Chapter 4

Issues of Identity Negotiation
What is identity?

The term Identity comes from Latin word *idem* meaning ‘same’. Even though it is a term widely discussed, it can not be easily defined. The term identity has varied connotations if defined within frameworks of psychology, sociology, gender, literary and cultural studies. Social psychology defines identity as ‘a person’s conception and expression of their individuality or group affiliations’. (Wikipedia). Here, identity can be discussed at two levels, self identity and social identity. Self identity is what is perceived by one’s own consciousness as an individual and its continuity over time. It comprises of what is unique about the individual and how s/he is different from other persons. On the contrary, social identity seeks similarity with a community or a group. Social identity refers to the belongingness of the ‘self’ to an imagined group and how it is ‘different’ from the ‘other’ who does not belong to that community or the group.

The question of social identity is complex and an area of debate since it raises issues marginalization of certain invisible or minority groups vis-a-vis the powerful and dominant groups. It problematizes the issues of sameness and differences and the issues thereby. Post-colonial and feminist theories have further brought out the issues related to social identity or collective identity as they are connected to political and patriarchal hierarchies.

**Ethnic identity - India's North East**

The North-East in India stands out for diverse ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic areas. The history of this ethnic heterogeneity is complex as each ethnic group has had to face diverse experiences as ’givens’ of cultural, historical, political and a myriad of other reasons. Thus, identity formation of the area did not happen in
one go. The various pointers of identity formation (social as well as personal) that is race, culture, religion, language as well as political and economical development have never had a homogeneous growth common to the entire North-East region. In addition in a multi-ethnic society, the clashes between the dominant and the minority groups as well as the unique economic and political development processes enforced by the state, have resulted in further aggravating the identity issue. Thus, identity becomes a process formation, functioning in different locals and time, making it a historical process.

Ethnic identity can be roughly explained as the affinities of people of a particular group to a certain shared history and culture. It also encompasses the superiority (at the level of collective consciousness shared by the group) over other groups and the act of developing inclusion into and exclusion from the group by certain set criterion. M N Karna says

Ethnic identity is the subjective and symbolic use of certain elements of culture by a group of people to differentiate themselves from other groups. It involves claims to higher status as a group in relation to other groups. (Aggarwal 30)

Karna further elaborates several methods to analyze the term ethnicity such as primordialist approach, ‘cultural pluralist’ approach and approach concerning modernization and development. The primordialist approach takes ethnicity as ‘given’ and thus the common descent and culture become the base of identity formation. Here, one seeks the relationship of the past and the present by reconstructing the past, to consider identity. The ‘cultural pluralist’ approach refers to the various groups of people in a society and the conflicts arising out of one group constantly striving to be dominant over others. Such different groups of people have what Karna called as
‘incompatible socio-cultural structures, belief systems and value patterns’.

The modernization and development approaches look into the globalization and expansion of the capitalist market as factors in the dissolution of ethnic identities.

The term ‘multi-ethnicity’ which is a fact for most of the countries of the world further problematizes issues in identity formation. The whole issue is of belonging to the majority or the minority groups. In any multi-ethnic society, there are always some sections of people who do not form the majority. The minority groups are often neglected and discriminated upon and there is always the fear of the process of assimilation to the larger (pressurized by the majority groups) whole which can cause loss of culture, language and tradition, and thus identity.

Now coming back to the North-East, this multi-ethnic region came under the British Rule during the second half of the nineteenth century. Unlike other parts of the country, most of the region was ‘excluded’ from the prevailing direct British administration (in the form of native-princely states). Karna further points out,

Under the colonial dispensation, certain areas were either ‘excluded’ or ‘partially excluded’ from the purviews of the then prevailing administrative and statutory controls, allowing the people to maintain their customary control over land and forests.

(ibid)

This ‘exclusion’ resulted in the inability of the North-Eastern people to form a strong linkage with the rest of the country. It is also important to note that before the setting up of the British Colonialism, the region was inhabited by independent multiple ethnic groups. Another important event was the arrival of Christian missionaries and the spread of Christianity in the tribal areas (Assam, Manipur and
Tripura valleys were already dominated by Hindus). During this period, the early 20th century, in most of the region, the rise of the modern educated elite can also be seen. The ‘exclusive’ nature of British colonizers and the weak connection of sensibility of the NE region with the rest of the country along with the hasty patched up merger of the region with the Indian union after independence led to many conflicts faced by the people of the region including that of identity. M.N. Karna points out

Independence has thus marked the widening of difference between nationalism and ethnicity. (ibid)

Identity formation in NE started with the idea of forming of large groups. M.N. Karna further writes,

Initially, the process of identity formation in North-East was based on the idea of large group formation. Attempts were made to bring several smaller tribal groups together to project a unified identity. (ibid)

Thus, it was imperative to gather smaller groups to form a larger unified group. One instance is the term 'hill people' which encompasses all the small sub-groups of tribes from the hills of the region. Such identification could not be sustained because each small tribal group is unique in its own way, with different dialects, territories and certain cultural systems.

Another major factor impacting identity formation and retaining it has been rapid urbanization of the region. Urban growth has lead to redistribution of spatial area for the different racial, linguistic and cultural population to rural and urban space and thus changing relations of people inter-alia and also their identity. The hilly areas of NE have gone through rapid urbanization in the recent years whereas the plains mostly remain rural. The emergence of dominant areas (towns) in the process of
urbanization attracted heavy concentration of people in these towns resulting in isolation of tribal groups in the wake of modernization and settling down of foreign cultures, thus further complicating identity issues and intergroup relations of the different ethnic groups.

**Mainstream and Sub-streams**

Ethnicity or ethnic identity can further be viewed as belonging to a mainstream and the sub-stream. In the case of NE, the ethnic identity is to be viewed against the Indian Mainstream concept of identity. Now, the term mainstream is a canopy term which subsumes the idea of sub-streams. Thus, the term mainstream is not 'inclusive' but ‘exclusive’ and therefore, a sub-stream with a certain set of characteristics is not recognized. Thus, the ‘Indian Mainstream’ which has ‘Indian’ characteristics or ‘Indianness’, has a homogenized essence.

The identity of an Indian, as a person who belongs to the geopolitical boundary of India with an Indian passport, at best is a political statement without much essence and one is provoked to question what is ‘Indianness’?

Indianness has to be further seen with respect to culture, religion, race and the 'diversity' that every Indian boasts of. Comparing the ethnic groups of the NE along with the Indian mainstream, there are poles apart differences (from food habits to customs). Thus, it can be one of the reasons why the NE sub-streams have rebelled and opposed to the Indian mainstream identity. Some of them have called for a total secession from the ‘mainstream’. There is an undercurrent of violence running underneath this dual nature. Pradip Phanjaobam says,
Once this hostile dualism between the 'mainstream' and the 'sub-streams' has been set into motion, each begins to feed on the other's hostility and rigidity, and in the process each gets more and more intolerant. (ibid)

This explains the rising gap between the Indian mainstream and the different ethnic groups of the NE and the mushrooming of insurgent groups in the region. It is also a fact that one cannot homogenize this problem for all the regions in the Northeast as each region has different internal politics and conflicts. And the Indian mainstream hardly reflects the historical sub-streams of the NE. (Pradip). A closer look at the consciousness of nationalism will further enlighten the issue.

The Indian Nationalism as a unified act of independence and nationhood is found in the country's history. And the modern Indian nation is seen as an unbroken continuity of this history. The issue that needs to be examine is how the sub-streams of the NE partake in that struggle of national identity in the context of diversity and plurality that prevails in the region.

Thus, the appeal of joining the mainstream poses a threat to the sub-streams as it demands a re-negotiation with history. Pradip Phanjaobam points out

The appeal of joining the main-stream has been almost a call for the negation of the region's (NE) collective memories of its past. (ibid)

Negating one's own history can create a psychological vacuum in any community as it means negating or compromising one’s identity. But as a part of the country and for the sake of nation building, where do these sub-streams stand? It is not an uncommon incident if a person from the NE is asked ‘which country do you belong to?’ in India itself. So where do they (NE people) stand as Indians? These are
some of the questions posed by various insurgent groups of the region, i.e. how to adjust identity. This insecurity is further heightened by the fact that the history books of Modern India have no place for the NE history. Text books rarely talk about the NE, if they do, Assam becomes representation of all the NE states. This absence further accentuates the isolation of the NE. Pradip Phajaobam further highlights the condition of the sub-stream (mostly self-sufficient with one's own history and culture) when it comes to contact with mainstream. The outside force of the dominant will either make the smaller community commit a cultural suicide or lash out in defense (in extreme case, insurgent movements). Cultural suicide by the ethnic people, or cultural ethnocide can be roughly understood as the loss of culture in the wake of nation-building. Rodolfo Stavenhagen, coordinator, United Nations University Programme on Ethnic Conflict, defines ethnocide as,

‘Ethnocide entails two principal aspects: one is economic and the other is cultural. Economic ethnocide is embedded in the theory and practice of development. It means that all pre-modern forms of economic organization must necessarily disappear to make way for either private or multi-national capitalism or state planned socialism or mixed thereof. Cultural ethnocide (perhaps a tautology) means that all sub-national ethnic units must disappear to make way for the over-arching nation state, the Behemoth of our times. Development and nation building have become the major economic and political ideologies of the last quarter century or more. Both of them, as traditionally expounded by statesmen and academics alike, have been ethnocidal at that they imply the destruction and/or disappearance of non-integrated, separate ethnic units. This is frequently carried out in the name of national unity and integration process and of course development.’ (Stavenhagen 156-57)
Thus, set against the modern capitalist world and concept of nationhood, the small ethnic groups are stripped off their identity and in case the ethnic groups resist, the resistance is called insurgency movement. Insurgency is the result of the incompatibility of ethnic groups with the so called larger concerns of national identity. Phanjaobam suggested that a possible solution to this problem can be redefining national identity from a wider spectrum.

Insurgencies result because of the non-compatibility of the identities of the ethnic groups of the sub-national groups, with that of the larger national identity. That is when the sub-nationalities or ethnic groups begin to see the larger national identity as anathema to their own. One solution to the problem, easier said than done, is to make these two perceptions of self-identity compatible. The process can begin with the redefinition of the larger national identity as the sum total of all its parts. That each of these parts is as much Indian because of what they are. That the variant characteristics of each and every community within the country is the characteristic of the new Indian identity. (Aggarwal 158)

In almost all the seven states, insurgency movements/uprising can be noticed as this multi-ethnic region is trying to come to terms with the outside world. Nationalist consciousness like ‘We the People of India’ is alien to most of the NE states as they cannot adjust to this new consciousness. On the contrary, the ethnic groups of the NE find they are being gradually marginalized and the sense of mistrust and insecurity is on the rise. Presently, many of the outfits are trying to reassert their identity by reconstructing their past, reviving culture and custom with a new gusto.

MANIPUR

Coming back to Manipur, the state as discussed in previous chapters has seen
different incidents in various periods of time which have compelled the state to negotiate and renegotiate its identity time and again. The first incident, i.e., in the 17th century, the coming of the Vaisnavism changed the entire religion. The plain people, also the majority in Manipur, ‘meiteis’ embraced the new religion willingly or unwillingly, but once they were into the new religion, it had a firm hold which has lasted for centuries.

This particular group, Meities, comprising of seven clans negotiated with their earlier religion to accommodate the new one. One interesting fact is the co-existence of both the faiths, the meitei faith as well as the Vaisnava faith in the community. Another important aspect is the addition of Kumar, Kumari, Singh and Devi in the earlier Meitei names and growing popularity of Hindu names. A name is what identifies a person. Thus, in this mix of Hindu and Meitei names, one can see how the Meiteis have adjusted being a Meitei as well as part Vaisnavite.

Another important but unfortunate event during the Vaisnavite conversion is the burning of the Puyas (ancient Manipuri manuscript) and the consequent adoption of Bengali script in place of Meitei script. In language also, many Sanskritized and Hindi words seeped in. One instance can be found in 'Gambhir Singh Nonggaba’ by Dayaram Louremba and Nabashyam Ningthoujamba.

‘We have here loving wives and husbands bound by life's maya.’

Such proliferation of the new culture/identity continued till the modern times. Younger poets are still not free from these adjustments. L. Kamal, a 20th century poet writes,

Leinam Chukhrabada koktaba

Vidhata na karamna semlamba!
(heavy with perfume
O what a wonder of creation)

Inclusion of words like Vidhata, Vishwa, Prem etc. are commonly found in the poetry of the poets of this time.

Manipur is best known as the place of famous dance Ras Lila to the rest of the country. Looking closely at this dance form, it is again a representation of the identity negotiation of the people of the state. Ras Lila is a mixture of Hindu myth and Meitei dance movements.

Manipuris, specially the Meiteis, had to compromise with the language, religion and culture to embrace the new (read mainstream) culture of the Vaisnavism. The Meiteis are still struggling to have a firm footing on where they stand as Meitei or Gouriya Meitei, (a term for Vaisnavite Meiteis)

It was during early 20th century that the revival of the old Meitei identity became a major focus. It can be said that the rise of the new modern educated elite in the society brought about the change. Redefining and reconstructing history became a medium to reclaim that identity. Since 1980's Meitei script has been included in the school curriculum.

Another important event in the history of Manipur, and also one of the reasons for various insurgent outfits claiming for a separate nation, is the Merger Agreement of 1948, irrespective of Manipuris having strong affinities with India (because of Hinduism and influence of Bengali culture) at the time of merger. Indeed the Merger Agreement was controversial, but direct revolt against the Indian union came much later than the merger. Merger with the Indian Nation just after independence is not the
sole reason for various movements and rebellions. The experiences and handling in terms of ethnicity, politics and economy, history, should also be taken into account. Phanjaobam writes,

A study of the issue of nationality, ethnicity, and various historical forces that work in the formation of a nation's consciousness, from close quarters, may throw some light in this regard. (ibid p. 150)

The difference of consciousness or rather national consciousness of the NE people has led to the gap between the center and the margin (Indian mainstream as the center and the NE sub-streams as the margin). And the approach of the center to close this gap by way of trying to alter consciousness of the marginalized has only resulted in more conflicts and bitterness.

The source of ethnic identity incorporates the relationship between the 'self' and the 'other'. The ‘self’ is the subjective perception of the being from the mirror stage, when one first sees himself/herself in the mirror for the first time and recognizes the reflection as the self, to the consciousness harnessed over time by culture, history, religion, gender and experience. Whereas, the ‘other’ starts with the objective view of a person, group, community, and even consciousness which work with the principles of difference and ‘exclusion’. Thus, most of the problems regarding identity start with the clash of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ when either of the two feels a threat to one's own identity.

In narratives, it is important to see how experiences are narrativized and the perception of the ‘other’ as an object by the ‘self’ as the narrator, expresses the issues. In the case of poetry, it is important to see the poet’s narrative identity and how the relationship of the ‘self’ and th‘other’ are presented.
Coming to the poets of Manipur, the modern poets (20th century poets) have indirectly talked about identity negotiation that the region has faced. In most cases, one can notice the subtle ways in which poets, Kh. Chaoba, L. Kamal, Shri N Biren to Robin S. Ngangom etc. have delineated the identity crises. In the older poets, like Kh. Chaoba and L. Kamal, one can see the affinity with the Indian mainstream but at the same time the influx of the two identities, as a Meitei and as an Indian as equally important sub-currents can also be seen. As a Meitei, the poets feel that the community is isolated and ignored yet at the same time as an Indian, the poets are proud to be so. Thus, the negotiation of the two identities which creates a dual identity can be seen manifested in their poems. Kh. Chaoba Singh writes,

Who are you, O Flower

Blooming on the slopes of the hills

On the Kyamlei

Laughing heartily!...

Tell me your identity, O Flower

Isolating yourself

From the intimate world

You remain hiding in solitude.

The metaphor of the 'Flower' hiding in 'isolation' is the perfect example of Meitei community. The poet at the same time is proud to be a Meitei and he asserts this in *Meitei Kavi*

Open your pages white and pure

Set your pen on the paper

Make a record of her charms

This land above all
Blessed with His graciousness
Is a place where poets are born

Another poem in which Kh. Chaoba talks about the influx of two identities is *Crumbling (Ningkhaire)*. Here, the poet talks about how a strong stream of water breaks the mud wall built by a baler and is overflowed. The metaphors are simple and yet very specifically express the condition of the ethnic group/identity when over-ridden by a new-dominant group. He writes,

Come and mend, mend it, all disintegrates
The very center of the wall of letters first breaches
Plays, music, all have drifted away
Stop it if you can, all have been overflow'd!
Raising both his arms, shedding tears of loved
His body bent by the torrents, cried the baler!
Better break the bund, O hapless baler!
Let the on-rushing stream meet the vast expanse
Who will stop the strong currents of time?

The poet talks of the impact of the new wave of modernism ushered in by education and also exposure to the outside world during the early 20th century in literature. But one can also sense the positive nature of the poet in seeing such influences on his community. The new wave has brought in rich resources of literature and art. It is overflowing. He further says,

‘The old yielding place to the new, it's the law of the nature
Sartorial fashion changes, hair style alters
What else remain?'
Blocking the rest, what will you gain?

Thus, the poet, Kh Chaoba in this poem, seems to welcome the changes happening in his society in the wake of modernization and the relationship of the community with the Indian Union. In his poems we see the duality of the identity, proud to be a Meitei, at the same time welcoming Indian identity as well.

Another poet who talks of identity negotiation is L. Kamal. Like his contemporary Kh. Chaoba, Kamal too is a romantic. His poems like, Chaoba's talks about the assimilation of his Meitei identity with the Indian one. In his poem *Leishak Khangdaba Leipal*, he writes,

> A certain fine sapling
> of the fam'd Bokul tree
> embellishing the garden of India
> as it was planted under the shadow
could not sprout in its season
and not even in the spring
the imperceptible aliens
thought it was a parasite
When the cool *breeze from the west*
attended on it
this *unknown plant*
started to shoot out tender buds!
Did it refrain from budding in time
fearing it would bear the burning heat
had it blossom'd in the Spring morn!
O perceptible aliens!

Do you still think it is a parasite.

Thus, the poet refers to the unknown plant in the garden of India which the aliens thought to be a parasite. The poet talks of the alien culture and perception of ‘Meitei’ (here, the unknown plant) as a parasite if looked at the backdrop of mainstream India. Thus, a parasitical (according to alien perception) Meitei ethnicity is trying to create a place in the multi-ethnic and larger context of India. It is also noteworthy, the breeze from the west which has determined the fate of the plant as an independent entity, identity (no longer parasite/or dead) blooming. The poet has called the ‘other’ alien as the ‘self’ plant is being judged by the former. The poet thus, talks of the dual identity, a unique Meitei ethnicity represented by the unknown plant and the ‘other’ as the alien and a Meitei ‘plant’ embellishing the garden of India.

In another poem ‘To a Certain Patriot’ he talks about the nationalistic fervor of the country during the mid 20th century. He talks about a certain patriot who is daring and courageous and is not afraid like a true patriot. The poet seems to be trying to locate the Meitei consciousness within the nationalistic sentiments of India. He writes,

When the winter snowfall thicken'd
And the wind became biting,
The Indian prone to cold
Bore its burnt crying 'save' 'save';
Hidden under warm clothes
They remain'd with their limbs folded
Savoring the warmth of the sheets
This courageous countryman
Jump'd into the cold river,
Show'd his love for motherland
Indians laugh'd at him as foolhardy
But this courageous one didn't even pay heed

Thus, this ‘patriot’ is laughed at by the ‘Indians’, for being courageous for his motherland. The term Indian can have different connotations here. The poet, in calling the alien/outside people (for the Meiteis) as Indians, denotes the dissimilarity of the Meiteis and the Indians. In Manipur, people from outside NE region are called by the local term 'Mayang' and in Nagaland as 'Indians'. Thus, the term can denote the exclusive behavior of the ethnic groups towards the 'other' i.e. main-stream India. Yet, as already mentioned in the earlier discussion, Manipur has had this co-existence of the dual-identity (in terms of religion) and the constant struggle to strike a balance between the two can be seen in this poem. For the poet further claims,

Lo countrymen! This sailor
Had many a desert travers'd
Encount'ring many a mirage...
He addresses his ‘countrymen’ to look and behold the courage of the sailor (here, Meitei patriot).

The poet is also concerned about the loss of identity in terms of language and literature because Manipur had stayed under the Hindu influence for a long time. He fears that there is not enough literature written in Meitei language to assert its identity. He laments in his poem Meitei Literature Today,

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

Another important aspect of the two poets discussed above is the language of
their poetry. As discussed earlier, the Meiteilon (Meitei language spoken by the Meiteis) the original language in which the above discussed poems are written, is influxed with certain Sanskritized words. When one talks of the Meitei affinity towards Indian consciousness, the influence in the language plays a major role. Language is part of an identity. Thus, accepting foreign words as its own and expressing them in the form of literature somewhat enlightens the community’s willingness to embrace the foreign culture. As discussed earlier, the Meiteis had already adopted the foreign religion and thus, its culture but they had also retained their traditional faith as well. Thus, in these poems one sees the duality of the people’s consciousness during the early 20th century. Coming back to the poems, translators have replaced certain Sankritized words used in the original poems with simple English. The following table shows the original as well as the translation. Few lines from the poems are taken for illustration and the Sankritized words are underlined and Italicized along with the translations. The English translations of the same are given next to the original to highlight the loss that happened during the translation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Meiteilon</th>
<th>English translation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poem Ninglhaire</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. <em>Sahityagi</em> panyammaktada hanna namkhaire</td>
<td>1. The very center of the wall of letters first breaches.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poem Kanagumba <em>Swadesh Bhakt</em> Amada</td>
<td>To a Certain <em>Patriot</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Ningtham Chaoba <em>Bharat vasi</em> na khangnaki <em>trahi</em> <em>trahi</em> haina</td>
<td>1. The <em>Indians</em> prone to cold bore its burnt <em>save</em> <em>save</em>.</td>
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</table>
A much younger poet, Sri N Biren also writes on identity and identity crisis. But unlike the two poets discussed above, he belongs to the generation where the duality of identity was not as much a point of celebration. After independence, when realism replaced romanticism because of the various incidents (WWII, Merger with the Indian Union) encountered by the people of the region, the poets began to see the loss of roots and the chaotic times where it was difficult to find a stable life. Sri N Biren is one such poet who is disillusioned and thus a self introspective poet who really wants to explore the inner psyche of the people of that time. In his poem, *I in the Boundless*, he writes,

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I am a duck
In this wide
Very widening
Sparkling boundless water
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The poet seems to be searching for the lost 'self', 'I'. the poem turns to a spiritual search of one's identity. The disillusioned youth of the post Independence Manipuri society, specially poets of the time, mostly indulged into the psychological terrain in search of the meaning of existence. Sri N Biren is one of the pioneers of this school of poets. He further writes,

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By and by
I dissolved
In this water..
I am dissolved
In this sky
This sky is absorbed in me
The separate twain
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Become one

Form one

The sense of the lost identity and the chaos erupting from an unstable society, making a person wonder at his/her existence is a recurrent theme for the poets of the time. Sri N Biren, in another poem, *My Sorrow*, writes,

I exist

As a ball of light

Surrounded by darkness

I boasted

Of burning darkness.

The metaphors of light and darkness depict the confusion of a poet regarding his existence. Darkness embodies confusion and loss of one's own image. He further writes,

I run far away

But every moment

I myself become darkness...

Thus, the darkness 'I' becoming 'darkness' signifies the sense of total loss of identity of an individual.

This total loss of identity is further highlighted in his poem The New Land. He talks of the hollowness of the contemporary Manipur where the people are subjected to negotiations over the time in terms of religion, identity and even politics. The new Manipur that emerged out of all these negotiations is empty to him. He writes,

This land is a new land

Neither man nor God is here
Nothing is here, empty everywhere

Another poem with a strong statement of identity by Sri Biren worth mentioning here is *Self-Advertisement*. In this poem, he advertizes himself, saying that he is a living man and that is his identity. The rebel in the poet refuses to be tied down to any particular identity that is given by a society on the basis of religion, caste or place. He writes,

I am giving my self-identity

That I'm the visage and colour of this place

Where I've arrived unexpectedly

The fight, in fact, is

Between me and myself..

.. I am not a Meitei

not a Pangan

not a Hao

not a Mayang

I'm man

Here, the poet is talking about an identity that surpasses all other identities.

Emphasizing more on the self, he further says,

What I do is what I do

What you do is what you do

I'm not one who is yet to get born

Nor am I a deadman

I'm a living being

A living being of present

Another poet who talks of this modern day identity crisis is RK Madhubir. In
his poem 'Dilemma', he writes,

It is an awful hour to me
Nobody knows me
No one hears my voice
Neither asked, 'who are you?'
I called
I asked
I cried.

The poem talks of the nightmarish experience of the poet where he is recognized by none, not even, ‘birds and the animals’. He keeps on seeking answers to his questions, ‘what is this?’, ‘where shall I exist?’, ‘Oh, is there any other world?’. But he finds no answer as to where he belongs. The poem ends with a sad note where he says,

To none shall I blame
nor a woman I am to mate with
So as my generations be vanished
not to be reborn.

The loss of roots can also be linked with the loss of heritage from the ancestors. When an individual identifies himself or herself, he/she tries to find a fine link that goes to one's ancestors. In the poem, ‘My House’, RK Madhubir talks about how the destruction of such link can lead to rootlessness. In this simple yet honest poem, he writes,

My great grandfather had given
To my grandfather, a house..
..How sorry am I today!
No house is here today
What is to be done today!
Oh, I am the destroyer of my house
I am the destroyer of my ancestors.

The symbol of the ‘house’ can be interpreted in many layered meanings. ‘House’ is where the person belongs, it is the symbol of ‘belongingness’. It identifies ‘him’ as the ‘house’ was passed on to him from generation to generation as a heritage. It is the fine link that makes the person rooted. The symbol can also mean the heritage of language, culture, history that a person gets from his ancestors. The destruction of the ancestral ‘house’ in the poem can signify the major events in history which led the people of Manipur to lose their heritage. The ‘Puya Meithaba’ where ancient Meitei Manuscripts were burnt has a resonance with the destruction of the ‘house’. Thus, the poem talks about the loss of roots and how it compromises identity.

Identity negotiation is a major issue in contemporary Manipur. As people are becoming more aware of the identity negotiation that happened in the course of history, the drive to reclaim the lost identity has got new momentum. The burning down of the central library (unfortunate, extreme step), introduction of Meitei script in schools and a new vigorous attempt by Meitei community to celebrate rituals according to Meitei Calander (e.g. Cheiraoba, Meitei Cheiraoba nd Gourya Cheirouba) etc. are a few steps taken towards reclaiming that lost identity. The poets have also not stayed behind and in their poems one can see the concern reflected. Although the poets of the pre-independence and the post-independence eras have dealt with identity differently, the basic concerns have remained the same. More contemporary poets are coming up with this issue as they become sensitized by newer and newer experiences (e.g. denial of entry for NE people to tourist spots such as Taj
Mahal because they look different and frequent asked questions like 'Are you an Indian?' in India itself, Racial attacks because they do not look like 'Indians' etc.). The issue of identity has, thus, become the prime focus both in literature and in the contemporary times.
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