

A Concise Socio-Political and Cultural History of Manipur At The End Of 17th Century

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The Manipuri social life which was perfected in the 17th Century was based on kinship structure of clans, lineage and families. The clan system is the foundation of the Manipuri social formation. The word Meitei originally covered the people belonging to the Ningthouja clans who became the ruling dynasty of Manipur in the historical times. But later Meitei covered all the ethnic groups which were brought under Ningthouja clans. There were seven clans (Salais) in the Meitei society namely Ningthouja, Luwang, Angom, Khuman, Moirang, Khaba-Nganba and Sarang-Leishangthem. The concept of "Salai" (political confederation) or "Yek" (blood relation) was the basic foundation of the social life of Manipur. Different views are put forward by different scholars to the origin of these clans based on diverse accounts of myths and legends in ancient literary texts. These seven clans emerged in different ages under the ruling Ningthouja dynasty.

There is another group of people in Manipuri society called "Loi". They are socially prejudice group of people and are prohibited to marry with other groups. Sekmai, Phayeng, Andro, Leimaram, Chairel, some villages at Kakching and Chandrakhong are the important places where the "Loi" people make their settlement. Most of the "Loi" people were expelled by the king from the common society for violating certain norms of social customs and usages. Other than this, the captives, who were captured at the time of war and aggression, were also included in the "Loi" section. Besides the Loi people, there were another section of people known as "Kei". They were the servants of king. Various hill tribes, took important parts to the establishment of the history of Manipur. Immigrant or war captives of Muslim known as Meitei Pangal was also began to settle in Manipur before 17th Century mainly during the time of King Khagemba (1597 – 1652 A.D.). It shows that before the coming of Hinduism, the social stratification existed in Meitei society.

In Manipuri society the smallest unit of a household was called the "Phunga". It is a fire place where a kitchen was installed for husband and wife for establishing a house. A number of Phunga was developed into a Yum or house which was under the control of the father. Thus the Manipuri society was emerged as a patriarchal society from the every early times. Number of households of Yumnak or surname of the family made up different groups. Such groups are called Sagei or kin group of same blood line. Yek Salai, is another terms which existed in the Manipuri social structure. It means the kinship relation of the clan and lineage and sub-lineage having a common ancestor. The kin group falling within the same groups are prohibited from marriage. Marriage is a socio-religion institution. Many forms of marriage prevailed in ancient Meitei society i.e. elopement, marriage by engagement, Keina Katpa a simple form of marriage on certain conditions without any ceremony, Nambo Thaba or marriage by servitude of a boy. The process of marriage were (i) Nupi Haiba or engagement, (ii) Yathang Thaba or negotiation of the marriage, (iii) Waroipot or the final settlement for the marriage, (iv) Heijing Kharai Puba or formal announcement of the marriage. Certain rules were followed for the marriage like – Pentinnaba or kin relationship between the descendants or having a common maternal grandmother, Mungnaba means the persons falling within the different surnames with a common maternal grandmother. Sairukuk Tinnaba means persons belonging to the same clan. These blood relationships were not allowed to marry. Anybody breaking the rules were expelled from the common society to Haochongpal end Samupal, a Loi area. The polygamy system was found in Meitei society from the very early time, but the monogamy was the common feature. Child marriage was not found. Widows may marry, but not within their deceased husband's brother. Divorce was found in Meitei society.

The Manipuri have a high philosophy of birth and death. The birth of a child was celebrated with a ritual called "Ipan Thaba" which is also called Swasthi Pujah in the later Hinduized period. After death the Manipuri performed different forms of disposal of dead body. The dead body was disposed in the air and water, or buried, or cremated. Rituals were performed for the disposal of dead and deliverance of the departed soul.

The clan or Salai was both a socio-political unit of the Meiteis which was constituted by merging or amalgamating of different ethnic and tribal groups under one kin group's name. There are seven clan

principalities which is mentioned earlier. Out of them the Ningthouja dynasty rose into prominence in the 1st Century A.D.

Nongda Lairen Pakhangba according to Cheitharol Kumbaba the royal chronicle of Manipur, ascended the throne of Manipur in 33 A.D. He was successful in maintaining a sound administrative system in the valley. He was a divine body in day and human by night which meant that he administered with divine justice like a god in the day and like an ordinary human being he spent the night with his family members. The dynasty founded by him is known as the Ningthouja the ruling dynasty of Manipur. He was assisted by three clans namely, Angom Luwang and Mangang for smooth administration Pakhangba appointed ten executive officers called Ningthou Pongba Tara and 64 Phamdons in his court. He established Kuchu, the highest court and Pacha, special court for women, Laipham Shanglen, Khaba Shanglen and Naharup Shanglen. The king was entitled as the Kanglei Mayum Taretki Piba Thou Puba, which means he was all in all in the state. This social consolidation of the different ethnic groups and tribes under the seven clans was the greatest achievement of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba. He also arranged for the administration of hill under chiefs. He was succeeded by Khuyoi Tompok in 154 A.D. who made an experiment in making of drum. During his reign, he explored salt producing sites – Sikhong, Ningol Waikhong etc. and began to make metal utensils and manufacture of Gong. Technological development as well as new ideas promote to the peaceful government. Taothingmang succeeded in 267. His most important contribution was dredging of all the rivers of the valley. He was practical enough for not reducing the level of the Loktak lake by draining away too much water through the channel connecting the lake with the Imphal rivers. Taothingmang built Yumjao or big house exclusive for the king and offices for the nobles.

Naophangba ascended the throne in 428 A.D. There was a political class for succession. The customary law of succession to the throne by the eldest son from his father was clearly shown during this time. Naophang Ahal accordingly claimed for the throne but rejected by the people because his mother at the time of her marriage was conceived of five months and she was with Thangyee Khongjomba. Trial was held by an ordeal of diving into the water. It show the social norms strictly binded to the accession of the throne. Naophangba made matrimonial alliance to strengthen the power of Ningthouja dynasty by marrying Kairema of Khuman and Yaoreibi of Luwang princes.

Sameirang became the king in 508 A.D. The consolidation of the Ningthouja kingdom began during his reign. The custom of entertaining the warriors in a public feast on the eve of the battle and in commemoration of victory was introduced in his time. Urakonhouba succeeded him in 568 A.D. He also initiated inter clan marriage. Another customary law for the accession to throne was in the case when the eldest son was not having the proper personally to be a king for example disfigure or physically handicapped son could not become a king. As the eldest son of Urakonhouba was disfigured, Naothingkhong succeed Urakonhouba. During his reign Samlung the younger brother of Sukanpha the king of Pong came to Manipur and stayed for ten years at Pong Ingkhol (homestead of Pong). No record of disputes was found in between the two kings. The king of Manipur cultivated cordial relation with him by which he allowed him to settle in Manipur. As regards the cultural contact Ponghawai (Bean), Pungdon (Gauva) etc. was introduced from the Pong country. He was a good administrator. Naothingkhong was succeeded by his son Khongtekcha in 763 A.D. During his time the Moirang invaded the Ningthouja kingdom but defeated. The inscription of the copper plates which were collected from Phayeng village, Imphal West mainly deals with king Khongtekcha and were published in the report on the archaeological studies in Manipur, Bulletin No. 1 in 1935 by W. Yumjao Singh one of the pioneers of Manipur. According to his report it was issued by king Khongtekcha. These inscription deals with religions beliefs, rites and rituals for the worship of Siva and Devi. It throws light on many points. After critical examinations on the language, words and religious mentions, regarding the authenticity of the inscriptions there are many controversies.

In 1074 king Loiyamba ascended the throne of Manipur. He was a great socio-political reformer of Manipur. He also tried to aggrandise the Ningthouja principality by consolidating many hill tribes. Many changes were brought during his time. He divided the kingdom into six division known as Lup (Luplen Lup, Kongja Lup, Thouja Lup, Khurai Lup, Chingja Lup, Khaija Lup). Lup system is based on Lallup services. A team of workers would go to the king to render Lallup services. Every male of 16 to 60 ages were compulsory for this service for a fixed number of 10 days in 40 days. It is a form of tax to be paid to the king in the form of labour which was a peculiar feature of Manipur society. All the administrative reforms was mentioned in the Loiyamba Shinyen the royal edict which was issued by king Loiyamba. Loitomba ascended the throne of Kangla in 1122 A.D. He introduced the indoor game of Kang. He was succeeded by his son Atom Yoiremba in 1150 A.D. During his reign revolt against the ruler took place and drove him out. Hemtou Iwanthaba after defeating his father ascended the throne in 1164 A.D. Thawanthaba was worthy son of Iwanthaba. He ascended the throne in 1195 A.D. His reign was a notable period in the political history of Manipur. He made matrimonial alliance with Angom and Khuman principalities, Lengmaibi and Shamphabi respectively. He also gave his daughter Chingkhei Thanbi in marriage to Khuman king Anon Punshiba. Peace did not last long. In a decisive battle

Khuman were defeated. In the battle one of the military leaders Khuman Kwakpa was beheaded. As a remembrance of Thawanthaba's victory the Meitei hung the head of the Khuman Kwakpa on the Hiyang Hiren or the royal boat of Ningthouja.

Chingthang Lanthaba succeeded his father Thawanthaba in 1213 A.D. After him Thingbai Selhonga and Puranthaba became the kings at Kangla one after another. During Puranthaba's time the Khuman, one of the foes of Ningthouja dynasty was completely defeated. Khumomba succeeded Puranthaba in 1263 A.D. Khumomba's time was a remarkable period. The Kabaws invaded the Khuman principality. With the help of king, the Kabaws were droop out and captured some prisoners. Moramba, the son of Khumomba ascended the throne in 1278 A.D. He too fought with the Khuman and the Moirangs and also defeated some hill villages. He was succeeded by Thangbi Lanthaba in 1302 A.D. After him Kongyamba ascended the throne in 1324 A.D. During his time the Mayang the people from the west most probably from Cachar or Tripura invaded Manipur. He also made expedition against the Chakpa who settled at Khurai Haora Lamangdong. During his time onwards Khuman principality became a part of Ningthouja principality.

Telheiba succeeded his father in 1335 A.D. After him Tonaba, Tabungba and Lairenba ruled from 1355 to 1404. During Lairenba's time the Angom revolted against the Ningthouja. Lairenba was defeated and Angom occupied the throne of Ningthouja for five years. In 1404 Punshipa ascended the throne by expelling the Angom. He also consolidated the Ningthouja's power towards hill tribes (Tangkul hill tribes of Monthou village, Koireng village, Maring Konkoi hill etc.). Ningthoukhomba succeeded in 1432. His reign was also a remarkable in the political history of Manipur. He fought with the Moirang principality and from his time onward the Moirang principality became a dependent of Ningthouja principality. An important event of his reign was the expedition of Akla and the role of his courageous queen Linthoingambi. In absence of the king the Tangkul tribes raided the capital of Ningthouja. In this very critical situation Linthoingambi very tactfully welcome the invaders and treated them cordially as allies. She dressed up as her husband and arrested without any fight by serving feast and drink. The name of queen Linthoingambi is mentioned till now as a courageous woman in the women's history of Manipur. During Ningthoukhomba's time almost all the portion of the plain of Manipur was united. He was succeeded by his son Kyamba in 1467. He established a diplomatic relation with the Shan State of Pong. Accordingly the states resolved to conquer the Kabaw Kiyang. A joint attack was made on Kyang with Choupha Khek Khomba the king of Pong and conquered it. Mungkhong and their territory was divided between the Pong and the Meitei. Manipur extended upto Loijari hills, the major portion of Kabaw was annexed to Manipur. Their victory was performed with great pomp and gift were exchanged. They also exchanged their servants. The Pong king presented a mouth organ player to king Kyamba in exchange of a drummer name Sekta, Kyamba also raided the hill areas. For the first time in the political history of Manipur the chronicle records, the Mayang (Thongnags) invaded Manipur in 1504.

The reign of Kyamba was a milestone in the history of Manipur. King Kyamba started to observe Cheithaba the Meitei new year's day. The Khoibu Stone inscriptions shows that he was a good statesmanship in bringing about the peace and harmony among the hill and plain people of Manipur. He modified two revenue or administrative districts known as Ahallup and Naharup Panas by appointing Lakpas or supervisors. Brahmins had migrated to Manipur during his period. During his reign the Brahmins were employed to look after the Hindu temple and to act as astrologers. Chaopha Khekhomba also presented a guava plant as a preventive medicine for the epidemic of dysentery.

Kyamba's reign was also a crucial period, for the emergence of Hinduism in Manipur, although it confined only to the immigrant Brahmins. He was presented a stone Celt by the Pong king revered as the Phaya or deity. Kyamba directed his officials to find the Brahmins who would be able to worship the statue. Some Brahmins were found taking bath at the Paonam Hiden in the Imphal river and were brought to the king. The Brahmin identified the statue of Lord Vishnu, the supreme God of the Hindu. Kyamba is reported to have constructed a Vishnu temple of brick at Lamangdong a former name of Bishnupur. But there is no evidence to show that king was converted into Hinduism. Kyamba was succeeded by Koiremba in 1508, then LamKyamba in 1512, Kabomba in 1524 respectively. Cheitharol Kumbaba records the digging of the Takhen Khong to mark the victory over the Tripuris in 1533 A.D. A trade route to upper Assam was opened. Matrimonial alliance with the Tekhao was established by giving Khongnanbi as a queen of Tekhao. The parentage of the girl not mentioned. An Ahom fishing trap known as Tekhao Loo was presented. Aniseed was introduced in Manipur after this event. Kabomba was succeeded by Tangjamba in 1542 and 1545 Chalamba ascended the throne. He raided Meinung, Narum, Thingnang and Ithing. For irrigation purposes he excavated the Leishangkhong canal.

After king Chalamba Thangwai Ningthou Kyamba popularly called Mungyamba ascended the throne in the year 1562 A.D. He expanded his dominion to Mungkhong Mungyang or Khamran which won the popularity of his name Mungyamba. Many hills and valley villages were defeated. Not only he was a great conquer he also introduced new weaving technology, Ametpa Loishang/Medical Department, fermented bamboo shoots, veneration of wine etc. The construction of Kei or granaries was also taken up by his time. Immigrants from Shan and the people from the rest of India were assimilated into the Meitei society.

King Khagemba a worthy son of a worthy father Mungyamba ruled from 1598 to 1652 A.D. He was well educated in the military warfare and administration of the land. He was educated by his father. He learnt religious mysticism from different scholars of the time namely (1) Apoimacha, (2) Konok Thengra, (3) Yumnam Tomba, (4) Soram Sana and (5) Khaidem Tomba. As a conqueror, Khagemba embarked on a policy of military aggrandisement and expansion. He extended the Ningthouja's power. He invaded Samsok in 1607 and Kyang in 1614 towards Kabaw valley and also many hill areas. During his reign in a boat race festival there was a grudge between his two brothers Sanongba and Koiremba. As a consequence of the event Sanongba fled to Cachar. With the Cachari in 1606 Sanongba invaded Manipur. Most of the invaders were Muslims. Khagemba defeated the invaders and captured a large number of invaders including Muslim. There were allowed to settle in Manipur.

According to chronicles the Meitei king attacked the principal Chinese village along with many Meitei brave warriors and defeated Chaopa Hondei. He assumed the title Lainingthou Khahi Ngamba (Godly king, conqueror of Chinese or Khahi). Khagemba not only a great conqueror but also a good innovator of the Kingdom. He took much interest in the construction of the kingdom during his reign. It was during his time that the capital city was divided into four division – Yaiskul, Khwai, Khurai and Wangkhei. He divided civil and military administration. He gave military training to both men and women. For smooth running of the administration the king always consulted with his nobles and other officials from time to time. Among them, the most prominent figures were Lairikyengbam, Nongshamei and Mahamadani Shah. It shows king Khagemba adopted a new policy of pluralistic social structure by appointing suitable post to the immigrants and war captives. He even established departments for them. They married local women and given several economic occupations. They absorbed completely into the Meitei society. New department were supervised by Lakpa or head of departments. The officials were differentiated by their ranks and were marked by the shirt, gown, dhoti, turban, armlets and bracelets which were worn according to their service to the state.

For the judicial administration Khagemba installed the abode of Khangjeng and Nongshaba in the court. King was the highest authority. Khagemba introduced new system of land laws and measuring units as Sana Lamjei which were measured by the length of the arm along with four fingers width. In the military organisation along with the Lallup militia there were many foreign immigrants in his army. The Meitei soldiers were expert in using boats since many battles were fought in the rivers and lakes. The boat race were regularly performed as the state sport. For the economic development he took up many measures. He was a great patron of agriculture. Rivers and stream were dragged and provided irrigation facilities to the people. During his time the system of transplantation of paddy cultivation and a new paddy called Taothabi was introduced. New system for the measurement of paddy yield was also introduced. Ten market places were installed in different area of the state kingdom. Brick making was attributed to his reign which was learnt from the Chinese. King Khagemba introduced bell metal currency as a medium of exchange. Khagemba established state granaries in different parts of the state to store food grains to meet the requirement of the people. Tobacco smoking and pipe smoking was introduced with the coming of Muslims in the kingdom. He improved the games of Polo, by introducing Pana Sagol Kangjei or inter Pana horse hockey and inter Pana boat race.

King Khagemba was succeeded by Khunjaoba in 1652. In spite of king lover of peace king Khunjaoba too tried to expand his kingdom towards hill areas and Kabaw valley. He collected a large war booty including cows, buffaloes and elephants from Samjok, Khunjaoba excavated the moat before the brick wall in front of the palace.

King Khunjaoba was succeeded by Paikhomba. He was the son of Tonaba the younger brother of Khunjaoba. Minor expeditions was sent during his time towards the hill villages and Kabaw valley. Developmental works carried out during his time. A large number of swampy land cover in jungle were cleared for habitation and cultivation. The king constructed road, dams and improved irrigation system of the country. Trade and commerce with the neighbouring kingdom like Tripura, Assam and Burma was recorded in the royal chronicle. It encouraged movement of people between these countries. The main item of trade were mostly elephant and horses.

In this foregoing discussion we have tried to trace the socio-political history of Manipur till the end of the 17th Century or before the coming of Hinduism as state religion. The social structure and its systems was purely indigenous. There was no influence (or forces to the formation of social structure. Society was based on kinship or blood relationship. There was no inter caste marriage. From the very beginnings Meiteis had their own system of life cycle i.e. birth, marriage and dead in the Society.

Politically, Manipuri from the very early time, had their own system of good governance. There were major seven principalities in Manipur – Ningthouja, Angom, Luwang, Khuman, Moirang, Kha-Ngangba and Chelei-Sarangleishangthem. Among these Ningthouja became powerful. They were amalgamated to the Ningthouja the ruling dynasty of Manipur in due courses.

There were wars for the supremacy of power among the clan principalities. The rulers of different periods tried to expand their power towards the valley villagers as well as hill villages. The neighbouring states

like Tripura, Cachar, Assam, Kabaw invaded Manipur and vice-versa. Repeated raids over the Kabaw since the time of 12th Century indicates that, despite military control there was no administrative integration of the valley of mainland Manipur. The main objective of the expeditions was probably to collect tributes from the villages and Kabaw valley. Matrimonial alliances adopted by the Ningthouja rulers with other clans and neighbouring kingdoms helped to the aggrandisement and to bring peace in the country.

There was well administrative system dividing administrative division like Pana. Division of labour under the Lallup system was highlighted in Loiyumba Shinyen, the royal edict of king Loiyamba. New constructions and developments were brought by the then rulers especially during the reign of king Khagemba. He was the innovator and a nation builder. During his time many changes were brought in the socio-political condition of the kingdom. Immigrates were absorbed into Meitei society. Though they were confined as minority their must be some influence of their lifestyle. Economically king Khagemba introduced many system of weight and measures, new system of taxation. He established market places and new villages for the welfare of the people. Thus till the end of 17th Century Manipuri lived on their own system of lifestyle without any outsiders influence even though foreigner were in the country. A good governance is inevitable to establish a prosperous society and this co-relation can be clearly seen in the pre-Hindu Manipur society.

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