

From Guardians to Ghosts: The Presence of Spirits Reflecting Ethno-Religious and Ethno-Cultural Identity in Northeast Indian English Literature

Muhammad Yaeen^{1,2}, Raihanah M M³

¹ Ph.D. Research Scholar, Center for Research in Language and Linguistics, National University of Malaysia (UKM), Malaysia

² Lecturer Dept of English, Preparatory Year Program, Batterjee Medical College, Dammam, 32313, Saudi Arabia

³ Associate Professor, Center for Research in Language and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia (UKM), Malaysia

Correspondence: Muhammad Yaseen, Lecturer Dept of English, Preparatory Year Program, Batterjee Medical College, Dammam, 32313, Saudi Arabia.

Received: February 4, 2026

Accepted: July 8, 2026

Online Published: September 24, 2026

doi:10.5430/wjel.v17n1p102

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v17n1p102>

Abstract

The socio-cultural framework of ethnic communities in Northeast India revolves around traditional beliefs, spirits, and indigenous practices. These spiritual beliefs have gradually diminished because of mass conversion, colonial otherization, and the increasing influx of immigrants from neighboring states. Regional Anglophone literature, often described as *political literature*, primarily addresses regional insurgencies, imperial subjugation, decades of militancy, paramilitary intervention, and transnational regionalism. The representation of ethnoreligious practices and the role of spirits in tribal social life are prominently reflected in regional Anglophone literature, thereby preserving and articulating the cultural identity of transnational Northeast India. Indigenous communities believe in two categories of spirits: *malevolent spirits*, associated with harm and misfortune, and *benevolent spirits*, associated with protection, fortune, and prosperity. This dichotomy is also reflected in the theoretical frameworks of animism, totemism, and hauntology. Spirits such as *U Rangba*, *U Blei*, *Ka Blei*, *Ka Hok*, *Ki Singi*, and *U Blei Nong-thaw* occupy a significant place within indigenous cosmologies, and communities perform rituals and offer sacrifices to seek protection from misfortune and maintain spiritual harmony. Indigenous communities maintain lifelong spiritual connections with these spirits, which provide guidance, healing, prosperity, and favorable agricultural yields. They believe that ritual practices, sacred mantras, and spiritual connections with the supernatural world possess the power to heal or harm individuals. This paper critically examines the role of spirits within the Anglophone literary corpus of Northeast India and investigates how indigenous literature functions as a cultural archive that preserves ethno-religious and ethno-cultural identity amidst colonial otherization, migration, and socio-cultural transformation.

Keywords: Influx, subjugation, transnational, Indigenous, otherization, animism; hauntology, sacred ecology

1. Introduction

1.1 The Background of Study

The northeastern region of India is not merely a geographical or political entity, but a culturally heterogeneous space shaped by diverse ethnic communities, languages, oral traditions, and indigenous belief systems. The literature emerging from the region reflects its political realities, cultural plurality, and socio-historical complexities. Terms such as *Northeast Indian Literature* and *Assamese Literature* are frequently employed to identify literary productions that articulate regional consciousness, ethnic identity, and cultural resistance. The region has produced several influential literary voices, both male and female, who foreground issues of regionalism, identity, displacement, and socio-political transformation within their narratives (Kalita, A.P 2015). Writers such as *Indira Goswami*, *Nirupama Borgohain*, *Arupa Patangia Kalita*, *Mamang Dai*, *Temsula Ao*, *Sabita Goswami*, *Rita Chowdhury*, *Easterine Kire*, *Mitra Phukan*, *Uddipana Goswami*, *Indrani Raimedhi*, *Binalakshmi Nepram*, and *Teresa Rehman* have significantly contributed to preserving and articulating the racial, cultural, and spiritual identities of the region through literature.

These writers frequently incorporate lived experiences, indigenous practices, oral traditions, and socio-political realities into their narratives to preserve tribal identities within a rapidly changing regional landscape. Their works engage with themes such as foreign influx, militarization, cultural transformation, indigenous belief systems, and the reshaping of regional demography through the presence of the Other. The influx of outsiders has generated insurgency, identity anxieties, and socio-political turbulence across the region. Consequently, many literary texts are situated against the backdrop of movements such as the *Assam Agitation*, reflecting the ethno-cultural and political upheavals experienced by local communities.

Jahnavi Barua's *Undertow* (2020), for instance, portrays the growing anxiety surrounding foreign infiltration and its impact on indigenous

identity, cultural practices, and economic structures. Through the character of Rukmini, Barua captures the fear of demographic transformation and the erosion of regional identity. As Barua writes, “*Make the government do its duty: to expel illegal aliens, instead of arming them with citizenship and voting rights*” (2020, p. 19). Such narratives reveal how migration and demographic change shape questions of belonging, identity, and cultural continuity. Themes such as the struggle for existence, transnational regionalism, linguistic preservation, political injustice, and cultural erosion therefore remain central to Northeast Indian Anglophone literature.

Similarly, *Temsula Ao's* poetry critiques colonial and missionary intervention in indigenous spiritual life. In *Blood of Other Days* (2006), Ao reflects upon the displacement of indigenous cosmologies through the arrival of colonial religion:

Then came a tribe of strangers

Into our primal territories

Armed with only a Book and

Promises of a land called Heaven

Declaring that our Trees and Mountains

Rocks and Rivers were no Gods

And that our songs and stories

Nothing but tedious primitive nonsense

We listened in confusion

To the new stories and too soon

Allowed our knowledge of other days

To be Trivialized into taboo

Blood of other Days)

The poem foregrounds the postcolonial tension between indigenous spirituality and imposed religious ideologies, revealing how colonial discourse trivialized tribal knowledge systems, oral traditions, and sacred relationships with nature. Such literary representations resonate with postcolonial theory and hauntology, where the suppressed cultural past continues to return through memory, ritual, and literary narration.

An important dimension of Northeast Indian literature is the representation of spirits and indigenous cosmologies. Within many ethnic communities, spirits are believed to influence agricultural productivity, prosperity, illness, healing, fertility, and communal harmony. This belief systems remain closely aligned with animistic and totemic traditions, where rivers, forests, mountains, animals, and ancestral entities are perceived as spiritually inhabited. Sengupta (2012) observes that northeastern tribes believe that human behavior and worldly experiences are deeply shaped by supernatural forces and spiritual participation in human affairs. Such spiritual frameworks are not merely anthropological elements but also function as cultural signifiers embedded within regional literary consciousness.

This spiritual imagination is extensively reflected in Northeast Indian Anglophone literature. Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014), for example, presents the supernatural as an active force within everyday tribal life. The narrative of Seno, who encounters a mysterious spirit while returning from the forest, illustrates the intimate coexistence of humans and the spirit world within Naga cosmology. Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* (2012) similarly portrays Khasi spiritual imagination through narratives involving mantras, ancestral forces, supernatural punishments, and sacred rituals. In *A Waterfall of Horses*, Nong Knia's spiritual mantra destroys Sahib Sam's arrogance, symbolizing indigenous resistance to colonial authority through spiritual agency.

Easterine Kire's *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* (2018) also foregrounds ancestral reverence and ritual continuity among the Nagas. The text illustrates how ancestral spirits continue to guide, protect, and spiritually govern living through communal rituals and ceremonial practices. *Shohe, L.* (2020) further notes that Naga tribes maintain strong animistic beliefs through their reverence for rivers, mountains, forests, lakes, and animals such as tigers. Likewise, Malsawmi Jacob's *Zorami: A Redemption Song* (2015) reflects the Mizo community's belief in ancestral spirits and ritual sacrifices performed to seek blessings and protection.

In *Spirit Nights* (2022), Kire further demonstrates how spiritual beliefs remain deeply integrated into everyday tribal practices. The medicinal use of frog meat as protection against evil spirits reflects indigenous healing traditions rooted in animistic cosmology. Similarly, *Sarma and Mallai* (2018) portray the Khasi belief that malevolent spirits may cause psychological and physical suffering. The character of Miss Lucy, believed to be possessed by the spirit kem ksuid, illustrates how spiritual belief systems continue to shape interpretations of illness and mental disturbance within tribal communities. In addition, *Echo Words* from *Boats on Land* (2012) associates disappearance, shame, and supernatural fear with the serpent spirit thlen, thereby reinforcing the persistence of indigenous spiritual memory within postcolonial Shillong.

Northeast Indian literature also documents the transformation of indigenous identities through migration, colonialism, missionary intervention, and transnational mobility. The presence of *dkhars* (outsiders) and illegal migrants has gradually reshaped cultural practices, social structures, and ethnic identities through assimilation and intermarriage. Foreign infiltration has exerted significant influence on

indigenous religious, social, and cultural life. The geographical proximity of Northeast India to *China, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar* has facilitated continuous cross-border movement, generating what may be termed transnational regionalism. According to Dutta (2012), these sustained interactions with foreign borders and migrant populations have transformed the ethnic and religious landscape of the region.

However, such transformations should not merely be interpreted as cultural decline. Rather, they represent complex processes of negotiation, adaptation, and identity reconstruction. Indigenous anxieties emerge primarily from territorial encroachment, demographic imbalance, and the fear of losing control over regional resources and sacred geographies. Despite these socio-political transformations, indigenous spiritual traditions, myths, rituals, and ancestral beliefs continue to survive within both communal memory and literary representation. Consequently, spirits within Northeast Indian literature function not only as supernatural entities but also as symbolic embodiments of indigenous resistance, cultural continuity, and ethno-religious identity.

Several writers from the region have also foregrounded militarization, political violence, and resistance movements. Irom Chanu Sharmila's *Fragrance of Peace* (2010) presents hunger strikes as a form of non-violent resistance against military oppression and political injustice in Northeast India. Similarly, Ngullie's *Iron Irom: Two Journeys—Where the Abnormal is Normal* (2013) portrays resistance to the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act through the figure of the human rights activist Irom Sharmila. Jahnavi Barua's *Next Door* (2008), on the other hand, presents emotionally layered narratives depicting the cultural life, spirituality, and natural landscape of Northeast India.

Maharaj Kumari Devi's *The Princess and the Political Agent* (1991) similarly portray colonial exploitation, political manipulation, and imperial domination within the region. The text demonstrates how colonial structures transformed indigenous socio-cultural systems and economic frameworks. Such literary works reveal that Northeast Indian Anglophone literature functions not only as political testimony but also as a repository of indigenous epistemologies, spiritual memory, and cultural preservation.

1.2 Research Gap

Existing scholarship on Northeast Indian literature has predominantly focused on themes such as regionalism, insurgency, migration, ethnic conflict, identity politics, militarization, and postcolonial resistance. While these studies have significantly contributed to understanding the socio-political and cultural complexities of the region, the literary representation of spirits and Indigenous spiritual cosmologies has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. Existing research frequently examines *spirits, rituals, and supernatural beliefs* from anthropological, historical, or religious perspectives, yet their function as literary mechanisms through which Indigenous communities preserve and negotiate ethno-religious and ethno-cultural identity remains insufficiently explored. Furthermore, previous studies have rarely examined how spirits operate simultaneously as manifestations of ancestral memory, sacred ecology, communal belonging, cultural resistance, and identity preservation within Northeast Indian Anglophone literature. Although scholars have investigated the effects of colonialism, missionary conversion, migration, and transnational mobility on Indigenous communities, limited attention has been given to the manner in which these historical and socio-cultural transformations are reflected through the literary representation of spirits, ritual practices, and supernatural cosmologies.

Consequently, a significant gap exists in understanding how spirits function as cultural signifiers that embody Indigenous memory, ethnoreligious identity, and cultural continuity within the literary imagination of Northeast India. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the representation of spirits in selected Northeast Indian Anglophone texts through the combined theoretical lenses of post colonialism, animism, totemism, and hauntology. In doing so, it demonstrates how regional literature functions as a cultural archive that preserves Indigenous knowledge systems, sacred traditions, and collective memory amidst colonial transformation, missionary intervention, migration, and transnational socio-cultural change.

1.3 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions: **(a)** *how are spirits and indigenous spiritual cosmologies represented in selected Northeast Indian Anglophone literary texts?* **(b)** *to what extent do spirits, rituals, and ethnoreligious practices function as markers of ethno-religious and ethno-cultural identity within Northeast Indian literature?* **(c)** *how do colonial intervention, missionary conversion, migration, and transnational regionalism influence the literary representation of indigenous spiritual traditions and cultural identities in Northeast India?*

1.4 Conceptual Framework

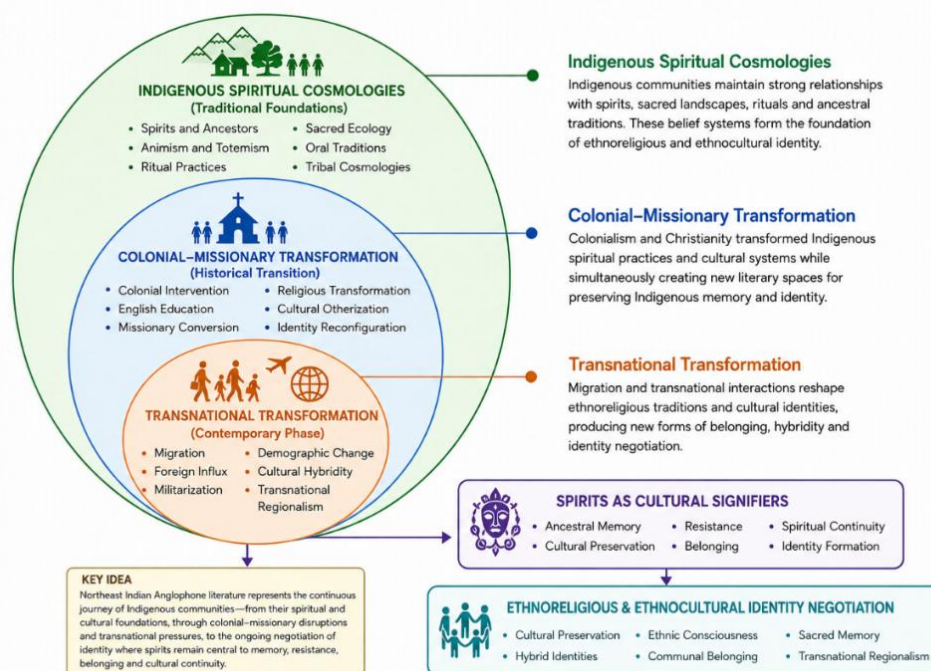


Figure 1. Transnational mutations in NE-India

Figure 1 presents the *conceptual framework* underpinning this study. The framework illustrates how Indigenous spiritual cosmologies constitute the foundational layer of ethnoreligious and ethnocultural identity in Northeast India. These cosmologies are sustained through spirits, ancestral beliefs, sacred ecology, oral traditions, ritual practices, and totemic systems that shape communal memory and cultural belonging. The second layer represents colonial-missionary transformation, which introduced new religious, educational, and cultural structures through colonial intervention and Christian missionary activity. Although these processes altered many Indigenous practices and belief systems, they also contributed to the emergence of literary spaces through which Indigenous memory and identity could be preserved and articulated. The third layer highlights transnational transformation resulting from migration, foreign influx, militarization, demographic change, and cultural hybridity. These forces have reshaped regional identities and generated new forms of social and cultural negotiation. Within this process, spirits function as cultural signifiers that embody ancestral memory, resistance, belonging, cultural preservation, and spiritual continuity. The interaction between these historical and contemporary forces produces what this study conceptualizes as ethnoreligious and ethnocultural identity negotiation. Rather than depicting Indigenous identity as static, the framework demonstrates how communities continuously negotiate preservation, adaptation, and transformation while maintaining connections to their spiritual traditions and collective memory. The figure therefore provides a visual representation of the relationship between Indigenous cosmologies, colonial and transnational transformations, and the literary construction of identity in Northeast Indian Anglophone literature.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Colonial Encounter and Transformation of Indigenous Identity

The emergence of Northeast Indian Anglophone literature is closely associated with colonial intervention, missionary education, the spread of Christianity, and sustained transnational interactions across the region. While Manipuri, Assamese, and Naga literary traditions developed through written and translated forms, many other ethnic communities preserved their histories, cosmologies, and cultural memories through oral narratives. Colonialism significantly altered the socio-cultural landscape of Northeast India by reshaping educational systems, religious practices, linguistic structures, and Indigenous identities. The introduction of English education and missionary institutions transformed traditional belief systems and Indigenous worldviews, thereby generating new forms of cultural negotiation and identity reconstruction.

At the same time, colonial modernity provided regional writers with a literary medium through which Indigenous experiences could be articulated and preserved. Writers such as *Easterine Kire*, *Janice Pariat*, *Jahnavi Barua*, *Mona Zote*, and *Arnab Jan Deka* incorporate myths, oral traditions, rituals, and spiritual practices into their works to reconstruct pre-conversion identities and safeguard ethnoreligious traditions. According to *Sengupta* (2012), Northeast Indian literature not only responds to militarization, political unrest, and transnational anxieties but also depicts a world in which humans, nature, and spirits coexist within deeply rooted Indigenous cosmologies. Such representations are particularly significant because they illuminate how Indigenous spiritual worlds continue to survive within literary

discourse despite historical and cultural transformations.

Within many tribal communities, spirits occupy a central position in social, religious, and cultural life. Indigenous communities maintain relationships with supernatural entities through rituals, sacrifices, chants, and ceremonial practices intended to ensure protection, healing, prosperity, and communal harmony. Although modernization and globalization have contributed to the gradual decline of some traditional practices, belief in the spirit world remains an important dimension of tribal identity. Consequently, spirits function not merely as supernatural beings but as symbolic expressions of collective memory, cultural continuity, and sacred ecological relationships that connect communities to their ancestral past.

The ecological landscape of Northeast India further reinforces these spiritual connections. Rivers, forests, mountains, wildlife, and ancestral spaces are often perceived as spiritually inhabited within Indigenous cosmologies. However, missionary intervention, migration, and foreign influx have increasingly distanced younger generations from traditional spiritual practices, thereby transforming Indigenous identities in terms of language, religion, and culture. The religious composition of Northeast India reflects remarkable diversity, where Indigenous belief systems coexist with *Hinduism*, *Christianity*, *Buddhism*, and *Islam* (Laisram, 2024). Similarly, Taneja (2017) argues that beliefs in jinns, saints, spirits, and supernatural entities form part of broader South Asian spiritual networks rather than isolated local practices. Baruah (2005) further contends that Northeast India should be viewed as a dynamic cultural space whose Indigenous traditions are connected to wider South and Southeast Asian spiritual continuums. Such interconnected spiritual landscapes provide an important context for understanding the literary representation of spirits within regional narratives.

Consequently, Northeast India emerges not as a peripheral region but as a living repository of Indigenous heritage, spiritual consciousness, and communal identity. This cultural imagination is vividly reflected in Easterine Kire's writings, where spirits function as active agents within everyday life. In *A Naga Village Remembered* (2018), *Kepenuopfu* is portrayed as a protective spiritual force associated with birth, guidance, and wellbeing. Kire simultaneously presents the complexities of missionary conversion, depicting it as both a source of coexistence and a challenge to Indigenous traditions. Through such representations, the text demonstrates how spiritual beliefs continue to shape communal values and cultural memory despite religious transformation.

Kire further reinforces animistic worldviews through narratives in which natural entities possess spiritual agency. She writes, *If you honor the spirits, they will bless you. It's spirituality* (Kire, 2018, p. 17). Likewise, Levi's father discovers that the creature trapped in the forest is *not an animal, but the guardian of wildlife himself* (Kire, 2018, p. 28). These examples illustrate how spirits are embedded within the natural world and reveal the interconnected relationship between ecology, spirituality, and identity. Such representations resonate with animistic perspectives that view humans, animals, spirits, and the environment as interconnected beings within a shared relational universe (Bird-David, 1999), thereby reinforcing the centrality of sacred ecology within Indigenous cosmologies.

The mysterious disappearance of *Vikhwelie* is also interpreted as a spiritual encounter, in which the character is believed to have been taken by spirits before returning with extraordinary experiences. Kire further associates illness and suffering with spiritual imbalance, reflecting Indigenous understandings of healing and ritual purification. Ceremonies such as *Terhase* are performed to restore harmony between humans and supernatural forces, demonstrating the continuing relevance of ritual practices within tribal life. These representations indicate that spirituality functions not merely as a system of belief but also as a framework through which communities interpret wellbeing, misfortune, and social order.

The literary landscape of Northeast India is therefore shaped by Indigenous epistemologies, vernacular traditions, myths, rituals, and spiritual cosmologies that distinguish it from dominant Eurocentric literary frameworks. Regional literature foregrounds local experiences through the representation of spirits, shamans, sacred spaces, and communal rituals, thereby functioning as a site of cultural preservation and resistance. Such narratives operate as cultural signifiers that challenge homogenizing colonial and postcolonial discourses while preserving Indigenous knowledge systems and collective memory (Ashcroft et al., 2002). Furthermore, regional literature frequently explores identity negotiation in communities experiencing colonial intrusion, missionary intervention, migration, and demographic transformation (Baruah, 2005; Dutta, 2012). As a result, literary texts become important cultural archives through which Indigenous histories, beliefs, and identities are continually remembered and reinterpreted.

Kire's portrayal of *Genna* rituals further illustrates the intimate relationship between spirituality and everyday life. The observance of *Genna* is intended to honour spirits and maintain cosmic balance within the community. During these sacred periods, ordinary labour is prohibited because violations are believed to invite misfortune. As Vilau explains to Mose: *It is a day when no one works or goes to the fields; we do that to please the spirits* (Kire, 2018, p. 33). Kire further emphasizes the significance of these practices through the statement, *If you break the taboos, you break yourself* (Kire, 2018, p. 13). Such representations demonstrate that spirits, rituals, and taboos function not merely as religious practices but as important markers of ethnoreligious identity, cultural continuity, and Indigenous belonging. Through the observance of *Genna*, literature preserves Indigenous cosmologies and reinforces communal values, collective memory, and spiritual relationships with the natural world. Ultimately, these representations illustrate how spiritual traditions continue to shape Indigenous identity and cultural continuity despite colonial transformation, religious conversion, and contemporary socio-cultural change.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a *qualitative interpretive* research design and employs close *textual analysis* to examine the representation of spirits and Indigenous spiritual cosmologies in Northeast Indian Anglophone literature. The research investigates how spirits function as cultural signifiers of ethno-religious and ethno-cultural identity and how literary texts preserve Indigenous knowledge systems amidst colonial

intervention, missionary conversion, migration, and transnational socio-cultural transformation. The primary corpus consists of selected literary works by prominent Northeast Indian writers, including *Easterine Kire*, *Janice Pariat*, *Temsula Ao*, *Mamang Dai*, *Jahnavi Barua*, *Siddharth Deb*, *Malsawmi Jacob*, and *Maharaj Kumari Devi*. These texts have been purposively selected because they foreground spirits, rituals, sacred ecology, ancestral memory, oral traditions, and Indigenous belief systems as central narrative concerns. The study is theoretically informed by postcolonialism, animism, totemism, and hauntology. Postcolonialism facilitates an examination of colonial intervention, missionary influence, cultural otherization, and identity transformation, while animism and totemism provide a framework for understanding the interconnected relationship between humans, spirits, ancestors, animals, and the natural environment. Hauntology further enables an exploration of ancestral memory, spectral presence, and the persistence of Indigenous cultural consciousness within contemporary literary narratives.

The analysis focuses on the literary representation of *benevolent* and *malevolent* spirits, ritual practices, sacrifices, taboos, sacred landscapes, healing ceremonies, and supernatural cosmologies in order to investigate their role in preserving ethnoreligious traditions and Indigenous worldviews. To address the research questions systematically, the article is organized into three interconnected sections. The *first section*, Colonial Encounter and Transformation of Indigenous Identity, reviews existing scholarship concerning colonial intervention, missionary education, Indigenous spirituality, and cultural transformation within Northeast India. The *second section*, Spirits, Rituals and Ethnoreligious Practices, examines the significance of spirits, sacred rituals, ancestral beliefs, and sacred ecology as markers of ethnoreligious identity and cultural continuity. The *third section*, Ethnicity, Spirits and Ethno-Cultural Identity, investigates the relationship between migration, colonial transformation, demographic change, transnational regionalism, and Indigenous identity formation. Through this analytical framework, the study demonstrates that spirits within Northeast Indian literature function not merely as folkloric or supernatural motifs but as important cultural signifiers that preserve Indigenous memory, sacred traditions, communal belonging, and ethno-cultural continuity amidst historical and contemporary socio-cultural transformations.

4. Spirits, Rituals and Ethnoreligious Practices

According to *Sengupta* (2012), oral traditions in Northeast India recount the existence of powerful supernatural entities such as Bonga, believed to inhabit natural phenomena including rain, floods, earthquakes, cyclones, and rivers while also influencing human life, wellbeing, and calamity. Oral traditions in Northeast India therefore function not merely as folklore but as repositories of historical consciousness, Indigenous epistemologies, communal memory, and regional identity. They also serve as important cultural mechanisms through which beliefs in spirits, sacred cosmologies, and ethnoreligious practices are transmitted across generations, thereby preserving Indigenous worldviews and collective memory.

According to *Longkumer* (2019), these oral traditions encompass myths of origin, genealogies, songs, chants, proverbs, ritual narratives, folktales, and ceremonial practices transmitted intergenerationally through memory, performance, and vernacular storytelling traditions. In the absence of written documentation, oral traditions functioned not only as archives of cultural memory but also as pedagogical systems that preserved Indigenous knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and tribal cosmologies.

Misra (2011) observes that the hymns and chants of the Ao Nagas, the epics and ballads of the Mizo and Khasi communities, and Assamese folktales frequently contain narratives associated with spirits, rituals, myths, and Indigenous belief systems. Oral traditions and vernacular literature initially emerged through Indigenous scripts such as the Meitei script of Manipur and were later expanded through missionary intervention and colonial education. In Assam, for instance, oral traditions formed the foundation of Assamese literary expression through folktales, riddles, songs, and ballads. Indigenous prose and poetry therefore serve as profound reflections of tribal life, cultural identity, and spiritual consciousness.

For example, the literary works of *Lakshminath Bezbaroa* foreground Assam's tribal identity, while *Khasi* and *Mizo* oral repertoires preserve Indigenous myths, spirit narratives, and ancestral memory within vernacular traditions. As a result, oral literature functions not only as a cultural archive but also as a significant medium through which Indigenous communities articulate belonging, continuity, and ethnocultural identity.

During the nineteenth century, colonial authorities and Christian missionaries introduced English education, fundamentally reshaping the trajectory of Indigenous oral traditions. Missionaries such as William Carey in Assam and the Welsh Presbyterians in Mizoram translated oral narratives into English, thereby transferring Indigenous cosmologies and spirit narratives from oral performance into literary discourse. According to *Devy* (2002), the incorporation of English into Indigenous literary traditions enabled writers such as *Temsula Ao*, *Easterine Kire*, *Mamang Dai*, and *Robin S. Ngangom* to reinterpret oral traditions through Anglophone literary forms.

For instance, *Ao's These Hills Called Home* (2006) reimagines Naga oral traditions by incorporating myths, legends, shamans, ancestral memory, and spirits into literary narration. These writers have significantly contributed to shaping regional literature, articulating identity politics, and preserving Indigenous spiritual traditions within contemporary literary discourse. The transition from oral storytelling to literary representation ensured that Indigenous spiritual cosmologies remained visible within contemporary cultural discourse despite colonial transformation and religious conversion.

According to *Bose Nirmal Kumar* (2000), animism constitutes an important Indigenous belief system grounded in faith in spiritual existence and life after death. These spiritual frameworks strongly resonate with theories of animism and hauntology, where supernatural presences and ancestral memory continue to shape communal consciousness and cultural identity. From an animistic perspective, humans, spirits, animals, and natural entities exist within an interconnected relational universe, while hauntology highlights the continuing

presence of ancestral memory within contemporary cultural life (Derrida, 1994; Bird-David, 1999). Accordingly, spirits in Northeast Indian literature function not merely as supernatural beings but as cultural signifiers that embody collective memory, Indigenous identity, and spiritual continuity.

Longkumer (2019) further argues that animal sacrifice remains a common ritual practice among several northeastern communities, although ritual variations differ across tribes. In many tribal societies, animals are not merely sacrificed but are also spiritually revered because supernatural entities are believed to inhabit them. Such practices closely align with totemic belief systems, where animals, rivers, forests, mountains, and celestial bodies are regarded as sacred entities possessing spiritual significance. Within these cosmologies, sacred beings function not only as objects of worship but also as symbolic markers of communal identity, ancestral continuity, and collective belonging (Durkheim, 1912/2008).

The concept of animatism, first introduced by Robert Marett (1909), is also relevant to these Indigenous belief systems, as spiritual power is perceived to reside in both animate and inanimate entities. According to Somi Roy (2021), animatism continues to shape the spiritual imagination of several tribal communities across Northeast India, reinforcing Indigenous perceptions of an interconnected relationship between humans, nature, and the supernatural world. Chatterjee and Sharma (2018) note that tribal communities frequently attribute spiritual power to natural objects and bodily practices capable of influencing human destiny. Wearing rings made of specific stones, bones, feathers, or wood chips, maintaining particular hairstyles, and preserving ritual objects are believed to possess spiritual significance. Practices such as tying cloth or threads to trees, embedding iron nails into wood, offering milk to rivers, leaving food on the ground, or placing objects at designated locations are regarded as protective rituals against malevolent spirits. These practices illustrate how spirituality is embedded within everyday life and demonstrate the close relationship between sacred ecology, ritual performance, and Indigenous cultural identity.

According to Das (2024), Naga communities maintain profound faith in ancestral spirits and invoke them to seek blessings for rainfall, prosperity, agricultural fertility, and communal wellbeing. Many communities also uphold beliefs in rebirth, where individuals may return to another life as animals or insects depending on their actions in the present life. The practice of black magic involving spirits, ancestral souls, and supernatural entities is also prevalent within several tribal communities. Ritual specialists such as *Ojhas* or exorcists therefore occupy an important place in tribal society. They address illness, infertility, mental disturbance, witchcraft accusations, and spiritual afflictions through chants, sacrifices, and ceremonial healing rituals. The continued presence of such ritual specialists demonstrates the enduring authority of Indigenous spiritual knowledge systems and their role in preserving ethnoreligious traditions within contemporary tribal communities.

In addition to spirits, totems constitute another important dimension of Indigenous belief systems. Animals such as tigers, hornbills, cows, cats, mice, and pigeons are frequently associated with spiritual and ancestral significance. Rivers, forests, mountains, the sun, and the moon are likewise regarded as sacred entities within tribal cosmologies. Communities such as the *Karbis* of Assam abstain from harming specific plants and animals because of their totemic associations. The *Tangsa* and *Wancho* tribes of Arunachal Pradesh also associate birds and animals with ancestral spirits and omens. Hornbills, for instance, are believed to embody ancestral souls, while the sudden appearance of a hoolock gibbon is interpreted as an ominous sign. Certain clans prohibit the consumption of particular animals because they are spiritually connected to clan identity and ancestral memory. *Ozukum* clans avoid consuming hornbills, *Longchar* clans abstain from pork, and *Kinimi* clans prohibit dog meat because such animals are considered spiritually sacred. These totemic practices reveal that animals function not merely as symbolic representations of spiritual power but also as cultural signifiers through which communities preserve collective memory, clan identity, and ethnocultural continuity across generations.

The religious landscape of Northeast India remains remarkably diverse, encompassing Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, and numerous Indigenous belief systems. Christian missionaries played a major role in transforming the religious and cultural imagination of the region through missionary education and mass conversion. However, regional literature often presents this transformation with ambivalence rather than complete rejection. In Kire's writings, missionary influence appears simultaneously as compassionate, transformative, and culturally disruptive. For instance, Kire writes, "*Later, the missionary family left for America at the beginning of the war. They were still away even when the government declared that the war is over*" (Kire, 2018, p. 54). Such representations reveal the complex relationship between Indigenous communities and missionary intervention, highlighting the ongoing negotiation between traditional spiritual cosmologies and newly introduced religious identities.

Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* (2012) foregrounds the continued presence of spirits within everyday tribal life. Pariat portrays the belief that spirits of deceased family members return to visit their homes, signaled through subtle movements such as flickering lanterns, slamming doors, moving stools, or shaking windows. These spectral returns strongly resonate with hauntological theory, where the dead continue to inhabit domestic and communal spaces through memory and supernatural presence (Derrida, 1994). Through such representations, spirits emerge as enduring carriers of ancestral memory and cultural continuity rather than merely supernatural apparitions.

The belief in shape-shifting spirits further illustrates the fluidity of supernatural identity within tribal cosmology. In one narrative, a human spirit inhabits the body of a tiger and intervenes to rescue Maina from military harassment. Such representations symbolically merge spirituality with resistance, survival, and communal protection. Within *Santhal* traditions, *Bonga* spirits are believed to govern invisible supernatural forces capable of influencing agriculture, illness, and social harmony. The literary representation of these entities

demonstrates how Indigenous cosmologies construct spirits as active participants in communal life, reinforcing cultural values, social ethics, and collective belonging.

Indigenous communities commonly associate malevolent spirits with diseases, mental disorders, infertility, and declining agricultural productivity. According to oral traditions, such spirits inhabit rivers, forests, graveyards, rocks, abandoned houses, ponds, trees, and animals, particularly tigers. As a result, rituals, sacrifices, festivals, and ceremonial offerings are performed to maintain harmony between humans and spirits. Many tribal communities worship the Sun as a divine entity and the Earth as a sacred maternal force. Rivers such as the *Brahmaputra*, *Ganga*, *Narmada*, and *Damodar* are also regarded as spiritually purifying spaces where rituals are performed to seek blessings and protection from evil spirits and black magic. During harvesting seasons, communities gather along riverbanks to organize festivals and communal gatherings such as *melas* to honour spirits and celebrate agricultural prosperity. These practices reveal the close relationship between spirituality, sacred ecology, and everyday social life, where natural landscapes are perceived as integral components of Indigenous cosmological systems.

Pariat's narratives further demonstrate how spirits continue to regulate everyday social and communal practices. During marriages, rituals are performed to ward off evil spirits and ensure the wellbeing of participants, while death ceremonies involve sacrifices, communal feasts, and prayers intended to guide ancestral souls peacefully into the spiritual realm. In *Dream of the Golden Mahseer* (2014), Pariat introduces water fairies known as *Puris*, supernatural entities believed to lure individuals underwater. In *A Waterfall of Horses* (2012), she foregrounds *Khasi* spiritual cosmology through the figure of *Nong Knia*, a ritual specialist capable of communicating with gods through sacred mantras. Pariat writes: "*He was a bearer of the word. The one who performs our rituals and communicates with gods*" (Pariat, 2012, p. 37). *Nong Knia*'s healing powers and ritual chants symbolize Indigenous spiritual authority within *Khasi* cosmology. His ability to heal wounds, invoke supernatural forces, and resist colonial intrusion demonstrates the continuing relevance of shamans and ritual specialists within tribal communities. As custodians of spiritual knowledge, such figures play a crucial role in preserving ethnoreligious traditions and transmitting Indigenous belief systems across generations.

Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam* (2006) portrays illness, spiritual imbalance, and ritual healing through interactions between humans and supernatural entities. Togum's son falls ill after killing a spiritually protected snake, while Hoxo performs rituals to negotiate with spirits. Dai writes, "*It was too late as spirits moved away to a place beyond recall*" (Dai, 2006, p. 25). Such narratives illustrate how Indigenous cosmologies interpret suffering, disease, and misfortune through spiritual frameworks that differ significantly from modern secular explanations of illness and wellbeing.

Superstitions and taboos also form an integral aspect of tribal social systems. In Pariat's *Pilgrimage* (2014), Barisha places rice in her boyfriend's backpack before his departure to ensure his safe return, reflecting ritual practices embedded within everyday emotional life. Tribal communities also emphasize the intergenerational transmission of communal skills and cultural knowledge. In Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014), bark-weaving, forest gathering, and ritual practices are portrayed as important forms of Indigenous knowledge passed from older generations to younger members of the community. Such practices demonstrate that spiritual traditions are sustained not only through formal rituals but also through everyday acts of cultural inheritance and communal learning.

Numerous spiritual taboos continue to shape everyday tribal life across Northeast India. In Kire's narratives, individuals believed to be affected by spirits are often buried outside village boundaries, while rituals involving chicken sacrifices and exorcism ceremonies are performed to remove evil influences and restore spiritual balance. According to Indigenous beliefs, spirits become hostile when sacred norms are violated, such as entering abandoned houses, visiting graveyards at night, harming spiritually protected animals, or disrespecting sacred trees and spaces. These taboos function as cultural mechanisms that regulate social behaviour while simultaneously reinforcing communal values and sacred relationships with the natural environment.

Dai also portrays ritual exorcism ceremonies in which shamans chant invocations, offer wine and animal sacrifices, and apply sacrificial blood to restore harmony between spirits and humans. Ritual restrictions associated with widows, menstruation, sacred trees, and pregnancy further demonstrate the deep interconnectedness between spirituality, ecology, gender, and communal ethics. According to Sharma, Thakur, and Uniyal (2021), taboos such as prohibiting pregnant women from consuming papaya, restricting menstruating women from entering farms, and preserving secret healing practices among traditional healers continue to shape cultural life across several northeastern communities. These practices reveal how spiritual beliefs extend beyond religion to influence social organization, ethical conduct, and cultural identity within Indigenous communities.

Therefore, spirits within Northeast Indian literature should not merely be interpreted as folkloric or supernatural motifs. Rather, they function as powerful cultural signifiers that preserve Indigenous epistemologies, sacred ecology, communal memory, and ethnoreligious identity. The literary representation of spirits demonstrates how Indigenous cosmologies continue to survive, adapt, and negotiate cultural transformation, thereby reinforcing both ethno-religious and ethno-cultural identity amidst colonial intervention, missionary conversion, militarization, migration, and transnational socio-cultural change.

5. Ethnicity and Spirits

The Garo ethnic community in Northeast India comprises approximately 1.2 million people and is primarily Indigenous to the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, along with certain regions of Assam and Bangladesh. Although nearly 90% of the Garos converted to Christianity through missionary intervention, approximately 10% of the population continues to practice their Indigenous religion, known as *Songsarek*. Within traditional Garo cosmology, the spiritual world is inhabited by numerous supernatural entities believed to coexist alongside

humans despite remaining invisible. These spiritual beliefs constitute an important dimension of Garo ethnoreligious identity, shaping communal values, ritual practices, and collective cultural memory.

For instance, *Saljong* is regarded as the spirit associated with the sun and fertility, Gaera symbolizes strength and thunder, while *Susume* is connected with wealth and prosperity. Christian Garos also retain belief in supernatural entities such as *Memang* (ghosts), demonstrating the coexistence of Indigenous spirituality and Christian belief systems within contemporary Garo society. Ritual practices associated with these spiritual traditions are prominently observed during the annual Wangala festival, which functions not merely as a cultural celebration but also as a sacred ritual reinforcing communal identity, agricultural prosperity, and spiritual continuity. The persistence of such beliefs illustrates how Indigenous cosmologies continue to survive despite religious transformation, reflecting the dynamic negotiation between tradition and modernity.

The Khasi community, of which nearly 80% identify as Christian, also preserves significant elements of Indigenous cosmology despite missionary conversion. According to *Bareh* (2001), Khasi religious beliefs are centered on a creator deity known as *U Blei Nong-thaw*, who occupies a central position within traditional Khasi cosmology. Similarly, *Nongbri* (2003) observes that Khasi spiritual belief systems include reverence for ancestral spirits and several supernatural entities associated with natural and social life, such as *U Lei Muluk* (god of taste), *U Lei Umtang* (god of water), *U Lei Longspah* (god of wealth), and *U Lei Ryngkew* (god of land). These spiritual structures strongly reflect animistic and totemic worldviews in which nature, ancestors, and supernatural forces remain closely interconnected with everyday communal existence. Such beliefs demonstrate that spirituality functions not merely as a religious system but also as a cultural framework through which communities define belonging, ancestry, and collective identity.

Khasi communities also practice divination through rituals such as reading eggshells, offering sacrifices to avert misfortune, and interpreting omens, mystic numbers, and symbolic colours as spiritually significant. Ritual dances performed during major festivals dedicated to *Ka Lei Synshar* are intended to ensure agricultural fertility, prosperity, and communal wellbeing. These practices demonstrate the continued centrality of spirits and ritual cosmologies within Indigenous social structures despite the growing influence of Christianity and modernity. As a result, ritual performance becomes a mechanism through which ethnoreligious traditions are preserved and transmitted across generations.

These ethnic communities therefore maintain lifelong spiritual relationships with supernatural entities to seek guidance, protection, healing, and prosperity. Easterine Kire's narratives further demonstrate the profound cultural significance of spirits within tribal consciousness. Kire writes, *Any clan member dying after encountering a spirit could not be buried within the village* (Kire, 2018, p. 6), thereby illustrating how spiritual encounters continue to regulate communal customs, burial practices, and social behaviour.

Kovi's protective ritual for his son further reveals the intimate relationship between naming practices and spiritual protection within tribal cosmology: Kovi quickly smeared saliva on his finger and touched it to his son's forehead with the word, 'first,' signifying that the spirits could not claim the child before him (Kire, 2018, p. 7). Kire further states: *Our people always name our children as soon as they can, because naming them makes them members of the clan and protects them from being taken by spirits* (Kire, 2018, p. 17). These practices demonstrate that spirits are deeply embedded within kinship structures, rites of passage, and the construction of communal belonging.

Such literary representations reveal how Indigenous spiritual practices are deeply intertwined with kinship, identity formation, ancestral continuity, and communal protection. Rather than functioning merely as supernatural beliefs, spirits operate as cultural symbols through which ethnic communities preserve social cohesion, ancestral memory, and collective identity. Therefore, spirits within Northeast Indian literature should not be interpreted solely as supernatural or folkloric elements; rather, they function as cultural signifiers that preserve ethnoreligious identity, Indigenous epistemologies, and collective memory amidst colonial transformation, missionary conversion, and transnational socio-cultural change. The literary representation of spirits therefore demonstrates how Indigenous communities negotiate cultural transformation while simultaneously preserving distinct forms of ethnic, religious, and cultural belonging.

6. Ethno-Cultural Identity in Literary Context

Assam experienced a major surge of Bengali-Muslim migration following the 1971 War of Independence. According to *Baruah* (2003), the influx of Bengali Muslims into Assam generated intense socio-political conflict because of anxieties surrounding linguistic domination, cultural displacement, and economic competition. However, the issue extended beyond demographic change and economic concerns, as migration also challenged Indigenous perceptions of territory, belonging, and cultural continuity. Assam was not perceived merely as a territorial or economic space but as a sacred landscape inhabited by ancestral spirits, ritual sites, sacred groves, rivers, forests, and supernatural entities deeply embedded within Indigenous belief systems. As a result, the question of migration became intertwined with concerns regarding the preservation of sacred geography, collective memory, and ethnocultural identity.

The Assam Anti-Foreigner Movement of 1979 emerged as a significant socio-political response to illegal migration and substantially affected the cultural, linguistic, spiritual, and social structures of ethnic communities in Northeast India. Nath (2022) notes those terms such as *settlers*, *bohiragoto* (outsiders), *bideshi* (foreigners), *Mia Muslims*, and *illegal migrants* became common labels used to describe Bangladeshi migrants in Assam. *Nandana Dutta* (2012) similarly argues that Assamese ethnic communities feared the erosion of their identity because of changing demographic structures produced by migration. Such anxieties reflected broader concerns regarding cultural survival, territorial belonging, and the preservation of Indigenous ways of life.

Indigenous communities were particularly concerned about the intrusion of outsiders into sacred landscapes such as forests, rivers, hills,

fields, and groves believed to be inhabited by *benevolent* and *malevolent* spirits that required ritual appeasement through sacrifices, chants, and festivals. Migrants, possessing different religious beliefs and cultural practices, frequently regarded such Indigenous cosmologies as superstition, thereby transforming the dynamics of sacred ecology within the region. Baruah (2020) further argues that the partition process became deeply traumatic for Assamese communities, while Goshal (2021) observes that the ideology of *Assam for Assamese* emerged as an attempt to preserve Indigenous cultural identity in the face of demographic transformation. The conflict therefore involved not only political and economic concerns but also competing understandings of land, spirituality, and cultural belonging.

Several Northeast Indian novelists situate their narratives against the backdrop of the Assam Agitation movement to portray the resulting socio-political and ethno-cultural turmoil. Jahnvi Barua's *Undertow* (2020), for instance, portrays the overwhelming anxiety surrounding foreign infiltration and its impact on Indigenous identity, spiritual beliefs, and cultural practices. The protagonist, Rukmini, actively participates in the Assam Agitation movement and experiences a profound fear of cultural erosion. Barua writes: *Make the government do its duty: to expel illegal aliens, instead of arming them with citizenship and voting rights* (Barua, 2020, p. 19). From Rukmini's perspective, migration is represented not merely as demographic change but as a perceived threat to cultural continuity, ancestral memory, and regional identity.

Indigenous rituals associated with sacred ecology were also gradually disrupted by migration and land encroachment. For Bodo communities, *Bathou* shrines centered on the sacred *Sijou* plant symbolized the protection of land, ancestors, and spirits; however, encroachment upon ancestral lands displaced these ritual practices. The Mising festival *Ali-Aye-Ligang*, traditionally associated with sowing rituals and fertility spirits, was likewise disrupted as agricultural fields became increasingly occupied by outsiders. These examples illustrate how territorial displacement simultaneously affects cultural practices, ritual continuity, and Indigenous relationships with sacred landscapes.

Migration also intensified anxieties surrounding interethnic marriages and cultural transformation. In *Undertow* (2020), Rukmini experiences internal conflict after deciding to marry Alex, a man from Kerala, perceiving herself as betraying her race, region, and ancestral identity. Her daughter, Loya, similarly believes that political authorities deliberately encouraged migration for vote-bank politics, thereby threatening the future cultural and spiritual identity of Assam. Barua further notes that migrants gradually assimilated into local society through religious conversion and intermarriage, contributing to the emergence of hybrid cultural identities. The novel therefore foregrounds the tension between cultural preservation and cultural hybridity, revealing the complexities of identity formation in a rapidly transforming social landscape.

According to Patangia and Kar (2024), migration introduced new languages, religions, cuisines, and cultural practices into Northeast India, generating both cultural hybridity and anxieties concerning assimilation, belonging, and otherness. Siddharth Deb's *The Point of Return* (2004) also portrays the region as a contested space where multiple ethnic and cultural identities continuously negotiate boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Such literary representations reveal that belonging within Northeast India remains a dynamic and contested process shaped by migration, memory, and historical experience.

Regional literature nevertheless continues to foreground the resilience of Indigenous cultural values despite colonialism, migration, and modernity. Kire's portrayal of Amo Molhoulic in *A Naga Village Remembered* reflects the idealized tribal ethos grounded in bravery, communal responsibility, respect for elders, and collective ethics. Kire writes: *Amo lived a hero's life, not only in the battlefield but even after the war was over. He was a good wrestler, sportsman, and obedient son. He made the elderly feel cared for; he attended to the widows who needed help fixing their homes and barns* (Kire, 2018, p. 81). Such narratives emphasize that cultural identity is sustained not only through rituals and beliefs but also through shared ethical values and communal responsibilities.

Kire's narratives also foreground Indigenous healing practices, communal labour, rituals, storytelling traditions, and sacred taboos as central markers of tribal identity. Traditional healers, bone setters, clan elders, ritual specialists, and storytellers continue to function as custodians of communal memory and Indigenous knowledge systems. These figures play a crucial role in preserving cultural continuity by transmitting traditional knowledge across generations despite social transformation and religious change.

Regional literature also foregrounds the transformation of Indigenous identities during colonialism and missionary conversion. Many communities, such as the Nagas, Mizos, Garos, and Kukis, underwent mass conversion to Christianity, significantly altering Indigenous rituals, attire, and spiritual practices. Nevertheless, writers such as Kire demonstrate that tribal communities preserved core cultural values despite religious transformation. In *A Respectable Woman*, Kire portrays how food-sharing, mourning rituals, communal gatherings, and marriage ceremonies continue to sustain Indigenous identity even within Christianized communities. The persistence of such practices suggests that cultural identity remains adaptable, capable of incorporating religious change while maintaining continuity with ancestral traditions.

Kire also foregrounds the importance of storytelling, ritual observances, taboos, dreams, and *Genna* days within Naga cosmology. Spirits continue to occupy a central role within tribal consciousness, where dreams are interpreted as forms of spiritual guidance and taboos function as sacred ethical structures regulating communal life. Kire writes: *If you honor the spirits, they will bless you; if you defy them, you will learn how mortal man is* (p. 70). She further notes, *If you break the taboos, you break yourself* (p. 31). Such literary representations demonstrate how Indigenous cosmologies continue to survive within Northeast Indian literature despite colonial intervention, migration, militarization, and transnational socio-cultural transformation.

Therefore, regional literature functions not merely as political testimony but also as a significant cultural archive that preserves

Indigenous memory, sacred ecology, ethnoreligious identity, and communal resilience. Through its engagement with migration, conflict, and belonging, Northeast Indian literature reveals how communities negotiate cultural transformation while simultaneously preserving distinct forms of ethnic, cultural, and spiritual identity.

7. Conclusion

This research explores the orthodox practices of various ethnic communities in Northeast India, which distinguish them racially, culturally, and religiously from mainland India. Predominantly composed of tribal societies, these communities adhere to animistic belief systems characterized by ritual practices, sacred cosmologies, and profound faith in benevolent and malevolent spirits. Indigenous communities regard natural elements such as rivers, forests, animals, mountains, objects, and ancestral spirits as spiritually inhabited by supernatural entities to whom reverence is offered in pursuit of protection, guidance, prosperity, and communal harmony. As a result, the spiritual dimension permeates nearly every aspect of tribal life, including agricultural practices, marriage customs, healing rituals, festivals, community ceremonies, and social organization.

This study critically investigates the extent to which these ethnoreligious and cultural practices have been transformed through missionary conversion, colonial intervention, and foreign influx within the region. To examine these transformations, the paper engages with Northeast Indian Anglophone literature and interprets literary narratives as cultural sites reflecting ethnic traditions, spiritual cosmologies, and the role of spirits within everyday tribal life. Through close textual analysis of selected regional texts, the study demonstrates that spirits and Indigenous cosmologies remain central components of literary representation, functioning as enduring markers of cultural memory, communal belonging, and spiritual continuity.

A comprehensive literary analysis foregrounds Indigenous practices and the reverence accorded to spirits within tribal communities. Particular attention is given to cultural and ritualistic practices such as Tenyimia, Terhase, Kepenuopfu, spirit beliefs associated with tigers, and other sacred traditions that reinforce communal identity and regional consciousness. These ritual practices not only reflect Indigenous cosmologies but also demonstrate the interconnected relationship between spirituality, sacred ecology, and cultural continuity within Northeast India. The findings further indicate that spirits, rituals, taboos, and ceremonial practices operate as important markers of both ethno-religious and ethno-cultural identity, enabling communities to preserve collective memory and ancestral traditions across generations.

The study also examines how migration, foreign infiltration, and demographic transformation have reshaped regional socio-cultural structures and redefined notions of belonging and otherness within Indigenous communities. The gradual incorporation of outsiders into the region transformed the discourse of regionalism into what may be termed transnational regionalism, where Indigenous identities continuously negotiate between preservation, adaptation, and cultural transformation. These socio-political and transnational processes have significantly altered ethnoreligious practices, communal relationships, and cultural identities across Northeast India. However, the literary texts reveal that Indigenous communities have not simply experienced cultural erosion; rather, they have actively negotiated and reconfigured their identities while preserving core cultural and spiritual values.

Drawing upon postcolonialism, animism, totemism, and hauntology, this research argues that spirits within Northeast Indian literature function not merely as supernatural entities or folkloric motifs but as symbolic embodiments of Indigenous memory, cultural resistance, sacred geography, and ethnoreligious identity. The study therefore concludes that the literary representation of spirits provides an important framework for understanding how Indigenous communities' articulate identity, negotiate cultural transformation, and preserve ancestral knowledge in the face of colonial modernity, missionary influence, migration, and transnational change. Ultimately, this study positions Northeast Indian Anglophone literature as a significant cultural archive that preserves Indigenous spiritual traditions, cultural resilience, and collective memory while documenting the ongoing negotiation of identity within a rapidly transforming regional landscape.

Acknowledgments

I greatly appreciate the valuable contributions of my colleague R.M.M.

Author contributions

R.M.M was responsible for literature review, data collection and revising. While M.Y was responsible for drafting, typing, formatting, reviewing and incorporating reviewer's comments and for communicating with WJEL editorial team. All authors read and approved the final manuscript with mutual consent over reviewer's comments.

Funding

It is a self-funded publication. Both authors are bound to pay equal amount as for APC.

Competing interests

Both authors declared that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The datasets analysed during the current study are available in the Dataverse repository:

UKM Learning and Research Repository: Browsing DSpace.

These datasets were derived from the following public domain resources:

https://ptsldigital.ukm.my/handle/123456789/388890/browse?type=title&sort_by=1&order=ASC&rpp=20&etal=-1&starts_with=Northeast+India+

https://ptsldigital.ukm.my/handle/123456789/388909/browse?type=title&sort_by=1&order=ASC&rpp=20&etal=-1&starts_with=Northeast+India+

Journal of Northeast India Studies

[3]+Ready+Published+-+Saranya.pdf

Literatures from Northeast India: Beyond the Centre-Periphery Debate

34-Satyajit+Kalita+-+Print+-+IERJ24075965172789.pdf

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

References

- Ao, T. (2006). *Blood of Other Days*. Heritage Publishing House.
- Ao, T. (2006). *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. New Delhi: Zubaan / Penguin Books.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2002). *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203426081>
- Bareh, H. (2001). *The History and Culture of the Khasi people*. Spectrum Publications.
- Barua, J. (2008). *Next Door*. Penguin Books India.
- Barua, J. (2020). *Undertow*. Penguin Random House India.
- Baruah, S. (2003). Citizens and Denizens: Ethnicity, Homelands, and the Crisis of Displacement in Northeast India. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 16(1), 44-66. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/16.1.44>
- Baruah, S. (2005). *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*. Oxford University Press.
- Baruah, S. (2020). *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503611290>
- Bird-David, N. (1999). "Animism" Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology. *Current Anthropology*, 40(S1), S67-S91. <https://doi.org/10.1086/200061>
- Bose, N. K. (2000). *Tribal Life in India*. National Book Trust.
- Chatterjee, S., & Sharma, R. (2018). Belief of Tribals in Supernatural Power and Its Relation with Religious Life (with special reference to Indian tribal society). *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, 5(3), 48-55.
- Dai, M. (2006). *The Legends of Pensam*. Penguin Books India.
- Das, N. K. (2024). Cosmology, Ecology, and Spirituality: Reappraising Stone Culture, Genna Tradition, and Ancestor Veneration among the Naga Tribes. *The Oriental Anthropologist*, 24(1), 45-65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0972558X241227861>
- Deb, S. (2004). *The Point of Return*. HarperCollins Publishers India.

- Derrida, J. (1994). *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Routledge.
- Devi, M. K. (1991). *The Princess and the Political Agent*. Har-Anand Publications.
- Devy, G. N. (2002). *Painted Words: An Anthology of Tribal Literature*. Penguin Books India.
- Durkheim, É. (2008). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/owc/9780199540129.001.0001>
- Dutta, N. (2012). *Questions of Identity in Assam: Location, Migration, Hybridity*. Sage Publications.
- Ghoshal, A. (2021). *Refugees, Borders and Identities: Rights and Habitat in East and Northeast India*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429317620>
- Jacob, M. (2015). *Zorami: A Redemption Song*. Notion Press.
- Kalita, A. P. (2015). *Written in Tears*. Niyogi Books.
- Kire, E. (2014). *When the River Sleeps*. Zubaan.
- Kire, E. (2018). *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*. Speaking Tiger.
- Kire, E. (2022). *Spirit Nights*. Simon & Schuster India.
- Laisram, R. (2024). Religious Traditions and Cultural Confluence in India's North-East. *International Journal of History and Archaeology Research Studies (IJHARS)*, 1(1), 17-24. <https://doi.org/10.63090/IJHARS/3049.1622.0003>
- Longkumer, A. (2019). *The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the Northeast*. Stanford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503614239>
- Marett, R. R. (1909). *The Threshold of Religion*. Methuen & Co.
- Misra, T. (Ed.). (2011). *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Fiction*. Oxford University Press.
- Nath, R. (2022). The Question of the 'Foreigners' in Select Fictional Narratives From Assam. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 14(2), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2.ne25>
- Ngullie, M. (2013). *Iron Irom: Two Journeys—Where the Abnormal is Normal*. Zubaan.
- Nongbri, T. (2003). *Khasi Society of Meghalaya: A Sociological Understanding*. Indus Publishing Company.
- Pariat, J. (2012). *Boats on Land*. Random House India.
- Pariat, J. (2014). *Dream of the Golden Mahseer*. Random House India.
- Patangia, A., & Kar, B. K. (2024). The Nature, Dimensions, Causes and Implications of In and Out Migration in North-East India. *AUC Geographica*, 59(1), 20-34. <https://doi.org/10.14712/23361980.2024.2>
- Roy, L. S. (2021). *And That is Why: Manipuri Myths Retold*. Penguin Random House India.
- Sarma, R., & Mallai, P. (2018). A Study of Khasi Folk Beliefs from Folkloristic Perspective. *International Journal of Research Culture Society*, 2(2), 364-368.
- Sengupta, S. (2012). *Indigenous Knowledge Traditions: Perspective from North East India*. Gyan Publishing House.
- Sharma, A., Thakur, D., & Uniyal, S. K. (2021). Taboos: Traditional Beliefs and Customs for Resource Management in the Western Himalaya. *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge*, 20(2), 575-581. <https://doi.org/10.56042/ijtk.v20i2.29346>
- Sharmila, I. C. (2010). *Fragrance of Peace: Essays on Peace, Identity and Survival*. Akansha Publishing House.
- Shohe, L. (2020). Naga Indigenous Religions: Reconstructing its Nomenclatures. *Panjab University Research Journal (Arts)*, 47, 10-27.
- Taneja, A. (2017). *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi*. Stanford University Press.