Lai Haroba: Festival of the Gods

Lai-Haroba is a Manipuri festival, and is associated with the Meiteis, an ethnic and majority community of Manipur. The Meiteis largely inhabit the valley of Manipur and they comprise roughly two-thirds of the state’s population. The Meiteis are distinguished from the Naga, Kuki and other tribes, which are classified as ‘scheduled tribes’ by the Indian constitution, in both language and in cultural development.

From mid-February to June each year, the plains of the valley of Manipur reverberate with the sound of music, drums and the pena, (a traditional Manipuri musical instrument) and we see groups of people, old, young and children, dancing and celebrating some profound beliefs in their lives. These celebrations are termed as Lai-Haroba. Lai means deity or ancestor and Haroba is an act of being pleased. Lai-Haroba which, may be translated as the pleasing of the gods—represents the heart of Meitei culture. The essence of the Lai-Haroba is to call up the gods and to please them through rituals in order to gain their favour. The songs of the Lai-Haroba have lyrics, which are very poetic. The dances and music indicate high aesthetic awareness and sensitivity, and the totality of the experience gives us a pre-Hindu view of the world. The pre-Hindu civilisations of the Meiteis have been preserved in the Lai-Haroba. The Lai-Haroba is an act of worship. It is a religious event, which can only be understood in terms of the Meitei experience or view of the Lais, the deities, as the ultimate reality.

The main rituals of the Lai-Haroba are performed or led by the Maiba (priest), Maibi (priestess) and penakhongba (the player of the pena). The Maibis and the Maibas are the traditional priestesses and priests of the old Meitei religion. The Lai-Haroba is also interpreted as an ancestor worshipping festival of the Meiteis of Manipur. Normally, the rites of the Lai-Haroba are performed during summer. The people celebrate the festival for odd number days, say five, seven nine, eleven days etc. Four distinct features of the Lai-Haroba have emerged at different geographical areas, namely, Kanglei (at Imphal), Moirang (the Moirang community near Loktak lake), the Chakpa (at Phayeng, Andro and Sekmai of the traditional Loi community), and at Kakching (a centre of an ancient Loi community; now the granary of Manipur). Each Haroba have distinct rites and rituals, though the spirit and the philosophy is the same. Some Lai-Harobas are also celebrated during winter.

The structure of the Lai-Haroba consists of the vast repertoire of songs, dances and music, which enshrines the heart of the people, and reveals their aesthetic development. Normally, the Lai-Haroba consists of three core rituals. The first is the drawing up of the spirit of the Lai from the water, which is also ceremonially taken in procession to the shrine. From the second day onwards, there is a major celebration at the courtyard in front of the shrine, of the birth of the Lai and subsequent development of the Lai’s relationship with the natural world and civilisation. There are rites to celebrate creation, dances and symbols depicting activities like construction of houses, cultivation of cotton plants and spread of the energy of nature where men and deities interact for the benefit of the world and the universe. Many rituals are added during these celebrations and offerings are made of flowers and fruits. At certain points, the maibi becomes possessed and delivers oracles. Finally on the last day, the spirits of the Lais are ushered into heaven, after the last core ritual is performed, which expects an oath of understanding from the Lais, who promise to give benefits to their children, to the people left in the mundane world. The Lai-Haroba is a huge fertility rite with sexual symbols and imagery freely and subtly utilised which effect food production, procreation and longevity for the community. There are rituals for human and agricultural fertility, welfare and protection. The celebrations are held mainly in the agricultural season when the earth symbolised as the mother is ready to receive rains from the sky, symbolised as the father.

At the end of the Lai-Haroba, communal and sporting activities are held. The Lai-Haroba not only reflects the entire culture of the Manipuri people but also preserves it. Young people are given an opportunity to learn dances for performing in the Lai-Haroba to carry on the rich tradition of the Meiteis. There are also formal institutions for imparting such knowledge. The myriad rituals performed by the maibas and the maibis are minute and complex; and the totality of the ingredients makes the celebration the finest manifestation of Manipuri civilisation. The Lai-Haroba brings together oral tradition, prayers poems, dances and music into a beautiful folk-ritual, which epitomises the unique culture of the Meiteis.

References
Performing Kahani is a colloquial expression used by the women in the Muslim community to refer to folktales that are ritual narratives. These narratives are about women saints, their miracles, and sometimes about their lives. This particular genre constitutes a major and vital part of women's folk religious expression. It is known to be widespread in Rayalseema, Telungana, and Coastal Andhra (the three major regions of the State of Andhra Pradesh) and also in the other Indian states like Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh. The women perform these kahani in Urdu, the language spoken by the community as a whole. The kahani are predominantly in oral tradition but they are also available in the form of chapbooks which are still in use. The women perform these kahani at gatherings in a neighbourhood house or in their own houses. It is usually performed on Fridays, either for the fulfillment of a vow or the well-being of the family or for specific problems in the family like an illness, a difficult labour, a delay in marriage or for education, job, etc. It all varies depending upon the habitual nature of the people and the places.

The whole expressive culture in and around this genre is too large and widespread to know all and it varies in ways-as many as the number of groups. It is a traditional practice among women's groups to carry it forward in a chain from grandmothers to mothers and daughters. Regarding the number of kahani opinion varies. Some say that there are many but others feel that there could be only twelve to fifteen kahani. Each kahani bears the name of a woman saint whom they refer to as Bibis (holy women). These bibis are either historically well known people like Bibi Fatima (Prophet Mohaddad's daughter and Hazrat Ali's wife) and Rabra Basri (717-801 AD), a sufi mystic or unknown saints like Bibiyon and others. Some of these saints are venerated in darghas and shrines which are also sites of great significance for women's folk religious culture. Women observe regular duties like Namaz and perform these kahani in the afternoons. These kahani should not be told other than in that particular setting. Usually an Ustadbi (a traditional teacher) or an elderly woman is invited to tell or read, thus lead the kahani performances for a nominal fee. Any woman can perform these kahani, if she so wishes by inviting other women. There are prescribed ways for performing with certain rules laid down like the fatheha (food offering) at the end of it. A kahani should not be told without a listener and there should be at least two persons one to tell and the other to listen. Even in the case of reading be another listener is required. They start each kahani with the utterance of the words bis'm-illa h-ir-rahma 'n-ir-ahim (In the name of the most merciful, most bountiful God.) In the first sentence of the kahani the starting phrase would be sometimes once in the region of prophet Mohammed…….' The kahani end with the phrase khuda Ki Khudrat se (with the grace of God), or Khuda ki shukar ada karke (thinking of the God for his grace). The following is the text of Bibi Segat ki Kahani – one of the most widespread Kahani: - A king and a queen, with the blessings of a Faqir, got a daughter and named her Bibi Segat, she grew up and led a pious life. When she was asked to get married, she refused saying that marriage is wrought with hardships. When her mother persuaded her to agree she disappeared in a closed room. She appeared in her ‘mother’s dream’, consoled her and told her to propagate her story by telling others in the world. She also told her that whoever performed her Kahani by telling and listening, their wishes would be fulfilled. Later in the story and in the subsequent incidents, it is reiterated that whoever listens and tells is benefited and those who don’t, suffer loss-whether loss of belongings like wealth and kingdoms or dear ones like family members and thus, face hardships. Even for the king in the story, a woman had to perform this on his behalf to regain his lost position. As is evident in the above narrative, these Kahani are women-centred, in the sense, women are in lead and play active roles as saints, believers and performers. We see the same, outside, of the Kahani, women in active and lead roles. These roles provide an advantageous side to a disadvantageous position in a segregated society. We see, in these performances, women's major role, in multiple ways, as against their marginal public participatory roles in general official religious culture.

What is missing, in the exclusion of their participation in the public, religious activities, is their identity-the first and foremost urge for an active share of the ‘self’ in the process of spiritual expression pertaining to the mundane life-with its immediate needs and an after life connected through this life. Another dimension that unwinds itself is gender identity-a closer one with the woman saint as a guidance, a support, a consolation in this mundane life-with its immediate needs and an after life connected through this life. When her mother was asked to get married, she refused saying that marriage is wrought with hardships. When her mother persuaded her to agree she disappeared in a closed room. She appeared in her ‘mother’s dream’, consoled her and told her to propagate her story by telling others in the world. She also told her that whoever performed her Kahani by telling and listening, their wishes would be fulfilled. Later in the story and in the subsequent incidents, it is reiterated that whoever listens and tells is benefited and those who don't, suffer loss-whether loss of belongings like wealth and kingdoms or dear ones like family members and thus, face hardships. Even for the king in the story, a woman had to perform this on his behalf to regain his lost position. As is evident in the above narrative, these Kahani are women-centred, in the sense, women are in lead and play active roles as saints, believers and performers. We see the same, outside, of the Kahani, women in active and lead roles. These roles provide an advantageous side to a disadvantageous position in a segregated society. We see, in these performances, women's major role, in multiple ways, as against their marginal public participatory roles in general official religious culture.

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communication – of narrative form both can be seen with a different but strong purpose or Dan-Ben-Amos’s classic definition (1972). Women’s culture in and around these Kahani performances shows their greatest strength in a single genre with diversity. Within the traditional means, they extended their freedom to choose and follow their choice of religious expression besides the prescribed choice. The blend they achieved lies in the way they turned the contradictory into complementary.

References

1. This article is a shorter version from my Ph.D. thesis titled, Oral narratives of Muslim Women in East Godavari District.


**Announcement**


National Folklore Support Centre proposes to publish two volumes of resource books on Indian scholars who have made significant contributions to the field of folklore in the twentieth century. As the discipline of folklore grew in India as an offshoot of regional languages study we seem to have different perspectives and engagements existing in different states at any given historical period. A compendium that offers a comparative perspective on the eminence of folklore scholarship in different Indian states would enhance possibility of dialogue within this nation.

These books with their accessible presentation are also conceived of as an exciting new series of cutting edge research and studies for wider readership across the most topical areas of Indian folk life and folklore. One of the key aims of the series will be to focus on the interaction of the theory and practice, exploring the application of international research to assess the seminal contributions of Indian folklore scholarship, and the scholars who have creatively and singularly helped to define the practice of Indian folklore for the twentieth century. Uniquely drawing together within one single cluster of titles, this high profile series, we hope, will offer an important contribution to our present day scholarship.

This project is conceived as a new venture in bringing together contemporary writers of different discursive fields and folklore to produce collective work. The book will attempt to find fascinating indices of our changing attitudes to folklore and folk life, the extended and multi-disciplinary approach to tradition, history and development of Indian folkloristics. Posing challenging questions, the distinguished contributors need to critically acknowledge, and throw light on the profiles of Indian folklore scholarship during the period 1900-2000. The books need to provide the following:

— Biographical sketch of scholar(s) worked in vernacular languages
— His / her seminal contribution to the discipline of folklore, innovation and development of his / her ideas
— Bibliography / discography of his / her published and unpublished works and works on him / her by other scholars
— Situating his / her work historically, chronologically and in relation to other works of that period and Scholars perception about multiple existence and variation of Folklife and Folklore and the dynamics of cultural mediation of that time
— Translation of his / her representative work into English with critical reflections on the newness of his / her ideas
— Concise historical introduction of folklore scholarship of that region / language
— Maximum length of each study should not exceed ten thousand words

These volumes are considered as easy-to-use sourcebooks and the format need to be accessible to specialist as well as non-specialist readers. Reinterpreting seminal regional ontology, variously reporting and situating their work, the sourcebooks attempt to provide an illuminating perspective on a richly varied selection of Indian folklore scholars of the last century.

We are looking for regional compilers and editors who would work with regional scholars to produce these seminally important volumes. Scholars interested in this exciting publication venture are requested to contact Director, NFSC or Program Officer (publications) at the earliest as the project is set to commence by July 2001 and the books are to be printed by December 2001.