

# Literary Legacy of Hijam Anganghal Singh in Manipuri Literature

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**Abstract—** [Hijam Anganghal Singh (1892–1943) holds a very important place in the history of modern Manipuri literature. He wrote at a time when Manipur was passing through major political and cultural changes after the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891 and during British rule. In this difficult period, Anganghal helped shape a new literary awareness among the Meitei people. Though he had very little formal education, he created a remarkable range of literary works, including poetry, epic, drama, novels, and allegorical prose. This paper discusses his contribution to Manipuri literature, with special focus on *Khamba-Thoibi Sheireng*, his greatest work, and examines his role as a cultural reformer who guided Manipuri literature from traditional forms towards a modern yet indigenous literary tradition.

**Keywords:** Hijam Anganghal Singh, Manipuri literature, Khamba-Thoibi Sheireng, Manipuri drama, modern Meitei writing]

## I. INTRODUCTION

Manipuri (Meitei) literature experienced a major change in the early twentieth century when traditional literary forms came into contact with new political, social, and cultural realities under British rule. Writers of this period tried to protect their cultural roots while also responding to the changing times. Among these writers, Hijam Anganghal Singh stands out as one of the most influential figures. Known respectfully as *Mahakavi*, he gave Manipuri literature its first great epic, developed original Manipuri drama, and enriched poetry and prose with deep human feeling and moral concern.

The *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*, Volume II, published by the Sahitya Akademi, provides a clear picture of Anganghal's life and work. It records that Hijam Anganghal Singh was a poet and dramatist who studied only up to the sixth standard and worked as a petition writer at the Cheirap Court in Imphal. Even with these limitations, he made a lasting contribution to Manipuri literature. From a young age, he composed songs and lyrics, some of which

were published in *Lalit Manjari Patrika* in 1933. His major works include the epic poem *Shingel Indu* (1938), plays such as *Nimai Sanyas*, *Thambal Chongbi*, and *Ibemma*, novels like *Yaithing Konu* and *Jahera*, and the allegorical prose work *Thambal*. His masterpiece, *Khamba-Thoibi Sheireng*, containing nearly 39,000 lines, was completed between 1939 and 1940. For his literary achievements, he was posthumously awarded the title *Kaviratna* by the Manipuri Sahitya Parishad in 1948.

## II. LITERARY REVIEW

Scholars and critics have long recognised Hijam Anganghal Singh as a central figure in modern Manipuri literature. E. Dinamani Singh describes him as a literary giant whose writings reflect the emotional and cultural life of Manipur. Among his works, *Khamba-Thoibi Sheireng* has received the highest critical praise and is often called the “Iliad of Manipur” because of its vast scale and cultural richness.

Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1890-1977), former President of the Sahitya Akademi, described Anganghal as the greatest writer produced by Manipur, praising the epic's artistic beauty and emotional depth. Later critics have also studied his plays and novels as early examples of social realism in Manipuri literature. These works moved away from translated mythological dramas and addressed real social problems and human relationships. Even so, many scholars point out that Anganghal's contribution across different literary forms still needs wider and deeper study.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This study follows a qualitative and descriptive method. It is based on close reading of Anganghal's major works, including *Shingel Indu*, *Khamba-Thoibi Sheireng*, selected plays, and the novels *Yaithing Konu* and *Jahera*. Secondary sources such

as biographies, critical essays, and literary histories are used to place his writings within the social and cultural background of early twentieth-century Manipur. This approach helps in understanding Anganghal both as a creative writer and as a cultural leader.

#### IV. CONTRIBUTION TO MANIPURI LITERATURE

##### 4.1 Poetry and Epic

Anganghal began his literary career by writing lyrical poetry marked by sincerity, emotional depth, and musical quality. His long poem *Shingel Indu* (1938) brought him recognition as a major poet.

His most important contribution, however, is *Khamba-Thoibi Sheireng* (1939–1940), a massive epic of nearly 39,000 lines. Based on the popular legend of Khamba and Thoibi, the epic presents the social values, moral ideals, and cultural life of the Meitei people. Unlike many classical epics that celebrate kings and warfare, Anganghal's epic values hard work, humility, self-control, and moral strength. In this way, he offers a unique Manipuri understanding of heroism.

##### 4.2 Drama

Anganghal played a pioneering role in the development of original Manipuri drama. At a time when theatre in Manipur depended mainly on translated Bengali mythological plays, he introduced original themes rooted in local society. Through theatre groups such as the Yaiskul Dramatic Union and the Chitrangada Natya Mandir, he helped shape modern Manipuri theatre. Plays like *Ibemma* and *Poktabi* dealt with social issues and human emotions, bringing realism and seriousness to the stage.

##### 4.3 Prose and Novels

Anganghal's prose writings also hold great importance. His allegorical work *Thambal* was once prescribed for the B.A. Manipuri syllabus under Calcutta University, showing its academic value. His novels *Yaithing Konu* and *Jahera* discuss themes such as women's freedom, love, social harmony, and conflict. *Jahera*, set in the 1930s, strongly criticises religious rigidity and the practice of social ostracism (*Mangba*), showing how narrow-minded customs can destroy human relationships.

##### 4.4 Cultural Leadership

Apart from writing, Anganghal was deeply involved in cultural and social activities. As a founding member of the Manipuri Sahitya Parishad in 1935, he worked actively to promote the Manipuri language, literature, theatre, and education. He helped establish libraries, schools, theatre organisations, and workers' groups, showing his strong commitment to the cultural development of Manipur.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Hijam Anganghal Singh made an unmatched contribution to Manipuri literature. Through his poetry, epic, drama, and prose, he expressed the spirit and struggles of Manipuri society during a time of great change. *Khamba-Thoibi Sheireng* remains the finest achievement in Manipuri literary history, while his plays and novels laid the foundation for modern literary expression in Manipur. Anganghal's importance lies not only in his creative talent but also in his lifelong dedication to cultural renewal. For these reasons, he rightly deserves to be remembered as the architect of modern Manipuri literature.

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