

Manipuri Lore: Folktales, Cultural History and Anthologies

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Abstract—The paper will establish a connection between folktales and the cultural history of a region, particularly with respect to the Indian state of Manipur. It is premised on the belief that a study of folktales can alert us not only to the various interconnections between folktales and the cultural history of a place but also help analyse the dynamics of the publication of the anthologies of folktales in relation to this cultural history. The paper will include analyses of Meitei and tribal tales pertaining to the nationalist phase and contemporary period in the history of the North Eastern Indian state of Manipur and look at how in the past few years, compilers and translators have incorporated versions of tales different from the earlier anthologies, establishing a direct link between the tales and the times of their publication.

Index Terms—Folklore, manipur, cultural history, folktales.

I. INTRODUCTION

The paper will establish a connection between folktales and the cultural history of a region, particularly with respect to the Indian state of Manipur. It is premised on the belief that a study of folktales can alert us not only to the various interconnections between folktales and the cultural history of a place but also help analyse the dynamics of the publication of the anthologies of folktales in relation to this cultural history.

Although it is not possible to define the vast discipline of cultural history, it can be understood as the study of different approaches of history or anthropology to analyse traditions, popular culture and most importantly cultural connotation of historical experience. Peter Burke denotes

the rise of cultural history to a wider cultural turn in political science, geography, economics, psychology, anthropology and cultural studies. There has been shift in these disciplines, at least among a minority of scholars, from the assumption of unchanging rationality to an increasing interest in the values held by particular groups in particular places and particular periods [1], [2].

Some of the anthologies of folktales that will be taken for analysis here were published between the late 20th and early 21st century; the historical and cultural events that had occurred in Manipur between these periods will also be traced. Among the older anthologies, some of the prominent ones are: Ching Tamgi Phunga Wari by Sarangthem Boramni published in 1977, reprinted in 2013, Manipuri Lok Sahitya by O. Bhogeshor published in 1985, Manipuri Phunga Wari:

A Collection of Manipuri Folk-tales compiled and edited by I.R Babu and Fables and Folk- Tales of Manipur by G.K. Ghosh and Shukla Ghosh; the last two published in 1998.

More recent publications include Chinglongi Wari Shingbun, a collection of Tribal tales by Chirom Rajketan which was brought out in 2007, Epu Ibengi Phunga Warising by Kirankumar Mayanglambam was published in 2013. Three different publications by Thokchom Thouyangba Meitei are extensively used for this research paper, namely Eshusha Pupu Waree Leerage published in 2011 and Eshusha Edhou Waree Leerage published in 2016. A new collection of folktales with a modern twist by James Oinam titled New Folktales of Manipur is also published in 2016.

II. BODY

The Indian state of Manipur is “situated in the extreme East of India, preserves a religion rich in mythology and colourful in rituals”; the word “Manipur meaning ‘the land of gems’ is a Sanskritised name given to the land when the Meiteis i.e. the people of the plains adopted Vaishnavism as a state religion in the in the 18th century A.D” [1], [2]. It is commonly understood that “the Meiteis were converted into Hinduism late in the beginning of the 18th century A.D. during the reign of King Pamheiba” [3], [4]. The common people as well as the nobles at the court initially agreed to adopt the new religion but eventually discords and disagreements began which led to the beginning of conflicts between the belief systems. The conversion created a huge impact on the Meiteis leading to various changes in their lifestyle; these are reflected in the earlier anthologies of folktales as some of them were published in 20th century. For example, Manipuri Lok Sahitya by O. Bhogeshor published in 1985 contains tales which focus on the direct influence of Vaishnavism among Meiteis as compared to the anthologies published after 2000 which are more focussed towards contemporary issues. The recent anthologies are geared towards addressing the visible conflict of religious ideologies among younger generation, who are pro- active in asserting Meitei identity and addressing the ongoing ethnic clashes.

One of the most important political events that affected the dynamics of ethnic harmony was the “uproar in the valley over the extension of the ceasefire between the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim, led by Thuingaleng Muivah and Isak Chishi Swu, NSCM (IM), and the Government of India beyond territorial limits in June 2001” [5]. This resulted in the death of 18 people and the “burning down of a number of the most important symbols of the establishment, including the Manipur State Legislative Assembly Building

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by an outraged public” [5]. This event marked the beginning of a series of severe conflicts between Meiteis and the hill tribes. It led to a further series of conflicts which affected the well-being of the common people in the state till today and these are in turn shadowed in the literature written at that time or the tales anthologised from 2001 till date.

Some of the political issues that are mentioned above are manifested in the form of violence, unrest and protests which disrupt the everyday life of people and these are reflected in the folktales. In the most recent collection of tales by James Oinam, older popular tales like “Hanubi and Hanuba” have been retold with the present volatile political situation in mind such as ethnic clashes, violence, bloodshed, identity issues, poor governance, militarisation in the state etc. The anthologies that are published earlier also include these tales but these are narrated without the resonances present in the recent version of the tale published in 2016 which are geared towards mirroring contemporary society.

The tale begins in an intriguing manner by stating that [5] “the valley has a huge lake with tiny rivers, and is embraced by seven grand mountains on all sides”. Nevertheless “the story is about the blood spilled by the non- tailed minority, fighting for equality, for justice, which colours the flowers of the valley to this day” [5] The introduction to the anthology summarises the thematic concern of the story by focussing on the current situation of Manipur and foregrounding the land as being continually disturbed by violence and bloodshed. There is no direct reference to any particular community but the story hints at the present conflict between Meiteis and some of the Tribal communities in the state which demand for unification of their inhabited areas. Reference [4] states that “the prolonged turmoil in the North East is rooted in two causes: (a) the question of ethnic/cultural identity, which is perceived to be threatened by encroachment/infiltration by people of other ethnic/ cultural groups from within and outside the region and the country; and (b) the persistence of economic backwardness”. The conversation that happens between the monkeys is crucial in understanding the brewing violence in the state; one of the monkeys who is referred to as [4] “fundamentalist” argues that they should teach the non-tailed ones that this territory belongs to us and they were born there just by accident”. The fight between the two groups signifies disagreements and the issue of territory that is prevalent in the state of Manipur as one of the monkeys says, [4] “The question is here not of right or wrong but whether we are sovereign or not. Can we dictate things within our territory or not”. This is a clear reference to the demands made by the Naga unions in the state for a sovereign territory and disagreements with the Meiteis regarding territory resulting in strikes or blockade of national highway on a regular interval.

The tale mirrors the effect on common people of the conflicts, fights against the authority and the manner in which these common people are sandwiched between the government and the protesters. It mocks at the meaninglessness of the action committees that form after every potent issue. The story records that

A powerful security force was already present to enforce law and order. A huge battalion armed with sticks surround the village in the evening. It was dark all around as there was

no electricity, as it happened to be load- shedding day. One day there is no light during day, the next day there is no light at night. All the men, young and old, were asked to come out in the street and stand in a queue with their hands on their heads. The strong one stepped out and said: ‘Those who say they don’t know the whereabouts of the old man are lying. Those who remain quiet are not cooperating with the authorities. Both of them are unpatriotic and will be dealt accordingly’ [4].

The power struggle between the armed forces and the non-governmental insurgent groups or sometimes the action committees have left the people of Manipur in despair clearly trapped between the forces. [6] Patricia Mukhim questions if “Manipur has been in the news for all the wrong reasons. ...Since 1988, this state has had to live with a draconian law called the Armed Forces Special Power Act which gives unfettered powers to security forces to arrest, interrogate and even eliminate suspected militants”. The common people have lost trust in the governance due to unresolved issues such as irregularities of hydroelectricity and various other developmental schemes post-independence until today. The problem of load shedding or interval blackouts can be seen in the above story which shows that the deep rooted mass resentment against the government and its failure to solve important issues for them.

Such political problems have given rise to a crucial cultural issue such as identity problem between Meiteis and Tribals. It has manifested in the form of violence, unrest and ethnic conflict between communities in the state. Folktales are one of the mediums to express the underlying issue of identity or territory or land and how it has caused an irreparable rift between Meiteis and Tribals. Meitei creation stories focus on building a pan Manipuri identity by bringing the community to the centre or lending it a divine origin to the creation of Meiteis. In one of the tales it is mentioned that “in the beginning, Manipur was under water” and “after the formation land Guru Atiya Sidaba, the Lord of the Universe entrusted God Kodim with the task of making mortal beings” [6]. In contrast to the Meitei tales, in most of the Tribal tales the creation either happens in human time or is not accorded a divine origin. For example, a Maring Tribe tale begins by stating that “there is a sacred cave at Mungsa situated near the eastern foot of the Heerok range in Kabow valley of Myanmar” [6]. In another Koirang tale titled Lord Kampinu, the territorial politics is evident when it says that “long long ago, there had no human habitation though there was vegetations and animals [6]. God Kampinu thought over the issue. He first created hills and then the valleys for Nagas and Meiteis to live, thereafter created the human beings” [6]. The difference in the tales sheds light on the burning issue of ethnic identity conflict in Manipur at present such as the divine origin of the Meitei stories can be associated with a fixed identity and Tribal identity being fluid. According to Pradip Phanjoubam,

One of the biggest problems in bridging the many fissures in the Manipur society has been the lack of inclusiveness of the Manipuri identity. The course of history has been one in which the Meitei valley dwellers dominated almost completely, so much so that the Manipuri identity has today come to be almost synonymous with the Meitei identity. Now

there are politically correct efforts to break this rigidity and broaden the base of this identity. But the identity warping has become so crystallised that these efforts that these efforts have not met with much success [5].

Another tale titled "Ita Thaomei" (My Dear Friend Lamp) is included in almost all the collection of folktales. This is the story of a clever old woman who used her intelligence to chase away a thief who had crept inside her hut. Earlier publications of the story follow a similar storyline whereas the latest publication includes criticism of the present economic condition of the state and brings in the ways in which corruption and poor judicial system have altered the society negatively. In the tale, a friend of the thief tries to make him understand that stealing or illegal hoardings "can be contagious and existence of even a minority of such people would be enough to bring misery to the masses. Disproportionate accumulation of wealth by few, and leaving the majority in scarcity, can distort the market and human relations" [4].

Although many critics would see colonialism, economic condition etc. as part of political or economic and not cultural history, one cannot deny that such political upheavals and economic conditions have had a great impact on the culture of a people, especially in a place like Manipur. In this story, the entry of communism into Manipur, the fascination it held for the people and its relationship with the common people are brought out, thereby justifying including it as part of cultural history. We might also add that writers such as Peter Burke encourages the inclusion of such political events and economic conditions into a study of cultural history.

In one of the tales titled "The Prince of Manipur", the colonial past and the freedom struggle in Manipur are highlighted although these are understated in many of the mainstream Indian history text books. Folktales thus become a medium to give tribute to the freedom fighters and also understand the colonial past effectively from the point of view of a marginalised community. The story begins by stating that "during the days of the British Raj, Manipur as was kingdom" and "there were continuous fights, imaginary and real, among the Tribal populations in the hills and the Hindu kings in the plains which are still argued about to this day" [4]. In addition to the problems during colonial era, the story repeatedly emphasises on the conflict between Tribals and Meiteis that have been analysed earlier.

The tale records the life of Irabot, the Meitei freedom fighter "who fell heart and soul in love with communist idea"; the story brings in the ways in which the Manipuri leaders were influenced by communist ideology [4]. N. Lokendra Singh points out that "in the early part of 1945, Irabot was allowed to enter Manipur on the ground of his mother-in-law's illness" and "no sooner did he reach Manipur, he assessed the socio- economic and political realities of the state" [7]. At that time Manipur was grappling with the after-effects of Second World War such as poverty, chaos and confusion among various political groups.

The people were not particularly favourable towards any of the parties as they did not trust the government or the movements at that time because of the failed development programmes and impoverishment. In the tale, the condition of the village had deteriorated due to wars and protests.

"He visited the villages to talk to the peasants and recruit people to fight. The village was cordoned. But it was too dark and there was no light. I think the British Raj is responsible for the electricity load shedding problem from which we are still suffering. Seven days a week, the electricity goes off now and then. Also, the soldiers could not trust the common people- they never do to this day. So they waited until the dawn to move in".

It shows the distrust of and the strained connection between the government and people and the fact that there is a reference made to the current situation draws attention to the need for a stable political situation in the state.

Older editions of the tale "Lai Khutsangbi" ("Long-Armed Demoness") follow a similar style of introduction e.g. "Once upon a time there lived a family" whereas the later edition introduces the demoness and hints at cultural differences between Meiteis and Tribals in the state: [5] "Nowadays, we burn the dead people, but it is said in the past we used to bury them. Some cultures still bury their dead ones. And there are others who keep the body on top of some sacred buildings as offerings to birds" (49). There is widespread debate on death rituals of the Meiteis that were practised before Hinduism was practised in the state whether the bodies were cremated or buried or disposed in the water bodies.

According to Rena Laisram During the Haya Chak or the first human age, the dead body was disposed off by throwing away in the open only to be taken by Khingpaingamba Thinungkhak, the king of Birds. The Disposal of dead by burial was introduced by King Moriya Phambalchain Haya Chak or second human age. The same Puya mentions the disposal of dead by fire which was started during the last human age. The Cheitharol Kumababa records that from the time of King Garibniwaz the Meiteis started the practice of cremation of dead by fire".

It is mentioned in the story that some cultures still practice burial and in Manipur; Meiteis are the only ones who cremate the dead bodies as a result of following the Hindu tradition.

In one of the new tales titled "Marrying Tanaubi", there is a reference to weight-lifting; the sport is famous in the state especially women weight lifters. The mother says, [5] "But no one listens to me. Is he getting any younger? You are like a friend to him. Why don't you persuade him to marry? Thabaton is such a nice girl, won gold in weightlifting. And he refused her" [4]. Currently weightlifting is one of the most popular sports in the state and the people of Manipur have always been fond of sports. V. Krishnaswamy's article on commonwealth games begins thus: "Tucked away in a far corner of the North-East, Manipur is among the smallest states in India, with a population of 2.7 million and land area of 22, 327 sq.km. Yet, as medals trickle into the Indian kitty at the 20th commonwealth games in Glasgow, the contribution of Manipuri stars is burnishing the reputation of the state as a sporting power". Notable female players such as N. Kunjarani Devi, Mary Kom, Sanjita Khumukcham etc have participated in various international competitions and have brought laurels to the country. The mother in the tale encourages her son to marry Thabaton and the weightlifter hints at the importance given by women to sports and subverts the stereotype of deglamourised portrayal of sportswomen in the society. The inclusion of the above

discussed tale in the recent publication of folktales is rather new to the world of Manipuri folklore as the people have begun to understand the importance of folklore as a carrier of cultural issues.

III. CONCLUSION

The inclusion of the above discussed tale in the recent publication of folktales is rather new to the world of Manipuri folklore as the people have begun to understand the importance of folklore as a carrier of cultural issues.

Folktales can thus be read as texts that incorporate the political and cultural history of the place that they emerge from. Both in their content and their publication, the tales can therefore be said to engage deeply with the cultural history of these places.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Yaisna Rajkumari wrote the paper, conducted the research and analysed the secondary sources. The author has approved the final version.

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