

## **Historicising Manipur's Social and Political Issues through the Poetry of Robin S Ngangom**

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### **Abstract**

History is said to be the narration of significant event that have occurred somewhere in the past. Earlier, it was looked up to as an authentic document of certain period and its veracity was never questioned. The investigation regarding its genuineness is just recent when scholars realized that different historical versions of the same period were available. Each version spoke different stories, often contradictory, about the same period. Now the question arises, how far the history is authentic? Historians write history based on their personal agenda and biasness. Thus the investigation began and up to now the debate still lingers on which version to accept as real and which to discard as unreal. Besides history books, plethora of information about historical facts are available online, therefore, selecting the right version has become difficult. Surprisingly, details of authentic historical events have started reflecting in poetry. The function of poetry has changed drastically since the First World War. Certain sections of poets have become imbued with the reality and pressing issues of their surroundings. They have started representing the reality of the events as it is and this kind of poetry could be seen emerging from the Northeastern part of India. The present paper attempts to explore the historicity as reflected in the poems of Robin S Ngangom and to see how his poem plays a major role in bringing out the social and political issues of Manipur.

**Keywords:** Manipur, Robin Ngangom, History, Poetry, World War First, Northeast India

### **Introduction**

In a simple word, history is the study of the past momentous events and period of bygone years. It is derived from the Greek word *historia* which means “inquiry, knowledge acquired by investigation.”<sup>1</sup> Merriam Webster defines history as “a chronological record of significant events.”<sup>2</sup> In the early society history was narrated in the form of oral stories. People relied on their memory to share the events as there was no written form initially. As the human felt the

need for keeping track of the events of the time, recording history began but it is unsure exactly when it began. It is generally assumed that writing history began with the invention of writing but over the span of time new ways of recording history has evolved. History in written form appeared quite later than 5000 years ago in Egypt and Sumer. The Sumerian record was recorded in clay tablet which still survives. After a few centuries, elaborate written chronicles began to appear and became the foundation for historical reference. Written document was seen as solid or authoritative than oral stories because written form did not change once it was penned down. As society started evolving and as people began interconnecting, questioning and comparing different stories, claiming different version of the past began to take hold. Thus, Herodotus also known as “Father of history” travelled far and wide, collected materials systematically and wrote the accurate account. After him Chinese historian Sima Qian wrote an account of the nomadic Xiongnu based on the details and experiences shared by many Chinese travelers who had visited Mongolia. Nevertheless, it is only during enlightenment era in 18<sup>th</sup> century history based on evidence garnered significance. The 19<sup>th</sup> century historian Leopold von Ranke was instrumental in bringing out history based on the basis of archival record. But even this had limitation because archive recording was done a few centuries ago and was archived much later. In spite, of all these drawbacks people relied on whatever historical materials were available. However, it is only after the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century people started to question about the veracity of history writing and record. Even in the written records only one side of the history of some noteworthy events were represented and many other side was ignored, unrepresented and unheard. Thus Voltaire wrote, “All our ancient history is no more than accepted fiction.”<sup>3</sup> The authenticity of the historical writing about the past is highly questioned at present. Likewise many things that historians piece together at present may be questioned tomorrow by future historians with their new evidence and study. Thus every writing has its limitation and cannot be said complete in itself.

Oscar Handlin in his book *Truth in History* said:

We can never be certain that we have recaptured (the past) as it really was. But the least we can do is to stay within the evidence. History does not recreate the past. The historian does not recapture the bygone event. No amount of imagination will enable the scholar to describe exactly what happened to Caesar in the Senate... History deals only with evidence from the past, with the residues of bygone events (412).

Every historical judgment varies from person to person and there is as such no objective historical truth. At present due to plethora of historical sources available has made people conscious about the materials they are paying attention and reading. According to E.H. Carr, “History means interpretation... Carr contends that historians arbitrarily determine which of the facts of the past to turn into his facts according to their own biases and agenda... It was

impossible to write an objective history because all historical facts were themselves subjective.”<sup>4</sup>

Recently post-modernist thinkers have questioned the authenticity of not only history but every other branch of discipline. They believe that history is what historian has created from their personal experience. They focus on small incidents of everyday life and call for exploring the minute details rather than focusing on large events and under representing it. They questioned the historiography and the historiographer of the past and the present. History is not just an academic discipline, but it is connected to many other disciplines. Literature and history are inseparable and interconnected. Literature is a body of work of a particular period written in the form of prose, poetry, novel, short-story etc. which reflects the social, political, economic tendencies of that particular period. In other words, literature identifies with the history of the time it is written. Both are subjective in its outlook; one gathers information about events and the other reflects the time of a particular period. It is also believed that the first historians had been poets. They did the duty of both poet and of historian. Ancient poetry represented the history of the time and was accepted with little question of historicity. Thus connection between history and poetry cannot be ignored. Thomas Warton in the *Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser* (1754) said that "They preserve many curious historical facts and throw considerable light on the nature of the feudal system. They are the pictures of ancient usages and customs; and represent the manners, genius, and character of our ancestors"<sup>5</sup>.

Just like history, poetry once was written to document the events of the time. Gradually as the time evolved, many tales of the politically noteworthy figures and the glory, power and victors of the war found place in the poetry. Most of the time essential social, economic factors, and ordinary people who usually made a huge contribution were hardly represented. Steadily poetry writing as a genre developed representing and reflecting the time of the period, but notable development occurred during and after the First World War. For the first time poets like Wilfred Owen, Edward Thomas, Isaac Rosenberg, Charles Sorley, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves were soldiers sharing their personal terrifying experiences through poetry. These soldier poets represented the horrors of the war, some wrote while fighting from the trenches, some wrote scarred by their experiences, some wrote while convalescing. For the first time the stark terror of the war was highlighted. Previously war was celebrated and identified with grandeur, honor, and power in the literature. But Owen declared that his poetry would reveal:

“the “pity of War” rather than the “glory, honor, might, majesty, dominion or power,” which war had acquired in the popular mind... But Owen’s message for his generation, he said, must be one of warning rather than of consolation. He used an unmitigated realism in his description of events: “the true poets must be truthful.”<sup>6</sup>

Poets wrote for the future generation depicting their ghastly experiences so that this form of war should not continue. Their writing was not just a poem but a warning and a proof of what once took place. This kind of poetry was named as “Poetry of Witness” by Carolyn Forché. Her book *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* (1993) has contributed to better understanding and popularity of the term. This kind of poetry directly or indirectly has greatly influenced the globe. In the present day, numerous forms of poetry are emerging be it performance poetry, slam poetry, digital poetry where the poet expresses succinctly his own experience and the issues prevailing in the society. In India also the trend for poetry is on the full bloom and never has craze for poetry so much seen before as it is now. Digital poetry has stormed the world now, readers online are much higher in numbers and are active readers. Everything is shared, appreciated, discussed, debated, and commented in a fraction of few minutes. Poetry of witness is not an invented story; it is a true details of an events taken place. Today poets from all over the world are highly conscious about their subject matter, the theme they are portraying on the page. They are highly motivated to reach the global audience and share their viewpoints, experiences and ideas for a change and for making the world a better place.

In Northeastern part of India there are several emerging poets who are representing the current issues of their states. Robin Ngangom who hails from Manipur is one among them who writes about the situation of his homeland. He is a witness to the conflicts and thus he represents the issues as it is. At present he is currently serving in the Department of English North Eastern Hill University. He has number of works to his credit which mostly represents the affairs and events of his time. He writes poetry hoping for a change, for peace and for a better time tomorrow. Manipur, a multi ethnic state where different ethnic groups lived harmoniously earlier is not the same anymore. They have their own respective demands and are at loggerheads among themselves which becomes violent at a time. Manipur became a part of Indian union on 21 January 1972. Their demand for autonomy from India still ensues which has led to formations of several rebel groups and insurgents. Due to several issues such as Armed Force Special Power Act, insurgency, ethnic tension, Manipur has seen various forms of conflicts in the recent years. The last few decades have seen thousands of people being killed and displaced in various ethnic conflicts. Thus the poets emerging from the region writes about their individual experiences. In the editors’ note to the *Dancing Earth: Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*, Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih have argued that:

The expressive concerns of the writer from the Northeast cannot be the same as that of a writer from elsewhere in India. The writer from the Northeast differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way. While it may not make him a better writer, living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but perforce master the art of witness (xii).

Robin shares his experiences and the events that he has personally witnessed. Portraying the scenario of the place he shares how the war has marred the region's peace. The richest are ruling motivated by their selfish interest. The idea of freedom appears to be elusive as the poet says freedom in his region can be felt only when guarded by security forces:

I hear a wicked war is now waged  
on our soil, and gory bodies  
dragged unceremoniously  
through our rice-fields.  
That they have  
dropped the word "shame"  
from the vocabulary,  
and the newly-rich are ruling our homes.  
I hear that freedom comes there, only  
if escorted by armed men. ("Homeland I left" 27-36)

The poet also is a helpless observer of the events taking place, he wants to do something with it and the result is his poetry. He wishes to bring transformation in the society through his verses. His poem doles out the glimpse of the social and political situation of Manipur. In another poem "The Strange Affair of Robin S Ngangom" he presents the scenario of the region during blockades. Frequently road blockades are imposed by different tribes with their different interest and agendas in order to seek the fulfillments of their demands. The bandhs which often lasts for days, weeks or months affects the economy of the state to a larger extent making daily life hard for the common people:

Nothing is certain:  
oil  
lentils  
potatoes  
food for babies  
transport  
the outside world.  
Even  
fire water and air  
are bought and sold. (116-25)

Such bandhs and blockades have had already affected the economy of the state and has caused severe inconvenience to the common people due to the shortage of essential commodities

in the region. For all the internal conflicts in the region the common people are mostly affected. Yet in another poem “To Pacha”, reminiscing one of the Manipuri’s finest poets, Robin recalls:

There are no more tears to shed  
In this withered country where they  
Kill pregnant women and children; (7-9)

In a way, the poet is paying a tribute to the dead poet and sharing what has consumed his homeland after his demise. He shares there is nothing constructive been taking place as:

Young boys and soldiers are butchering each  
other by the dozen, in the hills, the angry  
streets, day after day, and too many heroes  
and villains are not worth remembering at all. (13-16)

Apparently, the poet seems to be alright with the death of Pacha because he is not alive to witness the region which has gone dry due to ethnic conflicts where young boys and soldiers are against each other lives. It is said that people and organisations are illegally taxed in order to support many rebel groups. The elected leaders keep the public in illusion of false promises. Revolutionaries threaten and extort money and demand free services. If their demands are not met the public are threatened with the dire consequences. The following lines clearly speak volumes about the situation in the region. Describing the incident of revolutionaries coming for free service, the optician had to close his clinic, the poet says even though the situation itself is grim, but this is the truth:

The ophthalmic optician  
shut down his clinic  
after far-sighted revolutionaries  
came for a free check-up”  
But that wouldn’t sound aesthetic  
even though it’s the truth (“Writer” 16-21)

The poet, instead of contemplating on the situation, feeling bitter and giving up to despairing chooses to write: “You should write when you can still laugh at yourself and the world, before you give up to despair.” (“Revolutionaries” 55)

The poet seems to be looking for peace in the form of simple things as described in the lines below. In order to experience peace he believes that he and his people do not require the

soldiers behind to guard them. In the poem, “We Are Not ready for the Hand of Peace”, the poet tells:

Peace without fear of another vicious tomorrow  
is what we search, and not the false dusk of  
the seven brandished swords who guard our backs. (6-8)

The poet further says that what he and his people collectively desire is “what we desire is the witness of still winds;/we wish to hear the melodious laugh/ of the cheeks of children, the eyes of beloved women.” (11-13). Peace in the form of life’s simplest things is what the poet wishes for; in other words, he is trying to restore peace through poetry. At least as a poet he is putting his effort by writing and representing his place so that his words reaches far and wide and positive action may ensue:

I want to describe myself again and again  
To people who do not know me.  
That is why I always look for paper and ink,  
Even in the midst of terrible loss,  
Or, a dangerous illness  
Because someone said  
The spoken word flies  
But the written word stays (“I Want to Describe Myself”)

He writes to be heard and understood. His poetry itself is enough evidence of his personal experiences and occurrences in the region. His own personal experience of witnessing a number of events led him to represent all of it in his poetry. His intense love and concern for his place and people, made him look for the possible solution through his poetry. But still the poet seems to have no answer to the question of why his people have turned against each other. The poet seems to be in contemplation looking for an answer:

Why do trees weep leaves without warning?  
Why do the old choose to die in their mountain hamlets?  
Why did his people turn to terror?  
Why does love tie him down?

How is he a poet if he’s afraid to look for answers? (“Poet” 1-5)  
Possibly his verses could help people to realize and rethink of their actions they have done so far. Greed and corruption in the region have made people blind to the extent of forgetting one’s own blood ties. This reveals the ultimate blow to humanity. What can be a greater loss when



brother buys brother and father sells his son? In the poem “Racial Progression”, protesting against corruption he says:

Here everything is bought and sold  
to the highest bidder.  
The gunpoint, the hypodermic needle, and currency  
notes: these are the only languages we know.  
Brothers buy brothers and fathers sell sons  
as a way of life. (8-13)

Commenting on the scenario of Manipur, the poet in his essay, “Poetry in the time of Terror” states:

Manipur, my native place in Northeast India, is in a state of anarchy, and my poetry springs from the cruel contradictions of that land. Manipur boasts of its talents in theatre, cinema, dances, and sports. But how could you trust your own people who would entrust corruption, aids, terrorism and drugs to their children? Naturally the Manipur that I ritually go back to every year is not the sacred world of my childhood. (168)

The rapacity of people seeking more than needed is the plight of the present day. Robin poems are the result of the political and social crisis of the region. By pointing out the frailties of his society the poet hopes for a change in the attitude and mindset of the people and reform them so that a peaceful and violence free society can be created. He is specifying at the growing materialism where people are not bothered about humanity and relationships. It is actually a wake-up call for the people and a chance to ponder over their actions. As a poet, he cannot remain mute to the happenings around him, thus, he represents it; at the same time he also laments the past glory which has crumbled with the passage of violent time. In another poem “Racial Progression” the poet says:

We have no illustrious past we can think of,  
our history is shrouded in obscurity  
We all take pride in our forked tongues  
and devious chroniclers.  
Our necks and hands shake with perverse lust.  
We respect with avarice only the richest new. (14-19)

The poet clearly emphasises that they do not have memorable past because the distorted past is not worthy to be remembered at all. Therefore, the poet wishes to chronicle a new history of the present time by representing it in its numerous shades. Situation in Manipur is gradually changing for the better, what was past is being represented by the poet and what is going to be in



the days ahead will also be represented in a new approach. By representing the region in its entire dimension, the poet is actually trying to tell the reader what is worthy to be considered and what is to be relinquish so that the changes that the people have longed for so long could fructify. Above all, his motive through his writing is to resist the ongoing scenario so that changes may occur sooner or later in the region:

Our election emblems are the bottle and the glass.  
The best orators are our secret campaigners at night  
and we use great poetry as party slogans.  
our guardians give an inch and take a foot  
and their promises are the latest jokes. (22-26 )

Through the above lines, Robin has harshly criticised the politics in the region. The people of Manipur have been witnessing violence and conflict since long. The imposition of AFSPA in the region led to ethnic tension and formation of several insurgent groups seeking for an independent state and it is said to be one of the main reasons for continuing violence in the region. Thus, poets like Robin have begun to respond to the changing scenario of the present day society. Many poets from the region are occupied with depicting the realities of the place in the hope of bringing transformation. In his essay, “Contemporary Manipuri Poetry: An Overview” he observes:

Many poets seem to be preoccupied with insistent realities such as ethnic violence, corruption, extortion, terrorism, oppression and drug addiction... This is an extremely difficult task reminiscent of Camus’s mission reserved for the writer: ‘whatever our personal weaknesses may be, the nobility of our craft will always be rooted in two commitments, difficult to maintain: the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance to oppression.’ (299)

His poetry is the collective voice, anxiety and fear of the people of the region and search for love and peace. His poetry acquaints the reader with the issues of the region. His poems are a testimony of a trying period he has been personally through. He has chosen to historicize it rather than letting it be the way it is, his poetry serves as a reminder to the people about their own reckless actions, it is an eye opener. The present day is enmeshed with numerous issues and events. Everyday witnesses some sort of horror that is being represented by the worldwide media. Due to proliferation of technology recording has become easy and accurate. One cannot lie what happens as the camera clearly records it. Hence, people are becoming more-outspoken and blunt than ever before in sharing their experiences and are unafraid to admit what is wrong and what is right. The world of imagination that helped shaped poetry in the earlier era is taken over by world of reality of “here and now” and is characterized by “immediacy and vividness”

(Ngangom 300). Hence, witnessing, recording and preserving the events in poetry could be a reference of the present times for the future generations. Just like in the ancient Greece, history guided the future actions likewise the issues represented in poetry may give a clue to the coming generations about the social, political, economic conditions of the now. Perhaps it may guide them and set an example of what to follow from the past, what to revive and what to disregard. It may provide them a broader perspective about their own society and help them overcome many societal and political issues of their time in a better way.

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