

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

THE MESSAGE OF HARMONY IN KYNPHAM SINGH NONGKYNRIH'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Recollecting the riotous recent past of Meghalaya in general and the ethnic tensions that erupted in Shillong in the nineties of the last century in particular, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih in his shorter poems finds an ingenious way of sarcastically expressing the shallowness of the conflicts by thawing them with the possibility of an easy reconciliation. His sonnet "Sundori" is an apt example of the political message of harmony lost in the tumult of self-proclaiming and self-righteous rioters spreading hatred for ad hoc benefits. This paper is an attempt at an interpretation of that brilliant message encrypted in the form of a sonnet by Nongkynrih in "Sundori"

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INTRODUCTION

Writing about the roots of the times" with a sense of immediacy is a significant aspect of North-East poetry. Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih is one of the most promising poets writing in English from the North-East of India. Born in the wettest place on the planet, Cherrapunji in Meghalaya, in 1964, he has published several collections of poetry both in Khasi and English. As recognition of the promise of excellence that he has shown so far he was awarded the first Veer Shankar Shah- Raghunath Shah National Award for literature in 2008 and the first North-East Poetry Award in 2004. He is teaching in the Department of English of North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih moves beyond the mere recording of events in the sonnet "Sundori" by inviting the conflicting communal interests to the platform of consensus and mutual understanding. The sonnet opens with an account of the rare communal conflicts that shamed the history of Shillong in the recent past as the poet addresses his Beloved who belongs to the community with

which the poet's own community is in conflict in the opening lines. The sonnet concludes with a call for harmonious and peaceful co-existence.

Ethnic tension in Shillong:

In the xenophobic outrage of 1986, a large number of non-tribals were peremptorily evacuated from Shillong city. The immediate cause of this ethnic tension was the issue of trade license by the state government to the non-tribal traders. The matter remained a major cause of the festering communal division in Shillong for many years following that incident. The non-local traders kept complaining about the harassment inflicted on them by local bodies and the persistent delay in the renewal of trade licenses. They proclaimed that they had been doing business in Shillong city for ages together and nobody could stop them from doing legitimate business there. The problem of issuing the renewed licenses to non-local traders persists in the lewduh market or Burrabazar in the heart of the city of Shillong. This part of Shillong falls under the jurisdiction of the "Dorbar" of the Syiem of Myllieum. Without the recommendation of the

Siem, the Autonomous Khasi Hills District Council cannot issue trade licenses in this part of Shillong. Because of this tussle between the powerful local body and the non-local traders, the ethnic tension continues to simmer in Shillong city.

Communal Riots in the streets of Shillong:

The tension between the communities often gears up during the festive seasons as religious and communal feelings are at their apex during these days. In October, 1992, during such an occasion, a communal riot broke out in Shillong and 26 people were killed. Since then, the communal gulf between the local tribal community and the non-tribal communities has widened and that rupture often flares up in the form of conflicts between groups in Shillong. The poet describes those violent incidents in ironic simplicity, "Yesterday one of my people/ Killed one of your people/ And one of your people/ Killed one of my people." This killing and violence inflicted towards each other has made the subterranean hatred and suspicion between the communal groups explicit. It is not that the entire populace is involved in this bloody conflict. There is a section in the community with a communal agenda that serves their narrow political interests which is responsible for such conflicts. These stray communal forces ignited the feeling of hatred by drawing in the context of communal fear and lop-sided interest and as a result, "Today they have both sworn/ To kill on sight." A private conflict involving individuals from different sections of the society has the potential to be magnified into a larger communal turmoil resulting in the loss of many innocent lives. The poet expresses his disgust for the conflicts by describing the incidents of killing nonchalantly in repetitive lines. The doggerel with which the poem begins exposes the mindlessness and sheer oversight eating humanity at the core. The violent communal riots that engulfed Shillong city is only a travesty of those tragic turns of events.

Victory of love amidst enmity:

Individually neither the poet nor the poet's "Beloved Sundori" is responsible for the spread of hatred between the communities. In fact, they represent the possibility of peaceful co-existence between different groups of people wherein lies the

future of Shillong. The love that grew between the poet and his "Beloved Sundori", despite their communal differences, is an indication of the fact that the wall of animosity that has been built up between the communities is artificial and brittle in reality. What is necessary is the desire for the creation of a harmonious bond sweetened by the twin touch of sympathy and fellow-feeling.

The Umkrah River:

But the time is not yet ripe for such co-existence. The minds of the people are corrupted by the garbage of hatred for too long. The dirt and dust of communal anger and chauvinism have blurred their vision. They have lost the capacity to visualize the brilliant possibilities of harmonious co-existence being trapped in the confinement of communalism. Because of this confinement for much too long, they often release their pent-up feelings of anger and hatred in a flurry of violence. The poet envisages that the time has come to look beyond this confinement. People must wash away the dirt of communalism if they want peace to come back. The Umkrah River that flows right across Shillong washing away the dirt and dust of the city may become the right place to clean the dirt of communal hatred from the minds of the people. As the water level of the Umkrah River rises up to clean the city during the summer, the poet too finds the time of the communal violence the right time to start a new chapter of peace and harmony in the history of Shillong. This ceremonious abandonment of communal hatred will start at the individual level. The poet and the poet's beloved may initiate this process of recreation. He invites his "Beloved Sundori" for a reconciliation and asks, "Shall we meet by the Umkrah River/ And empty this madness/ Into its angry summer floods?" The poet anticipates that this small step of affection taken at the personal level will have a ripple effect. It will surely help alleviate the anger and the communal hatred that separated people from people by setting an example for people to follow.

The message of harmony:

The poet sends his message of love and peace to his beloved "Through a fearful night breeze". The violence and bloodshed between communal groups in Shillong is at its peak when the

message of harmony is sent to his beloved by the poet. The situation is so hostile that people are afraid of stepping outside of their house. The possibility of their meeting in the day is very thin as the violence spares nobody. But the poet requests his beloved not to be swayed by the fear and terror born out of the hatred. The poet believes that the breeze that blows across Shillong city every evening is the medium through which the message of peace has to be carried to people's doorsteps. This breeze is testimony to the fact that even in the midst of the violence and bloodshed as a result of the ethnic tension in Shillong, there is a glimmer of hope that peace and harmony will ultimately return to the peaceful city of Shillong.

What matters now is the unrelenting endeavour of co-operation at the personal level. When all else fail, it is the magic of affectionate personal relationship that will help wither the storm of suspicion and hatred in the city of Shillong. The poet requests his "Beloved Sundori" to help him initiate this effort as he asks, "...leave your window open." The eternal evening breeze of Shillong will carry the message of harmony to the house of the poet's "Beloved Sundori". If she opens the window to usher in the breeze carrying this message, the relationship between her and the poet will not get affected by the viral hatred of the communal riots. If they start the effort to bridge the gulf between the two communities at their personal level, their effort will definitely make an impact upon the society. No further dent will be caused in Shillong's metropolitan identity as people in Shillong will once again understand the value of harmonious co-existence.

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