



Culture and Identity in the Works of Selected Manipuri Poets from Bangladesh

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Abstract:

The Manipuri or Meetei community forms one of the ethnic minorities in Bangladesh. The forefathers of these people migrated from the northeastern Indian state of Manipur to the present day Bangladesh mainly during the early part of the nineteenth century due to political conflicts. In the course of two hundred years, these people have come to identify themselves as Bangladeshis while at the same time maintaining and preserving their unique linguistic and cultural identities almost intact. This leads to the formation of a unique Bangladeshi Manipuri identity which has found a strong expression in literature. In the light of this idea, the present papers seek to examine the works of two Bangladeshi Manipuri poets, A. K. Sheram and Hamom Pramod, and appreciate their concern with culture and identity. Especially, how they negotiate their Manipuri identity with the Bangladeshi identity amid the challenges exerted by linguistic and cultural factors will form the basis of the paper.

Keywords: Manipur, Meeteis, Bangladesh, Identity, Language.

Introduction:

The partition of India in 1947 is one of the most cataclysmic events in the history of the world in general and South Asia in particular. Not only did the partition impact international borders but it changed peoples' lives and cultures in innumerable ways. Especially, the event led to the re-shaping and re-framing of political identities of different populations in India including the Northeastern states. The Meitei/Meetei (Manipuri) community of northeast India is one among many of those communities affected by the 1947 Sylhet Referendum and the subsequent separation of Sylhet from India. The Manipuri community which migrated to Sylhet from Manipur mainly in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries due to political factors were transformed into Pakistani citizens due to the partition. Later, with the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 they became Bangladeshis. These political and historical events have had a deep-seated impact on the collective psyche of Bangladeshi Meetei populations, making them rethink about "home" and identity.

Thus, the Manipuri literary works produced from Bangladesh are mainly concerned with these complex and problematic concepts in a bid to recover a marginalised voice of this microscopic community which has remained largely unheard amidst the mainstream partition narratives. The present paper aims at examining the crisis of identity and culture of the Bangladeshi Manipuri community through a reading of selected Manipuri poems from Bangladesh. Works of two Bangladeshi Manipuri poets, namely A. K. Sheram and Hamom Promud will be studied and analysed for this purpose. Especially, how they negotiate their Manipuri identity with the Bangladeshi identity amid the challenges exerted by linguistic and cultural factors will form the basis of the paper.

The Manipuri Community in Bangladesh:

The first recorded instance of Manipuris migrating to the present day Bangladesh was in 1606 during the reign of king Khagemba in Manipur when a royal prince named Sanongba revolted against the king and left his motherland accompanied by his followers who settled in parts of the neighbouring states of Cachar and Sylhet (Khuman 13). However, it is widely believed that the largest migration of Manipuris to the present day Bangladesh took place during the seven years of Burmese rule in Manipur, known as the “seven year devastation,” from 1819 to 1826. A large number of Manipuris had to leave their homeland and take shelter in the Sylhet region of the present-day Bangladesh (Sheram, “The Manipuri”) whose descendants have come to form the Bangladeshi Manipuri community in the course of time.

Study of Selected Bangladeshi Manipuri Poems of A. K. Sheram and Hamom Promud:

It may be said that Bangladeshi Manipuri literature is still in its days of early infancy. As such, the number of writers in the oeuvre of this literature is very few. Mainly, it was only after the 1971 Liberation War and the upsurge of linguistic nationalism in Bangladesh that the Manipuris living there also started to feel seriously about their cultural and linguistic identity. The Liberation War and the formation of Bangladesh as an ideal abode for mother-language lovers made the Manipuris rethink about their place in the land of Bengali speakers. Gradually, there arose a sense of literary consciousness in them leading to the rise of Bangladeshi Manipuri literature.

Among all the genres, poetry is perhaps the most popular medium of literary expression for the Bangladeshi Manipuris. This is evidenced by the publication of more number of poems in comparison to other genres in this body of literature. Even then, the number of Bangladeshi Manipuri poets is still very less. Among them, two names stand out as the prominent voices of Bangladesh Manipuris— A. K. Sheram and Hamom Promud. The paper will engage with a few selected poems of these two writers and try to find in them a sense of diasporic consciousness.

A. K. Sheram is one of the leading Manipuri poets from Bangladesh who writes in both Manipuri and Bengali languages. Apart from being a poet he is also engaged with various social works and has been involved in developmental projects concerning the Bangladeshi Manipuri community. His poetry is informed by a sense of anxiety and concern for his ancestral homeland, Manipur. One notes a sense of longing and love for Manipur in his poetry which is often characterised by a touch of pathos and melancholy owing to an identity crisis. In

his poem, “Imagi Numit” (“Mother’s Day”), Sheram reflects upon the plight of his ancestral homeland in the recent times due to the political turmoil and ethnic clashes. He laments:

Mother!

O dear mother, your delicate,

Loving body is being torn apart

Into bits, in a bid to claim authority

By those whom you have dearly loved as your own children.

(Translated from Manipuri, Sheram, “Imagi Numit”)

Here, Sheram focusses on the loss of peace and rising violence in Manipur in the recent times. With a typical diasporic consciousness Sheram shows his deep-rootedness in his ancestral homeland that very much remains a part of his existence despite the physical distance. According to Robin Cohen, one of the features of a diasporic community is the nurturing of “a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history, suffering and achievements” (17). This is exemplified in the poem “Imagi Numit” (“Mother’s Day”) where Sheram speaks of commitment to his homeland which reels under the pressure of socio-political strife. He invokes the memory of the Patriots of the famous Anglo-Manipur war of 1891 while showing his love for his ancestral land. He says:

"But mother, do not panic!

Lakhs of your true sons still exist

Whose veins reverberate with the sacred blood of ancestors.

When need comes, thousands of your brave sons

Will stand up for you like Paona, Chinglensana."

(Translated from Manipuri, Sheram, “Imagi Numit”)

Sheram’s sense of historicity is noted in these lines. His ethnic and historical sense makes him relate to the two hundred year old history of his people’s anti-colonial war. Here, an element of strong patriotism is noticed in his poem. The folk memories of Manipur as an independent Southeast nation of the pre-British days which every Bangladeshi Manipuri cherishes in their hearts resonate in these lines.

A poet committed to the development of his culture and language, Sheram expresses his individual identity in relation to the larger Manipuri identity. His concern for Manipuri language comes from a fear and anxiety of losing its relevance in the context of contemporary Bangladeshi society. There is a clear evidence of a cultural angst in his poetry which is mainly a result of his linguistic and cultural minority in Bangladesh. One poem where this cultural angst is explicitly expressed is the poem, “Longi Awaba” (“Language in Crisis”) where he narrates how it feels to be a member of a linguistic minority community. He writes:

I speak in my own language,

Which is familiar to none.

No one hears the cries of my inner soul,

No one knows the secret tale of my angst.

Despite living among the people of the world.

I am alone, utterly alone!

(Translated from Manipuri, Sheram, “Longi Awaba” 22)

Sheram shares the loneliness of a person whose mother tongue is unintelligible and unknown to the people of the mainstream society of Bengali speakers. The lines express his longing to connect to the world and communicate his linguistic anxiety which remains unheard amidst the voices of the majority.

Sheram's poetry, in this way, seeks to represent the concerns and internal conflicts experienced by the members of a socio-linguistically microscopic community. At the same time, his poems serve as a kind of warning to his own people to become conscious about protecting the Manipuri identity in Bangladesh and work towards the collective progress of the community before it is too late.

Another noteworthy Manipuri poet from Bangladesh is Hamom Promud. He can be considered as a visionary poet whose works contain elements of symbolism and post-modernism. His poems often contain in them a dark humour that exhibits the modern-day realities of the urban world. In his poem "Manunggee Wari" ("Internal Matters"), the speaker presents the dark side of Manipuri youths' lives in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. We see a dual consciousness in the speaker who tries to negotiate, with a sarcastic tone, his Manipuri ethnic identity with the rough city culture of Dhaka. He says:

"In Bangla's capital, We proud Meiteis,
Ten of us, are Boastful Dhakaiaans.
Every moment we see killings, beatings, punchings
But how can we say we don't like the capital?"

(Translated from Manipuri, Promud 38)

The speaker hints at an implicit sense of regret in these lines and suggests how Meitei youths of Dhaka have come to compromise with the Meitei cultural values and adopted a morally degraded urban lifestyle. In a broader perspective also, the poem touches upon the universal conflict between tradition and modernity. Similarly, in another poem titled "Wakat Chebang" ("The Complaint Letter"), the speaker laments the loss of qualities like bravery and courage which are traditionally associated with the Manipuri community. The poem is imbued with a sense of patriotic fervour and the impact of the loss of societal values on the minds of a conscious person who thinks of their traditional heritage. He says:

"Naturally brave Meitei youths
Are reeling in the wilderness;
They grope for pleasure in obnoxious places
Just like an ox that likes garbage.
How many centuries more before you return to your senses!"

(Translated from Manipuri, Promud 42)

The last line here is deeply meaningful. It asks a question about the future course of the Manipuri community in Bangladesh. At a deeper level, the poem resonates with a sense of longing for an idealistic existence which, unfortunately, is not found in his present state of life.

Promud's love and concern for his ancestral homeland, Manipur, becomes explicitly evident in his three poems together titled "Meitei Leipak Manipur Ningshinglubada Ikhida Sheireng Khara" ("A Few Poems Written on Remembering the land of Meiteis, Manipur"). In the first poem, the speaker emphasises the pangs of diasporic identity which has become a lived reality of Manipuris in Bangladesh. He says:

Oh! Manipur, the land of Meiteis,
 An unbearable fire burns inside my heart

 For you, dear Manipur, the land of Meiteis
 I also do have some duties to perform.

(Translated from Manipuri, Promud 43)

Robin Cohen opines that a diasporic community idealises “the real or imagined ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity” (17). This idea is clearly exemplified in these lines where the speaker talks about his responsibility towards his ancestral homeland.

According to William Safran, diasporic groups always continue to relate to their homeland and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are the central basis of such a relationship (Cohen 6). This view is highlighted in the second poem of Promud’s collection of three poems, where he mentions:

As electron, neutron and proton are inseparable,
 You and I must not forget each other—my dear Meitei Leipak.

(Translated from Manipuri, Promud 43)

In a hyperbolic statement, the connectedness between Bangladeshi Manipuris and Manipur is elevated to the level of physical science here. This represents the sense of deep-rooted affinity that Bangladeshi Manipuris feel with their ancestral homeland.

Conclusion:

The Manipuris today form a significant diasporic group in Bangladesh. Despite their ethno-linguistic difference from the majority Bengalis, the Manipuris have adapted themselves quite well to their hostland which has in the passage of time assumed the role of a new home away from home. Their present political identity is clearly a result of the Partition of 1947 which is evidenced by their emotional and cultural ties with Manipur. Even now, Manipuris living in Bangladesh strictly adhere to their culture and language and try to resist hybridisation as much as possible. It may be mentioned that had there been no Partition, Sylhet would have been a part of India and the Manipuris living there would have been Indian citizens. Thus, the poems discussed in the present paper are, on the whole, an outcome of the physical and political distance from Manipur felt by the Bangladeshi Manipuri community at large. The poems of A. K. Sheram and Hamom Promud, in that sense, have tried to address the wide-ranging impact of the Partition from the perspective of a minority group whose voices have largely gone unheard amid the mainstream Partition narratives.

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