

My intention here is to present a slice of contemporary Manipuri Poetry and a brief historical background would be relevant. Manipur was a part of the 'forgotten theatre' of the Second World War, and the seeds of modern Manipuri Poetry were perhaps sown amidst the ravages of the Great War. Hjam Irabat, the Socialist poet, is considered a trail-blazer because of his revolutionary language and subject matter ('Vulture aeroplanes are on the wing/ Wolf siren is hooting/ It's quite a scene') which constituted a break with the high romantic poetry written by Chaoba and Kamal. A one-time princely kingdom with visions of grandeur, which fell into the clutches of the British colonial regime and ultimately freed, only to become a part of the Indian Union under dubious circumstances, Manipur became just another corrupt and disillusioned state under the new dispensation. After the trauma of World War II, there were distinct transformations in the political and social life of this erstwhile feudal state. Shared areas of experience for many would include loss of traditional values in human affairs, the tyranny of those who wield economic and political power, rootlessness, dispossession, fragmentation of home and family, urbanization, and, interestingly, the disturbing consequence of the struggles of those who cherish freedom in a perceived neo-colonial regime, and the misgivings of those who felt that they were losing their identity and culture.

Poets began responding to the altered circumstances by breaking with their romantic predecessors and choosing a diction which will suit the times. They became more inward-looking and, consequently, tried to adapt the world to themselves by adopting ironic and 'alienated' stances. In short, these modernist Manipuri poets fashioned a skeptical post-Independence poetics in which irony, satire and detachment or confrontation became the prime means of self-discovery. The new poetry is distinguished by a continuous probing into the social condition and the fractured psyche of modern Manipur. It was the period when Nehruvian optimism, induced by a promised 'tryst with destiny', was giving way to a darker, more somber, and questioning mood that gradually turned into deep disillusionment with the values on which a modern state had been founded.

The other notable architect of Modern Manipuri Poetry is undoubtedly E. Nilakanta, the scholar-poet, who began writing in the 1940s. In spite of his idealistic slant, Nilakanta employed realistic language ('Manipur, I can't help being worried about you') and was an intense witness of shifting realities. L. Samarendra is another outstanding poet with his matter-of-fact colloquial language, tongue-in-cheek humour, and biting satire. His vision is also largely humanist.

But it was during the early seventies that a group of young poets tried to accomplish something radical with a poetic agenda in mind. They were Bohemian in their outlook,

indecorous, and deliberately tried to shock their readers and mocked everything sacrosanct or sedate. Shri Biren is considered the leader of this new school. R. K. Madhubir is another prominent poet of this group. Then in 1974, Ranjit W., Thangjam Ibopishak and Y. Ibomcha who called themselves 'angry young poets' published an anthology titled Challenge in two volumes. Of this anthology a leading critic wrote: 'Their poems are like sudden bellows by vulgar young men in the dead of night. If you believe that whatever you say should be uttered without inhibitions and regurgitated like vomit, it stinks. That cannot be new art...' He accused them of being shallow, prejudiced and limited in their vision but grudgingly acknowledged their boldness. It was also during the 1970s that Manipuri poets like Brajeshwar and Kheiruddin from Assam published their own collections and joined the modernist bandwagon.

Things went quiet for a while until the publication of an anthology titled Storm that came blowing in '70 in 1979. The poets of this generation are Bhubonsana, M. Barkanya, Chetan Thongam, Hemchandra and others who avoided the excesses of the Angry Young Poet and used subtle imagery and appropriate symbols with a serious intent. Around this time Shahid Chaudhury, Ilabanta, Biswanath, Kalenjao and other young poets made themselves heard from Cachar, Assam. Thus the post-Angry Young Poet years saw a broadening of perspective and deepening of vision.

The 80s and 90s heard new voices who tried to grapple with the paradoxical worlds that surrounded them. Women's issues were taken up in earnest although there are no avowed feminists. There are many practicing poets of this generation which would include Memchoubi, Lanchenba Meitei, Birendrajit Naorem, Saratchand Thiyam, Raghu Leishangthem, Thoudam Netrajit, Doneshwar Konsam, Gambhini (Tripura), Naorem Bidyasagar (Cachar) and others; too many to be named here.

Manipuri poetry seems to be at the crossroads now. New volumes are being published each year and the churning of the seas continues with the hope that 'the great poem' will come. Many poets seem to be preoccupied with insistent realities such as ethnic violence, corruption, extortion, terrorism, oppression and drug addiction. As a result, experimentation seems to have slowed down a little. While it may not make him or her a better writer, living with the menace of the gun does not permit the Manipuri poet to indulge in verbal wizardry or woolly aesthetics, but is a constant reminder that the poet must perforce master 'the art of witness'. This is an extremely difficult task reminiscent of Camus's mission reserved for the writer: 'Whatever our personal weaknesses may be, the nobility of our craft will always be rooted in two commitments, difficult to maintain: the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance to oppression.' In contemporary Manipuri poetry, there is a predominance of images of 'bullets', 'blood', 'mother', the colour 'red' and, paradoxically, 'flowers' too. A poet from Imphal told me of how they've been

honing 'the poetry of survival' with guns pressed to both temples: the gun of revolution and the gun of the state. Hardly anyone writes romantic verse or speaks about disturbing aspects of sexuality or anything 'carnal'. There also seems to be a dearth of the confessional or the autobiographical, and an impersonal, detached mannerism seems to be the norm. Is it because contemporary Manipuri poets are absorbed in writing 'the poetry of survival'? All this has resulted in criticism that contemporary Manipuri poetry is hemmed in by extreme realism. There is, of course, a danger of the images listed above becoming hackneyed. And maybe poets should try to strike that fine balance between realism and reflection.

But poets also have to write about the here and now. And writing about it lends a sense of immediacy and vividness to their poetry. This is perhaps what constitutes 'the poetry of witness.' Thankfully, a few fine poets have moved beyond merely recording events and seem to have internalized the complex conflict between themselves and the milieu. In Manipur, when the reality becomes oppressive, these poets frequently seek refuge in absurdist irony often directed towards oneself, in parody, and in satire. It is a rejection by these poets of the extreme realism I've mentioned; they in turn, also reveal an inclination towards the surreal. In Manipuri poet Y. Ibomcha's 'Story of a Dream', murderous bullets turn into luscious fruits, and in Thangjam Ibopishak's 'I Want to be killed by an Indian Bullet', terrorists visit his home in the guise of the five elements. Ibopishak (like Milosz who didn't want to 'kiss' the wounds of his people in order to avoid making them 'holy') also wrote:

**Manipur,
People call you 'mother'
Let me also call you 'mother', please.
But I cannot die for you!**

....

**If anyone has to die, let those die
Who suck your resources dry
Deceiving stealing intimidating
Amassing riches for seven generations
Let them die for you.
Why should I die?**

I wouldn't claim that contemporary Manipuri poetry is as 'sophisticated' as Bengali or even Assamese poetry is, or 'rooted' as Kokborok poetry of Tripura is with its sense of genuine community. As regards the achievement of contemporary Manipuri poetry, let readers judge for themselves from the poems included in this section.