

Editorial

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Blessing for Manipur

Finally! the much anticipated extravaganza conceptualized to showcase and promote the diverse socio-cultural heritage and the rich traditional wealth of the state begins today without a glitch. That the State Government spared no expenses and efforts to make an impression to the visiting tourists would be an understatement. The Imphal city has been transformed within an incredibly short span of time into one which can be compared to any other mid-sized or tier II cities in the country- well almost. Despite the best efforts and undoubtedly noble intentions which had made tremendous improvements in the public facilities and certain infrastructures, a closer look into the activities brings to light various clear indications of the haphazard and rushed nature of it all. All is well this time but there seems still lack of proper experience in organizing such a festival. Perhaps of lack of proper experience from the side of the tourism department there is some minor loophole seen. For example even the AIR Imphal News section has not been invited for the inaugural function and even the Director of the IPR has not been invited by name. Editors, got the invitation only after the inaugural function had begun at BOAT.

Now that the Sangai Festival is underway, one cannot help feeling apprehensive about the longevity of the commitment the State Government initiated towards beautification of Imphal City along with other locations where the festival will be organised. If previous instances are any indications, we will be seeing a change in inertia and a visible drop in enthusiasm making the whole efforts an exercise in futility. The incredible potential for attracting tourism in the State has been well known and even documented. From the enchanting misty mountains to the incredibly beautiful ethnic handiworks and crafts, from the inherently hospitable people to the excellent climatic condition, the unbelievably beautiful and mysterious caves and lakes- this small state has it all, and in no small measures. This naturally endowed land has been wasted and neglected for centuries, our inability to see the big picture, occupied as we are in finding ways to secure our own personal lives through means fair or foul being the main reason. With the air connectivity with our neighboring Asian countries a reality now, it would be an act of utter foolishness not to cash in on the euphoria and enthusiasm such a development has created. Without going into the details of the nitty-gritty of tourism and it's pros and cons, it is an undeniable truth that with proper planning, timely and effective checks and due diligence, tourism would only improve the economy, change the perceptions of the local people towards the visitors and their way of life, adopt a more tolerant view of things and most importantly help in propagating our cultures and traditions throughout the world.

For all these to happen, basic infrastructures and basic amenities must be put in place and make the whole state a tourist friendly one. A lot more needs to be done to be where we want this State to be from where we are now. Only a dedicated, committed and sustained effort can make things possible. Working in fits and starts will get us nowhere. ■

GC TONGBRA'S POTRAYAL OF ARMED REVOLUTION IN 'CHENGNI KHUJAI': A STUDY

By- Dr. H. Subasini Devi

Besides being the most versatile playwright in Manipuri literature, Geetchandra Tongbra (b. 6/2/1913 - d. 3/6/1996) better known as GC Tongbra has been recognised as the father of modern Manipuri play. He had left a vast bulk of more than a hundred Manipuri plays, most of which had been published. And in these plays he had incisively dwelt upon a host of social, political and spiritual evils and problems that had been drawn into the fabric of his creation with latest reformist tendencies. With the use of irony and parody, intermingled sometimes with serious critical judgements, Tongbra had courageously tried to make such consciousness dawn upon this dissent beleaguered society.

'Chengni Khujai', tr., 'The Begging Bowl' published in (1972) was written to highlight the sorry state of administrative affairs in the state of Manipur after its inclusion in the Indian dominion in 1949. After the 1949 annexation Manipur was first turned into a Part 'C' state and was in turn transformed into a Union Territory. Its administration was placed under the Central Government. Manipur that has had a long but mostly benign monarchical rule for many centuries would not really forget its past that easily, and now exposed to the present day superficially, the people in the state were filled with discontent. Their anger turned to making the demand of statehood. Eventually it was declared a full-fledged state in 1972 within the Indian dominion. In this play, Tongbra had mainly dwelt upon the pre-statehood period of Manipur when it was under the care of the government in the centre. He slows the reality of central administration, the apathy thereby shown as well as the corrupt practices of the politicians of the state. So, it must be said that The Begging Bowl deals with a very important period of political and social life in this state which may be termed a seminal juncture in its present course of problem infested life.

The Begging Bowl commits itself to express the political vagaries, uncertainties and socially antagonistic situations after the post independence post annexation period in Manipur with the help of symbols in an allegorical construction of dramatic exposure. For this reason GC Tongbra discards the use of normal human names for the characters in this play, instead the dramatis personae in the play take the names of animals such as cattle, dogs, cats and in some cases, the names of divinities to represent the characters in a symbolic way. He seeks to resolve the situation of dishonesty among the state and central political representatives that had resulted into a movement by the people demanding statehood to fulfill the basic needs in life such as food and clothing. He turns out, as it is, to be a person much given to self criticism introspecting on the root cause of the belligerent attitude of the people. He does not always blame the central government for what happened during the period just prior to the declaration of statehood for

Manipur. It had already become common knowledge that funds from the central pool granted to the state government did not always reach the target. Much of the finance usually fell into the hands of unscrupulous people in the state government. All the while the people were suffering hardships in every sphere of life. Now, the people were of the idea that statehood only could bring them solace from their miseries. Their anger veered away for the time being from the evil machinations of the politicians, the administrators, in short, the people in authority.

In fact, the post Union Territory (UT) period in Manipur proved to be the most anxiety filled period to the serious minded thinking people of the state. The people in the government were bent on looting the fund meant for the welfare of the people. The place of the king of Manipur was now taken by these newly exalted powerful, money guzzling, authority misusing sons of democracy. A helpless, beguiled and leaderless people started raising their voices from many corners and their protests were directed towards a multiple of issues, most important of which was the issue of scarcity of food. Famine and food scarcity in Manipur in fact used to be a seldom heard thing. Because this state was the cradle of rice from time immemorial with surplus rice to export elsewhere. It piqued the Manipuri mind to become conscious of their famished state. Tongbra writes in the Begging Bowl:

Sheep: If we have to endure starvation, in sufficient clothing and broken roof tops, let's stop following democracy. What is the use of praying to the Goddess of Democracy? Why should we heap our trust on her? It's better to fill ourselves with two square meals a day in this birth then to get three meals a day in the next. So, let's try to find out the means to do so. Let's establish separate kitchens.

[GC Tongbra, 1972: 39]

People of this state, disgruntled, poorly fed, half clothed, support less and neglected rose against the maladministration of their representatives in the government. Many youths who would be the pillars of society in days to come started taking recourse to armed revolution for the sake of their motherland. To them the present situation in Manipur appeared dark indeed. For, wherever they looked and reached out they found themselves subdued by outsiders. In trade and commerce, in government departments the key positions were in the hands of non-Manipuris even in the period of post-transition in the administrative system of the state. Here post-transition goes for the late period of transition in the 1960s and 70s. Their anger now turned towards the government as well as the outsiders. The central government at this stage became the common enemy to their mind. Many young people irrespective of sex were attracted to the idea of freedom from the yoke of

servitude and they started laying down their lives willingly in what was termed as the course of freedom struggle of Manipur from Indian hegemony. This line of thinking is expressed in the 'The Begging Bowl' in these lines given below which is an excerpt of the conversation between the parrot and the rooster:

Parrot: You and I are sailing in the same boat. We want to revolt to mitigate our hunger. It is better for men to go down fighting than to lead a life of beasts and birds.

Unable to remain patient any longer under the apathy of the central government and the misuse of the state government, common people in the state started thinking of sacrificing their lives instead of suffering a slow death. The playwright shows this feeling of 'do something or die' among the people, particularly among the rebelling youth in these words spoken between two characters in the play - Amedeli and Durga:

Amedeli: When we say we the people of Vaishnavpura no longer want to be under the yoke of Kailash, even though we have to live under broken roofs, what wrong have we done, O Mother garlanded with human heads?

People in this state have been grumbling against the handling of state affairs which seemed like it had been handed over to outsiders and these people had been handling the administration whichever way they desired. On the other hand, the politicians who were representing the state were becoming puppets in the hands of the Central administration and that instead of sincerely planning development of the state, these representatives had started living for their own sake by trying to amass wealth as best as they could - such thoughts have started taking roots in the mind of the people of Vaishnavpura - the name which Tongbra used for Manipur.

Consequently, the people of Vaishnavpura as the playwright called, raise their voice to secede from the union for they would like to share the sufferings of the revolutionaries who have been spending miserable lives in the forests for they are striving to achieve an egalitarian society where is none is rich and none poor. The dialogue between 'Man 2' and Takhel reflects this kind of thought. It goes as the following:

Man 2: In order to rule ourselves in freedom!

Takhel: We want self rule to share everything equally. Why don't you come to join this fight? Why don't you offer whatever you could in this freedom struggle? Why don't you lend your help in our struggle to feed ourselves? Why don't you well being people want to join this struggle and take your share of suffering?

The playwright feels that there is something wrong with this democracy in this country and the system of administration of the state government that had paved the way to untimely

deaths for so many of the youth who had thought nothing of sacrificing their young lives. Again he sheds light on how the union government looks cock-eyed at the concerns of this little state.

The people's representatives are shown always worrying too much about safe keeping their positions in the government neglecting their responsibilities. This is shown ironically in the symbol of Durga, the goddess who had transformed herself into the form of Bhairavi Durga with a long garland of youthful heads. The security people are shown to torture the rebellious youngsters and in this context a character Amedeli is made to inspire the people to rise up in arms in demand for a sovereign state. The playwright feels chagrined at the way the Central Government had treated the state with negligence and how it exults when there is dichotomy amidst the people. In the words of Bhairavi he exclaims:

Bhairavi: Why did you show so much affection for the ignorant subjects? Now there is going to be a fight among the underfed and also among the underclothed so that the people in authority could enjoy the show. I am also going to fulfil my wish. Why do you disturb me when I am about to enjoy such a spectacle?

Here Bhairavi is compared to the central government which the playwright imagines is ready to witness a fight between the army in their pay and the undernourished higgledy-piggledy rebelling fighters in Vaishnavpura. The idea of unyoking the control to become free from all these maladies like negligence, unequal treatment, lack of basic amenities in life and also the lack of general development started hitting on his mind making him to come to the conclusion that only complete independence would be the answer for this people for all their miseries. The idea is beautifully expressed in the dialogue between the cat and the Rooster in this play.

Cat: If there is unity in Vaishnavpura, we will be able to do away with the constraints that are upon us today. We would be able to share everything among ourselves. Otherwise we should be prepared to sacrifice ourselves in the fight for freedom.

The play gives a clear message to us to free ourselves from such evils as hampering our development and to achieve this he views even armed revolution as an alternative.

Among the political plays of GC Tongbra, 'The Begging Bowl', is quite remarkably bold enough to show the stark reality of Manipuri society. He is able to express his as well as the peoples' mind without compunction. This play is a social critique as well because he is not only concerned with finding fault with others. He had particularly shown the characteristics weakness of the state by giving the symbolic name Vaishnavpura which is akin to what may be termed as spinelessness. ■



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