



RAPPORTEURS' REPORT
THE LISTENER: BRAHMAPUTRA

10-12 February 2025

Guwahati

10 February 2025 : Day 1

The Assam Royal Global University

THE INAUGURAL CEREMONY for the Festival, Listener: Brahmaputra started at 5 p.m on 10.02.25 with Mr. Ayushman Devraj, the anchor for the event, taking the stage with a warm address.

WELCOME Prof. Sheila Bora, the Festival Director, in her welcome address for the event, called upon the dignitaries, participants, discussants and everyone present to participate and celebrate the voices from across Northeast India. Reminding the learned gathering that story-telling has been the cornerstone of the Northeast for centuries, she called upon the audience to immerse themselves in the unique treasure trove of stories, songs and narratives from the region during the next two days.

INVOCATION Her welcome address was followed by the chanting of a Theravada Buddhist prayer in the Pali language by Venerable Moseng Mantaw and Khetseng Singkal, both from Arunachal Pradesh. As the monks filled the space with peace and reverence the stage was set for the lighting of the lamp and felicitation of the dignitaries on the dais.

FELICITATIONS Her Excellency Diana Mickeviciene, the Ambassador from Lithuania to India was felicitated by Prof. Y.S.R Murthy, the Vice-Chancellor of The Royal Global University, Prof. Stephen Morey was felicitated by Prof. Sheila Bora, the Festival Director and the two Buddhist monks were felicitated by Ms Banani Das Hazarika, the Festival Coordinator.

INTRODUCTION Next, Mr. Somi Roy, the founder chairman of Imasi: The Maharaj Kumar Binodini Devi Foundation, the producer of The Listener, explained the concept behind the Festival and The Listener: Brahmaputra. Stating that the region has a literary legacy that seems almost non-existent to

people outside the region, Mr. Roy explained that the objective of the Festival was to champion the unwritten literatures from communities and languages that do not have a script so as to bring together the literary heritage of the region for the benefit of those who are unaware of such a legacy. Describing the Festival as a festival for the Northeast, by the Northeast and in the Northeast, Mr. Roy believes that the Listener is not just a literature festival, but a movement to validate the unwritten literary heritage of the region.

ADDRESS BY THE AMBASSADOR Her Excellency Diana Mickeviciene, Ambassador from the Republic of Lithuania to India and the guest of honour for the Festival, was the next to be invited to address the gathering. Recollecting her first journey to Northeast India, she expressed the amazement she experienced. Being from a very small country with a population of three million only, she 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.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS In his keynote address, Prof. Stephen Morey, Associate Professor in the Department of Linguistics of Al Trobe University, Melbourne, traced his linguistic research in Assam since 1996 and said that he dedicates this work to Nabin Shyam Phalung, the first person he met in the region. Displaying a language map of Northeast India, Prof. Morey pointed out the incredible diversity of languages in Northeast India and termed the region as a linguistic hotspot. While mentioning his research on Tai languages from 1996 till date, he not only proposed ideas about the different types of manuscripts available in Northeast India, but also highlighted the challenges to be faced in reading such manuscripts. In this context he mentioned Late Ong Cham's reading of Tai-Aiton (5/9/03) manuscripts and his linguistic analysis of the text. Besides exploring Tai languages and being engaged in manuscript studies, Prof. Morey has delved into diverse oral traditions of Northeast India, including Tangsa songs, Bihu songs, and Singpho water-flowing songs. According to him, there are six Tai languages in Assam. Prof. Morey set the tone by highlighting the urgency of documenting and archiving such languages

THE CHIEF GUEST Speaking on the occasion as the Chief Guest, Prof. YSR Murthy, Vice Chancellor of The Assam Royal Global University, shared the importance of the transference of literature from one generation to the next. He emphasized the role played by oral traditions and written scripts in passing down traditions, culture, history, and human experiences through civilizations. Sound, according to him, may be regarded as the foundation of our civilisation and the central part of Indian philosophy. Prof. Murthy also threw light upon the importance of words, actions, and knowledge, in all forms inclusive of folklore, songs, stories, music recitals et al., the power they bear and how they stitch together life on Earth. Mentioning the contribution of each oral language to the linguistic diversity of the world, crucial for human thought, he laments his experience during his visit to Bulgaria, where indigenous languages are facing the risk of extinction.

VOTE OF THANKS While delivering the vote of thanks, Ms Sentila T. Yanger, ITACH Convener of Nagaland and consultant to the Listener: Brahmaputra, thanked Prof. Shiela Bora for organising the festival of indigenous languages portraying the beauty and significance of language and the role of oral traditions. She also thanked the authorities of The Assam Royal Global University for providing all the help and the use of the facilities available in the campus as well as the organising team for their help and cooperation. Last but not least she expressed her gratitude to all the participants and delegates who travelled long distances to attend the Festival and to the sponsors, without whose help the Festival would not have been possible.

CULTURAL PROGRAMME The inaugural programme ended with a cultural programme organized by Sattyakee D'Com Bhuiyan and Rosey Brahma of Assam RGU. It was anchored by Banani Das Hazarika. The cultural extravaganza was an attempt to showcase various ethnic rituals portrayed in their traditional languages with a focus on the oral heritage of a variety of communities of Assam. The entire programme was performed by the students of The Assam Royal Global University.

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 was started 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*. The *Sijou* plant is unique in that it has no seeds and can survive in any environment, making it a perfect symbol for the formless, eternal God. Bamboo sticks tied together representing the five core elements of Bathouism— Ha (Earth), Dwi (Water), Baar (Air), Orr (Fire), and Okwrang (Sky) each standing for truth, knowledge, power, beauty, and goodness, signify the divine power that sustains life, connecting the worshippers to the universe and the divine. The songs sung during this ritual offer solace and healing, while calling upon *Bwrai Bathou* to bring peace and protection to those in need.

The third item in the cultural program was the wedding ritual of the Ahom community known as the *Chaklang* ceremony. Through this performance the artists demonstrated the cleansing of the bride and groom from impurities or evil spirits, spiritually preparing them for married life. The central focus of the *Chaklang* ceremony is the *maral*, or an octagonal altar decorated with 101 earthen lamps, considered the most distinctive feature of a *Chaklang* marriage.

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 cultural programme which concluded at 7:35 pm was followed by dinner at the Royal Chulha.



11 February 2025: Day 2

THE ASSAM ROYAL GLOBAL UNIVERSITY

The second day of The Listener: Brahmaputra, Festival of Oral Literature commenced at 9:00 AM, anchored by Dr. Jasmine A. Choudhury, Assistant Professor, Department of English, The Assam Royal Global University. The day opened with a welcome address by Prof. Shiela Bora, Festival Director, who also provided an overview of the sessions scheduled for the day. This was followed by an address from Prof. A.K. Buragohain, Academic Chairperson, who spoke on the historical and cultural significance of the Brahmaputra, highlighting the river's profound impact on regional literature and music, including the legacy of the Bard of Brahmaputra, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika.

Session 1: Sanjoy Hazarika, Keynote Presentation

TALES OF THE BRAHMAPUTRA

Moderator: Dr. Dhiraj Kumar Borkotoky

Before the keynote commenced, Sanjoy Hazarika, International Director of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, was felicitated. Moderated by Dr. Dhiraj Kumar Borkotoky, Associate Professor, Political Science & Administrative Service, The Assam Royal Global University, the session centred on Hazarika's extensive research on the Brahmaputra and its floodplains. His audiovisual presentation included the river's immense scale, the cultural mosaic of its banks, and the communities that thrive along its tributaries. He also touched upon the role of boat clinics in riverine healthcare and addressed the complexities surrounding Chinese mega dams. The moderator then fielded questions from the audience, sparking a thoughtful dialogue on ecological and social concerns.

Session 2: Prof. Shobhana Chelliah

THE CORSAL ARCHIVE

Moderator: Dr. Kellen Parker Van Dam

The second session featured Prof. Shobhana Chelliah from Indiana University, who was also felicitated before her talk. She explored the theme of digital documentation and archiving of oral literature, spotlighting the Collaborative Research Center for South Asian Languages (CoRSAL) at the University

of North Texas, Denton, and Indiana University. Kellen Parker Van Dam served as the moderator, guiding a discussion on the importance of language repositories, digitization techniques, and the resources CoRSAL offers for preservation. The session culminated with a Book Launch of *Binodini's Crimson Rain Clouds: A Learning Module*, celebrating ongoing efforts to protect and share endangered narratives.

Session 3: Deuri Rongpi and Group

JHUM CULTIVATION AND WEDDING RITUALS

Moderator: Dr. Stuti Goswami

Anchored by Prof. Sania Wahid, Assistant Professor, Department of English, The Assam Royal Global University, this session spotlighted Mr. Deuri Rongpi and Group, who performed Karbi musical pieces illustrating Jhum cultivation and Karbi wedding rituals. Prior to their performance, they felicitated event organizers and dignitaries, marking the spirit of mutual respect. Dr. Stuti Goswami, Associate Professor, Department of English, The Assam Royal Global University, moderated a brief interaction after the performance, highlighting the cultural richness of Karbi oral traditions.

Session 5: Milda Varnauskaite, Concurrent Workshop

STORYTELLING IN LITHUANIA

Moderator: L. Somi Roy

A storytelling workshop led by Lithuanian storyteller Ms. Milda Varnauskaite took place in a separate venue. Participants from the English Department of Assam RGU were introduced to storytelling's universal appeal, with hands-on activities emphasizing creativity, audience engagement, and the emotional resonance of oral narratives. The morning sessions concluded shortly thereafter.

Session 6: Rishi Barua and Saumya Chakravarti

REDISCOVERING NIHAR BARUA

The festival resumed with a session dedicated to Nihar Barua, India's pioneering ethnomusicologist from Assam. Artist Rishi Barua related the story of his grandmother along with archivist Saumya Chakravarti using film footage, photographs and audio recordings. In addition to this, they also discussed the archival recordings of Goalpariya music and presented archival recordings, films, and photographs reflecting Barua's legacy.

Shikars or hunts, which were a part of the life of India's Pioneer Ethnomusicologist, Nihar Barua (b.1905) and her zamindari family of Gauripur in Goalpara, Assam, were also showcased.

Session 7: Milda Varnauskaite

LITHUANIAN ORAL STORYTELLING

The first cultural performance in the post-lunch session of the second day of the Listener: Brahmaputra began at 2:10pm, anchored by Pompi Basumatary. This session started with story-telling by Milda 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.

Session 8: Takhellambam Shyamkanhai Singh

MANIPURI *WARI LIBA* STORYTELLING

Moderator: L. Somi Roy

In an attempt to show case various styles of storytelling, the following performance was by Takhellambam Shyamkanhai Singh in traditional Manipuri *Wari Liba* style. Based on an episode from the Mahabharata, he related the encounter between Arjuna of the Pandavas and his friend and enemy Ashwathamma, resulting in 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 Manipur and in the modern world.

Session 9: Manisha Xalxo

PRAYER SONGS OF THE ORAON

After a short tea break, the third cultural performance of the day took place. Members of the Oraon tribal community of Assam showcased prayer songs of the Sarna religion and the different rituals of their 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 given by Manisha Xalxo, of the Oraon tribe.

Session 10: Preeti Gill

BOOK LAUNCH: *BUT I AM ONE OF YOU*

Discussants: Gilson Carvalho, Sanjoy Hazarika

The book launch for *But I am One of You, Northeast India and The Struggle to Belong*, followed by a panel discussion regarding the book took place as part of the session. Preeti Gill, along with Sanjoy Hazarika, and Gilson Carvalho 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. The session concluded at 6pm with a few positive words from Preeti Gil and Gilson Carvalho, and with closing remarks from L. Somi Roy, producer of the event, marking the end of the second day of the Listener: Brahmaputra.

Session 11: Salang Yanger, Naga Dinner

NAGA FUSION DINNER

Presenter: Sentila Yanger

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 award winning Chef Salang Yanger 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.



12 February 2025: Day 3

RIVER CRUISE ON THE M.V. KOHUWA BON

The venue for the third day of The Listener: Brahmaputra was a river cruise over the waves of the mighty Brahmaputra. In the midst of great excitement, the emcee, Mr. Ayushman Devraj delivered a warm welcome address to the participants and requested them to hold their breath in anticipation of a continuous journey of storytelling.

Session 12: Venerable Moseng Mantaw, Khetseng Singkai

THERAVADA PALI PRAYERS OF THE SINGPHO

Moderator: Prof. Stephen Morey

The first session on the boat was started with the chanting of Pali Prayers by the Buddhist Theravada monks, Venerable Moseng Mantaw and Khetseng Singkai. Mr. Devraj welcomed the presenters along with moderator, Prof. Stephen Morey to the dais. Thereafter, the monks explained the significance of the rituals practiced by the Buddhist Singphos of Arunachal Pradesh and highlighted the importance of the use of the Pali language in their prayers. Prof. Morey started the discussion on the session after a short introduction of himself. The presenters, who were highly knowledgeable about the use of Pali in Buddhism, satisfied the audience about their desire to learn and enlightened the audience. Before the end of the session, the moderator requested the presenters to close the session by leading the gathering in a Buddhist prayer in the Pali language.

Session 13: Jahumroy Sngpho

THE SINGPHO *LAIKA*

Moderator: Dr. Kellen Parker Van Dam

As the second session commenced, Mr. Ayushman Devraj called upon Jahumroy Singpho and her team to present the Singpho *Laika* in the form of a short skit illustrating the current state of the Singpho language and the Government's efforts to preserve the language. Jahumroy Singpho and her team were felicitated by Prof. Shiela Bora with an Assamese *gamusa* following which the group performed the skit which was moderated by moderated by Kellen Parker Van Dam.

Besides talking about the history of the Singpho script, the participants also discussed the importance of tea in the lives of the Singphos. A demonstration of the traditional way of preparing tea or *phalap* was followed by a tea tasting session of the original handmade Singpho tea. Over the cup of Singpho tea the participants discussed the endangerment of the Singpho language and the various ways to preserve the language, including its documentation and digitisation.

Session 13: Pompei Basumatary

BODO STORYTELLING AND FOLKLORE

Moderator: Dr. Stuti Goswami

The emcee thereafter, introduced the third session of the day, on Bodo Storytelling and Folklore from Bodoland. The session was presented by Dr. Pompei Basumatary, Assistant Prof. Dept. of English, RGU and was moderated by Dr. Stuti Goswami, Associate Prof. Dept. of English, RGU. Dr. Goswami began the session with a short introduction on translation of folktales. Dr. Basumatary presented her experience on translation studies and the culture of her Bodo community. She narrated a few Bodo folktales related to the call of the local birds.

Session 14: Dhiraj Rabha, Art Installation

Ongari: Stories from My Mother

Moderator: Rishi Barua

The last session before lunch was presented by Dhiraj Rabha in a session entitled, *Ongari: Stories from My Mother*, a Visualisation of Memory. Mr. Devraj introduced Mr. Rabha to the audience as the session commenced. He was felicitated by Dr. Baishalee Rajkhowa with an Assamese *gamusa* and a memento. Mr. Rabha showcased a wonderful presentation of his paintings and his excellent artistic experiences. The audience put forth their questions and participated in the discussion with great enthusiasm. The session was moderated by Mr. Rishi Barua.

As the session ended, all the dignitaries, resource person, faculties and the organisers proceeded for a lunch break. An excellent lunch hosted by the owner of the boat, and served on the deck was an excellent experience for all to remember.

Session 14: Milda Varnauskaite, Takhellambam Shyamkanhai Singh

Storytelling East and West

Moderator: Diana Mickeviciene

After lunch, Dr. Dhiraj Borkotoky, the emcee of the afternoon session commenced the first session of the afternoon with a session on comparative storytelling from the East and West. Dr. Borkotoky introduced the presenters Milda Varnauskaite, a storyteller from Lithuania, Takhellambam Shyamkanhai Singh a storyteller from Manipur and the moderator, Diana Mickeviciene, the Ambassador from the Republic of Lithuania to India. Diana Mickeviciene, started the session by explaining how important storytelling was for the Lithuanians and explained about the contrast that existed between the traditional and sacred storytelling in Manipur and the free-flowing expressions of storytelling in Lithuania.. Discussions on this session mainly revolved around conversation on the tradition of storytelling in Lithuania and Manipur.

Session 15: Preeti Gill, Sattyakee D'Com, Bhuiyan, Sanjoy Hazarika

TECHNOLOGY AND ORALITY

Moderator: L. Somi Roy

The last session of the Listener: Brahmaputra Festival, focussed its attention on the role of Technology and Orality. The session was subtitled *From Print to Digital Technology, Prospect and Potential of Digital Technology*, it included a case study of the digital publication *Binodini's Crimson Rainclouds: A Learning Module*. Shortly after the introduction by Dr. Borkotoky, the discussants, Preeti Gill and L. Somi Roy started discussion on the subject in which there was active participation from the audience who presented their feedback.

The day's proceedings ended with the Valedictory Monitoring and Evaluating session, in which Prof. Shiela Bora, Sanjoy Hazarika, Prof. Stephen Morey, Kellen Parker van Dam, Mr. L. Somi Roy, Mr. Gilson Carvalho, and Mr. Sanjeev Behari participated. The session was moderated by Mr. Atul Dev Sharma. Prof. Shiela Bora delivered her vote of thanks to all the dignitaries and participants of The Listener: Brahmaputra. At the very end, Banani Das Hazarika, the festival co-ordinator delivered a vote of thanks marking the end of the third edition of The Listener festival of oral literature.

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