



Contribution of Hijam Irawat to Manipuri Literature

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ABSTRACT

Hijam Irawat (1896–1951) occupies a central place in the political and cultural history of Manipur. He is widely remembered as a revolutionary, communist leader, and mass organiser, earning him the title *Jananeta* (Leader of the People). However, his contribution to Manipuri literature has not received equal scholarly attention. This paper examines Irawat’s literary legacy by analysing his poetry, journalistic writings, and his role in nurturing literary institutions. Using a qualitative literary-historical approach, the study demonstrates that Irawat’s creative works and cultural engagements played a crucial role in shaping modern Manipuri literary consciousness. His writings were closely linked with his ideals of social justice, nationalism, and cultural renewal, establishing him as one of the pioneers of progressive Manipuri literature in the early twentieth century.

1. Introduction

The early twentieth century marked a decisive phase in the development of Manipuri literature. Following the defeat in the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, Manipur came under colonial rule. This period witnessed increasing social inequality, political unrest, and the spread of nationalist ideas. As a result, writers and intellectuals began to question established traditions and search for new forms of literary expression. Literature increasingly reflected social realities, political consciousness, and concerns related to cultural identity.

It was during this period of transformation that Hijam Irawat emerged as a significant cultural figure. Although he is primarily remembered for his political activism, Irawat was also deeply engaged in



literary pursuits. To him, literature was not merely an artistic endeavour; it was a powerful medium to awaken public consciousness, educate society, and restore cultural self-respect. Through poetry, journalism, and literary organisations, he helped establish a tradition of socially committed writing in Manipur. This paper examines Irawat's contribution to Manipuri literature by situating his works within the broader social and political context of his time.

2. Materials and Methods

The study follows a qualitative literary-historical method. Primary sources include Irawat's poetry collections *Sheidam Sheireng* (1929) and *Imagi Pujah*. *Imagi Pujah* was written during his imprisonment in Sylhet Jail between 1942 and 1943 as a political prisoner and was published much later in 1987, after a gap of forty-four years.

His journalistic writings published in *Meitei Chanu* (1922) and *Anouba Yug* (1947) are also examined. In addition, his travel narrative *Mandalaygi Khongpham*, published in the *Manipuri Sahitya Parishad Patrika*, has been analysed.

Secondary sources include historical studies, critical essays, research articles, and archival materials related to Manipuri literature and political movements. Close textual reading is employed to analyse themes, imagery, and style, while keeping in view the broader historical and cultural background.

3. Results

The study reveals that Hijam Irawat's contribution to Manipuri literature is most clearly evident in three major areas: poetry, journalism, and the development of literary institutions. His engagement with multiple literary forms further reinforces his importance in modern Manipuri literary history.

3.1 Poetry

Jananeta Irawat enriched Manipuri literature through poems written in a new and distinctive style, with the aim of awakening the people of Manipur. His poetry skillfully blends traditional imagery with contemporary social concerns.

His early collection *Sheidam Sheireng* was primarily written for educational purposes and was later included as a school textbook. By drawing upon folklore, moral teachings, and mythological references, Irawat made poetry accessible to students as well as common readers.



One of the most striking poems in this collection is “Of Leaves (Oona)”, where fallen leaves symbolise the temporary nature of power and social respect:

Once its verdancy was on the eye easy
Such a beauty it was of a grand tree
Now it’s all over so suddenly
Now amongst the dust it lies with no dignity
Once when you’re young, when you’re strong
When the whole world struggled with the sultry sun
Then you were the saviour; and now you are down on the ground
Their gratitude is their feet on your face.

(Kapil Arambam, Trans.)

The poem sharply criticises society’s tendency to honour individuals only when they are useful and to discard them once they lose power.

Imagi Puja represents a more mature and emotionally intense phase of Irawat’s poetic journey. Written during imprisonment, the forty-nine poems express pain, resistance, deep love for the motherland, and intense emotional reflection. This collection introduced a new poetic voice in Manipuri literature, shaped by the suffering and aspirations of workers, peasants, and other oppressed communities.

Even while imprisoned, Irawat’s emotional bond with Manipur remains strong, as seen in the lines:

“In the stillness of the night
In the wee house so late
Amidst the moonlit calmness
In a voice mellow,
Who are mourning,
‘Mother, Oh Mother?’”

(U. Sanasam Singh, Trans.)

In poems such as *Dikhou Torbanda* (On the Bank of Dikhou) and *Samudra* (The Sea), distant landscapes remind him of familiar scenes like Loktak Lake, showing how his imagination remained firmly rooted in his homeland.



His sympathy for labourers and factory workers is powerfully expressed in poems like *Karkhana* (Factory) and the *Makhoisini* (They Are the Ones) series:

“Smoke in the sky
The sunshine too is smoky
Across the door, smoke-stained men
Walk to and fro like ghosts
They are all in utter silence.”
(U. Sanasam Singh, Trans.)

Themes of patriotism and sacrifice dominate poems such as *Matribhumi* (Motherland), *Meiteileima* (Mother Manipur), and *Imagi Pujah*, while nature poems like *Sharat* (Autumn) reveal his lyrical and romantic sensibility.

The poem “December 12” stands as one of his most powerful works, commemorating the women’s protest of 12 December 1939 against artificial famine under colonial rule. By transforming collective suffering into poetry, Irawat created a lasting literary memory that remains central to modern Manipuri poetry.

3.2 Journalism

Hijam Irawat was a pioneer of Manipuri journalism. In 1922, at a time when printing facilities were extremely limited, he edited *Meitei Chanu*, the first journal published in the Manipuri language. Though handwritten, the journal laid the foundation of Manipuri journalism and published important literary works, including Dr. Lamabam Kamal’s famous poem *Meitei Chanu* (Singh, 1983).

On 13 April 1947, Irawat edited the weekly *Anouba Yug*, which focused on political developments in Manipur during a crucial period of transition. Through journalism, he used language as a tool for political awareness, social education, and public mobilisation.

3.3 Literary Institutions

Irawat played a vital role in strengthening literary institutions in Manipur. He served as the first General Secretary of the Manipuri Sahitya Sanmelani, founded in 1935 and later renamed the Manipuri Sahitya Parishad. This organisation went on to become the oldest and most influential literary body in Manipur (Singh, 1983).



His travel account *Mandalaygi Khongpham*, written after attending the Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha session in Mandalay, is regarded as the first travelogue in Manipuri literature (Iboyaima, 2008).

3.4 Other Literary Works

Irawat's literary achievements are remarkable for their range and diversity. He wrote poetry, fiction, journalism, biography, drama, translation, and travel writing.

His novel *Muhini* (1931), serialised in *Yakairol*, addresses social problems and moral reform. His biography of Lokmanya Tilak, written in October 1933 and published in *Lalit Manjuri Patrika* (later issued in book form by Churachand Printing Works), reflects his engagement with wider Indian nationalist thought. He also began writing a play titled *Joymati*, which remained incomplete (Iboyaima, 2008).

His translation of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Krishnakanta's Will* introduced Manipuri readers to Bengali literature and encouraged literary and cultural exchange.

Overall, Irawat emerges as a key figure in the Manipuri literary renaissance, firmly linking literature with ethics, politics, and social transformation.

4. Discussion

The study clearly demonstrates that Hijam Irawat's literary work cannot be separated from his political ideals. His writings represent committed literature, where creative expression is closely tied to social and moral responsibility. By blending indigenous traditions with progressive ideas, he challenged both colonial domination and internal social conservatism. His approach influenced later generations of writers who viewed literature as a means of asserting identity, resistance, and human dignity.

5. Conclusion

Hijam Irawat's contribution to Manipuri literature is both foundational and transformative. As a poet, journalist, and cultural organiser, he played a decisive role in shaping modern Manipuri literary consciousness. His writings and institutional efforts ensured that literature remained deeply connected with social awareness and cultural pride. Any serious study of Manipuri literary history remains incomplete without recognising Irawat's enduring literary legacy alongside his political achievements.



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