



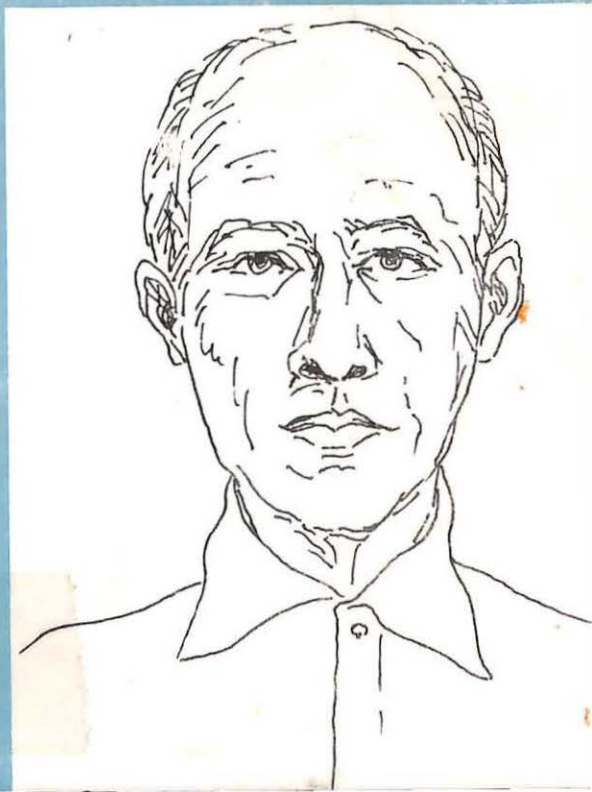
Khwairakpam Chaoba Singh

Rajkumar Mani Singh

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Khwairakpam Chaoba Singh

Kirwan, John (1840-1890)

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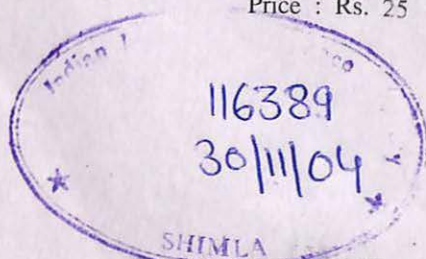
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Preface

In spite of its past richness, Manipuri literature, modern in form and content is considered to have started from the early days of the twentieth century. With the arrival of printing facilities in this geographically isolated territory, poetry, drama, fiction, critical essays, linguistics and dictionaries etc. began to be produced in large numbers as if in a great movement. Many gifted pioneers and talented writers had been contributing their best towards the revival of arts and letters in this part of the world. No wonder, the Manipuri language by virtue of having its own script, grammar and rich literature, has now been recognized as a scheduled language in the Constitution of India.

Khwairakpam Chaoba Singh (1896-1950) was one of the pioneers belonging to the early stages of the movement. In his writings almost all the genres of modern Manipuri literature were experimented. He was a writer of historical novel, a poet of religious mysticism and ancient glories of Manipur, a prolific essayist and lyricist, a literary theoretician and critic, a promoter of *belles lettres* and travelogues, a playwright and a translator all rolled into one. He was a culture hero too. His works are, indeed, imbued with significance.

To prepare a proper account of the life and works of such a refined personality will not be an easy task unless comprehensive surveys are made on the range and thrust of his serious thoughts on society, religion, aesthetics, education, nationalism, humanism, universalism and other values shaping the human destiny. In this monograph, however, only a humble attempt is made to have a bird's eye view on his life and works.

In the following pages, the reader will find a few glimpses of the poet's life-style and his mind-set on the various issues encountered by him in his own changing times. He was one of those who struggled hard for a new era of literary aesthetics through the mother-tongue. A transition from traditionalism and orthodoxy to intellectualism and modernity was the innate urge

of those days. With this objective in view, a brief coverage has been made on his poetic philosophy and style, his didactic role as an essayist and analyst, his crafts in historical fiction and plays as well as his awareness of the dynamic approach for the radical change in the educational and intellectual psyche prevailing in the then place of his birth where he spent his prime of life as a teacher.

In this endeavour, some of the original writings of Chaoba as translated into English by several scholars and self are also included to serve as illustrations as closely as possible. This is in addition to the views and overviews collected and inserted in relevant places from a number of critics. I would like to acknowledge my special debt to all the scholars and critics. I extend my gratitude for the same. I also thank Shri B. S. Rajkumar, who helped me in several ways. I am grateful to the Sāhitya Akademi for their cooperation and encouragement.

For the inadequacies and lapses in this work, I alone am responsible. If chances for rectifications do come, I shall welcome with all eagerness.

R. K. Mani Singh

Imphal

15 September 1996

I

Towards a new era of Literary Aesthetics

Lairabi Eronni

Khangdabana Haibani

Meetei Kavi Lakkhini

(A language poor they call it

By those who are ignorant

Doubt not, the Meetei poet is coming)

This triplet from Chaoba's poem 'The Meetei Poet' is undoubtedly the sublime statement that transports the minds of his readers past and present towards a new era of literary aesthetics. It was the religious mysticism in the poet Kh. Chaoba that stole the grand show of the first state level birth centenary of poet Chaoba celebrated in 1995 inside and outside Manipur.

The emergence of Khawairakpam Chaoba Singh in the literary world of Manipur may be compared to the awakening songs of enchanting birds in the early dawn. The sun is almost in the eastern horizon to remove the darkness of night. All signs of activity are visible as the sun appears above the horizon. Manipuri literature or for the matter, Indian literature as such, was in a bad shape.

In a brief survey in 1969 conducted by the Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, it was observed that from the angle of antiquity Manipuri literatures was probably next to none among the modern Indian languages or in other terms, it could be safely assumed as one of the oldest literatures of India. However, with the adoption of Assamese-Bengali script and since the reign of Garibniwaz in the eighteenth century A.D., the people began to give their cultural expression in Sanskrit and Bengali languages. By that time, the enthusiasm of the people for their creative literature was on the ebb. But it could not continue

long. Born out of an insatiable urge in the early part of the twentieth century of which the pioneers included even some Europeans and non-Manipuris, the movement was patronized by Sir Churachand Singh during his reign (1891-1941 AD). Chaoba belonged to this period.

Viewed from the formula of nineteenth century French literary historian Hippolyte Taine, Chaoba's works may be conveniently surveyed from the historical approach.

His *race* was the Meeteis, alternatively the Manipuris, in the larger context. This *race* was unfortunately often misunderstood, in the world arena, to have slept peacefully. But three great events took place in 1891, 1942 and 1949 which played a major part in destroying the inactiveness. In 1891, the freedom of Manipur was lost to the British. The first bombing in the Imphal Theatre of the Second World War was in 1942. In 1949, the princely state of Manipur was merged into the Indian Union. These historical events brought Manipur into the limelight of the outside world. One can easily imagine the destiny of Chaoba's *race* in those periods.

His *milieu* has its own unique characteristics. The geography plays double role of isolation and attractive climate. The lush green valley, the rings of crags on all sides were far from sea routes. In the railway map also it has no place. As indicated above, the political uncertainties were ravaging the land. The socio-economic condition was infested with poverty and traditionalism. Modern education system was just emerging slowly. Religious fanaticism was ruling the roost. The societal fabrics were disintegrating and the values were crumbling down. *Meeteilon*, the mother tongue of the Meeteis which has been the lingua franca of the region, had even disowned its own script. Only the past glories lingered.

The spirit of the age, the *Zeitgeist*, or rather Chaoba's *moment* demanded the revitalization of the old values through vernacular language and literature. Attitudes were to be reshaped gracefully. The pioneer Chaoba was to be a broad liberal humanist with an endearing social-reformist outlook.

Chaoba's works are, as stated earlier, surveyed through such *race, milieu and moment* at the *frontier* region of the early twentieth century. This period has produced the material of Chaoba's literature. Chaoba handled the language of his age as his efficient instrument of creative expression. The taste of the people was also full of meditative flavour in Chaoba's times and as reflected by him in his works. This is the *mark* left by him which is no doubt seraphically free from the taints of his personal likes and dislikes.

During his short life span covering only fifty-five years, his contribution to the great movement is pregnant with *significance*. His perception of the external world impinges upon his psychic reality and often disturbs the balance of his inner life. He could successfully translate this paradigm of readjustment into beautiful linguistic artifacts, and these have been launched on their own autonomous existence. The *corpus poeticum* of modern Manipuri literature shall be incomplete without Chaoba's poetics. I quote a few lines from his poem "Crumbling" (The sad fate of a baler) :

*Come and mend, mend it, all disintegrate
The very centre of the wall of letters first breaches
Plays, music, all have drifted away
Stop it if you can, all have been overflow'd !*

Other shining stars in the then literary firmament were also many. However, the tripod of the modern Manipuri literature was to be found in the workmanships of Chaoba (1896-1950), Kamal (1839-1935) and Anganghal (1892-1943). They were all stalwarts for the cause of the then ancient glories of Manipur.

There is little surprise when people talk of Chaoba as the Father of Manipuri Prose, the National Poet of Manipur, Kavi Guru, and a Maker of Indian Literature in Manipuri.

Like the cardinal exhortation of Horace, one is tempted to note :

*Consider well the Chaoba originals
Read them by day and think of them by night.*

Pratibha and *dhwani* of Chaoba will thus be immortal to the *sahrdays*.

II

Life and Works

Khwairakpam Chaoba Singh was born on January 23, 1896 (Thursday, the eighth day of the month of Magha, 1817 Shakabda as recorded in his horoscope) at Uripok Sorbon Thingel of Imphal, Manipur. His early life started amidst tragic events of death of his six brothers one after another in their infancies in an epidemic, locally known as *Laina Achouba* (cholera). He and his only sister could survive at great peril of his father Mukta Singh and mother Thaballeima. He thus earned the pet name of Ibochouba, the great son and his sister, Ibechoubi, the great daughter.

Mukta Singh was a *Nat-Sankirtana* singer and a devout Vaishnavite. His family struggled to exist through onslaughts of poverty and ill-luck. Chaoba's mother Thaballeima, like other ordinary Manipuri women, was a weaver and contributed to the family income and as a housewife, she was noble, brave and talented. She descended from the celebrated lineage of *Mantrimayum* clan, whose origin could be traced to Anantashai Mantri Punshiba, the trusted minister of King Jai Singh alias Bhagyachandra (1763-1798). Mukta Singh, the father of Khwairakpam Chaoba, too, is in the ancestral lineage from the younger brother of King Khagemba alias Khagendrajit (1597-1652), who was one of the greatest kings of Manipur. Conclusively, the name *Khwairakpam* is derived from the royal post of Khwairakpa, the Noble of Khwai. The other surname *Singh* signifies the martial and heroic virtues usually associated with the warrior class of India. Historically, Chaoba's family belongs to the Ningthouja clan. According to R.K.Jhaljit Singh, a historian of Manipur, this clan had a long dynasty right from 33 A.D. upto 1891 A.D. The patriarch of this dynasty was Pakhangba, who repulsed the Shans of Upper Burma (now Myanmar) in 28 A.D. and founded his kingdom with Kangla as the capital.

The geographical isolation from the rest of India and other neighbouring countries makes Chaoba's Manipur— a distinct principality with its own cultural roots. This isolation with the natural barriers of hills all around and a small valley at the centre had its own impact on the customs, traditions and cultures. The same reason also holds good for its isolation in terms of trade and commerce with the more commercialized centres in India and in particular, with the adjoining trade zones in the neighbouring states. In such environmental background, Chaoba started his early life in his native valley of puritan and obscurantist sentimentalism. The scenic beauties, the salubrious climate, the ancient glories of gifted predecessors, the divine protection of faith and destiny— all were waiting for the infant Chaoba to observe and articulate in his own way.

However, 1896, the year of Chaoba's birth was a tragic one. The monsoon withdrew early and rainfall was scanty. The result was poor harvest and famine. The tragedy was further deepened by the onslaughts of the partial drought of 1895. Epidemics of plague and cholera took their toll and miseries of the people were beyond description. Chaoba's family was not immune from such sufferings. The early death of his six brothers was no wonder in this context. To aggravate the situation Chaoba lost his father when he was only five years old. The burden of bringing up Chaoba and his sister Ibechoubi, later known as Chaobi, fell on the shoulders of his widowed mother and his paternal grandmother, Ngarunghanbi. These two brave women took great care of the children. The grand mother was a good storyteller to the children and the mother was industrious as well as far sighted in that she strove hard to give proper education to her only surviving son. The first ordeal for Chaoba proved to be the birth pangs of his philosophy of life as observed in his initial battles of human existence.

Mukta Singh's forefathers used to live near the royal palace at Kangla, where many Sanskrit scholars also used to stay as royal guests from time to time. But after the loss of independence of Manipur to the British Empire in the later part of the

nineteenth century, those areas were included in British Reserve and Mukta Singh, as a refugee took shelter at Thangmeiband for some time and thereafter settled at Sorbon Thingel, the birth place of the Chaoba. Chaoba's mother desired him to be a Sanskrit scholar. Chaoba thus started learning Sanskrit first. However, with the change of political climate, western education was spreading and Chaoba also switched over to western education and attended Thangmeiband Pathshala—a lower primary school run by the then Manipur Administration.

By this time, about 56 pathshalas (lower primary schools) in the valley and some others in the hills were established and run by the state Administration with Bengali as the medium of instruction. Chaoba also thus received his lower primary education in Bengali. In those days, there were no suitable Manipuri text books for the lower primary stage, although for higher classes some translations from English and Bengali were in use. After passing the lower primary examination, he got admission in Johnstone Middle English School in Class III in 1910. This school was founded in 1855 by Sir James Johnstone, the then British Political Agent in Manipur with the permission of King Chandrakirti. After the Anglo-Manipur War in 1891, it was re-opened in June 1892. When Chaoba attended it, the school premises were at the junction of the present Bir Tikendrajit Road and Thangal Bazar Road. It was a Middle English School, but it taught upto Class VIII. The Political Agent in Manipur was the ex-officio Secretary of Johnstone School. This ensured efficiency and discipline. While Chaoba was still studying in this school, Mr. Wince joined as the Head Master. Mr. Wince was a teacher of zeal and enthusiasm. In addition to his administrative work he taught English in all the classes. Thus, Chaoba got the privilege of learning English and some English literature from an English teacher.

According to the Administrative Report of Manipur State, 1916-17, the Durbar sent six students to Shillong to study there for appearing at the Matriculation Examination of the Calcutta University in 1918. Chaoba was one of them who passed Class

VIII in 1916. At Shillong they studied at Shillong Government High School. However, a merit scholarship of seventeen rupees each per month after passing Class IX was granted by the Manipur State Durbar to four students including Chaoba. The other three students were Arambam Ibungohal Singh, Sougajam Nandakishore Singh and Oinam Chaoba Singh. This scholarship was subsequently raised to nineteen rupees per month under instruction from His Highness and it lasted upto April 1918. Khwairakpam Chaoba creditably passed the Matriculation Examination in 1918 standing second amongst the successful Manipuri students.

On the basis of the Matriculation Examination results, the Durbar took initiative for admission of the young talents at Cotton College, Gauhati by awarding merit scholarships of twenty-five rupees per month per student. Khwairakpam Chaoba got his chance and proceeded for college education at Gauhati. The descendants of Khawairakpam Chaoba however asserted that he got admitted at Ashutosh College, earlier known as South Suburban College, Calcutta. Anyway, Chaoba had a short college career because of his deteriorating health, presumably due to severe influenza epidemic that spread through trench warfare in World War I. He had to return to Manipur to avoid the epidemic. In Manipur as well, the epidemic reached and could not be controlled by the State authorities. Chaoba thus caught influenza and suffered much. By the grace of the Almighty, he recovered, but again his financial condition did not permit him to go back to Gauhati or Calcutta for resumption of study. Further there was no college in Manipur in those days. He was compelled to discontinue his studies to maintain his family. About this time, he was twenty-three years old. He entered marital life by marrying Priyaleima of Khumanthem family.

Priyaleima, the devoted and faithful wife of Chaoba, was the daughter of Babu Singh of Thangmeiband. She gave birth to eight children— seven daughters and one son. The son was the third child. One daughter died very young, drowned in

a pond. The seven children were brought up with equal treatment irrespective of boy or girl. All of them were given education properly. Priyaleima was gifted with rare attributes of bravery, intelligence and perseverance. From the mother and the wife in her, Chaoba got rare inspiration in his creative activities.

Though Chaoba started his life amidst poverty, his earnings when employed, consolidated his domestic financial condition. He could raise a modest home with agricultural landed properties. He also proved to be an ideal father and a noble husband with gentle behaviour. He was thus a figure of attraction and an able person to his family. In this way he could manifest his worth to his mother Thaballeima who died in 1946. At that time Chaoba was entering his fiftieth year.

In 1919, Khwairakpam Chaoba entered the teaching career in Bengali School. After sometime, he taught in the morning in Bengali School and in the evening in the Churachand School. The rest of the day, he spent his time as private tutor of the children of the royal and noble families. After about ten years he became a teacher of Johnstone School where he taught Bengali and English. It was during the period of his service in the Bengali Middle School, that he wrote *Chhatra Macha* (Student), *Kannaba Wa* (Useful Advice) and *Phidam* (Ideal).

When he joined Johnstone School in 1929, it had become a High English School. The University of Calcutta recognized it in September 1921. As a gesture of encouragement the Durbar resolved to absorb all teachers of this school in State Service for the purposes of pension and gratuity. Thus Chaoba got a well-paid job with security of service and retirement.

His success as a teacher is still remembered with honour and dignity. He taught English, Sanskrit, General Knowledge, Bengali and Manipuri literature. Some of his students, who are still living, appreciated his perceptive style of teaching punctuated with wit and humour. It is said that in the class, he never beat or scolded students and yet every student loved and feared him. He inspired the students without any discrimination

to learn through their own efforts and he rendered assistance and guidance in the process all throughout. His message was "Learning is a life-long work. Continue to learn until you leave this world". Chaoba was a devout Hindu -Vaishnav and came to the class always with the *Gouriya Tilak* on his forehead, but never insisted his students to do so leaving it to their own conscience. But he spoke highly of daily bath, putting marks of devotion on the forehead by way of remembering the Almighty all the time and satisfaction of the soul in offering whatever possible to the Almighty in time. In this approach he had also no hesitation to contact the willing parents of his students whenever time was available to him.

He was simply dressed in mill cloth. He wore a pair of leather shoes but without socks. In the winter and sometimes in the rainy season, he came to the class with a sort of thick woolen shawl of deep violet, which he wittingly joked as made in Italy. He was humility incarnate. He had a vital and radiant personality. Middling in height, slim in figure, dressed always in impeccable white dhoti and shirt, serene and sweet in voice, he made a deep impression on all those who met him.

After twenty years of teaching service in Johnstone School, Chaoba died on October 9, 1950. He was only fifty-five. But for unfavourable health reasons, he could have lived longer.

Chaoba was, as stated earlier, a devout Vaishnavite. Some scholars added an epithet 'Vaishnav Poet' after perusal of his writings. He did inherit this trait of sacred character from his ancestors. The reign of King Churachand (1891-1941) was the continuing important religious era of Vaishnavite Hinduism in Manipur. The religious festivals were embalming the whole valley environment throughout the year. The soothing melodies from the ringing bells of the temples, the penetrating musical notes and the enchanting dance recitals in the *mandaps* in the royal enclaves and village circles cast sombering effects on all listeners. Chaoba was also one of the brimming pots for all these religious elixir. He actively participated in the annual religious festivals of *Yaosang* (*Dol Jatra*), *Kang* (*Rath Yatra*)

and *Kanglen (Punar Yatra)*, *Janmastami* and *Radhastami* (birthdays of Lord Krishna and his consort Radha), *Durga Pujah* and *Saraswati Pujah*. He also participated as an artiste in *Sankirtana Pala* (The band of Sankirtana singers) and *Holi Pala* (The band of Holi singers). His profound interest in *Bashak*, *Ras Leela* and allied musical repertoires in praise of the Almighty, was abiding throughout his mundane life. He was, however, not a fanatic and respected all other religious faiths from his own heart.

Chaoba not only believed in the dignity of labour, but he practised it wherever possible since the early period of his life. He assisted his mother in the weaving trade as far as he could during his childhood. He was also a lover of games and sports, particularly in indigenous varieties of the simple household games. He took special interest in the girls' games and he was a partner in such entertainments amongst the small girls. Later on, in his advanced age, he emphasized to his students the essential role of games and sports with the message that a healthy mind resides in a healthy body. He was also said to be sympathy incarnate. He treated animals and flowers as his own inseparable companions of life. After seeing a bicycle accident, he gave up cycling for life. He had no habit of walking in the centre of roads. He was a road-side walker all the time. Amidst crowds, he spoke little, the few words he used were also humorous and full of wit. He never lost his temper when agitated. He took special care not to waste time and energy in the wrong place and at the inappropriate occasions. Simplicity, humility, perseverance and cooperation with fellow beings were his natural cosmetics for his personality make-up. Once he was asked to contest in elections. Promptly came his reply, 'I am afraid, it may steal away the peace of my meditating life.'

The age of Chaoba is from 1896 to 1950—the most crucial period for the emergence of the modern Manipuri society. Prior to 1896, the social set up was completely overhauled by the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891. Sovereignty of the ancient

princely state of Manipur was destroyed by the mighty British forces. The heroes— Thangal General, Bir Tikendrajit, Paona Brajabasi and thousands of patriots sacrificed their lives for their motherland. A sort of catharsis was looming large in the native souls with conflicting ends. The king was only a titular head of the State. The victorious British power took their own tolls out of the partly Indianised social fabrics in the valley as well as in the hills. In the name of reformation and extension of western civilization, drastic changes were clamped down. Time which was considered to be stopped earlier, had then started moving.

The political, economic and social scenario was repainted during the age of Chaoba. The British Political Agent administered the State through the Durbar of His Highness in a style known as Native Rule. The revenue administration was updated and the social and cultural dimensions were reshaped. Education and health were on top of the agenda for this isolated region of sentimentalism. The process was often interrupted by the historical events of the Great World Wars— first (1919) and second (1939-45), the Women's War (*Nupi Lal*) in Manipur of 1913 and 1939, the Indian Independence in 1947, the interim state of Manipur having Legislative Assembly with a cabinet constituted through adult franchise, the merger of Manipur into the Union of India in 1949 culminating into the death of Maharaja Bodhachandra Singh in the year 1950. The same year saw the passing away of Khwairakpam Chaoba Singh as well as India becoming a republic.

Chaoba's battlefield was in the realm of education with bottomlines in Manipuri language and literature. His challenges were in the frontlines of morality and character. His forte centred round the values of life and literature.

He ventured to evaluate the treasure chest of beauty, art and culture nestled in this land of jewels as Manipur signifies since the days of the Mahabharata. In the varied and enchanting landscapes— glimmering, descending and entangling high

mountains pondering over the lush valleys below dotted with scenic lakes and meandering rivers, the salubrious and exotic seasonal climates create a heavenly atmosphere pervading the length and breadth of Manipur, the motherland of Chaoba. In this land of natural masterpieces, Chaoba lived and died as Plato and Aristotle did in ancient Greece.

Chaoba was not alone in the literary firmament. Other shining stars of the period were many. Some of them are Hijam Anganghal Singh (1892-1943), Hawaibam Nabadwipchandra Singh (1897-1946), Hijam Irabot Singh (1986-1951), Dr. Lamabam Kamal Singh (1899-1935), Ashangbam Minaketan Singh (1906-1995), Arambam Dorendajit Singh (1907-1944) and a host of other prominent litterateurs acting as forerunners of modern Manipuri literature. A rediscovery of Manipur's past glory, a renewed sense of patriotism and an aspiration for a new social order— all these heralded a re-awakening of Manipuri literature. They were the harbingers of this renaissance in letters. With their sharpened sensibilities, heightened imaginative feelings, exuberant curiosity and deep sense of patriotism, they ushered in a new literature.

The way he was brought up, the manner he got educated as stated earlier, were the source of his strategies for dedicated service for the cause of Manipuri language and literature. He tried his hand in many forms of the literature— poetry, essay, novel, criticism and even plays.

Apart from his inborn qualities as a writer he felt the necessity of bringing out many books, which could be prescribed as textbooks of his time. The need for textbooks urged him to try his hands in many forms of literature. He and his contemporaries adopted a different diction and idiom, which is quite new, compared to the literary works of the medieval Manipuri literature that preceded them. That was due to the new sensibility and temper that prevailed during the early decades of the twentieth century. In the schools, the Manipuris had to learn Bengali, as Manipuri was not a recognized

vernacular then. Only in 1924 Calcutta University allowed Manipuri for the Prabeshika Examination. Hence, there was the urgent necessity for expediting the growth of Manipuri literature. Chaoba's contribution in this regard is great. In many of his essay, the impact of Bengali writers is perceptible, especially that of Kali Prasanna Ghosh. It had even ramification to his poetry. Trans-literary influences of Bengali and English are discernible in his works. But his forte lies in poetry.

His works may be classified broadly in five categories :

1. Poems : *Thainagi Leirang* (Flowers of Yore), published in 1933 is a collection of twenty poems. From the year of publication itself it was prescribed as a text book for Matriculation examination. Some of the poems are still included in the syllabus of BA and MA courses.

2. Anthology of selected poems and prose : (a) *Chhatra Macha* (Student) first published in 1923, consists of nine poems and fourteen prose articles. (b) Ten poems and twenty-one essays are in *Kannaba Wa* (Useful Advice) published in 1924. *Sahitya Ahanba* (A literature Primer), published in 1936 under joint editorship with Hawaibam Nabadwipchandra, includes five poems and thirteen essays written by Chaoba.

3. Books on prose : (a) *Wakhal* (Thought), published in 1927 contains fifteen prose pieces, was a text book for academic purposes in those days. The pity is that not a single copy of this book is now reportedly available. (b) *Phidam* (Ideal), a collection of twenty-two prose pieces, was also published in 1927. It was also prescribed as a text book for various levels. (c) Eleven prose articles were compiled in *Wakhalgi Eechel* (The Stream of Thought) in 1928. The Assam Government purchased the copyright of this book in 1931 and since 1933 it was prescribed as a text book for I.A. (Intermediate of Arts) classes under Calcutta University.

4. Novel : *Labanga-Lata*, the novel, crafted as an historical romance was published in 1934 in its complete form.

5. Work on English Grammar and Composition : For imparting the knowledge of English language his compilation work "Elementary Lessons in English Translation and Composition—Part I (142 pages) was published in 1933 by the State Government by purchasing copyright from the compiler.

Besides the above cited, he also published in a few dailies and periodicals stray articles on literary criticism, poems, essays, editorials, introductory notes and journalistic views. These had not been collected and published in book form during his lifetime.

His unpublished works as upto the early part of 1996 are— 1. *Labanga-Lata* (Drama-incomplete), *Naba Malika* (Drama— incomplete), 3. *Madhu-Malati* (Drama— incomplete), 4. *Mathura-Viraha* (Fragmentary Songs), 5. *Matamgi Wakhhal* (Prose— three essays only— presumably incomplete) and 6. A few titled and untitled poems.

These are however published by Smt. Khwairakpam Sorojini Devi, daughter of the author entitled as *Kavi Khwairakpam Chaoba Amasung Mahakki Sahitya* (Post Khwairakpam Chaoba and his Literature) in 1996— compiled by Shri Thokchom Prafulla Singh in their incomplete pristine form in the volume of the collected works of Kavi Chaoba. In the compiler's introductory note, it is mentioned that Chaoba started writing in 1913-14 when he was very young. The prose piece *Manipuri Itihas* which is included in Chaoba's book *Phidam* is recorded to have been written on 12 June 1916. In 1920, the young writer Chaoba had brought out his first book *Madhu-Malati*, a slim volume of historical romance. The same is however untraceable as yet.

III

The Poet : Philosophy and Style

As has been said earlier, the age of Chaoba was a crucial period of socio-cultural reorientation in Manipur. After the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891, a slow and steady change came over in various aspects of life. Like in other states of India, a sweeping wave of liberal feelings and imaginations in the wake of the British rule held sway and the age-old ideas and beliefs began to peter out. The modern Manipuri literature that was born with Chaoba and other pioneers was marked with an attempt of rediscover Manipur's past glory, a renewed sense of patriotism and an aspiration for a new social order. The whole range of his writing reflects the urgency of this note. In *Loi Kaba* (Return from Exile) and *Loktak Mapanda* (By the Loktak Lake) his deep concern with a past glory and a rich cultural heritage, can be discerned. His feelings of joy in contemplating the dynamic role of the Loktak in the ethnic life of the Meetei is something to be shared by every Manipuri :

Today new ripples break dancing
On the surging stream in my life.
In the mere of my thought, high waves with crests
Surge into my mind.
Such a sight of the shining Meetei Lake
These eyes have been blessed with
This is Loktak, our Loktak that stretches
Glittering before us, Meetei Lake

(*By the Loktak Lake*) [Translation by B.S.Rajkumar]

This is how the Loktak Lake inspired the poet to sing the glory of his motherland. Further, the felicity and ease with which he employed to perfection the old Manipuri rhythm such as is used in *Lai Haraoba* (a community ritual in honour of the Creator) and other festivals show not only his genius but his love of the old and its sweet melody too.

The gist of his primary objectives was to develop Manipuri language and literature. He was often obsessed to distraction with the apparent obscurity of Manipuri literature though it had a rich background. His address to a flower in the poem *To a Solitary Flower* has a nostalgic reference to Manipuri literatures as yet unknown :

With no sister-flower
 No companion
 Why are you blooming
 Looking for whom ?

.....
 O flower of the olden days
 Your sweetness still lingers.
 Pity is your fate, for

Your beauty can't reach the royal hearts.

[Translation by L. Joychandra Singh]

And in *Meetei Kavi*, one of his most well known poems, he made his famous statement :

A language poor they call it,
 By those who are ignorant.
 Doubt not, the Meetei poet is coming.

[Translation by B.S. Rajkumar]

His idea of a poet as an advocate for the cause of language and literature, and his own responsibility and commitment in the field are quite assuring. And this he did as is shown by his various literary works and by his role as a teacher. This latter aspect of his creative life—teacher as a reformer, a moral guide and a torch-bearer, cannot be ignored. Chaoba knew his own time, which opened up to different horizons, his own society which was in constant transition. Old order changeth, yielding place to new. A new order was fast on its way and he himself felt the need for a change. So the baler in *Crumbling* (The Fate of a Baler) cried :

Come and mend, mend it ; all disintegrate
The very centre of the wall of letters first breaches
and to which replied the poet :

O brother baler ! Run for your home.

The downpour of the season starts, women and children
shout

O Rain ! Pour down, overflowing the tip of Langjij.

Refresh, damsels of Patshoi, but let the old men and
women drift away.

[Translation by L. Damodar Singh]

But it is not always easy to understand Chaoba and his poetic philosophy. Though essentially a poet, his poetic works are quantitatively very poor. *Thainagi Leirang* (Flowers of Yore) which contains only twenty poems and a few stray poems found in his other prose works, are now what we call his poetic works. However small in size, the book is a rare jewel of Manipuri literature, and alone can earn for the author a worthy place as one of the makers of modern Indian literature in Manipuri. His poetry speaks much deeper and hints at much more. Born at the juncture of a phenomenal crossroad of history, he invariably imbibed new ideas and notions that had to bear a good deal on the ethnic life of his people. Now the phenomenon of the change that came over to Manipur, and of which we have already talked about, close on the heels of the British conquest, was almost national in character. The phenomenon, which most people came to describe later on as a kind of Indian renaissance, presumably was first seen in Bengal about the later half of the nineteenth century. It slowly spread throughout India, and came to Manipur at a later stage. Chaoba's works show, like those of most of the pioneers and their followers, the impact of the liberal imagination of the west. His poems often reflect the romantic overtone of nostalgia, mystery and a deep sense of hankering after the glory of the past. The sense for the past was strong in him that one cannot but agree to his life-long attempt to recreate the past of his native land which we think is full of glory and excitement.

Another major strand his poetic life is woven of derives from his religious zeal and his close association with Bengali literature and culture. Since the conversion in the eighteenth century, the thrust of Vaishnavism on the cultural life of the Manipuris grew with a steady momentum. The Bengalis came again with new crafts they learnt from the Western Literature. This trend also played a major role in the birth and creation of modern Manipuri literature. With his native genius, Chaoba soon exploited the situation to perfection in formulating his literary aesthetics. As for his poetry, there is always a religious fervour punctuated with temporariness and futility of human life, and with ultimate submission to the will of the Almighty. We may look, for instance, at a few lines from his poem *Shiba* (Death) :

Nobody knows when to die
 Today or tomorrow
 Virtue is the sure thing
 Fame is the valuable treasure
 Death ends everything
 Family and friends.

.....
 In this workshop of God
 Attentive to our duties
 Nursing no anxiety
 With a healthy mind
 Leaving names behind
 Death could be defeated.

[Translation by L. Damodar Singh]

and from *Human Being* :

Man has been created and sent
 By Fate to weep

.....

 Prefer attention to work
 Shaking off indolence
 Wilt fulfil the wish of the Master.

[Translation by I.R.Babu Singh]

The submission to the will of God is not for him the renunciation of the world. For him, life always has a purpose, and the purpose is the glorification of life, the only service to him. His intense faith in a pious life often finds him lost in metaphysical contemplations of rare import. The poet wonders at the alien bird winging its way towards the stars. He shouts :

"O mute friend ! Tarry a while
The heaven's unchartered.
Under whose commands and guidance
Wilt thou reach thy home ?"

[Translation by L. Damodar Singh]

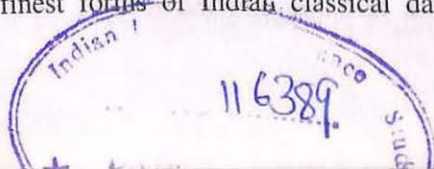
The poet is overwhelmed with deep sorrow as the bird does not heed and passes beyond his sight, but—

"Ere slumber has yet to lull my spirit
A heavenly angel in the moonlit deep blue
Welcomes the bird with loving beckon
And gives it an abode
The lonely bird on its perch sends its message

.....
O mortals ! vain thou art !
In this kingdom of the Lord
Who leads our path at every event ?
I'll come on the morrow too,
Wing my way as I did today
And sing the glory of the Lord"

[Translation by L. Damodar Singh]

There is always this sense of piety often tinged with shades of sadness and mysticism. He is called a Vaishnavite poet, and, of course, compiled, and even composed, devotional songs associated with *Nitya Raas* which has been acclaimed as one of the finest forms of Indian classical dance.



The universality of theme, the sublimity of tone, the beauty of diction, and above all, the felicity and ease with which he expressed the most intricate thoughts and feelings will always speak of the poet's superiority in his own time.

Chaoba's poetic style reveals that he was very particular about his craftsmanship. He was keen to follow the traditional rhythmic pattern through his zeal for romanticism. Old Manipuri rhythm used in *Lai Haraoba* (Festival of Gods), rituals, artistic festivals, melody of Pena (Manipuri stringed musical instrument) allured him. The basis of Manipuri *Chhanda* is *jati* or *parva*. The place of *jati* shows the identity of *parva* and determines the nature of the *Chhanda*. The number of *matras* of Manipuri *Chhanda* is quantitative equivalence. *Payar* is very common in Manipuri. There is a pattern in every poem determining the number of *parvas* for the *charans*. There are, however, variants here and there. Still in most poems, the number of *matras* remains mostly constant, which is the broad metrical feature of Manipuri poetry except those of the modernist poets. Chaoba attempted meticulously to maintain these patterns. His obsessions and contemplative moods are also at variance with the sensuousness, youthfulness and exuberance of Kamal. He was fascinated deeply by the old Manipuri rhymes and rhythms. He used *Laghu tripadi* with 7 + 7 + 5 *matras* in his poem *Engellei* and with 6 + 6 + 9 *matras* in some poems like *Loktak Mapanda*. Likewise *Dirgha tripadi Chhanda* is found in *Chekla Amada*. *Payar*, *Choupadi*, *Pada*, *Parvas* with *Parvangas* were also constantly used. His diction is simple and yet elevated.

L. Damodar Singh, a Chaoba scholar observes, 'Chaoba had many classical qualities— his meditateness, self-control, moods of repose, simplicity, notes and themes of peace just as Wordsworth was most classical of all the Romantics with his majestic, grand, serene approach to life, perfect self-possession and sublimity. He had also fine qualities of architectonics, power of expression, which was precise, simple and yet loaded with meaning and intensity.

His metaphors and similes are not decorative but functional. He can use the appropriate words for the moods, feelings and ideas welling up in him. In fact, he was a rare master of Manipuri language. Even in his translation of Gray's *Elegy* with the title *Awaba Ishei* (Sad Song), the words are so chaste and appropriate that one would not take it as a translation if Chaoba had not mentioned it as a translation. Such is the mastery and power of his diction. He can communicate abstract spiritual ideas and subtle plays of moods very easily without any obscurity, which bears ample testimony to his mastery of the language. Despite these poetic qualities, it may be mentioned that the element of palpable moralizing is strong in Chaoba's poetry and this didacticism severely curbs his lyrical quality. Too conscious of his moral pre-occupation, he was lyrical only in snatches. This stands contrasted to Kamal's poetry which is full of effusiveness pouring out of his soul in lyrical terms.'

To be precise, Chaoba is more intellectual while Kamal is emotional in their world-view. However, in both Chaoba and Kamal one can perceive perpetual dimension in their perception of the existence of harmony between man and nature. However, both of them did not attempt any long poem of epic dimension as was done by Mahakavi Anganghal whose *magnum opus* *Khamba Thoibi Sheireng* (Verses on Khamba and Thoibi) was written in more than 34,000 lines. But one may not miss the assertion that Chaoba's ballad *Loi Kaba* (Return from Exile) running in three hundred and twenty-five lines is replete with rare ethos of dauntless courage, unfailing intelligence and faithful determination of a typical Manipuri woman in Thoibi, the legendary heroine of the great epic.

Besides this observation a host of commentaries on the poet in Chaoba by different scholars is on record. The reason is primarily due to the fact that almost all his poems were included in the syllabi in the academic pursuits at different levels. From the primary stage to the university standard Chaoba's poetic philosophy and craftsmanship have no end for critical studies. In addition to the twenty-one poems in *Thainagi Leirang*, forty-

seven poems are also observed to have been compiled in different volumes including journals and dailies published in his time. Kavi Chaoba was dealing with a number of themes to suit his readers, young and old. He covered almost all aspects of humanism and universalism in a developing society. He stressed on culture, language, literature, religion, mysticism, patriotism, legends and myths along with even science and economics etc. His imageries were through objects of nature, birds and flowers, legendary personalities and divinities. Historical places of antiquity were also his sharp tools of imagination and creative expression.

However, as illustrated above, Chaoba's poetry is popularly known as the music of regret and reminiscence. A note of sadness is often articulated through the anxieties of romantics while evocating the beauties of the past and the illusive future. A spiritual dimension with transcendental philosophy was the result of his intellectual creative activities.

IV

The Essayist and the Analyst

Almost all the prose works of Chaoba are collected in the following books— *Chhatra Macha* (1923), *Kannaba Wa* (1924), *Phidam* (1925), *Wakhal* (1926), *Wakhalgi Eechel* (1930) and *Sahitya Ahanba* (1935). Some twenty-four pieces are found in old periodicals like *Jyoti*, *Naharol*, *Manipuri Sahitya Parishad Patrika* etc. which are out of publication today. Fortunately some of the outstanding pieces out of these had been reproduced in anthologies compiled by different literary and cultural organizations as well as close relatives of the late author. It seems, Chaoba also wrote another three prose works — *Sayon* (Incarnation), *Nongpokthangba Bharatta* (Eastern India) and *Angangi Sahitya Lairik* (Children's Book of Literature) which cannot be traced at present. It is also believed that he used to read a number of essays besides poems in literary and cultural gatherings. Despite the fact that most of them are untraceable, still there are about 118 prose pieces which are indicative of the resourcefulness of the essayist.

According to structured and thematic treatments Chaoba's prose works may conveniently be grouped into three categories : (a) Simple compositions, (b) Light essays, and (c) Serious essays. However, one can have reservations about such classification in as much as the simple compositions primarily meant for students also contain the seeds of beautiful literary expressions of high order.

E. Dinamani Singh, a Chaoba scholar observes that most of the essays found in *Chhatra Macha*, *Sahitya Ahanba* and *Phidam* fall into the first category of essays for students. These are written in easy, colourful and simple language to suit the mental development of young learners. For, Chaoba was a devoted teacher and in his days Manipuri vernacular was newly introduced in schools. Before the 1920's, colonial literature through English and other major Indian languages was the

medium of instruction all around including Manipur. English or Sanskrit or Bengali were the compulsory medium for Manipuri students. The authorities could not think of Manipuri for the purpose. It was simply ignored as a native dialect—not fit for modern type of education. This problem was felt much sharper by Chaoba and his contemporaries since long. It was responsible to a large extent for the spate of text books which encapsulated and textualised such thoughts as would have developed untrammelled if given the opportunity. Chaoba was also one of the social educators who had to fight a sentimental struggle full of emotive values for the sake of their language and literature when there was paucity of text books at the time of introducing Manipuri as the Vernacular. Men of letters in Manipur including Chaoba had to prepare a lot of textbooks for various standards. So Chaoba had to start with works of simple compositions with ideal themes. These simple compositions for students are of objective, narrative and descriptive nature. The language is simple, direct, unpretentious and easily understandable. These are comparatively short and the paragraphing, mostly done from easy to difficult themes is highly commendable. Some of these ideal compositions are— *Tamba* (Learning), *Chhatra* (Student), *Change Naiba* (Punctuality), *Lamchat* (Character)—these are found in the book *Chhatra Macha* and *Meeoiba* (Human Being), *Bhagyachandra*, *Moirangh Thoibi*, *Pukchel Chaoba Alfred* (Alfred the Noble) etc. In the book *Phidam* these compositions played an important part in the development of the scientific temper and moral thinking among the young students as they were of instructive and informative nature.

Chaoba's next group of essays is also aimed at enlightening young minds though of a wider perspective. In these works he employed a more concrete essay format. These wide ranging essays are connected with (a) character, (b) instinctive behaviour, (c) biographical episodes of great persons from history and myth, (d) natural beauty and (e) fundamental knowledge of science. Some of these essays no doubt, are concerned with

serious contemplations. Still, the thematic treatment is simple and easily communicated. They strive towards clarifying what is vague to the greatest extent. These are again essays mainly of reflective, descriptive, narrative and biographical types. Some of these light essays are focused on *Lamchat* (Character), *Nollukpa* (Politeness), *Pukchen Sengba* (Honesty) as found in the collection *Chhatra Macha* and scientific topics of descriptive nature like *Yuharaba amasung Meigi Ching* (Earthquake and Volcano)— this one is from the collection *Phidam*.

Side by side with essays of such kinds, others marked with introspection were also published. Some of them could be said to be *belles lettres* in which Chaoba tried successfully to project his personality. In the *belles lettres* like *Moirangda Chayol Ama Amasung Loktak* (A week at Moirang and the Loktak Lake), *Mohousagi Bhabok amasung Premgi Dhara* (Appreciation of Nature) Chaoba comes up with the poet in him more prominently than the essayist which compliment each other and makes them quite good reading. The poetic vision he projected in such essays places him at the forefront in the composition of *belles lettres*. In the light essay named above— *Moirangda Chayol Ama amasung Loktak*, he gives an account of his journey from Imphal to Moirang in easy and colourful style. Presumably this is the first essay in Manipuri literature written in the travelogue dimension. If one has some reservations about calling it a travelogue type essay, one need not really hesitate to describe the essay *Railgi Khongchat* (Journey by Train) as a travelogue. Thus, as a writer of prose Chaoba introduced for the first time the travelogue in Manipuri literature.

Eleven essays in the essay collection *Wakhalgi Eechel* and several others, which are found scattered in old periodicals, identify Chaoba with the writer of the serious essays. Though these are not so numerous, they bear the stamp of excellence and depict maturity of thought. He became more analytic, argumentative, philosophical and imaginative simply to create. In these essays Chaoba dealt with abstract themes as well as themes of immediate concern. To the later group belong the

essays *Meeteilon amasung Meeteiilon Ibagi Pathap* (Manipuri and its Grammar), *Meeteigi Kethok-Mouthokpa* (Luxuries of the Meeteis), *Thaina amasung Houjik* (The Ancient and the Modern) while the following essays, *Minungshi* (Sympathy), *Ishwar Bhakti* (Devotion to God), *Meetei Sahityada Vaishnava Dharma* (Vaishnavism in Manipuri Literature), *Shiba Kiba* (Fear of Death), *Meena Kari Haikhigani* (What Will People Say ?), *Laibak amasung Thabak* (Fate and Action), *Meeoibagi Thabak amasung Atanbana Wa Kaiba* (Duties of Mankind and Wastages of Idleness), *Sinpham Onnaba* (Wrong Profession) belong to the first group.

Some of his serious essays particularly the three essays, viz., *Kavi*, *Kavi Amasung Kavya* and *Khamba Thoibigi Wari Amasung Mahakavya* are brilliant examples of Chaoba's enduring quests for literary aesthetics. In *Kavi* (1926), he asks, 'Whom shall we revere as a poet and offer floral tributes ?' He takes intense care to answer this question. He gives importance to *pratibha* or inborn quality and imaginative power to be possessed by a poet. Hence only persons possessing these qualities deserve to be called poets. He also illustrates, 'At that moment of divine frenzy, hundreds of thoughts come running down in his mind and overpowered by this multiplicity of ideas, he has no power of speech, or utters a few irrelevant words like a *maibi*'. Moreover, he also cannot ignore the reins of the rules of composition. Herein lies the dominating role of *pratibha* in making a poet who is in a fiery state of creation.

When a poet reaches this condition, he is above pain and pleasure of the outside world and remains sustained by divine frenzy only. He then delves into the mystery of the world and his heart becomes alternately tender as a flower or harsh as a thunderbolt. But there is the perennial fount of love and beauty in his heart. Thus, the visitations of divinity in man are eternalized through the works of such rare souls. With such liberated consciousness and heightened awareness of the imaginative role of a poet Chaoba says, 'A poet is like a sage in deep meditation of a *maibi* (spirit medium), divinity possessed.'

He also adds, "Access to the rare and sacred seat of a poet cannot be had as and when one wills."

In his latter essay *Kavi Amasung Kavya* Chaoba admitted the unavoidable conventional grammar sometimes freed at the heights of evanescent visitations and imaginative stir of a poet. However he does not falter in pointing to the one necessary ingredient whose voice can without fail touch the right chord of a *sahriday* and can lift him out of himself. Thus, a poet cannot also be bound by the shackles of artificial circumscriptions harmful to natural giftedness. Chaoba concludes that the poet must be placed on a pedestal higher than poetry itself.

Chaoba's concept of a poet has already been interpreted in various ways by different scholars. In this regard L. Damodar Singh, remembers Shelley's words, "...The mind in creation is a fading coal..., but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original visitations of thought and feeling... it is as it were the interpenetration of divine nature through our own. While emphasizing divine inspiration and inborn gift Chaoba seems to appreciate the fact that poetry requires a fully conscious effort at technical perfection. The inner urge is to be meaningfully expressed as 'the music and dance of words'. Coleridge, in spite of his romantic exuberance, made a terse statement that poetry is 'the best words in their best order'. Baudelaire defined inspiration as 'working everyday'. For William Morris, 'there is no such thing (inspiration), it is a mere matter of craftsmanship. To Dylan Thomas, 'the poetical impulse and inspiration is only the sudden, generally physical coming of energy to the constructional craftsman's ability'. Frost said that poetry is 'a performance in words'. All these utterances emphasize the importance of a conscious effort at technical discipline. Indeed, poetry is inspiration and perspiration, vision and revision, rapture and mind. In the words of Auden, 'the poet is the father who begets the poem when the language bears'. This 'essential doubleness exists at the heart

of poetic creation itself and of any analysis of it'. Chaoba admits the short-lived and capricious nature of the visitations of the inspirational and mysterious inner energy and the resulting frustration that come in the wake of its withdrawal leaving only the impotent will. In his own poems, imagination and intellect run together.

Ch. Manihar Singh, another Chaoba scholar says, 'The impetus, though admittedly, derived from an essay by Kali Prasanna Ghosh, Chaoba has moulded the essays with an original touch and duly lays emphasis on *Pratibha* and imagination as its hand maid or the chemistry of poetic creation. Of course, neither Kali Prasanna Ghosh nor Chaoba are the originators of this notion of a poet, but it had been there for centuries both in the West and the East. It is because of their intense disposition to their creative pursuit that they, perforce, attempt to give vent to their personal perception and in this way turn out to share a common approach.

According to Plato, the poet was a possessed creature, not using language in the way that normal human beings do, but speaking in a divinely inspired frenzy. He develops this view at greater length in his *Ion*, in which the poet is presented as the inspired rhapsodist through whom God speaks. This notion of poetry has had a long history and though gone through many modifications survive till today. 'Great wits to madness sure are near allied, and thin partitions do their bounds divide,' wrote Dryden two thousand years later. Nearly a hundred years before Dryden, Shakespeare had noted that

The lunatic, the lover and the poet
Are of imagination all compact...

While the classical writers of the ancient world embodied it in Apollo or the Muses, the Romantics set this power in the 'imagination', regarded as something magical, apart from man's normal faculties. To Wordsworth it was

The Power so called
Through sad incompetence of human speech,

that 'rose from the mind's abyss' and took possession of him ; while Shelley saw it as 'that imperial faculty whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man'. Late poets start giving greater attention to the choice of effective words and art of composition, however they cannot overlook the two-fold nature of a poet ; the man and the artist. So, poetry comes from a two-fold source— a mysterious inner compulsion and a fully conscious technical discipline. Jung holds the view that 'any reaction to stimulus may be casually explained ; but the creative act which is the absolute antithesis of mere reaction will forever elude the human understanding'. Coleridge in a tantalizing way terms it 'a more than usual state of emotion with more usual order'. When we move from the conception of the poem to its making, this statement seems central. But the emotion must be there, whatever the kind of poetry. 'Poetry lives in gusto', says Keats, the romantic. Wordsworth calls it 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' but this does not mean that poetic composition itself is a tranquil and serene occupation. In the modern period, Eliot terms it, 'the pains of turning blood into ink'. Hopkins lamented that his own fire had left him, and what Chaoba speaks of a poet reminds us of Shelley's confident statement, 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.'

In Sanskrit literature too, 'creative imagination' or 'inspired creative power' is a native endowment (*Pratibha*). Bharata in *Natya Shastra* designates it as the 'intentional disposition' (*Antargato Bhava*) of the poet. Both Bhamaha of the seventh century and Dandin of the eighth century acknowledge the supremacy of the creative imagination which is said to be endowed by nature (*Naisargiki*) or inborn (*Sahaja*). Vamana of the eighth century asserts that in creative imagination lies the seed of poetry (*Kavya Bija*) and defines it as ante-natal capacity of the mind without which no poetry is possible. Mammata of the eleventh century aligns himself with the view expressed by Vamana though he uses more general terms, power (*Shakti*) for poetic creativity (*Pratibha*). Bhatta Tauta, Abhinava's teacher speaks of the greatness of the poet as Sage

and Seer. But going further than this Hemchandra of the twelfth century states that the Kavi has *Darsana* or vision, and *Vamana*, the power of description or objective presentation. Without the latter the Seer does not become a poet, for poetry is not mere vision, but vision objectified in poetic cast, *Vamana*. Chaoba in presenting his concept cover this aspect, but does not dither to add that the experience of the divine visitation cannot be conveyed into words in its entirety which again conjures up in one's mind Shelley's... 'but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline and the most glorious poetry that has been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet.'

Now we may examine how many of the poems of Chaoba are the effusion of 'unpremeditated art' and do reflect 'light that was never on sea or land'. Here we have to remind ourselves that Chaoba did not so deliberately attempt to correlate his theory of the character of a poet and the creative process with his own composition as the great poet like Arnold and later Eliot did. However, in a least *Loktak Mapanda* and *Lamgi Chekla Amada*, which may be regarded as his *pieces de resistance*, his stand seems to be vindicated. The captivating scene of the lake gradually transports him into the realm of imagination and enables him to see the 'Creator's hand' behind the visible objects :

When in the midst of the lake
Realising His magnificent virtues
My mind playing with the waves
Is eager to seek contentment
Singing at the top of my voice.

The lines give an echo of Wordsworth's

While with an eye made quiet by the power
of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

But going further, he takes in *Lamgi Chekla Amada* a swiftly winging bird which flew overhead at dusk as a symbol

and following it, his imagination can match a transcendental glimpse of the eternal fount of divine pleasure.

On the morrow will I fly back
As done today
And tell you further of His splendour.

To Chaoba, Valmiki, Jayadeva or Kalidasa of Sanskrit literature and Shakespeare of English literature were the models of a poet as conceived by him. In his essay *Laipok and Pratibha* (Genius and Inborn Creative Power), he classified the man of letters in two groups : those who reflected the old established knowledge and activities, and the others who propounded new inventions and fresh discourses in the world. Both are human assets. One can learn and practice the techniques of the first group. They are honoured as scholars, wise men and intellectuals. As for the second group they are destined to be inspired and elated to the visitations of the *pratibha* as a natural force or will. They are inborn and not made. However, these hidden qualities can only be developed through practice. Without practice, *pratibha* cannot be a direct manifestation. In short, a Rabindranath is born and not created.

Here, we may add that Chaoba was also the first theoretician in Manipuri literature. His essays entitled *Manipuri Sahityagi Samalochana Ama* (A Criticism on Manipuri Literature), *Khamba Thoibigi Wari Amasung Mahakavya* (The Story of Khamba Thoibi and the Epic), depict the resourcefulness of Chaoba in literary theories and their evaluations. His contributions in the process of developing the history of Manipuri literature are also reflected in his essays— *Meetei Sahityagi Itihaski Maramda Khara* (A few words about the History of Manipuri Literature) and *Swadeshi Manipurada Manipuri Sahitya* (Manipuri Literature in the independent Manipur). Writing on the theme of emotional integrity of Manipur was also initiated in his essay *Manipuri and Meetei*.

In the essay on the study of Manipuri and particularly in the essay *Manipuri Sahityagi Samalochana Ama* Chaoba hinted

to periodise according to the stages of its development. He divided Manipuri literature into three broad groups : *Khunthokchak* (The Age of Immigration or Vedic Age), *Khundachak* (The age of Settlement or Epic Age) and *Naodachak* (The Age of Proliferation or Modern Age). He compared the first stages as vedic age of Manipuri emphasizing on hymns and legendary poems. The trend continued upto the period before Bhagyachandra reigned in Manipur from 1763 to 1798 AD. The *Puyas* written in old Manipuri script were really things of wonders to the poet Chaoba and those who were born in the twentieth century. Then a second stage evolved which saw a vigorous influx of Sanskrit and Bengali literature in Manipuri. In view of the expanding narrative literature, novels in translation and long poems (Kavya or epic) the trend was very meaningful in the then socio-cultural context. Chaoba called this period as the Epic Age of Manipuri literature. The arrival of Vaishnavism and adoption of Bengali-Assamese script facilitated Manipuri translation of a number of classical works relating to Hindu religion. The change in all art-forms was astonishing. The third chapter *Naodachak* was however, left out as the essay in script was incomplete. But this stage may be sorted out if we read the above cited essay in conjunction with another essay entitled *Meetei Sahityagi Itihaski Maramda Khara*. The period might start from the days of Churachand Maharaja. The British rulers encouraged the growth of language and literature of Manipuri. A number of educational institutions came up wherein Manipuri language and literature was recognized for academic pursuits. Many voluntary organizations also participated in the rapid propagation of their own language and literature. A sort of renaissance was clearly visible. Hence Chaoba would like to term this period as the Modern Age. It is no wonder that Chaoba dedicated himself, along with other pioneers, for this cause.

With his essay entitled *Khamba Thoibigi Wari Amasung Mahakavya*, Chaoba re-established himself as the champion of introducing epic literature in Manipuri in his own style of a literary theoretician. The story of Khamba and Thoibi as

narrated by a minstrel with the musical instrument *pena* was a fest of beauty and transcendency in its highest form. The poet Chaoba was the first theoretician who called this great story of love and heroism 'epic'. As in great epics the story abounds in distinctive *rasas* and the protagonists Khamba and Thoibi are cast in moulds larger than those of ordinary mortals. Khamba is a Yudhisthir for his love of justice, a Bhima in strength and an Arjuna in martial skills all rolled into one. He is also as handsome as Nakula possessing the foresight of Sahadeva. Khamba and Thoibi fell in love with each other at the first sight. The successive ordeals that Khamba and Thoibi went through for love and trust are not meant for the common man. Thoibi, the only daughter of the heir apparent is a paragon of beauty, but bears silently all the hardships like a Savitri, Damayanti, Chinta and Sita for courage and constancy. There are also other characters like Nongban, the suitor of Thoibi and a villain by nature ; Khamnu, the elder sister of Khamba who can be compared to Kunti, the widowed mother of the Pandavas ; Thonglen, the dreaded general ; Chaoba Nongthonba, the king's trusted nobleman— all these are father figures to Khamba and Khamnu who had lost their parents during their infancy. The picturesque scene of Moirang with Loktak lake was as important as the kingdom of Hastinapur. Looming large in the background is Lord Thangjing who stands for righteousness. He serves as saviour of Khamba as Lord Krishna did for the Pandavas. Chaoba raises all these characters to epic heights in this story. To signify the victory of truth over falsehood and good over evil, Chaoba continues to point out the comparative views of extensive battle arrays at Kurukshetra of the Mahabharata and Khoirentak of the story of Khamba and Thoibi. The story has become more meaningful when it is narrated by a *pena* (a musical instrument) singer before an appreciative audience at the appropriate time of the day. Chaoba could convey this grandiose style of epic. In fact, the poet in him could analyze this epic philosophy.

Chaoba was a scholar and an analyst by the standards of his age. He read and studied widely. He used appropriate

quotations from the scriptures, English writings and also old Manipuri. He was able to move the reader with his creative personality which was full of exuberance and human understanding filled with compassion. Didacticism, which at first was imperative, dwindled gradually in his later essays. Question-answer type of exposition is his favourite technique of writing. Sometimes in dealing with abstract things, he employed the contrastive method to concretize the abstract. For instance, in particularizing 'sympathy' in the essay *Minungshi* he tried to prove that it is neither love nor kindness and devotion. This kind of nullification of ideas appeared to be a thought provoking method to Chaoba who was a serious and somber person himself.

Other influences that played a major role in the shaping up of Chaoba the essayist are the scriptures, Bengali works of essay and English writings. He clearly states in the 'preface' to *Phidam*, 'While writing this book I obtained a lot of ideas from *Prabhata Chinta*, *Nishiitha Chinta* by the well known Bengali poet Kali Prasanna Ghosh ; *Prakriti*, *Karmakatha*, *Jigyasa* by Ramendra Sunder Trivedi, *Vigyan Rahasya*, *Loka Charita* by Bankim Babu, *Swadesh* by Rabindranath Babu and by Macaulay's British History etc. I am grateful to these men of letters.'

Chaoba was also well versed in both Manipuri folk and old literature. He could provide local flavour in his prose works. As stated earlier, Chaoba was a teacher in the real sense of the term and thus proved himself a real guardian of young learners. His interests in ethical do's and don'ts spread over to his prose works inadvertently. But, due to his fine craftsmanship these works are always free from the tenuousness of political didacticism. The depth and vastness of his knowledge and scholarship prove that he is an essayist and analyst of all times. In addition, his chiselled form and diction really bear the mark of excellence. His poetic vision and tender treatment naturally softens the generic harshness of critical renderings.

V

Fiction and Plays

It is recorded that the first historical romance by Chaoba is *Madhu-Malati* which was published in 1920. To our dismay no copy of the novel or manuscript could be traced as yet. However, R. K. Jhaljit Singh, observes in an article, 'He (Chaoba) also wrote a beautiful love story, *Madhu-Malati* setting the events in a bygone age, possibly the reign of Bhagyachandra (1763-1798). It is a sort of short story and published in 1925 as a part of *Phidam*.' As the very title suggests, the short story might be an extract of the historical novel. But it is difficult to establish the correlation in the absence of reliable documents relating to the novel. Moreover, the craftsmanship of the short story and the novel is basically not the same.

The theme of the short story *Madhu-Malati* centres round the separation and union of a young man and a girl against the background of some historical incidents during the reign of King Bhagyachandra in Manipur. The incidents were the revolt of the *Moraal* inhabitants of the Kheba Hills against the Meetei king and subsequent defeat inflicted on the warring tribe by the Meeteis. The root cause of such events was the love affair of Madhu, a Meetei youth and his beloved Malati, the pretty daughter of a Meetei noble. The girl's father was suspecting elopement and thus was not agreeable to this love affair and Madhu was expelled through ostracisation out of his home with the approval of the king. Madhu took refuge amongst the *Moraal* hillmen by adjusting himself into tribal ways of life with the knowledge of the *Moraal* chief. He conspired with the chief to revolt against the Meeteis by convincing his own courage and skill to mobilize a big array of tribal warriors who could easily defeat the Meeteis. As planned, the revolt became successful and many Meetei soldiers were captured and brought to the tribal village which was like a natural fort on the top of the hill. Madhu could also bring

Malati to this hill fort and she was kept under the custody of the tribal chief. But Malati was expecting serious retaliatory attacks by the brave Meeteis any moment to rescue the Meetei captives including her. Madhu, the spirited young man disguised as a tribal warrior disclosed his real identity to Malati and started to rekindle his old flame of love with her. Madhu was ultimately pleased to disclose to Malati, the secret strategy of winning the tribal warriors. But she could not stay in that condition for long. She could disclose a route to the Meetei soldiers camping at the foothills through her *phoushu eeshei*, i.e., a song sung while dehusking paddy in the evening. The plan was fruitful and the tribals were subdued. Malti was rescued and the captured Madhu was almost to be killed as a tribal rebel. By God's grace, Malati could save him by convincing the victorious Meetei king that due to the stratagem of the Meetei youth Madhu in disguise of a hillman, they could win the battle. She added that he belonged to a respectable family of the land. Later on, Madhu and Malati got united in conjugal love and lived happily thereafter.

Chaoba's style of presenting the above story is in the pattern of narrating a fairy tale by an old grandmother to her grandchildren. Clear descriptions of the time and place, meaningful dialogues between the few characters skillfully portrayed and the sequences of actions mentioned above are all lively and effective. However, the concluding portion of the story appear to be in a slipshod style. Perhaps the writer took the liberty of closing a fairy tale for the convenience of the narrator who had no further time for the tale.

As for the lost historical novel mentioned above it has been discovered that Chaoba himself, being a lover of performing arts dramatized it for presentation on stage. But only four scenes of the first part are available. Because of such incompleteness, one is unable to proceed further except to acknowledge that the play was presented at the then Roxy Theatre, Uripok after the Second World War. E. Dinamani Singh has mentioned about an unpublished historical novel *Birendra-*

Kumari in his book on Khwairakpam Chaoba. As it could not get light of the day as a published work, we have very little to say.

However, we get a chance of studying Chaoba as an historical novelist in his only published novel *Labanga-Lata* which is available to us in its complete form. It was written by him sometime around 1930 and the same was serially published in the *Yakairol* (Awakening Song) which was a popular Manipuri journal in the early thirties. The novel was published in book form in 1934. This is the first novel of historical romance in Modern Manipuri literature. The events historically are as given below :

Khagemba (1597-1652), which literally means the conqueror of the Chinese, was one of the greatest rulers of Manipur. His real name was Lanba and Khagemba was his reign name. His another Hindu name is Khagendrajit Singh. He had two younger brothers. One was Sanongba who held the office of Yaiskul-lakpa. The office of Khwai-rakpa was held by the other brother who was older than Sanongba. Khagendrajit and Khwai-rakpa were brothers by the same parent and Sanongba was the half-brother. On account of misunderstanding among the brothers, Sanongba decided to rise in rebellion against the king. He fled to Cachar and raised a big army including a large number of Muslims equipped with firearms. He promised the Muslims rich rewards and high office if he succeeded in getting the throne.

In 1606, Sanongba came at the head of this army and encamped near Bishnupur. The rebellion or rather invasion was on a grand scale. The king went in person with a sufficiently strong army to repel the invaders. The king encamped at Toubul. After some fighting, the king won a decisive battle. Sanongba and his army were captured. Sanongba himself was pardoned. He died thirteen years later in 1619.

The Chinese invasion to Manipur was a matter of controversy as regards the time as well as the purpose. The apparent

timing of the invasion or the attempted immigration has been recorded as 1631 by R. K. Jhaljit Singh. The king who defeated them was no other than Khagemba. The Chinese were called Khagi by the Manipuris. Hence the title of the king was Khagemba.

The plot of *Labanga-Lata* was based on the background of the above historical events which were however re-interpreted and transposed by Chaoba to suit his own purpose. According to him the Khagi battle was fought before the Toubul battle.

The storyline of the novel concentrates in the romance and love of Labanga, a fictitious young man and Kunjalatasana, the only daughter of the king's brother, Khwai-rakpa. Labanga was handsome, bold, devoted to duty and willing to sacrifice his everything for the cause of his motherland. Kunjalata was also a paragon of beauty and a docile, self-effacing and determined girl.

In the Khagi battle, Labanga fought with exemplary courage and skill against the enemies. And another no less bold young man who joined the battle was Madhu, son of a distinguished courtier of the king. The king himself was in the battlefield challenging the Khagi chief with his legendary spear *Khangshunaha* and sword *Khoubomba*. It was a magnificent victory for the king. All the royal brothers were also very much pleased at the brilliant performances by Labanga and Madhu in the battle. The complicity and conflict in the novel started when Khwai-rakpa and Yaiskul-lakpa started thinking of distributing favour and rewards to the two young heroes. The problem was that the prize trophy would be Kunjalata. To whom she would be given in marriage was the question.

Yaishkul-lakpa was aware that his faithful follower Labanga was already in love with Kunjalata, his elder brother's daughter who was treated by him as his own daughter. But he kept this romantic relationship between the two young souls secret. He approached his elder brother with the hope that his elder brother would be pleased to accept his proposal of giving Kunjalata's

hand to Labanga. But the proposal was turned down by Khwai-rakpa saying that he planned to give Kunjalata in marriage to Madhu, his trusted follower. The crisis and conflict of the novel is thus set.

Yaishkul-lakpa felt insulted. His tension was high and his agony knew no bounds. When he was suffering from such worries and anxieties, he was informed that his favourite boat which was hired by the *Hiruhanjaba* (an officer in charge of boats) of Khwai-rakpa from his own *Hiruhanjaba*, was damaged while in use by the men of Khwai-rakpa. Being appraised of the delicate problem, Khwai-rakpa himself came to Yaishkul-lakpa and offered to make good the damage by repair or by the return of a brand new boat in its place or by giving the price of the boat. The opportune moment arrived for Yaishkul-lakpa to show the hidden displeasure in his mind and he took full advantage of the offers made by Khwai-rakpa. He insisted only on his boat to be returned undamaged in its original form failing which he would demand the *Hiruhanjaba* in person for inflicting appropriate penalty on him. This intractable problem ultimately reached the ears of the king who tried to adjudicate but failed because of the adamant nature of Yaishkul-lakpa Sanongba.

Yaishkul-lakpa was determined to use this incident as a convenient foil to revenge the indignity and shame he received in asking the hand of Kunjalata for Labanga. But the king was offended by this gesture of his younger brother. Hence in spite of the demand by Yaishkul-lakpa to hand over the *Hiruhanjaba* within five days the king extended security cover to the *Hiruhanjaba*. The rift between the king and Yaishkul-lakpa was thus full to the brim.

Kunjalata, however, came to his relief. She expressed her determination to submit to the wishes of Yaishkul-lakpa, who suffered so much out of the affection for her, instead of enjoying the royal pleasures of her father Khwai-rakpa and the king. Such bold statement of Kunjalata inspired Yaishkul-lakpa

and Labanga. They started to prepare for another attack on the king of Manipur. Labanga became again a man of action. He could find a helping hand in Nobin, his new friend who was then staying at Cachar after touring several places of Assam and adjoining states where he studied the Hindu way of life. He conducted himself more as a Hindu mendicant than an ordinary Meitei. He disclosed to Labanga that he also hailed from Manipur and was in love with a girl called Indurekha earlier. Yaishkul-lakpa came to know of these developments and he arranged the marriage of Labanga with Kunjalata and Nobin with Indurekha in the Hindu Gandharva style.

In Manipur, by that time, the king and Khwai-rakpa were planning to take the help of the king of Cachar in arresting Yaishkul-lakpa and his followers so that they could be sent to Manipur for suitable actions for their treacherous deeds. A letter was dispatched accordingly to the king of Cachar with whom the king of Manipur had cordial relationship since long. In Cachar also, Yaishkul-lakpa could win the support of some Muslim rebels who revolted against Jehangir and were then hiding in Cachar. The king of Cachar was showing leniency to these revolutionaries as they assured not to create any trouble in the land. Yaishkul-lakpa sent Labanga on errand to the king of Manipur informing the impending invasion to be launched by his army. Labanga returned safely to Cachar with the message that the king of Manipur was also ready to face any threat whatsoever.

Thus, Yaishkul-lakpa invaded Manipur and in the battle of Toubul he got defeated. All leading warriors including him, Labanga and the chief of the Muslim rebel were killed. Those who were not killed were captured. Latasana spent her days in pursuit of pious activities under the guidance of Nobin, the mendicant at Rampur in Cachar, which was known as *Mayang Leibak* (the Land of Mayangs). She learnt the Ramayana from Nobin. He impressed the ideals of Sita on her to a great extent. When her own father Khwai-rakpa came to Cachar to fetch her, she politely refused to return to Manipur. She said that

as a devoted wife, she would like to honour her late husband by staying away from Manipur by indulging herself in pious activities for the welfare of her parents as well as her late husband's departed soul. That was the only contribution she could offer for having born as a human being. As a pious woman, she requested her father to pardon her uncle Yaishkul-lakpa for the rebellion which he raised out of his sheer affection for her.

The king of Cachar also consoled the king of Manipur and Khwai-rakpa on his apparent indifference for taking drastic actions against Yaishkul-lakpa and his followers. He told that they were already in Cachar without causing any harm to his land. As a token of gratitude, he made a presentation of thirty elephants and hundred guns to Maharaja Khagendrajit Singh.

In the framework of this historical setting and the structured plot, Chaoba tries to unfold before us the romantic tale of Labanga and Kunjalata. He had to justify the affection Yaishkul-lakpa had for Labanga for whom and Kunjalata he had to rebel against the king. Otherwise, the novel would have been simply another story of palace intrigue and the rise of a dissatisfied half-brother who bore ill-feelings against the king for obvious reasons.

Yaishkul-lakpa, an adamant prince, a master of intrigue whose never would be demand gave rise to the popular phrase *Sanongba Higai* and who himself earned the infamous appellation *Higai* (damaged boat), valued much the love between Labanga and Kunjalata. But his rebellion against the king, his half-brother, according to historical accounts had nothing much to do with that affection. It was in his nature to take revenge for his wounded ego against the king for the nurtured ill feelings in his heart that he had kept hidden for some time. On the other hand, Chaoba, the novelist by necessary compulsions of the plot of his novel, had to present him in a different light by taking several liberties.

He was to depict Yaishkul-lakpa as a noble prince having the milk of human kindness in him. And he was also made to be in grateful appreciation of the exemplary courage shown by his followers, who should be rewarded appropriately through his nobility. For the purposes of his novel Chaoba had to ignore the historical characterization of Yaishkul-lakpa as an ordinary overambitious and petulant prince with an accusing finger against his half-brother. To do this Chaoba, the novelist had to take full liberty with historical incidents so that the basic primary aim set out in the plot of the novel could be focused and attained. In Chapter 23 of the novel, while describing the battle of Toubul, Chaoba has also mentioned about the necessity of transposition of historical facts to suit the storyline just as a grandmother usually does in her mode of story-telling to her grandchildren to arouse their sensitiveness and overall enthusiasm to enjoy the story.

Historically, the battle of Toubul between Yaishkul-lakpa with reinforcement from Cachar and the king's army was fought in 1606, whereas, the battle against the *Khagis* where Labanga, the valiant follower of Yaishkul-lakpa showed his exemplary courage took place in 1631. There was thus a gap of about twenty-five years. But in *Labanga-Lata* the novelist had to change the chronology of the two events. The battle with the *Khagis* was said to have occurred earlier than the one at Toubul. As pointed out by I.R.Babu Singh, a critic, Chaoba had to do this by necessary demand and compulsion of the plot. Labanga had to be introduced as a devoted and valiant young man. He was to win by virtue of his own service to the king all praise and appreciation so that Yaishkul-lakpa's sponsoring his case for the royal reward could be in direct conflict with the interest of Khwai-rakpa. The *Khagi* campaign provided the necessary objective correlative where Labanga showed his ability. The *Khari* battle is all important in the context of the plot of the novel. The adamant insistence of Yaishkul-lakpa to have only his original boat undamaged is the igniting flame as well as the *cause celebre* of the conflict. It becomes a ruse for the purpose of the novel in Chaoba's hand.

In the chronologically transposed situation, Chaoba had sufficient materials to expose Labanga in bold relief to deserve all praise and the king could appreciate him as a jewel of Manipur army. Labanga had been so ingeniously introduced in the plot. His relationship with Kunjalata sets the ball rolling in the plot of the novel. The conflict in the novel has been intensified. This relationship underscores the image of Yaishkulakpa and helps in building an image of him as one grateful and steadfast. He emerges in the novel as one who is valiant and noble. He posed to be rare soul who embraced death mainly to vindicate his honour and status though he, according to history, was captured at the battle of Toubul and died thirteen years later.

As stated in the life and works of Chaoba, he was well acquainted with the Sanskrit, Bengali and English languages and with the classics of these languages. Hence he could imbibe the mannerisms and stylistic devices of these languages. In *Labanga-Lata*, we find evidences of such styles as pointed out by A. Minaketan Singh, a scholar of Chaoba's times in his *Meitei Upanyas* (1950). *Labanga-Lata* was written on the model of historical romance which was made popular in Bengal by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in *Mrinalini* and *Durgesh Nandini*, Rameshchandra Dutta's novel *Rajput Jeevan Sandhya* and Dwijendra Ray's drama *Chandragupta* were the writers made free play of their imagination within the framework of historical background to give shape to their plot and straighten out the discrepancies. The writer's imaginative faculty and the relevant permutation in the chain of events to suit the plot and give an artistic shape are important determinants in this respect. In *Labanga-Lata*, Chaoba handles a numbr of such cases as mentioned earlier.

However, one may observe that, Chaoba sometimes appeared to be forgetful of the basic historical materials while writing his novel. Many scholars, therefore, point out a number of anachronic elements that had entered into the novel. The mention of *Sankirtana* in the social festivals of those days, the

introduction of the piece of song *Chingda Satpa Ingallei* (Ingallei flower blooming on the hills), the quotation of '*Sha mamangda angouba makok kellani*' (the heads of the whitemen will roll before the statues of dragons) by the villagers in their local gossip, making Indurekha's father a Menjor — an officer which came into existence only during the reign of Gambhir Singh (1825-1834) etc., are examples of anachronism in the novel. The descriptions, the social life, the atmosphere and the mannerism as depicted in the novel create an image of the contemporary society of Chaoba and its lifestyle rather than an image of the seventeenth-century Manipuri society. It has been rightly observed by some critics that, perhaps, Chaoba found it too difficult to distance himself away from his immediate surroundings that shaped his vision and coloured his imagination to enable him to reconstruct the manners, customs and atmosphere of a period gone by objectively and dispassionately.

Contrary to such weaknesses, Chaoba's forte as a novelist lies in his poetic descriptions of the emotional feelings of the characters and beauty and abundance of nature. The efflorescence of emotion of love in the mind of Labanga in the chapter '*Sagol Tongba Pakhang Adubu Kanano ?*' (Who is the youth on horseback ?) with an intense desire and anxiety are poetically described vividly. The mellifluous diction used in the dialogues is another significant feature of *Labanga-Lata*. The dialogues unfold the working of the mind of the characters and present an objective picture which helps the readers to analyze motives and intentions independently. The dialogues help in preparation of dramatic situations and lessen the boredom and monotony of reading long and discursive narration. Search for human values is the core issue cherished by Chaoba. This is reflected in plenty in the dialogues of the novel.

With a highly imaginative circumspection Chaoba changed the would-be petty melodramatic misadventure of *Yaishkul-lakpa Sanongba* into a good romantic novel with abundant creative intensities in his own rare craftsmanship and style. It has now become a classic in Manipuri literature.

With the arrival of the romantic movement in Modern Manipuri literature and language, Chaoba, the poet and novelist too, used to dramatize whatever fiction he had crafted. Earlier we have stated about his dramatization of *Madhu-Malati*. The novel *Labanga-Lata* was also dramatized by Chaoba himself and the record shows that it was also staged in Roxy Theatre during the pre-war days. The pity however, is the same non-availability of the published script in complete form. In the collection of Chaoba's works published in 1996, only a few stray scenes are available and no purpose of study can be served with this. For the sake of information, it may also be added that Chaoba's play *Naba-Malika* was presented by Manipuri Dramatic Union in the post-war years. By that time the title was also popularly known as Japan Lan (war) as the play covered the experiences of Manipur during the Second World War. In addition to these, one-act plays about the arrest of Bir Tikendrajit as well as the battle of Khongjom of 1891 were also written with inspiring themes of patriotism.

The irony of those days in the dramatic movement in Manipur was, perhaps, the absence of technical support for publishing the plays were supposed to have meant only for performance. This was not only in the dramatic and theatrical world but also in all other forms of performing arts. Though scripts were available, the arrangement for printing in book form or keeping in archives was almost non-existent. The continuing trend of oral tradition or folk literature simply blocked the rapid growth of dramatic literature in those days. Thus, another significant dimension of Chaoba's craftsmanship is still unclear. However, the fact that he was one of the pioneering playwrights in Manipur shall remain forever unchanged.

VI

A Pioneer in Literary Pursuits

The early part of the twentieth century saw a great movement in the history of Manipuri language and literature. By this time even some Europeans and non-Manipuris felt the enthusiasm of the people's urge to promote their mother tongue. This movement for fostering the growth of Manipuri literature was patronized by Sir Churachand Singh during his reign (1891-1941 AD). This literary renaissance in Manipur bracketed with a spirit of vernacular aesthetics is a fact. As observed by E. Nilakanta Singh, a scholar and critic, 'But this is not European renaissance in nature, with an overturn and reversal, a seizing of christianized, Teutonised, feudalized Europe by the old Greco-Latin spirit and form with all the complex and monumentous results which came from it as observed by Sri Aurobindo in his book "The Renaissance in India". It has a closer resemblance to the Celtic movement in Ireland. Because the attempts were made out of the zeal of a re-awakened spirit after a long period of eclipsing Bengali influence. It is more like an Indian renaissance as expressed in nature and socio-economic reforms. The English-educated and Bengali educated Manipuris who almost lost the link with the old culture and a vast amount of ancient literature in Meitei script (Assamese-Bengali scripts were then adopted for education and communication) had to struggle to revive the language and literature in modern formats like lyrics, fiction and drama. In Bengal, it was the age of Bankimchandra, Rabindranath and Saratchandra, which was 'enough for a single century' as Sri Aurobindo says. Literary journals came up in Manipur and Assam in the early twenties and thirties. Manipuri prose and poetry assumed a distinctive shape, a new look in the form of modern Manipuri literature in the hands of a few pioneer poets and writers. Poet Khwairakpam Chaoba was one of them. While summing his impressions on the works of Chaoba he says, 'The creative genius of Poet Chaoba lies in his ability to blend intellect with the yearnings of the heart, the past with the present, the local

traditions and folklore with the winds of vigour and beauty from Bengal, the juxtaposition of the imagery from old Manipuri literature (which he struggled to fathom) and the latest masters of Bengali literature, which found expression in measured and graceful prose and in the rhythmic voyage of self-discovery in his poetry. He was a great writer by any standard. He is a Kavi-Guru in the real sense of the term.'

L. Damodar Singh, who was also a student of Chaoba, however, sums up the pioneering role of Poet Chaoba in a different style : 'Chaoba was born in a family teeming with creative activities. The patriarch of his family, the poet's father was an acknowledged *Nat Sankirtana* singer. Fate was unkind to the poet. His six elder brothers died early in epidemics and he lost his father when he was very young. His mother had to rear him up. She made him learn Sanskrit in boyhood. Later he switched to formal education, learnt Bengali and English well in school and college ; but had to discontinue education because of the epidemics that raged Manipur and possibly due to indigent circumstances in the aftermath of the epidemics. But the self-possessed soul could not remain inactive. While teaching in schools he took upon himself the bonds of creation and is bound with us all forever....An ideal teacher, he was humility incarnate. He had a vital and radiant personality. Middling in height, slim in figure, dressed always in impeccable white dhoti and shirt, serene and sweet in voice, he made a deep impression on all those who met him. Purity of heart, detachment, a simple religion of concern for mankind and spiritual vision, a Vaishnavite with mystical and aspiring after harmony with God, nature and man. These sum up Kavi Chaoba, educationist, text-book writer, poet, novelist, essayist, critic, playwright all rolled together, a rare combination of quality of sorts. But his forte lies in poetry. In his poems we see an initial melancholy arising out of his concern for the sad fate of man, and then he passes on a gradual realization of God's spiritual guidance working unseen to us reaching finally to a serenity of spirit and meditateness out of an abiding faith in God. In his mature poems there are things

which move the heart and fill the mind and which will live for long. As a poet, he had great faith in *Pratibha*, inborn quality and the inner urge. But he also learnt that without transmutation of the feelings received during the brief divine visitations in terms of conscious craftsmanship great poetry will rarely emerge. His poetry is in its essence, a transfiguration and distillation of his personal reflection of reality which arouses response from sensitive readers. The blend of human interest and the concept of harmony between the individual and the immanent is an essential feature of his poetic creation. His intense moral strain imbued with longing for harmony with nature and the power that pervades the universe is in keeping with the fervid aspirations of our time, the aspirations for peace.' H. Dwijamani Deva Sharma, a scholar and educationist who also was a contemporary of Chaoba belonging to the same locality recollects : 'Chaoba's style of sweet language, charming words and fine compositions deserve appreciation. He depicted gracefully the then Manipuri society, romance of the youth, customs and traditions. His poems are very effective. He wrote many essays which were of high order. It may be said that no essayist had surpassed him as yet in this genre. ...Chaoba was a gentle and good natured person. He was a gifted soul. His contribution to Manipuri literature will ever be remembered.'

Chaoba, the poet, the essayist and the playwright is also a writer of different forms of literature under various themes and styles. His times were the days of intensifying the process of linguistic nationalism. Vernacular education attracted the best attention of school and college authorities with active support of the then Education Department of the government. If suitable manuscripts were available, the latter had no hesitation in publishing them as textbooks by purchasing copyrights from the authors. Among those authors Chaoba was a pioneering figure. Almost all the books written by him were accepted as text-books for different levels of school education. Some of these are *Chhatra Macha* (1923), *Kannaba Wa* (1924), *Phidam* (1925), *Wakhal* (1926), *Wakhalgi Eechel* (1930), *Labanga-Lata*

(1931), *Thainagi Leirang* (1932), *Elementary Lessons on English Translations and Compositions* (1932), *Sahitya Ahanba* (1935) and some other books whose copies are now not traceable. In writing all these text-books, Chaoba was much influenced by other works in the then Bengali and Assamese Vernacular text-books. The main themes are values of mother-tongue, patriotism, various attributes of good character and morals, biography of great persons, legendary heroes and heroines, social and cultural activities, secularism and integration, travelogues and historical episodes, nature study and science, love stories and devotional songs etc. In almost all the writings spread in more than one hundred lessons, the pioneering touch of Chaoba is felt in an inimitable style. Some of the lessons which are classic by nature are still included in the academic courses for university students and researchers.

Besides text-book oriented writings, he contributed many thought provoking articles in a number of dailies and periodicals which were published in those days. As an activist in journalism he associated himself with periodicals like '*Yakairol*' (1930), '*Lalit Manipuri Patrika*' (1935), '*Manipuri Sahitya Parishad Patrika*' (1937), '*The Johnstone High School Magazine*' (1939), '*Jyoti*' (1949), '*Ngasi*' (1942), '*Mukti*' (1949) etc. He was also editor of *Jyoti* and *Mingnaidabie* for some time and his editorial comments were of high standard. In his literary campaigns for ideal social order and enlightened sensitivity, he was a man of action as well. His organizing talents were observed in running social and literary associations like *Mitra Samity* and *Imphal Students Union* (1910's) and *Manipuri Sahitya Parishad* (1935) by holding responsible portfolios along with his contemporaries who were all enthusiasts for the cause of mass education and vernacular development.

Chaoba was again a pioneering analyst when he wrote his well-known articles on the issues relating to the history of Manipuri literature, literary criticism in Manipuri literature, Vaishnavism in Manipuri literature, Manipuri and Meiteis, roots of religion, faith in God, Manipuri drama and theatre, Manipuri

literature in Independent Manipur, epic dimension of Khamba Thoibi lègend, Poet and Poetry, and the economic status of the Meiteis etc.

When the twentieth century was almost coming to an end (1996) Smt Khwairakpam Sorojini Devi, daughter of Kavi Chaoba published a big volume entitled *Kavi Khwairakpam Chaoba Amasung Mahakki Sahitya* (Poet Khwairakpam Chaoba and his literature). It is a laborious collection of all the available published and unpublished works (including incomplete portions) of Kavi Chaoba as compiled by Shri Thoikchom Prafullo Singh. The compiler with his sixty-five items under different headings admitted that there are still a number of untraceable works like *Wakhal* (1927), *Angangi Sahitya Lairik* (Literature for Children), *Nongpokthangba Bharatta* (Eastern India), *Birendra Kumari* (Paly), one-act plays, *Madhu-Malati* (historical novel—the first book of Chaoba published in 1920) etc.

However, with the publication of this complete (though incomplete still) works of Kavi Chaoba in a single volume the pioneering dimension of the author is observed to have further diversified. Chaoba's love for dramatic lyrical poems (*Bashak* and *Rasleela*) in vernacular aesthetics (Enthusiasm in Vernacular press and periodicals), his sense of patriotism without political aspirations (*Desh Bhakta*), his reflections on the socio-economic conditions of the Meiteis (essays on Meitei style of living) and his faculty or yearning for *Bhakti* (Intrinsic Bliss) through several stages of action (*Karma*), discrimination (*Vivek*) and emotion (*Bhava*)— all these are abundantly found in this volume. The deep and pervasive interest in almost all the genres of Manipuri literature and language has been demonstrated with intensity and freshness. With this publication, though made after a lapse of forty-six years after Chaoba's death, his position as an outstanding pioneer in the realm of education, literature and culture has been further strengthened.

Chaoba has been adorned with several honours with epithets like National Poet of Manipur, Kavi-Guru, Kavi, *Oja*, Sahitya Ratna, Maker of Indian literature in Manipuri etc. His excel-

lence is however in the domain of teaching throughout his life. But for his premature death, many more avenues of his *pratibha* might have been thrown open. Even then in his brief period of mundane existence, a Manipuri Gurudeva in him has eternalized the marks of dedication with prolific and prophetic messages for the advancement of learning in modern Manipur. He was, however, not alone in this venture. There were several other stalwarts in the evolutionary process for the literary and cultural Renaissance of Manipur. But the dynamism of Chaoba in almost all the literary genres is quite unique and magnificent.

Select Translations

To an Alien bird

When Phoebus wings his galloping course towards west
When ploughmen in their fields call it a day
A cool bath and the balmy breeze
Their body and mind refresh.
When the fading day the descending darkness meets
When in the dusk around
The cows their homeward way plod
A solitary bird wings away towards the stars
Dancing and gyrating.
I listen to its chant
On the grandsire's courtyard by the seat of Brinda*.
O mute friend ! Tarry a while
The heaven's uncharter'd.
Under whose commands and guidance
Wilt thou reach thy home ?
The solitary bird heeds not my exhortations
And passes beyond my ken.
When the sun has run its race
I lie on my couch
And try to drown in sleep.
When numbing drowsiness begins overpowering my senses
Ere slumber has yet to lull my spirit
A heavenly angel in the moonlit deep blue
Welcomes the bird with a loving beckon
And gives it an abode.
The lonely bird on its perch sends its message :
It's as beautiful as I found it then
O mortals ! vain thou art ;
In this kingdom of the Lord
Who leads our path at every event ?

I'll come on the morrow too
 Wing my way as I did today
 And sing the glory of the Lord.

[Translated from the Manipuri original *Lamgi Chekla*

Amada by

L. Damodar Singh]

*The Tulsi plant on a raised seat at the centre of the courtyard usually worshipped as Brinda Devi

Pee Thadoi*

What thou art?
 Where dost thou sing?
 Only thy sweet note is heard.

Dost thou sing on the yon bough
 Or in the heaven?
 Thy sweet strains thrill us.

The Spring arrives
 The earth looks beautifully fresh
 Dost thou know O bird?

Like a love-lorn
 And unfortunate one
 Travelling all over the earth.

With remorseful cries
 And soft wailing voice
 Calling for his Thadoi.

Pee Thadoi Pee Thadoi
 Thadoi Thadoi Pee Thadoi
 Mad art thou for whose love?

It's natural for those
 Who suffer from pangs of love
 To feel grievous in time of joy.

When the, soft breeze
Waits round the earth
The pains of separation increase.

When the birds coo mouth to mouth
On the boughs
Affliction of the heart deepens.

I now realize O bird
Call to thy heart's satisfaction
Thadoi Thadoi Pee Thadoi.

Thy beloved Thadoi
Unaware of thy emotion
Has flown afar.

O hapless bird
Despite thy traversing the earth
Dost thou find thy Thadoi ?

Under the Tera tree¹ at Kumbi²
The address as Eetei³
Did fulfill the vow.

Thadoi the only daughter
Who galloped away on horse-back
Thy eyes will never see again.

She has gone to Khuman's⁴
Reached her beloved's place
So give up hopes of seeing her.

Expecting the advent of every Spring
Selecting only the red blossoms
Thou hast been calling her so long.

Call her even now
In thy high starin
As Thadoi Thadoi.

Had we been able to feel
A drop of Thadoi's love ecstasy
Like thee O bird.

We would have winged over the world
And with regretful voice
Called some beloved Thadoi.

In full satisfaction
Sung in loud note
As Thadoi Thadoi.

When the Spring comes
The earth is decorated with flowers
The song of birds pervade.

We also become pineful :
Our hearts are anxious.
And long unknowingly to call Thadoi.

Who is Thadoi
Who is the only daughter
We do not know what love is.

Like the soul
At the prime field of Khoirentak⁵
Injured by the tiger.

And yet Nature
Asks on repeatedly
To call her.

We try to articulate in the void
Like the one in nightmare
Unable to speak out.

Thought dominates as we ruminate
Thought remains inside the world
But the sweet ecstasy remains unexpressed.

Some fortunate ones
 Mad after thy voice
 Is trying to follow thy path.
 Bird, now I know
 Nature sent thee
 To teach universal love.

Unexpressed love
 Arising from the heart
 Only exudes drops of delight.

It showers down the earth
 Every being gets peace
 Getting Thadoi's love.

[Translated from the Manipuri original *Pee Thadoi*
 published in the *Ngasi* daily by L. Damodar Singh]
 (Another poem of the same title was published in the
Lalit Manipuri Patrika in 1935)

*A kind of bird. The Poet's imagination took it, as the soul of Nongban whose love for Thadoi or princess Thoibi as found in the legend/history of Manipur was unrequited.

1. Simule Cotton tree 2. Name of a place 3. Husband's elder brother,
 4. The clan of Khamba whom Thoibi loved and married, 5. A large heath
 at Moirang where Khamba, the hero caught the tiger and Nongban succumbed
 to injuries caused by it.

Tamna*

Bird, who art thou
 Crying in distance
 In this mountain side
 Drowned in mellow autumn moon light
 Like spattering elixir?
 Bird, who art thou?

At this forlorn ravine
 At dead of night
 Like the flute of *Shyam*
 In the middle of *Brindavan*
 Enchanting human mind.
 I am restless to stay at home
 Like *gopis* in *Braja Brindavan*
 In search of *Shyamkanhai*
 At the sound of the *Murli*
 Thou art being sought.

Thou, unkind bird
 As a hunter does
 Inside deep forest
 Thou canst be found
 By this swift mind
 And the anxious sight.

Bird, who art thou ?
 Dost thou sing
 In heaven or cry in hell ?

Audible is thy voice only
 Like reverberating sound
 Of *Veena* played in heaven
 O, Thou formless bird
 What impels thou to sing
 In sweet voice in this mundane world.

Thy voice rousing anxiety
 Being thy name !
 Bird, who art thou ?
 So encouraging and enlivening
 Like flowers spattered with
 Sprinkling of sandalwood
 In this desert like earthly grave
 Burned by desire.

Bird, who art thou ?
 In getting a drop early
 Of the delight unattained by thought
 Like thee, O bird,
 I shall be able
 To enchant the world.

O, thou lovely bird,
 Please sing to me
 To keep time
 With the dance of my thought.
 Like thee I shall sing of letters.

Bird, what art thou ?
 When thy voice is heard
 Tears run down
 From the corner of two eyes
 Like the Ganges in flood
 With thoughts of the Master
 Hard to believe and trust.

[Translated from the Manipuri original *Tamna* by I. R.
 Babu Singh]

*Tamna is the name of a bird that sings in sweet sound.

Human Being

Man has been created and sent
 By Fate to weep,
 We are drowned
 In the backwater miseries
 In the sea of life.

Being constantly caught
 In the mesh of desire
 There is no escape.

To die in cries
 Burned by miseries
 Has been the fruit of existence
 Who is mine
 Whose am I
 Death darkens everything.

Spring time runs out
 Yielding place to summer
 Time knows no delay
 Wealth is trash
 Strength also is lost
 Life is like water
 Upon a lotus leaf.

Recalling this in wail
 Why feel anxious ?
 Repeated recall of misery
 Increases the miseries.
 A work place of the Master
 It is a place of work
 Face the work.

When you show your strength
 In the battle of life
 For sure, miseries will be relieved.
 Indolent, your continuance to exist
 Is simply a weight for both of us.

To be wise only to receive
 Unconcerned to reach out
 Is the business of the lazy
 Proffer attention to work
 Shaking off indolence
 Wilt fulfil the wish of the Master.

Repent not for the past
 Anticipate not the future
 The present is the best time.

Accomplishing your task
With a pleasant mind
Assign the fruit to the Master.

The great and the wise
Have hoisted imperishable ensign
Trailing behind that path
With flags the goal will be reached.

With footprint on the bank of time.
We shall attain immortality.
Following that path somebody else
Will reach the doorstep of fame.

When you get
A rare birth
Unachievable the Fate
Calling it dream ?
The more you weep
Surely, more miseries will multiply.

Your needs being satisfied
So away with your self-interest
Spare for the welfare of others.

Let *Veena* also be played
Let flags also fly high
It is a birth
Unattainable to Brahma.

[Translated from the Manipuri original *Meeoiba* by I. R.
Babu Singh]

Death

Nobody knows when to die
Today or tomorrow
The flowers when decayed
The fruits when ripe

Will fall on the earth
Who can predict death ?

The sun has its hour of setting
The leaves too fall
Winter and summer
Shall carry all flowers and fruits
To their decay
Who can predict death ?

The moment we are born
On this earth
Death trails us
Like shadows
To pounce on us
On our weaknesses.

Like a bubble
On the vast ocean
Human beings
On this vast burial ground called earth
Are born to die
What is the difference between
Life and a bubble ?

Like a lightning
In the sky
Amidst clouds of rain
Like a glow-worm
On this stage of life
We appear to depart soon.

Where is Bhishma the Hero ?
Where is Napoleon ?
Raising the flag of victory
Leaving names behind
On this battle field of life
Departed forever.

Life is a show for a few hours
 Death terminates everything
 We are like rudderless ship
 Like bubble on water
 When the hour comes
 We will be seen no more.

Nobody knows when to die
 Today or tomorrow
 Virtue is the sure thing
 Fame is the valuable treasure
 Death ends everything
 Family and friends.

In this workshop of God
 Attentive to our duties
 Nursing no anxiety
 With a healthy mind
 Leaving names behind
 Death could be defeated.

[Translated from the Manipuri original *Shiba* by L.
 Joychandra Singh]

To a Solitary Flower

Who are you, O Flower
 Blooming on the slopes of the hills
 On the Kyamlei¹
 Laughing heartily !

With no sister-flower
 No companion
 Why are you blooming
 Looking for whom ?

O luxuriant *Mellei Leisna Nongjumpal*²
 Blooming on the solitary heights
 Sad to see your sweetness
 Waste on the forest air !

O flower of the olden days
Your sweetness still lingers
Pity is your fate though
Your beauty can't reach the royal hearts.

Seeing you, sweet flower
I forget both you
And myself
Absorbing in the whirlpool of thought.

Befriending you
My mind-friend
Obedient to the blowing wind
Dances merrily.

Beholding you, dear flower
The unfortunate poet
Finds himself shipwrecked
In the vast ocean of thought.

Tell me your identity, O flower
Isolating yourself
From the intimate world
You remain hiding in solitude.

My speechless friend
I can't bear you
Decayed and lost
On the branches of the tree.

My dear friend
I don't wish myself
To be praised and
seen.

Like you human beings
I can't pretend to be good outward
I love to translate thought into action
And learn to be honest,

I don't seek for a rise
 Nor do I care for a fall
 I love to follow in every step
 The word of the Almighty.

Let those like you
 May come and visit
 The quiet sanctum sanctorum of the Lord
 My heart will be too happy.

[Translated from the Manipuri original *Chingi Leirang*
Amada by L. Joychandra Singh]

1. A thorny tree, 2. A kind of orchid

The Meetei Poet

Even as flowers growing wild
 Waste in the desert air
 Their sweet breadth undetected.

Even as the pearl in watery depths
 Shine to itself in slimy paths
 With none to praise.

Ringed by crags on all sides
 Guarded by the hills people
 The golden land of Manipur.

Shone to herself unadorned
 Blossomed alone none to see
 Unsung and unnoticed.

This thought for her
 Makes my heart pensive
 Benumbing it day and night.

Like the Bhagirathi Ganga pure
 Down the virgin Gomukhi
 In torrents flows meandering.

The fountain that oozes purity
Inside the heart's sanctity
Overflows the eye's floodgates.

Until we grew our strength
Until we knew our mother's love
We weren't able to serve you.

(A mother to us thou art !)
Thy humble children this day
Wilt throng hand in hand
And sing invocation unto thee.

But thy child has nothing
Except these tears of love
To offer at thy feet.

Then into my heart
On the altar of devotion
Vouchsafe to sit mother dear.

I ask of thee mother
To give the strength to worship thee
In every moment of my life.

A language poor they call it
By those who are ignorant
Doubt not, the Meetei poet is coming.

The dawn paints the eastern sky
The sun throws beams of light
And the crows sound the war cries.

When evening down the western sky
Descends in red and gold
Enter the shore of the heart.

Setting on the mind's throne
Feast on mother's charm
That comes in waves and wavelets.

Fill your heart with her beauty
In the nights of azure sky
As the moon washes her with lights.

There's no dearth of the rich feathered flock
And their brethren numerous
No dearth will there be of poets.

When the earth in brilliance shines
Under the spring's watchful eyes
Birds most varied doth gather.

Settle themselves on the boughs
And enthralled sing of Him
Go forth, O Poet, feast your eyes.

Crystal beams of the Autumn moon
Radiance of the summer flowers
Are all things of joy to the poet.

(Ye brothers, devoted to Mother !)
Open your pages white and pure
Set your pen on the paper
Make a record of her charms.

This land above all
Blessed with His graciousness
Is a place where poets are born.

My brothers and sisters dear
With undivided attention
To pay the debts of our Mother.

Let them light the torch of knowledge
Let them serve our mother dear
Meetei poets will surely come.

[Translated by B. S. Rajkumar from the Manipuri original
Meetei Kavi]

Crumbling (The sad fate of a baler)

Come and mend, mend it, all disintegrate
The very centre of the wall of letters first breaches.
Plays, music, all have drifted away
Stop it if you can, all have been overflow'd !
Raising both his arms, shedding tears of love
His body bent by the torrents, cried the baler !
Better break the bund, O hapless baler !
Let the on-rushing stream meet the vast expanse.
Who will stop the strong currents of time ?
The old yielding place to the new, it's the law of the nature.
Sartorial fashion changes, hair-style alters what else re-
main ?
Blocking the rest, what will you gain ?
(Shift the grain from the chaff, why worry ?)
If you can bale out the water, you will get the fish
Why should we go down and get drenched ?
O brother baler ! Run for your home.
The downpour of the season starts, women and children
shout
O rain ! Pour down overflowing the tip of Langjing¹
Refresh, damsels of Patshoi², but let the old men and women
drift away.

[Translated from the Manipuri original *Ningkhair* by
L. Damodar Singh]

1. Name of a hill 2. Name of a place

By the Loktak Lake

(1)

Today new ripples break dancing
 On the resurging stream in my life
 In the mere of my thought, high waves with crests
 Surge into my mind
 Such a sight of the shining Meetei Lake
 These eyes have been blessed with.
 This is Loktak, our Loktak that stretches
 Glittering before us, the Meetei lake.

(2)

Here the flowers reclining elegant on the water
 Made the eyes unable to divert their gaze
 Graceful fowls that gambol in her fold
 Doth warble eulogies in her praise
 For domestic fowls 'tis a source endless
 A cornucopia of feeds diverse
 This is Loktak, our Loktak that stretches
 Glittering before us, the Meetei lake.

(3)

Here Zephyr softly fawns over her waves
 Arousing them to dance
 Rustic matrons on their little boats
 Dance with their fishing appliances
 Set in tune the joyous waves with their sweet strains
 To the rhythm of the paddles, constant beats
 This is Loktak, our Loktak that stretches
 Glittering before us, the Meetei lake.

(4)

In the Karang orchard¹ by the Thanga village
 Charming fruits on every branch shine
 The tenacious *Heikak Yelli*² with its flowers
 All around the village doth grow
 Birds, their tribes many, on the boughs and branches
 Gather to sing melodies sweet.
 This is Loktak, our Loktak that stretches
 Glittering before us, the Meetei lake.

(5)

A wish I had nurtur'd in my heart so long
 Shall find its fulfilment today
 I'll as if on the water embarking a boat
 Rock and dance with the paddle.
 My wishes fulfilled, there we orbs open
 Their gates whence flow tears of happiness.
 This is Loktak, our Loktak that stretches
 Glittering before us, the Meetei lake.

(6)

Once amidst the lake's heart, seeing
 The Lord's grace and excellence
 The mind spiraling with the dancing waves
 Acknowledging the excellence of God
 Let's sing in high strain His glory
 And amend the heart to rest.
 This is Loktak, our Loktak that stretches
 Glittering before us the Meetei lake.

[Translated from the Manipuri original *Loktak Mapalda*
 by B.S.Rajkumar]

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1. Karang : name of a place. The orchard there is supposed to have been grown by the orders of Churachand Maharaj of Manipur.
 2. *Trapa natans*, an aquatic macrophyte : *heikak* is its edible fruit.

Sympathy

Our Meetei word *Minungshi* (sympathy) is, among other human emotions, more tender than the *Malika* flower of the summer evening. When it drifts from the human heart, man forgets all admonitions of jealousy and anger, in the meanwhile they assume themselves to have been born in heaven. It differs from love : love naturally denies gifts of cordiality outside the fold of love. I can love the person who loves me. But who can

love others without reasons, for usually love originates in our mind at the sight of persons adorned with beauty and virtues ! It also differs from kindness. Kindness is willing to embrace the persons deserving kindness with its arms extended like the ever still water. Kindness lies stored in the bottom of kind-hearted persons. But our sympathy is really like a lightning to a traveller lost in the dark rainy night. It also differs from familiarity. Familiarity develops from frequency of company. Happiness is shared when the familiar embraces the familiar, the lip kisses the lip, the arm extends with the arm, the face turns towards the face and the eye meets the eye. But our present virtue— sympathy neither demands familiarity nor company. It hopes to treat even a stranger like a cordial friend. It is really a virtue purer than the tender of the tender, the soft of the soft Malika flower of the late summer.

To avoid the roadside beggar sitting amidst dirt and pebbles just for a handful of rice, I, the unkindly person could easily circumvent. You the kindly person came to show your kindness by tendering humble offers. But seeing his gloomy face and waving sorrowful hands, you the kindly person as well as I, the unkindly person could feel pity in our minds. Who knows that I am a poor half starved person ! Therefore, sympathy is more intense than kindness. Seeing his sorrow, sympathy and kindness join hands in my heart forgetting for a moment, the restrictions arising out of my poverty and the fears of sadness. Why should I care for the stealthy sweet-talks between you the lover and your beloved ? Your happiness and your sorrows are for both of you alone. But when the pangs of separation burn in your heart extensively thereby heralding the signals of sadness over your once smiling faces, I have no hesitation to spare a little of my valuable time by addressing a few songs of love, out of sympathy, though I have nothing to do with your affairs. There is no reason for this. I, the unkindly person also bear the burden out of sympathy. I am usually a peculiar person. I do not know how to be familiar with others ; I am also not blessed with the favour of others having the sublime virtue of possessiveness, but when you, a stranger to me, are in the great sea of trouble for some reason, having no one to

call your own with no signs of anchor for taking refuge, I, a stranger could but extend my arms of cordiality and am not hesitant to bestow new hopes. Because I, a stranger to you bear the burden out of sympathy for human beings. I am a hard hearted man, I could receive no single drop of kindness since my birth, perchance if I had received, I could not avail of the chance ; but I did not intend to offer you the gifts of love ; you and I are not the birds of the same feather. It is of no avail ; it is to tax Peter to pay Paul. Neither benefits you nor I. What can I do except shed a few drops of tears ? Therefore, sympathy lies more in the introspection of love and cordiality, rather a virtue associated with thought.

It has no relation with selfishness. We know nothing except for the self ; we do not like to enquire about others. But our sympathy is the reverse. I have no benefit, sometimes it is useless for you. However, we are getting satisfaction shedding drops of tears in vain. It also differs from devotion. Someone who knows nothing about devotion also bears the burden out of sympathy. Out of sympathy I, the undevoted, also can shed tears of love. Really it is a virtue ingrained, concealed in the very dark centre of the human heart. Fortunately for us, it remains a common treasure for the majority of human beings irrespective of rich or poor, big or small. Rather it happens to be the own treasure of us who are low, poor, have-nots and are unable to perform acts of kindness, even if desired. It is found out really to be the priceless treasure of mankind bestowed by the Almighty by way of His blessings. Because of it, the world is suitable for human habitation, otherwise mankind might have perished since long out of this mundane world where no one knows anything except the self. Because of it, worldly existence is kept in equilibrium through exchange of human relationship in all times of sorrow and happiness articulated by the human language. Otherwise, the name of mankind might have been forgotten long ago through fires of anger in this world of remorse.

[Translated from the Manipuri original *Minungshi* by self]

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In this monograph, Chaoba's (1896-1950) works are surveyed in brief through his *race, milieu* and *moment* at the *frontier* region of the early twentieth century. This period has produced the *material* of Chaoba's literature. Chaoba handled the language of his age as his efficient instrument of creative expression. The taste of the people was also full of meditative flavour in Chaoba's works. This is the 'mark' left by him which is no doubt seraphically free from the taints of his personal likes and dislikes.

During his short span of life covering only fifty-five years, his contribution to the great movement is pregnant with *significance*. His perception of the external world impinges on his psychic reality and often distrubs the balance of his inner life. He could successfully translate this paradigm on its own autonomous existence. The *corpus poeticum* of modern Manipuri literature shall be incomplete without Chaoba's poetics.

R. K. Mani Singh (b. 1939), a fictionist, translator and litterateur is an exponent of Manipuri language and literature. His works include two collections of his short stories, children's literature series, Manipuri translations of Hemingway's novel, selected poems of Octavio Paz, Jayadev's *Geet Govinda*, Iravati Karve's *Jugant* and Pandurang Rao's *Valmiki*. His *Ningtam Wari* is a book of essays on the freedom struggle of India. He received the Sahitya Akademi award in 1994 and NCERT's National prize for children's literature in 1995 etc.

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