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‘Manipur and World War II: (In verse), With a Glimpse of the World’:

An epic poem by Sanasam Gourhari Singh

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The Living Tradition of Indian Philosophy in Contemporary India

The image of India has recently shifted from "a country of stagnation and poverty" to "a country of great power" as a result of its growing economic strength.

India has realizedthis remarkable economic development primarily because of its relatively stable"democratic" politics. What interests us is that the norms and morals that maintain theIndian economy and politics reflect traditional Indian thought and philosophicalconcepts such as *Satya* (truth), *Dharma* (morality or duty), and *Ahiṃsā* (nonviolence),which have been formed during India's long history.

Our project attempts to integrate the knowledge and materials on Indian philosophy and Buddhism accumulated during the 370-year history of Ryukoku University with the newfindings of contemporary India studies, focusing on the "Living Tradition of IndianPhilosophy in Contemporary India". To that end, we opened the Center for the Study of Contemporary India (RINDAS), in collaboration with the National Institutes for the Humanities, for five years from April of 2010 through March of 2014.

Unit 1 Politics, Economy and Philosophy of Contemporary India

Unit 2 Social Movements in Modern India Across Borders

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Introduction

Manipur and World War II is a long poem by Sanasam Gourhari Singh of Manipur (born 29 December 1911), in two large 9”x10” volumes, written when he was a ‘frail old man.’[1] In poor English and bad rhyme, printed on not very good paper in double columns of four-line stanzas, it is about the Battle of Manipur fought between Japan and Allied forces between March and July 1944. It could be considered a heroic epic since it is about war, but there is much more in it than war.

The poet consulted standard works on the Burma Campaign by General Slim, Evans and Brett-James, and C.E.Lucas Phillips, which he versified without changing their facts. This gives a pretty thorough picture of the Allied part in the Battle of Manipur more or less entirely as it is in these accounts. Sanasam Gourhari Singh has no revelation that changes our view of the military aspect of the battles of Manipur and Imphal as found in these works. This is why my paper is not about military aspects of the war but on how the writer meshed these accounts with his love for Manipur. His love for Manipur is what makes the poem worth thinking about.

I will focus on two elements of the poem: its varied material and the arrangement of this material. After years of struggling to make sense of the poem’s design, I realized that these two are the means of unlocking its complexity.

My paper has three parts:

1. Who was Sanasam Gourhari Singh; some context for the poem; and what is in it.
2. India and World War II.
3. The poem’s place in the literature of World War II.

1.i. Who was Sanasam Gourhari Singh?

Sanasam Gourhari Singh was an English teacher, later private secretary to Maharaja Bodhchandra Singh of Manipur, and then Education Secretary to the government of Manipur after 1949.[2]

I am grateful to Professor Dake and RINDAS for giving me the opportunity to talk about this poem, which I have long wanted to write about. This is my first formal presentation on it.

I am indebted to my former student Konthoujam Sarda for information and material on Manipur.

Without recourse to my husband’s library on the northeast of India and his knowledge of the region and World War II, I could not have written this paper. I am especially indebted to his article, ‘Battlefields of the Northeast’ (*Frontline* July 22-August 1, 1989; also available at < http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/55/a3663155.shtml> [3. 3. 2014].

The poem is cited in the footnotes as SGHS followed by Arabic figures to indicate the volume, page and stanza numbers.

1 B.R.Sen Gupta, SGHS, n.p.

2 Sanasam Gourhari Singh:

Published privately, with funds from a few other sources, Volume II of the poem names Maharaj Kumar Tutendrajit Singh as the publisher. Volumes I and II were published in 1980 and 1983 with print runs of 1000 and 500 respectively. According to a colophon, it is available from a Manipur shop but the poem and the poet are virtually unknown in Manipur, and (I suspect) completely unknown in the rest of India, although Sanasam Gourhari Singh distributed it among friends and officers of northeast India.

He dedicated his poem to Lord Mountbatten. According to the preface, Mountbatten, the Imperial War Museum in London, and the Queen of England, each received a copy of Volume I. Despite this apparent esteem for the colonizing power, in his poem Sanasam Gourhari does not consistently admire the British. It is characteristic of him to embrace opposite points of view. For instance, he opposed the merger of Manipur with India but in his poem he is not especially critical of the Congress or of its chief leaders, Gandhi and Nehru. In 1988, he even wrote a verse biography of Indira Gandhi and a prose account of a century of the triumphs and tragedies of the Indian National Congress.

1.ii.i. Some context for the poem

Bodhchandra Singh became ruler of Manipur on 1 April 1942.[3] He had ruled for forty days when, on 10 May 1942, the first Japanese bombs fell on Imphal, the capital of Manipur. Bodhchandra Singh had asked Sanasam Gourhari Singh to become his private secretary because he (Sanasam Gourhari) knew English. As the Maharaja's private secretary, Sanasam Gourhari had a unique view of the Japanese attempts on Manipur and Allied preparations for battle, which included sending thousands of white, brown, and black troops whose colour and size

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- Born: 29th December 1911 into an orthodox and God-fearing family to a religious and scripture loving father, at Sinjamei, Imphal; the youngest of four brothers.
- Education: Matriculated from Johnstone High School, Imphal, affiliated to Calcutta University, in 1929. B.A. from Cotton College, Gauhati, also affiliated to Calcutta University, in 1934.
- Employment: years as Assistant Teacher, Sir Churachand High English School, Imphal, joining immediately after graduation. Private secretary to Maharaja Bodhchandra Singh from 1942. He 'was good in speaking English and that was a coveted merit in those days as Manipur was under British rule.' Maharaja Bodhchandra Singh recognized Gourhari's worth and as soon as became ruler, he appointed Gourhari as his private secretary in 1942 (not 1944 as the brief biographical note says).
- Post Independence: Director of various Manipur government departments and Secretary to the government of Manipur. Toured across Manipur. Organized meetings with Tangkhul chiefs and Kuki chieftans; had a close friendship with many Tangkhul headmen. Worked hard to develop agriculture, education, health and doctors' training courses, and roads and bridges.
- Retired: 1970, as Secretary to government of Manipur.
- Publications: *Practical Manipuri-English Translation* (1938). Said to be the first of its kind; *Modern Essays for School* (1979); *Manipur and World War II*, 2 volumes (1980 and 1983); *A Flower in the Himalayas* (Biography of Smt.Indira Gandhi in verse) (1988); *First 100-years' March – History of the Indian National Congress (Triumphs and Tragedies)* (1988).
- Awards: Gaveshna Bhushan of the Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, Imphal (1988)
  The Manipur State Kala Akademi Fellow Award (1987-88).
  (From 'A Brief Profile of Sanasam Gourhari Singh.' I am grateful to
  Mr.R.Shurchandra, Silchar, for sending it. Some details are from the poem.)

3 SGHS 2.68.1141.

astonished the locals.[4] The first Japanese bombs terrified the people of Imphal. They had been advised to shelter in trenches during air raids but having no idea what bombs were, they hid under their beds, where they had always felt safest in times of danger. Most of them fled to the hills.[5] I learnt this amusing account from a recent memoir by an ordinary Manipuri citizen, Kh.Nimaicharan Singh. Sanasam Gourhari Singh, on the other hand, never allows even a moment of levity into his poem.

Like Kashmir but smaller than it, Manipur is a flat, rice-growing valley surrounded by hills. It borders Burma with which it continues to have cross border trade. Before 1947, Manipur was a princely state, that is, an independent state ruled by a maharaja or king. Its topography kept it insulated from India until 1891 when two princes laid claim to the throne of Manipur, one the legitimate heir, the other supported by a dynamic army officer, Tikendrajit Singh. The legitimate heir turned for help to the British who declared war on Manipur on 31 March 1891, claiming that it had made war on Queen Victoria when Tikendrajit Singh killed five British officers. The truth is the British did not want a strong warlike kingdom in that corner of their empire, nor a popular leader like Tikendrajit Singh. By 27 April 1891, they had subdued the Manipuris. Tikendrajit Singh was arrested on 23 May 1891 and hanged in public. Manipuris were deeply insulted by the British treatment of their heroes, some of whom were executed in Imphal, others sent to prison in Port Blair. A British Resident was installed in Manipur. A minor, Chura Chand, was placed on the throne. He grew up into an incompetent and profligate ruler. The British brought back forced labour – 10 days of free labour every 40 days from all men between the ages of 17 and 60. The labour was needed to rebuild the Resident's house which had burnt down, possibly set on fire by Manipuris opposed to Chura Chand's installation as king. The British allowed outsiders – chiefly Marwari traders from Rajasthan -- to take over the rice trade. These traders exported rice to India, causing inflation and grain shortage in Manipur. The British also planned to sell sheds in the Women's Market, in existence since the sixteenth century, to outsiders. The British actions resulted in the two women's uprisings of 1904 and 1939. On the whole, The Anglo-Manipur war of 1891 was seen – and is still seen – as the Manipuris' fight to retain their independence.

Manipur is now one of the seven states of northeast India, but at the time of World War II, it included Kohima (now in Nagaland). It was an independent kingdom until 1891, then a princely state within the British Empire. It joined the Indian Union in 1949 through coercion or deception or at gunpoint according to different versions.[6] Sanasam Gourhari Singh, along with the Maharaja, 'resisted tooth and nail' Sardar Patel's Instrument of Merger.[7] Since 1964, various Manipuri groups have been fighting for independence or autonomy. Their anger is especially (but not only) directed against the Indian Army, which they see as an occupying force.

Manipur has many tribes, religions and languages. It has twenty-nine dialects, six of them recognized as official languages of instruction in school.[8] Sixty per cent of Manipuris are the valley-dwelling Meiteis who include animists, Hindus, combinations of the two, Christians and Muslims. Hindu Meiteis worship Krishna and Radha. Some Manipuris feel Hinduism was imposed on them by force when Raja Bhagyachandra made Krishna a

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4 There were about 100,000 African colonial troops in the Burma Campaign. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burma_Campaign>[27 Feb 2014]. For a young boy's surprise the first time he saw Englishmen, see Kh.Nimaicharan Singh, *The Second World War in Manipur and My Childhood* (Imphal: Kh.Ratankumar Singh, Khuria Toudam Leikai, Ayangpalli Road, 2012), pp.36-37

5 Nimaicharan p.13.

6 See Appendix 1.

7 'A Brief Profile of Sanasam Gourhari Singh.'

8 See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manipur#Manipuri_script>[23. 2. 2014].

state deity in 1776 and started the Manipuri Ras Lila, the dance drama depicting the life of Krishna.[9] Yet Manipuris collectively defend their culture and language. Along with the rites specific to their religion, they celebrate traditional customs and festivals of the sun god Sanamahi.

Unlike other northeastern languages, Manipuri has a script, Meetai Mayek. From 1709 to the middle of the twentieth century, it was replaced by the Bengali script, which Manipuris resented.[10] A Bengali Brahman, Shanta Das Goshai, converted King Pamheiba (1690–1751) to Vaisnav Hinduism. Under his influence Pamheiba attempted to wipe out Manipuri tradition, culture, script and religion. One of the things he did was to introduce the Bengali script. The Manipuri language was written in the Bengal script and many books in Metei were burnt. An updated form of Meetai Mayek was restored in the mid-twentieth century.

Manipur also has a vibrant tradition of secular dance and drama, such as the Shumang Lila or courtyard play, deriving from the Assamese and Bengali Jatra (travelling drama). It used to be performed at night in courtyards. Shumang Lila has an orchestra and either an all-male or an all-female cast but never a mixed one. The plays, on historical or contemporary themes, are meant as family entertainment and usually carry a social message. A Shumang Lila called *Japan Lan* or Japan War hinges on the battle of Manipur, which is known as the Japan War in Manipur.[11] The drama is about two generations of a family separated during the Japanese bombing of Manipur and re-united after a few decades.

I have spent some time on this because the poem is impossible to follow without knowing about Manipur's long history of political, cultural and economic independence. Knowledge of the context makes the poet's point of view visible.

1. ii. ii. What is in the poem?

The narrative is neither strictly chronological nor arranged thematically, as is characteristic of epics whose disparate material is bound together by organizing ideas. An epic can have several organizing patterns but there is usually one basic pattern around which the other patterns are grouped. In Homer's *Odyssey*, for example, the basic pattern shows that peace and orderly running of an *oikos* or household can define an epic hero, and that glorious death in battle is not the only heroism. Odysseus learns this in Hades from Achilles, the greatest of the Achaean heroes whom he has envied till that moment. Face to face with the shade of Achilles, Odysseus says he would rather have died in battle like Achilles than be on his is way home. Imagine his surprise when Achilles says that he would rather be the lowliest worker on his own *oikos* than be dead. This is a new idea for Odysseus who now heads home with purpose rather than loitering along the way as he has done so far. The *Odyssey* falls into two distinct halves, separated by the meeting of the two heroes in Hades. In the first part, Odysseus in a resentful and

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9 'Ningthou Ching-Thang Khomba (also Rajarshi Bhagya Chandra, Jai Singh Maharaja) (1748–1799) was a Manipuri monarch of the 18th century CE. The inventor of the Ras Lila dance, he is a legendary figure in Manipur, and much of his actions as King had been mythologized. He is also credited with spreading Vaishnavism in Manipur after his grandfather Pamheiba made Hinduism the official religion.' <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ching-Thang_Khomba>[27. 2. 2014]

10 See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pamheiba>[27. 2. 2014].

11 *Japan Lan* is on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XifnBOxkq88&list=PLJ7PP0By-ALnzHljj7gZyKuOzcbtNwb35>[10. 1. 2014]. Other Shumang Lila performances are at <http://chingtam.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=38&Itemid=61> [23. 2. 2014]. They are without subtitles.

irresponsible survivor of the Trojan War. In the second half he is the post-war hero who must re-build a homestead that has been steadily crumbling while its owner, Odysseus, has been away at war. Every detail of the epic contributes to this basic idea. Sometimes, by isolating a pattern in an epic, one can uncover its fundamental design. The kind of dwellings and householders Odysseus meets on his ten-year journey home from Troy is such a thread. The dwellings and their owners become successively more like Achaeans, and less magical, beast-like and ignorant of living together as a society.

Sanasam Gourhari Singh's epic does not have such clarity of design, and is therefore a challenge to read. I tried to find a narrative thread in the poem that would lead to and follow from the Battle of Manipur. There is one, but if one does not keep in mind the importance of Manipur history and culture to the poet, it is difficult to locate.

The narrative thread I will talk about is largely about Japan. There is so much else in the poem that to isolate just one of its threads is to virtually misrepresent it. Yet it is impossible to discuss without narrowing the focus in this way. In any case, the poem's title, *Manipur and World War II*, points one towards what is still called the Japan War in Manipur.

I.ii.iii. How the poem proceeds

Initially, Sanasam Gourhari Singh attempts to make Mountbatten the hero of his epic because, he says, Mountbatten came from a royal line, rescued Britain (singlehandedly, the poet implies) from the ravages of Japanese attacks and routed Japan from the eastern sector. But the poem is not about Mountbatten, for in Volume I, Sanasam Gourhari Singh describes the European theatre of war in which Mountbatten does not figure, but Hitler loomed large. After some indecisiveness in his assessment of Hitler, the poet makes it clear that Hitler was a monster. It would be interesting to follow up his wavering opinion of Hitler, but I am interested in the 1944 Battles of Imphal and Kohima, sometimes collectively known as the Battle of Manipur and among Manipuris, as the 'Japan War.' It is to be found in Volume II, the focus of my paper.

The poet modestly says that he has merely threaded together others' accounts of the war, including 'War Bulletins known as Platoon sheets' which the Allied Forces gave the Maharaja of Manipur 'from time to time during the arduous campaigns of the theatres in Manipur to help him in the conduct of his civil administration.'[12] He calls his poem 'a novel adventure in verse' since books on war are usually in prose.[13]

I.ii.iv. The Arrangement of Material

The layout of the poem is unlike anything in Homer and Milton and, as I have said, it does not have an easily comprehended arrangement. Homer and Milton used short introductions called proems in which they set out what their epics would be about and how they would unfold. Instead of a proem, Sanasam Gourhari Singh has a list of contents but the poem is often quite different from what the Contents lead us to expect. Since the poem was privately printed, the poet must have had complete control over its layout. Assuming this was the case, he must have had good reason for setting it out as he has done. I believe it is his way of indicating the importance of some events over others.

But how is it arranged?

In both volumes, the poem is divided into sections. The very longest sections are subdivided into smaller sections with subheadings. Normally these subheadings are the width of a column but when the event described is

12 SGHS, Volume II, Bibliography.

13 SGHS Preface ii.

significant to the poet, he centres the subheading across both columns. The numbering of the stanzas remains continuous throughout without a clear indication of when a fresh topic is broached. In Milton, a new topic is assigned a fresh Book. In Sanasam Gourhari Singh's poem, fresh topics begin on a new page. This is my guess.

Significant sections are also longer than others. The portion entitled 'The Rise of Hitler' is the longest section of Volume I, making it the chief subject of this volume. But the first three Books of Volume I are entitled Manipur, Mountbatten (as hero of the Burma Campaign and therefore important to Manipur), and Maharaja Bodhchandra. In other words, Volume I opens with a long three-part account of Manipur. I first thought this was a run–up the poem's real story of how Manipur experienced World War II. But by opening his poem with the long account of Manipur, Sanasam Gourhari Singh marks his sharp difference from Western accounts. Older Western histories of the War such as Churchill's taught us to think that World War II was chiefly the Allies against Hitler in Europe, the USSR and Africa.

This poem, on the other hand, is an assessment of the battle of Manipur from the point of view of Manipur, which had the misfortune of having a horrific battle fought on it. Both volumes have several pages on Manipur's history, topography, culture, beauty, peace, forest and animal wealth, lakes and people. Manipur has been like this for centuries, the poet says; his aim is to establish its divinely ordained natural peace. Only after he has established this does he narrate events of the War. The effect is to have us arrive at Hitler in Volume I and the Japanese invasion of Manipur in Volume II quite literally via Manipur.

1.ii.v. Volume II

At the end of Volume I, Sanasam Gourhari Singh says that there will be more about Japan in Volume II, but it opens with an ode to Kohima, praising its incredible beauty. The ode concludes with these lines:

> This ode is a humble bouquet common
> To both states—Manipur and Nagaland
> Since they both suffered alike under the sun
> During World War II . . . .[14]

After thirty-five pages on how Britain faced World War II, the Russian and African Fronts, Italy, D-Day, the Battle of the Bulge, and the Fall of Berlin, Sanasam Gourhari Singh finally presents the subheading 'Japanese Battlefield (Manipur),' leading the reader to expect a description of the battle, instead of which he gives us a history of the kings of Manipur. Why did he do this? And if he wanted to write about the history of Manipuri kings, why could he not call the section 'Manipur's Kings' rather than 'Japanese Battlefield (Manipur)'?

I cannot be sure of his reasons but here is a possible explanation. In war literature, 'battlefield' is used synonymously with 'battle.' A report titled 'The Battlefield of Waterloo,' for example, will describe the deployment of troops and the action at Waterloo. But Sanasam Gourhari Singh uses 'battlefield' to mean Manipur, the site of the battle. He presents it as a land, a culture, an economy -- a living organism, in fact, where the Allies and Japanese fought a battle that historians now recognize was decisive in shaping modern history. Had Japan won, the British Empire would have ended, with far reaching consequences.

And yet the poem repeatedly defers the Battle of Manipur because that is how the Manipuris experienced it. For them, the first significant stage in the engagement was the presence of the Allies on their land, from after the Japanese bombing in 1942 until March 1944 when the Japanese actually entered Manipur and faced the enemy.

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14 SGHS 2.n.p.107.

The Allies had asked the Maharaja to leave Imphal, but he knew he was responsible for the civil administration and had a duty to his people, so he stayed in Imphal, with consequences that Sanasam Gourhari Singh describes at length.

It is to this period, from May 1942 to March 1944, that we now turn.

1.ii.vi. Allied presence in Manipur, 1942-1944

Japanese incursions into Manipur came in two stages. There was some preliminary bombing in 1942 as part of Japan's hurricane surge into Asia. In 1942, Japan also bombed the British out of the Andaman Islands where they remained there till the end of the War. (Japanese bunkers have been preserved on Ross Island, along with the bombed ruins of the British township.)

The Allies had not expected the Japanese attack on Manipur. In 1942 Manipur had few roads, barely any troops, no anti aircraft guns, in fact no preparation at all for a Japanese attack. Sanasam Gourhari Singh criticizes Churchill's neglect of this crucial gateway into India. According to him, Churchill's plan was that the Allies would deal with Japan in this sector after finishing off Hitler in Europe. He does not say anything about the excitement of younger Manipuris whose lives were enlarged, in a manner of speaking, by so many new kinds of people, goods and food. Kh.Nimaicharan was a teenager at the time. He says that in spite of fear and the hardship of having to leave their homes in Imphal, 'it was a time for this place called Manipur to see and enjoy the view of several activities of all the allied forces. . . . Every day and night, thousands of different vehicles, quite strange to this place were ceaselessly coming in, carrying soldiers, guns, technicians. . . . To us, (we children) those days were times of happiness . . . . At any time, whenever we looked out, everything was found surprisingly interesting and enjoyable to us. We hardly remembered our personal sorrows in the midst of all that grandeur of war.'[15]

In the lull that followed the first Japanese bombings, the Allies prepared for the major confrontation that was bound to come. Troops, construction, ammunition, trucks, jeeps and tanks changed peaceful Manipur into a war zone. The Allied soldiers hung about with little to do except wait for the Japanese attack. They demanded to be entertained. The Manipuris performed traditional dances for the ordinary soldiers, some of whom misbehaved with the women and had to be reprimanded.[16] The officers demanded that the king entertain them.[17] He arranged

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15 Nimaicharan pp.30, 33.

16 Nimaicharan pp.102-14. See also p.103-104, where he writes of a young pilot sketching a Manipuri woman; he wanted her to remove the cloth covering her bosom, a cultural blindness on his part which insulted the woman and made such an impression on Nimaicharan that he remembered it six decades later.

17

> Amid zooming of planes and booming of guns
> Coupled with shortage of food and buns
> Allied Generals to boil down the tensions
> Implored the Maharaja for dance parties and funs.
>
> As Manipur's culture it would propagate
> And to the weary army men provide rest
> Such parties Maharaja did inaugurate
> And gave army personnel war interest.
>
> By such fine shows wonder-struck were they. . . (SGHS 2.97.1647-1649).

performances of Ras Lila (dances based on the life of Lord Krishna) for them, helped undoubtedly by Sanasam Gourhari Singh who was a scholar of Manipuri dance. In the poem, he says it was an education for the Allied officers. An 'ardent follower of Rajasri Bhagyachandra's legacy,' Sanasam Gourhari Singh used to participate in ritual dance performances in the role of the drummer.[18]

Later in the poem, he has many pages on the history and forms of Manipuri dance, which again baffled me. Had he stuffed everything he knew about Manipur into the poem out of misplaced pride? I now believe this was not the case.

There is a definite rhythm and cadence to his unfolding of the story of Manipur and World War II. After describing centuries of peace in Manipur, he shows its peace disturbed by the War. This sounds like a cliché but is not. The dance watched by the Allied officers is the first formal confrontation between an occupying army and the Manipuris. The poet can barely contain his displeasure that the Maharaja was being ordered to entertain the troops. He makes the Allied officers' demand for entertainment unmistakably a part of the general exploitation of Manipur and its people – their homes taken over to billet soldiers, their land ravaged by new roads, their domestic economy hit by inflation.[19] When the price of rice increased four-fold, Manipuris began to think longingly of the Japanese as potential suppliers of rice.[20] The passages about the dance establish Manipuri grace and superiority over these aggressive newcomers. Manipuri dance becomes the symbol of a civilisation where beauty developed over time. It becomes the opposite of the war which left the hills bereft of forests and wildlife.

In spite of his 'adoration' of Mountbatten, Sanasam Gourhari Singh does not appear to take sides, nor does he show the Manipuris preferring one enemy to the other. His narration of the battle is dispassionate, in marked contrast to, say, Winston Churchill in his history of World War II. When the troops finally withdrew from Manipur, there was little rejoicing, the poet says. There was a victory celebration, which he has included in the poem, but in his description of it, Sanasam Gourhari Singh concentrates on the Maharaja's message to rebuild Manipur. He says nothing about victory celebrations elsewhere in the world, thus yet again making Manipur of greater importance than the Allies. He even has the Maharaja *declaring* -- not announcing -- an end to the six-year global war, as if he was the Allied supreme commander.

But to return to the poem's narrative: Sanasam Gourhari Singh's presentation of Japan falls into two categories: Japanese military action in general and Manipur in particular, and his assessment of the Japanese

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18 'A Brief Profile of Sanasam Gourhari Singh.'

19 On billeting and rations. Nimaicharan Singh says there was no electricity and water in Imphal 'for the system had been stopped since the outset of the war;' there was an added distress of refugees pouring in from Burma, bringing cholera and their desperate need for food, shelter and medical aid. In spite of these problems, thanks to large scale construction of roads and bridges, 'many workers and contractors of this region could also earn handsome money just a few months after the bombing of Manipur . . . . Even though the price of rice and other food crops was escalating . . . most people could afford to procure and buy them easily for they had the easy means of earning' once the British began to prepare for war. After the bombing in 1942, shopkeepers also fled, leaving their shops empty. The Imphal Jail was left unattended, and prisoners ran amuck, looting the shops and homes whose owners had fled to the villages and hills. According to Nimaicharan, there was no enforced billeting, for a number of houses lay empty. What is more, the soldiers were friendly to the natives. The Gurkhas who had occupied the out houses of the writer's home shared their rations with them, asking them what they needed. 'They were angry if we refused to take anything they liked to give us' (Nimaicharan pp.25, 27, 37). Gourhari says the Manipuris were compensated for the billeting, yet after the War, Maharaja Bodhchandra successfully negotiated with Mountbatten for more money for the householders as they had suffered so much.

20 SGHS 2.72.1220.

character. Both appear to be derived from his reading rather than from his direct experience of the Japanese.

1.ii.vii. Japan in Manipur

Sanasam Gourhari Singh narrates the role of Japan in World War II in reverse order, starting with the 1944 battle of Manipur.

In 1944, Japan raced up the Burmese forests towards Manipur in its usual speedy military method which Gourhari Singh admires. But it was impeded by adverse conditions. Like many other commentators, Sanasam Gourhari Singh, too, acknowledges that Japan would have occupied Manipur and moved into the Indian hinterland from there had its troops not suffered from lack of food, water, ammunition, the rainforests, snakes, scorpions, disease, and an unusually heavy monsoon. All descriptions of the day-to-day battles of Kohima and Imphal as the two sides faced each other across a few yards, amidst filth and the stench of the wounded and dead, are harrowing to read. Gourhari Singh does not spare a single detail.

But in spite the title of his poem – *Manipur and World War II* -- the battle of Manipur gets only 104 pages of the 315 pages of Volume II. Forty-five of these are devoted to Manipur, its kings, and its independent spirit. Sanasam Gourhari describes the Anglo-Manipur war of the nineteenth century at some length, dwelling especially on how the British humiliated the Manipuris. He gives the most space to the public hanging of Tikendrajit Singh and 80-year old General Thangal.[21] Among many details of what the British did, one stands out. They burnt books in the Meitei script, paralleling the book burning by the Nazis (described in Volume I), thus making the British no different from the Nazis.[22] Details like this establish the poet's point of view.

Then come 1941 and the War, but the battle of Manipur is deferred yet again as Gourhari Singh narrates a history of Japan through its wars:

> There has never been in the annals of history
> Such a series of sudden and quick victory
> Over territories beyond their shore remote
> As Jap[anese] did in swift battle they fought.[23]

Sanasam Gourhari has almost unqualified praise for the Japanese, for their intelligence; their soldiers ('world's most formidable'); because they have 'the world's most difficult language'; they are

> Inured to hardships, revengeful, heroic
> And very industrious, sometimes stoic
> And lovers of civility and manners good. . . .[24]

What is more, 'Unlike British and Indian soldiers then,' they managed with very little rice and yet had 'a stamina and physical endurance' rarely seen.[25] Some more pages on the fall of Burma, the trek of refugees through the Burmese forests to India, the bombings of 1942, and finally, on page 85, we come to the Battle of Manipur.

In March 1944 (probably 7 March), Tokyo radio announced (in the words of the poem), '"It's a march on Delhi, / Our victorious army'll be in Imphal valley/ And that'll be by twenty-seventh March / And Imphal'll be our

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21 Among other things, old coinage was replaced. Manipuri women used to be tried by women's courts but the British ended this system, 'unfortunately for the ladies' (SGHS 2.62.1048 f).

22 SGHS 2.65.1002,

23 SGHS 2.74.1248.

24 SGHS 2.79.1326-7.

25 SGHS 2.79.1339.

spring-board.'"[26] The poet's very detailed account of the Japanese movement from Burma into Manipur is as it is in Slim, Lucas Phillips and others, except that it is in verse. Like his sources, Sanasam Gourhari has maps to help one follow the action. The inclusion of maps alone would have made it an unusual epic. Epics map their heroes' movements over earth, sea, sky, and in the underworld in words; they do not use cartographical maps.

Since Sanasam Gourhari Singh barely deviates from well-known accounts of this part of the battle, I will only point out that unlike most Western writers he mentions Indian soldiers by name and gives Subhash Bose's Indian National Army (INA) a lot of space, for example, that on 14 April 1944, Colonel Shaukat Ali Malik of the INA planted the Indian flag for the first time on the subcontinent at Moirang, a few miles from Imphal, 'with the help of Manipuris like Shri Mairembam Koireng Singh and others who were members of the INA.'[27] Also present was General Ito of the 33rd Japanese Mountain Division.[28] At the INA museum at Moirang, one can see Japanese Indian currency of World War II.[29] The Japanese printed these rupees in Burma to be used when they had defeated the Allies and occupied India. The currency was still being used in the 1980s in a couple of border villages of Burma and India.

The Japanese retreat from Manipur

Gourhari Singh again spares no detail of the suffering of the Japanese in retreat. He especially admires two characteristics of the Japanese at this time: they did not give up easily and they would not be taken prisoner, which is why they set fire to the Ukhrul hospital as they left Manipur, burning alive their own wounded. As they retreated through Burma, they left behind charred bodies in trucks and along the route. These were not acts of cruelty, the poet makes clear, but consistent with the Japanese code of honour to die rather than surrender. Finally, on 9 July 1944, according to this poem,[30] even General Mutaguchi concluded that the offensive could not continue and he ordered his starving army to get back across the Chindwin River:

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26 SGHS 2.85.1441.

27 Mairembam Koireng Singh was the first elected Chief Minister of Manipur. He was elected as Chief Minister of Manipur thrice. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moirang>[27. 2. 2104]. Manindra Singh Mairembam writes that the Sheel Bhadra Yajee Gallery of Freedom-Fighters on the 2nd floor of the Museum lists the names of 17 important INA freedom fighters of Manipur, including two women. He also lists almost 200 Manipuri freedom fighters, including several women, 'enshrined in the INA Memorial Complex' (Manindra Singh Mairembam, 'The Synthesizing Role of The I.N.A. Martyrs' Memorial: Moirang & The Indo-Japanese Peace Cenotaph: Lotpaching (Red Hill),' *New Insights into the Glorious Heritage of Manipur*, ed. Dr. H. Dwijasekhar Sharma. <http://books.e-pao.net/Heritage_Manipur/epShowChapter.asp?src=ina/inamemorial>[2. 3. 2014].

28 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mairembam_Koireng_Singh [2. 3. 2014].

29 Given by Romesh Bhattacharji who found the notes in a shop on the Burma-India border.

30 20 July 1944. See Mairembam.

With no food, no sleep and despair's sigh
The would be conquerors of India did die.
[They] fought superbly with supreme courage…

Those who did evade the British pursuit
Had to live on grass and bamboo shoot[s].

Tears blinded General Mutaguchi's eyes

when he saw his starving men who had given their all for the prize of Manipur.[31] The Japanese lost 53,000 men out of about 85,000 in the retreat through Burma (the poet's figures vary); in Manipur they had already lost 100,000, two thirds of the total number. 'As a result of their failure in Manipur…/ Kawabe and Mutaguchi were relieved of duty,' says the poet without comment, but he admired their tenacious courage and cannot understand their dismissal.[32] This is one of the many paradoxical moments in the poem. Sanasam Gourhari Singh knows the Japanese code of honour but cannot accept the disciplinary action that is part of the code. When the surrender documents are signed, Sanasam Gourhari Singh again expresses sympathy, but does not consider that his sympathy is not in keeping with the code he so admires.[33]

However, we must not lose sight of Sanasam Gourhari Singh's narrative of Japan. It is only after Mountbatten has retaken Burma that the poet narrates the Pacific war, battle by battle, the most detailed literary account of it by an Indian that I have read. The Manipuri poet is especially horrified by the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to which he returns more than once, often interrupting himself to talk about the sudden death of thousands, the lingering deaths by radiation, and the dangers of nuclearisation. He concludes his two sustained sections on the Atomic bombs with these lines:

War knows no law, men's heart to pity is shut
Killing is religion of war and its licence . . . .[34]

He concludes that 'Of all warring nations of the time . . . / The Japanese were the cleverest, bravest.'[35] He then gives some more figures of war dead. The British lost 16,700 troops, 4000 in Kohima alone. Japan's Indian partners, the INA sent 6000 troops to Imphal. Only 2600 returned. 1500 died of disease and starvation; 800 surrendered; 715 deserted.[36]

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31 SGHS 2.139.2447, 2449-2451. Mairenbam has the following table:

Estimated Loss of Japanese Soldiers in The Imphal Campaign

	Formation	Pre-Campaign Strength	Post-Campaign Strength	Casualties
1	15th Division	20,000	4,000	16,000
2	31st Division	20,000	7,000	13,000
3	33rd Division	25,000	4,000	21,000
4	Rear Units	50,000	35,000	15,000
	Total	1,15,000	50,000	65,000

32 SGHS 2.136.2382.

33 O, what a plight! Nobody was then sadder / Than Itagaki pressing heavily on paper. . . (SGHS 2.146.2577).

34 SGHS 2.163.2856.

35 SGHS 2.163.2857.

36 See SGHS 2. 138.2437-2438.

I need hardly say that there is a powerful sense of futility in these figures, but the poet need not have included them if he had not wanted to convey the futility. It is his assessment of the War, and a quiet but recurring motif of the poem, that becomes evident over longer stretches of the narrative. Towards the end of his long poem, for example, the poet describes the creation of Manipur at the same time as the stars and the sun, following this with the long disquisition on Manipuri dance mentioned earlier. The juxtaposition of dance with the creation of the heavenly bodies makes Manipuri dance divine, retrospectively underlining that contrast between Manipur and war we saw earlier as Allied officers watched the Ras Lila. After another account of Japan, this time its economic development during the early part of the twentieth century, its wars, and nuclearisation in general, Sanasam Gourhari Singh returns to the devastation of Manipur. Quoting Benjamin Franklin that there has never been a good war or a bad peace, he says:

> Peace lends to life all progress
> War leads to death and disgrace.[37]

The very last lines of the poem set the final seal on his distaste of war. Let men go to their graves naturally, he says.

The concluding segment of the poem is broadly in two parts: the aftermath of the war and a sort of *Lands and People* survey of the world with snippets about almost every country. Intially, the survey seemed to serve no purpose; it was as if the poet could not bear to end his poem.[38] But I had misread his intention again. Japan is the only country to figure in both parts of the final segment, and except for one reference to its 'land lust' and 'war lust,' Gourhari Singh presents Japan with an admiring sympathy which he does not always have for the Allies.

Nevertheless, we are left with a question. If Japan caused so much grief in Manipur, why did this Manipuri poet admire it at all? During the war, as we have seen, he esteemed Japanese courage and intelligence. About post-war Japan he says,

> It is valiant Japan that made the West
> See and feel the real worth of the East.[39]

Japan's industry, 'ingenious skill and fine artistry,' love of beauty, and the way it turned Tokyo into the world's largest city, bright with the 'magic of electricity' – these things have reflected well not only on Japan, but on the rest of us from the East. It is an unusual and interesting point of view.

We must now turn aside from the poem itself to consider its place in the literature of World War II, beginning with a brief account of how India remembered World War II in the years after Independence.

2. India and World War II

My discipline is English literature. I became interested in World War II through American and British novels and some accounts by journalists and historians. Much of what I read was about how the war was remembered, how it should be remembered, how it is not remembered, and how memory of it is wiped out. I could not read Churchill's history of World War II because I could not follow his reasons for the war or the battles. After reading Kurt

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37 SGHS 2.261.4556.

38 According to the Bibliography at the end of Volume II, SGHS consulted The Grolier Society's *Lands and People* series; *Illustrated Story of World War II* (Readers' Digest Publications); NEwnes, *Pictorial Knowledge*; *Our Twentieth Century World: Milestones of History* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson); *Know Japan* (British Commonwealth occupation forces); and 'Introductory part of the Great Books of the Western World' (SHGS, Bibliography. Volume II). He has not given dates or place of publication.

39 SGHS 2.263.4578.

Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-5*, I had checked out Churchill to learn more about the firebombing of Dresden but all he says about it is that it was 'unfortunate.' I read nothing from Japan about the War.

India and the War are among the many aspects of World War II I know little about for reasons that are partly personal, partly a result of being Indian.

I was born three years after the War. Petrol and food were still being rationed. We were still using army surplus blankets – dark grey blankets with two blue stripes along their length. My father-in-law used to manufacture such blankets for the army. My parents felt the effects of war more directly but there was nothing earth shattering in their experience of it. My father's admission to Cambridge was deferred because of the war, for example. More mysteriously we have black and white snapshots of my modest mother as a teenager with American GIs in the northern city of Lucknow, which is at the centre of the Gangetic plain, far from any possible battle zone of World War II. No one explained to us what the GIs were doing there. My mother said that *her* mother had been asked to look after the GIs, and that she would occasionally have them over for a meal. But who had asked her? Her own salary as principal of Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow, was barely enough to cover her domestic expenses. How did she find the money to entertain these hefty young men? No one explained the war economy to us. My mother also told us how American planes dropped chocolates tied to parachutes made of handkerchiefs. Surely an unusual occurrence in their lives. But the point of her story was the delicious American chocolates, not why American planes were showering them on India. (The chocolates were dropped along with propaganda pamphlets to convince Indians about the British cause in the War.[40])

These things translated into family sagas but World War II was not discussed in our home. It was not taboo. It was simply treated as a non-event. My well-read, intelligent and competent father encouraged us to think about world issues like ice ages, sputniks, Shakespeare, and the Himalaya, but not World War II.

His was not an eccentric omission from our informal education. The War was not on our school and college curriculae either. We studied many kinds of history, but not the World Wars. I am not sure what India's educational policy was with regard to the kind of national memory that was to be instilled in post-Independence Indian children. The policy documents on education that I have read focus on broad issues of technical education for boys and home science for girls. Across the country and in every kind of school in those early years after Independence, we learnt about Gandhi and the Freedom Movement but not about World War II. You may wonder about this – as I do now -- but it did not strike us as odd. It was almost as if we had an unspoken national policy about it. World War II was a largely European affair for us. The British used Indian soldiers and goods to fight it, but it was their war. Our history of the first half of the twentieth century, and especially the War years, was of the Indian freedom movement in which World War II did not figure.

Some years ago I said all this to an Irish historian who was studying the role of India in World War II. He replied, with justified impatience, 'This blindness that Indians have about World War II is really exasperating. Your freedom movement is not separate from the history of the War. The two histories have to be brought together.' He was right, of course, and many historians have shown the connections between the War and the Indian freedom movement. But almost the only connection we knew of was that Congress leaders agreed to support the British in the War on condition that India would get its freedom when it was over, which Sanasam Gourhari Singh includes in his poem: Churchill made a conditional offer that India would get its freedom if it supported the War effort; Gandhi called it a 'post-dated cheque on a crashing bank, but at last 'reluctantly agreed to stationing of British

40 See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quit_India_Movement> [3. 3. 2014].

troops in India.'[41] We also knew about the Bengal Famine of 1943 in which 2 to 4 million people died, but we did not learn about its connection with the war. At the risk of repeating what is well known, when thousands of Allied troops were suddenly sent into the Burma Campaign, grain from rural Bengal was requisitioned to feed them. Combined with high taxes for paying towards the war, this left rural Bengal destitute and dying. But we who grew up in the early post-War years in newly independent India only knew the simplified version that India was promised that if it helped the war effort, the British would leave, but this did not happen.

It fitted our notion of the British as really bad guys who did not keep their promise, and that when they did leave in 1947 they cut up the country and left it burning with communal riots. This was the chief reason why Partition rather than World War II was talked about in our home. We belonged to Punjab. In 1947-48, my father was City Magistrate in Lahore when it literally went up in flames. As Christians we escaped actual communal violence but our family was split between Pakistan and India. We really did have our own issues separate from World War II.

Yet to suppress memory of it is also to forget the millions of Indians who participated in it as military and medical staff, and as providers of food and equipment. It is also to wipe out the crucial battle of Manipur.[42] This poem has made me focus on India and the war. In spite of Sanasam Gourhari Singh's one-dimensional picture of the Japanese, in spite of his not addressing the complex post-war history of Japan, his poem has taught me a great deal.

But does it have a place in the literature of World War II? I think it does.

3. Sanasam Gourhari Singh's epic and the literature of World War II

I want to make two points about this.

3.i. *Manipur and World War II* is unique in the literature of World War II, which – unlike World War I -- produced few poems and no long poem. Sanasam Gourhari Singh is proud of being a Manipuri but he is never jingoistic. On the contrary, he comes through as a humble man whose tone is consistently elevated and serious, of great magnitude, as Aristotle would have recognized, which makes the poem valuable in itself, despite its often strange English and rhyme. *Manipur and World War II* is not just an epic of the War, it is the only full-length description of the Battle of Manipur from the perspective of a Manipuri. In standard accounts of this battle by General Slim and others, Manipur is just a place where the Allies confronted the Japanese. The Manipuris, their ancient culture and their spirit of independence are missing from their books, an imbalance that is firmly redressed by Gourhari Singh. Without appearing to side with either party, his pride in Manipur, his fine knowledge of Manipuri dance, his position as private secretary to Maharaja Bodhchandra Singh, and his poetic stamina make Manipur come alive as a participant and victim of a war between competing imperial powers. As part of the British Empire, Manipur was on the side of the victors but this poem is far from triumphalist. In fact, as we have seen, because of Manipur's hostile relations with Britain since the nineteenth century Anglo-Burmese and Anglo-Manipur wars, and despite the poet's love for Mountbatten, he did not much like the British in 1944. He definitely did not like Hitler. But he admired the Japanese for many reasons. This is hardly the view of someone loyal to the British, but it is the view of this loyal Manipuri.

3.ii. The poem is barely known in war literature, even though it is the only full-length account of the battle for

41 SGHS 2.71.1192-1193.

42 Thousands of Indians were killed in Italy, Greece, Africa and elsewhere, but most of India was not bombed.

Manipur by a Manipuri. In the 1990s, the publisher Gordon Graham, who had fought in the Burma Campaign, put together some notes about it for his daughter who was going to visit Kohima and other World War II sites of the region. He later published these notes as a book, *The Trees are all Young on Garrison Hill* (the title refers to the destruction of the forests during the battle of Kohima).

Garrison Hill, Kohima[43]

To refresh his memory of the campaign, he looked for material on it and found almost nothing, so he and some of his friends began collecting diaries, letters, books, anything at all on the Burma Campaign. In 2009, World War II literature was said to be so extensive that if every living person read for three hundred years they would not be able to read all of it. But – as Gordon Graham found -- there were only 1100 documents on the Burma Campaign and the Battle of Manipur. With these 1100 documents, he and a few others started the Burma Campaign Memorial Library (BCML), now housed in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. Sanasam Gourhari Singh's long poem was not among these 1100 documents, nor did Gordon Graham and his colleagues know of it. (Now the BCML and the Kohima Museum in York have photocopies of it, which my husband and I sent them.) There are surprisingly few Manipuri accounts of the battle. I have been fortunate to find two in English, *Manipur and World War II* and the memoir by an ordinary Manipuri who is now in his seventies. I hope more material of this kind will surface.

Conclusion

This has been a primarily literary assessment of *Manipur and World War II*. It is, after all, an epic poem. Over the

43 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:IND_003698_Garrison_Hill_Kohima.jpg

years I realised that the arrangement of its complex material must be understood to know the poet's point of view. A Manipuri view of World War II is what eventually makes it unique. I am hampered in my assessment of the poem by a lack of material on the Battle of Manipur by Manipuris and other non-western witnesses but some issues are clear despite this. My paper has been about many of these.

Here I would like to recapitulate three of its weaknesses.

1. There is a marked lack of depth and shading in Sanasam Gourhari Singh's presentation of the Japanese in particular. He admires them on the whole but he does not create a nuanced picture of them.[44] For instance, there is nothing in his poem about the Japanese being tired of the long years of war prior to World War II, of food shortages, of enforced military service, of young boys' education being curtailed because of conscription, of child labour for the war effort, and so on. He does not offer a full understanding of post-War Japan during the occupation and later, nor does he try to explain how Japan made the transition from militarism to peace, although he admires both aspects. These lacks do not lessen the significance of the poem, since his admiration of Japan and the Japanese, though not unmixed, is a major emphasis of the poem and contrasts with his presentation of the Allies, in particular the British.

One reason for the difference in Sanasam Gourhari Singh's presentation of the two sides may be that he was constrained by his position as private secretary to the Maharaja. The Allies were in Manipur in increasing numbers for two years from 1942 before the actual battle of Manipur in 1944. As the Maharaja's private secretary, he had close encounters with them and could write about them as he could not about the Japanese. As a senior Manipuri bureaucrat employed by a ruler who was committed to helping the Allies, he could not have become close to the Japanese in the way of some Manipuris. Consequently, his picture of the Japanese derives from his reading rather than from personal acquaintance with them. From his Bibliography at the end of Volume II, we know that he was more familiar with Western sources on this war than Japanese ones. For his knowledge of Japanese culture, he appears to have relied on encyclopaedic surveys like the Grolier Society's *Lands and People*. For Subhash Chandra Bose, however, he read S.N.Bhattacharyya's *Netaji in Self Exile, his finest hour* as well as Totsuyo Hayashida's *Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose: His Great Struggle and Martyrdom*. Totsuyo Hayashida is the only Japanese author in his Bibliography.

2. Sanasam Gourhari Singh faithfully follows the standard accounts of the Burma Campaign and the battles of Kohima and Imphal by General Slim and the rest. Other than mentioning Indians and Gurkhas by name, and dwelling on the INA, he has no new interpretations or revelations about the campaign. This makes his poem simultaneously reliable about facts as they were known through these accounts as well as a poem of the surface, without depth, narrating the familiar in familiar words. Yet this 'frail old man' set himself a challenge to write it in verse and he completed two massive volumes of it, an extraordinary achievement. What redeems its potential tedium is the way he folded his narrative of the war into his love for and knowledge of Manipur. The War is layered into the accounts of Manipur so that the final impression the reader has is of Manipur rather than the war. The poem is ultimately an epic about Manipur.

3. The poem is fraught with contradictions. Sanasam Gourhari Singh cannot admire the British yet he sent them copies of his poem; he admires Japanese warlike qualities but also praises their championing of peace. These

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44 I thank Professor Dake for pointing this out during the very useful discussion on my paper.

fundamental paradoxes can be very annoying for the reader. They make the poem inconsistent and blur its point of view. I have tried to show that there is method to many aspects of the poem that are exasperating at first reading, such as the long disquisition on dance. But if there is a reason for his paradoxical presentation of the Allies and the Japanese, I have not discovered it yet.

Finally

A long and complicated poem such as *Manipur and World War II* requires patient unravelling. I am grateful to Professor Dake and RINDAS for giving me the opportunity to talk about it. It is the first time I have made a formal presentation on it, and very likely it is the first time this 'unknown' poem has been written about. I was not and am not able to answer the student who asked why World War II was not on our school and college syllabus, but if someone has an answer I would be grateful if they would enlighten me. I benefitted from the comments of Professors Dake and Haroun-or-Rashid at my presentation on 26 February 2014 and look forward to more comments and reactions. I also hope more documents from Manipur, Nagaland, and other states of Northeast India will become available, and that those working on the battles of Kohima and Manipur can pool their resources to create a body of work that will add to our knowledge of this forgotten war.

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