

Revisioning The Historical Play, Narasingha

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Abstract: In Manipur, a hilly state lies in the easternmost corner of India, studies on literature is mainly carried on for literary pursuits. But literature cannot be studied in complete isolation from other social sciences from history in Particular. This work of mine is taken up with an attempt to study the relationship between literature and society through historical perspective. ‘**Narasingha**’ is the first original historical play based on the theme of Manipuri history and language in the annals of Manipuri literature. It was staged at the royal palace of Manipur on 30th September, 1925 at 8:30 P.M. for the first time. The script of the play was based on the historical episode of the Seven Years Devastation (1819-1826) in Manipur. The play reflects the ever changing scenario of the then Manipuri society in several aspects like religion, culture, economy, politics etc. during the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries.

Keywords: Easternmost, pursuits, Perspectives, Playwright, Devastation, scenario.

Date of Submission: 16-08-2017

Date of acceptance: 30-08-2017

I. INTRODUCTION

Manipur, the land of Jewels lies in the easternmost corner of India and is one of the seven sisters of North-East India. The wave of modern drama which had originated in the west made its appearance in this hilly state by the early part of the 20th century through Bengal, ‘**Narasingha**’ is the first historical play based on the theme of Manipuri history and language in the annals of Manipuri theatre. It was written by Lairenmayum Iboongohal Singh (1895-1966) a playwright, historian and scholar in 1922. The play was staged for the first time on the 30th September, 1925 at the royal Palace (Damodar: 1996). The script of the play **Narasingha** was based on the historical episode of the Seven Years Devastation (1819-1826) in Manipur. As the result of their inability to cop with the devastating Burmese invaders, Manipuri princes became runaways and took shelter in Cachar. Yet the courageous princes and aspiring soldiers like Gambhir Singh and his valiant cousin Narasingha drove away the Burmese forces from the soil of Manipur. By 12th June 1825, they recaptured Imphal valley and all the Burmese forces had been compelled to retreat to their country. And thus they saved Manipur from the clutches of the foreign exploitative rule. Then, Gambhir Singh became the king of this hilly region and Nara Singh, the Senapati (The Chief of the Army). When Gambhir Shingh expired in 1834, his two years old son Chandrakirti Singh was made The King of Manipur. Narasingh acted as a regent and caretaker of the minor king. But Queen Kumudini, mother of Chandrakirti was always suspicious of the regent. At her instigation one Nobin Singh made an attack upon the life of Nara Singh while he was praying to Lord Brindabanchandra. Nara Singh was severly wounded on his arm. When the mission failed, the Queen along with her minor son Chandrakirti ran away to Cachar. On the request of the various sections of the Manipuri population, Narasingh became the king of Manipur. The dramatic literature **Narasingha** is based on such historical theme. In this play the playwright shows successfully the dignity along with the truthful, promising and vigorous qualities of Nara Singh in this drama

This work of mine is an attempt to study the relationship between literature and society through historical perspectives. For this an interdisciplinary method has been adopted for obtaining scientific conclusion. This research work is mainly based on ancient literary text(Puyas, books, journals etc).

II. DISCUSSION

Customs, manner, discipline, etiquette etc. prevalent in the royal court of Manipur were clearly reflected in this dramatic literature. The custom of marriage was regarded as a sacred bond between man and woman. Strict restrictions were imposed on widow remarriage. (Iboongohal: 2003)

In this play **Narasingha**, the playwright portrays the conspicuous changes developed in the Manipuri society which resulted from the political instability, war of successions and internal dissensions amongst the princes of Manipur. The horrible scenarios of Manipuri society – the penance and agonies borne by the innocent people due to the Burmese aggression and atrocities, the confused, unsettled and unscrupulous state of affairs

were clearly visible in the play. Such illustrations, the pangs and miseries of human lives brought about by war and revolution reminds us of Charles Dickens' view on these wars and revolutions. Here we have few lines from Charles Dickens' novel entitled *A Tale of Two Cities*. (Dickens: 1979)

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredibility, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us. We had nothing before us."

The writer of the play Narasingha also shared the same view. He firmly believed in the concept of war in getting independence for a dependent nation. The two brothers - Gambhir Singh and Nara Singh took active part in the war against the Burmese in the battlefield to emancipate the meek and humble masses of Manipur from the tyrannical rule of the Burmese. After the destruction of thousands of enemies, Gambhir Singh washed away his blood thickened sword *Brajasingh* in the Ningthee river. Such historical incidents are clearly shown in this play within the social milieu and values that were prevalent in those days.

Regarding religious beliefs, during medieval period the Meiteis were the followers of Gaudiya School of Vaishnavism (Hinduism). The influence of the same religious cult has clearly been visible in the dialogues, songs, prayers, war cries included in every Act of this play a creation of the playwright who lived in the early part of the 20th century. The song of a lady character Padmabati goes like this:

*"Ha (oh) Lord Govinda,
Bestow thy mercy on me,
Drowned in the ocean of agony
Thy servant has ...
Swears to win against the Burmese, thy humble slave,
Pray to fulfill with thy blessing."* (Translation, Iboongohal: 2003)

Thus, she submits herself to Lord Shri Govindaji. When someone was in deep misery, one used to chant the name of Shri Govindaji. Likewise in happy moments too, he never neglected the name of the same deity. Besides Shri Govindaji and Brindabanchandra (Lord of Brindaban), The Meiteis had extreme devotion in Goddess Durga (Goddess of the battlefield) as they are courageous and warlike. The people used the war cry chanting the Hindu gods and goddesses:

'Jai, Jai durgamaiki Jai'
(Victory goes to Mother Durga) (Iboongohal: 2003, Translation)

Such ideas and actions shown in the play reflected the image of a Holy Hindu society of Vaishnavite Hindu Meiteis.

Besides these religious features, other changes in the sphere of religion were also visible in this play *Narasingha*. Since the reign of King Garibniwaz, Hinduism had become the State religion of the Kingdom. (Iboongohal and Khelchandra: 2012). But the Gaudiya cult of Hinduism had completely taken its roots during the reign of King Bhagyachandra and the process of *Sanskritisation* gradually began to spread its sway over every spheres of the kingdom – culture, religion, society and what not. (Kabui:1983). *Sanskritisation* as described by M.N. Srinivas, is a process by which a "low" Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction *twice-born* caste. (Srinivas: 2003)

An important impact of such process of *Sanskritisation* was that the Meiteis had claimed to be the progenies of the great Aryans. As a sequence of the processes of Aryanisation, the kings and the princes were described as the offspring of Arjuna, the hero of the Mahabharata. To make this point a little bid clear, a few lines may be quoted from the drama of *Narasingha* A free translation of a version made by Narasingha in this drama is given in the following manners:

*"How much had the Meitei people been distressed while I am living! Oh!
Pitamaha (Father) Bavrubahana !Oh! Ibudhou (great grand father) Pakhangba! Thou hath
not seen such deeds. Invincible Ibudhou Arjuna who had won the thirty
Crore Gods and the fourteen layers of the Universe could have also
been vanquished in the hands of Ibudhou Bavrubahana. I am also
born as a prince in this mighty lineage of this kingdom!"* (Translation, Iboongohal: 2003)

Such statements reflected on the process of Hinduism based on the concept that the Meitei princes were the courageous descendants of Arjuna, the great Kshetriya prince. In fact, such plays almost acted as the mirror of the existing social system of Manipur. This is also witnessed by a number of ancient literary works of the state known as Puyas. The influences of Hinduism which had emerged in the kingdom during the 18th century are clearly reflected in the storehouse of Manipuri literature. Works like *Sanamahi Laikhan (Sanamahi Laikan:MSS)* and *Miyat(Chaoba:2015)*, recorded such features of changes in the field of religion. Likewise, even in the socio-cultural realm of birth and death, the powerful impact of Gaudiya Vaishnavism had its sway. The then Hinduised Meiteis had extreme faith in the philosophy of *ShriMad Bhagavata Geeta*, a sacred book of the Hindus. This play *Narasingha* was never failing to depict such things in the form of dialogue made in the following manner.

*“Death is like the relocation to a new house from an old one.
This virtuous soul can never become decayed,
only this feeble body made up of 5(five) elements
will perish when we die.” (Translation, Iboongohal:2003)*

In spite of having such great leaning towards Hinduism, the traditional and ancient Meitei faiths, and ritualistic practices were still associated with the then Hinduised Meitei society. While Nara Singh was ready to make encounter with the mighty Burmese forces he had taken a vow in the name of the Sun, the Moon and Ibudhou Pakhangba, the ancestral God of the Meitei kings. For proper understanding of the existing situation, a word or two may be quoted from Narasingha.

*“By the Sun, the Moon and Ibudhou Pakhangba, I this time, do swear
That I will make war with the Burmese, I won’t flinch from the battle... (Translation, Iboongohal: 2003)*

III. CONCLUSION

The ever changing political, cultural, religious, economic and other social fabrics which have taken place en suite during the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries in Manipur are clearly reflected in the study giving more emphasis on the lifestyle of the Meiteis. The characteristics of a Hindu Vaishnava society are more visible in Manipur society during the above mentioned period. The new religious cult which had stepped into Manipur since the early part of the 18th century became firm rooted and even more stable in the 20th century, i.e. during the period of the playwright. Along with this continuing process of Hinduism, the traditional Manipur faith and belief had also simultaneously been practiced side by side in the society during the period under study. Besides, the state has a rich and well developed cultural heritage contributed by the new religion cult namely Hinduism and the early traditional beliefs of her own. Such extraordinary features of dualism are clearly visible in the heterogeneous components of culture in marriage, ritualistic practices and entertainment items like dance and music, dress, hair style, food habit etc. as reflected in the play *Narasingha*.

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IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

*Dr. Shamurailatpam Shantibala Devi. “Revisioning of Historical Play, Narasingha.” IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) , vol. 22, no. 08, 2017, pp. 55–57.