

## Historiography in Manipur : Some Problems

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History of Manipur is rich but not so the historiography of Manipur, as is true, for that matter, in the larger context of India too. A look at the history available, the history books we prescribe on history and culture of Manipur will prove our point. There are about forty books, of which only half could be called recent. The books are mostly in English and by English people. Happily some books are being written in Manipuri too. It is, however, encouraging that in spite of paucity of historical literature, the course content is of high standard.<sup>1</sup> Some books have to be prescribed which are more of source material in nature than history proper.<sup>2</sup> The writings of Megasthenes, Huen Tsang, Bernier and Louis Fisher, to name just a few, provide useful, sometimes the only, source of history, but only an indulgent view will treat them as history. Recently, some very useful books and monographs have been written on the history of Manipur but they are not sufficient and they do not completely succeed in enlightening about the complex Manipuri society.

Why is it so ? Because the prevailing conditions and the past background have not been congenial for healthy pursuit of historical studies. Like in other parts of India, there is no established tradition of historical writing. When it comes to source material, in spite of best efforts the picture that emerges is not quite bright and complete.<sup>3</sup> Archaeological studies are few and far between.<sup>4</sup> Epigraphical and numismatics evidences are yet to be fully collected and compiled.<sup>5</sup> Despite the destruction of a lot of ancient literature by the order of Pamheiba, *Takheingamba*, *Samjokngamba* and *Cheitharon Kumbaba*, which has been called *Rajtarangini* of Manipur by some, still survive.<sup>6</sup> But are they scientifically analysed ? The answer will not always be in affirmative. The museums in India, even the one at Imphal, do not provide much material. Archival material in the National and local archives needs better cataloguing and classification. The National Library at Calcutta does not have much of old and fresh literature on Manipur to recommend. Old records and literature lying with Manipuri pundits is almost inaccessible to common researcher. No complete catalogue of such material is available.

Under such circumstances history of Manipur is mostly based on English sources, which are partial, literally as well as valuation-

ally. Burmese, Chinese or Assamese sources for that matter are not often tapped even while writing on areas directly involved with the neighbours. And then, even while writing on things about which Manipuris and other Indian authors should be better equipped, one is prone to depend on available literature in English.<sup>7</sup>

There is two-way traffic in history - from root to fruit and from fruit to root. One can come to understand the present starting from the past and also one can go on tracing the roots of the present in the past, questioning why things are as they are.

Some of the pertinent questions before the writers of history of Manipur could be :

1. Why the family, particularly the woman, is living a contradictory life ? Why are the family bonds so tight and yet so loose, why are the women so free and yet so subservient ?

2. Why is Manipuri Hindu society not so hierarchically stratified as in other parts of India ?

3. Why is Manipuri economy so stagnant, though it was not so earlier. <sup>8</sup> Why is the economy so dependent. What are the historical reasons, besides the obvious political ones ?

4. Why are Meitei and tribal societies <sup>9</sup> not quite integrated in spite of the fact that the Meitei society also has strong tribal overtones ?

5. Why are the communal and disruptive forces not so successful in Manipur even though the society consists of so many almost exclusive communities which are oftener than not jealous of each other ?

6. What are the historical roots of insurgency ?

7. How far nationalism is manifest or absent and in what form and why in Manipur ?

8. Why is the process of modernisation so slow in Manipur ? How far the worldview (Weltanschauung) of a common Manipuri has changed or is changing ?

9. Coming to the contemporary society, why has corruption flooded the Manipuri society, a society so free from such maladies not long ago ? Is it not the concern of history to explain and help the diagnosis of a strangulating social evil ?

Besides answering such questions, the motive forces of Manipuri history have to be underlined.

As Davis has put it, the influence of physiographic environment on history is "nowhere more apparent than in India"<sup>10</sup> This should be equally true of Manipuri history, if not more. But is this fact kept in proper perspective by the historians ?

Cultural and ethnic admixture had been a constant feature in Manipur. It has been more varied, rampant and pronounced here than the much talked about and boasted cultural synthesis on the greater all India plane. It needs to be underlined and understood.

What role search for security and stability played in early history of Manipur? Then the dynamics of state formation, royal ambitions and search for a kind of natural frontiers need to be clearly noted and emphasised.

Coming of Vaishnavism can not be taken for granted. What has it done to Manipuri society is more or less known, though a deeper study may still be needed, but in the process what Manipur has done to Vaishnavism is yet to be properly studied. That will delineate the dynamics of the two. For example, we know the influence of Islam on Indian culture<sup>11</sup> but at the same time also the changes that Islam underwent in Indian situation.

For the British period it has to be clearly established as to what extent Manipur resembled others what were called native states and how far it was different. Consequently, what changes were natural corollary of colonialism as elsewhere and what was typical of Manipur which remained, more or less, a closed society even after the British Raj.

It is true even today that history of national movement in India, in spite of innumerable social and individual efforts, if for no other reason then only because the manifestation of nationalism in different parts of the country is not given due importance. For example, Rani Gaidinliu is treated as an exception and as just an individual.<sup>12</sup> Irabot Singh is almost non-existent. Were they not the manifestation of the national ethos?

Finally, as is the case with all micro studies so in the case of historiography in Manipur, the pitfall lay in overlooking the macro, the larger, may the largest possible perspective to be kept in view. It is true that history deals in particular but situates it in the universal. The dialectical relation between the universal and the particular, between the micro and the macro has to be kept in mind while writing the history of Manipur. And finally one has to do a really tough tight rope walking in dealing with the inter dependence of ethnography, anthropology, sociology and history and yet insist on historical methodology and the nature of history.

### References

1. See the syllabus of Manipur University, Besides *Resistance*

Published useful series particularly on Colonial History of Manipur, (Jan - Aug. 1976).

2. See for example Pamberton's *Report on Eastern Frontier of British India*, and Brown's *Statistical Account of Manipur*.
3. See Pandey's (ed) book on sources of history.
4. See M. Kirti's *Recent Advances in the Archaeology of Manipur-Lanmei Thambee*, August, 1986.
5. See P. G. Singh's *Epigraphical Records of Manipur*.
6. L. I. Singh, *Introduction to Manipur*, pp. 64-65.
7. L. I. Singh op. cit. p. 102. He frankly admits that his chapter on Hill People totally based on Major McCulloch's account.
8. Kaoba Singh quotes Home Political files to show what Gourshyam argued to pay to East India Company in 1762. Only a prosperous economy could provide all that. See JOURNAL Deptt. of History, Manipur University, vol. I; L. I. Singh, op. cit, pp. 81-84.
9. See S. Lokendrajit's article in JDHMU vol. I for the constitution of Manipuri Society.
10. See C. C. Davis's Introduction to *An Atlas on Indian Peninsula*.
11. See Tarachand's *Influence on Islam of Indian Culture*.
12. See any of the representative books on national movement.