

Slavery in Pre-British Manipur : A Historical Survey

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Slavery, defined in classical Roman law as an institution "whereby someone is subject to the dominium of another country to nature"¹, is perhaps, too harsh a name for the mild form of this institution as found in Manipur until recently². Slavery in Manipur should not be in same rank as that in Brazil, the West Indies, Turkey or Arabia³. However, slavery of its local variety has been functioning in the pre-British Manipur.

In early and simple societies, the procurement of slaves depended above all, on warfare⁴. The frequent wars and raids among the Meetei clans, viz., Mangang (Ningthouja), Luwang, Khumal, Angom, Moirang, etc, and the hill villages, had resulted in the enslavement of the people of the principality or territory or the hill village defeated or attacked. The Ningthouja Kings, who proved the ablest of them all in the later centuries, captured the defeated and made them settle in the various parts of the valley as Raja's slave⁵. Children captured from the hill villages were sold as slaves⁶. Among the Nagas, occasionally, captives in battle were made slaves, but more frequently they were killed for their heads⁷. The increase in the number of slaves was surely a result, not a cause of these wars and raids. There would be no justification in assuming that they waged wars against each other because they needed slave labour.

Economic backwardness of the masses was another important factor for the process of enslavement in Manipur. In times of general scarcity or individual distress, the poor people sold themselves or their children either temporarily or permanently, for food⁸, for funeral expenses⁹, or for bride price among the Nagas¹⁰. Hill people, occasionally, sold themselves, but they were sold more frequently by their relatives¹¹. There is not a single document, which gives the names of the

sellers and buyers, but it is evident from R. Brown¹³ that documents were made when the sale was finalised.

Indebtedness often led people to serve the creditor as slaves in conformity with the rule regarding debt that when a sum of money had been borrowed and not returned within a year, the sum due was double the sum borrowed¹⁴. As this was the law, the man in debt confessed his inability to pay and agreed to serve the creditor as interest on the original debt until such time as the debt could be paid¹⁴. As for example, *Asalba* worked for the creditor in lieu of the interest on the money paid to him¹⁵. In such cases, when the claim of the creditor was not settled and no arrangement was made, the debtor and his family might be seized and sold¹⁶. Sometimes, as among the Kabuis, men accepted slavery voluntarily to pay off a debt or otherwise¹⁷. Now, a man may serve the creditor, but there is nothing to regard him as a slave, since he is giving service in lieu of interest on the original money paid to him.

In Manipur, criminals were made slaves in certain cases. In case of theft, when the culprit was caught but the goods were not recovered in full he and his family might be seized and sold until the stolen goods were recovered¹⁸. In adultery cases, when the claims for damages could not be realised, the same might happen¹⁹.

In any society, the actual number of slaves was rarely known²⁰. In Manipur, though the number of slaves owned by the individuals was not known, the number of Raja's slaves was about 1,200 or 1,500 and this was classified into three categories : (i) *Ayokpa*, (ii) *Tengkul*, and (iii) *Kei*²¹. The *Ayokpas* were allowed to cultivate one *pari* of land each (about two & half acres) and rendered 'Lallup' services²². Lallup is an important social institution which played a vital role in the Manipur society. 'Lal' literally means war and 'Lup' organisation. Thus the literal meaning of Lallup is "organisation for war". Since there was no regular standing army in the state in the early time, it was the duty of every able-bodied man, who was between the age of 17 and 60, to serve the state as 'lalmey' or soldier for ten days out of every 40 days. In peace times, this 'lalmey' was engaged in public works. After the establishment of "Manipur Levy" by Raja Gambhir Singh Lallup became a purely civil organisation. Some British administrator described it as 'forced labour' on the ground

that those worked in the lallup were paid nothing. Though all the members of the "Lallup" had to work for the state without salary, they were given a plot of arable land of $2\frac{1}{2}$ acres each. So, it may be regarded as a tax paid in the form of labour to the State. For the Tangkul chief duty was gardening. They sometimes also traced stones and made vessels of that material²³. The Keis, who numbered about 200 families, cultivated chiefly for the Raja²⁴ and pounded rice for Raja's household²⁵. Hodson writes, "This work of the Keis is not confined to the supply of rice, but they may be said to embrace any work or the supply of any article the Raja chooses"²⁶. Besides, they also had to do their 'Lallup' works. During that time, they were chiefly employed in making brooms and baskets for use in Raja's stables²⁷. There was another class of slaves known as 'Phungnai'. This was divided into 'Hidakphalba' and 'Potsangba'. The 'Hidakphalba' attended to Raja's hooka and the Potsangba spread the cloth for sitting on²⁸ and took care of the Raja's property²⁹. In the hills, the system of working for the village chiefs closely resembled that existed in the valley, but was much less onerous in its nature in the valley³⁰. As in virtually all societies before the nineteenth century agriculture was of far greater importance than industry and any assessment of the importance of slaves as producers must concentrate on agriculture. Even though the evidence for the use of slaves in agriculture in pre-British Manipur is sparse, it may clearly be taken for granted that wealthy farmers would have slaves to assist them as it is evident from the fact that the slaves were chiefly employed in cultivation. As regards the slaves owned by the individuals, it is indicated that they were chiefly employed in cultivation³¹. Now, it may be concluded that though the slaves were not exclusively used for economic enterprises or the economic life of the time did not depend upon them, slavery was always connected with the idea of the compulsory labour and the basis of it was economic.

It appears to be general opinion that the slaves in Manipur were on the whole well treated. They lived in the same house with their masters, ate with them, and were like the members of the same family³². They did not hesitate to run away when they were ill-treated. This caused a scandal and was carefully avoided³³. Slaves in the hills were not perhaps so well treated as in the plain, but there were many checks

on their ill-treatment there also. If the slaves were not satisfied with their conditions, they ran to some other house where slaves were better treated. The new master made a point of paying the price of the slave to the previous master not in full³⁴. This would have had a certain softening influence upon the institution of slavery, since the running away implies some limitation of the absolute power and control of the master over the slave and provided a mechanism through which flight could be accepted as legitimate without directly challenging the absoluteness of an owner's power over his property. It may be noted that the slave could not become free simply by running away, but exchanged a new master for the one who had treated him intolerably.

It was formerly a practice that when there was a change of rulers, the slaves of those who held office were seized and divided among the new rulers. All this caused a great hardship to the slaves. Raja Chandrakriti did not allow the slaves to be divided among his officers, but they were made to work for him alone³⁵. This is the clear indication that the slaves owned by the kings had considerable freedom.

The geographical features of Manipur also might have presented a check on the master's severity towards their slaves as its hills provided the refuge of some of absconding slaves. The slaves in the valley often absconded to the hills, where they concealed themselves in the hill villages, but they were apt there to be apprehended, they usually preferred passing into the British territory, where they were at once free³⁶. This should be seen as the effect of dissatisfaction against ill-treatment by particular masters rather than opposition to the institution of slavery as such.

Among the Luhupas (Tangkhus), the idea of slavery was hateful to them to such a degree that on the occasion of their inability to release their children in the resistance against the Ningthouja Kings and sold as slaves, they came down from the hills, slew them all and carried off their heads. Since then there had not been any attempt to enslave any Luhupa³⁷. But there is no reason to suppose that the reaction of the Luhupas to the institution and the running away of slaves would have abolished slavery.

The attitude of intellectuals towards slavery did have interesting consequences. Slavery of any form was against the liberal and enlightened programme of the British government,

Sir James Jonstone, the political Agent of Manipur from 1877 to 1886, made a strong remonstrance to the Durbar against slavery.³⁸ The Chief Commissioner of Assam initiated a proposal for the abolition of slavery in Manipur, if possible, before the death of Maharaja Chandrakriti (1850-85) or when his son, Surchandra, the Jubaraj, came to the throne³⁹, and consequently slavery was abolished in Manipur on 29th April, 1892 with the setting up of the 'Native Rule' by the British after the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891. According to Gangmumei Kabui,⁴⁰ "Though officially slavery was abolished, it continued to exist in the rural areas throughout the period of British paramourty in the state (1892-1947)". It would be interesting to find the report of its residual continuance in the rural areas of Manipur even after its formal abolition.

References

1. *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, Vols. 13 & 14, 1972, London, p. 307.
2. R. Brown, *The Statistical Account of the Valley of Manipur*, Reprinted, 1975, Delhi, p. 91.
3. Sir James Jonstone, *My Experience in Manipur and Naga Hills*, 1971, Delhi, p. 119.
4. *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, p. 309
5. Nandalal Sharma, *Meitrabak*, Imphal, 1960, p. 25.
6. Brown, p. 42.
7. *Ibid*, p. 46
8. *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, p. 64.
9. "Once a little girl named Nowbee came to me. Her mother sold her to pay her father's funeral expenses". Jonstone, p. 118.
10. "For instance a Naga (a very common case), marries a girl of another Naga village, thereby incurring a debt of forty rupees to the father, that being the price of Naga bride. The man not being able to pay, his father-in-law says, 'Sell yourself and pay me'. This is done....". *Ibid*, p. 118.
11. McCulloch, *An Account of the valley of Munneepore*, 1859, Calcutta. p. 24.
12. "...When a slave is sold, a party other than the seller himself binds as security for the owner to refund the money given in the event of the slave's death within a time agreed on...." *Ibid.*, p. 30.

13. Hodson, p. 89.
14. Brown, p. 91.
15. McCulloch, p. 24.
16. Brown, p. 91.
17. Ibid., p. 52.
18. Brown, p. 91
19. Ibid.,
20. *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, op. cit.
21. Ibid., p. 91.
22. Ibid., p. 14.
23. Hodson, p. 64.
24. Brown, p. 14.
25. Hodson, p. 64.
26. Ibid., p. 65.
27. Brown, p. 14.
28. Ibid., p. 13.
29. Hodson, p. 64.
30. Brown, p. 14.
31. Ibid., p. 52.
32. McCulloch, p. 24.
33. Brown, p. 92.
34. McCulloch, p. 25 ; Brown, p. 31.
35. Ibid., p. 92.

Manipur is a hilly state which lies on the north-eastern border of India. It extends between 23°50' and 25°30' latitude north and between 93°10' and 94°30' longitude east. It is bounded on the north by the state of Nagaland, on the south-west by Mizoram, on the east by Burma and on the west by Cachar district of Assam. This territory consists of a small valley encircled by a chain of hills which measured about 40% of the total area.

36. McCulloch, p. 25.
37. Brown, p. 42.
38. Jonstone, p. 118.
39. Reproduced in Dr. Chandramani's, *Manipur Itihas*, 1970, Imphal, p. 200.
40. Gangmumei Kabui, "Social and Religious Reform Movement in Manipur in the 19th and the 20th Centuries," *Bulletin of the Division of History*, 1974-75, Centre of P. G. Studies, J. N. University, Canchipur, Imphal, p. 63.