

## **EXPLORING THE LIFE OF THOIBI DEVI (1920-1996), A COMMUNIST ACTIVIST/WRITER**

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### **ABSTRACT**

With the introduction of modern education in Manipur, three pioneer Meetei women writers of profound influence emerged in the 1960s. Often identified as the three legs of an iron tripod (*yotsabi*), they are Thoibi Devi (1920-1996), M.K Binodini (1922-2011) and Khaidem Pramodini (1924-2006). This essay enters the life of Thoibi Devi to understand how her personal experience in the existing social and political condition of Manipur led to her political leanings and her understanding of women's condition, which she reflects in her writings. This biography of Thoibi Devi opens a window to the conservative Meetei Hindu society and the dogmatic religious rule of Brahma Sabha in Manipur. It also highlights Thoibi Devi's contribution to the literary and cultural development in Manipur.

**Keywords:** Thoibi Devi (1920-1996), Beginning of Modern Education, Brahma Sabha, Thoibi Devi's Engagement with Communist Political Party, Literary Contribution of Thoibi Devi

## INTRODUCTION

Takhellambam Thoibi Devi (1920-1996) is one of the three pioneer Meetei women writers who emerged in the 1960s. The other two are M.K. Binodini Devi (1922-2011) and Khaidem Pramodini (1928-2006). Takhellambam Thoibi Devi writes under the name Thoibi Devi. She is the first Meetei woman novelist, autobiographer and translator in Manipur. In addition to the mentioned genres, Thoibi Devi has also written songs and short stories. Thoibi Devi was born on 1 January 1920 at Keishampat Wahengbam in Imphal. Her father is a Bengali named Prashanna Kumar Das, and her mother is a Meetei named Khuman of Khamnam clan. However, Thoibi Devi's surname is Takhellambam. How she acquired the surname, Takhellambam, involves a story, and this story mirrors a part of the social condition of Manipur, which has profoundly influenced her writings.

In the 1930s, before World War II, Manipur was under colonial and feudal rule of the British and their appointed Maharaja Churachand Singh (1891-1941). The Manipuri king, Maharaja Churachand Singh, sought to exercise his power through Brahma Sabha since he had no power in state politics. Brahma Sabha is an institution constituted by the Brahmin priests in the king's court. The head of this institution is the king of Manipur. With its *mangba-sengba* (purity-impurity) rule, Brahma Sabha could declare any person or community as *mangba* (impure) and ostracise them for the flimsiest reason. Those who were declared *mangba* (impure) could only be purified by paying some money to the Brahma Sabha. According to the purity-impurity rule of Brahma Sabha, interracial and inter-community marriages were unacceptable in Meetei society. It was regarded as an act of defiling oneself. Hence, if a Meetei woman marries a person of a different race, she would be isolated from society as she has defiled herself and is impure. She would not be invited to any social programs or events (Thoibi Devi 1997: 7).

In order to escape from the harsh punishment of Meetei society under the rule of Brahma Sabha, it was told that Thoibi Devi was the daughter of a Meetei named Takhellambam Chaoba, who was a worker in the shop of her biological father, Prashanna Kumar Das. Thus, Thoibi Devi acquired the surname Takhellambam (2-3). However, this lie could not save Thoibi Devi and her mother. The Hindu Meetei society ostracised them for the simple reason that her father was a Bengali, a different community. Such a rule of Brahma Sabha only proves the hypocrisy and whimsicality of the king and the members of Brahma Sabha to extort money from the people

for the very reason that it does not apply to royal families. The crown prince, Bodhachanda, the son of Maharaj Churachand, had no problem marrying Rampyari, the Princess of Borokhemji and Maharani Ishwari of Ramnagar as his queens (*The Maharaja's Household* 2015).

## EDUCATION

Thoibi Devi's father, Prashanna Kumar Das, took care of her education. Thoibi Devi lived in a time when Meetei society was cynical about women's education. The orthodox and superstitious society of Manipur considered going to school, speaking English and mingling with people of a different race or community as acts of defiling oneself. All hill people and Europeans, pagan and Christian, were considered *mangba*. John Parratt also records this ethnocentric and xenophobic characteristic of Meetei society during the late nineteenth and twentieth-century Manipur. Even for a European to touch the plinth of a Meetei house at this time rendered it unclean and demanded a fine and purification (*Wounded Land* 20). Hence, if a person went to school, he/she could not enter the house without changing his/her clothes first. Meetei society was also sceptical about new changes brought by Western modernity. Watching cinema, bathing with piped water, and using soap were considered acts of defiling oneself. Chanting hymns in the Meetei language was also considered "impure"; hymns should be either in Bengali or Sanskrit. This was primarily because Bengali Vaishnavism had established its dominance in Manipur by this time. Girls were not allowed to go out of the house. If they went out, an older family member accompanied them. Thoibi Devi's parents did not impose such restrictions on her. However, she faced criticisms from the people of her locality. Neighbouring women criticised Thoibi Devi's parents for educating her. They said that her parents were wasting time by giving her modern education instead of teaching her the traditional women's professions—weaving, knitting and stitching. What good could school education do for girls other than enabling them to write love letters? This disdainful remark of the people says it all about their views regarding women's education. Such orthodox was the society of Manipur in which Thoibi Devi lived (Thoibi Devi 1997: 19).

Besides society's cynical view about women's education, a rumour spread in Manipur was that educated girls would be deported to a foreign country. This was one of the reasons that the people of Manipur did not want women's education. Because of this rumour, girls stopped going to school. Despite the contemptuous outlook of Meetei society towards modern education, Thoibi Devi's father was very supportive of her education. Thoibi Devi began her education at a school that was run in the courtyard of Kojiam Amubi of Wahengbam locality. The name of this school is New Girl's High School. In 1935, Maharaj Churachand founded Tamphasana Girls School, and with this, Manipuri women could get a formal education properly. Thoibi Devi passed her matriculation examination in 1939 from Tamphasana Girls School (Thoibi Devi 16-18).

Thoibi Devi started working as a clerk in the Department of Arts and Crafts<sup>i</sup> in Manipur after passing her matriculation examination in 1939. She worked there till World War II (Shantibala 2010: 3). On 10 May 1942, there were bombardments in Imphal. It was during the World War II. Everyone evacuated from Imphal due to the destruction caused by the bombardments. Thoibi Devi also fled along with her mother to Thongkhong at Khumbong in Manipur. At that time, her father was staying at Karimganja in Assam. After some time, Thoibi Devi left Khumbong for her father, who lived in Sylhet (back then, Karimganja was part of Sylhet). She stayed for some time with her father in Karimganja and with her stepsisters in Habiganja in Sylhet. Thoibi Devi worked as a lower primary teacher in Sylhet when she was staying with her stepsisters. Thoibi Devi returned to Manipur in 1945 when World War II ended. She resumed her previous work as a clerk, and she did Intermediate of Arts from Dhanamanjuri College in Imphal in its evening session. Thoibi Devi started working as a clerk in Tamphasana Girls School when the Arts and Crafts office was shut down. She worked in Tamphasana Girls School as a clerk from 1945 to 1950 (Memchoubi 1995: 28-35).

Thoibi Devi's experience in Sylhet when she stayed with her father from 1942 to 1945 inspired her to become a translator. Since she had studied the Bengali language till the sixth standard, she could read Bengali literature. She came across a number of Bengali literature during her stay in Sylhet. She read the writings of Bankim Chandra, Saratchandra and Rabindranath Thakur. Thoibi Devi found the translation of Bengali literature into Manipuri language not difficult as she knew Bengali society, its language and culture. Thoibi Devi began writing when World War II was over, and peace was restored in her life. Her experiences of World War II

and as a part of the communist activism became a primary resource for her writings (Shantibala 2010: 4-5). I shall discuss her involvement with the Communist Party in a separate section later.

## **THOIBI DEVI'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE LITERARY AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN MANIPUR**

Thoibi Devi contributed to the development of Manipuri modern art and culture. Doordarshan Guwahati started broadcasting Manipuri programs on 21 May 1957. Since then, Thoibi Devi started writing stories for broadcasting on the radio. Her first story, "Paona Brajabashi," was broadcast on the radio. Chandam Gopal narrated it. Paona Brajabashi was a patriot of Manipur who fought against the British in the Anglo-Manipur war of 1891. When Doordarshan Imphal became a full-fledged station in August 1963, Thoibi Devi wrote songs and music images to broadcast on the radio. She wrote songs based on the life story of Mahatma Gandhi, which Ibemani Devi sang in the form of a ballad. Thoibi Devi wrote the first music image in Manipur, "*Thoibina In Chingba*"<sup>iii</sup> (The Story of Fishing by Thoibi), and Nongmaithem Pahari, a famous singer in Manipur, produced it. This music image is an adaptation of *Moirang Kangleirol*, the old Manipuri literature of Moirang principality of Manipur.

Thoibi Devi associated herself with literary organisations and forums in Manipur. She was a committee member of the Manipur Sahitya Parishad. She was also one of the founding members of Cultural Forum Manipur, founded on 17 May 1959. Thoibi Devi became its president in 1967. She was the leader of the women's group in the forum. The Cultural Forum Manipur offers an award in the name of Thoibi Devi, Thoibi Award, to encourage the production of literary work, creative plastic art and Manipuri modern song. Thoibi Award began in 1987, and the Cultural Forum Manipur gives this to each field alternatively every two years. This award is motivational to the people who love Manipuri literature and culture. Thoibi Devi was also the editor of the journal called *Ritu* (Season), published by the Cultural Forum Manipur in 1967. Thoibi Devi, in collaboration with other like-minded people, founded Writer's Forum on 3 September 1988. The aim and objective of the Writer's Forum were to help young writers in publishing their works. In addition, she founded an organisation named

*Chumthang* (Rainbow) in 1974-75 to bring development in Manipuri modern song. Thoibi Devi was the first president of this organisation (Romesh 2020: 45).

Apart from her contribution to the literary and cultural development of Manipur, Thoibi Devi also engaged with activities that would bring upliftment in the condition of women in Manipur. Hence Thoibi Devi, in collaboration with other like-minded friends, founded a women's organisation called *Mahila Kalyan Samiti* (Women's Welfare Group) in 1962. This organisation founded an orphan home and started producing a journal named *Nupigi Yaipha Khongthang* (Women's Welfare Activities). Thoibi Devi was the editor of this journal. The journal encourages Manipuri women to write. The objective of this journal was to motivate women to contribute not only in household management but also to take part in the administration of the state (Shantibala 2010: 11). Thoibi Devi's idea of the 'new woman' is characterised by this vision of women becoming socially and politically aware subjects.

## AWARDS

In 1958, the education department of Manipur awarded Thoibi Devi for her children's book called *Samaj Sindamba* (Social Education). She was also given the award of Women in Literature at International Women's Air in 1975. Manipuri Sahitya Parisad honoured Thoibi Devi with the award Sahitya Bhusan in 1989 for her contribution to the literary field. In the same year, Sahitya Academy awarded her for her translation work, *Dristipath* (1969). *Dristipath* is the Manipuri translation of the Bengali text of the same name originally written by Jajabor, also known as Binay Mukhopadhyay. Manipur State Kala Academy also awarded her for her short story collection, *Post-mortem* (1990).

## THOIBI DEVI'S ENGAGEMENT WITH COMMUNIST POLITICAL PARTY

In the monograph of Thoibi Devi titled *Thoibi Devi* (2010), Koijam Santibala writes that Thoibi Devi was a follower of Hijam Irabot (1896-1951), a liberal social reformer and a revolutionary leader of Manipur in the first half of the twentieth century. Irabot was against the social and

religious injustice done to the poor peasants by the feudal rulers of Manipur. He built up a democratic political movement in Manipur. Irabot's opinion against the exploitation of women and polygamy influenced Thoibi Devi. Thoibi Devi believed in the communist vision of a classless society. Therefore, she joined the struggle for a democratic society in Manipur. On 13 April 1947, she joined the new Manipuri weekly paper *Anouba Yug* (New Era) as one of its seven editors. Irabot chaired *Anouba Yug* (New Era). This weekly paper imparted knowledge to the masses about their rights (Shantibala 2010: 5-8).

In *Eche-Thoibi Amasung Atei Warising* (Sister-Thoibi and Other Stories 1997) Khaidem Pramodini Devi, who is one among the first three Meetei Women writers, succinctly states that Meetei society was marred by the culture of purity-impurity, class gradation based on caste, poverty, exploitation of the poor by the rich and powerful people, and subjugation of women. They (Pramodini and Thoibi Devi) lived in the same discriminating society, and they believed that the political objectives of the Communist Party would bring changes in the society of Manipur. Hence, they joined the Communist Party in Manipur (Pramodini Devi 1997: 6).

Thoibi Devi started her communist political activism in 1948-49 while working in Tamphasana Girls School. It was a time when the political condition of Manipur was not stable. The British left Manipur in 1947, and there were contestations between different political organisations of Manipur regarding the state's administration. Manipur merged with the Indian dominion in 1949. After the merger of Manipur with Indian dominion, Manipur was declared as a Chief Commissioner's province on 23 January 1950. The political leaders of Manipur demanded the complete statehood of Manipur without disintegrating the hill and valley areas of Manipur. In her memoir *Ningsinglakli Ngasida* (In Retrospect 1997), Thoibi Devi writes that government employees were not legally allowed to participate in political activities during this politically uncertain time of Manipur.

Thoibi Devi writes that during this transition period of Manipur's independence from the British and merger with India, Manipuri people did not have the right to question the ruling government, Manipur State Congress (MSC). MSC represented the policy and ideology of the Indian National Congress in Manipur. Other dissenting voices or those who questioned the ruling party (Congress) were declared unlawful. So, political meetings of the Communist Party, led by Irabot in Manipur, were held in secrecy. Thoibi Devi was also secretly involved with

the Students' Federation of Manipur and the Communist Party in Manipur. She gained her political consciousness in the company of Hijam Irabot. Manipuri students who went outside Manipur for higher studies saw the struggle for freedom from British colonial rule. Students' Federation of Manipur was founded under the leadership of Irabot in 1946. This student's federation was constituted by the students who already had joined the Students' Federation of Assam. Irabot strengthened the women's organisation named Manipur Mahila Sanmeloni (MMS), founded during the *Nupi lal* (women's war) of 1939. The historic event *Nupi lal* of 1939 was a women's agitation against British colonial rule. Thoibi Devi became the secretary of MMS in 1948 (Shantibala 1997: 4 - 8).

As a part of their political activism, Irabot and his followers visited many remote areas of Manipur and conducted public gatherings in which leaders of the party, men and women, spoke. Thoibi was also one among the speakers of the Communist Party. During this time, women rarely took part in politics in Meetei society. Only four or five women were there in the Communist political struggle in Manipur, and Thoibi Devi was one among them. Thoibi Devi began to know about the rights of a citizen from her engagement with the Communist political movement. She could understand how far the women of Manipur were deprived of their rights. She knew the advantages of women's education and how it could bring emancipation of women in society (Thoibi Devi 1997: 65-74).

Under India's government's policy, Sardar Patel proposed to form a state called Purvanchal Pradesh by integrating Manipur, Cachar, Tripura and Lushai Hills, having two official languages, Bengali and Manipuri. This idea would be feasible for the region excluding Khasi Hills, North Cachar, Mikir Hills, Naga Hills and the North-eastern frontier tract of eastern Himalayas. Irabot was against the proposal of Purvanchal Pradesh because it would destroy the historical political entity of Manipur as the hill and valley areas of Manipur would be divided (Kamei 2015: 97). He mobilised the members of the Manipur Krishak Sabha (MKS) in this anti-Purvanchal Pradesh movement. Hence, under the leadership of Irabot, on 21 September 1948, at Manipur Dramatic Union Hall, a protest meeting was organised by MKS. Police personnel fired at those who came for this protest meeting. In this incident, Sub Inspector K. Naran Singh died. After this incident, Irabot went underground. When he was in hiding, he worked on realising Communist Revolution in Manipur. Since Thoibi Devi was the leader of the women's wing, Manipur Mahila Sanmeloni (MMS), she also had to go underground



following Irabot. Krishak Sabha, Praja Sabha and the Students' Federation of Manipur were all declared unlawful organisations. Many of its members were arrested (Kamei 2015: 44).

When Thoibi Devi went underground in hiding, she worked for the women's wing. As the representative of the women's wing MMS, she organised meetings and conferences for matters related to women's social, political, and economic conditions in Manipur. She taught women in villages. During this period of her underground life, Thoibi Devi was known by the male name Lamcha or Nupamacha. Thoibi Devi loved this phase of her life because she could get close to the lives of simple and ordinary rural women, and in that way, she could understand their conditions and thoughts well (Thoibi Devi 1997: 84-86). Thoibi Devi could no longer live in hiding as her mother was old and weak. Hence, she surrendered herself to the government. Regardless of her surrender Thoibi Devi was arrested on 22 August 1949 on the charge that she was still in contact with the Communist Party. She was released in July 1951 (98).

In 1953, the headmaster of Tamphasana Girls School, Haobam Ibungotombi, who had taught Thoibi Devi, appointed her back as a clerk in the same school. After some time, she worked as an undergraduate teacher in Tamphasana Girls School. While she was working as a clerk in Tamphasana Girls School, Thoibi Devi pursued the course of Bachelor of Arts from Dhanamanjuri College (D.M College) in Imphal and graduated in 1954. Later on, in 1956, she passed Bachelor of Education from Jamia Milia Islamia, Delhi. On 1 January 1984, Thoibi Devi retired from the post of the headmistress of Tamphasana Girls School (Shantibala 2010: 8). Thoibi Devi is an unconventional woman of her time like her female protagonists. She chose to remain unmarried but lived the life of a mother to her adopted children. She passed away on 9 October 1996.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THOIBI DEVI'S WRITINGS**

Thoibi Devi engaged herself with social and political activities to uplift women's condition in Manipur. Even the thematic concerns of her writings are focused on this objective. Thoibi Devi's personal experience in a debilitating Meetei Hindu society, coupled with her experiences as an activist and a follower of Hijam Irabot, have influenced the formative development of her writings. She reflects her social and political consciousness in her writings.

For instance, her short story collection titled *Post-mortem* (1990) mirrors various social issues of the twentieth century Manipur. Thoibi Devi's collection of short stories *Post-Mortem* (1990) reflects the communist political objectives. The stories included in the collection are only four or five pages long. They are so short that it looks like a brief narration made by one passerby to another. Thoibi Devi records the changing society while she sternly critiques the social evils. This short-story collection is a compilation of different social issues in Manipur. For instance, "*Laifam Chatpa*" (Pilgrimage) is about the commercialisation of religion; "*Oja Nattabana Oja Sabinu*" (False Teacher) is about the commercialisation of education; and "*Rajnitigi Chatnabi*" (The Trend of Politics) tells the story of corrupt political leaders.

The short-story collection, *Post-mortem*, also includes women's issues. The title short story "*Post-mortem*" of the book tells the painful story of a young indigent woman whose dead body is found hanging in the house where she worked as a domestic servant. Her death is suspicious because the post-mortem result of her dead body does not show any sign that she died by hanging. The story reflects how the murder of the poor has become so common. Their deaths have become a trivial and insignificant issue in Manipuri society. It depicts how people have lost faith in the law since powerful and wealthy people control it. The story titled "Post-mortem" represents the forgotten and unnoticed deaths of poor people. "*Adhikar*" (Right) is about the demand for equal wages of men and women wage labourers. In the story, Chandani demands a rightful wage for her work. She points out that it is wrong that the contractor gives women wages lower than that of men when they spend an equal amount of time and energy. Chandani also threatens the contractor by hinting at the power of labourers. She indirectly indicates that they can form an organisation of women labourers and boycott work until the contractor increases their wages and clears their due payments.

Thoibi Devi's critique of the society of Manipur, which was fanatically orthodox and highly rigid about its religion and culture under the influence of Hinduism, is also visible in her novels. Thoibi Devi's novel, *Chingda Saatpi Ingellei* (Ingellei Which Blooms in the Hill 1971), criticises the discriminatory treatment of tribal peoples by the Meetei Hindus of Manipur. *Nungsi Ichel* (The Course of Love 1967), on the other hand, represents how discriminatory class gradation prevails in Manipur.

Besides reflecting the condition of Manipuri society, the construction of women's identity in the colonial and post-colonial Manipur has been the subject of her writings. The female protagonists of her novels are not the conventional women who are seen as irrational, foolish and weak. The thematic issues of tradition and modernity are engaged persistently in her novels. One can trace the conception of the idea of a 'new woman' in her novels. It begins from Sarla in *Radha*, Chitralekha and Rina in *Nungsi Ichel* and culminates in Pratibha in *Chingda Saatpi Ingellei*. The concept of the 'new woman' was born with the advent of modern education in Manipur. Her women characters have been constructed meaningfully different from the conventional women images found in the male literary tradition. In contrast to Radha, the female protagonist of the novel *Radha*, who is weak, submissive and dependent, who gives up/suppresses her desires and is obedient to her parents, Thoibi Devi constructs a strong modern woman, Chitralekha in her novel *Nungsi Ichel* (The Course of Love), who can make her own ways and live independently. With Pratibha in the novel *Chingda Saatpi Ingellei*, Thoibi Devi's idea of the new woman attains its final culmination. Marriage and reproduction is never the destiny of women for Thoibi Devi. Thoibi Devi depicts her new woman as independent of men and who can go hand in hand in their endeavour for the cause of bringing a transformation of society. She is an independent, rational, calm, poised figure who can make their own decision in life.

## CONCLUSION

Contradictory to the popular view about Meetei women that they enjoyed a high status in society, an observation of the life of Thoibi Devi and how she became an activist and a writer shows the debilitating condition of women in the conservative and orthodox society of Manipur. Despite many hardships brought by the political and social conditions of her time, Thoibi Devi established herself as an activist as well as a writer. Her active participation in the social, political, and literary activities made her an exemplary figure of the 'new woman' in Manipur—the historical product that arose after the British colonisation of Manipur and the introduction of modern education in Manipur. Her personal experiences in the discriminatory Meetei Hindu society, the prevailing social and political conditions of Manipur, and concomitant involvement with communist activism constitute the substance of her writings.

The thematic concerns of her writings reflect her understanding of the discriminatory stratification of Manipuri society and the condition of its women. She was a communist activist, and her writings embody communist political ideology.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Arts and Crafts is an institution established by Mrs. S.M Jolly, wife of C.F. Jeffery, a state engineer of Manipur appointed by Maharaj Churachand Singh.

<sup>ii</sup> *In* means fishing net; *chingba* means pulling