

**BEHIND THE VIOLENCE:
A LITERARY READING OF ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN MANIPUR**

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Abstract

Towards the end of 20th century, Manipur experienced a large scale communal violence between two tribal communities – Naga and Kuki. This was aggravated by the impact of globalization which led to an identity crisis associated with the territorial claims by the ethnic armed outfits. Though the physical aspect of the violence is reported here and there in the print and electronic media, the psychological world of the tribal people and the erosion of human values are registered only in the few contemporary literary texts available in Manipuri literature. The present paper is a comparative analysis of the impact of the Naga-Kuki violence on the innocent tribal people of Manipur as portrayed in two short stories – “Nongdi Tarakhidare”(It Never Rained) by Keisam Priyokumar and “Josephki Macha” (The Child of Joseph) by Sudhir Naoroibam. Both the stories depict a strange subaltern experience of the tribal communities living in the moors cut off from the rest of the world.

Key words: *Naga, Kuki, identity, territorial, ethnic, outfits, subaltern, moors.*

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Postcolonial India's claim that it is the largest democracy in the world certainly lacks legitimacy if the practicability of its democratic institutions are interrogated in terms of their functionality. This notion effectively finds a working space when we look at the various ethnic conflicts in the Northeast today. There are various interests working behind such conflicts, but one feature that is common to all is the lack of state's intervention and inclusiveness of the economic entitlement carried out through a flawed political system. This paper will study the impact of the ethnic conflict between the Naga and the Kuki¹ tribes of Manipur in the 1990s as portrayed in two Manipuri short stories written during the crucial years of the ethnic conflict.

The settlement of the Naga and the Kuki tribes spreads over the Northeast of India and Myanmar. In Manipur, both the tribes settle in all the five hill districts. Therefore, it is difficult to give an exclusive territorial boundary of any of the tribes. History of Manipur, written so far, is also silent over the question of territorial boundary on ethnic lines. However the Naga-Kuki clash is rooted in the territorial claims of the protagonists of the violence though the larger subaltern populace is innocent over this intricate political issue. While the plight of the people belonging to these two tribal communities largely remains unreported in the media, which is controlled by the Manipuri elites at Imphal, Manipuri writers comment and narrate it in their works. Such works frequently unfold the damaged lives of the tribal people living in the jungles largely cut off from the rest of the world.

Making of the Mad: The other Side of the Violence

Sudhir Naoroibam's short story, "Josephki Macha" (The Child of Joseph) is one such piece which exposes the mental pang of Joseph, the protagonist, during the long period of Naga-Kuki violence in the hills of Manipur in the last decade of the last century. By bringing in the biblical figure, Joseph, one is suddenly allowed to draw various images — the death of Jesus, the cruelty of the people who killed him, the resurrection etc. Joseph's search for his son (an allusion to Jesus) in the story reflects how Jesus was brutally murdered by the Christians as part of the communal adventure they carried out in Manipur. Sudhir's is, yet, an apt narration of the psychotic conditioning of man by an evil social contradiction for which he finds no solution because he is so small to stand against the huge evil.

The story begins with Joseph coming out of his home by driving his car to ascertain the identity of a dead body, a victim of the Naga- Kuki violence, lying unattended in the morgue. It is because his only son has not returned home since ten days and that the dress and description of the dead body resemble his son's. But what is more interesting is the manner how he came to the cemetery before reaching his destination, the morgue. The information he received shows that the dead body in the morgue is his son's though he could not accept or reject this reality.

The result of the failure to accept this stark reality of life has posed a psychological infliction on Joseph which is deeply rooted in the Naga-Kuki conflict Manipur experienced in the 1990s. Take, for instance, the manner how Joseph, the protagonist, came to the cemetery on his way to the morgue.

Joseph takes out a cigarette and smokes it. He left the steering of the car while lighting the cigarette for a while. He is not careless in driving. And it is not that he could not light the cigarette by holding the steering. Yet he wants to leave the steering. He thinks what's wrong in leaving the steering for a while. Joseph knows two things about death. One is morgue, the other is cemetery. Love and memory reside in the cemetery. Fear and sorrow reside in the morgue. Joseph had never been to a morgue. He didn't want to go too. (Sudhir 77)

This portrayal of the protagonist's psychotic state reflected in the manner how he drives the car is the result of a long communal conflict that has completely rejected human values thereby rendering individuals unable to lead their own lives. Being alive becomes the heaviest burden while death means no assurance of a future. This existential dilemma runs every vein of the protagonist:

In "Joseph ki Macha" [The Child of Joseph] the inner conflict in the heart becomes a significant aspect. Joseph's character is built with a restlessness of being caught within a catch-22 situation, unable to relate his own condition. For Joseph, there is no outlet to release his inner conflict. Undeniable news of his son's death, which he cannot reject though he did not want to believe it, causes restlessness to his heart. His only son has not returned for ten days. In the meantime the news of a dead body lying in the morgue, which resembled his son in dress and age, came to him. But why did Joseph go to the cemetery instead of the morgue! It shows an exceptional psycho-analytic view of Sudhir on man. Though both places are related to death, there is *sorrow and fear* [my emphasis] in morgue while *memory and love* [my emphasis] are in the cemetery. Joseph wants to hug love and memory instead of fear and sorrow but he has failed in his effort to convert his heart-breaking agony into memory and love. This is his inner psychotic state. To give an outlet to his psychotic burden, he rang the bell of the cemetery so loudly time and again. (Anand 24)

Joseph's choice of 'cemetery' instead of 'morgue' hints at his failure to raise his voice against the killers of his son thereby directing his angst against the imagined parents of the dead boy in the morgue instead of the killers: 'I am rather angry with the parents of the dead. They can still leave the child to the morgue. See how inhumane! Or the dead may be an orphan' (Sudhir 80). This outburst of Joseph has a dual implication: one, for him, his belief that the dead body is not his son's has belittled all his knowledge that the dead body is his son's; and two, for his wife, her logic that the dead body must be her son's is all her knowledge and belief. So, when Mary wants to ascertain the identity of the dead body in the morgue, Joseph is hesitant and the morgue becomes a symbol of 'fear and sorrow' to him. This difference between them in realizing the facts around them has become a cause of the breakdown of their married life. Yet, Joseph could not find out the reason of his own alienation. This Joseph is one among many representing a period of turmoil, asking crucial questions on the culture of violence, alluding to the theological failure of a religious group, narrating the futility of ethno-centric ideologies which delivers the culture of violence and symbolizing the erosion of democracy.

It is interesting here to recall the historical circumstances of the 1990s during which the ethno-centric ideologies got delivered by the armed groups of different tribes provided by the poor governance. 'Homeland', 'unique history', 'sovereignty', 'autonomy' 'sixth schedule', 'fake encounter', 'Armed forces special powers act', 'territorial integrity', 'state terrorism', 'demand letter', etc. have become the most prominent catch-phrases understandable even to the illiterate natives of the state during this period. Here comes the importance of analytical history:

That is why the history which interests me is analytical; that is to say history attempts to analyze what happened rather than just uncovering it. I don't mean that it can be used to understand exactly why the world developed in a certain manner, but, it can tell us how various elements coming together within a society serve to create an historical dynamic or conversely fail to cause it. (Hobsbawm 6)

If we open the pages of history in conjunction with the complex demography of the state, it will be extremely difficult to give a definitive shape of the period which is presented in the two short stories under my scrutiny. However, since history is an unbreakable chain of events, it can give itself an event as the cause of another. It is how we can examine the causes of the violence:

Another development since the late 1980s that has compounded the crisis is the emergence of several non-state counterparts in the region following the same *declarative discourse* [my emphasis]. Violence as a means to contain such protest has been the inclination of the insurgents and the Indian state. The contest was once binary— between the Indian state and the insurgents as two opposing camps. But over time, the contests have shifted from a binary to a multi-cornered one. The conflict is no longer between the Indian state on the one side and the insurgents on the other, but also among the different insurgent outfits.

This is due to the emerging trend of assertions by numerous ethnically based insurgent outfits, often working for their respective ethnic and community interests, translating community differences and animosity into the language of violence. (Oinam 183)

The substitution of cohesive culture by the 'language of violence', however, has its roots in the neo-colonial political set-up of the country that always rejects the subaltern voice through military power and economic subjugation.

The decade under discussion presents a heap of chaos and conflicts: the Naga-Kuki violence in the hills, poor governance of the state by the small executive coterie and a sudden wave of economic liberalisation and globalisation have all become the defining features of the period. And it is within this period of turmoil that the subaltern people experienced utmost fear psychosis in the remote isolated villages unknown to the protagonists of the world's largest democracy. Yet, literature narrates once again the story of these rejected and forgotten lives lost in the dark moors.

Into the Moors: Negotiating Love for Life

Apart from Sudhir's short story already mentioned earlier, Keisham Priyokumar's "Nongdi Tarakkhidare" (It Never Rained) is another instance of subaltern predicament born to the ethno-centric ideologies delivered by the insurgents of the communities in question. The centrality of subaltern life in the story of Priyokumar is a case never questioned anywhere by anybody. The writer had also admitted that his stories were conceived through his engagement with the subaltern life, in his capacity as an engineer, while carrying out his duties at the far-flung corners of the state:

The anxiety felt by the young writers at the thought of a mammoth power trying to engulf their culture and identity is expressed clearly 'in their writings. The woes of the poor and downtrodden, the sufferings of the marginal farmers, the plight of the innocent victims of the ethnic clashes, have also left their imprints in Manipuri short stories. The laments of the neglected and forgotten people inhabiting the far-flung corners are heard in the writings of Keisham Priyokumar. (Bijoykumar 81)

The story under discussion ("Nongdi Tarakkhidare") moves around the lives of a tribal couple, Lungjahao and Chongnikin, living in a far-flung village in the hill of Manipur. This couple is the symbol of Manipur's subaltern life cut off from the rest of the world and leading a purely human life deeply rooted in their traditional past. They know no nationalism, no ideology, no politics, no education and no philosophy. Life is, thus, for them, earning their livelihood: 'bamboo cutting', 'fishing', 'gardening', 'toiling in the farm to reap their valuable labour.' They never believed that their tranquil village would be a hotbed for multiple crises, a place for upstarts to experiment their 'political prudence' only to make violence on the innocents a calling.

My intention behind this piece of writing is two-fold: one, to trace the socio-political circumstances, in a given historical period, that led to the rejection of the beautiful lives and two, to project the point how literature could reach out to the places and people which /who are completely or partly failed by history. The later case will definitely involve our constant engagement with the former by both supplying and receiving meanings to/from the circumstances. The contestants of the violence always try to give meanings to the circumstances through their 'declarative discourses' to make 'unique histories' while the 'peoples' are always at the receiving end of such discourses. There is very little room for the peoples in question to question the validity of such 'declarative discourses' and the denial of such discourses means succumbing to the bullets or to be a player of the game of violence. Many innocents were thus dragged into the game under these circumstances and were always guided by their emotions and community interests rather than by ethics and democratic spirit. As a result, the 1990s saw a sudden mushrooming of ethno-centric armed groups distorting history and at times, rewriting 'exclusive histories' to claim their 'right to self determination.'

Another cause responsible for the conflict reaching out to an undesirable degree is the failure of the state to get involved in resolving the issue before it gets out to unmanageable size. Both the short stories of Sudhir and Priyokumar, at any point of the stories, hint at the government(s) coming or attempting to come as savior of Joseph's son or of Lungjahao. When the police was informed of Joseph's son's not returning home, the police, as an instrument of the state, could only bring the news of a dead body lying unattended in the morgue. This news bewildered both Mary and Joseph as if their lives have been cut short with no future and Joseph could think and see nothing more than 'morgue and cemetery'. The cruelty of man is alluded to at the sight of the cemetery by bringing in a biblical figure, Jesus:

Joseph was watching towards the direction of the forefinger. The crosses line afar. Each cross seems speaking to him that the dead is Jesus who was crucified. That Jesus who was jabbed by spear and killed. Even the son of god met such death. Look, the cruelty of man. (Sudhir 78)

Every cross in the cemetery hints at one or another 'Jesus' brutally killed like the biblical 'Jesus' and as such Joseph said, "It may be, Daju. Everywhere can be cemetery's land. Grave must be enlarged. To be enlarged bit by bit" (Sudhir 78). Along with this image of grave, Joseph raises another serious question of identity — the fear of being identified by the other contesting community anywhere in his own motherland. When insecurity haunts one's life within his own motherland, the talk of identity becomes a mockery on life. When asked whether he is a Naga or a Kuki, Joseph gives an ambiguous, yet, very serious reply to Thapa:

I know Daju that you are trying to ridicule me. Okay. I can be ridiculed. I am afraid to disclose my community. I am ashamed of it. I want to be neither Naga or Kuki. You know, there are only two kinds of people in Manipur, one is *Chingmee* and the other being *Tammee*.² Joseph belongs to the *Chingmee*. A simple *Chingmee*. This much, only this. (Sudhir 78)

Is it an identity crisis? Whose identity has been upgraded or degraded? These may be the million dollar questions which can be answered or at least discussed with political prudence, but the erosion of human values, the plight of the subaltern life, the anxiety of the period, the pollution of the peaceful life of Lungjahaos and Josephs are, however, best registered in the two short stories under my scrutiny. Of the two, Priyokumar's is more subaltern and vocal in giving the physical account of the communal violence while Sudhir probes into the depth of the psychic injuries of his characters that also imperil their physical existence.

Since life implies two facets — one, our physical existence i.e. our health, home, food, cloth, work, economy, etc.; and two, our spiritual existence i.e. love, religious beliefs, honour etc. — the degradation in one of the two will definitely imperil the other because both are to be always in complementary order so that it(life) finds its definitive shape. The demographic change is one example of the distortion of physical existence of the tribal people which has an implication on the later facet because when the villagers left their village to a safer place, Leijangphai, it becomes an unbearable psychological burden on Chongnikin. Her dear past is in the village, deeply rooted in the bamboo bushes, in the river Barak, in the woods and in the hut. This past is, for Chongnikin, dearer than her proposed safer future at Leijangphai. This is how the balance of the two facets of life was broken by the violence as portrayed in Priyokumar's short story.

Though both the writers have made significant responses to the violence, there are marked differences in both characterization and storytelling while the biblical images drawn are a conspicuous affinity between the two. The protagonist of Sudhir's short story has a 'car', wears 'a coat and a tie', has a comfortable home provided with modern cosmetics which are all indicative of a (lower) middle class family while Priyokumar's Lungjahao and Chongnikin are all hand-to-mouth people with no decent cloth and home. Joseph has got university education and reads newspaper while Lungjahao and Chongnikin could not work out mere addition and subtraction. Joseph is conscious of the rule of law and as such he informs police of his son's missing while Chongnikin and his fellow villagers, all living in the heart of the hill cut off from the rest of the world, could find no option but to flee home. These villagers know no police, no government, no fundamental rights or a bit of democracy. Theirs is a subjugated life surrounded by violence from all directions and yet again neglected by history. This is the predicament of the subaltern life in Priyokumar's story.

But, whereas the protagonists of Priyokumar's story are illiterate who cannot see the administrative mechanism of the state where they live, Sudhir's Joseph, though he has got education, could not make use of his intellect to solve his own predicament. Since it is their social being that determines their consciousness (Marx 1977: 389) the social (i.e. material) circumstances surrounding them have shaped the consciousness of the characters of both the stories. It is here that how the violence which has made significant inroads into the psyche of the tribal people, in turn, creates a world of illusion from which the characters and the protagonists in particular cannot escape. Thus the 'cross' in both the stories speaks more to Chongnikin and Joseph than by her father-in-law and his wife, Mary respectively. This is a case of conflict between reality and illusion, where the individuals cannot participate in a solution to their own problems — a case in which individuals drag themselves into their own problems which is more serious than the physical violence. When the physical violence is internalized within an individual, it takes the form of charged emotions having no outlet to release and such emotions frequently become the cause of alienation of the individuals in question. Joseph is such a case in hand, who is characterized by such charged emotions that brakes his 'car' from going to 'morgue' and later leads him to the 'cemetery' where 'love and memory' reside because 'cemetery' consoles while 'morgue' frightens. In the similar fashion, with certain nuances, her own village is dearer to Chongnikin than the 'unknown' Leizangphai. Thus the protagonists of the two stories are caught within their own psychological conflicts, unable to resolve and thereby failing to participate in the sense of community in their own physical environment. Such portrayal of the protagonists alludes to the effect of the violence that it not only kills but also deforms human knowledge in guiding a civilization.

Another interesting aspect that can form part of our discussion is the imagery in the two stories. While the biblical images drawn are aptly supported by the simple and colloquial language, the images can easily arrest our attention to the complex psychological burden of the tribal people. The frequent appearance of Lungjahao after his death, saying 'Look Chongni, is this fish big?' provokes both 'fear and sorrow' which are manifested by the 'morgue' in Sudhir's story. The imagery of 'fear and sorrow' reaches out to an utmost degree when references to the crucifixion of Jesus was frequently given. When the young lad says that Lungjahao was 'crucified on a tree at Makui', Chongnikin's fear and sorrow knew no bound. The manner how Lungjahao died is how Jesus was killed by men as described by Joseph in Sudhir's story. 'Cross', 'Jesus', 'crucifixion', 'pastor', 'cemetery', 'gospel', 'god', etc. which are frequently used in both the stories bring in live biblical images at different intervals of the story.

The two short stories, in a nutshell, register not only the historical past but also raises serious questions on the business of violence as a political protest, the contents of which are always ethno-centric. These stories also make a juxtaposition between the physical violence and the spiritual sanity of man with references from the bible and the violence experienced by the two tribal communities in the 1990s in Manipur. The two

writers, in their stories, have made an attempt to make significant literary inroads into a more human world by rejecting the business of violence. This picturing of the lives of tribal people in Manipur negates the very theoretical claims of economic growth and social justice by the Indian state in dealing with its subaltern Northeast.

NOTES

1. The *Nagas* and *Kukis* are two different tribal communities inhabiting the hills of Manipur. Most of them are Christians. There was a long communal violence in Manipur involving these two communities as contestants in the 1990s. When an individual is identified in terms of their community identity- either Naga or Kuki - he is most liable to be killed by the other community. Thus community identity is a symbol of fear during the ethnic violence.

2. *Chingmee* refers to the people of the hills of Manipur while *Tammee* means those living in the valley.

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