

Diasporas of Gods, Forgotten Histories, and Cultural Identity: Religion, Power, and Resistance in Postcolonial Manipur

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This paper explores how religion, history, and power have shaped cultural identity in Manipur within a postcolonial context. It examines the spread of Hinduism and Christianity and shows how these religious influences reconfigured indigenous traditions and produced tensions over belonging and historical memory. By engaging with the political merger of Manipur with India and the workings of secular governance, the study highlights how dominant national narratives marginalised local voices. The paper also foregrounds the role of women, vernacular politics, and indigenous languages in sustaining resistance. Figures such as Rani Gaidinliu and Hijam Irabot illustrate how subaltern histories continue to challenge official accounts of the nation.

Keywords: Identity Politics; Indigenous Religions; Nation-State; Feminist Historiography; Minority Cultures

Introduction

There could be no politics without religion in this present era of interculturalism and transculturation. Religion syncretism in Manipur gave rise to a new and unique essence in its culture and identity. The traditional primordial religion became an important factor in the struggle of a new identity after the state merged to India. The paper focus on the role of politics played by ‘diasporas of Gods’ and effectiveness of negating histories in building a united nation.

Religious Diasporas and the Crisis of Indigenous Identity:

It is tempting to go quickly over the history of Manipur for its recurrent resistance with British colonial rule as an external oppression and the internal oppression which came from feudal kings of Manipur, before one pops up the question of Gandhi affirmed monitoring of religion, politics and secularism. In the eighteenth century, Vaishnavism was adopted by the feudal kings of Manipur without the consent of ‘Meitei

scholars or intellectuals’. Likewise, the tribal communities inhabiting the hills of Manipur adopted Christianity when the British missionaries came in the 20th century. The rise of Hinduism and Christianity created a cultural hegemony to the people of Manipur, largely between two plural communities, namely the Meiteis and the tribal. This created a fear psychosis and xenophobia among the people of Manipur that an ethnic rivalry will create among the Christians, Hindus and Meiteis. The small community or microscopic minority would be over swarmed by the diasporas of Hindu and Christian God, which means the loss of identity for indigenous small community of Manipur. K.S Subramanian in his work State, Policy and Conflicts in Northeast India commented that, “an influential section of Meiteis saw Vaishnavism as oppressive and sought to revive their own ancient religion of Sanamahi (Manipuri religion), free of the Hindu caste oppression” (Subramanian).

Nehruvian religious secularism based on ‘substantive equality’ slightly contradicts

with Gandhian secularism based on ‘formal equality’. In this matter, an important strand emerge to testify the monopoly played by ‘independent India’ in the ‘State’ (Manipur) by using the same mechanisms of hegemonising fragments of opposite pole using old decorum of European Liberalism in religion to show its superiority without limitation, which was a control mechanism for the administration. The articulation of such facades for the suppression of one identity would be often seen as reactionary.

Secularism, State Power, and the Forced Merger of Manipur:

Establishing a distinct conceptualisation of “independent India’s” failures in understanding Manipur in October 1949, Manipur was forcibly merged to India by ignoring the conventional interim government and also the new constitutional monarchy. The merger agreement became the ground of political tensions and conflict. Before India got independence, with the lapse of British paramountcy, Manipur became one of the first states in India to have free election with adult franchise. It would be worthy to mention that constitution-making (July 1947) was completed before ‘independent India’ got independence. However, this furore led to the birth of ‘insurgency’ in the state as a political response and its forcible integration without the consent of stakeholders. K.S Subramanian observed:

“The complex history of absorption of Manipur into India explains the continuing popular suspicion and resentment felt by Manipuri’s over moves and motives of the

government of India. The proliferation of insurgency movements in Manipur fighting for political autonomy and even complete independence must be placed in this context” (Subramanian).

The newly birthed pet ‘theocratic policy’ wipes the autonomy of independence. With the rise in pluralism among Hindu nationalists, minority religions were cordoned apart to a great extent. Arguably, global world support ‘liberal pluralism’ though it still has a complex backdrop in becoming the marker of identity politics. In establishing degrees and equations of freedom and democracy (belonging), Richard Buckham writes, analysing the cultural institutions of emotions, “a so-called freedom-loving society will be no more than a jungle of competing interests unless it values other goods as well as freedom. The pioneers of modern democracy took this for granted, but we can no longer afford just to assume it” (Buckham).

But independent India’s effort to establish secularism with sensitivity to a plurality of religions, made the people retrospect without the essence of freedom, but instead having the idea of complete solid belonging. Radically, Isaiah Berlin says, “freedom is so porous that there is little interpretation that it seems able to resist” (Berlin).

Now reflecting jeopardise topic of adopting and adapting distinctive intra-cultures and languages, Manipur merged to India to contribute in livening the Indian nation into composite chain of culture and identity. But with the lack of rapport and understanding between different ethnic

groups with different cultures and religions, it led to the emergence of the Hindu religion as the only religion of mankind or as a 'hegemonising universal religion' like British Christianity in 19th century all over the world. Propagating different kinds of psychological thresholds in histories and 'cultural anthropology' constitute the right to freedom of expression which is there in the Indian constitution. Unfortunately, there is not a single chapter with correct and adequate information in the syllabi of Indian history about Manipur, though Manipur has a long history even before its merger with the Indian state. Such dominance in marking and upbringing in one identity led the typical indigenous people mindset to falsely believe the clarity of law. Lack of understanding ones histories and identity led to racial attack and prejudice in one's religion. Ethnic revolutionary fighter always took law in their own hand in communal clash. Indian constitution is not going to be a-one-man-army throughout the time.

Vernacular Memory, Insurgency, and the Politics of Forgetting:

The historical imagination crediting nation heroes mostly emerges from the act of anti-colonial movements. The linear rise of resistance movements seems to have been done only by Gandhi and Nehru in independent India. Pluralism in the public domain neglects the historical memories of minority communities. The manipulation of these memories in the public domain becomes only commentary avoiding the idea of reflection as an integral part of building the

nation. Thus the collective memory of the nation was a selective one. It also reconstructs society, forging unity and resistance between minority communities. Since 'independent India' set itself up as a supreme power over minority communities, resistance emerged in the shape of practising politics in 'vernacular'. Though it is subjected to correction, one might argue that the self-styled-contradiction between followers of Nehru and Gandhi led to resistance emerging from south Indians, north-east Indians and especially Kashmir in the northern part of India.

Jangkhomang Guite, writing to Economic and Political Weekly, asserted that "the rise of historical events to prominence in public spaces is a two-way traffic: what was vernacular in the colonial period becomes official today and what was official memory then has been cast into oblivion now". Imperial Britain colonialism ended long ago but our nationalism starts appearing more prolifically by remembering our heroes now. Alternate versions of 'Asura' were implanted through historical monuments, museum and war memorials.

Women, Resistance, and the Feminist Foundations of Manipuri History:

Indian history would be incomplete without Rani Gaidinliu and Hijam Irabot. This is an example of the slippage of many valuable insights of strong and independent minded women from the pre-colonial times. Rani Gaidinliu whom Nehru awarded the title

‘Rani’ was the only Indian woman who was detained the longest in British prison, for a total of 14 years. Herein lays the truth of negating and ignoring ‘the otherness of history’. The high social status of Manipuri women uniquely marks a cohesive link between gender issues and the inseparable history of ‘Women war’ (Nupi lan) which broke out in 1904 as a retaliation against the British order to send their sons and husbands to build camps in Kabaw valley. The second women war broke out in 1935 and lasted till the end of World War II to agitate against the British Commission’s decision to export rice from Manipur. The agitation which saw a tremendous participation of women was “an active engagement aimed at exploring the real lives of women which deserves a prominence in histories of India” as observed by J.B Bhattacharjee and H. Sudhir in their book “State and Economy in Pre-Colonial Manipur”.

Hijam Irabot who fought against the established authorities in the 1930s and who is to this day remembered by the people of Manipur as a political scientist wrote a poem about the significance of “Nupi Lan” (women war):

“The night has passed,
The whole day has gone,
Lady, tie up your hair,
The hair so dishevelled: One
December 12th has passed,
Another December 12th has come.
Have you forgotten?
Did you believe that your hair could
be tied?

Did you believe that this day would
ever return?” (Irabot)

The existence of autonomous historical dyadic power of ‘masculine model’ and ‘feminism’ in Manipuri women derives from a ‘romantic relationship’ between the male and the female counterpart. By composing more radical elements on what led to a romantic relationship without undermining patriarchy, it could be highlighted by measuring relative education level, employment, and earnings. Superiority varies when phenomenological reduction of women’s income subsidies. Manipuri women had had perspectives of a credible personality. Till contemporary time, women or gender issues are yet to give birth. Popular or common women shape inseparable events like ‘Women war’ so visible in the public sphere, which became an icon for generations to come. After the ‘Reign of Terror for seven years’ from 1819 to 1826 between Burma (now Myanmar) and Manipur, there was a sudden decline in sex-ratio (*male depopulation*) as an effect of the war. Women had no choice to remain only in domestic chores. Unquestioned metamorphosis led to the formation of collective identity of women. Today, Manipuri women ran a unique market called ‘Ema Keithel’ (women-market), a market where only women can trade. The transfer of the indigenous feminism into traditional Manipuri society boldly forms as a fourth dimension of culture adding to economic independence.

In a patriarchal society, the relationship of male and women could be picture as a marketplace where women’s were

treated as being ‘goods’. Women lose their independency in self and instead become male property. The treatment of women as ‘goods’ in male canon society were largely reformed in literary discourse by Luce Irigaray, for instance in *Sexes and Genealogies* she says,

Our desire to install a new kind of social system does not preclude us from living in the one that exists, i.e. the sacrificial and technocratic society that has been set up and managed by men alone. This is still true today, perhaps more than ever (Irigaray).

Patriarchal trading in one society passes much like commercial trade from generation to generation or men to men. Institutional setup limited women even further, reducing them to objects being traded. To wipe off patriarchal family from its existence there should be an economic independence and self-definition for women. Manipuri women strengthen their self-definition alienating male centred politics from public domain. For instance, the sex ratio for female exceeds male sex-ratio in Manipur (births of female child are encouraged). The respect in female sex established claims from ‘cultural ethnic identity’ based on religious worshiping of female Goddess. In Meitei religion sacred books female Goddess were conceived equally superior to male God. Since the early classic authors were all male writer, women became the consumer of their intended writings in whole world but women social experience and practice in representing their

identity were marked in the history of Manipur starting from historical epics. U.A Shimray, like many other nationalist intellectuals marked “the dominant language of the larger community occupies a pre-eminent place subduing the minor language/dialect of the minorities. There are many instances, where the minority languages become a ‘dead’ language” (Shimray).

Language, Minority Cultures, and the Politics of Cultural Survival:

In a diverse country like India, female creative vernacular literary discourse ends up only with a few groups of community. Many of the tribal language still doesn’t have their own script to print their acceptance and decadence in all social changes, their history of existence began noting down only after bilingualism and trilingualism has spread. Though the constitution of India has registered 28 official languages, there is no provision or amended law to protect the indigenous vulnerable languages. The national movement on language –cum-cultural led by Gandhi and Nehru encouraged Hindi and Urdu language largely in their movements (post-independence). As Nehru attributes in his autobiography, “I have no doubt whatever that Hindustani is going to be the common language of India. It is largely so today for ordinary purposes” (Nehru).

After independence Hindi language was made the official language, thus after partition Urdu language became pathetic victim for extinction with consistent decline of preserver in the realm of literary discourse and lack of unanimity among the speaker

further the subjugation articulated by Hindi speakers. Language could be treated as vocal symbols in representing minority ethnic identity. Distinct functional hierarchy of dominance is lifted in subduing one language. U. A. Shimray vividly portrays the tone of hesitance in accepting the defeat of one's dominance, "A language becomes a vital tool to subjugate a minor ethnic group by larger and stronger dominant groups. The languages of the dominant majorities are being forcibly imposed upon the minorities" (Shimray).

Conclusion:

Cultural identity is a shepherd to the flock of religious harmony, gender and traditions. The shepherd might change with the change of circumstance but the pressure of encountering alien dominant rival become a tragedy which is ironic for small, microscopic minorities. An extinct cultural harmony cannot be brought back but the policy makers who hold the future of nation-building can wiped out the fear psychosis within people's mind of their identity in a multicultural India.

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