

‘SOCIAL CHANGE IN MANIPUR IN THE POEMS OF KHWAIRAKPAM CHAOBA’

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ABSTRACT

Resulting from a number of internal and external factors such as the advent of new religious cult viz., Hinduism in the state, establishment of British colonial rule (1891 – 1947), introduction and development of modern western education in the valley as well as hill areas, and the outbreak of the second world war (1939 – 1945) Manipuri Society underwent changes during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Moreover, the influence of Bengali language had extended its dominating influence over all the cultural, educational, administrative and other social aspects of the state during the early parts of the twentieth century though the language had already made inroads into the country since the reign of King Garibniwaj (1709 – 1748). With the emergence of Indian Renaissance in Bengal in the 19th century, new India began enjoying a new life and gradually such a movement made its advent in Manipur by the beginning of the 20th century. With the efforts of many young enthusiastic youths who were enlightened with modern education, remarkable changes in the field of education, politics art literature, language etc. began to evolve in the state. Among them Khwairakpam Chaoba (1896 – 1950), one of the gigantic figures in the literary scenario of Manipuri literature occupies an un-formidable place and such types of social problems that predominated in the then society are shown in his collection of poems, “Thainagi Leirang” which were published in the journals of the period such as Yaikairol, etc.

Key words: *Hinduism, colonial period, inroads, Renaissance, Scenario.*

INTRODUCTION

The period from the middle half of the 19th century up to the second half of the 20th century has been known as the era of the Modernism in the European society because of the tremendous changes in all aspects of European society. It was a period which saw a great impact caused by the Industrial Revolution and its impact on

the European society and various regions of Asia (Priyobarta: 2007). However, such changes had its dark side also. In fact, this period also produced certain backlashes in the form of cold war, political tussles and imperialistic designs. Resulting from the tussles in various aspects there were also problems in the form of communalism, social tensions and economic crisis. (Priyobarta op.cit.).

The State of Manipur a hilly region in the north-eastern corner of India also witnessed colonial attitude of the British. It also strongly felt the impact of the World War II (1939 – 1945). Such things in turn, brought about changes in various spheres of the state– social, political, economic, culture and what not. Thus, the old landscape based on traditional practices, values, norms, folkways and conceptions were being replaced by new ones. Corruption, unemployment and other evil practices started acting as an hydra to swallow the traditional values, norms and other social practices of the Manipuris. As a result, there was a clash between the traditional outlook and the problems created by modernism. All these problems had been engraved in the works of the young and enthusiastic poets emerged in the early parts of the twentieth century. The poets never failed to expose all these conflicts between traditional practices and modernism (Tombi and Ibohanbi). In short, all the poets felt such a drastic-changes which was created by external influences from India, Europe and America.

METHODS AND MATERIALS:

This study of mine is not a literary criticism but a humble attempt to study the relationship between literature and society through historical perspectives. For this, an interdisciplinary method has been adopted for obtaining scientific conclusion. The research work also mainly based on books, seminar papers, early journals, souvenirs etc.

DISCUSSION:

In the realm of poetry Khwairakpam Chaoba (1896 – 1950) occupies an unformidable place amongst the gigantic figures in the literary scene of Manipuri literature. He used legends, folklores, historical sources, etc. to show his contemporary Manipur society. Various types of social problems that predominated in the then existing society were shown in his collection of poems *Thainagi Leirang* and journals like *Yakairol*, *Manipuri Sahitya Parishad Patrika* and periodicals circulated in the first half of the 20th century (Prafullo: 1996) Rather than this, there are the expositions of love for the beautiful aspects of nature too in his poetic works (Dinamani: 1992)

Chaoba was a poet who sincerely loved his mother tongue and took his best responsibility to develop his native language and literature even by trying to sing *Khubak Eshei* (Palm clapping song) in Manipuri language.

Grown up in the colonial kingdom of Manipur, this poet felt suffocated to see his motherland under the British yoke. He was also disheartened to find the state of Manipuri language and literature suppressed by other developed languages and literature of India and Europe. The poet lamented for the colonial status of his motherland under the British regime although it had its glorious past. Thus, he writes in his poem *Meitei Kabi* (Meitei Poet) (Prafullo, op, cit)

“As Blooming flowers of the bush
with non to smell,
fall in vain
As hidden pearls
with non to see
Shine in vain
Walled with Mountains
Guarded by Hill-people
Manipur, the Golden land
Glittered in vain
Bloomed in vain
With non to know [Translation]

In this way, the poet described the heart-breaking condition of his motherland where the language and script of the country had been modified by the colonial rule of the British. With the arrival of the British, western education started spreading in this State and a stage also came when the native Meitei script started disappearing with the enforcement of books written in Bengali script. Not only this, customary festivals, religious prayers, etc. related with religio-cultural activities of the Meiteis were also colored with *Bengaliphobia*. All songs were sung in Bengali language. Songs related with the Vaishnava religion replaced the songs and hymns of the Meitei religion. In Chaoba’s words, “Everyone knows how far the verses of Vaishnava religion terrified the Meities and how the early folk songs endured by veiling”. (Ibid)

On the other side, the poet also described the inexhaustible treasure of Manipuri literature and language. He had all praise for Manipur literature in his various literary works. According to *Chaoba*, Manipuri language and literature almost acted as a huge granary which was not lacking in various literary elements although this community had faced ups and downs of life due to external aggression from the days of yore.

He further stated that the Meiteis were never failing in writing several Puyas (ancient sacred texts) like *Thebaron and Apokpalon* even in the midst of battle smoke. Even after the influence of the Hinduism, the Manipuri scholars and Pandits retold or translated *Vaishnava* oriented books like the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and Sanamanik in their own mother tongue. But the new cult used to go hand in glove with the traditional practices including religion of the pre-Vaishnavite religion. In other words, there was no shortage of traditional culture-oriented ingredients in *Khulang Eshei* (folk song), *Wari* (Story), *Thabal Chongbi* ((moonlit night dance) etc. (ibid) The tireless hope of the poet was that by making and endless effort in mingling the beautiful thought and idealism of the outsiders with the rich heritage of Manipur one day or other *Meiteilon* or Manipuri language would come up to the status of the developed languages of India like *Tamil, Telegu* and others. This view is well expressed in his poem *Meitei Kabi Lakkhini (Meitei Poet Will Emerge)*. Here, the poet writes:

“That it’s a poor language
The ignorant says
Meitei Kavi will emerge”. [ibid]

However, the poet never fails to look into the fast changing Manipuri society in response to external influences caused by *westernisation* and *modernisation*. *Modernisation* of course brought development in the field of education, literature, religious matters, art and culture. Such images of social changes are portrayed in Chaoba’s poem *Ningkhair, Esheetpa Nipa Amagi Awaba Dasha*. A few lines of the poem translated by L. Damodar Singh run in the following manner:

“Come and mend, mend it, all disintegrate
The very centre of the wall of letters first breaches.
Plays, music, all have drifted away
stop it if you can, all have been overflowed!
Raising both his arms, shedding tears of love
His body bent by the torrents, cried the baler!
Better break the bund, O hapless baler!
Let the on-rushing stream meet the vast expanse
who will stop the strong current of time?
The old yielding place to the new, it’s the law of the nature
Sartorial fashion changes, hair style alters what else remain?
Blocking the rest, what will you gain!

(Shift the grain from the chaff, why worry?) [Chaoba: 1931]

Here, the poet showed as to how the forceful current of change flew powerfully through art, culture and literature of the Manipuris. The period as well as saw a great change in the mind set of the educated Manipuris. Change, either progress or decline is a failure of human society (Kamei: 2003). Social change may be defined as the process which discernible significant attractions in the structure and functioning of the particular social system (Kuppuswami: 1979). Social change is possible only when there is a shift in social structure, transformation in social institutions and alteration in social norms, values and folk ways (Lokendra: 1989) Every social change essentially involves a human aspects. Such changes could be witnessed in various cultural practices and activities including dress and costume, ornaments, hair style and family life style. The youth of that time discarded their traditional hair style and adopted the *Dhaka* hair cut as something new. This new trend began to replace the old with the arrival of the Meitei youths who were educated at Dhaka (now in Bangladesh). Here, the poet expressed his view that none could stop the drastic changes of the society. However, he warned in his poems that appropriate steps were to be taken to choose the good ones and discard the inappropriate and evil ones.

Chaoba also felt all these changes which were taking place in other works of the life of the Manipuris – more particularly in the economic scenario of the State. Hence, the altering economic system with its forceful impact on the life of the Manipuri was the central theme depicted by the Poet in his various poems. In this situation, the poet sterilized in his poem *Babugi Dasa* (The misfortune of the Babu) the steady rise in prices and the decreasing value of money and the wasteful condition of the prodigal government employees who spent their monthly salary without looking into their family income. Here, we have a translation work from the poem *Babugi Dasa* (The misfortune of the Babu):

“Meitei Babu, trash at home
 What are you thinking of?
 Tomorrow, first day of the month
 Today, Month close.
 How come, Babu’s misfortune
 How to watch, with this eye?
 ...
 On getting, wants to watch (the pay)
 More dreadful to get
 To spend, Thousands,

Two went, Four broke.
 Twenty, yes sure.
 Why gloomy, borrow fifty.
 First day of the month, is there". [Prafullo, op.cit]

In one sense, this poem is the vivid portrayal of the Meitei way of house-keeping. Generally, according to the poet, the Meiteis had no financial discipline in the management of their household affairs. Such thing were well reflected in his poem *Houjik Karam Touba* (What shall be done now). Here the poet described in details the life style of the Meiteis who had earned money by doing business and by taking contract works. The businessmen and contractors led the life style of *Babu* in dress, meals, drinks, etc. of the western society without looking into their financial matters. The family members of these people familiarized themselves with the luxurious life style of the west. This eventually led them to disastrous end. When the Second World War came to an end they became confused and bewildered by not having the means of earning after the war. This is reflected in his poem *Houjik Karam Touba*. To make the point more clear, a few lines from this poem is given in English version:

“In ignorance of such consequence,
 Have become a bottle addict.
 If not Capstain, can't enjoy
 The taste of smoking.
 Have made the wife addicted to,
 Wearing of gold bar.
 For a pace's stroll,
 Have learnt to park.
 Some-children have also learnt
 Having dusk snacks at hotels in the evening
 Loving daughter is able
 To choose films
 War is ended, we are ended
 We have become zero". [Ibid]

Thus, the good and bad sides of the changing Manipuri society are beautifully marked out in these poems of this writer.

Chaoba had a critical eye on the educational changes of the Manipur society. Though there had been several changes in the field of education under the influences of western education in Manipur with the establishment of a number of primary schools and high schools, some educated sections of the State talked endlessly like birds quarrelling among themselves for the additional establishment of educational institutes for higher studies without looking into the reality of the role of modern education in the Manipuri society. This is shown in his poem *Basanti Debating Club*. An English version of the poem goes in the following manner:

“Co-co- College, Kya Matlab establishment
 The angry birds shout with vibration
 Let’s set up, set up, set up a College
 Voted at last, to set up a College
 ...
 O time, even birds have reached this stage
 When will Meitei come at par with others.” [Ibid]

Thus, from the pen of Kavi Chaoba who is generally regarded as a romantic poet, different facts of the Manipuri society are delineated, shown and described in detail.

CONCLUSION:

Being a pioneer of modern Manipuri poet Kavi Khwairakpam Chaoba showing an intense effect of his emotion, imagination and vision did not lose himself only to the beautiful aspects of nature as a whole. Like historians, his poetic creations had multi dimensional and multi faceted expressions. He never neglected describing what were happening around him with a vivid conception of the scenario of human civilization of the world in general and of Manipur in particular. Moreover, the emergence of a radical change in social aspects of the states like culture, tradition, lifestyle, economy, education and literature due to a number of external and internal factors were vividly portrayed in his poetic works as well.

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