



# Higher Education in Manipur and the Emergence of Modern Manipuri Women Writers

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**Abstract-** Education in Manipur has a long history of different stages of development beginning from its embryonic stage of Gurukul system during and pre Hinduisation period till it attains its full maturity in modern times since the British occupation of the state. In this sense, education scenario in Manipur, past and present is not at all different from that of other states of the country though because of its geographical, socio-cultural and political factors, the tempo of development is rather slow and steady in comparison with some of the important states of the country like West Bengal, Kerala, Madras etc.

As Manipuri society is androgenic by nature, women have always been cornered in every respect and as such their participation in the education of the state came rather very late; it began just as late as the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since then they have not looked back and have been able to keep pace with their counterpart, the male folk; even surpassing them more often than not. Besides the blizzard of globalization has swept them of their feet and now they begin to question their rights and place in the male dominated contemporary society.

So, modern Manipuri women have started to think anew about themselves, their place and position as well as role in moulding the society. They have started writing about themselves and steadily have developed feminist style of writing challenging the androgenic society and its iron rules which have marginalised them in their ontological life.

The present paper therefore seeks to highlight the full picture of the education system in Manipur laying emphasis specially on the higher education scenario in the state—its advent and stages of development well as impact on the emergence of modernist Manipuri women writers.

**Keywords: Education System, Modernist Manipuri Women Writers.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Education in Manipur has a long history of different stages of development beginning from its embryonic stage of Gurukul system during and pre- Hinduisation period till it attains its full maturity in modern times since the British occupation of the state. In this sense, education scenario in Manipur, past and present, is not at all different from that of other states of the country though because of its geographical, socio-cultural and political factors, the tempo of development is rather slow and steady in comparison with some of the important states of the country like West Bengal, Kerala, Madras etc.

Since it is not possible within the scope of this paper to trace in detail different stages of development of education in Manipur, we will try to highlight in brief, the education scenario in the state from the beginning till today, but in the main, concentrate on the impact of higher education on Manipuri women in bringing about a change in their outlook and thinking which they reflect in their writings specially in the realm of poetry.

Education system of Manipur in ancient times embodied the method of oral teaching and memorizing the text by heart. The teaching and learning was effected through oral transmission of knowledge from generation to generation, under a Guru (teacher), before it was transcribed in the manuscripts in around 16<sup>th</sup> century during the regime of king Khagemba (1597-1652).

So, historically, there was no formal education system in Manipur for a long time. It only began in around 1872 when efforts were made by Captain Gordon and Major General W.F Nuthal, the political agent, to open vernacular schools in the state. However due to negative attitude of the people towards formal education which was exogenous to their cultural system and social structure, their efforts ended in a fiasco. As a result growth of primary education was very slow. In course of time in 1885 the first English school known as Johnston Middle English school was established at Imphal with due permission of the then Maharaja Chandrakriti. During 1893-95, four lower primary schools, three in imphal and one in the hill area were opened. It is interesting to know that the enrollment at that time was confined to boys only as the parents were unwilling to send their daughters to these schools. However, in spite of such prejudice against female education, in 1899 a separate girl's primary school was established at Imphal. Interestingly enough, only 12 girls came forward to join the school.

It was in 1910 that the department of Education was established in the state in order to cope with the expansion in all stages. As a result in 1921 Johnston M.E School was upgraded to high school level under the affiliation of Calcutta University. During 1931-41 many more high schools came up to meet the increasing demand of schools from the public. In 1946 the first college in the state was established at Imphal in the name of Maharani Dhanamanjuri. Then in 1964 post graduate studies started in Manipur with the establishment of P.G Centre in the same college. By 1970 there were as many as 13 colleges imparting general education upto degree standard. Besides these, one law college, one Teacher's Training College, one Art College and two institutions for imparting technical training also came into being in the same year. But the long cherished desire of the people to have a university of their own fulfilled with the establishment of M.U at Imphal in 1980. Recently a remarkable improvement in the academic atmosphere of the university has come with the conversion of the same into a central University under the Manipur University Act 2005. In 1972 the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences, the first Medical Institute in the state was established. Then in 1992 the central Agricultural University was established by the Central Agricultural University Act.

Thus from a humble beginning during the British occupation of the state, the education system in the state has come a long way and at present we see a profuse number of schools and colleges offering different subjects in Science, Commerce and Arts which have eventually improved the higher education scenario of the state to such an extent that the state at present is considered as one of the front liners in the sphere of education. Regarding women education in the state it has remained informal in character for a long time. It was confined to the training given by their mothers in weaving and embroidery of their garments, and other cultural activities of the society. But this kind of old traditional system of education alone is inadequate to equip the women with the demands of the ever-changing society. From the available records the formal education in the state, as stated already began only from the year 1899 onwards. But the history of Higher Education of women of Manipur is of recent origin. It has developed in the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the establishment of Dhanamanjuri College with two women students on the roll. Since then, Manipuri women have not look back and have started participating in education even trying to reach the highest rungs of their careers in different realms, thereby adding new dimension to the scenario of higher education in Manipur. The process of increase in women literacy rate in Manipur can be seen from the following table of last few decades:

Year	Total population	Total % of literacy	Male	Female
1951	5,77,635	11.4	20.77	2.36
1961	7,80,037	30.4	45.12	15.93
1971	10,72,753	32.4	46.40	19.53
1981	14,20,953	41.3	53.29	29.06
1991	18,37,149	59.9	71.63	47.60
2001	21,66,788	68.87	77.87	59.70
2011	27,21,756	79.85	86.89	73.17

Thus in spite of many obstacles, the women of Manipur got the light of western education. And with this, they started to think anew about themselves, their place and position as well as role in moulding the society. They started writing about themselves imitating the style of their male counterparts. Steadily they developed feminine style of writing, challenging the androgenic society.

Amongst educated Manipuri women who contributed to the development of literature, the names of M.K Binodini (1922-2011), Thoibi Devi (1920-1996), KH.Pramodini (1924-2006) who were known as 'triangular force' come in the fore front. They are the new generation of educated women. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these women writers took up their pens when the sapling of Manipuri literature planted by the male writers had struck root and grew into a tree.

In spite of masculine predominance in the field of Manipuri literature, M.K Binodini emerged as a phenomenal writer who revisits the male ideologist of 'honor' in order to recognize female power through her delineation of strong and powerful female protagonist. The emergent figure of the independent woman as portrayed in her female characters challenges for space on traditional male territory thus threatening the complacent superiority of male characters in her writings. In this regard we can specially mention her only novel "Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi" for which she was honored with Sahitya Academy Award in 1979. Set against the backdrop of the Anglo Manipur war of 1891 and its aftermath, the novel encapsulates the story of Sanatombi the female protagonist of native origin who fell in love with a white man, Maxwell, the then political Agent of Manipur. She reflects the new age female epitome of spontaneity and organacity of life. Her indictment of social ostracization is a response emerging from her secular outlook and is feminist credo that 'the personal is political'.

The next woman writer who chronologically precedes M. K Binodini is Thoibi Devi, best known as the first woman novelist in the domain of Manipuri literature. Though she was mainly concerned with translations and adaptations, she had to her credit a good number of novels, critical writings, short stories and lyrics.

Especially in her short stories the leit motifs are mainly on gender discrimination the women are undergoing in a male dominated society.

The last tripod Khaidem Pramodini is the most prolific having more than 35 works to her credit. Her works include almost all the genres of literature: poetry, drama, short stories, travelogue, legends, film scripts, biographies and essays. Her vibrant voice in her writings is evident mainly as a strong advocate for the cause of the liberation of the women especially in the realm of economy which has compelled women to remain as subordinates to men in the society.

In the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the question as to how in Manipuri poems do the poets see the woman, how do they try to see her, how do they feel about them, became pertinent and important. In the context of feminism we ought to look if they have made a new image of the women in the Manipuri poems, a sort of narratology that breaks through the hackneyed stereotyped faces of the woman of the past.

The publication of 'Sajibugi Leirang' (The flower of April) by Kh. Anandi in 1967 marked the emergence of the first woman writer of poems in Manipuri. Next came Kh. Subadani's 'Mangkhraha Esheigi sur' (The lost Tune, 1975), Longjamongbi Bempishak's 'Mammi Shamlaba Khonjel' (The Faded voice, 1976). A sensation as it was, the writing was still traditional in spirit and style.

But the first jolt came in the 90's with the appearance of a group of writers. Such works as 'Khonjelsibu Nangira' (Is the voice yours, 1982) by Sanjenbam Bhanumati and 'Nongoubi' (A Bird associated with rain, 1984) by Arambamongbi Memchoubi and 'Loinaidaba Thammoigi Eshei' (1988) by Moirangthem Borkanya, were some of the trend setters that brought a new dimension to the literary world of Manipur. And with these they were able to carve a place for themselves.

The poet Memchoubi feels pain when she sees the big disparity as to the social status entitled to her in comparison with the hard labour she had rendered for the society. For them questioning and arguing are a taboo and out of time with the womanly qualities. Today they have questioned, they have argued which is a real revolt against the polite begging attitude attributed to them.

Kshetrimayum Subadani also joins in the agenda of women and gives her own voice 'Peegiwari' (The tale of tears, 1995). Women are humans but they are always put in a closed room. Subadani is not pleased with the bond of marriage in which the husband is put on the seat of the God and the wife is treated as a sen/ant. The relationship is that of the master and the servant which is clear sign of the exploitation; it is her desire to go hand in hand like dear comrades.

These female writers are all products of the traditional society where patriarchy still rules. It is not an easy task to break through the cordon of the encircling environs. It calls for a clear consciousness, an idea conceived in a healthy way. Only then the protest will be efficacious, it will not be nice and good to employ Feminism as a fashion of venting out sudden outburst of anger. It is not an attack on the men by harboring anti male attitudes. It is none other than a protest against the unacceptable and unpalatable things in the old bases. The end result of Feminism is to make the women believe firmly in her own qualities and strength and that she does not live in a sub-culture and she is a human being. It is not violation of the natural law of male-female pair.

Thus education in Manipur has come a long way: beginning from the mere informal stage of Gurukul system to the most advanced stage of Higher Education. And its impact on the people of the land in general, and the women in particular are so much so that today there is no dearth of a Manipuri, man or woman specialized in each and every department of Higher Education: from humanities to the most advanced spheres of science and technology.

However, the most contesting question which is asked more often than not, is the status of the women in the society dominated by the male folk. No doubt, the light of education especially higher education has awoken them from their long-slumber and enabled them to look into themselves as evident from the voice of the women writers, but the moot question that is asked is how successfully they have broken the jinx of logo centrism of male metaphysics of presence in their ontological lived life. The question still remains to be answered with affirmation. But their voice continues with unabated echoes.

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