



## REPRESENTATION OF PEOPLE'S VOICES IN THE LITERATURES OF NORTHEAST INDIA \*

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**Abstract:** A representation is a visual, written, or audio depiction of something or someone. This term also refers broadly to what texts mean, the meanings they potentially convey, and how they come to acquire those meanings.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most widespread and forthright view of literature is that it serves as a representation of life and people's voices. The concept of representation has been fundamental to the understanding of literature. Literature is not only the contribution of journals and newspapers but also novels and other literary pieces. This studies the consciousness of the people towards various issues in Northeast India, mainly during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This paper consists of three parts. The first part of the paper discusses the theories of consciousness. The second part examines the various themes/issues that reflect the growth of societal consciousness as represented in the literature. The third part is in the form of a conclusion.

Received : 19 September 2025

Revised : 15 October 2025

Accepted : 19 October 2025

Published : 27 December 2025

### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

P. Gracefulness Bonney (2025). Representation of People's Voices in the Literatures of Northeast India, *Journal of South Asian Research*, 3: 2, pp. 271-281.

## I

Human consciousness is a type of perceptive and reflective activity (observing, monitoring, judging self, among other things) that is encoded in language and generated in conversations about collective and individual selves.<sup>2</sup> Consciousness is a broad term that encompasses a range of different phenomena, making it an imprecise concept. Various theories of consciousness attempt to explain the diverse ways in which human consciousness can be understood, both in physical and abstract terms.<sup>3</sup>

In the classical Marxist theory, which has dominated social science for decades, there are two types of human consciousness: Class Consciousness and False Consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Class Consciousness refers to the awareness by a

social or economic class of their position and interests within the structure of the economic order and social system in which they live.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, False Consciousness is a perception of one's relationship to social and economic systems, which is of an individual nature, and a failure to see oneself as a part of a class with particular class interests relative to the social and economic order.<sup>6</sup>

Collective Consciousness is a condition of the subject within the whole society and how an individual comes to view itself as a part of the given group. Collective Consciousness, therefore, is the internal knowledge known by all, shared by a plurality of persons regarding an idea or proclivity (inclination).<sup>7</sup> A pattern of commonality among individual unity is what results in the making of the subject as an aggregation of external processes or societal conditions.<sup>8</sup> Social consciousness is the collective knowledge, skills, values and wisdom of a society.<sup>9</sup> Charles H. Cooley has described it as an awareness of one's society inseparable from self-consciousness.<sup>10</sup> Thus, consciousness meant the awareness that drove people to probe and take steps to improve their social, economic and political lot within a society.<sup>11</sup> According to Marx and Engels, it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, consciousness plays a crucial role in enabling individuals to understand the developments occurring within their surroundings. It signifies a heightened awareness that motivates people to question existing conditions and to take deliberate actions aimed at improving their social, economic, and political circumstances within a given society. In this sense, consciousness encompasses an understanding of one's societal context and is inherently entangled with self-awareness, as the recognition of one's position and identity within society forms the basis for collective and individual transformation.

## II

Literature, extending beyond mere storytelling, has long served as a powerful medium for both reflecting and shaping the values and consciousness of society. It acts as a prism that refracts the complexities of social norms, cultural dynamics, and historical contexts, allowing them to be both observed and critically examined. Through the intricate relationship between literary expression and social awareness, it offers a distinctive perspective on the multifaceted nature of human experience and the continual evolution of society.

**Consciousness of the Nepalese Community:** This discussion highlights the longstanding and commendable role of the Nepalese community in the socio-economic development of the region.<sup>13</sup> The memorandum states that wherever the Nepalese have chosen to settle, members of the community have demonstrated a deep sense of belonging and loyalty to their adopted homeland. They have consistently integrated with the local population, embracing the land as their motherland. This deep-rooted identification with India is evident in their selfless commitment, patriotic sentiment, and active participation in nation-building efforts. Despite facing numerous challenges and adversities, the Nepalese people have willingly borne these hardships to contribute meaningfully to the welfare and progress of the country.

The historical association of the Nepalese community with the Garo Hills district of Meghalaya can be traced back to the British colonial era. During this period, a significant number of Nepalese individuals served in the British Indian Army, earning a reputation for discipline, courage, and loyalty. Their participation in the military not only reflects their dedication to public service but also lays the foundation for a legacy of commitment to national defence.

Beyond military service, many members of the Nepalese community turned to agriculture and cattle grazing as primary means of livelihood. Through these occupations, they not only sustained themselves but also played a vital role in the rural economy. One notable indicator of their economic contribution is the substantial revenue they generated for the district administration, exceeding one lakh rupees in grazing taxes alone. This figure is particularly significant given the historical context and illustrates their compliance with civic duties and their support for local governance.

In addition to their contributions through taxation and land-based livelihoods, the Nepalese community has also been instrumental in promoting local trade and commerce. Their production and sale of dairy products, especially ghee, butter, and other milk-based goods, have provided a steady source of income for the district. These goods are not only consumed locally but are also transported and sold in markets across various parts of the country, thereby enhancing the reputation of the district and expanding its economic mark beyond regional boundaries.

Taken together, the contributions of the Nepalese community reflect a pattern of responsible citizenship, economic productivity, and cultural assimilation. Their enduring presence and participation in various sectors

of society reinforce their status as integral members of the region and as stakeholders in the nation's development.

The number of Indian Nepalese Citizens in India was more than 30 lakhs in 1971, but so far, the Government of India have failed to give due recognition to Nepalese as one of the major languages. The members of this community felt that it was a matter of great injustice to keep this language out of the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, while Sindhi, a language spoken by a far smaller slice of the population and developed not more than the Nepalese, has been included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. The Nepalese community impressed upon the Government of India the need to give the Nepalese language the status of one of the major languages by duly including it in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India without further delay.

The Nepalese people of this district expressed their gratefulness to the Government of India for providing nomination to the Nepalese community, considering the dominant economic, social, agricultural and political stake of this community. They also entreat the government to keep this provision of nomination in the Act. Providing for Meghalaya the status of a full-fledged state. It is further prayed that in the event of giving minority representation by way of nomination, an educated person, well posted with the community's interests and concerns and able to harmonise relationships with all communities, should be nominated to make the nomination meaningful and democratic.<sup>14</sup>

This memorandum, which seeks to highlight the significant contributions of the Nepalese community to the nation at large and to the district, across political, social, and economic spheres, shows the collective consciousness of the Nepalese community towards their position in India in general and the district in particular. Despite their longstanding and meaningful involvement in these areas, the community has not received due recognition from the government. Additionally, there is a growing concern within the community regarding their future status and representation under the new State of Meghalaya to be constituted.

**Growing Consciousness of the Khasis:** *U Nongialam Catholic*, one of the religious journals of the early 1900s, issued by the Catholic Missionary Society, published an article reflecting the growing consciousness and concern of the Khasi people towards the changes that came about with the coming of the Europeans into the Khasi Hills. The article "Ki Khasi-Shuwa ban wan ki Bilat"<sup>15</sup>

(The Khasi before the Coming of the British) compared the condition of the Khasis before the coming of the Europeans to the Hills and after.

The article in the journal reflected that before the advent of the Europeans, the Khasis had iron, brass, bronze, cinnamon, rubber, lac, oranges, betelnut, pan, bay leaves, Assam silk thread, *Ryndia* and *Muga* (a type of silk). By working the iron found in the Khasi hills and carrying it to the borders and the plains, everybody, from young girls to grown-up men, obtained their livelihood. The blacksmiths manufactured Khasi spades, jumpers, hammers, daos large and small, axes, swords, daggers, bowls, guns, spears and various other utensils, thus making themselves self-sufficient as well as creating opportunity for trade with the plain districts of Sylhet, Cachar, Nowgong, Kamrup and Goalpara.

The rearing of cattle was a good and flourishing business, as the cattle farmers were able to trade in cattle. They also practised paddy cultivation. The Khasis also made their own *Ryndia* and *Muga* silk, worn by females. The Khasis were well off and had gold ornaments, silk clothes, etc. and were able to perform different ceremonies and festivals connected with the old customs. They also used their wealth for the construction of roads, the erection of monoliths and monuments of sorts. They work not only to amass wealth. The people were prosperous, well-nourished and lived to a good age as they had sufficient to eat and drink and were free from all care and worries. There was no drunkenness, or vulgarity, no encouragement to change their religion.

With the coming of the Europeans, the life of the Khasis changed. They worked either as a day labourer at road making, a carrier, a domestic or a government servant to earn a living. Trade in potatoes, once a flourishing business, has dwindled almost to nothing, as they can be purchased in the plains at low prices and now the tuber is cultivated more generally for home consumption than as an article of trade. The trade in cinnamon, cotton, rubber, and iron may be said to be extinct.

The trade in British manufactures of clothes, iron, brass, copper utensils, China cups, saucer plates, tobacco and leather goods, instead of enriching the Khasis and their people, impoverished them as money spent on such articles fills the coffers of the Europeans and other nations. The distillation of liquor, which, by the way, the Khasis learnt from the Europeans, is a source of income, but this impoverishes the country and gives rise to all manner of vices. Iron and different kinds of metal are brought from England, as also British-

manufactured cloths; all these are gradually ousting the indigenous industry of these hills.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the article published in *Nongialam Catholic* reflects an emerging awareness of the worsening social and economic conditions that accompanied the arrival of the Europeans. It illustrates a growing consciousness among the people regarding the transformative and often detrimental changes taking place within their society. This consciousness signifies an awakening that prompted individuals to critically evaluate their circumstances and the broader implications of European intervention on their social structures and economic stability.

**Insurgency in North East India:** The Northeast region is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions in India. The problem of insurgency in the Northeast has reached an all-time high. There are many reasons behind the problem of insurgency/ terrorism. Some of which is a lack of political will and determination to make the people of this region have a sense of oneness and sense of belongingness to the country. Due to not having any industrial growth, the States have a lack of employment opportunities, a lack of proper facilities, planning, etc. The other reason is the geographical isolation/location of the states of the Northeast from the rest of the country. Due to this, there is a lack of communication, poor transportation, no opportunity for sending agriculture and other products outside the state, etc. All these adversely affect the economic development.<sup>17</sup> A number of studies show that deprivation, unemployment, racial discrimination, ethnicity, minority status, and so on show altogether different impacts on identity development.<sup>18</sup>

The secessionist movement has remained in India's Northeast for quite a long time. The book by Jugdep S. Chima and Pahi Saikia offers a comprehensive and insightful analysis of secessionist movements in Northeast India. It does not simply document conflicts but engages with the historical, political, and socio-economic factors that have shaped the ethnic conflict.<sup>19</sup> The continuation of violent secessionism in India's Northeast demonstrates that the process of state-nation building has not been fully successful, irrespective of the Indian state's efforts over the past seven decades.

Bethany Lacina focuses almost exclusively on the lack of state capacity and ethnic "autocracies" in the region as her primary cause for insurgencies in Northeast India. Threats to language and cultural identity are also considered to be potent causes of insurgent mobilisation in the region.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the literature of the region represents or reflects the people's consciousness. From these literary works, we learn that the people of the Northeast became increasingly aware and conscious of the prevailing circumstances and grew deeply concerned about the preservation of their identity, language, ethnicity, religion, and ancestral land. They perceived these core elements of their heritage to be under threat, fearing the gradual erosion of their cultural and social distinctiveness. In response to these perceived threats and the sense of marginalisation, various communities began to assert their rights and express their grievances through organised movements and protests. Over time, this collective unrest and struggle for recognition and autonomy led to the emergence of numerous insurgent groups across the region, each seeking to safeguard and reaffirm their people's identity and self-determination.

**The Press Censorship:** The censorship of the press that is considered offensive, indecent, or controversial has occurred throughout its history. Several legal restrictions on the press were in force in India before Independence and the Northeast of India is no exception to the rule. One of the Government policies that affected the working of the press was the Indian Press (Emergency Powers) Act, 1931. This Act empowered the government to require the keeper of a Press and the newspaper publisher to deposit security. The Act also made provisions for confiscating and destroying unauthorised news and declaring certain publications forfeited. The Indian States (Protection) Act, 1934, was an extension of the Indian Press (Emergency Powers) Act, 1931. These special laws existed over and above the provision of the general (ordinary) criminal law of the land relating to security and public order, defamation, public morals, and decency. The Indian Press (Emergency Powers) Act, 1931, and the Press and Registration of Books Act, 1867, were also applied to papers in the Northeastern region.<sup>21</sup>

With independence, the Government of India enacted the Press (Objectionable Matters) Act, 1951. This Act, however, lapsed on January 31, 1956. With the lapse of the Press Act, the Press in India does not come under any special law but is only subject, along with the citizens, to whatever restrictions are imposed by penal law. The State Governments were requested to use Section 144 Cr. P.C., power against the press with great circumspection and caution and only in exceptional circumstances.<sup>22</sup> Thus press in the region, as elsewhere in the country, has been under strict observation and control right from the colonial period and even after.

*U Nongphira* (The Guardian), a newspaper published in the Khasi Hills by U Sib Charan Roy Dkhar, was first printed in the month of July 1903. This paper served as a powerful exposition of the public view. It is said that it was highly admired for its impartial outlook and views on current conditions. The paper went into circulation for many years. Besides local coverage and articles, the newspapers also highlighted important events in the country and abroad, especially during the period of the First World War, when most people were anxious to know about the events of the war.<sup>23</sup> The British once imposed a ban on the publishing of *U Nongphira*. However, undisturbed by the banning of *U Nongphira*, the editor brought out another newspaper under a new name, *U Nongpynim* (The Saviour), in 1928.<sup>24</sup> This reflects the increasing consciousness among the people and highlights the importance of maintaining an impartial and balanced perspective on the issues that affect them.

Looking at the state of Manipur, from the colonial era to the present day, the press in the state has faced constant pressure and targeting from politicians, business groups, and various interest groups. Even the state's first daily newspaper was forced to cease publication due to government interference. In the 1970s, as the underground movement gained momentum, the seizure of press materials and the arrest of journalists became commonplace. Salam Bharatbhusan, former editor of *Hueiyen Lanpao*, and Meinam Mithai, editor of *Matam*, were detained under the National Security Act and imprisoned for six months. The safety and security of the journalists in Manipur is seriously endangered. The freedom of journalists is violated by both state and non-state actors. Armed underground groups and the security forces are also not left behind in violating journalistic freedom in Manipur. In response to the pressures and threats from various armed groups, journalists in Manipur organised protest demonstrations and left newspaper editorials blank as a form of resistance. To protect press freedom, the All Manipur Working Journalists' Union (AMWJU) adopted a 15-point Journalists' Code of Conduct on June 19, 2005. This code grants editors the authority to partially or fully censor, delete, or withhold any report, press release, interview, or press conference that could incite communal tension or conflict among groups.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the reviewed literature, comprising journals and books, clearly illustrates that the press and newspapers in the Northeast have long operated under intense surveillance and control, from the colonial era to the present day. These constraints have originated both from the government and from

various public forces, including underground groups. These literatures reflect journalists' growing awareness of the need to safeguard their rights and emphasises the importance of promoting awareness and sensitisation programs on human rights, media freedom, and risk reduction. Engaging government authorities, security forces, non-state actors, media professionals, and the public in such initiatives is vital for fostering a safe and secure environment for journalists working in conflict zones.

### III

Probably the most common and naive intuition about literature is that it is a representation of life. Representation has always played a central role in the understanding of literature. Thus, we can conclude that the study of various literature reveals a growing consciousness among the people of the Northeast, encompassing social, political, and cultural dimensions. This awakening reflects an increasing awareness of their changing circumstances, whether through colonial intervention, social transformation, or political marginalisation and a collective effort to preserve identity, language, and heritage.

These literatures also highlight how different communities have sought recognition and protection of their rights in the face of neglect and uncertainty. Similarly, the experiences of the press demonstrate an awareness of the need to defend freedom of expression and ensure the safety of journalists amid political and militant pressures. Altogether, these literary works highlight the consciousness of the people of their enduring struggle for self-determination, dignity, and a secure space for expression within the broader national framework. In this reconstruction exercise, it is also important to study the socio-cultural and intellectual background of the author(s), editor(s) and others involved in the publications. Their approach and attitude helped shape the consciousness; due to limitations of this paper, this aspect is not discussed here and will form part of other discussions in the near future.

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