

Life, Work, Society: A conversation with Prof. N. Tombi Singh

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PURPOSE AND AIM OF THE INTERVIEW:

Professor Nongmaithem Tombi Singh is one of the most prominent critics in the literary circle of Manipuri Literature. Most of his interviews are in Manipuri language which makes it difficult for those Manipuri people who are not able to read the language. Keeping in mind of those audiences I wanted to publish in it English so that it might be useful for them. Not every man is born as a great person, there is a story behind every individual and so is Professor Nongmaithem Tombi Singh, who has given his entire life to shape up the Manipuri Literary Criticism. The discussion of Manipuri literature is incomplete without the discussion of Tombi Singh's contribution. The extract interview focuses on the literary journey of Professor Nongmaithem Tombi Singh and his contribution to Manipuri literature. The whole conversation was in Manipuri language and it has been translated into English for a larger audience. It's like a dream come true for me. I am humble and grateful to him for giving his precious time to have a long conversation with me. All these years I was looking for this moment. I humbly attempted to capture his words of wisdom for generation to come by.

INTERVIEW DAY AND DATE:

This interview was taken on 8th June (Saturday), 2019 at the residence of Professor (Dr.) Nongmaithem Tombi Singh, Keishampat Leimajam Leikai, Imphal, Manipur, (North East India).

SHORT INTRODUCTION OF PROFESSOR NONGMAITHEM TONBI SINGH:

Professor Nongmaithem Tombi Singh has more than 60 years of a literary career and his writing career is more than 30 years. He started his career as a Senior Lecturer in Manipuri Department, Imphal College, Imphal, Government of Manipur from 1967 to 1985, then joined as an Associate Professor in Manipuri Department, Manipur University, Chanchipur in 1985, became Professor in 1996 and retired on April 30. 2004. Currently, he is a Guest Faculty at Manipur University. He is one of the most prominent figures in the Manipuri literature circle and he has immensely contributed to the development of Manipuri literature. He is widely known by his pen name of a Manipuri daily ‘Poknapham’ as **Nongmai Pandit** in the literary circle of Manipur. He has authored 12 books, has written 4 Radio plays, and has written 20 Introductions to various Anthology and books. He has achieved many awards and laurels which includes Nalima Sinha Memorial Award 2019 (jointly given by Bangladesh Manipuri Sahitya Sangsad, Bangladesh), Theatre Critic of Manipur 2002 by Kalakshetra (Manipur), Residence Professor by Chorus Repertory for 2001 and 2002, Manipur State Kala Award for Literature 2015 and Lifetime Achievement Award 2016 by Manipuri Sahitya Parisha (Assam) to name a few. He is a distinguished and outstanding scholar and critic in the field of Manipuri literature, theatre and culture. His critical writings and observation reflect his deep knowledge of understanding in various areas of Manipuri literature and culture.

The acronym ‘AN’ is Anuradha Nongmaithem the interviewer and ‘NT’ is Prof. Nongmaithem Tombi the interviewee. The italics words used in this extract are Manipuri words and the English translation is provided within the bracket.

AN: What is happiness according to you?

NT: “Happiness”! - A sense of happiness. It is an important question for all human mankind. For me its contentment, what little things I have, I am happy with what I have. To be satisfied with what I have and not to desire beyond my capacity. Not to feel jealous of things that I cannot have. It involves three aspects to be happy, mental, physical and spiritual. We cannot be happy when we are not feeling well. It is very important to balance all these three aspects to be happy. What is wrong with today's youth is that they are focus only on one aspect of life say in terms of education. They run after their dreams like crazy without balancing the other aspect of happiness. This is not good. Mentally I am healthy now. I don't have any sickness, spiritually I am strong, and so I am happy. So satisfaction is important to be happy. The day you desire beyond your facility you will not be happy.

AN: Give a brief account of your literary career.

NT: This year Naharol Sahitya Premee Samiti, Imphal is celebrating, its 60th anniversary, it means that this is my 60th year as a literary activist. It is one of the most active literary organizations in Manipur. I am one of the founding members; it started with me and one of my dears departed friend Lt. Shri Biren and few other members. It's been quite a long journey. I must be in class 9 or 10 then. My first book *Manipuri Sahitya da Anaouba Mityeng* (A new insight into Manipuri Literature) a collection of essays was published in 1985. It's been 34 years since then. The book was the beginning of my writing career. But as a literary activist, I have completed 60 years. Total book publication is 12 all are prose and critical works and only one is poetry collection.

AN: Can you give me your literary profession in three words?

NT: For me, I cannot restrict it to only a few words, because people should be given freedom of thinking.

AN: Okay! Guide me through the journey which evolves you as one of the finest critic of Manipuri literature.

NT: Basically, I am a student of literature, arts, culture dance and music. I am having an affiliation with Manipuri arts and culture is because of my father. My father, Late Nongmaithem Brajabidhu Singh (1906- 1984) was a well known Khol and *Meitei Pung* (Manipuri Drum) and was awarded ‘ **Badya Bhusan**’ by Manipuri Sahitya Parsad in 1976, he was also the President of Manipur Manoharshai Sabha, he was a Tabla teacher in Govt. Music College and passed his ‘ **Bisharad**’ in 1969 from Bhatkhande Sangeet Vidyapith, Lucknow. Not only was my father, but my eldest sister is also a great dancer, singer, and actress of her time. She is fondly known by people as Bimola Achoui (The big one). My family was known for its love for arts and culture when I was young. There was an emotional involvement from my childhood. My family used to be the meeting point of all the famous artists, Gurus of Manipur. They used to meet every *Ekadashi* (is the eleventh lunar day) and discussed arts and culture of Manipur. I used to listen to their conversation eagerly. It has left a deep impact in my life. Though my profession is not similar to my father since I am by profession a Manipuri literature faculty but love for arts was instilled from my father. When I started my teaching profession there was no reference book. There were only countable two or three books written by *Oja* (a title given to scholar or any renowned artist with respect) Elangbam Nilakanta Singh (1927-2000) or Oja Ashangbam Minaketan Singh (1960-) they are regarded as the founder of Modern Meitei literature, the pioneers of Manipuri literature. They were no reference books at all. I couldn't provide any books for my students. I must say it was out of necessity which compels me to start writing. The profession demanded me to write. That's how I started my writing career and then I have not turned back. I became more and more involved with the critical literary theory of Manipuri literature and one thing lead to another. So here I am completed 34 years of my writing career as a critic mostly.

Another aspect of my writing profession that I would like to mention is my role as a columnist. I write in many other daily Manipuri newspapers but the feature column in ‘ Poknapham’ a Manipuri daily newspaper called “Chumna Yengba” (Truth Interpreter) under the pen name ‘ Nongmai Pandit’ is quite prominent that people address me by the pen name in the literary circle of Manipur. I have been writing the column for 34 years nonstop, 3 articles every month. One question to you, “Can I write without reading?” No, not possible. I cannot write without reading, I read lots of books. I write about what is happening outside Manipur, the current trend of literature or any issues. This writing exercise has helped me to shape my critical writing. Currently, I am writing a series of articles about Mahatma Gandhi, since India is celebrating its 150th birth anniversary. To me, everything is interconnected with my love for Manipuri arts and culture and my writing career and my teaching profession and my passion for reading and my quest for a new idea and present it through my work of art. Necessity compels me to start writing about critical work, which in turn helps me to become a critical writer. So, I am happy with what I have written up till now, not everything was perfect there are some which are average but overall I am happy.

AN: What was the condition of Manipuri Literature then and now?

NT: There were no good reference books when I started my teaching career, things have changed now. We have lots of writers now. There are many good writers now. And the production of literary books is quite impressive before it was rare.

AN: What thought process goes into your mind when you sit down to write a work of art? Guide me through the process.

NT: This is the most important and most difficult question. It also means how I choose a particular topic for my writing. You can choose any topic or write on any idea but the result should be good. It may be a short or long one but the end result must be good. The result should be artistically perfect, ought to have aesthetically value and be supposed to give pleasure while reading. One should feel joy after reading it. And what are the materials involved in making a work of art joyful is a huge topic by itself. Writing is a serious art. When we are studying a play we can apply as many theories as we want, but it will not give pleasure. It's not worth until and unless it is enjoyed by the audience. For me, the most

important thing involved in the thought process of writing is one should have a fertile mind, should be receptive and sensibility. Without sensibility, there can be no communication.

After I watched a movie, I look for new ideas. I try picking up a new idea. My mind is full of new ideas. I try doing new things. We should read lots of books to find out new things. When we do not read a week-long newspaper we become outdated, we miss the track so many things happened in a week. When I first came to know about the first woman Finance Minister of India is Nirmala Sitharaman. It's news! After getting the news, I started researching her background. Then, I bring the idea into the regional context of Manipur. I always try to bring any new ideas to the regional context.

Let me tell you incidents in one of the creative writing class, students were asking where to get new ideas to write new poetry, novel or short stories. I forgot the famous author name, the famous author during the session replied "Just look at the wall, carefully you will have all the materials for your stories. Do you know the meaning behind that statement? It involves the critical mind, critical analysis on any topic to find out the new idea. The materials are the same for all, but what new ideas you are going to add on depends on the individual's perspective. You need to identify that and start writing. Critical mind, critical analysis, what new perspectives are we going to add on to the existing idea play a vital role.

AN: Do you solicit feedback?

NT: It is essential and somehow related to practice too. There is no feedback as good or worse. All feedback is good if you take it positively. We are not perfect; we always try to be perfect. When we write, we tend to miss out on a few important points or aspects. Feedback helps us to re-examine. For me, when I give lectures in public, I tend to miss out on a few things and I employed feedback as my tool to prepare better next time, it goes for the writing too. For me, I prepare a lot before going to class. For me, visiting a class is like visiting a temple. I mentally prepare for every class. Every performance or every lecture should be prepared; every lecture in the class should be a successful one. You cannot fail in the class. You will be called a good teacher if you don't fail. The lesson you are going to teach, the text you are going to teach is the same, but every year there are new students, new ideas, new trends are developing, you need to incorporate what is happening in the last two years when you are teaching- you need to give awareness to the students. Coming back to the feedback, we sometimes deviate ourselves from the point due to the occasion or situation, it's always helpful to get feedback to keep ourselves in the track. Thus, feedback helps in improving one's shortcoming.

AN: What is the most difficult part of the writing process?

NT: Writing the first draft is important. Each sentence is important. Each sentence should be written in the most perfect, most beautifully constructed. There should a sense of aesthetic value in it. We should check whether there is a logical connection. One sentence is very important to me. Then you have to make sure that the next sentence has a logical link with the previous one like that the last sentence should have a logical connection with the first sentence likewise the middle sentence and the last one should be connected. It is a unity in itself. Any composition should have its artistic unity and artistic design.

Look at nature, take an example of a flower, say a rose or lotus. It has its artistic unity, each component of the flower complements each other to give a perfect unity, nothing is out of place, a rose cannot have the petal of a lotus nor thus the lotus. There is perfect harmony. I am telling this from my own experiences, I don't know somebody also said it or not. For me, I work like that; take care of each small minute component. Another example I can think of is, "Why do we say this curry is very tasty?", there are many people who have made the curry before and each cooking will differ from others, but the one who has utilized the correct proportion of the ingredient will taste better than the rest. If one puts anything extra it will spoil the curry.

According to me, while drafting, you have an idea, you have points, you have theories, you have your approach, while writing try to avoid making mistake, if by chance you made a mistake, try to look at the whole of the article, see whether what you want to say is said or not. Do not exaggerate, avoid making sensational, do not write anything beyond the logical mind. The piece of work you are writing might be long or short it doesn't matter. Try to always write most perfectly. It will never disappoint you. The article that I wrote in the early 50s and 60s still gives me the same pleasure till now. The very moment you hold your pen to write, try to make it the most perfect one, to give a perfect unity.

AN: Which is more important practice or discipline?

NT: Practice.

A theoretical foundation without practice is not possible. Without practice, nothing can happen, especially in terms of arts. How to analyse a poem or a novel? You might have all the theoretical information and background. You just can start writing a critical judgment just like that. No one can just start writing a criticism; a critic is involved in that criticism. A critic is also a writer; it involves creativity in his writing. A critic brings out the puzzles that are hidden inside that piece of art. Everybody has creativity deep within themselves, but everybody cannot write, that's why one

needs to practice. With every practice, one will become more refined in their writing. For me, without practice, art is not possible.

AN: You're very active in Face book, what's the appeal?

NT: Today's is a world of technology. We are connected with different parts of the world through technology. A few days back I listened to a video clip that went viral and the talk was quite sensational. I think one should not just say things for the sake of entertainment. We need to be careful about what we are saying in front of the mass. I think like that kind of talk appeal on to those who are not so intellect because I think there was no logic in the speech, it just makes few people laugh and enjoy for the moment that's all. There is no profundity in it. Technology is a strong tool; we should utilise it for the benefit of humankind.

AN: What is your advice to the budding writers of Manipur?

NT: I would like to say that group feedback is important among young scholars and writers. This will help them grow as better writers. Suppose one of my students write a review of theatre performance. I make sure that I called up and give me genuine feedback. I asked them what you are trying to say in the review. You wrote about the director, the synopsis of the play, the achievement of the director, who is the hero or the heroine of the play, everything except the performance. Why? You are just reproducing the narrative synopsis which was distributed before the play. This kind of feedback has helped many of the young writers as well as my students. Those who are genuine will welcome the feedback positively. And one should carefully, try to give the best and should not be bothered about the criticism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT:

I acknowledge that the interview is personal and the views of the interviewee are kept intact as far as applicable. It is the exact words of Professor Nongmaithem Tombi Singh as I wanted to make it authentic and preserved his words to posterity. It is a little contribution from my side.

NOTE: This is an interview, so not applicable any references.