

Divine Kingship in Manipur

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Like in some other culturally advanced countries of South East Asia such as Cambodia, Thailand and Burma, the concept of divine kingship was also prevalent in Manipur. ¹ The cult emphasized that the king was an universal ruler who received the divine essence from a myraid of gods and goddesses with the Supreme Being as the pivotal figure. Here, myths, legends, folklore and other oral and literary sources of Manipur give valuable information.

Phamlon, a Meitei text, gives a comprehensive account of the coronation events which took place at different periods of history during the reign of three kings, namely, Tao-thing-mang (264-364 A. D.), Nao-thing-khong (663-763 A.D.) and Pamheiba alias Garibaniwas (1709-1748 A. D.). According to the text, during the time of coronation all the elaborate and mystical sacrifices were carried out through the agency of the Kangla Surung, a hole or cave or remnant of a dead volcano at Kangla, the permanent seat of the Meitei Kings. The text further states that the 'Kangla Surung' or the hole through which the coronation events were carried out, was an area where 'naofam' (placenta) and 'Naoyom' (amniotic membrane) of Lairen Peenaitaba Taret, the seven ancestors of the seven 'salais' or clans of the Meiteis, were buried. ² The same text goes on to tell that sitting on this seat called 'Melkhom-Yaikhom' gave divine strength and power. Thus the cave or hole was bound up with tight security of the state. The text further mentions that the throne of the Meitei King was made up of the two horns of the Supreme Being (Taibung - Pan-Ba - Gee-Mapu Salailen Shidaba) who at one instance took the form of a carcass of a cow floating against the stream of the Imphal River. From such mythical literature in which the throne was associated even with the Lord of the Universe and the strict way of safeguarding the cave where coronation events were carrying out, we come to know the value and importance attached to the concept of divine kingship in the land of the Meiteis.

Besides, the yearly ceremony known as 'Chaithaba' also has the essence to fuse divinity with kingship. Usually the ceremony took place at the end of the Manipuri month, 'Lamta', which corresponded with the month of April. It was a day of powerful influence on the coming year and on it took place the selection of a man called 'Cheithaba Nupa' who bore all the sins of the king and the country. On this day, the man (*Cheithaba Nupa*) addressed the king before an essential multitudes in the following manner :

"O son of heaven, ruler of the kins, great and ancient Lord, Incarnation of God, the great Lord Pakhangba. Master of the bright Sun, Lord of the plain and Despot of the Hills, whose kingdom is from the hills on the east to the mountains on the West, the old year perishes, the new cometh. Now is the sun of the new year, and bright as the new sun shalt thou be, and mild withal as the Moon, May thy beauty and thy strength grow with the growth of the New Year. From to-day will I bear on my head all thy sins, diseases, misfortunes, shame, mischief, all that is aimed in the battle against thee, all that threatens thee, all that is bad and heartfelt for thee and thy kingdom".

Thus, the significance of this ceremony was to re-establish king's solidarity with the divine forces and the state.

This ceremony of 'Cheithaba' or yearly re-establishment of king's solidarity with divine power had certain similarity with its counter-part of Mesopotomia, where human order appeared contingent on divine favour. Just to get divine favour, the kings had to maintain constant contact with certain god-agents - some on local and regional levels and some on general and cosmic grounds.

Of these different god-agents with whom the Meitei Kings tried to keep continued relationship, Pakhangba, the ancestor of the Ningthouja, the ruling clan of the Meiteis, was the most prominent one. In many cases, Pakhangba was depicted in the form of a coiled snake which had divine power. Here, McCulloch writes, "The Raja's particular god was a species of snake called Pakhangba from which the royal family claims decent." 3" Hodson also mentions that "the snake (Pakhangba) is the external soul of the Raja, the piba of the Ningthouja clan and the head of the Meit-hais (Meiteis)". 4 Under strict supervision of the state, on a fixed day, the king in particular and the members of the royal family in general performed comprehensive religious rituals of the temple of Pakhangba. It seems that the common people were not allowed to worship Pakhangba, the principal God, who could bestow divinity on the worshipper. Thus the worship of Pakhangba by the

ordinary people other than the king and the royal blood might have been regarded as a political attempt for the highest office of the state.

Pakhangba who, according to Chietharol Kumbaba, a Meitei chronicle or royal dairy, ruled in the first century A.D., was the first historically known ruler of the Meiteis referred to as divine. The same text reveals that Pakhangba used to assume the form of god by day and used to be a man by night.⁵ The same royal dairy further mentions that one day Laisana, the queen of Pakhangba, asked the king whether he was having any illicit relation with another woman during the day time when he was not available to her.⁶ Pakhangba instantly replied that he could be either a 'lai' (god) or mei (man) at his sweet will as he descended from Heaven while his consort, Laisana could not act as 'Lai' or deity because she was the younger sister of Poireiton⁷, an immigrant from Khamnung-sawa.

Such an encomium mentioned in the text was largely associated with the concept of divine kingship. It is a well known fact that heaven has been regarded as the abode of gods and goddesses. Here, Cheitharol Kumbaba, the chronicle of the Meiteis, has clearly mentioned that Pakhangba came from heaven, the celestial kingdom of gods. To make it more precise and meaningful, some other texts like Krakthok Lamlen, and Leithak Leikharol reveal that Pakhangba was brought from heaven as 'nonglum' (egg of cloud or fertilising fluit of cloud) by Taoroinai, one of the chief deiteis of the Meiteis. To be true, such allegory given in these texts is full of classical literary fantasy which few people can understand. Some times these fantasies so overwhelm the memory picture that we tend to forget that these myths and legends give a bit of human experience, a bit of social facts and a bit of history. To be more precise, myths, legends, and folklore express people's memories woven into dreams and fantasies describing a social fact⁸. This is very much true in the case of Manipur. When we study these early sources of history, this much is clear that the words 'lai' or god, 'nongdon' or heaven, and 'nonglum' or fertilizing juice of cloud, have been purposefully used to elevate Pakhangba to the divine height for some specific reasons although the underlying ideas were expressed in highly fantastic poetic forms. From historical and sociological view points, it is quite clear that such literary practices were carried out mainly to meet the demand of the changing political and social life of the people.

It may be interesting to note that the present Manipuri or Meitei society has evolved as a result of the assimilation of the various tribal groups at the different stages of societal evolution⁹. Probably some of the tribal groups maintained political and cultural entities up to the 14th century A.D. From all credible Manipuri sources, the Luwang tribe appeared as a separate community at least since 949 A.D. ; the Khumans, 1278 A. D. ; and the Moirangs, 1354 A.D. However, from the time of Pakhangba, the first ruler of the Ningthoujas, who ruled in the 1st century A.D., the Ningthouja rulers, started making war for supremacy against the other tribes of the Imphal valley. Such a long drawn warfare launched by the Ningthouja princes against the other principality chiefs of the Valley ultimately led to the final subjugation of all the principalities of other tribal groups including the Luwang, Angom, Khuman and Moirang.

The process of political unification of the different groups of the Imphal valley under the hegemony of the Ningthouja rulers further demanded a change in the social structure which would surely act as a cementing force for welding the different tribal sections of the Imphal Valley and help developed a well organised Meitei nation.

A distinctive feature of the newly formed Meitei society was the institution of kingship. Now the king was no longer a mere chieftain of one particular clan or tribe or village of the early primitive society. He, unlike the early tribal chieftains whose function and duty were limited by the simple concept of a defender of the tribal community and father to the fellow tribal or clan or village members, had now become the real sovereign head of a vast territory exercising absolute authority over the various sections. In other words, the newly found concept of kingship had all the attributes of an universal ruler whose power and function were felt by all who lived within his territory. Now the king was both the commander-in-chief and chief-priest in his realm. Moreover, all the civil and military officials were appointed by and responsible to him. He had to enact laws in accordance with the custom and tradition of the country. Such a wider function of the king naturally demanded a change in his status.

However important his military might, however high his political status and however great his power and function as a king, until and unless his position was legitimized in the religious and cultural tradition, his throne would remain insecure. This is one of the reasons why myths were told and retold by the 'Maichous'

or local elites with a view to authenticate the authority of the Ningthouja rulers over his different subjects and to sanctify the throne in the religious and cultural traditions, since the dawn of literacy in the State. In this respect, some literary works such as 'Leishemlon', 'Nongkhongkoiba' and a host of other Meitei texts give a good picture as to how a cosmological religio-cultural system systematizes the constitutive symbolism of the Meitei society thereby developing a well organised administrative apparatus in the state with the cult of divine kingship.

An interesting detail about the religio-cultural system which systematizes the growing Meitei society was that the body of the Great Father, Atingkok Sidaba was divided into a number of parts. Of His body thus partaken off, the Nighthoujas were given His inner being; the K'humans were blessed with His holy water (Urine); the Moirangs, His nerves; the Khabas, the sting of the bile; the Sarang Leisangthem, the brain; the Nganbas, the senews; the Luwangs, the skin; the Angoms, the head. Such are the myths connected with the Supreme being in order to link the regional or clan principalities with the centre of the Meitei power at Kangla, the permanent royal seat of the Ningthoujas.

A closer look into this myth shows that the earlier form of ancestor belief and nature worship had now broken through to highly philosophical levels of generalization and systematization, thereby developing conceptions of a supernatural order based on cosmological religio-cultural system.

Nongkhongkoiba, another myth of the Meiteis reveals that when the God Father grew old, he called his two sons, namely, Sanamahi and Pakhangba by his side and expressed his desire to relinquish the throne in favour of a powerful son who could go round the Universe seven times. Sanamahi, the elder son of the Supreme Being, who had the potentialities of doing that left home at the very instant for moving round the universe, while, Pakhangba, the younger, who was comparatively weak, went to his mother Leimaren only to express his physical weakness in carrying out the order of his father. Leimaren felt pity on Pakhangba and told him the secrecy that the effect of moving round the throne of the God Father Seedaba Mapu was as same as that of going round the universe. Following the advice of his mother, Pakhangba moved round the seat of his father seven times. The God Father became very much pleased with this and abdicated the throne in favour of his younger son Pakhangba. When Sanamahi, the elder, came back home, after the completion of his assignment he saw his youn-

ger brother Pakhangba sitting on the throne of his father. This naturally enraged Sanamahi. In view of an eminent danger of a fight between the two brothers, the God Father made an amicable settlement by which he reaffirmed Pakhangba's right on the throne of Kangla on one hand and gave Sanamahi all the attributes of the Supreme Being thus making him the Lord of the Universe on the other. He told Sanamahi and Pakhangba that while Sanamahi like his father, would be the Lord of all human beings, Pakhangba would be the king with its capital at Kangla. From such literary sources, it becomes clear that the local elites on one hand developed a cosmological order which, in turn, welded culturally all the 'Salais' or clans and on the other hand legitimized the divine right of the Ningthouja rulers with a mandate from the Supreme being, namely, Atiya Seedaba.¹⁰

Here, unlike the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt, the Meitei Kings were not the actual divinity. The Egyptian conception was that the Pharaohs were the actual divine beings whom no human or ritual agency made him divine, though he was a human being of flesh and blood.¹¹ It is also interesting to note that the Egyptian gods neither intervened in human affairs nor manipulated the political leaders of human societies.¹² On the contrary, the concept of divine kingship of the Meiteis has it that the Meitei kings were not the actual gods. They got their divine power and strength from the Supreme Being and from the ancestral gods of the clans through certain processes such as consecration sacrifices at the time of coronation and the yearly ceremony of Cheithaba. Thus, in such loose form of divine kingship conflicts over the succession was frequent and too many sons of the kings with a number of queens made the problem more complicated. However, the divine theory of Meitei kingship made the Ningthouia rulers hereditary occupants of the throne of Kangla and of the entire Meitei population.

In its good side, it attained a highly secular development than that of Egypt. Since the Meitei kings were not the actual divinity and they were supposed to re-establish their solidarity with the divine forces as a mandate of the Supreme Being through consecration sacrifices at the time of coronation and the yearly renewals of Cheithaba, they could not utilize their power beyond the jurisdiction of custom, tradition and culture of the Meiteis. In such societies, legal norms and customary rules were highly respected by the kings. Under these circumstances the growth of certain legal codes such as Loiyumba Shilyan were favourable.

If the kings acted against norms, mores and social institutions, there was every possibility to withdraw from them the mandate of the Supreme Being who also represented the entire Meitei population through religio-cultural system. To be precise, though the common people could not participate in the secret order of divine kingship yet they could act as king makers who were known as 'Ningthou Ngamba Angambas' (ones who could influence the king). In such societies, revolutions and rebellions were very frequent.

However, it is very difficult to trace as to when the concept of divine kingship was introduced in Manipur. It has already been stated that Pakhangba was the first historical figure whose name was associated with divinity. Besides, the other six Meitei rulers from Khuiyoi-Tompok to Naokhamba were also described as 'Lai' or Gods.¹³ Thus, it seems that the concept of divine kingship was started from the time of Pakhangba and was further adopted by the other six Meitei kings with Naokhamba as the last ruler who assumed the title of divine Kingship. But interestingly, Cheitharol Kumbaba mentions that Khagemba who ruled in the 17th Century A.D., adopted the title of Laiyingthou or God-king.¹⁴ From this literary sources, this much is clear that the concept of divine kingship had already been in existence during the pre-Hinduism period-most probably before Garibaniwas who ruled in the 18th Century A.D.

Notes & References

1. In ancient Cambodia the cult of god-king was first instituted by Jayavarman II, the founder of the Khmer empire of Angkor in the 9th Century A.D. See. *ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA*, Vol. III, 1980, p. 500.
2. Some aspects of the coronation events of the Meitei kings of Manipur were discussed by A. Lokendra Singh in his paper entitled *MANIPUR -A RITUAL THEATRE STATE*.
3. Ma Culloch, *VALLEY OF MANIPUR*, Delhi, 1975 p. 17.
4. T. C. Hodson, *THE MEITHEIS*, Delhi, reprint, 1975, p. 100
5. L. Iboongahal, & N. Khelchandra, (Ed), *CHEITHAROL KUMBABA*, Imphal, 1967, p. 1.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.

8. S. C. Malik has observed that "when a lioness speaks to a fox's cub the beast's talking is a fantasy but when she expresses the sentiment that a particular action is expected of somebody born in a particular family, she is symbolically referring to a social belief about castes and their hereditary functions, thus revealing a social fact", See Malik, S. C. (Ed). *INDIAN CIVILIZATION*, Vol. 17, Simla, first edition, p. 212.
9. The archaeological discoveries so far made both in the hills and valley of Manipur reveal that from the pre-historic period, this area was visited by different hordes of people whose cultural affinity was traceable to China and the South East Asian countries; For details see Sharma, T. C. Majumdar, D. N. (Ed). *EASTERN HIMALAYAS*, New Delhi, 1980, pp. 148-149.
10. According to Talcott Parsons, cultural elaboration depends on the literacy of priesthoods and their capacity to maintain a stable written tradition. See Parsons Talcott, *THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIETIES*, New Jersey, p. 51.
11. Ibid., p. 54.
12. Ibid.
13. *CHEITHAROL KUMBABA*, op. cit., p. 2.
14. Ibid. , p. 23.