International Journal of Recent Development in Engineering and Technology
Website: www.ijrdet.com (ISSN 2347-6435(Online) Volume 15, Issue 01, January 2026)

Transforming Memory into Text: Indigenous Oral Cultures in Northeast Literature

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***Abstract*-- This paper investigates how the literatures of North-East India transform collective memory, oral tradition, and indigenous cultural knowledge into written narrative forms. Focusing on the works of Indira Goswami, Mamang Dai, and Temsula Ao, the study argues that their fiction emerges from oral worldviews that treat memory - not state archives - as the foundational source of history. Drawing upon memory studies, oral history theory, and postcolonial criticism, the paper analyses how myth, ritual performance, ancestral storytelling, and ecological cosmologies migrate from the spoken domain into the literary text. In doing so, these writers redefine literature as a medium through which communities sustain identity, resist erasure, and reinterpret lived experience across Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Nagaland. Their narratives demonstrate that oral cultures are not remnants of the past but dynamic epistemologies capable of generating literary forms that preserve, reinterpret, and circulate indigenous knowledge. Ultimately, the paper contends that transforming memory into text is both an act of cultural survival and a decolonising intervention against dominant historical models.**

***Keywords*-- Indigenous oral culture; Memory; Northeast India; Cultural transmission; Folklore; Decolonising literature; Goswami, Ao; Dai.**

I. Introduction

Literary production in North-East India unfolds against a backdrop where official histories- shaped by colonial ethnography, administrative surveillance, and post-Independence state narratives - have long marginalised the experiential realities of its communities. These archives tend to fragment regional identities, reducing vibrant cultural worlds to categories of tribe, custom, or insurgency. In contrast, oral traditions - songs, myths, origin tales, genealogies, ritual chants, and seasonal narratives - function as living vessels of knowledge, memory, and community history. When these orally transmitted forms migrate into written literature, they generate what may be understood as textualised memory: literary narratives that preserve, reinterpret, and circulate indigenous knowledge.

Within this transformative process, the works of Indira Goswami (Assam), Mamang Dai (Arunachal Pradesh), and Temsula Ao (Nagaland) are foundational. Their writing does not merely reference folklore as an aesthetic resource; it performs a deeper cultural work. By reimagining oral memory within modern narrative structures, these authors recover submerged experiences, gendered marginalities, ecological worldviews, and collective traumas that do not appear in state or colonial archives. Their fiction becomes a site where myth and memory are not relics but active epistemologies - bridges between ancestral voices and contemporary readership.

This paper explores how the act of transforming memory into text enables these writers to challenge dominant historical paradigms, assert indigenous presence, and create literary spaces where community histories are retold on their own terms.

II. Discussion

Oral Memory as Indigenous Archive: A Theoretical Framework

The transformation of oral culture into literary narrative rests on the premise that memory is an active cultural force rather than a passive storehouse. Scholars of oral history argue that recollection is shaped by performance, place, and communal retelling rather than fixed in linear chronology. Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory underscores how societies sustain their past through rituals, mythic narratives, and symbolic practices that operate outside formal archival systems-precisely the domain from which Northeast literary traditions draw (Assmann 4). Complementing this, Pierre Nora's notion of lieux de mémoire, or sites of memory, illuminates how communities preserve lived histories in spaces, landscapes, objects, and repeated stories when institutional narratives fail or erase them (Nora 7).

Within Northeast India, where many communities historically relied on oral transmission, memory resides in terrain, kinship bonds, genealogical stories, river legends, and seasonal rituals tied to agricultural and spiritual rhythms.

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Here, folklore does not function as decorative mythology but as a repository of indigenous knowledge, encoding ethics, ecology, spirituality, and historical trauma. When writers such as Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, and Indira Goswami translate these oral reservoirs into textual form, they perform more than literary adaptation-they enact an epistemic transformation that carries memory from voice to print.

Postcolonial theorists remind us that such writing must be read not as ancillary cultural material but as alternative historiography, challenging colonial and state records that marginalize tribal and non-elite experiences. By embedding oral memory within fiction, these authors produce a counter-archive - one capable of mourning loss, preserving identity, and resisting epistemic erasure. In this framework, Goswami, Dai, and Ao become chroniclers of lived time, transforming inherited story-worlds into literary testimony that restores presence to voices omitted from official history.

Indira Goswami: Ritual Memory, Body Politics, and Syncretic Folk Worlds

Indira Goswami's fiction demonstrates the transformative power of oral cultural knowledge when translated into literary form. Unlike Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai, whose work grows primarily from tribal memory, Goswami occupies a syncretic Assamese world where Sanskritic, Tantric, folk, animist, and oral Shakti traditions converge. Her short story collections *The Shadow of Kamakhya*, *Pages Stained with Blood*, and *The Offspring* repeatedly draw from the stories whispered in village courtyards, temple precincts, and riverside ghats - memories that survive outside written history yet shape the lived consciousness of community (Goswami, *Shadow* 12).

In *The Shadow of Kamakhya*, the Kamakhya temple becomes a living archive - a site where oral mythology, ritual practices, and socio-spiritual anxiety are constantly renewed. The Ambubachi ritual, Chhinnamasta worship, and tales of tantrik asceticism are not described as exotic spectacle but as social knowledge systems embedded in everyday life. This ritual world - learned through hearing rather than reading - organises relationships among caste, gender, labour, and desire (Goswami, *Shadow* 48). Goswami's retellings of mythic memory expose how these oral beliefs impose taboos, produce marginality, and police female bodies. Stories such as "The Offspring" and "Under the Shadow of Kamakhya" demonstrate how caste pride, impurity rituals, and goddess worship can become technologies of control over women's sexuality and reproductive agency (Goswami, *Shadow* 102).

At the same time, Goswami transforms these oral worlds into spaces of resistance. In *Pages Stained with Blood*, folklore intersects with lived political trauma - the anti-Sikh riots -revealing how communal memory survives violence through retelling (Goswami, *Pages* 77). Oral gossip, whispered testimony, rumour, and street stories circulate as counter-narratives to official versions of history. Similarly, in The Offspring, the remembered stories of ancestral lineage and Brahminical purity are hollowed out by the pain of an illegitimate pregnancy and the desperation of a woman forced to make choices outside the sanctioned moral universe (Goswami, *Shadow* 139)

Goswami's narrative strategy reveals that oral culture carries not only mythic belief but also social critique. Her fiction converts ritual memory into testimony, chronicling caste oppression, gendered subalternity, and indigenous anxieties that remain unrecorded in archival historiography. By embedding folklore into stories of poverty, violence, desire, and survival, Goswami unearths the subterranean cultural history of the Brahmaputra Valley - one sustained not by state documents but by song, rumour, prayer, and embodied memory. In doing so, she produces a literary archive where oral knowledge becomes both narrative resource and instrument of decolonizing interpretation (Goswami, *Shadow* 154).

Mamang Dai: Translating Oral Worlds into Textual Memory

Mamang Dai's fiction and poetry stand at the forefront of literary efforts to translate the oral consciousness of Arunachal Pradesh into written narrative forms, transforming ephemeral folklore into enduring textual memory. Drawing deeply from the cosmologies of the Adi community, Dai's works such as *The Legends of Pensam* and *The Black Hill* reimagine myth not as metaphor or aesthetic embellishment, but as an active system of knowledge that structures the lived world (Dai, *Legends* 12). Dai's landscapes- mountains, rivers, forests - are storied terrains, inhabited by ancestors, spirits, and watchful presences whose existence is validated through collective remembering (Dai, *Black Hill* 44). In *Pensam*, stories flow between characters like circulating oral tales: the mysterious disappearance of children into the spirit world, the cyclical return of omens, and the porous boundary between human and other-than-human beings represent modes of memory that resist rational Western historiography (Dai, *Legends* 63-64). Dai's narrative structure itself mimics orality - episodic, circular, embedded in community memory rather than linear chronology - thus transforming the novel into a literary archive of oral imagination (Dai, *Legends* 5).

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The Black Hill similarly melds history and myth to retell colonial encounters as experienced from within Indigenous epistemologies, foregrounding prophecy, ancestral codes, ritual obligation, and communal survival rather than the administrative records that typically define the historical past (Dai, *Black Hill* 101-02). Dai's vocabulary, cadence, and recurring motifs - ancestral whispers, the winds of Pensam, the unseen - reinstate the oral rhythms of storytelling, while her recurring preoccupation with liminality anticipates a cultural civilisation living between breath and text, forest and page (Dai, *Black Hill* 78). Through her writing, Dai demonstrates that oral tradition is not merely material to be collected but a worldview to be enacted; her literature becomes a space where stories serve as custodians of history, enabling Arunachal's voices - once excluded from written archives - to exist, circulate, and speak authoritatively (Dai, *Legends* 112). In Dai's hands, literature becomes a conduit through which cultural memory moves from the spoken to the written, ensuring the survival of knowledge systems that continue to live, breathe, and evolve within the imaginative terrain of Northeast India.

Temsula Ao: Orality, Memory, and Communal Testimony in Fiction

Temsula Ao's writings constitute one of the most sustained literary engagements with oral culture in Northeast India, particularly within the Angami and wider Naga context. Her short story collections *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head* demonstrate how oral memory functions as a counter-history that contests both colonial ethnography and postcolonial nationalist narratives. In Ao's fictional universe, folktales, tribal songs, clan genealogies, and spirit lore are not ornamental story elements - they are foundational systems of knowledge through which communities interpret their world (Ao, *These Hills* 14). The hills themselves are memory keepers: landscapes that store stories of headhunting, displacement, and resistance, retold in language suffused with ancestral rhythm (Ao, *These Hills* 27).

Ao's narrative strategy often mimics oral transmission - fragmented, recursive, and communal - where stories are not possessed by individuals but held collectively. Characters frequently recall old tales told by grandmothers, warriors, and village priests, grounding memory within intergenerational continuity (Ao, *Laburnum* 9). Even stories rooted in the violence of insurgency - burnt villages, raped women, missing sons - are narrated through communal voice, transforming trauma into shared testimony rather than individualized confession (Ao, *These Hills* 56).

In this sense, Ao's fiction functions as a form of cultural witnessing: a textual memorial for ordinary Naga lives erased by state archives, media reportage, and military records.

Unlike realist historiography that privileges dates and events, Ao foregrounds affective history - fear, displacement, fragmented kinship, and resilience - as forms of truth that circulate orally and survive even when official records disappear (Ao, *These Hills* 88). Her metaphor of "hills as home" affirms place-based identity rooted in storytelling, where land and memory are inseparable. Ao's stories thus enact what Homi Bhabha calls a "third space" of narration, where indigenous cosmology and modern political suffering coexist without subordination to one another. By transcribing communal memory into written narrative, Ao ensures that Naga cultural knowledge - once confined to the spoken - enters the literary archive while retaining its orality, cadence, and worldview. In Ao's work, literature becomes a vessel for collective remembrance, transforming stories into historical text without losing their ancestral breath (Ao, *Laburnum* 47).

III. Conclusion

This study establishes that literature emerging from Northeast India performs a crucial archival function by transforming oral memory into written narrative. While dominant historical discourse in India has long relied on colonial documentation, state records, and institutional historiography, indigenous communities have preserved their past through storytelling, ritual enactment, and collective memory. The writings of Indira Goswami, Mamang Dai, and Temsula Ao demonstrate how these oral epistemologies can become powerful literary sources for reimagining history.

Across their works, oral tradition is not treated as a nostalgic trace of vanishing cultures but as an active reservoir of historical knowledge. Goswami's fiction evokes oral memory to interrogate caste hierarchies, gendered violence, and social trauma, foregrounding voices that traditional historiography marginalizes. Dai reanimates myth and legend as credible historical testimony, revealing that landscape, community belief, and ancestral narrative preserve experience in ways official archives cannot. Ao transforms folk song, ancestral mourning, and war memory into literature, foregrounding the politics of remembrance and the ethics of witnessing. Each writer constructs what may be called a literary repository of cultural memory - a vernacular archive inscribed on the page.

These interventions collectively challenge epistemic authority. The literature does not merely supplement gaps in Indian historiography; it shifts intellectual frameworks by legitimising indigenous knowledge systems as historical methodology. Myth, song, and oral narrative thus function as alternate, equally valid modes of remembering, recording, and transmitting the past. In rendering oral cultures textual, Northeast writers reclaim representational agency for communities historically excluded from state histories.

The study concludes that transforming memory into literature is an act of cultural survival and creative resistance. The works of Goswami, Dai, and Ao ensure that erased histories and silenced voices are preserved, circulated, and interpreted anew. Through their writing, indigenous knowledge moves from the margins of discourse into the centre of literary and historical analysis - affirming that the past is not only written in state archives but sung in the mountains, whispered in folktales, and ultimately revived on the printed page.

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