

The Role of the Raja of Tripura and the English in capturing the Mizo Chief Lalchukla

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The District of Sylhet came under the British rule after the grant of Dewani by the Mughal Emperor to the East India Company. British administration was actually extended to Sylhet in 1765. The eastern portion of Sylhet which is now known as the Karimganj District in Assam had a long border with the principality of Hill Tripura. The Chatarchura hill range which separates Mizoram from Assam was located in the Sylhet District during the British period. Present Patharkandi area is inhabited by many Manipuris. The forefathers of these Manipuris were settled by the British administration to check the marauding Kukis to come to the plains of Sylhet. Geographically, present Jampui Hills in Tripura is the elongation of the hill ranges in Mizoram. The Chatarchura hill is also an extension of the hills in Mizoram. In the hills bordering Sylhet lived the *Paite* Kukis. These kukis were under the nominal sovereignty of the Raja of Hill Tripura. They did not pay any fixed rent to the Raja but offered presents to him and participated in the *Durbars* of the Raja. The Raja, too, had very nominal control over them. But the relationship of the Raja with the *Paite* Kukis were very cordial.¹

In the meantime the English settled Manipuris on the borders of Sylhet. There had been frequent clashes between the Kukis and Manipuris.² The Kukis came to the foothills for trade and they met the Manipuri villagers. Manipuris, on the otherhand, used to collect the timber and other forest products from the hills which the Kukis considered to be an encroachment on their territory. Naturally, there had been infrequent clashes between the Kukis and the Manipuris on the frontiers of Sylhet. But the Kukis did not bring these incidents to the notice of the Raja of Tripura.

The leaders of the Manipuri settlers on the Sylhet border were two Manipuri *Rajputras* of royal blood. They became British ryots and collected rent from the Manipuris and others. They were named Ram Singh and Tribonjit Singh. They were

brave and courageous. In spite of many lapses on their part the local officers of Sylhet patronized them because they were considered to be powerful sentinels to guard the British frontiers.

Ram Singh and Tribonjit Singh were very ambitious. There had been political troubles in Manipur. They seized the opportunity and attempted to capture the throne of Manipur by force. They collected band of soldiers. Ram Singh sought the help of the *Paite* Kuki Chief Lalrihia or Laroo. Ram Singh asked money and about five hundred soldiers from prince Laroo in 1842. Laroo refused to comply with the request. There had been sufficient grounds for refusal. First, the supply of a Kuki levy of five hundred was beyond the means of the *Paite* chief. Secondly, what was the *locus standi* of Ram Singh and Tribonjit Singh to ask financial and military help from Prince Laroo? Laroo was after all independent Kuki Chief and not a vassal of Ram Singh. Ram Singh and Tribonjit were the political refugees from Manipur. They were simply misadventurers. Thirdly, why should Prince Laroo help the political misadventurers in their illegal activities?

Ram Singh and Tribonjit failed in their adventure. They were pushed back from Manipur. The frustrated Manipuri *Rajputras* fell upon the *Paite* chief Laroo. Laroo was unaware of their designs. He was caught, insulted and killed by Ram Singh and Tribonjit (1843). Lalchukla, the eldest son of Laroo, succeeded his father and according to Kuki custom ascended the throne. Lalchukla was an enterprising chief and on many occasions represented his father in the *Durbars* of the Raja of Tripura. It is said that he was the most enlightened of all the Kuki Chiefs. He visited on his own initiative Comilla, Sylhet and Dacca. Raja Lalchukla intimated the cause of murder of his father to the Raja of Tripura and sought justice from him. Raja of Tripura was shocked to learn the death of Raja Laroo, his vassal, but did not do anything to help the aggrieved *Paite* chief Lalchukla.³

Lalchukla could not forget the death and humiliation of his father. According to the Kuki custom the corpse of Laroo was kept dried on the courtyard of his house for burial. The Kukis believed that the princes of royal blood needed slaves to serve them in the underworld. So, they offered human heads on the burial ground. Lalchukla decided to offer hundred slaves for the funeral of his father. In the winter of 1844 he came to know that some Manipuri traders of the Kachubari village misbehaved with the Kukis of his clan. On 4th April 1844 under his instruction more than one hundred armed Kukis descended on the Kachubari vill-

age and completely destroyed it, killing more than hundred and carrying off more.⁴

Kachubari massacre created a panic in the Sylhet frontier. The local authorities of Sylhet got alarmed. Mr. Sealy, the Magistrate of Sylhet came to know that Kachubari was within the British district and that the offending Kukis were the subjects of the Raja of Tripura. He immediately informed Mr. Wise, the political Agent at Agartala, to bring the matter to the notice of the Raja and to request him to bring the offenders to book.

Raja of Tripura was in a dilemma. Lalchukla was his vassal and he had friendly relationship with him, but he was beyond his control. He was almost an independent chief. Moreover, the Raja was aware of the grievances of Lalchukla whose father was killed and insulted by the Manipuris. The English did not take step against Ram Singh and Tribonjit. But the Raja's councillors advised him not to antagonize the English and take measures to help the local officers of Sylhet. Wise, the Political Agent at Agartala, informed Sealy that the Raja of Tripura was anxious to see the murderers punished and had taken necessary step in this respect. He pointed out that the Raja was having a direct negotiation with Lalchukla. Sealy was overzealous. He had no faith in the Raja's capacity and suggested a punitive expedition against Lalchukla to the authorities of Bengal in Calcutta.⁵ The authorities of Fortwilliam accepted the suggestion and recommended that Captain Blackwood of Sylhet Light Infantry should head the expeditionary force in December 1844. The Raja of Tripura was instructed to cooperate with the expeditionary force. The Raja supplied the coolie corps and also won over Lahmir Singh, the cousin brother of Lalchukla, and engaged him against Lalchukla. Captain Blackwood was successful. He captured Lalchukla and brought him as a prisoner to Sylhet. The authorities of Fortwilliam duly recognised the services rendered by the Raja of Tripura.

The role of the British officers posted at Sylhet in their dealings with the Mizo Chief Lalchukla was not open and above board. Rather they were malicious. But the role of the Raja of Tripura was even more despicable. He left his obedient vassal to the Lurch. The most interesting information is that Manomohan Ghosh, the leading Barister of Calcutta and a national figure was the Raja's chief councillor along with the Political Agent.

Notes and References

1. A. C. Choudhury, *Srihatter Itibritta*, Vol. II.
2. Suhas Chatterjee, *Mizoram under the British Rule*.
3. *Op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.
4. Bengal Judicial Proceedings, May 27, 1844, No. 103 ; Officiating Magistrate Mr. Sealy to Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal in the Judicial Department.
5. "That the Raja of Tripura had displayed most culpable carelessness made excuses without foundation". B. J. P., September 3, 1844, No. 42.