

## 'Bijoy Panchali' : A Bengali Chronicle of Manipur

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*Bijoy Panchali* (alias *Meitei Puran*) is a matric chronicle in Bengali which was composed by two poets of the royal court in Manipur in three different parts. The first part entitled 'Garibniwaz Charit' was composed by one Kirtichandra in 1894 Saka (1872 AD) the second part entitled 'Bhayachandra Charit' by Dina Gunendra in 1854 Saka (1932 AD) and the third part entitled 'Gambhir Singh Nara Singh Charit' by Dina Gunendra in 1856 Saka (1934 AD). The composer of the second and the third parts seems to be one and the same person, while the first part was composed by a different author. It is known from the history of Manipur that Garibniwaz, Bhagyachandra Gambhir Sing and Nara Singh ruled in Manipur during 1814-1755 AD 1856-1899 AD 1826-1834 AD and 1834-1859 AD respectively. The parts are indeed independent chronicles dealing with the events during the reigns of the rulers after whom these are named. The chronicles were therefore, composed after the death of the respective rulers except the portion dealing with Nara Singh which was composed when Nara Singh himself was the reigning monarch. Although the composer of 'Garibniwaz Charit' mentioned that he completed the chronicle in Canchipur (then capial of the state;), both of them made it clear that they took up the work at the instance of the vaisnava Gossains. The *Panchali* has been edited and published by L. Mangi Singh Bhaktirasachurhamani and L. Mani Singh Swarasiddhanta-churhamani from Imphal in 1967-1971 with parallel translation in Meitei prose. It also appears that another edition of the chronicle was published earlier as edited by M. Jhulan Singh which has been used by J. Roy in his *History of Manipur* (Calcutta, 1958). We could not collect a copy of that edition. On the authority of Jhulan Singh Roy tells us that *Byjoi Panchali* was rewritten by one Dwija Sitaram Sharma a chronicler in the court of Garibniwaz. This may mean that there is a pre-18th century version of the *Bijoy Panchali*. However, three parts of the *panchali* edited by Mangi Singh and Mani Singh cannot be parts of a pre-18th century chronicle since the central figures in the texts are rulers of Manipur in 18th and 19th centuries only. It is possible that the *panchali* is in the

tradition of writing biographical chronicles during and after the death of each or some important rulers. Although each part deals with a wide variety of historical themes, J. You is perhaps the only historian who has so far used the *Panchali* as an important source of information for the history of Manipur. The *Bjjoy Panchali* used by him is, however, different from the one edited by Mangi Singh and Mani Singh. The 'Mitqya Puran' referred to by L. Iboongohal Singh in *Introduction to Manipur* (Imphal, 1960) is perhaps either of the two versions of the chronicle. In any case, our observation on *Bjjoy Panchali* is based on the text edited and published by Mangi Singh and Mani Singh which was published after the works of J. Roy and Iboongohal Singh.

As told, the *Panchali* deals with a wide variety of themes. The first part ('Garibniwaz Charit') begins with the accession of Garibniwaz to the throne. It narrates the career of Garibniwaz, particularly his wars and encounters with Burma, Cachar (Heramba and Tripura). It also depicts the ancestry of Garibniwaz, life and condition of the people, the palace life, the spread of vaishnavism in Manipur on a massive scale under royal patronage, the influence of Santidas Adhikary and other Vaisnava missionaries in the court, besides the geographical sketches of various places, particularly Canchipur city, the routes followed in expeditions and the battle fields.

The 'Bhagyachandra Charit' describes the accession of Bhagyachandra or Jai Singh, a grandson of Garibniwaz to the throne after some confusion and contests among the sons and grandsons of Garibniwaz, the support of the Nagas and Kukis to Jai Singh, the Burmese invasion of Manipur, stay of Jai Singh as a fugitive in Cachar and then in Assam and the nature of hospitality and support offered by the rulers of those states to him and his followers, contacts with Tripura, recovery of the throne by Jai Singh, the details of the socio-religious festivals like 'raslila', a visit to Tripura, pilgrimage to Navadwipa and the construction of a temple there, biographies of some of the prominent Vaisnava Gossains, and a few other major events in the reign of Jai Singh. The sections on Jai Singh's sojourn in Cachar and Assam are lengthy and descriptive. The 'Charit' projects Jai Singh as a popular ruler and a deeply religious and virtuous personality.

The last part of the chronicle ('Gambhir Sing Nara Singh Charit') describes the events in the life time of Gambhir Singh in first ten sections. It begins with the scramble for power among the sons of Jai Singh, particularly Labnya Chandra (Rabindra

Chandra), Madhu Chandra, Chourjit, Marjit and Gambhir Singh, brief reigns of the first four, Burmese occupation of Manipur, rise of Gambhir Singh, hit occupation of Cachar, Anglo-Burmese War in Cachar and Manipur, role of Gambhir Singh in the war, Gambhir Singh's accession to the throne in Manipur, and Manipur under the rule of Gambhir Singh till his death in 1834. A substantial portion of this 'Charit' (infact, four of the ten sections exclusively and two other sections largely) is on Cachar. In the remaining three sections, the 'Charit' describes the first two years of Nara Singh's reign. Although Nara Singh ruled till 1859, the 'Charit' was completed in 1834 and therefore, the remaining period of his reign is not covered here. As there was no major event in the beginning of his reign, the 'Charit' concentrated on his patronage to religion, temples and the Gossains, besides brief references to his works as a ruler.

The content analysis of the chronicle brings out its importance both as a historical work and as a source of history. Written in chronological historical format it describes the developments in a sequence of events that a trained historian would normally do. The 'Charit' of Garibniwaz and that of Bhagyachandra were written not much after the respective reigns and that of Gambhir Singh and Nara Singh was written almost contemporaneously. The source value is further compounded by the fact that the authors were connected with the court to have access to information. The references to Tripura, Cachar and Assam are corroborated by the local chronicles of those areas as well as the British archival records. We have compared the relevant information given in *Bijoy Panchali* with 'Rajmala' (Tripura), 'Gopichandrer Panchali' (Cachar) and 'Asom Buranji' (Assam) to be satisfied that there is no contradiction. On the contrary, each one of these contains independent additional information to reinforce the narrative. In fact, this a beauty of the mediaeval historical tradition of the north-east. The chronicler of a state had appreciable information about situation in the neighbouring states. The description of the *Bijoy Panchali* about the routes followed, geographical sketches of places and the cultural patterns is almost like that of an eye-witness account. Written the style of the 'Mangal Kavya' series of mediaeval Bengal the *panchali* deserves serious attention of the historians of Cachar, Tripura and Assam besides Manipur, as an important historical work of 18th century Manipur.