

## An Account of Rani Banaitangi : A Lushai "Chieftainess"

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In the Lushai Society, Chiefs had a paramount place. Before the coming of the English, the Lushai Chief was the sovereign. He not only led the army in times of war but also protected his people from the foreign aggression. Throughout the year he had to feed his subjects. When the Chief became too oppressive or failed to protect his subjects, they shifted their allegiance to a more powerful or a dignified chief. The Chiefs had in their ranks subordinate chiefs. Although there was no cast system among the Lushais, the Chiefs certainly belonged to the nobility. The principal wives of the Chiefs and the sons-in-law of the Chiefs were all members of the ruling family ; Sometimes when the Chief died leaving behind a minor son, the principal wife of the Chief succeeded to her husband's estate and acted as chief till her son attained majority.<sup>1</sup> After attaining the majority, the son, however, subjugated the mother to a subordinate position. If she was active she could be appointed a Chieftainess under him. A Lushai Chief was ways a "Lal" or "Raja". The 'Chieftainess' was the "Rani". However when her son was a minor, a Lushai Rani discharged all the functions of a Chief. She was the sovereign. Her words were law. She discussed social and political matters with her ministers, decided on issues of war and peace, and met whenever necessary, the foreign dignitaries.<sup>2</sup> However, she did not take active part in war. But after the war she met the officers of her own party and the other party on the negotiation table. The records of the British Government are full with the deeds of such female chiefs. The most notable among them, however, are Rani Banaitangi and Rani Ropui Leni.

Rani Banaitangi was the wife of Raja Murchhuilal, the eldest son of Raja Lalchukla, the illustrious Lushai Chief whose trial evoked keen interest among the frontier tribes in the North East India.<sup>3</sup> Raja Lalchukla was a de-facto independent Chief under the nominal sovereignty of the Raja of Tripura. His kingdom was situated in the Jampui Tang ranges bordering the district of Sylhet (now Karimganj). In 1944, Lalchukla raided the British district of Sylhet (Kachubari Village), killed and captured more than a hundred persons to be sacrificed at the grave of his father Lalnihua. He was captured by Captain Blackwood of the Sylhet Light Infantry and the Sessions Judge, Sylhet, passed a life sentence against him. He passed his life as a state prisoner in Sylhet at an outhouse of Ali Amzad, the renowned landlord of Sylhet. Murchuilal in his boy-

hood became a student of the Sylhet Government School for some time and learnt English and Bengali. He also went to Dacca. Murchuilal married Banaitangi, the eldest daughter of Mungpira, the Chief of the North Lushai Hills. Raja Sukpial, the son of Mungpira, was the most powerful Chief of the North Lushai Clan. Banaitangi was his sister. Banaitangi was much younger to Sukpial. She was beautiful and intelligent. Sukpial made her a subordinate Chief of some villages in the north-east of Mizoram, bordering Cachar district.

Raja Sukpial was not merely a powerful Chieftain but also a skilled diplomat and very ambitious. His principal enemies were the Pois of South Lushai Hills. To counterbalance the Pois and Howlongs of South Mizoram he intended a diplomatic marriage alliance with Raja Murchuilal, the son of illustrious Lalhukla. Murchuilal readily agreed and the marriage ceremony took place in February 1862. We do not know exactly whether Murchuilal had any other wife or concubine before his marriage with Banaitangi. Banaitangi was however, his principal wife and the Rani. There was, however, a great difference of age between Banaitangi and Murchuilal. Banaitangi was hardly twenty when she came to live with her husband and Murchuilal was more than thirty five. Although there was the difference in age the Murchuilal-Banaitangi pair proved to be an ideal one. Murchuilal was an enlightened and educated Lushai Chief and Banaitangi a beautiful and intelligent lady.

The marriage of Banaitangi with Murchuilal was also a historic one. It has been pointed out that the marriage was a diplomatic marriage. By this marriage Sukpial increased his political power considerably. Sukpial allowed Banaitangi to retain chieftainship which she enjoyed during her maidenhood. Sukpial made hectic preparations for her marriage. With great pomp and grandeur the marriage ceremony took place. The local authorities of Sylhet came to know of the preparations of the marriage. The District Magistrate of Sylhet issued a circular to the neighbouring villages of Sylhet and Cachar warning of fresh Lushai raids.<sup>4</sup> The marriage of Lushai nobility was always associated with daring raids as the bride needed a large number of slaves according to her status to accompany her to her husband's house. In spite of the warning, Sukpial outwitted the British authorities and conducted several raids. It is believed that the bridal procession of Banaitangi was accompanied by about one hundred female slaves many of them being plainswomen from Cachar.

Murchuilal was an enlightened Lushai Chief. He took Banaitangi to Agartala, Sylhet and Dacca. In those days it was difficult as there was no hotel either at Sylhet or Dacca. Anyway it is believed she came and stayed at the residence of Ali Amzad at Sylhet. Murchuilal was a nominal vassal of the Raja of Tripura and participated in some "Durbars" in the court of Tripura. It is likely that on one such occasion, Banaitangi accompanied her husband to Agartala. Other than Lushai (*Dulien*), Banaitangi could speak in Bengali. Some of her maids (Slaves) were Bengalies. Her brother-in-law, Bankhampui was a Bengali poet. Rai Hari Charan Sharma Bahadur, the Extra-Assistant Commissioner, Cachar and the right hand man of Sir John Edgar, the towering personality in the Anglo Lushai relationship testified that Rani Banaitangi could not speak or understand English but knew Bengali well. In her life style she resembled an aristocratic Bengali Hindu lady.

Within a few years of his marriage, Murchuilal died. His children were all minors. Rani Banaitangi the widow succeeded as regent to her son. The untimely death of Murchuilal was a shattering blow to Banaitangi's personal and political life. Sukpibal, the brother of Banaitangi who became almost invincible after the marriage alliance also became weak. Sukpibal leaned heavily towards the English. The Cachar Kukies (Mizos) began to look after Sukpibal as a "spent up force".

With great courage and fortitude Banaitangi bore the loss of her husband. She assumed the sole control of the reins of administration. As a chief she displayed talent and tact. She was aware of the strength of the English and refrained from antagonizing them. Being a resident of a place near the British district of Sylhet and her early visit to Sylhet and Dacca convinced her of the futility of antagonizing the English. After the sentencing of Lalchukla, the Lushai Chiefs hated the English as betrayers but Rani Banaitangi had seen the fate of Sukpibal, her invincible brother, humbled by the English and his rebellious sons all destroyed by the '*Sahibs*' and realized that hostility with the British would be harmful in the long run. The death of her consort Murchuilal also made her a sadder and wiser person. So, when she agreed to meet Major Boyd, the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar (Assam) in Feb. 1881 in her zawlbak, the D C. was astonished. He could not hide his amazement that the daughter-in-law of Lalchukla would meet an Englishman personally.<sup>5</sup>

There was a superstition among the Lushais that the visit of a white man was always associated with the outbreak of cholera. So,

an Englishman was seldom cordially received. After the Lushai Expedition of 1871-72, the expeditionary force again visited Lushai country in 1880 to suppress the Lushai ferment. Major Boyd's visit was a goodwill visit. He was accompanied by Hari Charan Sarma Bahadur whose knowledge about the Lushai custom and language was monumental. Boyd was cordially received by the Lushai Chiefs. Rani Banaitangi was free from superstition and willingly invited Boyd in her zawlbak. Banaitangi appeared before Boyd in a white Saree, the dress of widow Hindu. As she did not know English she talked with Hari Charan Sarma both in Lushai and in Bengali. Sarma was impressed by her charming manner. According to Sarma, Rani Banaitangi was the first Lushai 'Chief-tainess' to talk directly with a British diplomatic officer. Banaitangi was a good administrator and very popular among the Lushais of Jampui Tang. She died in harness. We do not know exactly when she died but she died before the Lushai Expedition of 1890-91. "Rani Banaitangi, because of her high pedigree, connexions and more so of her personality, was the cynosure of the Hills South of Cachar and Sylhet. To the people of Sylhet she was almost a legendary figure".<sup>6</sup>

#### Notes and References

- 1 × 2. I. F. Extl. A. December 1892. No. 42. McCabe's report. Vide also B. J. P. August 1872, No. 220. Weekly despatch from the Brigadier General, Bowrchiar, No 276. How Vonde's widow made peace with the Right Column of the Lushai Expeditionary Force, 1871-72, can be found in author's book *Mizoram under British Rule*, pp. 69-70.
3. S. Chatterjee, "The Trial of Lalchukla" *Proceedings of the N.E.I.H.A*, 6th Session, Agartala. Vide also *Mizoram under British Rule*, pp. 20-23.
4. A. C. Choudhury, *Sreehatter Itibritta*, Vol. II, Canto V, Chapter III, p. 52.
5. Bengal Political Proceedings (B). Nov, 1884, No. 4. Boyd to the Chief Commissioner of Assam.
6. S. Chatterjee, *Mizoram Under British Rule*, pp. 93-94.