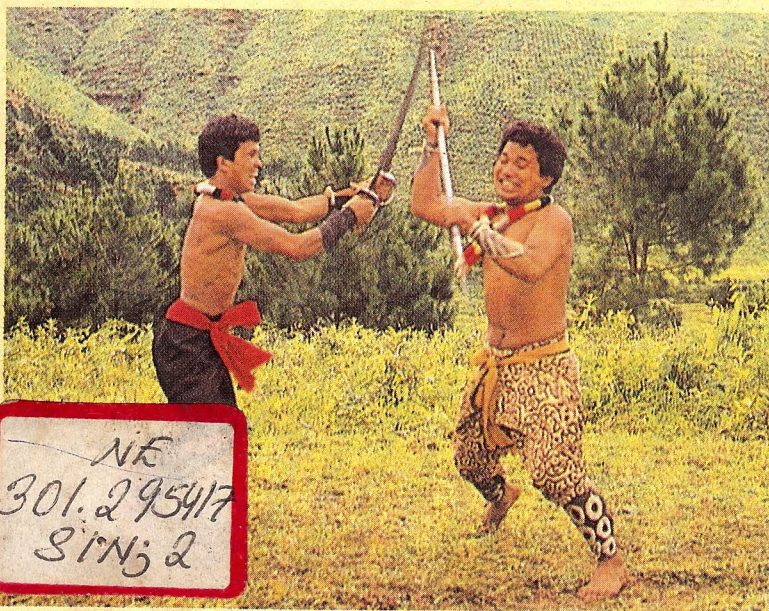


FRAGMENTS OF MANIPURI CULTURE

Nilakanta Singh

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E. Nilakanta Singh

About the Book

Manipur, a land of beauty and culture, is still, in most Indian eyes, a land of adventure and discovery. It has not yet been projected sufficiently in the cultural map of India, despite its world-famous dances of the hills and the valley.

Prof. E.Nilakanta Singh has rare privilege to devote himself for more than three decades, to the exploration of the rich heritage of Manipuri culture in all its varied aspects viz, literature, music, dance and the other arts. This collection of papers and articles represents a summery of his present state of knowledge from an insider's point of view, suggests possible lines of investigation and a programme of research for the future.

He has also looked at the neighbouring areas like Assam and Bengal of which the links are established but still need further acquaintance in the broader context of Himalayan India, China and South-East Asia. This book represents not a body of established fact but a process of the fascinating search for identity on the part of an eminent scholar of Manipur. The materials published in this book represent fragments of the harvest of over 30 years of study and research which readers would positively appreciate.

About the Author

Prof. E.Nilakanta Singh (b. 1927), formerly of Gauhati University retired Director, Social Welfare, Arts and Culture, Govt. of Manipur (1978-1986), Founder-Secretary, Manipur State Kala Akademi (1972-78), has been associated with various Literary and Cultural Bodies of Manipur and Delhi for last four decades including the National Akademies viz. Sangeet Natak, Sahitya and Lalit Kala. He was, for sometime, Consultant and Senior Research Associate in Manipur University.

Having degrees in Philosophy and Law, E.Nilakanta Singh is a recognised modern poet of Manipur (won Sahitya Akademi Award in 1987), a critic of arts, a Gandhite and an orientologist. He has represented Manipur and India in various conferences and seminars - both national and international, and submitted papers

He has traveled extensively in Sri Lanka and Europe (1970).

He is one of the few scholars in Manipur who can speak with authority on Manipuri Culture.

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To

DR. (Mrs.) KAPILA VATSYAYAN

AND

KUMARI SAVITA N. MEHTA

**GREAT FRIENDS OF THE MANIPURI PEOPLE,
WHO HAVE DONE SO MUCH FOR THE
EXPLORATION, PRESERVATION AND
PROJECTION OF MANIPURI CULTURE**

Acknowledgement

I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to the following Institutions which kindly gave me permission to include in this book my articles and papers which have been already published and presented

Sahitya Akademi	— Bhagyachandra's Contribution to Manipuri Culture. Vaishnavism in Manipuri Literature. Mystic and Devotional Poetry in Manipur. Manipuri Literature: A Survey. Tantric Elements in Manipuri Culture.
Manipur University	— Renaissance in Manipur : Fact or Fiction ?
Assam Academy for Cultural Relations	— Manipur and Assam : Quest for Cultural Identity.
Gauhati University	— Rama-Katha in Manipur : Folk Tradition and Performing Arts.
North-East India Council for Social Science Research.	— Status of Religion in Tribal Areas of Manipur.
Manipur Folk-Lore Society.	— The Concept of Sanamahi through the Ages.
Marg (Bombay) Publications	— Martial Arts of Manipur.
Paschimbanga Bangla Akademi.	— The Contribution of Indo-Mongoloids to Indian Culture.

It would not be possible for me to name all the friends and scholars who gave me sufficient courage and inspiration for the publication of the remaining papers and articles. I am most grateful to all of them.

But I wish to thank, in particular, the dynamic and understanding publisher, Shri Ramesh Kumar of **Omsons Publications**, New Delhi who kindly agreed to accept my writings and undertake its publication in his admirable commitment to the projection of the cultures of North-East India. I shall remain always indebted to him.

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Introduction

Manipur, situated in the north-eastern corner of India, happens to be an area where the people (now of about 2 million population) have developed a particular civilisation and sensibility. It is a meeting place of different cultures of the east and the west, of the north and south. The basic traits of culture associated with this Indo-Mongoloid people, claiming to trace their origin in the south-west of China raise questions of such evident complexity for the solution of which demands an extensive acquaintance with the cultures of the Himalayan people like those of Tibet and Bhutan and even a part of China, the Tantric belt of North-Eastern India, Burma and South-West Asia. Such an exploration in depth has not yet been started and hence the findings are at best tentative and inadequate.

I have had the proud privilege of devoting myself for the last three decades to this voyage of discovery in various capacities as a scholar, an activist mixing with the artistes and also as an official of some responsibility. This collection of papers and articles touching on the varied aspects of Manipuri culture, embody a fragment of the harvest of my present state of knowledge. It does not claim to be a body of an established fact but represents a process of my inquiry and a programme of work for the future. It also represents a quest for identity on the part of an insider from an angle which the author adopts.

The present stage of research into the past of Manipur is at the moment largely confined to oral traditions and written records including the Puranas (called PUYAS in Manipuri) which are plenty. Archaeological excavations would have given considerable support to some of the findings. But Manipuri Archaeology, if by Archaeology, we mean the results of properly conducted excavations, is still at its infancy. Excavations, worth the name, have started only recently, eclipsing thereby most of the pre-historic and

proto-historic phase of Manipuri culture. But the Purano-Tantric phase or layer of medieval Manipuri culture is increasingly evident and much more work in this field remains to be done. But the Vaishavite phase of its culture since the 15th Century A.D. (when the Brahmins from other parts of India started entering in batches) which the people assimilated and enriched is quite evident. Most of the papers in this book are being devoted to an exploration of this aspect of Manipuri culture as expressed in their literature, painting, music and dance. Bengal Vaishnavism came to Manipuri to be reborn, enriched and energised with a particular Manipuri sensibility and the result of the synthesis is *sankirtana* and *Raas leelas* which have won world-wide recognition. The neighbouring State of Assam has also contributed immensely to the making of this particular type of culture : a fact which invites further investigation.

The search is still on. The more the author meditates upon and studies such a phenomenon, the more powerful and mysterious it appears, the less certain his own convictions become and all the more humble, the approach. One sometimes wonders if these specialised investigations (the fashion of the days) based on scientific data would lead to a fragmentation of one's Knowledge. But authentic knowledge, as the saying goes, cannot be fragmented without affecting the knower: a modern predicament. The fascinating and never ending dialogue between tradition (which never repeats the old) and modernity still continues.

The author claims to keep an open mind, waiting for surprises and even shocks, if necessary. The vedic-centered phase of research associated with a great Manipuri Indologist. Panditraj Atombapu, a modern Rishi in the early forties has been now increasingly replaced by another phase of the dialectic, by an anti-Hindu outlook in the hands of the young specialists, which, I am confident, would give way to synthesis in course of time. Some rituals of Manipuri *Nata Sankirtana* hark back to Natya Shastra tradition, coloured with Vaishnavit practice, while the Manipuri myth of nine gods of creation takes one to Bonpo religion of Tibet and Bhutan where nine is a seed number. Scholars have to

see if the concept of Universal Motherhood has anything to do with the tantric concept or is more allied to the Chinese concept of Universal Motherhood.

This book has the modest aim of offering a glimpse of the workings of the Manipuri mind from an insider's point of view and sharing with the readers a little of his pride and joy and even concern for this group of people who are now proud of being Indian. It does not claim to be a systematic, coherent scholarly treatise enriched with footnotes and references. It is meant for those sensitive minds who do honour to this small group of people by taking some interest in their life-style and their specific contributions to Indian culture.

E. Nilakanta Singh

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