Chapter 2

A Survey of Manipuri Poetry
Survey of Manipuri Poetry

The origin of literature of any place is always associated with the language and culture of the specific area. The history of Manipuri language and culture goes back a long time and so does the literature. As already discussed in the previous chapter, Manipuri literature can be divided into three parts keeping in mind the historical events that occurred, the **Early Period**, from the earliest time till the advent of Hinduism, i.e. up to the 18th century, the **Middle Period** i.e. from the advent of Hinduism till the British imperialism (the 18th century to the late 19th century) and the **Modern Period**, from the early 20th century till date. This chapter will analyze the growth of literature, particularly poetry from the earliest period recorded till the modern times. The division here is also merely for the convenience of analysis and it cannot be taken as final division.

**The Early Period**

It is believed that writing in Manipuri started around 12th century. Ch Manihar wrote,

> From the foregoing account we have been able to see that writing in Manipuri alphabet commenced probably at the close of 12th century but not later than the 15th century. (Singh AHOML 12)

Historians and scholars are unable to organize a proper chronological sequence for works written prior to the 17th century as they are undated and anonymous. Thus, it is only through the content, the style of writing and presence of certain words that earlier works can be put in a time frame.

From these findings, the earliest form of Manipuri literature is considered to be the verses and the hymns. They were composed to be recited and sung for gods and
goddesses. These songs are generally associated with the ancient ritualistic festival of the Meiteis known as ‘Lai Haraoba’. The songs were not in written form in the earlier times instead they were passed on orally from one generation to the next. Although these songs were in oral form, they did not have the folk quality, so as to say that they were not popular among the general masses. Only the priests and priestesses conducting the rituals could sing these songs.

Before taking up these different hymns and songs, a brief introduction of the ritual ‘Lai Haraoba’ will help in understanding these songs. The exact origin of ‘Lai Haraoba’ is not known but it is mentioned briefly in the ancient manuscript ‘Panthoibi Khongkul.’ But Meiteis believe that the origin of ‘Lai Haraoba’ is associated with the myths of creation. As found in the manuscript ‘Leithak Leikharon’, the Earth was created by Asheeba, son of God Almighty. After creating Earth, Asheeba was in mental dilemma thinking about who will live in this new land. At this, his father showed him the different species that would inhabit the land. The ritual ‘Lai Haraoba’ thus, depicts the different stages of creation and inhabitation of Earth by men through songs and dance. The Meiteis believe that by enacting this process, the gods can be pleased. That is why the literal meaning of the ritual ‘Lai Haraoba’ is ‘pleasing the god’. ‘Lai Haraoba’ is performed in every part of Manipur during summer. Dance and songs are an integral part of the festival. Other than the songs associated with ‘Lai Haraoba’, some of them also portray the myth and legends of Manipur. Manipur has got a rich heritage of myths and legends and they were popularized by a group of singers who have rendered them to songs. ‘Basak Sakpa’, ‘Moirang Parva’ are examples of myths and legends sung through songs. The most popular of these myths is the story of ‘Khamba and Thoibi’.
Songs

Of the many songs, the most important songs associated with Laiharaoba are ‘Ougri’, ‘Khencho’, ‘Anoirol’ and ‘Lairemma Paosa.’ The songs are believed to have originated with the ritual, ‘Lai Haraoba’ itself. Although these songs are in archaic Manipuri, they are still sung during the festival. The songs have different rhymes and rhythms based on certain metrical arrangements. For example, the first line of the first part of the ‘Ougri’ is as, *Hoi rou ha ya ha ya* consisting six syllables and so is the second line, *he hu pe he hu pe*. But from the second part onwards, every line has eight syllables, *lam len ma da ma dai ma da* and it continues like this. The poem is given in the next paragraph.

The four songs ‘Ougri’, ‘Khencho’, ‘Anoirol’ and ‘Lairemma Paosa’ are found in the ancient manuscript ‘Panthoibi Khongkul’. Of the four songs, ‘Ougri’ and ‘Khencho’ have more archaic words than the other two. Therefore, they can be considered as older. ‘Ougri’ is associated with the myth of creation. The myth is that the two sons of god almighty had a feud over supremacy. They were put to a task in order to prove their skills. But the younger brother won by cheating, and thus provoking the older brother to attack him. But the older brother was defeated as other goddesses came to the rescue of the younger brother. ‘Ougri’ was sung to commemorate this win by the younger brother. This song is still sung during the ‘Lai Haroba’ rituals by a chorus. ‘Ougri’ is also known for its incantatory power. The long vowel sounds in the song rendered it an eerie charm. The song goes like,

*Hoirou haya haya*

*He hupe he*

*Ougri O kollo*
Lamlenmada madaimada
Kangleiyonda pungmayonda
Yoimayaibu Taodanbabu
Taoroinaibu Anganbabu

‘Khencho’, on the other hand has a totally unintelligible diction in the modern times. But this song is known for its musical quality. The priests and priestesses clap their hands rhythmically while singing this song. It is believed that the music of this song originated from the sound of water running downhill and splashing through boulders on its way down. ‘Khencho’ is a very important song for ‘Lai Haraoba’ ritual.

The other two songs, ‘Lairemma Paosa’ and ‘Anoirol’ are quite simpler compared to ‘Ougri’ and ‘Khencho’ whether it is the diction or the context. ‘Lairemma Paosa’ depicts the playful nature of god Nongpokningthou and goddess Panthoibi, who were lovers. The two gods who had taken human forms as lovers were courting each other. The song is a repartee of these two lovers. ‘Anoirol’ on the other hand is a longer song which tells about the evolution of the dances performed during ‘Lai Haraoba’. The song describes many incidents and events related with the dances. The song goes on like,

Hayingeita noypapu Sorarenna noypapu
Chakpa Sawangpana Urakye
Menang Hamengmitna yarrow tanpana urakye
Sachi tanpata khanglakye…

‘Anoirol’ also depicts formation of earth by God Almighty and later on how he molded man. The song goes on like,
Korao houngeigibun noiyee
Nonga houngeigibun noiyee
Malem sengei laiga semngegibu
Noiyee Shorarendu Noiyee..

The song narrates an incident when Chakpa Sawangpa went to the sky while hunting. There he saw the Almighty God, Soraren dancing various steps. He learned the dance movements and came back to earth. There he started dancing and the other people of his community started following his steps. These dance movements were passed down through generations and that is how today’s generation is dancing those steps during ‘Lai Haraoba’.

Another important song sung during ‘Lai Haraoba’ is Hijan Hirao. This poem is considered to be one of the earliest literatures of Manipur. The poem unfolds the story of a Luwang king, Hongnem Luwang Ningthou Punshiba (circa 400-600 AD) and his feat to build a bridge. He ordered his artisans to cut down a big tree from the forest to build the bridge. When the artisans found a mighty tree they performed rituals so that they can cut it. The artisans believed that the tree has a spirit and therefore they needed to take permission to cut it. It is believed that before cutting the tree one has to put the axe on the trunk of the tree overnight and invoke the spirit by saying that if it has any problem with the felling of the tree it should move the axe during the night. The poem progressed with the spirit of the forest, the mother of all trees, mourning the ill fate of the tree. The poem reads as following,

At the dead of the night
The mother who begot the tree
And the mother of all giant trees
The queen of the hill-range
And the mistress of the gorges
Took the tall and graceful tree
To her bosom and wailed:
“O my son, tall and big
While yet an infant, a sapling
Didn’t I tell you
To be an ordinary tree?
The king’s men have found you out
And bought your life with gold and silver.

Other than these songs associated with ‘Lai Haraoba’, ‘Ahonglon’, ‘Yakeiba’ and ‘Kumdamsei’ are important songs. ‘Ahonglon’ has a long history as it is mentioned in the ancient manuscript Loyumba Sinyen, which goes back prior to 11th century. The song was sung during joyous festivals. ‘Yakeiba’ which literally means ‘to wake up’ is a beautifully composed poem. The poem was sung in the morning and it describes about the rising sun and how it illuminates the hills and the plains. The song goes like,

Um Hayaha nahanong wakmana
Malem Leisem leiroishei
Yawarenna Kaudasheibu punung
Putangeidagi aa hounarakpa wakle
Eera wairina kaudashei Khut yawa ekhonjenna nilakta
Khnjel yabiren Shidaba.

‘Kumdamsei’ is a song for seasons and it means a song that ushers in the new season. The song goes like,
Nong ho churo / Langjing Maton Thumhatlo / Patsoi Nurabi taotharo

The song talks about welcoming rainy season. Absence of archaic words shows that this song is comparatively newer than the rest.

Thus, these songs were an important part of the lives of the people of the time. Literature, particularly poetry has its origin in these songs. Other than these songs there are hymns and incantations which were also the early form of poetry. They are also a basic source of today's Manipuri literature.

**Hymns**

Earlier, ancient Manipuris composed simple verses which could be sung or recited. Some of these verses were hymns to gods and deities. One of the oldest Manipuri verses is the hymn to fire. It reads as,

- O fire brought by Poireiton
- Thou Fire maintained by Poinaota!
- Fire, twin Fire,
- O brightly burning Fire!
- Thou representative of sun. (Singh, QJ 19)

The hymn alludes to the myth of a person called Poireiton, who is believed to have brought fire in the valley of Manipur. It was kept burning by his brother Poinaota after him. It is believed that the fire brought by Poireiton is still kept burning in a place called Andro, few kilometers from Imphal. The hymn likens Fire with sun and people worship both fire and sun as gods. They believed that fire is the representative of sun after it sets. The hymn is in archaic Manipuri language and is not used now. Another Manipuri hymn to the sun reads like,
I human being,
Cannot describe in my lay
The full glory of immortal sun
The chief among gods
O sun! Great jewel of daytime. (Hudson 211)

This hymn is different from the earlier one. Here, the mortal human beings sing the glory of the sun. The language used in the hymn is also noteworthy. Obsolete words like ‘thabi’, ‘yoimayai’, ‘taodanba’ are used for ‘numit’ or the sun.

Another hymn to the sun reads like

Nupan tubi angangba korou
Nongbu khonba chanu malem leirumba
Chanu nongpok mahou leirang pangna ningthou
Chanu paima sana lingounungi thoudu nungpak thakpa nounouba

The hymn praises the sun for its qualities. The long vowel sounds in the hymn gives poetic quality to it. Here is another example of a hymn to the moon,

Loidam thaja pakhangba thaja thaningthou
numidang tanglou leina thenglaba amamam touba
naran sirabada leitengnariba nangbu punemjarie kubiu.

Myths and legends

Myths and legends again can be considered as the source of poetry in early times in Manipur. As people of Manipur are fond of performative acts, there are many rituals and functions where singers and performers will recite poems and verses for the general audience. These performances are still popular in Manipur. Such as Basak
Sakpa, Moirang Parba and Khubak Eshei where the singers will narrate myths and legends of Manipur. Thus, the myths and legends are a repository of numbers of songs and poems.

Some important books of early period other than the hymns and songs are, Panthoipi Khongkul, Poireiton Khunthokpa, Nummit Kappa, Nongshaba Laihui etc. The poems of these books are completely free of any outside influence and deal with indigenous themes. Some lines from Nummit Kappa read like,

Korou numitmadi
Taloi marumbina pheija
Poptek lei pullang luroi thong
Laija epallang eemu mayon sat
Leirai huison karakpada.

Almost all the words used in the poem are archaic. The poem deals with the myth of shooting down the Sun by a brave Meitei.

Most of the poems are for the purpose of performance. They form an integral part in the lives of the people of Manipur. The poems constitute the regular rituals performed by the priests and priestesses in the close knit community of Manipur. They define the Meitei essence. Later on there was an amalgamation of this Meitei with the Hindu which came from Vaisnavism. Therefore, one can see a marked difference in the poetry of these two eras. After the advent of Hinduism, it strongly influenced the myths and culture in Manipuri poetry. As already discussed in the previous chapter, the influence has been gradual but sure footed.

Thus, the songs, hymns, myths and legends paved way for early poetry in Manipuri literature. They are built around the beliefs and culture of the people of
Manipur. Their livelihood, their fear and prayers are all deeply embedded in them. But after the advent of Vaisnavism the structure and content of poetry started to change. Somewhere, the early Meitei myths and legends gave way to the Hindu myths and legends in the Manipuri poetry.

As many of the writers got acquainted with Indo-Aryan languages, particularly Sanskrit and Bengali, they could not escape the influence of the rich literature and they also developed a habit of interlarding their writings with words of those languages mainly for the sake of embellishment and emphasis. (Singh, ASHOM 19)

But still one can see that the form of poetry that evolved when these two cultures clashed, opened up new vistas for Manipuri literature.

The Middle Period

From the advent of Vaisnavism (a sect of Hinduism) in Manipur till the early 20th century, can roughly be termed as the Middle Period. This is again not a definite division, but done merely to organize the analysis of the course of poetry of Manipur. As already discussed in the earlier chapter, during this phase Manipur underwent a tremendous change regarding culture, religion, language and even literature, the variation being the inclusion of many facets of Hinduism. Poetry still enjoyed patronship from the royal court and with new found themes and inspirations, it bloomed. A close study of poetry of this period reveals that the theme is generally religious whether inspired by the new faith or as a continuation of the early faith. Because of the ban imposed on the people of Manipur to follow the ancient ritual ‘Lai Haraoba’, the number of indigenous themed poetry dwindled. Thingnam Kishan observes,

'With the restrictions on practice of the indigenous faith and the widespread patronage to the newly imported alien fate, writers
Chingangbam experienced a sudden influence of literatures in Indo-Aryan languages, especially Sanskrit and Bengali. Apart from the changes that can be seen in the formalistic domain of writing, the new religion and its associated cultural aspects heavily influenced thematic engagement.’ (Misra 149)

The charm of the new faith and its vast source of myths and legends took over the poets of this era and they started singing of the great epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The result came in the form of the local myths incorporating Hindu myths. One instance of this amalgamation is the portrayal of Arjun as the son in law of Manipuri king according to a new Puya Bijoy Panchali written during king Garibniwaz (18th c). Another example is of the legend of Henjunaha and Leima Lairuklembi. There are two versions of the story. Henjunaha and Lairuklembi are lovers but they are reincarnate of god Ningpokningthou and goddess Panthoibi who are cursed by god Thangjing to have seven lives as humans and to have tragic end to their love each time. The story of Henjunaha is one of the seven lives of the gods as human and they were destined to be parted. Thus, one version ends with Henjunaha dying at the gate of his lover and beloved Lairuklembi follows him by committing suicide. But the other version adds some more paragraphs and talks about how the soul of Lairuklembi followed the god of death and ultimately got her lover back. This ending echoes the story of Satyaban and Savitri of Hindu mythology. Other than this influence on local myths there are many poems of this era were influenced by the translations of the two great Hindu epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*.

Another important change in poetry during this period is the influx of Sanskrit and Bengali words in poetic diction. Early poetry like *Hijan Hirao*, *Nummit Kappa*, *Panthoipi Khongkul* etc. were written in pure meiteilon (Manipuri language spoken by Meitei group). But poems of this age like *Lanka Kanda*, *Chothe Thangwai*
Pakhangba, Langlon etc. were written in language corrupted by Sanskrit and Bengali. For instance pure Meitei language can be seen in these lines from Hijan Hirao,

Luwang maibana

Thanglen napan hai

Kajeng yothak channa

Chamlou laga tha

Shinglen leihuntei. (Nongthombam 24)

Compared to the above lines, Lanka Kanda has Sanskrit words,

Sannoupallempi macha-o

Pran thawai amana

Yoi channaba nangbu

Rakshas hingchaba Ravan

Samu makhubakta nongmallabadi...(ibid)

Or these lines from Chothe Thangwai Pakhangba,

Haya he liklai-o epunghourel

Vaisnav thongnang mayampa chingu

Indra Soraren namu ponghanbada

Bhakti ngakkoi thongbu...(ibid)

Here, one thing worth noticing is that the new Sanskrit or Bengali words which have come to Manipuri poetry, do not replace the original Manipuri words. Instead, they are placed alongside Manipuri words that have the same meaning for a repetitive effect. For instance the words ‘Pran thawai’, Sanskrit word pran means life and similarly thawai also means life. Similar cases can be seen in a number of poems.
e.g. 'Rakshas Hingchaba' (demon), 'Indra Soraren' (god of the sky) etc.

Thus, the basic feature of the poetry of the middle period is the influence of Vaisnavism in terms of themes and language. As the period is dominated by the epic religious shift (Manipuris converting into Hindus), most of the themes of poetry were based on religion. Another factor of poetry turning towards this new religion can also be the translation of the Hindu epics such as Virat Santhuplon from The Mahabharata by Prince Navananda, Parikshit, a part of The Mahabharata by Gopal Das which influenced the poets of the period tremendously. And then influx of the outside language which was carried on even by the next generation of modern writers marks a distinct feature of Manipuri poetry of this period.

The Modern Period

The Modern period comprises of the period from British occupation of Manipur (1891) to the current period. The coming of the British again brought a marked shift in the course of Manipuri poetry. As discussed in the earlier chapter, western education system, nationalism and the two World Wars brought in new ideologies to the people of Manipur. These ideologies can be seen reflected in the poetry of this period.

This period can be further divided into two parts keeping in mind the different or rather distinct ideals that occupied each half of the century. The modern period thus can be divided into pre-independence and post-independence Manipur. The pre-independence era is marked by romanticism, the post-independence by realism through awakening arising from the struggle of independence and the World Wars. Similarly, people of Manipur became aware of the issues in the sphere of social, political and economic affairs leading to disillusionment. To add to this the dubious
way in which Manipur was merged (1949) into the Indian Union led to resistance and bitterness towards the mainland. This sowed the seed of insurgency movements in Manipur which the state nor the center has been able to tackle till now. The following discourse will deal with the pre-independence Manipuri poetry that set it apart from the previous period.

The Pre-Independence Manipuri Poetry

After British occupation, new western education system came to Manipur. It ushered in a new generation of youths who became aware of the status of Manipuri language and literature. During this time, i.e., early 20th century, the curriculum of Manipuri schools did not have Manipuri language or literature. A student of Manipur had to opt for Sanskrit or Bengali as vernacular language. Thus, the first batch of educated youths took up writing in order to find a place for their neglected mother tongue in the education system. Naturally, they were very patriotic and their works expressed their love for their mother tongue and literature. Three literary figures dominated in this period. They were Lamabam Kamal Singh, Khwairakpam Chaoba Singh and Hijam Anganghal.

This period is also known as the Renaissance of Manipuri literature. It is also believed that in this period, Manipuri literature reawakened after a long spell of darkness. Lamabam Kamal writes, 'After a long time / Mother Meitei has deigned to enter / Into the temple of Meitei literature.

But, N SriBiren, a prominent Manipuri poet and critic says that if Manipuri literature of the previous centuries (i.e. Middle period) was in darkness, what about the poems and other forms of literature produced at that time? They were definitely influenced by Hinduism and other languages from outside (Sanskrit, Bengali), but
what about the new poetry of the modern writers or the writers of the early 20th century? They are as much influenced and inspired by Sanskrit and Bengali. Thus, it will be wrong to call the middle period as dark age in Manipuri literature.

On the other hand, to call the early 20th century as a period Renaissance is justifiable. It is a reawakening of the need to revive Manipuri literature. The writers of the period were hurt because Manipuris had to study others' languages despite having a rich language of their own. There was a new zeal in these writers to prove that they had a rich language as compared to other languages of the country. Hence, patriotism and a deep love for the language and literature became the major themes of poetry of this period. Another important feature of this poetry is the love of romanticizing everything by the poets. This romantic tendency might have come from the need of imagination of the poets for new hopes and dreams for their motherland. These poets explored the traditional Manipuri values, its history, people and natural beauty of the place. Lamabam Kamal writes,

O Youth; learned in science / Why don’t you believe in the mantra of love?

Here, the poet talks about universal love, Biswaprem. He searches for the selfless love for others. In another poem Mingchat thiba, (seeking honour) Hijam Anganghal says that honour can be achieved by those who do not seek it out. He says,

For you I have traveled the world / For you I have wandered in vain.../ Only when I am selfless, do I get you?

Khwairakpam Chaoba on the other hand has praised his motherland and her natural beauty in most of his poems. His imagination is vivid and his expressions romantic. He writes,
Who are you O flower
Blooming on the slopes of the hills
On the Kyamlei
Laughing heartily
O luxuriant Mellei Leisna Nungjumpal
Blooming on the solitary heights
Sad to see your solitary sweetness
Waste on the forest air!

Here, the poet talks about Manipuri literature which is compared with exotic flowers blooming unseen on the hills. He fears that they might wither without people recognizing their sweetness. One can almost reminiscence Thomas Gray's famous lines from his elegy

Full many a flower born to blush unseen / And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

While Gray talks about poor villagers who have had no opportunities in life to shine, Kh Chaoba talks about Manipuri literature which has remained unknown to people (even her own people) for a long time.

In another poem ‘Pee Thadoi’ he dwells on the legend of Khamba and Thoibi. Nongban, the villain of the story is killed by a tiger while dueling with Khamba for Thoibi's hand. Although he is a villain, he truly loved Thoibi. The poet imagined that the bird ‘Pee Thadoi’ is the soul of Nongban who has come back to life in order to wait for his beloved. The poem says,

What thou art?
Where dost thou sing?
Only thy sweet note is heard
She has gone to the Khuman's
Reached her beloved's place
So give up hopes of seeing her.

The poet's imagination is truly vivid and it gives a haunting charm to the poem. Thus, it seems that Kheairakpam Chaoba has revisited the rich source of myths and legends of the region to resurrect Meitei identity.

Another great poet of this period is Dr Kamal, perhaps the most celebrated of them all. He has written about the rich culture and heritage of Manipur in his poems. Particularly in 'Chandranadi', an imaginary river, he talks about the buried heritage of Manipur. He says like a river overgrown with weeds and grass, Manipuri history also lays forgotten. He writes,

Let’s dig for once and see if the spring flows out / Let’s grow flowers on its bank, construct stairs of bricks.

He says that if the river is cleansed, the people of Manipur need not look out for foreign rivers.

Another concern for Kamal was bringing back Manipuri literature to its due place. According to him Manipuri literature has been ignored and forgotten by her own people. He writes,

Why mother does your look darkens among your peers?

Why do no new leaves sprout?

No flower buds put forth?

I realize mother, you are the only poor flower in this garden of India

Lo! your unperceptive children
Instead of scattering water at your feet
Are digging ponds in the desert
Trying to catch hold of mirage.

But Kamal also has high hopes that Manipuri literature will one day prevail. He believes that one day people will recognize it. He writes,

The spring, king of the seasons
Is said to be your eternal companion
Lo! the spring has arrived at the Meitei garden,
Its time for your advent O cuckoo.

Kamal's poems do not follow strict form and meter all the time. But there is a musical quality to poems which one can almost reminiscence with the great Bengali poet, Tagore.

I am here to sing thee songs. In this hall of thine I have a corner seat.
In thy world I have no work to do;
my useless life can only break out in tunes without a purpose. (Tagore 29)

Thus, the contribution of these three poets to Manipuri literature is enormous. They are rightfully called the pioneers of modern Manipuri poetry. They ushered in a new wave of writing style, new themes and worked for the revival of Manipuri literature. Many younger poets followed in their footsteps. Poets like A. Minaketan, RK. Shitaljit, A. Darendrajit, H. Nabadwipchandra started on the path laid out by the pioneers even though some of them fall in the transition phase of pre and post independence period.

A Minaketan, like Kamal and Chaoba, writes about his love for the motherland and its culture. His poems are more elegiac as he cries for the lost glory of Manipur.
He writes

The sweet tune of pena has died,
Lost to me is the jingle of the cow bells...
..O dear mother Kangleipung, O beloved motherland!
Accept mother, my tears running down copiously! (Singh, RFTP 61)

Another facet of A Minaketan's poetry is his creative use of language. He chooses his words carefully and structures them methodically. He was well read in Hindi, English, Sanskrit, and Bengali. He was also familiar with the ancient Manipuri lore. He travelled a lot and thus was exposed to different cultures as well. He himself has claimed that he was inspired to write by Tagore's *Gitanjali*. He is thus considered to be one of the main poets of Renaissance Manipuri Literature.

Another influential figure during this period is Hijam Irabot. He was a reformist, a revolutionary, a poet and a writer. He is even considered as the first Modern Manipuri poet as his book *Seidam Seireng* (1924) was prescribed for the schools. He is a versatile writer and is deeply influenced by Marxist thoughts. He knew about the exploitation of his fellow men at the hands of British as well as the King. He is also considered as the leader of insurgency movements in Manipur. He writes,

Appear O sunshine
Depart O shadow!
Could the sunshine be adding in fear
Fascists do not come
there's no cause for fear
Appear O sunshine
In the land of the lotus eaters. (Singh, AOML 62)

Thus, the pre-independence poets were more concerned about the idea of their motherland remaining unsung despite having a rich heritage. These writers were imaginative and sincere. But most of them were romantics except, perhaps, H Irabot. He was led by an ideal and he followed it through. Though some of the younger poets like A Minaketan continued writing even after independence, their outlook remained the same as earlier. He was not much moved by the changes brought in by the Second World War and the Indian Independence movement. This burden fell on the shoulders of a younger generation of poets who expressed in the post-independence period.

Post Independence Poetry

The traumatic effect of the Second World War and the Indian Independence movement can be felt in the mid 20th century Manipuri society. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Merger Agreement with the Indian union had brought much bitterness to the people of Manipur. Thus, a group of sensitive poets who were highly disillusioned, started expressing feelings of anger and contempt in their poems. They could no longer follow the footsteps of their predecessors who were content with singing the praise of their motherland. These new writers could not pretend to ignore the injustice and corruption that was quickly claiming the society. One of the earliest poets who captured this mood in his poetry is E Nilakanta Singh. His poem titled Manipur published in 1949 is considered as the representative of this time. He writes,

Kadomdano Lambelsibu

Chinga khutka manadaba

Lanthungfamga lambenga samnadaba

Fidamdagi mishakna luba.
Wither the path

No unity between precept and practice

No nexus between path and destiny

Personality more valued than ideal? (ibid)

E Nilakanta was a learned scholar, familiar with the western thought. He had been to France, Hungary and Germany to study western art and culture. He was also interested in Indian aesthetics. Even though E Nilakanta is considered as the first modernist poet, his poetry is different from the western modernism. He started a new approach to poetry which was not there in the pre-independence period. He was able to vocalize the inner tensions and turmoils faced by a modern man in the difficult times. Thus, he deviates from the usage of language or rather the poetic language mostly used by the pre-independence poets and starts using language of the common people. That is why he is considered to be the pioneer of modern poets of post-independence poetry.

E Nilakanta was aware of the changing social and political values. He captures the deteriorating moral value of people in his poem,

Ima Manipur phajabi

Nahakki sanskritigi leikolsida pukning huraba

Oijage eihatti kavi

Leikha taraba, oktabashingi.neihatpibagi, pummang mangbagi.

Beloved mother Manipur

In your breathtaking garden of culture

Let me be a poet

Of the downtrodden, the exploitation and of the forgotten.
E Nilakanta's poems can be called poems of intellect rather than emotions. No doubt he writes about his feelings but he does not merely report what he sees or feels. He digests what he encounters and brings it out with all his learnings and experiences. Thus, his poems have the capacity to make the readers think. He writes in Ireipak,

I don't have a name
Nor any race
I don't have a face
I am just a human being
Son of infinity. (Nongthombam 105) (translation: self)

He further writes in Akeeba (Fear)

What if a man's life is a dream/ And the 'dream' his reality/ What will a man do?' (ibid)

Nilakanta has also written some love poems. 'Chatlasine Kadaidano Ibani' (Lets go Somewhere, You and I),'Ningshinglibara Manorama' (Do you Remember Manorama) and 'Ningthoukhonge Chandrasakhi' (Chandrasakhi of Ningthoukhong)' etc. are some of his love poems. In Chatlasine Kadaidano Ibani, he writes,

Let us go you and I
In the moon lit expanse where the sailors cannot reach
To the realm of unseen and unheard of
Only let us go and don't ask
“why is this?”

E Nilakanta is a prolific writer with a number of poems and essays to his credit. Even though he writes poems of protest, his poems are not very loud or bold but have a subdued voice. After his lead, many younger poets who could connect with
his expressions came forward in the field of Manipuri literature.

Laishram Samarendra Singh, another post-independence poet has contributed immensely in ushering in modernism in Manipuri poetry. He is also a disillusioned man who was constantly disturbed by the moral bankruptcy of his fellow men. He writes of the bitterness that he feels and through satire he finds the correct way of expression,

One petty thief
Was caught by six thieves
The petty thief lost his life
When trampled by thirty six thieves
And torn to pieces by forty thieves.

He uses irony, wit and humour to express meanings in his poems. And in the garb of these poetic means, he criticizes the modern society. One of his most famous poems, 'Mamang Leikai Thambal Satle', he says

Manipur this golden land / Has transformed itself into a wonderland /Six lakhs of Meiteis are now fully employed.

And more when he says,

The contractor has changed his mind
“This bridge should be saved”
The engineer too is now in a different mood
“Oh the country has to be saved”

L. Samarendra talks about the corrupted individuals who are only interested in filling up their pockets. During this time, unemployment also increased as there was growth in education but economy stood still. Corruption was openly accepted. Many
disillusioned youth without proper guidance fell into a life of crime and violence. Many joined insurgency movements and others were swallowed by corruption.

Samarendra writes in A Pair of Black Trousers,

Many pairs of black trousers ran helter-skelter
Blows of stocks were exchanged
Missiles were hurled against one another
With demonic cries of 'Kill', 'Kill'

The poet uses the symbol of black trousers to portray the lost youth of the time. They are caught in the web of corruption and crime.

Samarendra and Nilakanta belong to the older generation of post independence period. Even though they are realistic and sincere in their work, they are subtle and gentle. Their satire, more of a Horatian kind, gentle and humourous, does not become scathing and loud. But the younger poets who followed them became very bold and loud. One such young poet is Sri Biren. He can be considered as one of the first 'angry young poets', who churns out poems of protests to poke at the sensibilities of people.

Sri Biren demands in his poem 'Dabi (Demand)',

My demand is that
Karna also should live
Give him freedom
Give him freedom
Give him freedom.

These new poets leave all inhibition in their expression and indulge in experimental poetry. Their poetry seems loud, and sometimes vulgar. But he says 'to me language of literature should be taken from language of day to day life, the inner
content of literature should also be from one's life...if our life is not smooth then how can literature which reflects life be smooth?' (Nongthombam 34) (self translation)

Another young poet Th Ibopishak writes about the condition of man in such a society. He writes in *Puppet*,

You have eyes, yet you cannot see
You have ears, yet you cannot hear
You have lips, yet you cannot speak
Oh, what pitiful life you have. (self translation)

In one of the interviews, Th Ibopishak says, 'to me poetry is an art and nothing more than that.' He further says that poetry cannot cure the ills of the society and one should not think of poetry as a means to do it. Despite his belief that poetry is mere art and has nothing to do with reforming the society, his poems have something to say about the rotten system of Manipur. Th Ibopishak, in the early phase of his writing career, was bold and his poetry reflected his anger. But with time it changed to more mature and spiritual poetry.

Yumlemban Ibomcha is another important poet of this period. His poems are his emotional outbursts after witnessing the eroding society. To him, everything is like a dream or rather a nightmare, unfolding in front of him when he sees the unpleasant and violent incidents happening around. He writes in *Story of a Dream*,

It is our home, quite dark inside / On the floor, their entrails spilling /

Bodies of children lie about.

To the poet, dream and reality have intermingled in such a way that he is caught in the nightmare. In order to suit his theme, the poet has used different imagery and forms. He delves into surrealistic images to express this dreamlike reality.
These angry poets have now mellowed down, mostly after 1990s. It does not mean that they have stopped writing protest poetry. They still do. But the voice has calmed down. Their anger has metamorphosed into deep philosophical and spiritual search. Younger poets have joined in this search. Poets like RK Madhubir, RK Bhubonsana, Memchoubi, Robin S Ngangom, Saratchand Thiyam are some of the poets who have made a mark in modern Manipuri poetry. Some of them are inspired by the rich Manipuri folklore, while some are going back to nature and their ancient beliefs to find their roots. But what connects them is their concern for the society and diminishing moral values.

Manipuri poetry has come a long way from the hymns and songs to the contemporary poetry. Literature cannot be constant as it reflects the society and its people and society keeps changing as happened in the case of Manipur. The flux has been recorded in the form of ideologies over the course of history of Manipuri poetry. The coming chapters will further dwell on the close networking between the times and newer and newer ideologies that manifest in the Manipuri poetry written over the years.
Works Cited


Singh, L Damodar *Aspects of Manipuri Literature*, Imphal, Writers' Forum 2008, Print


Ed Ngangom S Robin, Nongkinryh Kynpham, *Dancing Earth, An Anthology of*
Poetry from NorthEast India, New Delhi: Penguin Publication, 2009, Print

**Manipuri Books**

Nongthombam, SriBiren Manipuri Sahityada Wakhallon Khara, Imphal, Writers' Forum, 2009, Print

Kondumba, Samchetsabam, Umanglai Haraorol, Imphal, Ethno Heritage Council(HERICOUN) 2010, Print