

Construction of Ideal Woman in old Manipuri Literature: An Analysis of the Manuscript Bhakta Charit by Ningthoujamba Madhava

Ningombam Shreema Devi^{1*}, Samson Sitlhou², Ningombam Satyabrata Singh³

1Assistant Professor Department of Political Science Nambol L Sanoi College, Nambol

2Assistant Professor Department of History Dhanamanjuri University, Imphal

3 Lecturer, Department of History Ningthoukhong Higher Secondary School

Abstract

There is a paradigm shift in the mode of deployment of women's sexuality in Meitei society after the coming of Vaishnavite Hinduism. The Brahmanical ethos merged with the ancient female archetypes in Meitei society to create the ideal of present-day Meitei Women. To understand this better this paper attempts to analyse the manuscript written by Ningthoujamba Madhava as reproduced in Ningthoukhongam Khelchandra's book *Ariba Manipuri Sahityagi Itihas* (A History of Old Manipuri Literature) to understand the discourse surrounding the ideal womanhood as informed by the Hinduism. This writing was reproduced in *Ariba Manipuri Itihas* (A History of Old Manipuri Literature) by late Pandit N. Khelchandra Singh (Ningthoukhongam, 1969). The most significant feature of *Bhakta Charit* was that of providing or elaborating the fundamental qualities of the ideal Vaishnavite Hindu women. Here Madhav elaborated on what an ideal woman should not be, and on the dos and don'ts in the conduct of the human being. He was very particular on the rules of behavior and morals concerning women. He was in particularly concerned about the type of women whom one should marry especially in terms of her physical features. One remarkable feature of the above passages is that Madhava compared women with different kinds of animals.

(Key words: Vaishnavism, Meitei, religion, sexuality, mythology, ideal woman)

Introduction

Every society has a defined parameter of an ideal woman. These parameters of the construction of ideal woman can be found in religious teachings, social norms, mythologies, folklore and other cultural artefacts. In Meitei society as well the construction of an ideal woman is found in the legacy of many ancient texts as well as in the texts which arrived after the advent of Vaishnavite Hinduism. Therefore, the ideal woman as we see in our society is defined by the meeting of these two ideals- the first that of the pre-Hindu ideals of womanhood as defined by legends like Thoibi and Panthoibi and post Hindu ideals embodied in Satidharma. What we could recover of the 19th century women's worldview and of patriarchy in practice could be referred from two evidence – one in the folklore related to women's sexuality under Vaishnava ethos, prevalent silently in social gossip, and the other a notable textual production of a Meitei scholar, Ningthoujamba Madhav, who left a manuscript named *Bhakta Charit* (Qualities of the Devotee), regarded to have been written sometime in 18th or 19th century. This paper attempts to analyse this manuscript written by Ningthoujamba Madhava as reproduced in Ningthoukhongam Khelchandra's book *Ariba Manipuri Sahityagi Itihas* (A History of Old Manipuri Literature) to understand the discourse surrounding the ideal womanhood as informed by the Hinduism.

Brahmanical influence in Meitei Society

Brahmanical influence became crucial in the state formation process in the 15th century when Brahmins from Bengal immigrated in Manipur in a considerable number. As Vaishnavism became a popular religion in Manipur, this was followed by assimilation of the Brahmins into the Meitei society. They also became priests and preceptors in Meitei society. Subsequently the ecclesiastical authority moved into the hands of the Brahmins. The Brahmins associated with the ritual services in the palace were settled in Kangla, while others mostly settled in the fertile northern plains along with the Meiteis. Almost every village had a Brahmin family authorized for priestly functions (Thokchom, 2011). However, ancestor worship and some other practices of the ancient Meitei religion never lost their significance. Therefore, their ancestral worship of Umang Lais or the Sylvan deities continued along with the practice of Vaishnavism, and it continues at present (Singh, 1963). With the coming of Brahmins their ideals and ethos too came along. There are three main salient pillars of Brahmanical social order: maintenance of caste purity, lineage purity and family purity. Brahmanism can be defined as a holistic socio-religious and political ideology with its system of perception, arrangement and classification of society guided by Brahmanical ethics. Brahminism necessitates the control of women's reproductive capacity to construct and consolidate its envisaged social and moral order. Brahmanism conceptualizes women as 'the other', the tool and a body to be regulated essential for the legitimization and sustenance of a caste-based society. For a society based on caste purity it can be achieved only by a close guarding of the sexuality of womenfolk especially of the women of higher caste (Chakravarti, 1993). Naorem Sanajaoba (1988) in his seminal work *Manipur: Past and*

Present, noted that a significant feature of Manipuri society is that caste discrimination was unknown to the Manipuri mind and women did not experience gender discrimination unlike in many other social systems which thrive on the enslavement of one section of the society by the other. Therefore, although the Brahmanical regime of regulation and control of women's sexuality began to apply in the daily lives of Meitei society, the rigid caste system as found in other parts of India could not take roots in Manipur. Yet the notion of pollution and purity became entrenched so as the sex-negativity (Rubin, 2002).

Institutionalisation of Vaishnavite Hinduism and Introduction of Hindu text in Meitei society.

One of the most significant developments which accompanied the adoption of Vaishnavite Hinduism by the Meitei Kingship was that of the propagation of Hindu mythology and other religious texts under the state patronage. The narratives of epic Ramayana entered Manipur in the early decades of the 18th century. It was the time when numerous tumultuous changes due to forcible conversion under the patronage of the king were getting affected in Manipur because of the coming of Hinduism. This was followed by the Manipuri Pandits making sincere efforts to translate and trans-create Mahabharata of Kashiramdas and the Ramayana of Krittibas. A great Manipuri Scholar, Angom Gopi who had adorned the court of king Garibniwaz (1709-1748) composed the seven Volumes of Manipuri Ramayana based on the Krittibasi Ramayana (Arambam, 1996). In 1713 CE, King Garibniwaz had authorized two indigenous scribes to render the chapters of the fall of Birbahu to be rendered into semi-archaic Manipuri, but later the fuller translation of Krittibasi's Ramayana became necessary (Gourachandra, 1984). A multiple collection of scribes, scholars, traders, etc. who knew the narratives were authorized to transliterate Krittibasi's Ramayana, rather than Valmiki's Ramayana. The immediate need to familiarize the story of Rama was to change the lives of the common people through a new theory of Devaraja or the idea that kings are the epitome of Gods. Ramayana was thus elevated to the status of a sacred mantra or chant that could impact a change on the moral condition of the listener. For example, by and by people started believing in things like couples who had experienced long period of barrenness in spite of marriage, could be blessed with progeny once they listen to the Rama story; that whosoever listens devoutly to the story of Rama will be blessed with good things in life and should be able to propitiate their sins; that even listening to a chapter from the Ramayana could earn a boon and the fruits of it would be equivalent with the fruits secured from performing the Aswamedha Yajna itself, etc. (Singh, 1963). The Ramayana, therefore, became a sin-absolving, blessedness giving story. At the same time the story of Ramayana embodies the story of Sita in her pristine qualities. The concept of ideal women was very much the characters exhibited by Sita. Therefore, the discourse on morality and ethos of Ramayana has the means and power to influence the norms and conduct of sexuality in a society where the narration is an integral part. In due course of time, the notion of the ideal women as embodied by Rama's wife Sita became the ideal parameter of Meitei women as well. The Manu Samhita was translated by a local Meitei Brahmin Surchand Sharma in 1949 (Arambam, 1996). He was also a Sanskrit scholar and cultural enthusiast. Meitei scholars were deeply influenced by these texts. Ningthoujamba Madhava's Bhakta Charit is one remarkable work carrying deep influence of the ideology entrenched in the texts based on Hindu mythology and religion.

Bhakta Charit: Ideal Women Discourse

One of the most significant and influential manuscript concerning the discourse on women's ideals was the text Bhakta Charit of Ningthoujamba Madhav. This writing was reproduced in Ariba Manipuri Itihas (A History of Old Manipuri Literature) by late Pandit N. Khelchandra Singh (Ningthoukhongjam, 1969). The most significant feature of Bhakta Charit was that of providing or elaborating the fundamental qualities of the ideal Vaishnavite Hindu women. Here Madhav elaborated on what an ideal woman should not be, and on the dos and don'ts in the conduct of the human being. He was very particular on the rules of behavior and morals concerning women. He was in particularly concerned about the type of women whom one should marry especially in terms of her physical features. Now let us see the translation of passages from Bhakta Charit:

Women who often break into loud laughter or breaks into fierce cries; and those who wanders around neighbour's households belong to the category of 'Nupee Kwak' (Crow-woman). They are closely related with wicked demonesses. She should not be taken into marriage.

Husband and children of those women who have moles near the spaces below the pituitary glands, where the tear drops run down on the face, do not live long.

Women have moles on the occipital space of the head, or those with larger skulls, often marries too many husbands.

Women whose glances are mischievous or don't pay heed to their husbands' words/wishes or shouts at the top of their voice while interacting with others or whose gaits are accompanied with a loud sound are usually impoverished in life with their husband and children not living long lives. They are also related with demonesses. As such they are not to be taken as wives.

Women with a pointed nose and curly hair are not conducive to accumulating property and wealth.

Women who talk too much, and irresponsibly, belong to the category of Nupi Charoi (Blue Magpie-women); and are not to be taken as wives.

Women who often have mucus filled eyes, whose body is heavy and broad; and with big untidy heads are also termed as O-Lakhi (the opposite of Lashmi, the Goddess of wealth); and are not to be taken as wives.

Women with sunken eyes and an elongated head; behave with prejudice and malice; and do not respect elders are also not to be taken as wives.

Those who spit often in public; and those whose rows of teeth are large often quarrel with their neighbours; and as such are not to be taken as wives

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Women who commit adultery like a stealthy snake are termed as Nupi Lin (Serpent-women); and are not to be taken as wives.

Those women who keep their heads upturned, whose eyes are loud and aggressive, those who often visit neighbours and gossip, those who do not possess an iota of shame, etc. belong to the category of 'Nupee Shembang' (Swallow-Woman). They belong to the tribe of demonesses and are not to be taken as wives.

Those who do not bother to sweep the floors of their precious house, and rashly swings the tips of their brooms are also O-Lakhis and are not to be taken as wives.

Those women whose phanek or sarong rustles in an unruly manner while walking, and whose tips of the sarong create noise in gait, belong to the category of Nupi Besha or women who are like prostitutes. They will be born as horses in their next lives.

Those who cheat on their husbands, those who have a warped mind, and those who profess to be virtuous with their husbands, yet who moves with freedom behind their husbands back will be born in their next life as dogs.

Those women who do not bother about what their husbands say, those who kick their husband's bed with their feet, those who cook their food in a broken pot, those who feed their husbands with their hands soiled from the leftovers and who feeds their husband with such soiled water, belong to the category Nupi Besha (Prostitute Women). They are often born in the next life as worms

The women whose body is deliberately expansive, those whose nose are like those of cats, those whose breasts are provocatively large, even if you are born in a low caste, do not marry them, as they are O-lakhis.

Those women who have long tongues, whose lips are small, whose laughter and pranks are high, may stray and wander in unlikely places. Such sharp lipped women are too gossipy and are prone to reckless merriment.

Those very hands while examined have lines in the palm straight and linear like a flag, and whose lines shape like the imagery of banyan trees, or like a lotus, or have reddish ears are Like Goddess Parvati. Marry them! They should make good wives.

Those women who softly and quietly give orders, and whose minds are soft and tender, and who serve their husbands without counting days, practice regular care, whose state of clothing are dignified and sanctified are believed to possess the virtues of the mother goddess (Leimarel) and also are known as the Lakshmi Yumleima (Goddess Lakshmi of the household). They should be compulsorily sought after for marriage.

When the women cook the family's victuals, she should not wear torn clothes. When you rest your head on the pillow, the pillow should not be touched by the feet. Also the rice dish should not be touched by the feet. Do not point to your house with your feet. She should not make sounds when she walks. Even at a daily order by her precious husband, she should not retaliate or rebuke him (Ningthoukhonjam, 1969, p. 89)

One remarkable feature of the above passages is that Madhava compared women with different kinds of animals. It may also be noted that in Greek literature also women are often compared with different animals. Writing on ancient literature of the Greeks, Lloyd-Jones (1975) quotes Phocylides who wrote in the 6th c. B.C.E. where he describes and value a certain type of woman: "The tribes of women originated from these four creatures: one from a bitch, one from a bee, one from a bristled sow, one from a mare with a long mane. The last is graceful, speedy, a runabout, a beauty. The one from the bristled sow is neither bad nor good. The one from the bitch is cross and savage. The one from the bee is a good housekeeper and knows how to work. Pray, dear friend, to get her in delightful marriage." (p.98) Likewise the ideals as elaborated in Bhakta Charit, women are classified into different categories on the basis of her physical features and behavior to define a good wife or what kind of woman is to be married with. His ideals were relegated almost to a canonical status and they are like that of the highest form of Hindu moral order informed by Brahmanical patriarchy. This is a marker of women's loss of subjectivity and consciousness.

There are two main hypotheses concerning women in Brahmanism as propounded in Dharmashastra and Manusmriti. The first is that women by nature are fickle, cunning, untrustworthy, and sexually uncontrolled. (Wadley, 1977) Second assumption is that women's sexuality needs to be controlled if the society as Brahmanism envisioned had to maintain purity of caste, lineage, and family. The regulatory regime of control over women's body was systematically constructed by the Brahmanical ideology. This regime is carried out by the fundamental categorisation of women as mothers and non-mothers (Ray, 1999). This classification was based on their reproductive capabilities. Thus, a mother becomes the primary normative category among others. Woman as wife or daughter formed the secondary normative category. They have the potential of procreation, which is the primary biological function for a woman, and is yet to be realized. As a wife and daughter, therefore, a woman held an ambiguous kin position. She was regarded as sexually dangerous, which led to an emphasis on the wife's fidelity and the daughter's chastity. According to Brahmanism, a woman was defined by her reproductive abilities. A woman who was not (or could not be) a mother was by definition a 'deviant'. This category included the widows, the woman ascetics, spinsters and the Vesyas (commercial sex workers), women whose potential for procreation is either absent or not legitimate.

It is argued that in India and China, ideological constructs supporting male dominance were intensified during historical periods of consolidation of state power. (Bonvillian, 1998). It is assumed that the systematic codification of Hindu laws in the post-Vedic period was responsible for giving official sanction to strengthened patriarchal rights and the decline in woman's status. Many ethnographic studies also study point out that even today there is an important relationship between female purity and purity of caste. (Yalman, 1963) Whenever the caste system has proliferated there has been a parallel development of institutions

concerned with the control of female sexuality. He continues that in India, where purity is the principal idiom of status differentiation, there is a major preoccupation with the maintenance of female chastity. For the purity of the caste is directly dependent on the purity of its womenfolk. The male members of the caste are in large measure dependent for their status rating on the purity of their women – primarily on that of their sisters and daughters whom they give in marriage, and secondarily on that of the women they take in as wives. Hence, there is a rigorous control of female sexuality (Chakravarti, 1993). Although the caste system was non-existent in Meitei society, the notion that women's sexuality needs to be controlled and out under surveillance to uphold the social order defined by Hinduism becomes an entrenched social feature in Meitei society. In a male dominated sex-gender system, both women and animals are identified with nature which is presumably governed by irrationality, emotion, banal needs and uncontrolled nature whereas men are identified with culture associated with reason, logic, civilization and self-control. (Mackinnon, 1989) This is the primary reason for rationalizing men's control over women and nature. The above passages from *Bhakta Charit* shows how women have become regimented in terms of her sexuality and other behaviors in day-to-day life.

Conclusion

A woman who is considered as worthy of marriage is expected to show certain physical traits as well as follow certain behavioral norms. The way a woman carries herself in the manner she speaks, walk, or dress is strictly kept under surveillance. Even the cognitive aspects of her being were to be developed in a manner that will conform to such ideas as propounded in *Bhakta Charit*. It is to be noted that any woman who deviates from these given norms are compared to different birds and animals. Even her physical appearances have not been spared. All these shows how women were being subjected to a cruel judgment. A woman seems to exist for the sole purpose of men's satisfaction and for the wellbeing of the family. Her agency and autonomy in terms of her body and subjectivity is being subverted severely which is a drastic shift from the previous archetype of women embodied in *Panthoibi* the ancient Goddess of Meitei society. These dogmas engraved in *Bhakta Charit* by Ningthoujamba Madhava is an example of how women are subjected to symbolic violence functioning on the basis of acceptance on the part of the women to follow these norms due to rigorous process of socialisation since their childhood. This text exemplify the profound influence Brahmanical patriarchy has on Meitei society.

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