



THE ASSAM

ROYAL GLOBAL UNIVERSITY

(Under Section 2(f) of UGC Act 1956)

Press Release for conclusion of The Listener: Brahmaputra

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Guwahati ---- The Listener: Brahmaputra, a three days festival of oral literature, organized by Imasi, the Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi Foundation, held in The Assam Royal Global University (RGU), Guwahati and on the MV Kohuwa Bon, a cruiseship on the Brahmaputra river, concluded on February 12, 2025.

The Listener takes this opportunity to share the good news that, in the intervening period, The Listener team has edited all the sessions recorded by RGU. They may be accessed at the Imasi Foundation Youtube Channel www.youtube.com/@ImasiFoundation

This unique festival of oral literature in Northeast India, was an attempt to highlight the unwritten non-text and pre-text literatures of the tribes and communities living in the region. According to the founder of Imasi and festival curator, L. Somi Roy, “Oral literature is more than storytelling; it is memory, emotion and the wisdom of generations expressed in voice.” With scholars of language, literature and linguistics beginning to explore the literature of the tribes and communities whose languages are without scripts and whose literary heritage is largely oral, the festival also tried to highlight what technology, both oral and aural, meant for the small, weak but globalizing communities of the Northeastern region.

As the inaugural session of the festival started on February 10, 2025, with an inaugural address by Prof. Shiela Bora, the Festival Director, an air of reverence filled the hall with the chanting of Pali prayers by two Theravada monks from Arunachal Pradesh. Explaining the concept behind the Festival, Mr. Roy, the founder and Managing Trustee of Imasi, stating that the region has a literary legacy that seems almost non-existent to people outside the region, explained that the objective of the Festival was to champion the unwritten literatures from communities and the languages that do not have a script and bring together the literary heritage of the region for the benefit of those who are unaware of such a legacy.” The guest of honour for the Festival, Diana Mickeviciene, Ambassador from the Republic of Lithuania to India, talked at length about the importance of recognizing small and beautiful languages. Wishing success to the movement she urged upon the audience to cherish and immortalise the oral languages which continue to thrive till today.

Prof. Stephen Morey of La Trobe University, Melbourne, a scholar known for his pioneering work in linguistics of Northeast India, delivered a deeply moving keynote address in which he traced his linguistic research in Assam starting in 1996. While mentioning his research on Tai languages from 1996 till date, he not only provided an idea about the different types of manuscripts available in Northeast India, but also highlighted the challenges to be faced in reading such manuscripts. Prof. Morey set the tone by highlighting the urgency of documenting and archiving such languages.



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The cultural evening started with a mesmerising performance of the Oja-Pali which demonstrated how oral epics were transferred down to generations through dance and music. This was followed by the performance of the Boro ritual of Bathou Puja which began with a simple yet profound act of planting the Sijou plant or the Euphorbia splendens, a symbol of life, soul, and the supreme God, Bathou Bwrai. Through their performance, the Ahoms displayed their wedding ritual known as the Chaklang ceremony. The programme ended with a breath-taking Bihu performance which demonstrated the significance of the three Bihus - Kati Bihu, Magh Bihu and Bohag Bihu - showing the intricate relationship between nature and culture.

The second day of the festival was initiated by Sanjoy Hazarika, Founder and Managing Trustee of C-NES, a renowned author, journalist and filmmaker, who presented an insightful presentation on his extensive research on the Brahmaputra and its floodplains. Tracing the river's journey from Tibet to the Bay of Bengal, his audiovisual presentation included the river's immense scale, the cultural mosaic of its banks, and the communities that thrive along its tributaries. Another important session on the second day was dedicated to Nihar Barua (b.1905), a pioneering ethnomusicologist from Assam. During this session, her grandson, artist Rishi Barua, along with archivist Saumya Chakravarty, reflected on her legacy with the help of film footage, photographs and audio recordings. Goalparia music of Assam breathed into the air, as discussions on the archival recordings of Goalparia music took place. Hunts, which were a part of the life of India's pioneer ethnomusicologist, Nihar Barua and her zamindari family of Gauripur in Goalpara, Assam, was also showcased.

Highlighting the cultural richness of Karbi oral traditions, Mr. Deuri Rongpi and his group, performed musical pieces illustrating the practice of jhum cultivation and Karbi wedding rituals.

Concurrently, a storytelling workshop led by Lithuanian storyteller Ms. Milda Varnauskaite and Takhellembam Shyamkanhai from Manipur, reminded the audience that though languages differ, the heart of storytelling remains universal. Ms. Varnauskaite, centred on Historical and Contemporary Storytelling from Lithuania, introducing the smoke-sauna tradition of Lithuania, and linking it with the folklore of the Laumės, fairy-like creatures from Lithuanian culture, while Mr. Takhellambam based his performance on an episode from the Mahabharata, in traditional Manipuri Wari Liba style, of the encounter between Arjuna of the Pandavas and Ashwathamma, and the latter's death. As the performance ended, a discussion was held on Wari Liba as an art form and the various ways it has manifested in the modern world. Participants were introduced to storytelling's universal appeal, with hands-on activities emphasizing creativity, audience engagement, and the emotional resonance of oral narratives.

Prof. Shobhana Chelliah from Indiana University, explored the theme of digital documentation and archiving of oral literature, spotlighting the Computational Resource for South Asian Languages (CoRSAL) at the University of North Texas, Denton, and Indiana University. The session moderated by Kellen Parker van Dam, discussed the importance of language repositories, digitization techniques, and the resources that CoRSAL offers for preservation. The session culminated with a Book Launch



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of Manipuri writer Binodini's *Crimson Rainclouds*. In a world where oral traditions are often overshadowed, the festival delved into the role of digitisation and emerging technology in preserving oral heritage. Voices, once disappearing, can now be immortalised, ensuring that the wisdom of the ancestors finds its way into the future.

Members of the Oraon tribe of Assam showcased prayer songs of the Sarna religion and the different rituals of the community and their strong relation with nature. The exposition regarding the tribe and religion's traditions as well as the translation for the songs were written by Manisha Xalxo, of the Oraon tribe.

The second day ended with the book launch for *But I am One of You: Northeast India and the Struggle to Belong*, as well as a panel discussion relating to the book that took place as part of the session. Preeti Gill, along with Sanjoy Hazarika, and Gilson Carvalho from Brazil took to the stage to elaborate and explore the idea and inspirations behind the book as well as to analyse the struggle of identity, and the need to find a place to belong, using India and Brazil as contexts for the same.

A fitting finale for the second day was the invitation to a grand dinner at the Dhaba of The Assam Royal Global University. It was a feast in every sense—both culinary and cultural, cooked by the award winning Chef Salang from Nagaland. Old-Fashioned Pork Nuoshi (Non-veg) or tender cubes of smoked pork simmered in a decadent dark yam sauce, infused with mong-mong jang and dried napa - Naga basil flowers, together with Konger Amruso (Veg), a luscious rice broth infused with oyster, shitake, mushrooms, sumac, ginger, and garlic leaves and Rosup (Veg) or a vibrant medley of mong-mong leaves, eggplant, and kidney beans, slow-cooked with bamboo vinegar for a distinctive tangy depth, provided a glimpse of the rich culinary heritage of Nagaland.

The sessions on the third day were held aboard the MV Kahuwa Bon. On the unforgettable cruise along the Brahmaputra, art spoke in ways that words failed to express. While in conversation with Rishi Barua, Dhiraj Rabha's art installation explored the visualisation of memories from detention camps in Assam, a stark reminder that story telling is also about remembrance and resistance. The scenes were further awakened by the Singpho tea-tasting experience, an immersion into the rich tea traditions of a people where stories are woven into every cup of tea. Dr. Pompi Basumatary also spoke on the third day on her enriching experience of translating Bodo folktales into English. This enabled her to provide a global platform to indigenous Bodo stories that treasures close bonding of the tribe with the Nature.

As the cruise gently made its way back to the shore, it left behind a promise that the stories will never fade as long as there are listeners. As the last story was told and the final song sung, the Listener Brahmaputra left more than echoes and as Mr. Roy observed, "This festival was an act of listening and preservation." The Festival was not just a three day event—it was a movement, a promise.

The session videos of the three days Festival: Listener Brahmaputra, have been edited and are now available for viewing at https://youtube.com/@imasifoundation?si=5qf3MEeAZ_vuu49b (Don't worry about this repetition)

For further information, please contact Prof Shiela Bora, Festival Director at 9435033222.



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