

MAHARAJ KUMARI BINODINI DEVI (1922-2011), A HARBINGER OF MODERNITY AND FEMINISM IN MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

Born a princess, Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi (1922-2011) is a distinguished literary figure of Manipur. She writes under the single name Binodini. Binodini does not identify herself as a feminist. However, this biography of Binodini represents her as a harbinger of modernity and feminism in Manipur. An observation of this kind calls for an engagement with her life and works. This essay examines Binodini's life, her contribution to Manipuri art and literature and some of the notable characteristics of her writings. It highlights feminists insights of Binodini, the representation of women and their experiences, reflected in her works. It traces how Binodini became a writer. In the process, the essay offers a glimpse of the beginning of modernity in Manipuri art and culture.

Keywords: Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi (1922-2011), Women's Education in Manipur, Literary and Cultural Development in Manipur, Significance of Binodini's Writings

INTRODUCTION

Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi (1922-2011) is the youngest of the five daughters of Maharaja Churachand Singh (1891-1941) and Maharani Dhanamanjuri Devi, the Lady Ngangbam of Manipur. Her traditional Manipuri name is Sana Wangol or Princess Wangol. She is also revered as *Imasi* (Royal Mother) by the people of Manipur. She is the first female graduate of Manipur. Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi is one of the three pioneer Meetei women writers. The other two are Thoibi Devi (1920-1996) and Khaidem Pramodini (1924-2006). One of the distinguished literary figures of Manipur, Binodini has written various literary genres—novel, short story, radio play, memoir, travelogue, film scripts and song lyrics. She writes under the single name Binodini. Binodini is the first woman radio playwright and the first woman who wrote short story in Manipur. Binodini is also the first to write a thanatography in Manipur if one reads her novel *Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi* (The Princess and the Political Agent 1976) as the literalisation of death, figurative as well as actual death, and the process of dying of the female protagonist, Sanatombi.

Her surroundings have constantly nurtured Binodini into becoming a writer. Though born a princess, unlike many other children, she was closer to her nurses and servants than her parents when she was a child. It is the tradition of the royal family that children were reared by their respective wet nurses rather than by their biological mothers. The same is the case for Binodini. Her birth mother and father did not raise her in the royal palace. She depended on the breast milk of Tolchoubi, her wet nurse. Binodini said that if she were indebted for her mother's milk, it would be Tolchoubi's breastmilk, her wet nurse, not her biological mother's (Ksh. Subadani; *Saknaiba Kharagi Pungsi* 2008: 31). Since she grew up in the surrounding of ordinary people, she could embrace people of different classes and express their thoughts and sentiments.

In her interview that appeared in the documentary film, *Binodini: A Writer's Life* (2004), directed by Aribam Syam Sharma, a renowned film director and composer and produced by Sahitya Akademi, Binodini shares how she loved to hear stories from her attendants like Lilasingh and Tapuchand. While highly imaginative stories of Lilasingh would ignite her adventurous and imaginative mind, Tapuchand's religious stories of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* not only left a profound impact on her young impressionable mind but also widened her understanding of right and wrong. Their stories amplified her imaginative world while

simultaneously enhancing her perception of human nature. Binodini has been imaginative and creative since an early age. She used to be lost in her world of fantasy when she was small. Binodini recounts how she played dolls while she was small:

She would play by imagining the dolls to be living in a big family. She would even name the characters. One was named ‘Ati’—a tattletale doll who would instigate the other dolls to fight with each other. There would be a running commentary going on while playing dolls. She was so absorbed in her fictional world that she hated ‘Ati’ so much until one day, out of anger, she tore off her evil doll’s hair and threw it into the palace pond.

(*Binodini: A Writer’s Life* 2004)

Since Binodini was born in a royal family, she could get exposure to different people from different social strata of Manipur, which further augmented her artistic and inquisitive mind. She could observe people and understand their lives in depth. She wrote from what she could perceive and understand from her surrounding. In her introduction to Binodini’s memoir *The Maharaja’s Household: A Daughter’s Memories of Her Father* (2015), Nahakpam Aruna records Binodini’s statement regarding her writings, which Binodini shared in the literary circle of *Leikol* held on 22nd May 2005: “I do not know how to write except from what I hear, from what I experience. I write from what I encounter in life, from what I hear around me” (“A Princess Remembers: The Making of a Memoir” 2015).ⁱ

EDUCATION

Though Modern education had begun permeating its influence in Manipur, especially with the annexation of Kanglaⁱⁱ by the British in 1891, women’s education was not encouraged, at least until the 1930s. People had a negative opinion about women’s education. People criticised those girls who studied. What is the point of educating girls, they guffaw, except for enabling them to write love letters to their boyfriends? (Thoibi Devi 1997: 19). This social criticism applies to the common people of Manipur, not the royal families. In *Introduction to Manipur* Lairenmayum Iboonghal Singh observes that before the Anglo-Manipur war of 1891,

Manipuri society considered women's education a matter of luxury, and only the noble families would go for education of their women (Iboongohal Singh 1987: 79). Sanawangon (Binodini) and her sisters were no different; they got their education at home. Waikhom Sellungba was one of their teachers. Even though they did not have a school education, they were well educated. They learned English, Hindi, and Bengali languages at home (Ksh. Subadani 2008: 31).

Binodini could get the finest possible education a Meetei woman could receive at that time. She could go to different places outside of Manipur for a better education. Such exposure to different societies and cultures became very important in moulding Binodini to become a writer. She stayed for around four years in Nabadwip, West Bengal and studied in a school named Ishani Smriti Mandir for three years. Not everything came along smoothly in her life. In Ishani Smriti Mandir, she appeared for her matriculation examination but failed. However, her experience in Nabadwip paved the way for her career as a writer. In Nabadwip, she learned to speak Bengali fluently. She read famous Bengali writers and thinkers like Bankim Chandra, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra, and Michael Madhusudhan Dutt (*The Maharaja's Household: A Daughter's Memories of Her Father* 2015: 131). Binodini shares that because of this exposure to Bengali language and literature, she could embark upon her career as a writer and produce her first literary work called "Imaton" (Stepmother), a short story (*Binodini: A Writer's Life* 2004).

In 1939, she passed her matriculation examination from Tamphasana Girls School in Manipur. It was during this time that she wrote her first short story, "Imaton" (Stepmother). Her career as a writer was not without pitfalls. She had to face disappointment and embarrassment when she first attempted writing. When she showed her first work, "Imaton," to her teacher, Salam Tombi, who was also the editor of Tamphasana Girls School's magazine at that time, reprimanded her for writing about adulterous and amorous relationships. "Imaton" tells the story of sexual attraction between a son and his young stepmother. Later on, her collection of short stories *Nung'gairakta Chandramukhi* (Chrysanthemum among the Rocks), published in 1965, includes this story.

Binodini went to Shillong for her bachelor's degree. She studied at St. Mary's College, Shillong. During her stay in Shillong, Anjali Lahiri, her communist friend and a future writer

from Shillong, inspired Binodini to write. She was also motivated by her teacher, Prof. Majumdar of St. Mary's College: "I heard that your father is a king, I will give you a list of books, buy them and read; you have the potential to be a good writer" (*Binodini: A Writer's Life* 2004). Binodini built a small library at Redlands, Shillong, and invested her time and energy in writing. In that library, she started writing about her childhood days at Nabadwip and her experience in Redlands and Manipur. She studied art from 1948 to 1950 at Viswa Bharati University in Santiniketan. She went there to learn drawing, but she specialised in sculpture.

BINODINI'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE LITERARY AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Driven by her artistic passion and a sense of responsibility towards society as a princess, Binodini engaged in activities of various fields. She has been a crucial figure in bringing modernity to Manipuri art and culture. She founded Roop Raga by collaborating with the young artiste of Manipur in 1960. She was the founder general secretary of Roop Raga. As an organisation of art and culture, Roop-Raga has remained pivotal in bringing modernity to Manipur's art and culture. This organisation engages with theatre and dance, Manipuri modern song, and Manipuri cinema (*Manipuri Cinema: Eigi Paodam* 29-34). In the chapter "Sanaibemma," Aribam Syam Sharma shares that the domesticity of married life was causing conflict in her' self.' She had to find an expression of her own, and the formation of Roop-Raga became a saviour for her. Her association with the artistes of the organisation, which included singers, and actors, gave her renewed confidence and desire to write. Her contribution to Roop-Raga was as a writer. She wrote lyrics and scripts for Roop-Raga's productions of stage performances and also for broadcasting on the radio: songs, music compositions and plays. Sharma expresses his gratitude to Binodini. He acknowledges Binodini's contribution as a scriptwriter in making his films successful (*Manipuri Cinema: Eigi Paodam* 69). Nahakpam Aruna opines that Roop Raga has been Binodini's companion in her journey of becoming a writer. After having absorbed into married life for around ten years, Binodini found in Roop Raga a platform to express the artistic impulse that she learned from Kalabhaban in Santiniketan (Introduction; *Khonjel Lila Binodinigi*).

Apart from Roop Raga, Binodini was also associated with literary and cultural forums. In October 2001, Binodini founded the women writers' circle named *Leikol*,ⁱⁱⁱ a platform that would facilitate women to impart their thoughts and convey their ideas on themes encompassing social, political and women's issues. She was the first president of *Leikol*. She was a life member of both Manipur Sahitya Parishad and Cultural Forum, Manipur. She was also associated with Manipur Film Development Corporation (Kh. Gourchandra Singh 2020: 68). Binodini's role in introducing and developing modern forms of Manipuri art, culture, and literature makes her the harbinger of modernity in Manipur.

Binodini does not identify herself as a feminist. Nahakpam Aruna, in her introduction to *The Maharaja's Household: A Daughter's Memories of Her Father*, writes that "she (Binodini) balked at being called a feminist, and was impatient with women who paraded the superficial trappings of feminism, yet founded Leikol, the women writers' circle of Manipur" (xxxviii). Despite her rejection of feminism, Binodini is regarded as the first woman of Manipuri feminism and women's literary movement, though she refuses to identify herself as a feminist. The subject matter of her writings proves it. The writings of Binodini display her in-depth understanding of human nature, their emotions and sensibilities. For this reason, critics often describe Binodini as a humanist, but what good a humanist is if not a feminist.

SIGNIFICANCE OF BINODINI'S WRITINGS

In addition to her perceptive disposition, Binodini's life encompasses the time of the ancient monarchy and the British colonial period followed by the slow development of modernity till the early twenty-first century Manipur. She has witnessed the significant changes that occurred during this period in the history of Manipur. Therefore, her writings are significant for historical reference too. They encapsulate the social, political, cultural and religious conditions of the mentioned period of time. *Maharaj Churachandgi Imung* (The Maharaja's Household 2009), a memoir and *Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi* (The Princess and the Political Agent 1976), a historical novel stand in distinct for their historical importance. *Maharaj Churachandgi Imung* is a memoir of her father, Maharaj Churachand, written using historical accounts. Binodini uses anecdotes and her memories to provide the upper-class view of Meetei

society and recovers the fading and forgotten history of ancient Manipur. Through her memories, in some way, readers can perceive the lives of the royal family, particularly the condition of their women. Binodini gives voice and presence to those virtually forgotten lives like Rampyari, the Princess of Borokhemji, Maharani Ishwari of Ramnagar, and Tampak, Maid of Chongtham. It encompasses people from various social strata of Manipur. She writes not only of the kings, queens, ladies, princes, and princesses, noblemen of the court but also of the humble, ordinary people like servants, attendants, wet nurses, and others. In this sense, this memoir represents a microcosm of the ancient monarchic Meetei Kingdom.

Binodini's writings stand out for her distinctive representation of women and their experiences specific to Meetei society. Her novel *Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi* (The Princess and the Political Agent 1976) is also known for its historical importance and its representation of the condition of royal women in Manipur. It lays bare the difference in the treatment of women in the royal palace between those who bore sons and those who only had daughters or were childless. In this regard, Nahakpam Aruna observes that history usually represents the male perspective and male story. However, Binodini's historical accounts represent women's view and their stories. In this sense, Binodini subverts the tradition of patrimony in Manipuri genealogical writing, where a person's identity is taken from the father and his patrilineal forbears (*The Maharaja's Household: A Daughter's Memories of Her Father* xix).

Binodini's *Asangba Nongjaabi* (*Crimson Rainclouds* 1967) is a compilation of three plays. All these plays have been broadcast on All India Radio (AIR) Imphal. They are *Kaorabra Raas Sanabagi Ahingdo* (Have you Forgotten the Night of Ras?), *Ngaikho Hingminnakhisi* (Wait, Let Us Live Together) and *Shilpi* (The Artist). The play *Shilpi*, which was broadcast on radio, changed its title to *Asangba Nongjaabi* (Crimson Rainclouds) when presented as stage production in 1966-67. This play was also broadcast as a television film in 2003. This play is based on Binodini's life in Santiniketan. It was directed by the same person who directed the documentary film *Binodini: A Writer's Life* (2004), Aribam Syam Sharma. Binodini's days in the company of those learned teachers in Santiniketan, especially Ramkinkar Baij (1902-80), became her inspiration in writing this play. Critics have opined that Gautam, the protagonist of *Asangba Nongjaabi*, was inspired by Ramkinkar Baij. In this play, she has used Tagore's songs "Akla Base," "Hero Tomar Shabi." These songs were translated into the Manipuri language by Maibam Haricharan. According to Samik Bandyopadhyay, Binodini's well-known play

“*Asangba Nongjaabi*” (Crimson Rainclouds 1967) is based on her experience in Santiniketan as an art student. Observing the deep-seated commitment to personal freedom that characterises the play’s male protagonist, Gautam, Bandyopadhyay wonders if the play expresses Binodini’s frustration of not having enough time to practice art (*Crimson Rainclouds* xvii-xviii).^{iv}

The remaining two plays included in the anthology *Asangba Nongjaabi* offer a critique of the victimising androcentric norms and values of Meetei society. In her article “Binodini: Recovering the ‘Silenced Voice’,” Ningombam Rojibala discusses the remaining two plays, namely *Kaorabara Ras Sanabagi Ahingdo* (Have You Forgotten the Night of Raas? 1967) and *Ngaikho Hingminnakhisi* (Wait, Let Us Live Together 1967). Ningombam reads the play *Ngaikho Hingminnakhisi* as a critique of the androcentric imperatives of womanhood, which values women only for her reproductive capacity, which devalues those childless women. In *Kaorabara Raas Sanabagi Ahingdo*, she examines how Binodini alludes to women’s entrapment in the domestic domain by making a man do domestic work, which is considered a “woman’s job” (Ningombam 165-173).

Binodini’s film *Ishanou* (The Chosen One 1990) is known for its authentic depiction of culture, the mystical characteristics of a Meetei woman on becoming an *amaibi*, and the subsequent changes in her life. The film *Ishanou* is about the transformation of a Meetei woman, Tampha, who has lived as a woman in the conventional heteronormative way into a dramatic character of an *amaibi*. In this quasi-documentary film, Binodini shows the mechanism of the Meetei patriarchy that subsumes sexual deviance into its heteronormative structure in the case of *amaibi* (priestess); she shows how Meetei society denies its women to have sexuality on their own terms.

Apart from the thematic significance, Binodini’s writings are often noted for her writing style. In their editorial note, Chongtham Ongbi Kamala and Bishnulatpam Tarunkumari share that Binodini attempted various genres, but her favourite was the radio play. In the words of Binodini, “I love radio play. There was not even a single day that I thought of writing a stage play. To tell the truth, it is challenging. If I am able to write radio play successfully, I can say that I have become a good writer” (Editorial note; *Khonjel Lila Binodinigi* 2016; translation mine). Nahakpam Aruna observes the performative characteristics of radio play in her introduction to *Khonjel Lila Binodinigi* (Binodini’s Radio Play 2016). A highly imaginative

writer, Bindoini considered radio play—an art form, without the visual representation, only by variations in tone and dialogue stirs the audience’s heart—the noblest form of art. She writes that the audience’s attention can be captured through visual and hearing capacity in stage drama. Radio drama uses only the hearing capacity to arouse the imaginative faculty of the audience. Radio drama is viewed from the inner eye, not the outer eye. It was this challenge of radio drama as an art form that Binodini loved about it (Introduction; *Khonjel Lila Binodinigi*). In this regard, Koijam Shantibala observes that Binodini’s plays are written for broadcasting on the radio. Hence they have distinct characteristics. Actions are represented verbally as much as possible: dialogues replace actions. The dialogues of her plays invoke the audience’s imagination. Therefore, her plays can touch the heart of listeners more intensely than the stage play (Shantibala 37-38). Bishnulalpam Tarunkumari notes that Binodini uses the flashback technique as her favourite literary technique. She uses this technique in short stories, radio dramas, her novel and her memoir. Tarunkumari further observes that Binodini also likes to use the dialogue form. Binodini uses dialogue form or interactive style not just in her radio plays but also in her short stories and novel (Tarunkumari 2011: 365-378).

AWARDS

Binodini’s literary journey brought her accolades and prestigious awards. In 1966, Manipuri Sahitya Parisad awarded her Jamini Sunder Guha Gold Medal for her first published work *Nunggairakta Chandramukhi (Chrysanthemums Among the Rocks 1965)*, a compilation of nineteen short stories. In 1979, she was honoured with Sahitya Akademi Award for her seminal work *Boro Saaheb Ongbi Sanatombi (The Princess and the Political Agent)*. In 1976, the President of India honoured her with the award of Padma Shri, acknowledging her contribution to literature. However, she returned this prestigious award protesting against the killing of thirteen people on the infamous 18th June 2001 incident. In 2002 Kamal Kumari Trust conferred her the Kamal Kumari National Award for Culture. Sahitya Akademi honoured her with the Eminent Senior Writer Award in 2007. Manipur State Kala Akademy gave her, posthumously, Lifetime Achievement Award in 2011.

CONCLUSION

When creative ingenuity meets material resources and an inquisitive mind with experiences of life, works of exceptional significance ensue. Every genre Binodini has attempted—novel, short story, radio play, memoir, travelogue, film script, and song lyrics—bears remarkable characteristics. The thematic concerns, the style and techniques of representing them make her distinct. Binodini's understanding of women's oppressed situation, her feminine sagacity, displayed through the representation of women and their experiences specific to Meetei society, makes her a feminist. Binodini is much more than a princess; she established herself as a distinguished literary figure in Manipur. Her contribution to the introduction and development of modern Manipuri art and literature has made her a harbinger of modernity in Manipur. She has been a source of inspiration and a torchbearer to the Manipuri writers of younger generations.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ L. Somi Roy's *The Maharaja's Household: A Daughter's Memories of Her Father* (2015) is the English translation of Binodini's *Maharaj Churachandgi Imung* (2009)

ⁱⁱ The throne of the kings of Manipur. It represents the power and identity of the Meeteis.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Leikol* is the acronym for *Leima Khorjeikol* meaning women writers' circle.

^{iv} *Crimson Rainclouds* (2012) is L Somi Roy's English translation of Binodini's play "*Asangba Nongjabi*"



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