

## **The socio-political condition depicted in the short story “Aunty Leibaklei”**

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**Abstract:** The paper is a study of one of the prominent writer of Modern Manipuri literature and the story is selected from Akademi award winning Anthology of Manipuri Short stories *The Taste of an Hilsa and Other Stories* (2009) by Nongthombam Kunjamohan Singh in Manipuri and translated into English by Thounaojam Ratankumar Singh. The present paper is taken from the English version. The story is simple; it's about a woman called Leibaklei. Through the story the author depicts the horrific situation of common people in Manipur. Manipur for the past several decades have been tussling a unique identity with the rest of the mainland India. The socio-political condition is also at the stake. For decade after its merger with the independent India, Manipur is going through a darker phase be it political, social or literature. The paper especially highlights the predicament and helplessness of the common people which are sandwich between insurgencies, the indigenous identity, political conflict and the silent treatment from the centre to name a few. The literary scenario in Manipur is also not praise worthy. The writers are struggling in their own way to depict and project the condition of Manipur. The dilemma over the dual identity of state haunts the writers in Manipur for the past 68 years after its merger because of the distancing of the northeastern region from mainland India.

**Keywords:** Manipuri, Insurgency, Silence, Women, AFSPA

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Manipur is one of the eight north eastern states of India. Its boundary is surrounded by Myanmar in the east and south, and Nagaland state in the north, Assam state in the west and Mizoram state in the south-west. Manipur is a meeting point, epicenter, between South East Asia and the Indian sub-continent. The Manipur valley, in the middle of the state, is at a height of 790 meters above the sea level and is surrounded by nine hill ranges in circles creating a hill and trough geography. More than 60% of its inhabitants are Meiteis including Bamons and Pangans who settled mostly in the valley and the remaining are hill tribes, namely, Tangkhul, Thadou, Zeliangrong (Zemi, Laingmai, Roungei - Kabuis), Mao, Maram, Poumai, Paite, Hmar, Maring, Anal, Aimol, Angami, Chiru, Chothe, Gangte, Monsang, Moyon, Kom, Purum, Ralte, Sema, Simte, Salte, Vaiphei, Lamgang, Zhou, etc. Each group has its own language, tradition and culture. Meitei-lon (Meitei language or Manipuri) is the common language adopted by all tribes for communication. Imphal is the capital and a major trading centre. The present political system in the state includes sixteen districts.

Manipur has a rich written literary tradition. The development of Manipuri short stories as a genre, however, has closeness to Bengali and Assamese literature. The changing political social and economic state, stage of modernization and contemporary world literature shaped the thematic structure of Manipuri short stories. It can be broadly divided into:

1. The period of conception (1932-1941),
2. The birth of the short story (1946-1960)
3. The stage of maturity (1960-1970)
4. The age of Meirik (Sparks) (1970-till date)

### **The Interpretation:**

“Aunty Leibaklei” is a short story taken from short story collection; *The Taste of an Hilsa and Other Stories* (2009) translated in English by Thounaojam Ratankumar Singh of Akademi award-winning Manipur short-stories *Ilisha Amagi Mahao* by Nongthombam Kunjamohan Singh. It is a mundane story in Manipur, atrocity is nothing new. The story focuses the life of Leibaklei. It is a story of a poor mother of two children trying to survive in this harsh world especially in social and economic chaotic condition of Manipur. The poor sections of the society are always at the receiving end.

The backdrop of the story is the great uprising in Manipur which rocked the whole state in June 18, 2001 ‘it was great uprising’ (51), where 18 sacrificed their lives for their motherland. The story is plain, portrays ordinary people moved by the ordinary concerns and passion of life, particularly the passion, love and all its

consequences of joy and sorrow. The story of Leibaklei can be considered as the mouthpiece of the poor and neglected section of Manipuri society. The protagonist's situation represents the ailing Manipuri society in the story.

The story opens in a hospital where a woman around in her 50s is admitted in a serious condition. They have been trying hard to save her and she has been in coma for the last two days. ... "Doctor, there is a serious case...?" And I retorted lightly, "Every day there is a serious case for you." But the nurse was flabbergasted, "No doctor, it is really serious, it is in coma since yesterday." (51) ... The opening of the story set the tone and the predicament of the victim's life. Sometimes how casual human lives are treated by the medical people. The woman is referred as "it" rather than saying a woman, or old woman or the patient. Thus, the writer has skillfully captured the nuances of human lives in hospital and the problem is not only in Manipur but throughout the world. The doctor replied casually, "After coma, there will be a full stop..." However, I could not complete the remark as I felt a sense of the soft corner of the human heart...(51).

The hospital is flooded with patients, everyday due to the unrest that was happening at that particular point of time. The agitation of the common people and clash between the police personnel leads to many innocent people becoming victims. The agitation is the impact of the infamous 'the Bangkok Declaration, a ceasefire agreement "without territorial limits" signed between the Government of India and NSCN (IM) on June 14, 2001 which created havoc in the Manipur's capital Imphal which turned into a violent agitation. During the unrest, 18 people lost their lives when security forces tried to control the crowd.

The unrest resulted in several visible changes in Manipur in almost every aspect of life. Many among the protestors which included women, children, elderly persons and students were injured in the indiscriminate continuous firing by the CRPF personnel. Vehicles, tyres and woods were piled up and burnt in the middle of the roads to discourage movement of vehicles and pedestrians. Glass debris littered all the major roads of the city and oil was splattered on all the important roads. All commercial activities came to a grinding halt; the state came to a standstill and was spilt with pool of blood of the 18 martyred.

The great uprising was one of the ugly phases in the history of Manipur alongside there were many loopholes which included, "...the increase in the prices of commodities, unemployment, corruption and allotment of plots in the heart of Imphal city" (51). Things were not proper somewhere. The internal conflict between the indigenous tribal, the silence treatment from the centre and the puppet Manipur government in the hands of some powerful MLAs and Ministers were responsible for the destruction of public properties and loss of innocent lives. There was procession and protest almost every day during those times which hampered the livelihood of many poor women in Manipur and students' communities were mostly affected.

"She was the "Aunty Leibaklei" of every student" (54), the doctor recognized the woman in coma. He recollected those times when he was doing his schooling and how he came in contact with aunty Leibaklei. He had fond memories of her. "Noticing her kindness and generosity, majority of the students did not dare to deceive her" (55). He remembered her to be kind to all and never ask money from those who used to buy things on credit from her in spite of her poor state. She never spoke ill about anyone nor does she get angry. He recollected it was because of her that today he is a doctor.

He instantly started to look into the matter of the patient since he knew her in person. "The medical profession is a noble profession; it is a service to the people who are suffering" (56), the writer is also trying to bring forth the corrupt doctors who do not do their duties properly and are biased with the patients. The patients who are poor and do not have any contact with the people in the hospital are not given proper care and attention. "I was astounded. What was happening in this hospital? Today no film, tomorrow no power, day after tomorrow machines not working and then..." (54), he studied the case minutely and certain departments in the hospital always have complaints of this or that, long queue, no proper response from the authority and some treat the poor like dirt too. This kind of things are not new in Manipur as well as in different parts of India, some medical people have become selfish and are always trying to fill their bank balance at the expense of patients' lives. The more we are heading into the world of science and technology, more self-centered we have become. It's like a blind leading another blind everything seems so dark there is no way out all are caught up somewhere and we all are struggling for an outlet.

When I saw the report of the x-ray, my suspicions were confirmed. That was the reckless work of our doctors, who did the stitches with foreign bodies inside. But they never took enough care as if the patients were inanimate objects. I took Aunty Leibaklei inside the operation theatre without delay. I operated and removed two pieces of stone and again stitched her up. (58)

The passage shows the amount of recklessness, playing with the lives of the patient since it does not prick their own skin. One operation is enough to go through in one's life but reoperation again because of some reckless fellow, is too much according to me. The lives of the patients are invaluable to them since it is not related to them.

The later part of the story is symbolic. The writer explain the symbolic representation of the name, "Leibaklei flowers...In extremely hot summer season, tearing apart the hard crust of the earth, the flower Leibaklei comes up. Nobody can trample" (59). Leibaklei known as Bhumi champa, in other language is a small flower but very powerful. It needs to tear apart the mother earth in the hot summer to assert its identity. Likewise women needs to fights all odd in order to survive in this harsh world.

When Leibaklei was conscious, she was happy to see the doctor since she knew him and used to treat him like her own son. The doctor advised her to keep away from the strike and protest and to look after her health. She said, "...whether we die of hunger or of strike" (59), it's the same any way but poor people will surely have to die. The government is trying to bring changes and they are, "... shouting for the eradication of poverty" (56). There is no one for the poor people not even god. God is also for the rich men where they can donate lakhs of rupees in the name of prayers. She pathetically said, "Do you know this government? It is for rich. It exists to give employment to the rich, to protect the wealth of the rich and enhance the profit of the rich..." (59), for every single thing, "Without bribing the ministers, nothing can be done". (59). How true! There is no such thing as free meal in this world. Everyone seems to be so busy accumulating more and more money. All wants to live a luxurious life. The poor sections of the society suffer more and more. The rich drinks the blood of the poor, play politics at the expense of their lives.

"There are several charges against her--- criminal trespass, loot, arson, conspiracy..." The police officer recited the charges as if reciting a poem.

I felt laughing. So many charges against Aunty Leibaklei! How terribly sarcastic a joke it was. (60) The police personal came to take Leibaklei from the hospital. He was flabbergasted to hear all the charges against aunty Leibaklei. The person who has never hurt any living is today wanted by the police with so many criminal charges against her. Manipur is turning into a darker place. There is no good governance. There is no justice in this land. How could a poor woman having hard time fighting for day- today meal is wanted by the law. Being poor without any political connection is a crime in Manipur. In the land where AFSPA is implemented, anything can happen. There was no remorse in the face of aunty Leibaklei. She just smiled at him and said, "I am going my dear." (60). As soon as she came to the main gate there were group of people waiting for her and some put garland on her neck and screamed, "Inquilab---Jindabad...Inquilab—Jindabad...!" (61), while the police took her to the van.

The story is open ended. One can probably assume that Leibaklei became an aspiration for the poor since she revolted against the government. Common people need to come together to bring about changes in the society. We need to start burning the lamp of patriotism in one's heart. We should not be at the receiving end all the time. Sometimes an "Inquilab" is needed to bring about changes.

There are many activists working hard to bring about changes in our society. In 2004, Ms Binalakshmi Nepram co-founded India's first civil society organization which is working on conventional disarmament issues, namely the Control Arms Foundation of India. And in 2007, in order to help thousands of women who are affected by gun violence in her home-state Manipur, she launched the Manipuri Women Gun Survivor Network. At one time, there were more than 30 rebel groups. Manipur was engulfed in binge of violence in the 1990s because of the ethnic militias and severe infighting between Naga groups. The centre needs to intervene and try to bring changes rather than playing the game of politics at the cause of innocent lives. The story of Leibaklei is one such representation of the socio-economic and political condition of Manipur and the suffering of the common people. The is no way out for the poor people it's a pit which will take them down, like the bog 'daldal' the more you move the more it will drag one' down.

The political senerio of Manipur can be compared with a Burger. In order to make a burger you need to cut the bun into two halves and stuff the rest of the ingredients. One end of the bun is Manipur and the another end is the Government of India, they are poles apart. The stuffing is coated with the bloods of innocent victims, AFSPA, poor connectivity with the mainland, insfrastructure, internal and external conflict, unemployment, ethenic unrest, drug trafficking, illegal emigrants, corruption, geographical and psychological isolation to name a few are the various ingredients of the wonderful stuffing of the Burger. I belived it must be one of the most costliest burger in the world. Manipur is at the verge of becoming a lost civilization.

The question that lingers in my mind is will conducting State level and National seminars will help combating the problem? The answer is "No", we all academician need to come out from the four wall of classroom as well AC room seminar halls and literally come in contact with poor people and try to adopt one of them and try to help them in all possible way. I think then, there is room for improvement like Ms Binalakshmi Nepram, we need to come out and help them.

This seminar is a step towards understanding the Country's North East, many scholars and experts are presenting paper here is indeed a step towards understanding and trying to bridge the gap that is long due to the people of Manipur as well as the rest of the others north eastern states. We as an academician have a larger role

to play. We definitely can bring a change, but the question that lingers in my mind is how far I have changed. The change should start from within; we need to come out from this four wall seminar hall. Let every institute, every academic department, big or small companies or any industry adopt a poor family to educate a child in the family and provides basic need, and then I know for sure the change is near. It's near. We need to stop giving only lip service and literally come out into the field.

Let me end with a quote by Paul Bloom, "Our best hope for the future is not to get people to think of all humanity as family - that's impossible. It lies, instead, in an appreciation of the fact that, even if we don't empathize with distant strangers, their lives have the same value as the lives of those we love". Thank You.

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