

# Editorial

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## A take on Freedom of Media

The advancement in information technology has made today's world a 'Global village' - the term first coined by Canadian-born author Marshall McLuhan. Man born at the extreme corner of Far East Asiatic countries knows, cry and pray for the kind of disasters that happen in Middle East countries or in Latin America. Installation of internet technologies to cell phones which every human being can afford makes the people of our Earth-whose circumference is estimated at about 40,075 Kilometer staying at a communicable distance. Now every human being equipped with cell phone can now talk or stay in touch with any of their friends or relatives staying thousand miles away. Point bringing here is about the changes in the theory of mass media in relevance to today's journalism. The very concept at which the older generation considered 'proximity' as a characteristic of news is somewhat losing its foot.

Professor M.L Stein, the then chairman of Department of Journalism, California State University, Long Beach, California in his book "Shaping the News" in 1974 wrote that people are more interested in what happens in their neighbours. The one time presumption that 'a dog fight on Main Street is of more interest to our readers than fifty thousand foreign troops killed in battle somewhere' seems to have no relevance in today's society. Readers are now interested about happenings at distance places if the subject matters is his or her interest.

However, another characteristic of news - 'Prominence' on the hand is becoming a matter of more interested subjects for almost all readers. People now want to know what had happen to their leaders, celebrity or the bureaucrats irrespective of where they stay or which country they reside. Every news readers are eager to know the story of successful personality.

Points bringing up here are not to lecture on what is news and what should be reported but this is an attempt to make some of our critic to understand on why the newspaper especially the kind of ours often published story about real heroes or events that happen far away from our state. Sometimes a mere insignificant event at which some people are of vested interested are often left of and the result is not always good for we in the media fraternity of Manipur state in particular. The other kind of pressure that the media persons sometimes remain helpless is their intentions to get publish their story.

Manipur or say Imphal is not a safe place for even VIPs who are escorted by security personnel days and night. It is an open secret that almost all the politicians including MLAs or Ministers or even the Chief Ministers have linked with the UGs, the only thing we don't have is the proof.

So, what would be the security of those working with the media if in case, some of the individuals or rebels force us to publish stories of their interest. Being taken up this profession, we always stand with our ethics and there is no question of compromising ethics while publishing stories. But when the government said that this should not be published and this should be published then where is the freedom of speech provided under the constitution of our country. Government machineries can invite news editors and can discussed about the content on objectivity reason but dictate the media. Calls of bandh or blockade by any organisation are in some way an essential news items for media houses living in conflict zone - because it is for the safety and security of the common people that the government machineries cannot guarantee their safety. We have PCI guidelines, local code of conduct and this should be respected.

Bottom line is that media should not be harassed at any cost for any reason because we chose this profession not merely to earn for living but with full intention to serve our nation.

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## ARMED CONFLICT AND NATIONALISM IN MANIPURI POETRY

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The attempt for a review of literature through the lens of the existing armed conflict in the state, which is founded on a nationalistic ideology and accompanied with a strong desire for self-determination, is a new perspective at the journey of Manipuri literature. This is a departure from the previous concept of literature as 'arts-for-art-sake,' to view human life and literature as more closely-bounded. In trying to understand what aspects of the nationalistic movement and the armed conflict triggered by this nationalism are being delineated in Manipuri literature, it becomes necessary to trace anew the footsteps of the nationalistic and armed conflict movements in Manipuri society.

On the one hand, literature is art — the creative imagination of the writer is present at all times. Truly speaking, it is also not possible to present the images of a living society in its actuality in literature. Therefore, the main focus in this essay is to trace how the poets of Manipuri literature viewed the nationalistic and armed conflict movements in this land, what were their responses, in what way did they try to express this, was their poetic craftsmanship (style, diction, form, etc.), a movement of its own, and how did this development again inspire their writings.

The nationalistic movement developed during the first half of the 20th Century in Manipur. Generally known as the Jananeta Hijam Irawat's period, the first half of the 20th Century was a time when a strong movement for socio-political reformation, cultural and religious revitalization took place in the land in a manner unprecedented in the earlier history of the land. The period was also a time when Manipuri literature grew anew in a renaissance period. The renowned writers of that time started singing an invocation for a new journey of Manipuri literature, praising their mother tongue and native literature. Among them Dr. Lamabam Kamal (1899-1935) warmly welcomed the emergence and new awakening of Manipuri literature after being immersed in Bengali literature for a long time:

*After a long time,  
Enters Ima Meitei Chanu  
Inside the temple of Meitei Literature  
Wicker basket overflowing with flowers  
Let's place at Ima's feet.*  
[Lamabam Kamal, Meitei Chanu]

About this time poet Khwairakpam Chaoba (1895-1950) strove against the strong winds and storms of Hindunisation which placed Bengali and Sanskrit languages at a higher position and status, and worked hard to break the then prevailing prejudice against Meiteilon as a language unable to fully express one's aspirations and inner thoughts, to bring Meiteilon back to its rightful position:

*Our impoverished language  
The ignorant say  
Meitei poets will come.*

[Chaoba, Meitei Kabi]  
Thus, these voices of new awakening and invocations of the mother tongue and national literature by these renowned poets of a new Manipuri literature, nationalism began to germinate in Manipuri poetry. However, a political consciousness, which is the back bone of nationalism, was not fully developed in their writings. Their view was mostly a new perception built up in strong reaction against the existence of Bengali language as vernacular, the absence of reading and study materials in Meiteilon, as well as the predominant perception that Meiteilon is an inferior language, incapable of adequately expressing one's feelings.

This perception is more distinct in the poetry of Jananeta Hijam Irawat (1895-1951) whose concept of Mother Manipur is an image built up by his poetic vision and intellect, and based on the foundations of nationalism. Orphaned from his parents at the early morning of life, Irawat strove for the welfare of his motherland even putting his life at risk. Contradictory to this, he was alienated by his motherland, became a prisoner in jail, and was not allowed to enter his beloved motherland. Such conditions only served to increase his memories and love of his mother and his motherland. The remembrance of such a mother and love of motherland is the twin streams blended beautifully in Irawat's poetry:

*In the silent night's  
Late hours  
In the cool moonlight  
That feeble voice  
Calling, 'Ima' -  
Who's it?*

[Hijam Irawat, *Imagi Puja*]  
With the depiction in this poem of a pure image of the inner soul of a poet whole-heartedly in love with his motherland, a nationalistic style of writing was initiated in Manipuri poetry.

A matter of discussion at this juncture is why the issue of nationalism came into Manipuri society and literature. The most important reason for this is that though geographically small, Manipur had existed for more than 2000 years as an independent, self-ruled kingdom, with a rich treasure-trove of arts and culture, language, religion, spirituality and history. This land which existed freely, with the power and strength of a nation, was taken over by Aryan cultural imperialism in the 18th Century and by European political imperialism in the 19th Century. The consequence of all these was the suppression of the people's life ethics, their self-determination and socio-political and cultural identity.

The expression of the unbearable anguish and angst of a people kept under suppression by the above-mentioned two facets of imperialism became the main picture of nationalism in Manipuri society and literature. But in the 18th Century, especially during the reign of Meidingngu Garibniwaj (1709-1748), when the strong winds of the Aryan cultural imperialism blew through the land, even the strong efforts of the scholars of the land bore no fruits as the king himself stood firm. On the other hand, in the 19th Century, when the powerful British among the European political imperialists interfered in the governance of Manipur during the reign of Gambhir Singh Maharaj (1825-1834), the people of the land rose courageously and tried to protect the national identity of the land. In the Anglo-Manipuri war of 1891, even while knowing that they will definitely lose at the hands of the shrewd British with their vast armies and modern weaponry, the Manipuri people of that time battled till their last moments to protect the freedom of their motherland, exhibiting that this is the strength and courage of Manipuri people. Manipur came under British rule after this battle, the six-year old Churachand was put on the throne, native rule was set up, and a distressing

puppet administration (with the British as real power) came into being.

At such a point of history, Janneta Hijam Irawat was born as a rare son of Mother Manipur. As goes the saying that the morning shows the day, Irawat's revolutionary zeal started exhibiting from his student days onwards in Johnstone School, when he led a protest corporal punishment of students by the teachers, thus laying the foundation for the long journey of his later life and preparing his stance against oppressions, persecutions and injustice.

In 1922, Irawat published a hand-written magazine titled *Meitei Chanu* and started his service to Manipuri literature. Through his essays on current issues published in important journals of the period such as *Yakairol*, he tried hard to give direction to the Manipuri society and inspire the people. At a time when weren't books to be used in school, he was at the forefront of writing books for children's education. Alongwith many poets and writers of that time like Chaoba, Kamal, Anganghal, etc., he formed a literary group known as 'Sahitya Sanmela' in 1932. Not only this, in 1935, he was the first secretary of the newly formed Manipuri Sahitya Parishad which still survives till date as the oldest literary group in the state. Deeply interested in dance, music, sports as well as arts and culture, Irawat himself was sportsman running around in the fields. He was also an actor and founder of the Manipur Dramatic Union (MDU). The emblem of this union which depicts two crossed ploughs was designed by Irawat himself. Irawat who played an important role in spreading the movement initiated by the Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA) entered into marital life with Khomdonsana, the niece of the then King Maharaj Churachand - daughter of the King's elder brother Chandras. As a member of the Sadar Panchayat Court, he held a high position in the Manipur Administration.

However, the King, who was also president of the Manipur State Darbar, as well as the Brahma Sabha confined all matters related to religion, religious rituals, tradition and customary issues in their hands, denying Irawat his due authority. Nevertheless he strove relentlessly and continued to stand against the oppressive customary laws, excessive taxation and the system of untouchability promulgated by the Hinduisation process - a system which permits a person to be ostracized by saying 'untouchable' and yet can shake off the 'untouchability' tag after paying some money, which gave more sufferings to the poor, common people and the farmers. By forming the Seva Committee, he initiated funerals and religious rituals for those persons deemed untouchable and ostracized, and hence could not be given proper funeral due to poverty. For those poor people unable to perform the shraddh ritual, he himself along with his followers would sing and conduct the rituals.

Not only this by establishing the Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha in 1934, he enabled the emergence of the first political party in Manipur. With the removal of the word 'Hindu,' from the name of the organization in 1938 during the fourth meeting of the Mahasabha at Chinga (in present-day Imphal West District), the Mahasabha became a full-fledged political party. Among the thirteen resolutions taken during this significant meeting, are included important resolutions such as establishment of a 'Purnadaitwashi sashan', election of representatives by ballot voting, establishment of village panchayats and the slogan that 'the one who holds the plough should be owner of the paddy fields.' [Loitam Yaima & RK Maipaksana, ed., 1983:171]

Around this time, the monopoly of newly-founded rice mills in the task of de-husking paddy (which hitherto was the economic activity of individual women and women-groups) and sending it to other parts of British India, and the resultant famine due to such over-export created an artificial famine in Manipur. The situation came to such a point that even if there was money in hand, rice was not available for purchase in the market. In the consequent women's agitation of 1939 protesting against this development, an event now known in history as 'Anisuba Nupi Lan' (The Second Women's War), Irawat played an important role by giving a direction to the women's upsurge. In 1940 a new political party called Manipur Praja Sammelani was formed with Irawat as president. The first woman's political organization Mahila Sammelani too was formed under Irawat's leadership. On the charges of treason and rebellion, he was imprisoned for three years (1940-1943). While in jail, he pioneered many agitations for jail reformation. Here he met many political leaders of the time and expanded his political understanding. After his release from jail, Irawat was however not allowed to return to his motherland. While in Sylhet Jail, he wrote what is now regarded as the masterpiece of his literary works - 'Imagi Puja', which is a collection of his poems. In 1943 he became a communist and attended the first congress of the Communist Party of India (CPI) at Mumbai (then Bombay). In 1945 as soon as he got permission to re-enter Manipur, he set up many organisations for students, youth, farmers and women. Not only this, he ran for elections to the Manipur Assembly as a candidate from Utiou. But unfortunately while organizing a huge people's meeting at Pungdongbam (in present-day Imphal East District) in protest against the proposed grouping of Manipur, Tripura, Lushai Hills, Karbi Anglong and Silchar to form a new geographical entity called 'Purbanchal Pradesh,' the police lathi-charged, and in the resultant struggle between police and people who had come to participate in the meeting, the police Officer-in-charge (OC) himself was shot dead by a stray bullet while giving the firing order. Due to this turn of events Irawat left the place and went underground. A price of ten thousand rupees was placed on his head.

Yet even while he was underground Irawat did not cease his work. He expressed his thoughts and views through his self-published journal entitled 'Anouba Yug'. Though Irawat breathed his last soon after in a place called Tangbo in Burma on September 26, 1951, it is without doubt that the nationalist movement grew strength in the Manipuri society in the first half of the 20th Century under his leadership. In the opinion of Professor N. Sanajaoba, in September 1920, the closure and boycott of the market by the people to stop the export of rice was the first kindling of the torch of Manipuri nationalism, and the establishment of 'Apoka Marup' in 1930 by Naoriya Phulo (1888-1941) in Cachar with the sole aim of revivalism of Meitei literature and way of life in 1945 is the birth of Meitei Nationalism. [N. Sanajaoba, 1997: 2-5]

(To be continued)