



## EXPLORING THE WORLD OF THE TRIBES: A STUDY OF SELECTED NORTH-EAST SHORT STORIES

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### Abstract

*The research has its premise based on the North-East Indian region, especially in Manipur. North-East India has a centuries old history and traditions to follow with their rich mythologies and cultural importance which can only sustain with preservation of language. There are countless languages and dialects which are in endangered state whereas some have gone extinct. Such languages are revived by some enthusiastic writers who are writing extensively in these endangered languages to keep it alive. The paper examines such great works of the selected writers like Smriti Kumar Sinha and Linthoi Chanu. The research is an endeavor to assess the multiple experiences of North-East Indian tribal people with their social, political and cultural relevance. The situation of tribal people in the backdrops of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times is the pertinent reference point of the study.*

**Key Words:** North-East Literature, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Manipuri, Extinct Languages, Margin

When we talk about diversity, naturally we think of religions, language, history, food and many other things. But we seldom discuss different races, and linguistic parameters of faraway places from our periphery. North-East locales call the central Indian states 'Mainland India'. There are reasons behind this special naming. Just as calling North-East states as 'North-East India' point to many other meanings, not just as a directional meaning denoting place but people of the North-East take it as leaving them out of Indian politics, culture, laws and sometimes as special rights also. They feel being majority of tribal communities in these seven

sisters and one brother i.e. Sikkim<sup>1</sup>, they differ in many prospects of language, culture, customs, geography and history. Thus, feeling alienated from the Indian constitution they feel deprived of development schemes and other facilities. The distant location of states causes identity problems as the tribe's origins are of complex history and since independence, the communities have been divided either on the bases of language or on the bases of ancestry. Some tribes felt uprooted as they were forced to leave their homeland, and were treated as immigrants and refugees in neighboring countries.

After decades of independence, demarcations and wars, now the changes can be seen after all these years-long struggles. The educated young generations of North-East Indian states are writing about their homeland in different languages and trying to reach out to the world to showcase the beauty of their cultures. Their themes are not only limited to one prospect but they discuss the more serious issues also, like identity loss and modern problems faced by them after independence. Trying hard to preserve their religious ideology and beliefs in this fast-growing mixed culture of the modern age, some North-East writers are writing extraordinarily about their past and linguistic elegance.

Ethnically, Manipur state has two major paths of beliefs. One is religious, which is bishnupriya Manipuri, a Vaishnavism sect. And another includes all the tribal groups like Kuki and Naga. All the tribes have their own language but Meitei is accepted as a link language. Bishnupriya manipuris uses only bishnupriya language, which is now an endangered language of the state. The present research presents aesthetic beauty of Manipur state, its language, history, and culture. Manipuri or Meitei is a widely spoken language and state language. Whereas, Bishnupriya Manipuri is an endangered language of Manipur. The paper takes examples of short stories from the famous writer of Bishnupriya Manipuri, Smriti Kumar Sinha, who tries to continue the tradition of this lesser-known dialect in Manipuri Literature. The short stories were originally written in Bishnupriya Manipuri and later were translated into English by Ramlal Sinha.

The selected stories present the picture of typical Manipuri village and running different cultural activities. The selected short stories are 'Amity in Queue' and 'Floating Dreams' from *Wari: A Collection of Manipuri Short Story Stories* (1019) by Linthoi Chanu

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<sup>1</sup> For more details, refer to Indian Culture.

and ‘Seducing the Rain God’ and ‘God for a Night’ from *Seducing the Rain God*. (2015) by Smriti Kumar Sinha.

One should be curious to know more about those languages which are on the verge of going extinct. Suzanne Romaine, an American linguist rightly says, “...diversity is at risk when language become extinct because languages are a critical vector for cultural diversity...Protecting cultural and linguistic diversity means ensuring their continued existence.” There are two sections of Manipuris - Meitei, which is the majority and Bishnupriya Manipuri, a minority. The Manipuris have a cultural continuity from the pre-Mahabharat times. Both the Meitie and Bishnupriyas trace their ancestry to Babruvahan, the son of Kuru prince Arjun and Manipuri princes Chitrangada.

Now, one would notice some difference between Meitie culture and Bishnupriya culture. In today's time, Meiteis are tribal communities and Bishnupriya are religious followers, often called Vaishnavism, which is a sect of Hinduism, devotees of Lord Krishna. This religious turn came in times of monarchs. In 1704, king Charairongpa converted to Hinduism, becoming the first Meitie king to formally adopt Hinduism. His successor, Pamheiba, later known as Garib Nawaz, converted to Vaishnavism in 1717, being initiated into the faith by a Brahmin named Guru Gopal Das or Shanti Das. (Choudhury 111)

Here, the paper attempts to explore the culture and life styles of Manipuri people through the literature. The following four stories depict the real-life challenges faced by Manipuri people in a distant state adjoining the foreign countries. The first story- “Amity in Queue” is written One of the most typical scenes during Blockades of Manipur wherein hundreds of vehicles would line up at any petrol pump, with people staying overnight in their vehicle to be first in the queue. In the story, two women meet in such a queue and narrate their hardships of living. Also, with these two characters the writer highlights other issues, like health facilities and education. Sakhi, a widow of a private school teacher, leaving her only daughter at home, had to stand in the queue to fill the petrol tank. And another lady, who came from Canchipur which is quite far. But she had to leave her three children at home and departed from home at three in the morning. Her husband is a driver who now is stuck in the Highway blockade. Manipur is a landlocked state, essential commodities are brought in by trucks through the National Highways. There have been occasions when ‘blockades’ have been enforced for three or four months. During such blockades, stocks in shops and markets gradually run dry even as a black market with hiked prices thrives.

While two women are sharing their difficulties, Sakhi says, “Indeed, living like slaves in a free country.” (Chanu 57) this statement confirms their misery. Further, the political condition is expressed by Sakhi. ““That is what! Those idiots on the reigning chairs do not face any acute problems except people like us, the working people.” Sakhi said, looking angrily towards a huge billboard that read “*Naharol gi Tengbang Scheme. For the youths, our future!*” where photos of several happy people in clean and expensive kurtas were flashed bigger than the information of what the scheme was about.” (Chanu 58-59) The Billboard was about health treatment in cashless mode. These incidents show that the people of Manipur are not satisfied with the current scenarios and are hoping for a better future.

Another interesting story from *Wari* is about ‘*Phumdi*’, as described in “Floating Dreams” by Linthoi Chanu. *Phumdi* is a miracle, found floating only in the Loktak Lake of Manipur made of piled up biomass. Away from the city or small town, the poverty-stricken people live here for generation, because such places do not require any rent or property claims. The short story “Floating Dreams” begins from ninety kilometers away from this ‘Floating Island’, where a teacher named Likla is having sweet beverages, but her mind is roaming at some other place. This is her school where she used to teach before the summer vacation began. Her class has only three children- Senyenbi, Phajabi and Sarif. From the beginning other characters like Senyenbi’s mother and Khura(uncle) Ibo, a boatman who came rowing ferry boat to pick up girls from their *phumdis* to school expresses their doubts whether their beloved teacher will return or not. The story has a deep meaning to show a yearning feeling of a teacher and excited students who at the end of the story felt deceived because teacher Likla, loved by them all so dearly did not return from her hometown in Imphal and had abandoned them. The kids were so excited to return school after vacation, so much as Senyenbi even purchased a second-hand white tennis-shoes, stitched them and washed so neatly that they almost looked like a new branded shoe. Because they were instructed by their teacher ‘to try to put on a proper school uniform’. (Chanu 135) ‘Not one of them ever stayed on.’ Khura Ibo continues, ‘They don’t want to stay here. They must have felt trapped to serve their posting here in a place like this...they only come here while they seek for a transfer somewhere.’. (Chanu 141) this the harsh reality of distant places who do not get proper attention from system, and at the end either they leave their hometowns to get employment and education or they just choose to live their forever without having a hope of development or even basic facilities like hospitals. Miss Likla was a passionate teacher, who showed the world outside their *phumdis*, and kids were thrilled

to hear more about city life. But their dreams and hopes gets withered soon when their only teacher abandoned them. Their first step towards education depends on their school. Their school is running in a tattered cottage, 'well-ventilated with several holes around the mud walls...the breeze touched every corner.' (Chanu 137-138) the story ends with Senyenbi throwing her shoes in the lake out of frustration of being betrayed by her teacher and Phajabi begins to weep.

Through this heart touching story, the writer perhaps tries to show the struggles of marginalized people of Manipur, who are already located in the far east corner of the country, what could be the scope of quality life for those downtrodden people of village who don't get the basic right of education. earlier in the story, "Amity in Queue" we witnessed their 'basic need' of petrol. but one cannot expect petrol to be a basic need as the people living in *phumdis* don't get to go outside their village or their little island i.e *phumdi*. their requirements are food and employment for mere living and sustaining in those extreme cold weather. This shows how the state as a whole is deprived in many ways and is looked upon as a marginal state.

Smriti Kumar Sinha established evidence to show Manipuri beliefs through his story "Seducing the Rain God". The story is about Sabi, a plain woman of forty has an impeccable record in 'rainmaking'. She has learnt the art of 'rainmaking' from her forefather for the well-being of people. The story is from pre-colonial times. Khumolmati, a former independent principality of Manipur is burning from the unprecedented drought. people are praying to Soralel- the Rain God. Koirengthe king asks his soldiers to bring a woman who can seduce the rain god, Soralel and Sabi is invited. Now Sabi starts the job of cherry-picking the women well-versed in the songs and dances of 'rainmaking'. In order to appear seductive, she makes efforts. The effects of using aromatic chengi (washed uncooked rice and aromatic herbs) as hair conditioner and khar (alkaline solution) made out of burnt banana husk as body cleanser are quite visible.

The residents of Khumolmati, including Koireng, have been waiting for Sabi with baited breath. Koireng pleads with Sabi to save the Khumolmati, otherwise he will have no other way to fight this drought. Rules say that virgins are forbidden to join and also no one is allowed to see the performance. They stop in the middle of the field, and their clothes come off. They start cracking jokes spiced with sexual inuendos, targeting Sabi. Sabi offers eira-tankha, lights a vartika- a lamp, and begins her ode to Soralel.

*Soralelte Rajaro, leipak pungou koilo*

*Leipake marai makhonge, khoimu e jangal dilo*

*Khumolor mati hukeilo, boron diyade douraja*

*Lu-kom mahi nukulil, boron diyade douraja.*

(Oh Rain God, put an end to the killer drought in Khumolmati with a downpour...)

(Sinha 61)

The women dance to a soulful tune, pleading “Oh Soralel, cause a downpour”. (Sinha 63) And having savoured the exotic spectacle of nude seducers dancing elegantly to appease him, the lustful Rain God Soralel turns north. She's a known face, the great hope among rainmakers! Soralel stops and turns to look at her. And rainfall starts. This supernatural event hints at many other things in the story. If one looks at a time and place, it is a midnight and womenfolk are standing naked and yet are enjoying the freedom, the moment where they do not need to feel any shame and this privilege to perform this ritual only by mothers who have tasted this pleasure before feels elated by the touch of a droplet gives a manning that the pure water droplets is not that defiles them but it is a touch of divine God itself. Sabi, whose Husband had gone to war but never returned. It's been many decades and yet no news of his whereabouts. In the process of seducing the Rain God, the soft touch of fresh water makes her feel erotic and this indicates her yearning for her husband's love. When impressed Koirang asked her to make a wish for this miracle, she did not ask for any wealth but instead requested if he could get any news about her husband. She believed that the art of rainmaking should not be used to gain power, money or reputation. It is only for welfare and however, proud to be part of a nation, and serve her duty towards the same.

From a mythological perspective, Soralel can be linked to various deities from different mythologies. In Greek mythology, he shares similarities with Uranus and Cronus, while in Hindu scriptures, his characteristics bear resemblance to those of Indra and Vishnu.(Oinam) These parallels underscore the extensive influence and significance of Soralel within the pantheon of gods across different cultural narratives. Rainmaking is a ritual that many tribes follow. Weather modification rituals were common in the world. Even today, some of the rain rituals are still performed by the natives, particularly those living in the southwestern part of America. In her book *The Rhythm of the Redman*, Julia M. Buttree describes the rain dance of the Zuni, along with other Native American dances; feathers and turquoise, or other blue items are worn during the ceremony to symbolize wind and rain respectively. While visiting Kubai

Hills and Tribes, Verrier Elwin was so impressed by their dance and the attire of the group of young boys and girls. they too were using blue feathers as the head and ear ornaments. He said, 'Fortunate are those who, even in this utilitarian modern world, can please beauty and happiness first among their concerns!'. (Verrier 228) Other tribes of Manipur also perform such rituals with some differences. Giving insight of such rituals, Dr. Budha says when people did feel the sufferings of droughts, men and women divided into two separate groups went on naked at night singing aloud songs for getting rain. In the Royal Chronicle, there are numerous references to droughts which caused famines both in the hills and valleys of Manipur. At the time of droughts, efforts were made to irrigate rice fields from the nearby rivers (Turen); hymns were recited and many rain rituals were performed to get rain.

Another story from Smriti Kumar Sinha's short story collection is "God for a Night". The story is about a household who are excited to perform a Rasolila for the forthcoming Rasopurnima<sup>2</sup>. Hoba is so passionate to play Nandarani because her long-awaited dream of holding a Rasolila at home is finally happening after decades of her marriage. Monigo- her son is nine years old and will play the role of a youthful Krishna. Monigo is of playful nature and now that he got his new toy that is muroli (flute), he never forgets to take it with him. All the time, whether in school or at playground, one would see him carrying it all the time. Everyone is so immersed in rehearsing lines, the songs and practicing maintaining the rhythm. In the story, villagers are shown to celebrate this festival like it is their life depends on it. Monigo, who is playing a part of Krishna, really does have traits of notorious young Krishna. And her mother Hiba is always trying to catch him. Monigo's father Manu is *Esulpa*, a traditional singer. Monigo's teachers inquire about the preparations going at home. This shows the upcoming event is of everyone's interest that they are eagerly waiting for. Monigo's relationship with Bana, who is playing Radha, is of confusing nature. Sometimes Monigo cares for her and at other moments he tries to keep her away. First, he hurts her and then feels guilty for doing so. The villagers enjoy the rehearsal. The musical instruments like Mridongo are played and Sutradhari is practicing along with them. Glittering outfits were ordered a day before the Rasolila.

One the day of the Rasolila, the village and its households are aglow with decorative lamps. The mandap is filled to capacity. The program begins. Brinda dances to the rhythm of

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<sup>2</sup> Rasa Purnima- one of the major festivals of the Manipuri Community is celebrated during the full moon of Autumn.

Manipuri music. The emotional Vaishnavite audience is mesmerized at her performance. Monigo was next to perform, who was found sleeping in his full regalia. He gets to his senses when Manu shouts ‘tamarind’. He jumps and dances the length and breadth of the Rasomandali, and the audience is emotionally moved by every step of Lord Krishna. Villagers witness a divine soul in Monigo and everyone bows to Lord Krishna. Oja Karan Singh, Monigo’s head teacher rushes with hands raised, and crying aloud he too falls at the feet of Lord Krishna. Stunned Monigo looks at the elders, Oja Guna bows down to him and starts crying, so does the audience. Monigo too burst into tears, his emotions in a turmoil. Afterwards, Radha enters gracefully dancing and leading a group of Gopis. When two of them give the pose of a divine pair, the audience feels an aura of divinity. As if enlightened with God’s presence they start weeping with a smile on their face. The Rasolila ended and villagers praised every move they witnessed. Such is the feeling of the event that Bishnupriya Manipuri is still keeping in their heart. To Bishnupriya Manipuris. This is not a couple of two school going kids but one indeed witnessing a godly presence in them. Every village holds such celebrations on Rasopurnima and this has become their culture to arrange a staged performance. This can prove their roots of Vaishnavism that is being followed by Bishnupriya Manipuris.

This research has explored the possibilities and problematics of critiquing the short stories in English by selected Manipuri writers. The study asserts that most of the writings from North-East are firmly anchored to the local ethos and hence they provide a fresh perspective on the cultural, social and other issues pertaining to the lives of the diverse communities and tribal residing in the region. Moreover, by choosing to write in English, prominent writers from the region have been able to not only highlight its under-represented culture, socio-political, ethnical and gender issues before a wide reader base but have also been able to get a separate place for itself within the larger body of Indian writings in English.

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