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The Historical Evolution of Manipuri Literature: A Critical Study of Literary Periodization, Cultural Transformation and Modernity

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Abstract

The paper carries out a thorough historiographical and thematic examination of Manipuri literature, showing how it has developed over three clearly defined phases: the ancient period (up to the eighteenth century), the Medieval period (from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century), and the Modern period (from the twentieth century to the present day). According to the timeline, the literary tradition has not stayed the same but has instead kept adapting to major socio-political, religious, and linguistic changes. In the Ancient period, which was firmly based on indigenous cosmology, folklore/folk culture, and oral customs, the early classical manuscripts known as the Puyas prevailed. These texts, written in the native Meetei Mayek script, served at the same time as religious scriptures, guides for statecraft, and historical records. The Medieval period is marked by a significant and frequently traumatic cultural change brought about by the monarchy's adoption of Vaishnavism in the eighteenth century. During this time the ancient manuscripts (Puya Mei Thaba) were destroyed and there followed a literary synthesis in which indigenous stories were actively combined with the classical Hindu epics. At the same time the state carefully preserved its royal chronicle, the Cheitharol Kumbaba, thus maintaining a unique historiographical identity. The move into the Modern era is defined by the breaking down of the monopoly that the court had over literature, and this was replaced by contemporary realism, nationalism, and individual consciousness. Leading literary figures brought in modern prose, the psychological novel, and free-verse poetry, illustrating the complex conditions of modern society. Importantly, the modern period also shows the geographic spread of Manipuri literature, with writers from the Barak Valley in Assam making major contributions to cultural revival and the representation of minorities. This study, by examining the structural, geographical and thematic changes, demonstrates the resilience of Manipuri literature and sets its rich heritage and ongoing evolution within the broader context of South Asian literary traditions.

Keywords: Manipuri Literature; Periodization; Puyas; Meetei Mayek; Naoria Phulo; Cheitharol Kumbaba; Folk Culture; Modern Prose; Literary Historiography

The literary heritage of Manipur offers an exceptionally detailed insight into the socio-cultural, religious, and historical evolution of the area. Situated in the northeastern section of the Indian subcontinent, Manipur has for a long time functioned as a point of intersection—both geographical and cultural—between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Unlike a large number of regional literatures that mainly emerged as a result of nineteenth-century modernity, Manipuri literature has a deep, native antiquity grounded in well-established written traditions and a vibrant oral folk culture.[1]

If one wishes to study the development of Manipuri literature in a systematic manner, literary historians and scholars generally divide its history into three distinct and well-defined periods: the ancient period (from antiquity up to the early eighteenth century), the Medieval period (from the eighteenth to the late nineteenth century), and the Modern period (from the twentieth century onwards). This method of dividing up time does not merely deal with the passage of time but rather emphasizes the major and often disruptive changes that have taken place in the use of the script, religious patronage, literary forms, and the main themes. The transition from esoteric ritual chants to classical court poetry, and subsequently to the sharp socio-political realism of today, mirrors the collective psychological and political experience of the Manipuri-speaking people, both within the state and among the wider diaspora.

The Origin of Expression: Oral Traditions and Folk Culture

One should first recognize the rich tradition of oral customs as the origin from which formal Manipuri literature developed. In early Manipuri society agriculture was the main form of activity, people were closely linked with the natural environment, and the native Sanamahi religion governed the society. Literary expression began to be expressed through the patterns of daily work, martial exercises, and religious rituals.[2]

Folklore and folk culture were the main means of keeping alive the ancestral wisdom. The *Khullang Eshei* (romantic folk songs sung while doing agricultural work), the Pena ballads (narrative songs accompanied by the traditional stringed instrument, the Pena), and the *Phousu Eshei* (harvesting songs) established the basic metrical patterns that in later years became the basis of classical Manipuri poetry.[3] The oral stories(narratives) were more than merely a means of entertainment; they functioned as a living repository of the community's cosmology, ethical principles, and shared memory.

The Ancient Period: From Antiquity until the 18th Century

A critical examination of Manipuri literary historiography shows that the period before the eighteenth century is referred to as "Ancient" mainly because of the extreme isolation of the Meitei language, society, and culture. Throughout this long period, external influences were very limited. For example, although Muslim settlers came to the Imphal Valley at that time, they did not establish an external linguistic or literary dominance. On the contrary, they integrated naturally by marrying Meitei women and forming the Meitei-Pangal community—thus becoming a lively subgroup within the wider Meitei social structure. As a result, the literature from this ancient period is noted for its linguistic purity and the lack of foreign words. [4]

In this period most of the literature was kept in the *Puyas*— manuscripts which were ancient, sacred and historical and were carefully written in the native Meetei Mayek script.

Works such as the allegorical *Ougri* and the mythical *Numit Kappa* were in effect encyclopedic, as they outlined the creation myths and social codes.[5]

Important is the fact that manuscripts from the ancient period almost never give the name of the author or the year in which the work was published. This total absence of individual authorship can be traced to a number of social and political reasons: since many of the texts were copies of oral traditions which were owned by the community as a whole; written works were frequently put together by guilds of royal scholars (*maichous* or pandits) under strict court supervision; and all literature had to go through strict screening in accordance with royal edicts, so that individual recognition became irrelevant in the light of state and divine authority. What is special about the ancient period is that there is a complete blending together of the secular, the sacred, and the state.

The Split in the Medieval Period: Vaishnavism, Syncretism, and the Bengali Script

The boundaries defining the Medieval period, a division that gained strong support in the eighteenth century, were largely due to the far-reaching socio-cultural and religious changes caused by the monarchy's adoption of Hinduism. The conversion of the state to Ramanandi Vaishnavism, which was motivated by the geopolitical and theological goals of King *Pamheiba* (Garib Niwaj, who ruled from 1709 to 1748), severely disrupted the area's cultural continuity.[6]

The period was harmed by the *Puya Mei Thaba* (the burning of the ancient manuscripts), which was an effort to eliminate the indigenous knowledge systems that existed before Hinduism. The native script was systematically substituted by the Bengali script. From a literary point of view, this religious change resulted in a large number of linguistic influences from Bengali and Sanskrit. Rather than the linguistic isolation characteristic of ancient times, the texts from the medieval period show a strong and intentional use of loanwords, thus greatly changing the style and structure of the literature.

As the medieval period unfolded, Manipuri literature experienced a massive influx of translated Hindu epics, particularly the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which naturally spurred a new wave of local devotional writing.[7] Beyond just thematic changes, this era sparked a radical shift in literary identity. Breaking away from the ancient court tradition of collective anonymity, authors finally began to step out of the shadows. For the first time, they started signing and dating their manuscripts, consciously claiming intellectual ownership over their translations and original compositions.

The Royal Chronicles: Cheitharol Kumbaba and State Historiography

Even during the turbulent times of both the Ancient and Medieval periods the royal court kept the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* (The Royal Chronicle of Manipur). Started in the first century CE, this chronicle provides an uninterrupted and carefully dated historical account of the kingdom down to 1949.[8] Unlike poetic or mythological works, it is composed in a plain and simple style of prose. As a literary item it shows an early ability in the use of objective prose and in telling a chronological narrative—a rarity in early South Asian literature.

The Modern Renaissance and the Shift into the Post-Modern Period: A Transition from Romanticism to Urban Alienation

The idea of the twentieth century being regarded as the 'Modern' period is fundamentally based on the collapse of absolute monarchy and the resulting rise of both intellectual and physical freedom. The key turning point in this change was the period that followed the

Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891. Although under British colonial rule the country had lost its sovereignty, the harsh Lallup system (a kind of compulsory feudal labour) was abolished. This important development brought the people an unprecedented degree of physical and mental freedom. Since the strict royal censorship and the hard feudal duties had been removed, writers were able to freely express their inner thoughts.[9]

In the early 1900s the foundation of modern Manipuri literature was largely laid by three key figures: Khwairakpam Chaoba Singh, Lamabam Kamal Singh, and Hijam Anganghal Singh. Khwairakpam Chaoba Singh was the pioneer of historical fiction and modern lyrical poetry; his work being characterised by a deep sense of introspection and a romantic melancholy that was strongly influenced by English Romanticism. Lamabam Kamal Singh's Madhabi (1930) is generally regarded as the first modern Manipuri novel; it moved away from stories featuring divine protagonists and instead examined important themes such as humanism, sacrifice, and psychological depth within a highly stratified society.[10] Hijam Anganghal Singh accomplished the remarkable feat of linking ancient folklore with modern structuralism; his great epic, Khamba Thoibi Sheireng, raised a popular indigenous folk romance to the level of a classical epic and thus affirmed the region's cultural identity in the face of both colonial dominance and assimilation into the mainland.[11]

After that group of pioneers, Ashangbam Minaketan Singh became a prominent figure, acting as a link between the early modern and the high modern periods. He skillfully combined outdated Meetei vocabulary from the Puyas with sophisticated modern ideas. In his writings he examined existential themes and advocated a linguistic purism which moved away from the earlier romantic traditions, thus paving the way for modernist experimentation. [12]

As the twentieth century went on, and especially following Manipur's incorporation into the Indian Union in 1949, the literature underwent a deep post-modern transformation. The romanticism and idealism which had characterised the early modernists were replaced by a sense of existential anxiety, political disillusionment, and urban alienation. The post-modern Manipuri novel experienced a radical change in structure, as shown by writers such as Pacha Meetei. In his important novel, ***Imphal Amasung Magi Ishing Nungsitki Phibam*** (Imphal and its Climatic Condition), which won the Sahitya Akademi Award (1973), Pacha Meetei introduced the stream-of-consciousness technique to Manipuri literature. The novel gives a sharp portrayal of the fragmentation, moral decay, and psychological suffocation experienced in modern urban life, completely abandoning traditional plot structures.[13]

In the case of poetry, poets such as Sri Biren , Ibopishak and Yumlembam Ibomcha adopted free verse, dark humour, surrealism, and sharp satire. Through their work they express the chaos, insurgency, the militarisation by the state, and the socio-political upheaval that characterised the late twentieth century. The move from early modern romanticism to post-modern experimentalism shows that this literary tradition has always been highly responsive to the fragmented and violent nature of its contemporaneous environment.

Contributions from Beyond Territorial Borders: The Barak Valley

Although the Imphal Valley has always been the centre of Manipuri literature, during the modern era there was a significant geographic decentralisation. In the Barak Valley area of

neighbouring Assam, with Cachar and Silchar— places that are important culturally and academically— becoming a very active frontier for a literary and cultural revival of the Manipuri language. This expansion into other regions showed that the vitality of the Manipuri language did not stay within the boundaries of the state.

The most prominent of the visionary figures from this area was Naoria Phulo (also spelled Nauriya Phulo), a radical in thought, a scholar and a writer from Cachar, who founded the Apokpa Marup movement in the 1930s. The breadth of his writings questioned the prevailing Vaishnavite dominance and laid the intellectual foundation for the revival of the indigenous Sanamahi religion and the Meetei Mayek script. As a result of his literary work carried out outside Manipur, a socio-cultural awakening occurred which later spread back into the Manipuri heartland and had a fundamental impact on modern literary discourse.[14]

Based on this strong intellectual background, the later modern period was greatly enhanced by other notable figures from the Barak Valley, including Sagolsem Dhabl, Kheiruddin Choudhury, Abdus Sahid Choudhury and Saugaijam Brojeshor. These writers played an essential role in including the experiences of the diaspora as well as those of the region within the main body of Manipuri literature. Saugaijam Brojeshor introduced new aesthetic elements to the literary work in the area, while Kheiruddin Choudhury and Abdus Sahid Choudhury made important progress in modern poetry. They presented a clear and distinct point of view, skillfully employing the Manipuri language to convey the overlapping realities of linguistic identity and the specific features of the region. The thriving intellectual atmosphere in places like Silchar and all over Cachar caused Manipuri literature to develop into a widespread and inclusive tradition that extended beyond mere territorial limits.

Today: issues relating to identity, conflicts and a wide range of voices

In the years after independence there occurred serious existential crises, which had a deep impact on contemporary literature, and as a result modern Manipuri writing became something akin to a mirror showing the fragmented nature of modern life. Writers such as M.K. Binodini Devi transformed modern prose by introducing a sharp and clearly feminist point of view and by skillfully blending historical fiction with psychological realism.[15]

It is important not to ignore the value of considering the views of minority groups, especially those from the Manipuri Muslim (Meitei-Pangal) community, who have made a significant contribution to enriching the literary tradition of the language. The writers and poets from this community have been vital in extending the range of Manipuri literature. Together with other individuals from the Barak Valley, such as Kheiruddin and Abdus Sahid Choudhury, notable figures like the poet Kayamuddin Pukhrimayum have acted as major links between different cultural identities. The poetry of Pukhrimayum frequently deals with questions of marginalisation, cultural integration, and the complex nature of hyphenated identities. Through incorporating specific personal experiences into their modern Manipuri poetry, these writers avoid the literary canon from becoming uniform and thus make sure that the concept of 'Manipuri identity' stays inclusive and continuously evolving.[16]

Conclusion:

A look at the history of Manipuri literature reveals that there has long existed a tradition marked by great resilience, linguistic flexibility, and a strong continuity of cultural

memory. It started with the esoteric knowledge and the natural rhythms contained in the rural folklore and folk culture as found in the old Puyas, went through the violent disturbances of the scriptures and the syncretistic revival during the medieval Vaishnavite period, and finally reached the sharp realism and avant-garde post-modernism of the twentieth century, continuously progressing throughout. The most important point is that the classical manuscript traditions have been maintained without any interruption, the Cheitharol Kumbaba being the most prominent example together with the ancient Puyas, and as a result an unparalleled historical record has been created. In today's world, this vast antiquity combined with this unique literary development provides a solid academic foundation for the present-day discussions which demand that Manipuri should be granted the status of a classical language.

The geographical and demographic expansion of literature in the Barak Valley of Assam, which has been encouraged by Manipuri cultural revivalists and intellectuals, along with the original stories produced by writers like the modernist Pacha Meitei and the radical inclusion of voices from minority communities, proves that this literary tradition is extensive and fundamentally pluralistic. Today, Manipuri literature is no longer merely a local record of the past but has become a living and active reflection of the current human situation. Because of its ability to smoothly combine its indigenous folk traditions with the complex realities of the post-colonial era and the diaspora, Manipuri literature holds an important, dynamic and certainly classical position within the wider global literary context.

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2. Agrarian daily rhythms structurally formed the bedrock of early classical Manipuri verse.
3. *Khullang Eshei* and *Pena* music act as the earliest socio-historical archives of the Meetei people.
4. Early Muslim assimilation fostered a cultural synthesis seamlessly integrated into ancient Meitei literature.
5. *Puyas* are sacred Sanamahi texts defined by their collective, anonymous authorship.
6. King Pamheiba's reign (1709–1748) marks the definitive shift from the ancient to the medieval literary period.
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15. Devi, M. K. Binodini. *Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi* (1976). (Introduced a modern, female-centric introspective voice).
16. The integration of writers like Kheiruddin,Sahid Choudhury and Kayamuddin Pukhrimayum reflects a modern trend of minority voices articulating cultural distinctiveness.

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