

National Seminar  
**Cultural Self-Fashioning in North-East India:**  
**Interplay of the Oral, the Written and the Performative Arts**

**Organised by:**

**Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies, Gauhati University and  
North East India Association for Human Sciences (NEIAHS)**

**In association with**

**Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS)**

**Dates: 22-23 March 2019, Venue: Gauhati University, Assam**

**Thematic Note**

**(Papers may be presented in Assamese, Hindi or English)**

North-East India has been home to a wide variety of cultures and communities living in close association with one another and, at the same time, also responding to the larger pan-Indian frameworks of inclusion and appropriation. These intra-regional and inter-regional modes of influence and response have generated newer and often interesting narratives of cultural self-fashioning among the cultures and communities of North East India. Narratives such as these have found expressions through a wide repertoire of genres inherited not only from the cosmopolitan Sanskrit literary culture but also those endemic to the local cultural geographies of North East India. The cultural geography of North East India has two dominant traditions: Indigenes-Oral/folk and written-textual (derived from the Sanskrit Cosmopolitan and local traditions) having obtained in the performative. For example, the performative cultures are manifested in folk festivals across cultures and also followed certain normative patterns in classical as well as Sankari traditions in Assam and Rasleela in Manipur.

In mapping the interplay of the oral-written and performative formations, we may take the example of the manner in which the Indian cultural traditions in general have conceptualised and understood the great epic traditions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and the Puranas in Northeast. The scope and dimension covered by the two epics across time and space have defined the very essence of Indianness. Similar to the manner by which the aestheticians (*alamkarics*) of Sanskrit language influenced the subsequent development of aesthetics in the regional Indian languages, the thematic and ideological issues explored within the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have influenced the nature of literary works undertaken in the vernacular. The regional language-literatures of India trace their origin and development on the basis of the creative and disseminative works undertaken by early poets and playwrights in Indian languages.

Tracing its origins to the ancient past, Ramkatha, for example, has remained a living and vibrant tradition in India. Not merely a textual tradition, the story of Rama has provided the basis for oral and performative traditions in various regions of India. Many of these regional variations have focused on specific characters, which are then perceived in accordance with the local beliefs and attitudes. Though it would be certainly misleading to claim that these characters actually belonged to the North East, yet it would be worthwhile to understand how the narratives associated with the characters are validated through their association with various local sites and geographies, and also through their percolation into the folklore of the region. With respect to our claim, we may refer to the unique manner in which the character of Sita has been empowered by Sankardeva in Madhava Kandali's *Ramayana*, which in turn, is a direct reflection of the position of women in the tribal society of Assam at that time. Similarly, we may talk about the social picture on the Karbi society presented through *Sabin Alun*, the

Karbi Ramayana or the Buddhist element of the Singpho society presented through *Likchau Lamang*. Further on the folk narrative of Ramakatha prevalent among the Mizos, Garos, Bodos and others demonstrate the adaptation of the Rama story into the folk matrix. Therefore, it is necessary to explore both folk and written traditions in order to understand the process of culturalization. Most of the folk performances are culturally produced, for example, the harvest festival or a victory celebration practiced by all communities, whereas Ojha Pali, a folk performance, derived from the Panchali tradition is rendered in the *ragas*.

With this understanding, the seminar proposes to extend these arguments towards exploring complex and wider nuances of cultural self-fashioning among the cultures and communities of North East India through the medium of various artistic genres spanning across the oral, textual and performative traditions of the region. The impact generated through such encounters is palpable in the social, cultural and linguistic spheres of the society, including the domain of popular culture. The seminar endeavours to understand the above also in relation to the idea of Comparative Indian Literature which is a subject of postgraduate study and doctoral research in the Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies, Gauhati University. From this perspective, the seminar seeks to discuss and deliberate over the following topics at large associated with the oral, the written and the performative traditions of North-East India:

1. Oral, Textual and Performative Traditions of North-east India with reference to domains of Archaeology, Anthropology, Manuscriptology, Cultural Studies, etc.
2. Sanskrit Cosmopolitan Culture and North-east India: Travelling of stories and traditions
3. Epic and Puranic Traditions in North-east India
4. Religion and Identity: Colonialism, Ethnography and Community Mythologies
5. Literary and Cultural Representations: Modernity, Politics of Identity and Violence
6. Performative and Visual Arts (Films and Documentaries) based on North-east India
7. Folk, Ritualistic and Community Practices in North-east India
8. Media and Its Role in Cultural Representation of North-east India
9. Linguistic Cultures of North-east India
10. Writing of Histories in North-east India and Literary-Cultural Historiography

Please send your abstracts (in Assamese, Hindi or English) in not more than 300 words to **csfnei.mills@gmail.com** on or before 24 February 2019. It is advisable to use your own email address while sending across your abstracts so that we can directly get back to you on the status of your submission.

The final list of selected abstracts shall be declared by 1 March 2019. The selected paper presenters have to register for the seminar on or before 12 March 2019. The mode of payment shall be notified along with the list of selected paper presenters.

Registration Fee: Rs 1500/- (For Teachers) & Rs 1000/- (For Research Scholars and Students)

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