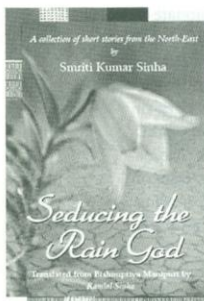




The Heart of Manipur



Seducing the Rain God by Smriti Kumar Sinha, translated from Manipuri by Ramlal Sinha, Niyogi Books, 2015; p.x+182; Rs.395/-

Manipur stands out among the states of the north-east with its multiplicity of religions 'Vaishnavism being the main one among them' and a rich cultural heritage. This reviewer has heard of its great scenic beauty but it is not a popular tourist destination because of the prevalent turbulence/insurgency. The translator and the publisher deserve a word of praise for introducing the English language reader to a beautiful region inhabited by people with indomitable courage who proudly uphold their cultural traditions.

A few words about Bishnupuri Manipuri are in order before one proceeds to discuss the stories. Bishnupuri Manipuri is an Indo-Aryan language, enlisted as an endangered language by the UNESCO. About half a million people living in some of the north-eastern states of India speak this language which is dead in its place of origin in Bishnupur and a few more areas near Imphal. The community speaking this

language migrated to Tripura, Assam and Bangladesh at different points of time and had to struggle for a long time for their ethnic identity till the Supreme Court of India gave a verdict in their favour, classifying them as Bishnupuri Manipuris on 8 March 2006.

Now, for the stories which have a rural backdrop and give the reader a genuine feel of the place. Anyone familiar with the story of the *Mahabharata* would know that Arjuna married Chitrangada, princess of Manipur and Babrubhaha, their son was a brave warrior. There is a reference to him in the concluding story "Choudhury Golapchan," a sense of pride pronounced in having such a great warrior as an ancestor.

As one reads the stories, the region comes alive with its scenic beauty as well as its numerous legends. "Seducing the Rain God" explores one such tradition sensitively. The plight of Sabi the protagonist, who has not seen her husband since he left for Kachar with Maharaj Kolaraja, hints at turbulences that have rocked the region even earlier. Sabi's paradoxical life – dancing for rain and being flooded out of her home when the Rain God is bountiful, is sad as well as beautiful in a stark way.

There is a stark simplicity in the style of narration which effectively portrays the life of people close to the soil as well as to their traditions. The clash between traditional beliefs and progressive/futuristic thinking is very sensitively portrayed in "In Search of an Immortalising Herb" and symbolises the ways in which progress has eroded faith in many ways. Some stories make one feel happy, though one cannot specifically say which. The story "The Muse of a Modern Poet," which, according to the author is 'exclusively dedicated to the spouses of poets and writers' is one such story and one has to read it oneself to find it out.

From a comparatively light-hearted observation, to something more profound. As the brief bio-note indicates, Smriti Kumar Sinha is a professor of Computer Sciences; professionally he has nothing to do with literature. Yet a reading of his stories shows a great sensitivity along with a great love for the region – its traditions, its heritage and the like. Writing them in Manipuri was a conscious decision. To quote him: "The main aim was to revitalise the moribund language, enhancing its prestige by producing high quality literature at par with other Indian regional literatures." Credit also goes to the translator for making these stories available to a larger target readership and "...connect the thoughts of the writers of this community hailing from the landlocked North-East with a wider global audience."

This is rather important in contemporary India. Most people know very little about fellow Indians living in the North-East except for the fact that many of them are Mongloid, something that comes in the way of knowing more about them and their way of life. The fact that there are seven states (sometimes called the Seven Sisters) with different cultures, languages/dialects and ways of life, is not known to many, even

among the educated. Manipur stands out among them as there are a number of religions though many of them are Hindus, mainly Vaishnavas. Reading a book like *Seducing the Rain God* introduces the reader to the region with all its socio-cultural nuances and religious practices, so that people from these parts of India are not considered aliens/outsideers in their own country.

As said earlier, the narrative is in simple language sprinkled with words in Manipuri which are explained by footnotes. The reviewer feels that this adds to the authenticity. There are times when one feels that some visuals, even simple sketches, would have provided an added dimension to the book. One hopes that the stories from other parts of the North-East are translated into English for a larger readership.