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Shri Biren's 'A Tangkhul Dog': A Subaltern Perspective

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Abstract:

The paper is a study of Nongthombam Shri Biren's 'A Tangkhul Dog' in the light of subaltern theory. Manipuri literature is embedded with rich indigenous culture and tradition of the state. With changes of time and influences from globalization there are sea changes from its earlier literature with the present literary scenario. Due to lack of exposure not much is known about the rich literary tradition of Manipur by the outside world. Manipur for over a decade's has witness series of atrocities and exploitation by the insurgency, clash between the ethnic groups and lack of support from the centre to bring about peace in the land. The miseries and woes of the valley people is less acknowledge by the center. Thus, creative writers are at constant war to preserve the rich tradition and culture and vigorously trying to have an identity in this world of identity crises. The paper attempted to analyze 'A Tangkhul Dog' as a representation of the subaltern attitude by the mainland India. "Tangkhul" here is one type of a dog breed in Manipur as well as an indigenous community name, but the reference in the paper is the type of dog breed.

Keywords: Subaltern, Manipuri, Insurgency, Meitei.

The paper '*Nongthombam Shri Biren's 'A Tangkhul Dog'*' is an attempt to study it from subaltern perspective. In the 1970s, subaltern began to denote the colonized peoples of the Indian subcontinent and described a new perspective of the history of an imperial colony as told from the point of view of the colonized rather than that of the colonizers.

The vocabulary.com defines subaltern as someone with a low ranking in a social, political, or other hierarchy. It can also mean someone who has been marginalized or oppressed. But the term is also used to describe someone who has no political or economic power, such as a poor person living under a dictatorship.

Manipur is going through a dark phase for the past few decades. Escalation of armed struggle in Manipur has made intense impact on contemporary Manipuri literature. Various arts form has plunged deep into this conflict by many older as well as new writers trying to explore the

distasteful reality, informed, shaped and hazy socio – economic condition played by the conflict. Even women poets and writers have attempted to examine contemporary life and society in a draconian tone. Questions of identity, freedom and status figure are prominently focus in many of these poets whose female sensibilities offer another dimension of social analysis and critique. A detailed study and analysis of Manipuri literature can provide crucial insights of the numerous shifts in the socio-political history of Manipur. Manipuri literature through the ages has felt the need to address crucial debates on the society's attempt to come to terms with the rapid changes that we witness today. The kind of indigenous cultural sabotage is taking place through ages and it is just taken for granted in the name of nation building and modernization. This is probably a reason why, in Manipur, some people and groups are up in arms fighting for pre- merger state, which off course I do not personally support but something need to be done. The result of cultural vandalism only breeds criminality, hatred and all things that are only bad. Manipur has been plagued by insurgency ever since it was formed in 1949. The fault lines that existed during colonial administration by the British got accentuated post-independence and the ethnic militias and severe infighting between Naga groups has torn apart Manipur. Several rebel groups have their bases in neighbouring Myanmar. There are foreign hands and indigenous people who are involved in breaking the state in parts.

The voices of the Manipuri people are like the subaltern voices unheard minority section to mainland Indian in terms of literature, culture and socio-political status. No doubt there are many writers who are able to assert their identity through their writing and made their presence felt in with the mainland literature but there is still a long way ahead. Anganghal (1892-1943), Chaoba (1896-1951) and Kamal (1899-1935)—the great triplex were the gleam of patriotism, national consciousness and reawakening and heralded a lyrical explosion in Manipuri literature. The trio inherited the genuine literary traditions of the country and was at the same time the master-builders of modern Manipuri literature. Many new younger generation writers also echoes the same tune their pioneer had echoes in their poetries lamenting for their motherland. The best they could do was expressed their views through writing the rich heritage of Manipuri culture and tradition. They remain a legend in Manipuri literature. Like the subaltern these writers tried to assert their identity through re-writing their own history. Writing becomes a strong weapon of documenting the untold stories of the unsung heroes and heroine of the state. The political scenario of Manipur has not changed much in past few decades, it has literally worsened. The political drama in Manipur is an aged old story; there is no hope with the new BJP government in Manipur. The indigenous people are more apprehensive now. The dual identity of state and nation still haunts the writers in Manipur for over 65 years after independence because of the isolation of the northeastern region from mainstream India. Though many writers accept the dominant Indian identity, they want to assert their indigenous language and culture on the national level.

This is not an easy time for scholars in Manipuri literature. Over the past years or so, many writers and scholars have tried their level best to assert a separate identity and made their

voice heard. I here recalled Spivak's essay 'Can the subaltern speak'. It has lingers in my mind when I started searching out what subaltern means. My answer is similar to Spivak. 'No' subaltern cannot speak, like that the Meities, the people of Manipur cannot speak. There is no voice in the center which comes from Manipur. It goes unnoticed and uncared. The best example to this is the AFSPA, 1958 peace crusader Irom Sharmila. She was on fast for the past 16 years and nobody heard her voice. This is in fact the longest hunger strike in the history of mankind. Her fight was unique and one of its kind. I am sure if she was from some metropolitan cities or from some mainland people, it would have been a different scenario altogether. But who literally care? Who is there to hear her story? The whole world is focus with Kashmir issue, and people are least bother about the north eastern part of India. There are atrocities and acute insurgencies issues going on from the day Manipur was merge to Independent India in 21st September 1949. There has been lot of protest, blockage, strike, bandh, killing of civilian by army personnel in the name of law and order. But woos and cries of poor mothers are unheard by the center. Manipur for the past 67 years is going through a dark phase both in political as well as in the literary front. Manipuri people feel doubly colonized once by the British and another by India in the name of democracy. India is in silence treatment with Manipur for the past 67 years and how long more it will take? , that's the question that haunt every individual in Manipur.

"A Tangkhul Dog" is a short poem of thirteen lines written by Shri Biren Singh. Here in this particular poem, the poet talks about a particular breed of indigenous dog in Manipur. The Tangkhul dog breed is found in Ukhrul district and is used extensively for hunting purposes. It is a courageous breed which corners bears, wild hogs and other dangerous wild animals in hunting trips. It has unique tracking abilities. The locale of the short poem is a construction site where heavy construction is going on. Men are constructing new road by pouring 'concrete chips in piles' not caring about the tender flower 'Kombeerei' (a local flower in Manipur) which 'got crushed under the boulders' that is growing beside the construction site. The poet is worried that the flower is being crushed under the boulders. Nobody seems to bother about the flower. People are carried away with building new roads and houses or symbolically in constructing a new nation. In the wake of construction a new nation certain basic human rights are violated by the center. The sensitivity of the indigenous issues is not kept into consideration.

With Urbanization in Manipur and elsewhere in India many indigenous heritage and culture was at stake. Where will the Meiteis go and plead their miseries and sorrows? The flower here is symbolic representation of the lives of the Meiteis. The construction men are busy construction new India, better India at the cause of crushing many indigenous lives, its culture and tradition by the huge machinery. But in the wake to build new they crush the existing old ones. Thus, creating a huge gap between the mainland and the indigenous people of Manipur and creating confusion to the people. Allowing loops holes to seeps inside the existing culture and tradition of the indigenous state.

'History from below' as it is stated in the subaltern theory, how far is it applicable in north east specially Manipur. There is no such comprehensive history about the contribution made by the Meiteis in history of India. There are few people who know the history of Manipur. Many people are still confused with our identity. Of and on there is news about discrimination of north eastern people when they go to other part of the country. They don't seem to treat Manipuri like a normal Indian. A Manipuri stepping outside the zone of north east has to continuously define their identity and have to proof that they are authentic Indian like the rest. We are not free in our own country and there is a tremendous lack of belonging in India. The sense of the 'other' and unwanted is deeply rooted in the psyche of the Meiteis. Manipuri's are always at the receiving end from the 'other' Indians.

The lines from the second paragraph of the same poem:

The construction workers did not pay a heed,
instead the roller ran over it.
The driver with grime and sweat
showing teeth dirty
burst into laughter
harsh and deadly.
A huge Tangkhul dog sitting nearby
howled aloud, broken-hearted. (6-13)

The poem beautifully depicted the mental state and social scenario of Manipur. The dog kept on barking but nobody pay heed to it. And how long will it howl, obviously it will get tired and stop by its own. The year 1891 is important in the political history of Manipur. The Manipuri fought their last battle of independence against the British at Khongjom war 1891 and with this war Manipur came under the domination of the British Raj. After 58 years under the brutal rule of British, Manipur was once again under the hand of Indian. Manipur was merged with the Dominion of India in October 1949. The Merger destroyed both autonomy and democracy of Manipur and brought a bureaucratic Central rule under a Chief Commissioner. This was, indeed, the continuation of the colonial rule, a mere substitution of the white men by the brown sahibs of the Government of India. This was a most unfortunate political turn over in the modern history of Manipur which was as catastrophic as the British conquest of Manipur of 1891 in its consequences. It's been 67 years since then, the situation have not changed. It's bad to worse; the people are deprived of basic human rights.

Thus, the pathetic situation is that the center is watching and taking its own time to solve insurgency and border conflict between Naga and Manipur. Actually we are at the receiving end in both the cases. In the late 1940s there was a massive revolution strongly emphasized for a unity of all the down trodden people of Manipur. As the world is developing Manipur also in terms of construction, there are few obvious changes that cannot be ignore but the core issue of identity crises remains the same. The problems have become more acute and intense than before.

The Manipuri felt marginalized at the hands of other mainland people like the subaltern with ‘no political or economic power, such as a poor person living under a dictatorship’ as define in volcabulary.com. The state has seen less economic growth due to poor connectivity with the other parts of India. There many tribal living in the hills where there is no facility of electricity and hygiene food in this digital world. In terms of political rights, there is no freedom of expression. The best example is the historic naked protest on 15 July 2004, by twelve middle mothers in front of the Kangla Fort under the banner ‘Indian Army Rape Us’ shook the whole world but the result is the same , left unheard.

Hegemonic attitude is one core issue that is prevailing between the north east and the mainland. There are very few people from Manipur who are holding position in the center. There is a bitter feeling towards the center by majority of the people in Manipur. The feeling of second class treatment; a sense of belonging is not felt by many. Writers and activist have expressed their feeling through their creative works. Yet, like the ‘Kombeerei’ in the poem is crushed and left unattended. The laughter of the ‘men with dirty teeth’ is the dirty politics played by center. The Meiteis are in true sense a subaltern. And yes, Subaltern cannot speak. The Meiteis cannot speak. The present situation of the national identity in Manipur is a big question. The center is trying its level best by integrating regional peculiarities within the lager structure of a umbrella term called ‘India’. The changes and events occurring in different parts of the on her mainland is also having an impact on the socio-economic situation in Manipur, but the core issue stills remains the same. Irom Sharmila the peace crusader has broken her fast on 9 August 2016, a clear sign that she has lost faith in the system, ultimately knew that nobody is going to hear her voice. The writers are voicing out to break the hegemonic rule by the dominant state at the center. In the past few years there has been quite a resistance from all walks of life. There are many civil bodies trying to assert the unique identity of Manipur. Blaming only the center will not be ideal, since there are self-centered foolish individual try to gain out of the conflict between the center and Manipur. This type of middle man politic is typical of a hegemonic society trying to create a huge gap of misunderstanding among the people.

A beautiful amalgamation of pre-Hinduism myths and Hinduism myths and indigenous myth is at the verge of extinction in Manipuri culture if utter most care is not taken. India for the past 67 years is silence and it’s high time the people of Manipur get its due. This study thus draws upon Subaltern attitudes by the mainland people especially the center towards the north eastern state. That includes gender, race, and class in the analysis, asking how, in what ways, and to what effect these signifiers of exclusion and domination work within representation of Meitei at the larger context. The concern here is not with the outcome of representation on people, but of the effect of class, race and gender and indigeneity on representation of the Meitei. However, to change the mindset of mainland people has long way to go. Meiteis have been treated as second-class citizens since the inception of this country. Forcibly made to be part of independent India and treating like a second class citizen to the other part of India, Meiteis have never been

treated as completely equal to Indian. Stereotyping of the north east as barbaric, lazy, stupid, foolish, cowardly, submissive, irresponsible, childish, violent, sub-human, and animal-like, are rampant in today's society. The poem 'A Tangkhul Dog's' rightly taken for the study to prove the subaltern attitude by the mainland India. The dual identity one of indigenous another to assimilate the new found Indian identity and the 'silent' treatment from the center have always been a problem which hindrance the development of Manipur. The only solution is through political and effective dialogue between the center and Manipur which ultimately will bring equal treatment and status between Manipur and the rest mainland India

About the poet:

Sahitya Ratna , Late Nongthombam Shri Biren, is Sahitya Akademi awardee, a noted poet of Manipur, playwright and short story writer passed away on December 29, 2011. Shri Biren quickly became an inspiration for many younger poets in the late 60s. In spite of his physical obstacle serious debilitating illness, Parkinsonism, he has never stopped his love for arts. He was a rare example of a writer who started writing since very young and he did not stop till his last days of 69 years of his age. His works manifested closely related to his stages of life. The particular poem 'A Tangkhul Dog' was written when the poet was doing his under graduation. It was written around 1964-65 and was published after he became a teacher at the D.M. College in one of the college magazine. The poem is taught in the syllabus of Manipuri literature and was disused by many expert in Seminar and Conferences held in Manipur.

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