

Manipur: State Formation in Pre-Colonial Period

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ABSTRACT

Manipur is situated in the extreme northeastern frontier of India.

Manipur existed as an independent kingdom inhabited by different cognate groups /clans from the ancient period .Some of these clans amongst themselves congregated into one group collectively termed as Meitei. The Meitei, emerged as the initiator of the composite state of Manipur in the early pre-colonial period and reflected the political development of the citizens as an advanced community with indigenous religion, script and governance of high order.

However, with the passage of time and the fast pace of migration and settlement from different directions the valley population became multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religion. Thus, the state of Manipur became the home to various ethnic groups and denominations with different cultural, social and racial backgrounds

Thus, Manipur continued to be an independent princely state as long as 1891.

KEY WORDS: *Manipur, Meitei, Clan, Ethnic and Indigenous*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Manipur, one of the eight northeastern states of India is situated in the extreme northeast frontier of India. It was once a princely independent state. It is surrounded on the north by Nagaland, on the east and southeast by Burma (now Myanmar), on the south west by Mizoram and on the west by Assam. Manipur is known by different names in the ancient times, such as Poireipak, Poirei Meitrabak and Kangleipak etc. In early times this state was called differently by the people of its neighbor. The Burmese call it Kathe, the Assamese call it Makhale or Makle, the Shans call it Cassey while the Cacharies call it Monglai. It was only in the 18th century that the land was known as Manipur. Geographically, Manipur comprises two parts-the Hills and the centrally situated Valley. The Hills cover nine-tenth of the total area of the state and they were recognized to be 33 in number .It serves as one of the routes between Southeast Asia ,and Central and South Asia .Being a gateway to southeast Asia, Manipur was influenced by the geographical situation and ecology and in shaping its territory and cultural development(Kabui,1991:1).However, with the passage of time, the fast pace of migration and settlement ,valley's population is becoming more multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious. Manipur is a classic example of plural society. Ethnic and pluralism is the basis of the state and society of Manipur (Kabui, 2016:87). Manipur , today is the result of a long process of state formation as a unified valley and integrated hills.

Objective: The focus of the article is to study the formation and re-construction of the early Manipur as an integrated society and polity or state in the pre-colonial period.

Methodology: For this study the method used is that of historical method. Using secondary sources collected from published books, journal and articles etc.

THE STUDY:

Under the study of historical method, the valley of Manipur appears originally to have been occupied by several groups of people as recorded by popular traditional and historical records . Comparative and ethnographic studies suggest that it is fairly certain that the Meitei might belonged to 'Tai' race of the Chinese group of mongoloid .T.C.Hodson suggest that it was an outcome of the blending of the two terms 'Moi' and 'Tei' means separate man. H.B. Hodgson propose that the ethnonym –Meitei was a combined appellate of Siamese 'Tai' and Kachin 'Moy' into Moytai (Moitei-Meitei) and this Meitei belong to Mon section and the great Tai race. According to Ch.Budhi, Meitei is a blending of two tribes from China, Mei and Tei=Mei +Tei=Meitei (Budhi, 1984:26-34). It is well known that the local historical documents record the existence of a number of clans in the Meitei society namely Mangang,Ningthouja,Angom,Luwang,Khaba,Nganba.Sarang,Leisnang,Heirem-Khunjan,Haorok-Konthou,Houkha-Lokha ,Moirang, Khuman and Chenglei etc. Some of these clans amongst themselves

congregated into one group and others absorbed into that prominent group. Thus, in the later period only seven prominent groups or clans came to be recognized in the history of Manipur. They are (1) Angom (2) Chenglei/Sarang Leishangthem (3) Kha-Nganba (4) Khuman (5) Luwang (6) Moirang and

(7) Ningthouja/ Mangang respectively. Although it is difficult to come to any conclusive statement on the origin of these clans (Salais in Manipur). There were various myths and legends which recorded the account of the origin of these clans. Different ancient chronicles (Puya in Manipur) and Scholars trace the origin from different angles and views. Each clan had separate independent principalities in well defined region, headed by a Chief with aid and advice of a Council of Nobles.

The political history of ancient Manipur was basically the history of relations between the Meiteis and other clans. The political history of Manipur in ancient time is more or less dynastic. It is the period of political expansion of the Meiteis from Pakhangba up to 17th century. The process of state formation was largely confined to the valley. When the process of state formation in the valley was completed during the middle of 15th century, wider expeditions were taken up to integrate the hill tribes. Several villages were annexed one after another (Indramani :2017:338-340).

Meitei in pre-colonial times was a reflection of the political development of the citizens as an advanced community with indigenous religion, scripts and governance of high order. Meitei as a community was capable of organizing a society of the times with a sterling model polity. The people of Manipur had a distinct culture and tradition of their own such as religion and practice of writing indigenous script.

There were three phases in the history of Manipur given by the Royal chronicle Cheitharol Kumbaba (1) from Nongda Lairel Pakhangba 33 A.D. to 1484 A.D (2) from 1484 A.D, to 1780 A.D (3) dealt with those years to the middle of 20th century. Polity has been defined as a form of organized state. It has also been a art and science of organization and management supplied to the affairs of the state, its people the political forces inside and outside, looking after the needs of the country (Encyclopedia Vol. 11:197). Society on the other hand, has been defined as a self-sustaining system of social relation and evolution (Ibid). Society is a product of gradual evolution of organized community spread over many centuries.

The ethnic group, Meitei as we find today was formed by amalgamation of the seven different principalities, who once settle in different parts of Manipur. The population of Manipur is predominantly mongoloid with some non-mongoloid elements. In the social structure of the Meitei, the clans play a very important role. The clan system is the foundation of the Meitei social system. Each clan consists of a number of family groups bearing different surnames. In pre-colonial period the reconstruction of the history of Manipur was based on the chronicles of the Ningthouja dynasty supplemented by other genealogies and literary sources. There were inter-marriage among these groups of people living in different principalities. The formation of state in the 15th century took place after a long inter-clan and inter-societal conflict among the principalities of Manipur. After the completion of state formation in the valley, wider expeditions were taken up to integrate the hill tribes. Several villages were annexed one after another. The present day territorial boundary of Manipur is the result of long process of state formation. This process unified the valley and gradually integrated the villages of the surrounding hills. In this society there were a number of institutions in order to serve social, political and economic ends. The transition from clan territory and tribal organization to state community was a gradual process. The state is a section of land and a section of humanity organized as a single in terms of a particular areas. The state is a gradual and natural evolution. The manuscripts Cheitharol Kumbaba and Ningtouroi Lambuba and a host of indigenous Meitei manuscripts are rich source of information of their development.

The Meiteis in their evolution have undergone three distinctive phases or stages starting from pre historic times (Arambam: 1991:9-12). In our findings from the study and analysis of data provided by the manuscripts we find the first stage of social formation was enacted in a generally pre-historic form of life, which remained vague. The social organization of the pre-historic cavemen was regarded as that of band societies. In the early formative stage of social organization, no ethnic demarcation was possible, since proper life had not emerged in this period. The second phase was that of tribesman. This was probably the period of the introduction of the art of shifting cultivation in the hills and the valley, the clans and lineages with the woman marrying outside of the group for social harmony and co-operation processes. Women were responsible for forging a common language amongst the clans. The third stage is the most decisive one in the Meitei social evolution in the context of re-integration of clans and historical struggle to establish its hierarchical social structure.

The Meitei state, in the early 17th century witnessed slow but steady development of technology. To protect and expand, and to sustain their space or collective habitation and operation, the Meiteimen were equally engage in state service. These commoners performed public duties in the military organization of the state and served as labour force for agriculture in the village by attending 10 times out of 40 days which was called Lallup system. It covered all state works including military as well as administrative activities. The development of Lallup system (organization of war) was the manifestation of the emergence of feudalism in social, administrative and economic division. Lallup was a feudal service rendered by the subject to the king or

the state for every male from the age of 16-60 years without any remuneration (Hodson: 1975:63). There were division of labour –man as protector of the territory and boundary of the kingdom, and women taking care of social, economic and familial life. Manipuri women have always played an important role in the economy of their family as well as that of state (Helen, 2012:36). There was stability in the social structure. They established functional specialization. King Loiyumba (1074-1122 A.D.) introduced the loyal edicts entitled 'Loiyumba Shinyen'. It is an important historical work for the reconstruction of the social and political history of Manipur. The government of the country was based on the written constitution 'Loiyumba Shinyen' which formed the backbone of early Manipur polity. There were as many as 64 Phamdous or Officers of the great Council of the King's Court who were filled by the topmost classes. He systematized the administrative division of the country by creating six Lups or division as well as introducing the Pana (or distric) system. Thus, the medieval history of Manipur witnessed changes and development of the early Meitei polity in different spheres of administration.

For administration of justice, law and customs the chief court was "Cheirap". The administration as primary unit of justice was the village court consisting of the village headman and elders. Administration in the hill areas was conducted by the village council consisting of Khullakpa, Khunpus and other village elders. The root of the sophisticated Meitei society was laid during the days of Pakhangba which was based on kinship, especially the clan lineage and family. The formation of Meitei society in the 15th century took place during a long period of inter-clan and inter-societal conflict among the principalities on Manipur during the reign of King Kiyamba. Meitei society was covered and governed by a highly organized administrative system existing from early times. The administration was highly centralized. Although the form of Government is highly centralized there were some element of federalism through the establishment of different loishangs for different groups. The polity was maintained by the King at the apex as a divine ruler. The ancient Meitei believed that the state functioned like a body organism. The Meiteis believed that the Koubru, the hill in the north-west was the head of the organism, and Loktak the belly, and the capital Kangla as navel. However, the beginning of the 18th century saw the dawn of a new era in the history of Manipur (Roy,1958:P:33). In the 18th century social classes, there were other social groups such as Brahmins and other immigrants from East and West (Nongpok Haram and Nongchup Haram in Manipuri). We thus found that the Meitei social society as revealed in the 18th century was formed by the mixture of certain clan societies with additional social formation of tribes, migrants and other ethnic outputs into the social stratum.

Findings: We thus found Manipur was settled in by different groups which were consolidated or congregated to form the collectively termed Meitei clan in the valley with a centralised organization of polity and distribution of resources and they introduce changes through contacts with outside powers. The Meiteis was expanding as a society and as well an integrated political organization. In the pre-colonial times, unity and plurality of the people helped to form the nation-state in the 17th and 18th centuries. Thus, the entire state was the home of various groups and different ethnic groups in the historical period like Muslims, the hill tribes, the Lois, the Bishnupriyas etc. and other denominations with different social, cultural and racial backgrounds.

Conclusion: Thus broadly from the 18th century onwards those clans became a part of social and political system of a well organised and developed Meitei society of Manipur. By the 18th century, Manipur had become a full-fledged sovereign state with a polity and integrated society to meet the needs of the time. Its territory has been recognized by outside powers. Thus, Manipur continued to be an independent princely state as long as 1891.

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