

Editorial

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Caution for the cocksure

In a state as ours steeped in symbolism, it comes as no surprise to anybody when any developmental project or progressive step which started off with much aplomb and show of sincere intent ultimately comes out a cropper. Perhaps the public, having had to face the frustrating situation for far too long, have become inured to the unfortunate reality to a degree, and therefore the ability to be awed and shocked by the still rampantly prevailing irregularities and malpractices. Is it that the people have inadvertently got used to the system and have made peace with the unfortunate facts of the present government? Or is it that the general public have given up on the collective hope of any improvement on the part of the state government and instead chalked out the means to survive and prosper in their own ways? Or worse, still, have the people become attuned to the system and have become a part of it in spite of the apparent flaws instead of fighting and resisting its regressive influence on the society? While a definite answer is a distant possibility, the unfortunate fact remains that the state as a whole has been regressing backwards on all parameters despite the state government shouting itself hoarse to the contrary.

Corruption, coercion and commodification of any and every progressive aspect have become the norm rather than an exception. Selection of candidates for essential services has effectively become an auctioning exercise with the opportunity going to the highest bidders. The result - as everybody is experiencing - is inefficient, unqualified and inexperienced administration. While the voice condoning the manner of governing the state has been unanimous and loud, it remains to be seen when everybody stand up to corruption and coercion against the unscrupulous bureaucrats and officials. As long as the general public gives in to pressures and prefers the easy way out, corruption and coercion is bound to thrive.

Recent indications however present a ray of hope for an alternative and resurgent government in the form of the BJP revving up its efforts to shore up support from the public, and by the look of it, the party is doing a good job. There is however the danger of a newbie getting heady with power and deviating from the set objectives although those steering the party are old war horses who have been in the thick of politics long enough. It would be wise for the aspiring ministers and MLAs to observe and learn from the mistakes of the previous government and formulate means and ways to rectify them. Of late, a few political turncoats have started bad-mouthing the state government - a serious concern indicating that these turncoats are yet to forego the old habit and mentality of reactive and recriminatory politics. Their cocksure attitude has made many keen observers to sit up and take notice of the developments. The only way to proceed is to practice progressive politics and pragmatic governance. Transparency, inclusivity, expeditiousness and resoluteness should be the hallmarks of effective and enduring governance. Confusing the job for the person will bring everybody back to square one. Presidents, Prime Ministers, Chief Ministers and MLAs are descriptions of jobs that need to be performed and not privileges that should be abused.

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They have every right to co-exist with us on this mother planet. Thus, to our ethos and morality, we should also include how we live and treat with animals. Neither can we claim to have love in our heart if we have no love for animals. We can never be truly in touch with our soul if we do not realize that animals can suffer pain and sorrow like us. Hence, we should defend the animals when they are being treated with cruelty. When we save an animal and learn to live with them, we are not just keeping them alive but keeping an act of compassion, kindness and inspiration to our children and our children's children. With this we can also leave behind a wonderful legacy of working towards a better environment. With this day, we must work hard to achieve the goals of peace, safety, and coexistence. We should not forget that by taking care of our animals we also take care of ourselves. Animal rights is an ideal in which all non-human animals are entitled to the possession of their own existence and that their most basic interests. Almost all religions around the world espouse some forms of animal rights. They maintain that animals should no longer be viewed as property or used as food, clothing, research subjects, entertainment, or

beasts of burden. Cruelty to animals is the infliction by human suffering or harm upon any non-human. More narrowly, it can be the causing of harm or suffering, such as killing animals for food, for their fur or even their tusks. With approximately 65 billion animals killed annually for food. Killing of animals in religions procession should be stopped immediately. The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act was enacted in India in 1960 to prevent the infliction of unnecessary pain or suffering on animals. Now-a-days, we find rearing of animals of our country origin in the houses, hospitals and farms to exhibit them which is a punishable offence under the Law and such animals should immediately be handed over to the Forest department. The country also has the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 to deal with all sorts of wildlife crimes. But, whatever the law we may have, the most important is we need to realize and understand about animals and feel the love care for them. If it is so then we can proud that we are really participating on this World animal day. Let us not harm the animals today and before that, think twice for an earth without the animals.

The writer can be reached at munall@yahoo.in

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Haloi Taret: Dangerous Beauty, Ecological Balance and the Male Submission

By Rubani Yumkhaibam

Is the female beauty dangerous? How is the construct of the invisible female gaze that preys on the human males achieved? How does society imagine overarching female beauty? These are a few questions that can be recovered from the existing perceptions of Haloi Taret, the seven beautiful nymphs of the Manipuri cultural imaginary. Haloi Taret are a part of the belief system and the creation stories of the Meitei Cosmology. The narratives surrounding the mystery and magic of Haloi Taret represent them as a symbol of exquisite beauty, danger and insanity.

The essence of Haloi Taret narratives can be briefly summarised in the following manner:

Haloi Taret are the malignant yet exquisitely beautiful invisible spirits of the ether, they are also believed to be lurking on the face of the earth mostly at odd hours of the day and night. Haloi Taret do not kill humans; rather they make human "victims" lose their reason and logic. Individuals affected by an encounter with Haloi Taret cannot think or act coherently. Afflicted by a sickness akin to madness, the "victims" seem to have entered in a different world that is exclusive of the ones unaffected; they can be treated on the intervention of a traditional maiba/maibi who can engage in a dialogue with Haloi Taret through the intermediary of the sick person. The treatment is complete with the food offering made to Haloi Taret (Haloi Taret decide which food items and delicacies to be offered). Haloi Taret engages with both men and women; however, it is believed that they desire the male "victims" more than the female ones.

In *New Folktales of Manipur* (2016), James Oinam retells the story of one Haloi. A brief summary is provided here:

Halois are the female divinities who married mortal men at a time when there was no spatial separation between the mortal and immortal realms of existence. After all the immortals including the Halois had left the earth for the netherworld, one Haloi remained on the earth. The Haloi was extremely beautiful, and her beauty made the king forget all the accusations labelled against her (the charge that she harmed the humans). Charmed by the Haloi's extraordinary beauty, Purenba risked his life by marrying the Haloi, which unfortunately entailed a defiance of Sitapa Mapu's decree that humans and Halois can no longer intermarry. The Haloi gave birth to Khamba and Khamu. Following a trail of events, the Haloi left the earth for the netherworld, but not before predicting the hardship and the final victory of her children. Purenba succumbed to a curse, the result of defying Sitapa Mapu's decree, and was beheaded by Thonglen.

In both Oinam's narrative and the oral sources, Halois are associated with alluring beauty. Although the Haloi in Oinam's narrative is shown in a sympathetic way (that she harmed no mortals), yet her marriage with Purenba was responsible for his death. Notwithstanding the dire consequences that would follow, Purenba decided to marry the beautiful Haloi. Ultimately it is her beauty that made him choose death and destruction.

It is believed that humans' encounter with Haloi Taret entails from the Haloi Taret gaze. When an individual crosses path with such a gaze, the encounter

happens. While such a gaze is perceived as a chance encounter, it is also believed that few individuals are more prone to Haloi Taret encounter, such as individuals with weaker aura. In this trajectory, both the particular individual as an object of Haloi Taret gaze and the resultant encounter are partly chosen and partly accidental. (In this sense, can we call the humans "victims"?) Once the gaze falls on the particular individual, she/he is afflicted by a sickness. Delirium, outbursts of dancing, singing, unintelligible talk, etc., are some of the marked signs of the sickness.

Although, both men and women can be affected, one of the most intriguing aspects of the encounter is the chosen male and the effects on him. The encounter with the male is the subject of this article. The extraordinary contact with the beautiful Haloi Taret acquires the character of seduction with the human male. The visible symptoms on the males, dance, songs, incoherent talk, etc., which we see as manifestations of lunacy, are the consequences of the intoxicating contact with which Haloi Taret charm, seduce and retain the male. It is required to note that in many visual depictions seven beautiful Haloi Taret engaging in bathing, swimming and relaxing are observed by a besotted male from a distance. However, it is not merely an exhibition of the captivating beauty that makes the seduction enduring, they also use magic and illusion to create the presence of food as a way of securing the human male. The male relishes the food in a state of joy and trance. The act of feeding the male increases the intensity of erotic play and bonding between the male and Haloi Taret. Thus, the interplay of food, beauty, and feeding/hunger is a strong factor in the process of manipulation and submission of the male.

The power and manipulation by Haloi Taret is also manifested in the treatment of the ones affected. In the state of the perceived illness, the chosen male is considered as dwelling in a temporal state of insanity, a context that ensues an exclusive contact between Haloi Taret and the human. The spirit of the Haloi Taret never leaves the human until such time their demand is fulfilled (demand for food), which also points to the symbolic isolation of the chosen one from other humans in the surrounding. Haloi Taret can thus cut off the traffic between the humans and the everyday working world by transporting the former in the incoherent world of dream, magic and illusion. As long as the "victim" stays within that transfixed world, Haloi Taret fully control them. The intriguing thing is throughout this exclusive contact, the chosen one (usually seen as sick) is not actually suffering, he is in ecstacy.

Haloi Taret's contact with humans is motivated by their need for food. In the creation moments of the Meitei cosmology, while trying to create the human form, various spirits and creatures were created before humans were ultimately created. Haloi Taret were among those creations. Finally, a question arise - how would these creations survive? Sitapa Mapu determined that in the natural scheme of survival, the other creatures would survive on the food offerings made by the humans. Thus, the symptoms of sickness on the humans are a way of procuring food sustenance from the human world, an effective survival script. Once the food

offering is made, the human whose consciousness hitherto exists at a different level of reality is released back into the ordinary reality. In this scheme of possession and release, the encounter and the consequent seeming dislocation are a medium of striking the balance Creation has ordained. In this ecological balance, the humans cannot be considered as victims.

Magical food, dreamlike sequences, inconceivable dimensions of reality are the tropes often employed in the cultural and literary imaginary about the deceit and seduction of the female beauty. A good example of this construct is John Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", one of the characteristic poems of the Romantic Movement in Britain. In the poem, the mysterious and beautiful woman that the knight encounters in a dreamlike atmosphere left him wandering in a state of madness, enslavement and hunger for the magical food. The poem's preoccupation with ruins, isolation and exotic beauty finds deep echoes in our understanding of Haloi Taret - the secret art of manipulation and submission that makes a man a slave to the devastatingly beautiful women, and the intoxicating power of the shadowy food being fed to the male. The female gaze suffused in the wild untamed nature and the elements of the wind pose as a danger to the human male. Generally males have the privileges in society to wander free of restraints that women encounter. However, an encounter with Haloi Taret leaves the man devoid of the geometry of reason and shame - he dances, he sings, he talks to himself. He becomes an isolated man, and in the civilized society that is oriented towards the male consciousness, an isolated man could be perceived as a madman.

So, is the female beauty dangerous? Exquisite female beauty is culturally perceived as a kind of overarching quality, a distraction to men. The understanding that female beauty stupefies men has succeeded in constructing crimes of passion and sins, potent weapons that have kept the female movement in control, thereby separating the good women from the bad ones. Thus, in popular culture, powerful women are constructed as manipulating their "feminine guile and sexuality" so as to bring doom and destruction to men. One of the greatest examples is the depiction of Cleopatra in the Hollywood, the veritable playboy of the Western World. Interestingly, Elizabeth Taylor, an actress who was portrayed as a sex symbol throughout her career made a very memorable Cleopatra among the movie goers. However, Cleopatra's danger was not her looks (attribution of sensual beauty to Cleopatra is debated among the historians); it was her learning, knowledge and expertise on politics that the Romans must fear. She was the patron of the library at Alexandria, that library the Muslim, Christians and Romans rulers considered as a threat to their power. The Cleopatra we see in the popular imaginary is not always the real Cleopatra. We can also ask, have we seen the beauty of Haloi Taret? A person who has not encountered Haloi Taret has not witnessed the beauty of Haloi Taret; we condition ourselves to believe that only a captivating beauty can create such utter madness in men. Women are expected to be beautiful, at the same time a beautiful woman that wields power is considered

dangerous. That is why a femme fatale that yields power, success and influence through her own charm, sexuality and mental wit are projected as dangerous and often made to meet a tragic end.

The narrative of Haloi Taret is an astute reversal of the male gaze. Males are not free from the lurking power and gaze of Haloi Taret. Women have been subjected to various coercive effects of the male gaze - rape, erasure of agency, punishment are a few instances. However, the constructed "victimisation" against which the commentary has argued is not an erasure or a coercion of the chosen male. The rapturous daze and the interplay of submission and merriment, evidenced in the dance and song of the chosen male, hint at the sense of participation and consent with which the gaze of Haloi Taret engage the male. As mentioned before the encounter is the working of the Cosmological Balance, and thus Haloi Taret are also the guardians of the nature. Haloi Taret are preservation, not destruction.

Another important aspect of Haloi Taret is their kinship defined by friendship and sisterhood. The resultant female bonding is a resonant space where in they share food and sustenance. A strong note of egalitarian value bonds them. It is also their togetherness that instils fear in the humans. Haloi Taret continues to be the female force that is outside the sphere of the male power. The invisible gaze of Haloi Taret dispersed in the wind is symbolic of female force that cannot be harnessed by the male hegemony. We can try to avert the gaze of Haloi Taret by wearing amulets and stones, but we cannot domesticate the gaze once it is befallen upon us.

Amidst their role in the construct of ecological balance, Haloi Taret are also a lonely figure that does not mingle with the belligerent and competitive human environment. Women who choose to live in solitude are looked upon as a threat to the functioning of the heteronormative rationality; they are asked - Why they are strong? Why they do not need men? Why they are self-sufficient? Mention may be made that the cultural stigma of spinster is stemmed from the self-sufficiency of the unmarried women. Whereas in the Middle Ages, spinsters were well-praised for their economic self-sufficiency; they chose love and marriage out of personal choices, not for financial security. The invisibility and aloneness of Haloi Taret are a statement against the socio-cultural compulsion on women to marry, to be a mother, to be a beloved, to sacrifice personal space, and so forth.

Even in the new millennium women's labour is continually exploited by family and society; unfortunately women's participation in paid employment outside the domain of the home has often failed to liberate them from the regime of patriarchy, mostly in the name of "labour of love" and familial bonding. We need to rethink and redefine what freedom means for women. Haloi Taret give/gift us vital political lessons for reclaiming and owning our sexuality, resources, female bonding, and the need to care for ourselves. Ultimately, the danger of Haloi Taret lies in the female self-sufficiency, not merely the extraordinary beauty. They are an ambiguous figure of agency, threat and the object of male anxiety.

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