

**National Seminar on 'Literature from Northeast India: Texts and Contexts' (06-07 May 2019)**

*Concept Note:*

Different literary and cultural theories that we have embraced so far have presented a diverse prism of reading, understanding and interpreting literary texts and their inherent world views. There are divergent views among scholars and critics about the way a reader understands the text within a given context of the environment depicted by a particular text and invariably create his or her own perspective that forms an afterlife of the texts. These theories and approaches have enabled readers and authors to recreate their own contexts and gradually navigate them into the centre of mainstream literary discourse that generally tends to ignore those voices from the periphery. The voices from the periphery in Indian literary environment are those coming from the social, economic and even geographical margins that includes inter alia the writings from translingual, minority, Dalit writers as well as writers from remote areas like the Northeast. These writers form a periphery which has been termed as 'Subaltern' by Antonio Gramsci and highlight an ongoing endeavour to portray a different 'context' or world view that can be understood and adequately interpreted from the author's own social, cultural and political milieu. Such writings, though limited in number and scarce in our critical literary landscape, nevertheless underline an alternative mode of consciousness that emerges from caste, community, spatial existence and economic marginalization. It also depicts a subtle ongoing struggle of the writings from the 'margin' to move towards the 'centre'. The writings from the periphery, therefore, are a case of assertion of identity, culture and social reality that is 'different' from the mainstream and a protest against any literary hegemony of the mainstream. Thus a translingual writer (Na'Asomia) with East Bengal origin in Assam writing in Assamese or a poet from the Ao Naga community all raise questions about those real and imaginary margins enforced and try to strike back by using their

texts as a platform of resistance. Ironically, the centrality of the 'margin' in their texts sometimes may be seen as an appropriation of the margin, its literary/artistic practices as well as the further marginal position of gender and sexuality.

Literary texts and other forms of cultural expression that were seen as marginal or lying in the periphery during the first half of the twentieth century by scholars like Bourdieu and Even-Zohar are gaining new momentum in recent years. Several factors facilitated this movement that includes commercialisation of cultural symbols, democratic access to literary spaces through the advent of new platforms like the Internet and the social media. Bourdieu regards language as a mechanism of power assertion highlighting the writer's relational position in a social context. Distinct use of language and cultural symbols, metaphors and special registers comes from particular contexts and militates against the reader's own positions about the text and its meaning. Linguistic interactions and literary interpretations are therefore parts of the readers own contextual positions in the broader mainstream social space and parameters of understanding. Depending on the contexts of the reader, the writer's voice is thus understood and interpreted. In recent years Even-Zohar stressed on the problems of majority and minority, and centre and periphery in the context of wealth, power and control of resources. His "polysystem theory" focuses on relations between literature and language that reflects a complex analysis of socio-cultural systems. In understanding the writings from the periphery these socio-cultural systems may play a vital role in redefining our approach to literature from the margins.

Globalisation and the emergence of technology-led information society have also impacted the forms and contents of art and culture in contemporary world. However, there are some distinct trends of writing that thrives on being different, driving home the idea that every country, and every local community with different cultures and histories and tries

to create a 'space' away from the mainstream (called 'subaltern' by Antonio Gramsci). The seminar attains significance to bring to the forefront different perspectives of such writings from two specific contexts - language (translingual), society and location (tribal communities of the Northeast). The seminar not only made a case for examining literature with a pre-existing, pre-compiled traditional literary history but also examined them critically from the point of view of the caste, class, the minority, the marginal and the quintessential 'subaltern'. There this seminar was a fresh academic exercise that will produce new insights into the study of literary texts from a diverse set of theoretical and analytical frameworks.

A National Seminar on '*Literature from Northeast India: Texts and Contexts*' was organized at IAS from 06-07 May, 2019. Professor Baharul Islam was the convener of this seminar. Professor Makarand Paranjape, Director, IAS delivered the Inaugural Address. Keynote address was delivered by Professor M. Asaduddin, Jamia Millia Islamia University. Vote of thanks was given by Professor K.M. Baharul Islam, Convener of the Seminar

Participants:

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