

MANIPUR—A VOLATILE MIXTURE



When we reached Imphal airport on a November afternoon, we sensed an air of subdued nervousness and cautious movements among the organizers, in spite of the warm welcome that we received. Incidentally, I and Samarjit Kar (who passed away on July 5, *see Obituary p. 406*) were visiting

Manipur on invitation from Dr. P.G. Rao, Director, CSIR-NEIST. We were taken by car to a hotel and our suspicions turned out to be true when we found two truckloads of armed CRPF personnel stationed around the hotel. Manipur, which dates back in history for about two thousand years and had the distinction of inventing the sport of polo, is now a place of recurrent attacks from insurgents and there were enough reasons for concern among the organizers. We learnt that this hotel is among the best in Imphal, and that all sessions and meetings will be held here to avoid our movements within the city. In addition to our routine work, what we usually do while travelling is to explore the place to understand the people and culture of the area. We were instructed not to venture out on our own, but that cars would be arranged for us if we wanted to go out. The notion of such restricted movement was a deterrent to our plan.

Manipur is a small state in the north-east of India covering an area of about 23,000 sq km, surrounded by Nagaland, Mizoram, Assam and Myanmar (erstwhile Burma) with a population of 25 lakh. It is predominantly hilly, except for the flat Manipur valley that occupies ten per cent of the state. According to the royal chronicles of the kings of Manipur, the warrior king Nongda Lairen

Pakhangba defeated all his rivals and established a kingdom in 33 CE known as ‘Meitei’ kingdom. Although there are differences of opinion about the origin of the word ‘Meitei’, it is believed that ‘Mei’ means ‘man’ and ‘tei’ means ‘separate’. Historically the Manipuri is a mixed ethnic group and according to a historian ‘West was mixed with East and North with South, Chinese have blended with Aryans, Mongolians with Dravidians’ to create the ‘pure’ Manipuri called Meitei. Manipur was thus a kingdom under the Ningthouja dynasty till 1949 when it came under the Indian Union and was finally declared as a separate state in 1972. Incidentally, Ningthouja dynasty was one of the longest-lasting dynasties of the world with seventy six kings ruling in between.

A striking feature that I noticed in Manipur was the surnames of Manipuris. Surnames of all men are ‘Singh’ except a few with ‘Sharma’ and ‘Devi’ for all women. Sharmas are Brahmins. There are a few Meitei-Roys, whose names are followed by the word Roy for both gender. Manipuri titles have an interesting history. According to the ancient custom, Meiteis used to call their names along with the particular clan (*salai*) they belong to. There were seven clans: *Moirang, Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Khaba Nganba, and Chengle*. Therefore, according to the old custom, names of Meitei persons were like Moirang Thoibi, Angom Nongbal etc. Inter-marriage between the clans was allowed but marriage within the same clan was strictly prohibited.

The entire history and culture of Manipur changed after the introduction of Hinduism in the eighteenth century. It was only in the early eighteenth century that King Pamheiba, better known as Garib Niwas, came under the influence of Shantidas Gossain— a *Vaishnavite* preacher from Sylhet, and declared Hinduism as the state religion. He burnt all the holy books or Puyas of the Sanamahi faith

and brought in *Vaishnavism*. Under the Sanamahi faith, Meiteis believed that Sanamahi or the Sun God created all the living beings and sent his son King Pakhangba to establish the kingdom to protect people. With the adoption of Hinduism as state religion, the original custom of using the specific clan (*salai*) with their names was abolished and the title 'Singh' was accepted as the surname for all except Brahmins. Brahmins were differentiated by the title 'Sharma'. All women are identified by the last name 'Devi'. It was during this time (1729) that the original name of the land 'Meitei Leipak' was changed to Manipur, the 'Land of Jewels' and the king replaced the original *Meitei Mayek* scripts by Bengali. It was only recently, during the middle of the last century, that a movement to revive the original Meitei scripts has been started and a consensus was reached to replace Bengali by the modified Meitei Mayek scripts. Manipur had witnessed a violent agitation in 2005 to this effect when the Central Library of Imphal was put on fire. Instructions were issued to schools to burn textbooks written in Bengali and newspapers were asked to print the front page with Meitei Mayek scripts. We noticed signboards in Bengali in some of the old shops which bear the testimony to the old cultural history of Manipur.

A pleasant surprise was in store for us when we found my eldest brother in the lobby of the same hotel waiting for check-in one afternoon. His grandson was getting married to a Manipuri girl and we were invited to be present at the wedding. We considered this as a good opportunity to observe a Manipuri marriage ceremony, a subject which satisfies half-way the theme and title of our journal *Science and Culture*. We readily agreed to the proposal. Due to political movements and insurgencies, the marriage was scheduled to be held in the afternoon and not in the evening.

Since our movements outside the hotel were restricted and subjected to the approval of our host Dr. H.B. Singh, we contacted Dr. Singh. He looked a little nervous hearing our proposal and wanted to know more about the place that we would be visiting before giving his approval. Even the address and place presented in the invitation card was not sufficient and I had to obtain more complete information, including the names of the villages we would be travelling through. Dr. Singh finally relented to our proposal on the condition that we would return before sunset and not venture any further beyond that place.

We reached the bride's place on the afternoon of the wedding and found the courtyard of the house decorated with *shamiana*, while '*rasalila*' was being carried out before the assembled locals of the area. All the men were *dhuti*-clad and women were covered with '*fanek*' (a piece of

cloth wrapped around the waist) with blouse on the top. Contrary to Hindu weddings that are solemnised in front of the Fire God, Manipuri weddings take place in front of the *tulsi* (*ocimum sanctum*) plant. The entire atmosphere at a Manipuri marriage is very serene and devotional in contrast to what we observe in Bengali marriages which are more of enjoyment. The *rasalila* was being performed by a professional group, complemented by ladies singing and dancing with soft rhythms, while the *mridangam* was played by male accompanists. Guests would offer money in the name of God while joining the *rasalila*. During the entire period, the groom was seated in a separate place with his relatives and friends.

After sometime the groom was taken to the main stage and was seated on a wooden platform.

The bride was brought in in a bridal dress which is similar to the costume we see in Manipuri dances. There was a *pandit* (priest) who performed the rituals. The rituals are much simpler than our Bengali marriages—no change of dress by the groom was necessitated, there was no formal offering of the bride in the hands of the groom (*kanyadan*) by the bride's parents. After a few minutes of rituals by the priest, the bride rose to commence walking around the seated groom, offering flowers to the groom at the end of each cycle. After the rituals, the assembled people started presenting gifts to the couple, first by the men and then by the ladies. Interestingly I found that it was customary to offer money instead of fancy gifts. Guests were offered sweets (*bonde*) in a simple paper packet (*thonga*) after the occasion. I was told that the grand feast to celebrate the occasion of the wedding would be held at the same house two days later.

I will finish this episode by recounting another interesting custom which reiterates the seriousness of Manipuri marriages. I was surprised to notice that the groom was silent, serious and sullen all through the ceremony, and felt that perhaps he was concerned about his future married life. On enquiring it was revealed that according to Manipuri custom, the teeth of neither the bride nor the groom should be visible during the wedding. This reminded me that even in Manipuri dances, the dancers never show their teeth. It was unfortunate that we could not stay on till the end as the sun had started setting in the west signalling that it was time to return to the hotel.

Like anywhere else, the circle of life in Manipur is bookended by life and death and infused with marriage and birth; but with an underlying sense of fear and anguish, frustration and disturbance for the last several years. This problem is not unique to Manipur—any state with different

ethnicities will be a victim of such frustrations. There are more than twenty active underground outfits in Manipur belonging to different ethnic groups, fighting for different causes. The Kuki group is demanding a separate Kuki homeland, the Meitei groups for an independent Meitei Leipak (the original name of Manipur), while Naga groups are demanding the integration of Naga-dominated areas. Development of the region, without impacting the ethnicity of groups, in line with the rest of the country has been a plaguing issue for many years. I have no solution in hand, but it is true that North-East, in general, was neglected for many years, resulting in an inadequate assessment of the

problems of the tribal groups which led to political extremism and violence. It is only in recent years that the government has been taking special attention of these states. If this had been done with more humility and attention from the beginning, the situation could well have been very different.

Invoking James Baldwin's phrase 'slow burn', Gopal Krishna Gandhi in his article published in this issue (page 340) has correctly pointed out "India is socially, economically, politically, philosophically, civilisationally on a slow burn". □

S. C. Roy

A time to be born and a time to die

His presence was golden, radiant and sunny. When you sit beside him, you felt a little taller and a little more composed. Words flowed from inside him, rich with experience gathered over the years, just like water or oil come out from inside the earth. His words were useful, comforting and convincing. I met Samarjit Kar for the first time in the seventies when I was at Bose Institute and he was the Assistant Secretary of the Indian Science News Association (ISNA), the office next door to Bose Institute. At that time he was at the peak of his activities, writing a science article every week in the Bengali magazine *Desh*. And he wrote it uninterruptedly for twenty four years. I considered it a privilege to spend time with him then. When I met him again after about thirty years in the same office as a member of the Editorial board of the journal *Science and Culture*, I realized that his association was more of a pleasure than a privilege.

Walking is not covering distance only. Walking is an experience to realise one's strength. His walking was straight and steadfast. You walk with him and you will feel a little more confident and a little more successful. Travelling with him was an experience, an experience to learn to love people. Love is a language, the language that never hurts but reaches one's mind. He was resilient but loving.

Love and strength perfectly coexisted in him. His name gave him the strength and confidence that 'he is winner in any fight or battle, and never learned to lose'. Love lets one to see only good in men. Love helps one to forgive people even when one is meted out bad treatment. Love teaches one not to arrive at any conclusion about a person even when he or she is badly treated. All of us are victims of situation. A person who apparently seems bad may have many other good qualities and can be good in other situations. He strongly believed in these qualities of love and lived it through his life.

Nature teaches us to be open. Openness brings elegance in life. Sea is open, we appreciate it more than a pond or a swimming pool. His openness made others to be intimate. He loved to talk to people, welcomed any stranger he met during his travels in life. Finally he met the 'Unwanted Visitor' on July 5, 2013.

"A time to be born and a time to die
A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
A time to kill, and a time to heal,
A time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn, and a time to dance;
A time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together;
A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to get, and a time to lose." – Paulo Coelho

Suprakash C Roy