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KHAMBA AND THOIBI

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ABSTRACT

As we are aware the earliest epics all focus on the legendary adventures or about the deeds of a traditional hero against the backdrop of a historical event of a place or region. All the earlier epics can be thought as noble examples of the art of literature both in oral or written forms. Folktales is an oral history that is preserved and conserved by the folk of a region consisting of culture and traditions belonging to their specific place. Folklore or folktale allows people to give meaning to their lives and their surroundings, because every culture has different definition to each culture. These traditions usually include music, stories, history, legends and myths. The legendary tale of the story of Khamba and Thoibi is a very famous folktales from the region of Manipur which is very well known amongst its people. The narrative is even alive in the minds of its people and is passed down from generation to generation. My paper concentrates in revisiting this art form as a form of connecting the past with the present milieu and to understand the enriched mores of the past history to give a meaning of our culture and traditions.

Keywords -> epics, culture, tradition, Khamba and Thoibi, Manipur, revisiting, meaning present milieu.

Folklore is one of the major means by which individuals or a group of people can discover and establish their own identity. Among the genres of folklore folk/oral narratives help in the search for roots of people which are often outside the historical records. Hence revisiting the past through the medium of oral narratives, folktales, legends, myths is of immense importance towards giving meaningful clues to the dynamics of the past and such narratives besides being an anchorage to hold on to one's roots are a bridge between the past and the present.

Chingkhru Telheiba was the King of Moirang. He had no child, but his brother, the Jubraj had a daughter, Thoibi by name. Thoibi thus was greatly loved by both the King, her father's brother and her father too.

Long ago Puremba was a nobleman in the Moirang King's court. But he died before he reached old age and his wife too killed herself upon his pyre, unable to bear separation from her husband. But, they had left two children and a friend of Puremba, and the General of the King, Thonglen took charge of the children. The elder of the two children was a girl, Khamnu and the boy, her brother, was called Khamba. But, soon both Thonglen and Nongthon were busy in the affairs of the state and they forgot about the two children of their

friend. The two children gradually grew up with help coming from the neighbours. Soon, Khamnu grew up to be fully grown woman, and she used to sell at Moirang Bazar vegetables and water plants collected from the Loktak Lake.

One day Thoibi, the princess went to the bazaar where she met Khamnu, selling vegetables. She became curious about the new face and soon Thoibi befriended her. Meanwhile, Khamba who had become a full grown young man, one day decided that it was time for him to go out and earn some money to help his sister. Then he went out from place to place and finally reached the house of a rich man and so he decided he would seek the day's work there. It was the house of the Jubaraj, the King's brother. When Khamba entered the house, the Jubaraj was surprised to see a young man whom he had not seen before. He asked Khamba about his parents, but Khamba did not tell him the real name of his parents. The Jubaraj felt pity for Khamba and he gave him new clothes and food to eat. Meanwhile, Thoibi had seen Khamba and thought that the young stranger was really a handsome person and she fell in love with him. It was all according to the plan of Lord Thangjing, the God Almighty.

Going back home, Khamnu heard from Khamba how he spent the day at the Jubaraj's house. She became frightened something bad might happen to her brother, because the Jubaraj, a powerful man might find some mistake in his behaviour. So, she prevented her brother from going out any more. Thus Khamba remained at his home.

Thoibi, meanwhile, eagerly awaited for Khamba, but he did not come. Then, there came a day, when all the young girls of Moirang, including Thoibi were to go to Loktak Lake for fishing. Thoibi invited Khamnu to join in the fishing, which Khamnu agreed. On this day, all men were asked by the King not to go to the lake. But as the day advanced, Khamba became hungry. He did not know that no young men could go to the lake that day. So he thought he would go to the Loktak and find his sister. At the Lake he took a boat and rowed it in search of his sister. But some mysterious force made the boat go to the place where Thoibi was fishing. Khamba could not control his boat and it struck and destroyed the bamboo frame of Thoibi's net.

Meanwhile, Khamnu, Khamba's sister came, but she denied any knowledge of the man's identity, because she was afraid he might be punished for disobedience. But, Thoibi was very clever. She said that Khamba's turban exactly matched Khamnu's chadar and also that he was wearing the bracelet she had given to Khamnu the day before. Thoibi then guessed that Khamba must be the little brother that Khamnu had told her. Thoibi then asked Khamba to go back soon before the King's guards found him there.

Then Thoibi asked Khamnu to take her to her house. There she prayed to the household deity to grant her the boon of staying in that house. Khamba heard it and soon they realised that they loved each other. Thoibi then persuaded Khamba to go out among the people. Khamba obeyed Thoibi's request. Wrestling was a popular sport among the youth of Moirang. Khamba joined the youths of Moirang and showed his strength and skill in wrestling among them. When Khamba was doing the wrestling there happened to pass Nongthonba, the minister of the King. Khamba's skill impressed him and soon he called the young man to come to him. Then he realized that the man was no other than his long dead friend Puremba's son. He repented that he had forgotten them. He further remembered that Puremba, his dead friend had betrothed his daughter Khamnu to his eldest son. Nongthonba then soon took Khamba to the King's durbar and introduced him to the King and his courtiers. In this way, Khamba gradually got recognition.

It so happened that there was another young man in the King's durbar, Nongban Kongyanba by name. He was rich and handsome. But he was boastful and arrogant and he hoped one day of marrying Thoibi.

Then the day came when the festival of Lord Thangjing was held and the youths of the locality went to the nearby hill to collect orchid flowers to offer to the Lord Thangjing. Nongban was already jealous of Khamba who was rival to him in games and sports and also in love. But, they went together to the hill. Khamba had no experience of the paths of the hill and Nongban, out of jealousy, asked him to go into an area where there was no flower and he himself went to the area where there were plenty of flowers. Khamba was soon lost in the hill but he prayed to Lord Thangjing and there appeared a tribal woman who told him where he

would find beautiful flowers. She also showed him which way he should take to go out of the hill. The woman was no other than Lord Thangjing who was responsible for all the events

On the day of the festival, Nongban, after offering his flowers to the Lord, presented one orchid to Thoibi. When Nongban left, Thoibi threw away the flower. But Lord Thangjing was angry because she had thrown away a flower that had been offered to Him. So he cursed that Thoibi should be separated from her lover for three months. It forewarns Thoibi's exile to the neighbouring Kabo valley in present day Myanmar.

A lot of many competitions in games and sports and other activities followed as was usual in those days. But in race, or Kangjei (indigenous hockey), or wrestling Khamba defeated Nongban. But before Khamba came, Nongban was always the champion. As a result, Nongban's enmity against Khamba increased day-by-day and he always thought of how to bring evil to Khamba. Meanwhile, the King was very pleased with Khamba and he gave him many gifts. The General of the King, Thonglen and the minister, Nongthon, were all well-wishers of Khamba.

The one day, Nongban met a woman from the other side of the Loktak Lake fishing nearby Moirang. He became curious and asked her why she was fishing so far away from her village. The woman then told him that there was a wild bull feeding on the other side of the lake and it attacked anyone which it saw. That is why men or women were afraid of fishing there. The evil Nongban then felt that it was a great opportunity to get rid of his opponent, Khamba. So, he went to the King and told him about how the bull had become a threat to the people. Then he pretended that God Thangjing had spoken to his ear that only Khamba could kill the wild bull. The King was anxious to get rid of the bull so that the people could fish in that area of Loktak and so he called Khamba and asked him to catch the bull. Khamba realised that it was a plot of Nongban, but he was not afraid of the bull. Actually, the whole event was arranged by God Thangjing, so that Khamba's reputation would increase. So, a large group of people went to see Khamba catch the bull and Khamba went into the reeds in search of the bull. It so happened that the bull actually was one of the bulls Khamba's father had when he was alive. But, when he died, there was no one to take care of the bulls and this one then became wild.

After some searching Khamba came face to face with the bull and they began to push against each other, Khamba holding the horns of the bull. Khamba then murmured to himself, "I belong to Khuman clan and I am not afraid of you." Hearing the word "Khuman" something happened to the bull, because he remembered he once belonged to the "Khuman" house. He realized the man who was fighting against him was the son of Puremba, his master long ago. So, he became tame and Khamba led him out, pulling by the rope. Nongban was somewhere nearby and seeing that the bull was tame, he asked Khamba to allow him to hold the rope. Then when they reached the King and the spectators he said that it was him who rescued Khamba who was about to be killed by the bull. Khamba then became angry and asked Nongban to catch the bull again before the King. Nongban was afraid to do and so he refused, but Khamba again agreed to catch the bull in the enclosure and he easily tamed the bull. The truth then was known to the King and the spectators. The King was so pleased that he immediately announced that he would give his brother's daughter, Thoibi, in marriage to him.

This event was followed by an archery competition. During it, the King had to shoot an arrow, and Nongban had to trace and bring it back. And it was Khamba's turn to do so when the Jubaraj shot the arrow. But, Nongban, with the help of a sorcerer had charmed the King's bow and so the King's arrow did not fly a long distance and Nongban brought back the arrow quickly. But, the Jubaraj shot the arrow fast and to a long distant. Khamba had to run fast and in doing so, the outer shirt of Khamba flew open revealing a beautifully embroidered shirt within it. The Jubaraj recognized that it was his own shirt. He realized his daughter Thoibi had given it to Khamba as a present. But, he was annoyed with Khamba and he refused to take the arrow that Khamba had brought to him. He expressed his displeasure with Khamba and declared that he would give his daughter, Thoibi, to Nongban as his bride. When he was informed that the King had already given Thoibi to Khamba, he replied that he had no knowledge of that. The Jubaraj thus became angry against Khamba. However, in the days that followed it became clear that Thoibi would not easily give up Khamba.

So, the Jubaraj and Nongban made a plan to remove Khamba altogether. According to this plan, Nongban one night called Khamba out of his house, on the pretext that the Jubaraj wanted to see him to talk about Thoibi. But on the way, Nongban and his men met Khamba and demanded Khamba to give up Thoibi. When Khamba refused to do so, they attacked him and beat him so severely that Khamba was unconscious. Then, they bound him with a rope. Then Nongban sent a man to Jubaraj to inform him of what had happened. Jubaraj then came with his elephant and fastened Khamba to the feet of the elephant. The mahout, who knew Khamba was innocent, left some space for Khamba to be able to breathe. Then they dragged Khamba all around the market place. Meanwhile, the Goddess Panthoibi came in a dream to Thoibi and woke her up telling her what had happened to Khamba, Thoibi woke up and taking a knife in her hand rushed to the market place where she found Khamba, badly bruised but still alive. Then Khamnu too came and took care of her brother. When Thonglen, the General and Nongthon, the Minister heard of what happened to Khamba, they were so angry that they told the King that the culprits must be punished. They rebelled against the Jubaraj and the King, but the King requested them to calm down and to concentrate on saving Khamba's life.

But, the Jubaraj was so angry with his daughter that he was determined to punish her. So, he said,
"Better be childless than be the father of this
evil girl. Sell her to Kabo and let me never see
her more."

As a result of this, Thoibi was sent to Kabo. There, she stayed in the house of one Tamurakpa, a nobleman, who looked after her as his own daughter.

After three months, the Jubaraj was sorry for the way he treated his daughter and so he sent men to bring her back. On her way back, Nongban waited for her. But Thoibi pretended that she would like to ride a horse as she was tired. Nongban then offered her his fastest horse. Thoibi then sat on its back and then rode it as fast as it would run towards the house of Khamba. Nongban then complained to the King of Thoibi's trickery. But Thonglen, the General and Nongthon, the Minister, refused to punish Khamba. Finally, it was decided that the matter who should win Thoibi, be decided by the trial of the spear.

But, Lord Thangjing intervened the trial in another form. A woman came to the durbar and informed the King that a tiger was roaming around Loktak Lake and had killed a young girl. It was then decided that whoever, between Khamba and Nongban, killed the tiger would marry Thoibi. The next day was fixed for both Khamba and Nongban to kill the tiger. Hudson describes the incident in the following way:

So they went and sought the lair of the beast,
and in it they found the body of a girl but newly
killed. Then they found the tiger, and sought to
spear it, but it turned the spears away as they
threw them. Then the tiger sprang upon them
and bit Kongyamba so that he died, but
Khamba wounded the beast, and drove it off.
Then he carried Kongyamba to the machan,
Wherein sat his father. And Thonglen taunted
Khamba, "What! art afraid? Thy father slew
five tigers and thou fearest one. Go to, I will
come and kill the beast." Then Khamba entered
the jungle once more and found the tiger
crouching in a hollow half hidden by the jungle,
but in full view of the machan of the King. As
the tiger leapt upon Khamba, he speared it
through the ravening jaws, so that it died as it
fell. Then the King gave rich gifts to Khamba,
and bestowed upon him wide lands and rights

of fishery, robes of honour, and titles of high fame, and made him master of a salt-well and ordained that men should call him Pukhramba.²

There after Khamba and Thoibi were wedded. But, their married life was not to last long.

One day Khamba thought that he would test the chastity of Thoibi. So, in the darkness of the night he pretended to be another person and offered his love for Thoibi. Thoibi was terribly annoyed at this and in anger she opened the door and threw here knife to the place where the sound of the man was coming from. The knife struck Khamba and he died. When the man's true identity was known, Thoibi was so sad that she took her own life with. Thus, ended in a tragic way the lives of the two lovers and they were denied the happiness of a long life.

The present paper demonstrates how the Manipuri folk epic, Khamba- Thoibi displays the past history and the rich culture of the Meiteis of Manipur which in turn help construct the identity of the Meiteis. The famous epic of Manipur has been referred to as one of the great epics of the world by folklorists, and serious attempts have been made to study the dynamic aspects of this epic by a few scholars and folklorists. Yet it being the storehouse of s culture and traditions still we can look at it from different perspectives to generate knowledge and information about our past history and culture. In this direction the paper intends to reflect upon our past glory so that the present generation is aware of this aspect of our culture.

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