

A Discourse on North-East Culture and Literature

Editor

Nongmaithem Suraj Kumar



Sub Editors

Kshetrimayum Devendra Singh, Chingangbam Ningthilsana, Moirangthem
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Priscilla Karam, Laishram Pinky, Pushpa Maimom, Ningthoujam Dhana Devi,
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Folk Memories and Narrativisation of the Nation in Subram's Historical Novel *Pishinhoudraba Thesis*

— Smaranjit Singha

Introduction

The histories of human civilisations around the world abound in events of mass migration, both forced and voluntary. At different points of history, people leave their ancestral homeland for a variety of reasons such as war, socio-political unrest, search for better living conditions, livelihood and so on. This paper is concerned with a particular ethnic community of the present northeast India—the Meeteis (Meiteis) or Manipuris—who have experienced mass migrations on various occasions in the past four centuries. Tracing their origins to Manipur, an erstwhile sovereign kingdom and presently a northeastern state of India, the Meeteis at present reside in significant numbers in the neighbouring Indian states of Assam and Tripura as well as in the bordering countries of Myanmar and Bangladesh. The present paper will specifically focus on the Meetei community of Jaribon in the Hailakandi district of Assam, their collective history in their adopted land and how they rely on the folk memories to constitute their sense of belonging to the Meetei nation. This will be done through a postcolonial and folkloristic reading of the Manipuri historical novel *Pishinhoudraba Thesis* (2017) written by the Kamini Kumar Awardee Manipuri fiction writer Subram from Assam.

The Author and the Text

Moirengjam Dev Singha, popularly known by his pen name, Subram, is among the leading fiction writers in Manipuri from the Barak Valley of Assam. Mainly a writer of short stories, he has till now published two novels. He received the Kamini Kumar Gold Medal in 2004 for his historical novel *Meera Memsahab*. In 2017 he came up with his second historical novel *Pishinhoudraba Thesis (The Unsubmitted Thesis)* which represents the early history of the Meetei settlers in Jaribon in the Hailakandi district of Assam and records their subsequent struggles in forging a self-identity in their adopted land. The novel is written mainly in the third person, focussing on two female characters, Rajashree and Manglembi. Manglembi, a resident of Krishnapur in Cachar district, is a Phd aspirant in Manipuri who plans to write a thesis on the topic "Jaribongee Khunda-Leita Wari" (An Account of Human Settlement in Jaribon) for which purpose she visits her friend Manglembi at Laishramkhun in Jaribon, Hailakandi. Staying at her friend's house, Rajashree visits the various places of historical importance to the Meetei community in Hailakandi and acquaints herself with the folk stories and legends about the people. All these unknown aspects of Jaribon's history are represented in Rajashree's thesis. Thus, the readers come to see, through the eyes of Rajashree, a reconstructed account of the Manipuri history in Jaribon, Hailakandi spanning almost four centuries since their earliest emigration to the Barak Valley from Manipur.

Folk Memories

According to Brone Stundziene, "folk memory" does not mean an inactive memory bank, but, on the contrary, it represents an actively working system and an intensely used arsenal that repeatedly exerts impacts on contemporary reality (Bûgienē, 38). This view is echoed by the famous nineteenth century Estonian folkloristic Jakob Hurt who believed that folkloristics can be seen as "our own living chronicle" and as "memories" (Naithani, 18-19). So, it appears that folk memories are a living entity which, although rooted in the past events and historical moments, continues to play a significant role in the present times. In the process, they manifest a bond between the past and the present in a way that ensures the continuity of certain aspects of social life.

Manipuris/Meeteis in Jaribon, Hailakandi, Assam

Jaribon is an endonym for the lands under the occupation of Manipuri populations in the Hailakandi district of Barak Valley in Southern Assam. At present, there are approximately 34 villages and hamlets in Jaribon. As per the 1991 census, the total Manipuri population of Jaribon is 11,557 (Subram 30). Subram's historical novel *Pishinhoudraba Thesis* is set in Jaribon. In the novel he tries to highlight the constructive role played by folk memories in preserving a group's collective identity. He brings forth a realistic version of the history of the Meeteis in Jaribon, Hailakandi, as conceived by him through his research on the local history. However, his book abounds in many historical events in a fictionalised form, thus synthesising fact and fiction in a way that utilises the folk memories of the people. Regarding the role of memories in human life, Maurice Halbwachs observes: "We preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through

them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated. (47)" Memories, as indicated by Halbwachs, play a constructive role in forging human relationships across time and space insofar as they help in perpetuating a sense of collective identity among people. Thus, recreating or invoking past memories of a particular community may enable the present generation to associate themselves more closely with its previous generations. It is this specific role of folk memories that the novelist Subram attempts to explore in his novel.

Folk Memories in *Pishinhoudraba* Thesis

The evocation of folk memories in the novel is evidenced from the seventh chapter onwards. The chapter begins with a description of two men, Soibam Tona and Khumong Chaoba who were the supporters of Prince Sanongba, a younger brother of King Khagemba. In the early 1600s, Sanongba waged a rebellion against the king and he and his supporters had to flee to the neighbouring states (Chhetri). One of the most influential voices in postcolonial literature, Chinua Achebe, in his novel *Things Fall Apart*, shows that the main cause of the Igbo society's downfall was as much external as it was internal (1958). This also holds true in the case of Manipur when the internal conflict between brothers paved the way for the dispersal of the population in the subsequent periods. The novel shows that Tona and Chaoba were among the supporters of Prince Sanongba and hence they fled from Manipur along with their families and ventured into the unknown terrains of the Barak Valley. The narration commences through the perspective of one of the two men:

How unfaithful to one another you royal members are! I thought. Is there nothing in this world except the throne? In your struggle for the throne you have destroyed the feelings of brotherhood. And the fear of assassination of the promising royal sons has landed us here, hapless and wayward, in search of a shelter. (33) (Translated from Manipuri)

The description highlights the perilous journey of few of the earliest Meetei migrants to Hailakandi who fled from their homeland to save themselves from the soldiers of King Khagemba. The author very skilfully sheds light on the emotional conflict of those migrants which is not recorded in written history:

Fleeing during wars is not a pleasant thing. In front there is the unknown land, and at the back there is the king's ferocious army determined to destroy the enemy...We know it well that we are on the wrong side, but being close followers of the king's enemy we have arrived here, ill-fated and miserable, in a bid to escape from the king's vengeful eyes. (33) (Translated from Manipuri)

The author here tries to reconstruct those moments of Manipuri history which exist only in the form of oral tales and folk imagination. By doing so, he enables his readers to engage in a fruitful dialogue with the past and encourages them to scrutinise those historical events which caused the migration of Manipuris four hundred years ago.

One of the ways in which Subram explores folk memories in the novel is through his depiction of several Manipuri historical figures from Jaribon whose stories exist amongst people mainly in the form of oral tales. One such famous personage is Narendrajit, popularly

known as Sana Chahee Ahum. Born in 1818 at Sonai, he was the second son of King Chourajit of Manipur. The novel mentions about a popular folk belief regarding his birth; legends have it that he had been in his mother's womb for three years before being born and thus he came to be known as "Sana Chahee Ahum" which literally means "Three Year Royal Blood" (Subram 65). It is also said that he has elongated arms with his fingers reaching up to the knees (Subram 65). Among the many popular legends about Narendrajit that finds mention in the novel is the tale about his deportation to the Cellular Jail in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the mysteries surrounding his alleged escape from the Jail. The narrator mentions how Narendrajit had expertise as a traditional healer and cured many prisoners inside the Jail which earned him the title "Rajkumar Kaviraj" (Subram 69). The novel also features a folk legend that Narendrajit once cured the Jailer's wife with his traditional healing methods and so as a token of gratitude the Jailer secretly arranged for his escape from the Jail, escorting him up to the Sundarbans (Subram 69).

The novel also provides fictionalised details regarding several historical events, thus intermixing factual and folk elements. For instance, it mentions that during the reign of Koirengsana in Jaribon, a Sagol Kangjei (Manipuri traditional Polo) match was played between the Manipuris of Jaribon and the British at Monacherra Club Ground on the 3rd March, 1894 in order to solve a deadlock regarding the issue of tax collection from the locals (Subram 82-83). It is depicted that the Manipuris convincingly defeated the British and the king earned the right to collect tax (Subram 90). The narrator also includes brief details about Thirty (30) Manipuri Sagol Kangjei players from different villages of Jaribon whose stories may serve as a source of inspiration for the local people even to this day.

Narrativisation of the Meetei Nation

The value of Subram's historical novel seemingly lies in its act of narrativisation of the Meetei nation outside of Manipur. In other words, by providing space to the different folk accounts concerning the Manipuris' community life in Jaribon, the novelist has tried to give a unified shape to the four hundred years of local history. The novelist seems to be influenced by the realisation that the history of Manipuris in Jaribon naturally lies outside the purview of the history of Manipur. But more importantly, the question he probably tries to address through his book is whether or not such a local history qualifies to be included within the collective narrative of the Meetei nation as a whole. While there may not be any direct answer to this, the way the novelist juxtaposes historical accounts from Manipur with those from Jaribon and harmonises the two settings points at his vision of narrating a unified Manipuri history which is beyond the limitations of spatial boundaries. In this connection, one may quote Maurice Halbwachs:

What makes recent memories hang together is not that they are contiguous in time; it is rather that they are part of a totality of thoughts common to a group, the group of people with whom we have a relation at this moment, or with whom we have had a relation on the preceding day or days. (52)"

Based on Halbwachs's opinion it may be assumed that Subram's narrative mode which relies on the interplay of folk memories as a means of bridging spatial gaps between two

separated group of Manipuris—one in Manipur and the other in Jaribon—indicates that he is in favour of viewing the two groups as parts of the same nation.

While talking about the idea of Meetei nation one may refer to Benedict Anderson's famous statement that a nation is an imagined political community which is inherently limited and sovereign (6). Anderson further explains that the idea of a nation centres around the image of communion among the people in question (6). This view clearly finds reflection in Subram's narration of the sentiments of the earliest Meetei settlers in Jaribon. In one of the passages in the novel the author describes the reaction of Soibam Tona, permanently settled in Jaribon, on receiving two young Meetei soldiers who had recently fled from Manipur due to the political turmoils in King Khagemba's court. Tona says: "Dear sons, what is it that has brought you two from *Meitei Leibak* to this *Mayang Leibak*? How are things going on in *Meitei Leibak*? It has been long since the last time I heard about the brothers and sisters of my mother land. Sit down, and narrate to me in clear terms" (37). Although Soibam Tona is physically away from Manipur, his patriotic feelings for his motherland remain quite intact and so he, in a way, can imagine his communion with the fellow Meetei people back home.

Interestingly, in showing a significant deviance from Anderson's basic proposition that nation is based on feelings of horizontal comradeship and fraternity (7), Ernest Gellner rather harshly describes nationality as unnatural and a historical oddity (150-151). While Gellner's view, seen vis-à-vis Subram's perceived notion of the collective Meetei nation, may lead to challenging propositions, the narrative assumes a deep meaning in the light of Eric Hobsbawm's views on invented traditions as a sign of nationhood. He remarks: "'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practises, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (1). As is evident here, Hobsbawm talks about the role played by certain rituals and repetitive practises of symbolic nature in binding people together across generations. In this way, invented traditions may become crucial in forging feelings of nationhood among people.

The idea of invented traditions in the novel becomes evident in Subram's depiction of a saintly lady named Laishram Konu. The novel narrates that she was the youngest daughter of Soibam Tona and the wife of Laishram Mongyamba. She suffered an early death after ten years of marriage in the middle of the seventeenth century. Days before her death she became divinely inspired and started to give prophecies. One of her prophecies, which ultimately came true and had a huge implication on the Meetei history, is the following:

Let me, the divine mother *Sidabi*, render the words of wisdom.

Let me tell you about the future chain of events.

In this land there will be the arrival of hordes of Meiteis, crossing the nine mountains of our motherland. There will be progress and prosperity all around, and a change in ancient customs; hear, o hear, my dear children! (Subram 48) (Translated from Manipuri)

Laishram Konu here very clearly mentions about the waves of migration to Assam from Manipur which were to take place at later historical periods, most notably during the seven year devastation from 1819 to 1826. In keeping with the local folk accounts, the narrator indicates that after her death Laishram Konu's status was elevated from a normal mortal to a divine figure; since she was the first Meetei person to breath her last in Jaribon a shrine was erected in her memory and she came to be worshipped as a *Lamabi* or forest deity (Subram 50). In the month of Sajibu (first month in traditional Manipuri calendar) every year, offerings are made to her shrine (Subram 50). In this way, the practice of paying homage to the deceased Laisram Konu has taken the form of an invented tradition which has been in practice in Jaribon since the last four hundred years. The function of such a tradition is two-fold. On the one hand, it serves to remind the Manipuris of Jaribon about their origins and their earliest days of migration. On the other hand, it also fosters a sense of unity and connectedness among the local Manipuris and promotes the feelings of nationhood among them.

Conclusion

By way of concluding the discussion on folk memories and narrativisation of nation in Subram's novel it seems imperative to allude to Rabindranath Tagore's view that the past renews itself creatively in literature (Guha 5). Taking about this creative aspect of literature in representing history Tagore opines: "I have not been able to put the entire history of my life in words, but that history is of no importance. It is the desire for self-expression on the part of man as the creator that has engaged him in all his long endeavor over the ages" (99). Evidently, Tagore suggests that representation of history in literature could become meaningful only when such a history leads to man's self-expression as a creator. In this context, Subram's work does not seem to be contrary to Tagore's view as the novel is about self-exploration of the identity of all Manipuris living in Jaribon and reviewing of those folk memories which history books hardly shed any clear light on.

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