

Political Relationship of the Meiteis with the Hill Tribes of Manipur before 1891 A.D.

(A Historical Perspective)

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Manipur is a land of heterogenous population. Physically Manipur is divided into the valley and the hill ranges. The hills are inhabited by the hill tribes belonging to the Nagas and the Kukis Chin tribes while the valley is inhabited by the Meiteis. The Meiteis are also not a homogeneous group. During the historical period the valley of Manipur was occupied by different ethnic and tribal groups. At a particular stage of time all of them had enjoyed independent status. Later on, they were all assimilated to the social and political fabric of the Ningthouja led Meitei fold.

The relationship of the Meiteis with the hill tribes of Manipur means the relationship of the Ningthoujas with the hill tribes. This relationship is reflected in the myths, legends and folklores of these people. The relationship of the Meiteis with the hill tribes began from the time of Nongda Lairel Pakhangba, the first historical king of Manipur who ruled from 22 A.D. It is mentioned that when Pakhangba tried to occupy the throne of Kangla, the Tangkhuls of the north eastern side of the valley followed him and arrived at Kangla.¹ Upto the 15th century, the Meiteis did not take up any serious measures against the hill tribes. Because, they were busy in the annexation and consolidation of all valley based principalities to their kingdom. They only raided those villages and collected the tributes symbolically to indicate their control over them. The first mentioned occupation of tribal village by the Meiteis was the occupation of Khoibu, a Maring village situated in the Manipur-Myanmar border (Chandel district) by king Sameirang (508-568).² He used this villages as a military outpost for their further expansion to the Kabow valley.

In the second half of the 15th century, the Meiteis were free from their internal problems in the valley. They changed their former policy toward the hill tribes. Many tribal villages situated at the foothills of Manipur like Chiru, Koireng, Chthe, Anal, Maring, Kom, Namphau, Purum and Mantak were brought under the administrative control of the Meiteis.³

From these villages, the Meiteis collected tributes regularly. The tributes varied from tribe to tribe. Though they collected the tributes regularly, they never tried to interfere in the internal affairs of the tribal villages. The village chiefs enjoyed maximum autonomy in their internal management if they gave the tributes regularly to the king.

In the first half of the 17th century, the boundary of Manipur was extended from the Gwai to the Chindwin, from the Maram hills to the Tuvai.⁴ Many tribal villages of surrounding hill ranges were conquered and brought under their control. But from these tribal villages the Meiteis collected tributes occasionally. From them they demanded men and home or forest produce only which they needed from time to time. If these villages failed to give the said demands, the Meiteis continued their former policy of raiding the villages. Sometimes they also brought captives in large number. For these captives the kings made arrangement for their settlement in the valley. This type of tribal villages were known as *Ayokpa* (adopted) or *Kei* according to their work and duty.⁵ To them the Meiteis kings extended the *Lallup* service like other valley people.

Upto this period, most of the hill tribal chiefs enjoyed fairly large measure of autonomy and authority in the management of their internal affairs. The Meitei kings did not interfere in such affairs. The administrative guidance or supervision was done through the office of *Lambus*. The Meitei superiority was symbolized by the annual and occasional tributes to the Meitei king.⁶

The reign of king Charairongba (1698-1709) was very important in the history of Meitei-tribal relationship. He established a new department called '*Haomacha Loishang*', a department of hill people, to deal with the tribes of Manipur. According to N. Khelchandra Singh this Loisang was established by king Irengba (984-1074) and subsequently reorganized by king Charairongba. The duty of this department was to maintain contact with the hill people and organized the festival of *Mera Haojongba*. All the hill people belong to this department were forced to attend *Lallup* service.⁷

The region of Garibaniwaz (1709-1741) was also very important. During his reign the power of Manipur was extended up to Kabow valley and he fought with the Tripuris in the Barak basin. He took up strict measures to control all routes of communication. He imposed Meitei political hegemony over all tribal villages. He ordered the rendering of the feudal service i.e. *Lallup* by all tribal villages of the hill ranges. Garibaniwaz was the first king of Manipur who interfere in the internal affairs of the tribal villages. For the first time he introduced the offices of *Khunbu*, *Khullakpa* and *Luplakpa* in these villages. *Khunbu* is the

owner of the village. *Khullakpa* is the administrator and *Laplakpa* is the assistant. The use of both *Khunbu* and *Khullakpa* in place of Ningthou or chief was a very significant transformation in their relationship with the hill people. Not only this, some other offices like *Mantri* and *Senapati* were also introduced in some tribal villages like the villages of Anal, Tangkhul, Mao and Kabuis. Though the persons to these offices were appointed from their own villages, they worked as the agent of the Meitei king. The office of *Lambu*, who dealt with the tribes as tribute collector, we also continued to exist.

To check the rebellious nature of the tribes, Maharaja Garibniwaz followed the policy of shifting tribal village from one to another like the village of Purum to the Tarao area. Besides, he also friendship with the tribes by extending many privileges to the *Khullakpas*. Some of them were given the honor of riding the elephants and use of Palanquin provided by the state. From that time, in the history of Manipur, there were records of rejection of the Meitei political hegemony by any tribes of Manipur. The tribes became friends and gave valuable support to the king whenever he sent military expeditions outside Manipur as well as their liberation from the Burmese occupation (1819-1826).⁸

During the reign of Bhagyachandra (1753-98) the Kukis, in the south, had started penetrating into Manipur. The king sent an expeditionary force toward Tuiva in the Manipur-Mizoram border and defeated the Kuki intruders and forced them to recognize his suzerainty. A stone inscription was raised to mark their victory over the Kukis.⁹ That stone inscription is now in the Mizorsm State Museum.

After the liberation of Manipur from the Burmese in 1826 AD, the kings of Manipur became an ally with the British. Maharaja Gambhir Singh (1826-34) wanted to have a direct link with the British of Assam. Because of this, he decided to open a road through the Naga hills. To achieve his objective he fought many battles with the chiefs of the Naga villages. It is said that Gambhir Singh conquered 76 Naga villages and set up two stone footprints in memory of his victory. There are two other stones with his footprint on the bank of a small pond, east of the cartroad, in the Kohima.¹⁰ After this in 1835 AD the forest between the Doyeng and Dhunsiri formed the boundary between Manipur and Assam¹¹ Again, in 1842, a vague boundary, between Manipur and Naga Hills was laid down. This line is known as Bigge-Gordon line. But the Angamis had little regarded for this line. Therefore, there was a long standing boundary dispute between Manipur and Naga hills in the north. After the Anglo Manipur war of 1891 AD, there was a great change in the territorial

possession of Manipur towards this frontier and as a result, the northern boundary of Manipur was confined to the Mao. Since then there was no loss or gain in the territorial possession of Manipur and Mao continued to be the northern boundary of Manipur.¹²

Thus, the relationship of the Meiteis with the hill tribes may be divided into four phases – viz. (1) from 33 AD to 1467 AD. (2) 1467 AD to 1652 AD. (3) 1647 AD to 1748 AD. (4) 1826 AD – 1891 AD.

In the first phase, the Meiteis were engaged themselves in the consolidation of many valley based principalities of Manipur. They had no time to subjugate the tribal villages. In the second phase, the Meitei king extended their power from Maram to Tuiva, from Gwai to Chindwin. All tribal villages, were brought under the jurisdiction of the Meiteis. In the third phase, the kings of Manipur made the tribes their trusted friends and gave many facilities like other Meitei nobles. In the fourth phase, the kings of Manipur tried to extend their power beyond Jiri and Mao and even controlled many Naga villages lying between Dhunsiri river and Mao.

Notes and Reference

1. Gangmumei Kabui; *History of Manipur*. Vol I, p. 84.
2. *Ibid*, p. 104.
3. *Ibid*, pp. 205-26.
4. Gangmuneis Kabui, *op. cit.* p. 206.
5. "Relation between the rules of Kangla and the surrounding ethnic tribes :” A seminar paper presented by N. Indramani at seminar on ‘Kangla, the Domain of Culture 2005. Oct., 23-24th Orgd. By TMRC, Imphal.
6. *NEIHA 1990 Proceeding*, p. 142.
7. Hareshwar Goswami, p. 289.
8. G. Kabui, *Op. cit.*, pp. 240-42 also see *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, pp. 62-69.
9. *Ibid*, p. 274. *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, pp. 135.
10. I.C. Higgins : *Notes on Meitei Belief and Custom* edited by John Parratt. Pp. 58.
11. L. Chandramani : *The Boundaries of Manipur*, p. 41.
12. *Ibid*, p. 42.