

**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

NINTH SESSION

GUWAHATI ; 1988

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PREFACE

The ninth session of the North East India History Association at the Gauhati University was indeed the fulfilment of a long cherished objective of the Association to hold a session in the premier University of the region. In fact, there had been efforts on the part of the Association ever since it came into existence in 1979 to hold a session at the Gauhati University. We are thankful to the authorities of the Gauhati University for inviting the ninth session and organising it in an excellent manner.

Shri Bhisma Narain Singh, the Governor of Assam, inaugurated the session. Professor D. P. Barooah, Vice-Chancellor, and Professor J. N. Phukan, Head, Department of History, Gauhati University did the Association a great honour as Chairman of the organising committee and Local Secretary respectively for the session. It was presided over by Professor Bhupen Qanungo of the North-Eastern Hill University. More than one hundred and fifty delegates attended the session in which eighty-five research papers were presented and discussed.

The present volume is the proceedings of the ninth session of the North East India History Association held at the Gauhati University on November 3-5, 1988. I am thankful to my colleagues Dr. J. P. Singh, Dr. O. P. Kejariwal, Dr. M. S. Sangma and Dr. D. R. Syiemlieh for the help in selecting and editing the papers and publishing the volume. We are also thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for the generous financial assistance extended to the Association.

J. B. Bhattacharjee

General Secretary,

North East India History Association.

Shillong

The 25 August 1989

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A Historiographical Study of some aspects of Cheitharol Kumbaba

N. Lokendra Singh

Cheitharol Kumbaba, as the editors of the book have clearly spelt out, is the Royal diary or chronicle which the palace scribes in the 'Pandit Loishang' (Department of Pandits) have maintained over the centuries. The book contains entries of events and happenings in Manipur from 33 A.D. to 1966. The entries are mostly short, apparently unconnected from each other and predominantly deal with the important activities of the king ranging from tours to wars and other significant administrative policies. There are, however, a number of other recorded events which pertain to almost every aspects of the society.

Scholars in Manipur and outside who work on Manipuri studies are generally critical and sometimes doubtful about the authenticity of the contents of the book particularly of the pre-15th century period. The doubts are more on the question of the 'dating and chronology'. They also question the period and time when the process of actual recording started. The latter question is crucial because it questions the very authenticity of the chronicle as a source of history. As early as 1967, E. Nilakantasinh had summed up the opinions of different scholars in the preface to the same book'. One group believed that the process of recording started in 33 A.D. itself. This theory was questioned and generally doubted with the argument that had proper recordings been done, the records of 37 kings from Pakhangba (33-158 A.D.) to Ningthou Khomba (1432-1467) would have far exceeded than the mere 8 pages that is there in *Cheitharol Kumbaba*.² From linguistic point of view also it was pointed out that the entries of the first 37 kings could not have been recorded in the corresponding time period. The second group believed that recording started during the reign on King Kyamba (1467 - 1508).³ This group argued that the Cheithaba system,

system, which was a very important feature of Kumbaba started during Kyamba's region. The third group believed that regular recording started during the reign of Bhagyachandra (1759-1798)⁴. This argument was based on an entry in Kumbaba which read as "Kumbaba which was lost was again revived"⁵. It is possible that when Kumbaba was lost from the palace due to some reason or the other, other copies of Kumbaba from outside were brought for the use of the palace. Some people might have maintained duplicate copy also. It is also possible that Kumbaba was rewritten or revised using many other sources. But the fact remained that Kumbaba continued to be maintained properly and the scholars are more or less convinced on this point.

The other important problem is that of dating of events. Various 'eras' like Kalyabda, Shakabda, Chandrabda etc. are used in different periods in dating the entries. For the colonial period shakabda was used in dating the events. A solar Calendar would have to be used to convert the dates into Christian era. Still the problem of accurate dating would continue. Even during such a late period as that of 1st half of 20th century there are errors in dating e.g. Pothang system (some sort of forced labour) as per Durbar resolution and other archival sources was abolished on 13, June 1913, whereas in Kumbaba Pothang is recorded to have been abolished in the month of March/April (Lamda) 1912⁶.

The third problem is that since the Pandit Loishang and the scribes represented the interest of the rulers, they did not leave any evidence to show the real dialectical relationship between the rulers and the ruled. For the colonial period, there is not even a single entry to make out the dialectical relationship between the Raja and the colonial officers. Cheitharol Kumbaba projects the colonial authority and the king as one homogeneous group. The ruling group has been well projected

as the enlightened protector of their subject people. There are many entries speaking well of the kings and the colonial officer's charity works like distribution of free food during famine, exemption of the people from taxes in time of crisis like flood, famine, harvest failure, sickness etc.

Despite all these limitations, Cheitharol Kumbaba continues to be an important source material for writing the history of Manipur. The various entries, reflecting the socio-economic, political, ecological, religio-cultural and many other aspects of Manipur society throughout the centuries could still be properly used through a scientific methodology. Application of the knowledge and tools of folklore and anthropology would help in the comprehension of the detailed contents of Cheitharol Kumbaba.

The entries pertaining to the colonial period are certainly more authentic. The colonial officers took special interests in Kumbaba and the process of its recording. Two entries in Kumbaba speak of the colonial policy. The first entry runs as "The year 1814 shakabda (1892) Taoriya and sharang, the two pandits were asked to maintain and continue the recording of Cheitharol Kumbaba". The 2nd entry for the year 1912 runs "on the instruction of the Raja, Cheitharol Kumbaba has been translated into English". It may again be interesting to point out that in 1946, C. Gimson, the then Political Agent, Manipur State Durbar of the time to bear the expenses of the publication of the Manipuri and English versions of Cheitharol Kumbaba. Whether the money was used in the task or not is uncertain.

The portion of the book which deals with the colonial period could be broadly analysed in three phases:

- (i) 1891-1907 : The regency period of direct British administration when Raja Chura-chand was a minor.

- (ii) 1907-1916 : When Churachand was involved in the administration of the state, in the capacity of President, Manipur State Durbar.
- (iii) 1916-1941 : A period when Raja Churachand was removed from the Presidentship of the Durbar and remained only as a *de jure* Maharaja of the state.

The records of entries during the 17 year period (1891-1907) basically deal with the reorganisation of the new colonial administrative system, particularly in revenue, land tenure, judiciary, trade etc. The details given in Cheitharol Kumbaba on the above issues more or less tally with the information available in official Administrative Reports. Some very interesting entries of events during this period are the holding of a number of 'Melas' (fair), Shagol Kangjei (Polo), 'Hiyang Tannaba' (Boat race), 'Lai Haraoba' (Merry making of the forest deities) etc. on the initiative of the colonial rulers, most of the occasions with generous donation from them. All these measures were probably meant to reconcile the Manipuri masses to the new regime.

The entries for the period from 1907 to 1916 reflected the increasing role of the Raja in the administrative affairs. His tours of the different villages and propitiation of the numerous deities (Lais) formed a major subject of concern for the recorders. The assertion of Raja Churachand Singh in politico-administrative affairs could be seen in some of the entries in Kumbaba e.g. in 1910, a person named Shambanduram was whipped in the market place for disrespecting the Raja. In 1912, 32 persons from Thoubal village were imprisoned for refusing to pay 'Panch Napet' (a tax to benefit the barbers)¹⁰. Some noticeable entries during this period are about the extortions and taking of bribes by the followers and associates of the Raja from the masses. A good number

of crimes like 'robbery' (Shagun Touba) and murder were recorded. These informations could be well verified by evidences in archival sources¹¹. The state official particularly the revenue clerks and 'Lakpas' used to extort 'free supply of food and lodging (Amin Chakthak) and 'sentry duty at night' (Yairek sentry). Kumbaba records that in 1916 in Nambol village one official Thangjam Bokul was stabbed by one Yumnam Roton Singh¹², when the former had asked for 'amin Chakthak'¹². It was also recorded that in 1917, Shri Kulamjat Singh of Atom Khuman village stabbed and killed one Leiphon for forcibly conscripting him to the 'Police Siphai' (army)¹³.

For the period from 1916 to 1941, Cheitharol Kumbaba reflects the Raja to have been deeply involved in the socio-religious and cultural life of the people. It may be interesting to point out that since the Raja was deprived of effective political power, after he was removed from the Presidentship of the Durbar in 1916, he was probably interested in consolidating his hold over the religio-cultural life of the people, for which he was the accepted leader. There are numerous entries of the Maharaja organising sankirtans, Raslilas, and other festivals like Jhulon, Rathjatra Holi etc. No wonder, the 1st half of the 20th century Manipur produced hundreds of cultural personalities like Pung (Mirdangam) players, sankirtan singers, Pena (lyre) singers, etc. Pandit Kh. Chandrasekhar has so far compiled and edited short biographical notes of about 300 cultural personalities in 5 volumes. Because of the conservatism that crept in, the society was increasingly becoming heirarchicalised, the Brahmins and the Rajkumars being on the top of the ladder and the masses on the other end of it. the condition of the 'Lois' worsened so much so that most of the cheithabas were selected from amongst the lois. The non-Hindu hill people and the Muslims were gradually segregated and there are numerous entries which show the policy of the religious leaders

to segregate them from the common Meitheis. Even within the common masses, clans and families competed among each other for superior status often reflected on ritual days. On ritual days there were set places in the mandaps where persons with their assigned status and dress could sit. The records of the period also show the expanding social bases of the king by increasing the number of title holders. All title holders were socially accepted privileged group. The king also gave sanctions to a number of people to use the traditional dress of nobles like 'Khamen chatpa' (a kind of dhoti used by aristocrats), 'Reshom furit' (velvet shirt) Shana Khuji (golden bangles) etc. Any commoner allowed by the king to wear such dresses was taken as a close associate of the Raja and thus respected. Apart from these broad trends there are certain other issues which could be examined like the numerous entries on 'Cattle lifting' (Shan huranba) and 'Robbery' (Shagun Touba) which reflect the socio-economic life of the people of the contemporary time. There was only one entry on land dispute, which showed that there were relatively less conflicts and tensions over land and also that the land market was very limited.

Finally, what is very fascinating is the over all ethos, values and outlook of the Raja and his court in particular and the contemporary society in general. There were numerous entries of many unusual happenings like the sight of 'Dhuma-ketu' (meteors), suicide particularly by 'Thouriyamba' (hanging) etc. All these entries were recorded because they had a bearing to the ideology and the functioning of the state. Numerous entries on milching of 108 cows for rain, reading of scriptures for rain etc. showed that the ruling group and the general masses were fairly traditional in their outlook. The study and analyses of Cheitharol Kumbaba would thus be relevant to the investigation of any historical theme of the contemporary time.

Notes & References

1. L. Ibungohal Singh & N. Khelchandra Singh, **Cheitharol Kumbaba**, Imphal, 1967, PP. III-IV.
2. *ibid.*
3. *ibid.*
4. *ibid.*
5. *ibid*,p.9.
6. *ibid*, p. 558.
7. *ibid*, p. 502.
8. *ibid*, p. 555.
9. *ibid*, p. 549.
10. *ibid*, p. 555.
11. It may be interesting to point out that the Political Agent, H.W.G. Cole, in a letter to the Chief Secretary to the Chief-Commissioner of Assam, dated August 1914 reported that the king and certain persons in authority from him enjoyed extra sources of income in the form of 'pranamis' or 'Salamis' from persons appointed to state offices. The income of the king from such sources had been in the "neighbourhood of Rs. 20,000/- per annum". In another letter, Lt. Col. Cole wrote about the possible involvement of some of the close relatives of the Raja with a number of cattle thieves which abound in the valley. Cheitharol Kumbaba also reflects severe social oppression by the state officials.
12. *ibid*, p. 572.
13. *ibid*, p. 573.