

Editorial

Monday, April. 2, 2018

RIP Tamo Khelen: You will be always in our heart

It is natural - if you are born you will have to die one day. Thousands are born every day and thousands died each days. Among the people die everyday - few are remembered for the kind of service they provided for the people and humanity. Their names are engraved to the heart of every right thinking people. And their names continue to shine in the future too.

Among the few, Senior Journalist Khelen Thokchom, who left us all for heavenly abode yesterday, is one. To the younger journalist fraternity he was a mentor, an advisor and an inspiration for all. To the people he was a critic, a messenger of truth. When he got free time he wrote satirical words at social networking site Facebook. His every post at FB makes his friends who are known either physically or virtually, 'smile'.

When he spared times with journalist colleagues, he made no difference between young or old, new comers or experienced one. He would make jokes that carry thousand meanings. He indirectly inspired every one near him to stand up for truth and truth only. He redefined kitchen gardening not only for living but for pure pleasure and for saving the environment.

Before his visit to Gujarat on journalists' tour organized by the Manipur Legislative Assembly, something started disturbing his mind very seriously. I went to his home to comfort him. We two of us sat together for a while. Instead of telling me what actually disturbed him he taught me how to take decision at time of critical reporting. He suggested me how to extract the resource from experts while interviewing or anchoring programme like discussion hour at ISTV. I thought of spending that whole day with him, but could not as I had another assignment including a marriage ceremony of the daughter of his close colleague (another senior journalist Irengbam Arun).

Four days back we met again at ISTV discussion hour programme. Every time we met, he used to talking something which made me happy and smile. That very day he sat quietly and again said that he was not feeling very well.

As we started our programme discussing about the question leak problem of CBSE, I was a little bit worried as I was told that he was seriously disturbed (personal problem I guessed). But to my surprised, when it came about issues he gave logical reply and also suggested many good things which could bring a change in the system.

After the discussion hour, we stood together for a while at BT road sharing a pub of cigarette in front of ISTV Network. He never told anyone about his personal problem. But then I insisted him to tell me what exactly, was that thing that made him unhappy and disturbed.

Well, the thing which he was worried was the rotten system of our society. The culture of suppressing people, who wanted change by using means which sometimes made him voiceless. At 58 he had a young and energetic mind. But then like every father or husband, he wanted his wife to be respected by all and his son and daughter to be the best. Except having some moments at late evening and morning he hardly found time to spend his only belongings. At 58 he knew he will retired soon and he was little worried about his son's and daughter's future as he would be retiring after 2 years.

Another thing which he told me was about an incident which he felt that he had not committed any wrong except cracking some jokes as he usually did to many of us. However, when I insisted him to tell me about it he said, it was late, he would tell me some other day. When I started my two wheeler bike to go back home, he said, "that incident is the only thing that really hurt me, and I am left in such a situation that I have to keep quiet as I have great love for my son and daughter".

I could not trace out what that incident was which kept such a courageous journalist mum his mouth even though I had heard him many times arguing with the most powerful men of this state.

Rest in peace Ta Khelen, you will always be in our heart. Hope the truth about Tamo Khelen's worries comes up from someone who knows about that incident.

By Deepak Naorem
Courtesy: <http://raioat.in>

It is absolutely not farfetched to argue that Manipur was imagined in the 18th century, some 250 years ago. I must, however, caution myself here lest my arguments are misconstrued as denying the existence of state/states or communities with distinct social, political or cultural identities in the region which is called Manipur today, one of the many provinces of Indian 'state...nation'. The states in this region were referred to by many names.

In 1799 CE, Francis Buchanan wrote an article about the languages and people surrounding the Burmese empire, and he wrote in the article of a rebellious people who inhabited the region between Sylhet in Bengal and Ava. He wrote that the people inhabiting in the valley called themselves as 'Moitay', and those in the hills by many names. However, he argued the region was known by many names. The Burmese called it *Kathee/Cussay*, the Britishers in Bengal called it *Meckley* and the Brahmins of the region called it *Munnypura*. The existence of many names often confused the Europeans so much that Rennel who prepared the first map of *Hindoostan* and beyond laid down two Kingdoms, Cussay and Meckley in the first draft of his map. He was also considering including Munnypura as the third kingdom between *Hindoostan* and Burma. The two treaties signed with the East India Company in 1762 and 1763 CE also referred to the region as Meckley, and the king as Meckley Raj. Moreover, revisionist historiography has also come up with many names such as Kangleipak and Meitei-leibak etc.

These various names represent competing political and cultural visions for the region. We should also not forget here that parts of the Manipur state are claimed by other political movements today. By mid 18th century CE, a particular political and cultural vision was promoted aggressively in the region aided by the royal court at the expense of the others. Munnypura or Manipur, a brahmanical imagination of the region began to be identified with the region by the beginning of the 19th century. This was achieved through a careful and meticulous myth-making by the Brahmins who are locally referred to as 'Bamons' or Manipuri Bamons. It is also important to point out that we should not treat Manipuri Brahmins as a single monolithic category. Brahmins migrated to the court of Manipur in different waves and many of them were imposters and fortune seekers who travelled in disguise of Brahmins. Moreover, they belonged to different sects and denominations and were often exiled to Kubo, Ava and Arakan for political and religious dissents in the court. Many of them actively took part in the making of a Brahmanical Manipur through myth-making. Vaishnavism received royal patronage only in 1704 CE, when Raja Charairongba embraced and consecrated idols of Hindu gods and subsequently built a temple dedicated to Vishnu in the year 1707 CE. Such traditions were followed by Raja Garibniwaz who transferred the responsibility of taking care of the shrines and lais/deities from the amaibas/amaibis (priest/priestess) to the Bamons in 1723 CE and subsequently demolishing of many pre-Vaishnavite shrines. The succeeding kings also followed the policy of popularizing Vaishnavism in the region. Myth-making was done in many ways, but this article will engage with one dominant form of myth-making by writing texts called Bijoy Panchalis.

The region is often associated with orality and oral traditions, and it is shocking to many in the academia

Myth making and imagining a Brahmanical Manipur since 18th century CE

when it is pointed out to them that the region developed a written literary culture between 14th and 15th century CE. It is definitely not to say that oral traditions are less important, and in fact oral traditions continued to remain the foremost form of knowledge transmission in the region. Texts which are locally known as Puyas were written mostly within the confines of the royal court. Likewise, Bijoy Panchalis were also commissioned and written in the royal court. However many do not consider it as a Puya depending on how one defines a Puya. If we are referring to all the written texts as puya, it is definitely a puya since it was commissioned and composed in the court by the Pundits/Maichous. However many scholars refrained from using the word *Puya* for Bijoy Panchali, because in their understanding Puyas are associated with pre-Hindu or non-Hindu traditions and they find Bijoy Panchali lacking such attributes. Manihar Singh and Jayanti Thokchom consider Bijoy Panchali as state chronicle which emerged with the adoption of Vaishnavism by the court in the 18th century and J.B. Bhattacharjee calls it a Bengali chronicle of Manipur. However, it did become the state chronicle and did not replace Cheitharon Kumpapa as the court chronicle. Bijoy Panchali comprises of five parts/volumes written over 150 years between 1782 CE and 1954 CE. There are many manuscripts of these texts; in Bengali in Bangla Lipi and in Manipuri in Bangla Lipi. Then there are translations in Manipuri in Bangla lipi by L. Mangi Singh and L. Mani Singh and by Anganghal Singh in Manipuri language in Bangla lipi which cannot be traced.

Unlike Cheitharon Kumpapa, each of the five volumes of Bijoy Panchali deals with the genealogy and heroic deeds of various kings of Manipur who embraced Vaishnavism. The five volumes are: volume 1- Garibaniwaz Charit; Volume 2- Bhagyachandra Charit; Volume 3- Gambhir Singh and Nar Singh Charit; Volume 4- Chandrakirti Charit and Volume 5- Surchandra, Kulachandra and Tikendrajit Charit. The commissions of Bijoy Panchalis are recorded in Cheitharon Kumpapa. It is recorded, 'On 15th of the month of Langban (Aug/Sept), Ibungshi Mantri, Lairikyeba Kiritchandra and Tulsu Narayan, the hanjaba (an official) completed the composition of Bijoy Panchali of King Garibniwaz'. The first volume, Garibniwaz Charit, was initially written in 1782 CE in Manipuri language in Bangla lipi, later rewritten in Bengali in 1872 CE. This text follows the birth and career of Maharaja Garibniwaz (1709-1748), his matrimonial alliances, his religious pursuits such as pilgrimages and endowments to temples and his military exploits in Burma, Cachar and Tripura. The second volume, Bhagyachandra Charit was written much later, composed by one Gunendra in the year 1932 CE. This volume deals with Raja Bhagyachandra (1763-1798), and it deals with his birth, his wars with the Burmese, his exile to Cachar and Ahom capital, and his religious pursuits such as the construction of the Govindaji temple in Kangla, introduction and composition of Raj Lila and Rajeshori Pala, consecration of Sri Govindaji idol and finally his pilgrimage/retirement in Navadip in Bengal. Similarly the third volume, Gambhir Singh and Nara Singh Charit was compiled in 1935 by the same person Gunendra, which recounts the reign of Raja Gambhir Singh (1825-34) and Raja Nara Singh (1844-50), their birth, wars against the Burmese and introduction of Rath Yatra festival (Kang Chingba) and Jalakeli Pala. The fourth and the fifth volume was composed by L. Mangi Singh at the order of Maharaja Bodhachandra in the year

1954, which deals with the reign of Raja Chandrakirti, Surchandra, Kulachandra and Tikendrajit. It is important to remember that Bijoy Panchali texts are commissioned and composed within the court, and written by Bamons pundits. New narratives were introduced through these texts, such as a Brahmanical narrative of the creation/origin of the kingdom whose name Manipur appears in these texts prominently and a new genealogy of the kings of Manipur also emerged in these texts. In Bhagyachandra Charit, it is mentioned that the kingdom was created by lord Shiva in the last Satya yuga. Lord Mahadeva, according to these texts was in search of a place for the divine dance with his consort and he found a place which was flooded. They could only see the tip of Nongmaiching hill, the abode of many traditional deities. Mahadeva stood on this hill and dug a hole with his trisul, a trident and drained the water. Thus the valley came into existence and a dance was performed in which all the gods participated. According to the narratives in the texts, the dance performed was the first Lai Haraoba. The gods gifted the region with many jewels to the region. Ananta, the snake god also apparently took out his precious gem from his head and granted it to the land, and hence it became covered with jewels. The text claims that from that day onwards the region came to be known as Manipur, or land of jewels. These texts also traced the genealogy of the kings of Manipur to Babrubahana, the son of one of the Pandava brothers Arjun and a Manipuri princess Chitrangada. The text narrates how Babrubahana and his queen Urmila failed to conceive an heir to the throne. They prayed to the sun god for a child, which was granted to them in the form an egg which was rejected by queen Urmila. The sun god asked Yamraja to keep the egg till the beginning of the Kali Yuga. When Kali Yuga began, Goddess Laxmi descended to Manipur with the egg so that the child hatched from the egg will become the king. The egg was received by the chief of Angom clan, Pureiromba. When the egg hatched, the boy Jabishtha or Pakhangba was born along with 5 snakes named Sarang-Leishangthem, Luwang, Moirang, Khuman and Khaba. The text further says that another snake emerged from the navel of Pakhangba, and it was named Ningthoucha, and then all the snakes turned into men, and along with Pureirongba became the ancestors of the seven salais/clans which today constitute the Meetei society. Eventually, Pakhangba of the Ningthoucha clan became the first king of Manipur. Similarly, many myths were created by these texts. These texts aggressively sanskritised the names of the kings, the rivers, the mountains and villages and older traditions and deities were identified with Vaishnavism.

By the beginning of the 20th century, these myths were accepted as unquestionable truth by the elites. The ruling elites considered themselves as Kshatriyas, sons of Arjun and as

Aryans. Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India and Hodson's The Meiteis published in 1908 CE created quite a scandal in the royal court after they classified Manipuri as a Tibeto Burman language and not an Aryan. This started a historical debate, perhaps the first one in the region, on the question of origin of Manipur. Pukhrabam Parijat wrote *Manipur Parabrata* in 1917, under the patronage of Maharaja Churachand Singh as a response to Hodson's work and reiterated the Aryan and Hindu origin of the kingdom and its people. As a result of the efforts of the Nikhil (Hindu) Manipuri Mahasabha, a Historical Research committee was formed, and investigations of materials on the history of Manipur were started. Under the guidance of the Mahasabha, Shri Mutum Jhulon studied *Bijoy Panchali*, which carried the ethos of the Meitei elites. John Pratt argues that the first generation of the indigenous writers (Local scholars) in Manipur generally pursued an agenda which saw Manipur as a part of the Sanskrit Indian traditions and that Manipuri had an Aryan origin. Similarly, Phurailatpam Atombabu Sharma, a Brahmin scholar was a pioneering proponent of such views. In 1940, he wrote *Manipur lithas*, where attempts were made to show that Meiteis were Aryans, and Manipur was identified with *Manipurna* from the Mahabharata epic. The genealogy of the ruling Ningthouchas were also linked to Brababohan, the son from the marriage of Hindu demi-god Arjun with Chitrangada, the princess of Manipurna. Atombabu's work was indeed very popular during his times, and influenced many younger historians. Such arguments are also shared by Indian nationalist historians such as R. C. Majumdar and Suniti Kumar Chatterji who claimed these regions for the Indian nation.

However such works and arguments have been widely discredited by generations of historians and political commentators. It began in a movement during the 1930s and 40s which sought not only to reform the corrupt and exploitative Brahmanical Hinduism under the Brahma Sabha, but to reject the Brahmanical religion altogether. They rejected the efforts of Atombabu and others to bring the Meiteis within the Aryan Hindu tradition, and strongly rejected the Aryan origin of the Meiteis. Naoria Phulo, Takhellambam Bokul and others played significant roles during these movements. Naoria Phulo wrote and published as many as 22 books on different subjects on Meitei philosophy and religion, and was directly responding to the works of Atombabu Sharma and Mutum Jhulon Singh. In 1934, he published a work, *Meitei Houbham Wari*, which describes the origin of the Meiteis or Manipuris with a plea to acknowledge their real identity. Similarly, in 1940, he wrote and published another work, 'Eigi Wareng', which criticized the misinterpretations and corruptions followed specially by Manipuris and suggested ways to realize their correct history, religion and identity.

CONDOLENCE

It was with a sense of deep shock and utter disbelief that the news of the sudden expiry of Shri Thokchom Khelen, Special Correspondent of Telegraph at RIMS Hospital due to a cardiac arrest, was received in the morning on the first of April. A man who loved life and was in his profession for about thirty years and had due to his dedication and commitment being regarded as one of the conscience keeper of contemporary Manipur will be missed by not only his family and the journalist fraternity but by the common man who reads his columns and who listens to his dissection of events in the local TV channels.

Shri Khelen is a good human being, with his ever helping hand to new initiatives. He was kind enough to support the initiative of neScholar and related activities and expressed his happiness that the venture was successful and regards it like his child, enquiring now and then about its progress.

We have lost not only a good friend and a keen supporter but also a man committed to his profession. We convey our deep condolence to the bereaved family members and share their grief at the time of their great loss.

May his soul rest in peace in the heavenly abode!

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