Development Scheme' in the year 2017 for building infrastructure relating to power, water supply and tourism, Prime Minister's Development Initiative for North-East Region (PM-DevINE) was announced in the Union Budget 2022-23 and initial amount of rupees 1500 crore was allocated for various projects in the region. However, owing to the various schemes and development projects introduced, the North east regions remain in the same state that it was a decade ago or so. The rampant corruption and the siphoning of funds sanctioned for these regions in the clutches of invisible hands turned the efforts in bringing changes, futile. Subramaniam states that "the fruits of development may not be percolated to the beneficiaries owing to the lack of local absorptive capacity and inappropriate development strategies or due to corruption and diversion of funds, often to the coffers of the insurgents." (23) Subramaniam's ideas on inappropriate developmental strategies and lack of local absorptive capacity may be examined from what Bertil Litner wrote on the administrative reforms in the North East region. "Without a proper understanding of the complex histories of the north eastern people and the evolution of their fractious rebel movements and fragile alliances, no progress can be made in achieving peace in the Northeast". (Bertil 2016) Subramaniam also wrote on the lack of transparency in the ministry of human affairs, government of India and continued reliance on the draconian Arm Forces Special Powers Act in suppressing violence in the region. This reliance on force and overwhelming militaristic approaches of the central government, enfeebles the strength of the state forces in combating the insurgents. The excess of militaristic activities and misusing of power under AFSFA, by the security forces, upset local sentiments, thereby complicating the strategies of conflict management. This also creates distrust against the security forces and their role in keeping internal security, thereby obliterating any meaningful connection with them. "The approach is important and relevant but the insistence on sticking to AFSPA could prove an impediment in shaking off the resistance of the people of the region to any attempts to promote happy relations with the Government of India" (156)

Locating the Context: Robin S Ngangom and Witness Poetry

Literature produced in times of conflicts can mirror ideological and political issues at stake. In doing so, it reflects 'a state of being' which is precipitated by violence, loss and resistance. Poetry in times of conflict, for instance is door to a plethora of heightened feelings which are resulted from prolonged sufferings and endurance. A poem evolves around emotional and psychological intensities, which are superficially shown in news reportage, policy documents and standard historiography. However, modern Manipuri poetry is becoming a medium for articulating trauma and protest. Robin's poetry of witness is a powerful artistic expression that can unravel atrocities in the state and his writings are the accounts of the plight of his people. Much of the extraordinary violence and other forms of extremities that Manipur has witnessed over the past few decades have been documented by many Manipuris, civil society activists, journalists and international human right groups. However, the effects of long-term violence and its consequences in forging political, social and cultural subjectivities, have never served any importance to scholarship in contemporary Manipur.

The state has become a battleground and a new sense of normality that is coerced in its people, is the normalization of insurgent violence. Analysts tend to focus on political developments and rampant gun culture but what is noticeably absent from their analysis is the intellectual and redemptive discussions on traumatising experiences of innocent victims.

Carolyn Forche traces the intellectual origins of the “Poetry of Witness” and used in her essay “El Salvador: An Aide Memoire” in 1980 and appeared for the first time in *American Poetry Review* in 1981. And this represents a poetic genre which speaks as autobiographical testimony to trauma, violence and other forms of extremities. It relies on traumatic extremity, and it has a therapeutic pleading to human heart and invites to hold on and remember, to hear and feel the inhumanity of war, violation of human rights, and loss of lives. This genre exists in a space which negotiates between voice and silence, between speaking and unspeakable, and between collective and individual experiences of extremity.

Forche’s anthology, “Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness” is her “effort to understand the impress of extremity upon the poetic imagination” (Forche, 1993, p.30). The anthology contains English translations of 477 poems by 146 survivors and witnesses and it is her “poetic memorial to those who suffered and resisted through poetry itself” (31). The poems retold the stories of extremities and these are the stories of survivors from Nazi Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, soldiers of the First World War, and Spanish Civil War. These poems are the mouthpiece of civil rights movements and liberties and traversed several places across America, Europe, Asia and Africa. Therefore, these poems are the product of the witnesses from personal and political domains and employ a traumatic language that appeals towards humanity and peace.

Robin S Ngangom: Poetry in Times of Conflict

In his Essay, “Poetry in the Time of Terror” Robin notes the need for the poets of the north east region to write with a sense of immediacy and acceptance. He opines that a poet can’t remain in the romanticized world of verbal wizardry and on the mere reflection of routine events. His writings respond to the growing ethnic violence, secessionist ventures, cultural and religious intolerance and rampant corruption. Born in Manipur, influenced by the rich cultural heritage and natural landscape of Shillong, his poetry is the embodiment of a deep understanding of the complex and the growing extremities in the state. His poetry doesn’t belong to cerebral poetry and is written with a strong desire to be understood and accepted. His writings are deeply rooted in the hills, the rich natural landscapes, diverse cultural and religious tradition and noted that “Manipur, my native place in Northeast India, is in a state of anarchy, and my poetry springs from the cruel contradictions of that land”. (Robin 5)

In his poem, titled *Native Land* the poet narrates the chilling accounts of ethnic clashes and violence. The poem captures the volatile socio-political situations which are driven on ethnic lines thereby escalating tension in the region. Such ethnic based social order fuels the deeply rooted hatred amongst the communities and paralysed lives beyond measures. The poet begins by narrating the news report where six people were shot dead and more than twenty-five houses were burnt. He also recounts the gruesome report of sixteen people whose hands were tied behind their backs and beheaded inside a church.

First came the scream of the dying
in a bad dream, then the radio report,
and a newspaper: six shot dead, twenty five
houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied
behind their backs inside a church...

(Ngangom, *Native Land*)

The horrifying experiences of the poem echoes the ethnic strife in 1990s that killed hundreds of people including women and children. The ethnic strife between the two major communities uprooted thousands of people and rendered them homeless. Many of them flee from the state and took shelter in different cities living a life of an exile. Still today, the chilling accounts of the strife are still fresh to the memories of many witnesses.

The poet Robin's writings constantly seek refuge in absurdist realities and his poetic voice incline towards the surreal. And the articulation of such an expression offers a tradition of writing which rejects harrowing realities and enable them to tell their readers the truth that they are coerced to burry deep down in their bosom and the forever silence that their people are destined to live with. Shadowed by violence and the grimness of gun culture, their poetry expresses a deep anger and fear against the rootlessness and displays the bitter truth of being in an exile in one's own land.

I shall conclude this chapter by stressing that Robin's writing provides an impetus of peace and harmony through what Carolyn Forché calls "the art of witness". Realizing that his homeland is in a state of anarchy, the poet attempts to shake people from their slumber and speaks of the horrifying incidents happening in his place. While reflecting of his anger, on violence, insurgency, human right violation, corruption and the political turmoil in the state, his poetry appeals for peace, humanity and love. Also, it is highly vital to acknowledge that the conflict management strategies of the government of India needs further scrutiny. In looking at the impacts of the various policies adopted by the central government and the progress made in bringing peace and development in the region, it is not difficult to find an inordinate result in these strategies. The central government and its reliance on overwhelming military presence in combating conflicts may not be as effective as it is thought to be. It is highly pivotal to understand and feel the local sentiments in bringing peace and development in these regions. For this, the state police can be more accountable in keeping the internal security of the state, and not by the military and paramilitary forces deployed in the region. Increasing the presence of military forces with a huge expenditure, will only aggravate the conflict, and the efforts of the government in combating insurgency may remain unchanged and ineffective

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