

Famines in the Valley of Manipur as Recorded in the *Cheitharol-Kumbaba* (16th to 18th Century A. D.)

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The *Cheitharol Kumbaba*,¹ a Royal Chronicle or a Royal Diary of Manipur, is a rich source of material for reconstructing the history of Manipur. The study of this Royal Chronicle is not only essential for political history but also yields useful information for the reconstruction of socio-economic history of Manipur. This paper attempts to discuss and analyse several causes of famines in Manipur from the 16th to the 18th Century A. D. and the relief provided by the then reigning kings as recorded in *Cheitharol Kumbaba*.

The study takes into consideration the peculiar physiographic condition of the state. The most significant feature in Manipur's geography is the division of the state into two unequal but distinct geographical units, namely, the hill tract of young, unconsolidated sedimentary rocks and the small central plain of recent alluvial filling. The central plain or the valley of Manipur is the most striking topographic feature in a mountainous country like Manipur. It is oval in shape. The hills cover 7,900 square miles and the valley about 700 square miles. The valley is surrounded by mountains. The mountain ranges are higher on the north and gradually diminish in height as they reach the southern part of Manipur. The valley also slopes from north to south. In the northern part it rises 2750 feet above the sea level and in the southern part it is 2600 feet above in the sea level. So, the rivers in the valley run southwards. They originate in the hills towards the north. Important among them are Imphal, Iril, Thoubal, Nambul, etc. The Nambul river joins the Loktak Lake and the water of the lake is drained into Imphal river through a short channel called Kordak. The Imphal river is known by different names such as Turel Achouba, Manipur river which falls into Chindwin river. When the rainfall is unusually high and heavy, the rivers in the valley could not drain the water away, and it resulted in flood.

Usually, famines in the valley are caused by floods. *Cheitharol-Kumbaba* records eleven floods and several cases of excessive rainfall and inundation causing crop failures and great distress to the people. It refers to the entire valley being completely flooded and to the death of many people. The dreadful famines of 1715² and 1775³ were the consequences of the devastating floods. The latter

was so severe that one Shangpai of paddy was sold at a very high price that no one could afford to buy and people were seen sitting on the roofs of their respective houses. According to Captain E. W. Dun, ⁵ "The rainfall of the valley appears to be very considerable. In the valley, it does not exceed 60 inches". From above it is evident that if the rainfall in the valley happens to be much more than 60 inches, this is liable to the cause of flood and consequently famine.

Rice, as it is even to-day, is the only staple food of the people. This crop is raised in the summer months and reaped in autumn. Since this crop constitutes the principal source of food supply to the population, the failure of this (Kharif) harvest usually resulted in famine in Manipur. Thus one of the most important causes of famine in the valley where rainfall played a crucial role in determining single crop yields on which people depended for their food supply, is almost invariably excessive rains. Even today, when much efforts have been made to keep flood under control, the rivers in the valley, namely, Iril, Imphal, Kongba, Thoubal, etc. often swell to spread devastation, misery and famine.

In *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, there are numerous references to droughts which also caused famines both in the valley and the hills. At the time of droughts efforts were made to irrigate rice fields from the rivers and *mantras* were recited and many rain *puya* were performed for getting rain. T. C. Hodson ⁶ has noticed the Hindu ceremonies performed by the Brahmanas, such as the milking of one hundred and eight milch cows before the temple of Govindaji or at the presence of the images of Radha and Krishna at river bank. But the great characteristic of the rites of the Hindu system is the management by the *maiba* (Priest), the *Piba* (head of the clan) or in more important cases by the King. ⁷ The hill, which rises to the east of the valley and which is called Nongmaiching, is the scene of a rain compelling ceremony. On the upper slopes there is a stone which bears a fanciful resemblance to an umbrella, and the King used to climb there in state to take water from a deep spring below and pour it over this stone, obviously a case of imitative magic. It is a tradition that to erect an iron umbrella on the hill was an almost sure method of getting rain when occasion needed. ⁸ In dire extremity human sacrifices were made in the olden times. ⁹ The Khuman Ningthou (Chief of the Khuman clan) worshipped the tribal deity Okporen on behalf of the clan whenever rain was needed. ¹⁰ In doing so, he had to abstain from all sexual intercourse before the Puya. To purify him water is poured over his head

by a virgin from a jar which is promptly broken.

Besides these pujas, there are number of traditional rituals practised in Meitei society for getting rain. When people felt the sufferings of droughts, men and women dividing into two separate groups went out naked at night singing aloud songs for getting rain.¹¹ If rain falls to the land, where there is distress or scarcity of water to the extent that it could cause flood and bring its water level up to the top of the *Langjing hill* and consequently carry away women and children (or old women and man) of the Patsoi village with the flood, it would receive the people and water would be in plenty. Then, let the sacred drops of rain carry away the immoralities. Another tradition is that the women at night gathered in a field outside the village or the town, stripped themselves and threw their 'dhan' pounders into a nearby pool of the river and made their way home by byways.¹²

The failure of rain compelled the people to perform all sort of ceremonies in their respective ancestral shrines. For instance, in 1684 puja of Lai Puthiba was performed.¹³ In 1688, when there was a threat of drought (in the valley) Yenkhom Maitek soon worshipped rain publicly or privately.¹⁴ The dreadful famines of 1634 and 1760 in Manipur were the consequences of the terrible droughts.

Cheitharol Kumbaba records the occurrence of earthquake also but not with a definite evidence of destruction of the valley of Manipur during the period under study. However, there is a tradition in the society to shout Nga-Chak or Chak-Nga (Nga means fish ; Chak means rice), when earthquake occurred, in order to save their food supplies from the demon who was shaking the earth¹⁵ and from the notion that it would have an effect on their food.¹⁶

There are also ample references to small-pox and cattle epidemics. *Cheitharol Kumbaba* refers to small-pox epidemic in 1520, 1531, 1661, 1720 and 1785, of which the last one lasted for two years and was most severe. Thousands of lives were lost. The same source also refers to wide spread cattle epidemics in 1633 and 1670 and records the death of large number of cattle. This would have certainly affected cultivation to a great extent resulting in famine.

Cheitharol Kumbaba mentions the destruction of paddy by locusts in 1580 and 1687. The latter was so destructive that there was wide spread famine. The destruction of crops by birds, deer and wild animals necessitated the employment of field-watchers. Hodson¹⁷ writes when the rice begins to ripe, it has to be watched

against the depredations of immense flights of birds. Deer and other wild animals also do a great deal of mischief, and against them precautions have to be taken.

The devastations of the valley by the frequent wars and raids by the Burmese, the *Kabaws*, a branch of Shans inhabiting the Kabaw valley lying between the present Indo-Burma border and the Chindwin river called Ningthee by the Meiteis, was one of the important causes. The first great invasion by the Burmese took place in 1755. This is still known among the Meiteis as the *Khunta-khanba*, primary or first devastation.¹⁸ Next, in 1758 Alompura in person attacked Manipur and remained 13 days in possession of the valley.¹⁹ After these initial Burmese invasion, according to Captain R. B. Pemberton,²⁰ the Burmese armies had swept the country many times from one extremity to the other with the apparent determination of extirpating a race. The successive Burmese invasions from the second half of the 18th century to the first quarter of the 19th century, would have certainly affected cultivation and thereby caused scarcity of food.

Last but not the least was the primitive cross-country communications. According to Dun,²¹ the roads were simple earthen banks and a little rain makes them slippery and cart traffic would soon make them impassable. The rivers in the valley also admit the passage of dug-out canoes carrying 15 to 20 mds each throughout the year except when streams are very low. But they always carry 5 to 6 mds. So, when some distant localities are affected by famine, it must be very difficult to supply food to the affected area. This is clearly indicated by the evidence from *Cheitharol Kumbaba* that in 1673, people of ten villages of Loi Achip of Langlong shifted to the Capital for relief from the reigning king.

Cheitharol Kumbaba records relief provided by the reigning kings themselves to the famine stricken people in cash and kind, sometimes, sitting on a slab in front of the palace gate. During the famine of 1715 and 1775 caused by floods, the reigning kings visited the market places to distribute rice to the poor and the weak, and in the latter, salt²² and sel;²³ every one received salt and one hundred sels. In the villages there were clubs named 'Singlup'. In the event of calamities, these clubs supplied food to the victims and looked after the seek.²⁴

In spite of relief stated above, people suffered a lot and the situation became so grave that crops had to be guarded vigilantly from thieves. Often people sold themselves or their children as slaves for food.²⁵ During the famine of 1715 mentioned elsewhere

'one phoupot' (one bag of rice) was sold at 45 sels and 15 phoupot could get a slave.²⁶ This was also a clear indication of hoarding by resourceful persons and selling of rice at high prices with a view to amass wealth and enslaving poor people. This also again shows the prevalence of feudal system of land ownership in the state and the exploitation of common masses in times of scarcity.

Although there are numerous references in *Cheitharol Kumbaba* to peace and prosperity, dredging of rivers, construction of bunds, irrigation of rice-fields from the rivers during the period under study, the valley of Manipur could not escape the violent anger of nature and was not free from natural calamities. From the beginning of the 16th century to the end of the 18th century A.D. famine occurred once in almost every twentyfour years.

Notes & References

1. *Cheitharol Kumbaba* transliterated from the archaic Manipuri scripts into the present scripts and edited by L. Ibungohal Singh and N. Khelchandra Singh in 1967.
2. *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, p. 63. 3. *Ibid*, p. 116.
4. One Shangbai is one basket which, according to R. Brown, *The Statistical Account of Manipur*, 1975 (Reprint), contains 60 (sixty) Pounds.
5. E. W. Dun, *Gazetteer of Manipur*, 1975, p. 10.
6. T. C. Hodson, *The Meitheis*, 1975 (Reprint), p. 108.
7. *Ibid*. 8. *Ibid*. 9. *Ibid*. 10. *Ibid*.
11. O. Bhogeshwor, *Thainagi Sheireng Neinaba* (1973), p. 25.
12. *Ibid* and also see T. C. Hodson, p. 108.
13. *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, p. 47. 14. *Ibid*, p. 42
15. Hodson, p. 120 16. Brown, p. 97.
17. T. C. Hodson, p. 42 18. Dun, p. 39 19. *Ibid*.
20. Captain R. B. Pemberton, *Report on the North-Eastern Frontier of British India*, (1835) 1965, p. 37
21. Dun, p. 9.
22. According to Pemberton, 'The salt is circular in shape and its weight is about $\frac{1}{8}$ seers', p. 31.
23. Sel is the indigeneous coin circulated in Manipur. According to R. Brown, 428 sels is equal to one British Rupee and its usual variation is between 420 & 450.
24. R. Brown, p. 92
25. *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, p. 64
26. *Ibid*, p. 63.