



The Muslim Settlers in Manipur during the Reign of Meidingu Khagemba

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Abstract:- This paper deals with the relationship between the monarch and the Muslim settlers in Manipur during the reign of Meidingu Khagemba i.e. 1597 A.D. - 1652 A.D. The reign of Meidingu Khagemba is an important period to study because it was during his reign that the Muslim settlers were first given titles and land to settle. Here the monarch's attitude towards them will be discussed in detail as the monarch extended a generous attitude towards them and accommodated them in his kingdom letting them to settle down.

Further, there will be discussion about the social hierarchy and their position in the then society as after the settlement of the Muslims, they were instantly made the king's army in the kingdom and a new department was opened for them in his administration which shows their outstanding position in the society.

On the other hand, their relation with the meiteis will be explained in this paper as how the monarch gave local Meitei women in hand for marriage. And also the influence of Meitei culture to the Muslim settlers.

Last but not the least their occupation will be discussed thoroughly in this paper as the monarch assigned duties according to their skill. Most of them were made king's army due to their strong physique to defend foreign invasions like Cachari, Shans of Kabaw Valley etc. And on the other side, they were excellent cultivators as they introduced a new transplantation system of cultivation in the kingdom.

Keywords:- Meitei Kingdom; Muslim settlers; Monarch's attitude

Manipur, known as Kathe by the Burmese, Moglie by the Cachari, Mikli by the Assamese, Kassay by the Shans, was called Meitrapak by the Manipuris. Lying between latitude 24° and 26° North and longitude 93° and 94°, it is bounded by Nagaland in the north, Cachar of Assam in the west, Myanmar (Burma) in the east and Mizoram in the south. Geographically, Manipur is divided into two parts, that is, the valley and the hilly areas in which the valley is surrounded by the hill ranges. And Manipur's population has three major ethnic groups: the Meitei of the valley, the Nagas and Kuki-Chins of the surrounding hills.¹

In historical time, Meiteis are divided into seven clans i.e. Ningthouja (Mangang), Luwang, Angom, Khuman, Moirang, Kha-Nganba (Khaba-Nganba) and Sarang-Leisangthem (Chenglei). The clan amongst the Meiteis was both social and political institution. The Meitei society is a kinship and lineage based society, clan or lineage is known as Salai (Sa= Sagei= lineage and Lai= god= ancestor). The principalities of the salai or clan or lineage had delineated territories and, after a series of tussles amongst them, Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, from Ningthouja clan, emerged successfully and ascended the throne.

It was during the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba that the socio-political, cultural and religious pattern of the Meiteis found its roots. In fact, it was with the foundation of Ningthouja dynasty that the social and political development of the Meiteis began to be concentrated around the ruling dynasty, moving towards a more centralized system of governance, a political pattern noticeable in dynasties across the world. From his reign onwards, igniting the relevance of the concept of a ruling class, there started the council of ministers called the Ningthou Pongba Tara meaning ten nobles in which the ministers played an important part in building the administration.

Since then, there had been many kings who ruled in this small kingdom. Likewise, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Meidingu Khagemba ruled his kingdom from 1597 A.D. to 1652 A.D.

Sources paint a rather competent, as history stands testimony, in reference to his series of expeditions and expansionist strategies, and courteous picture, as a historicized study of the society reveals, of Khagemba who maintained a substantial degree of balance between appeasing the subjects and establishing a strong hold over them at the same time. He was courteous not just in the sense of his cordial treatment of his Manipuri subjects but also in view of the relationship that he maintained with the migrants of the time, more noticeably and significantly the Muslim immigrants. The concept of migrants and migration might surely be a subject the people were well-acquainted with but what brought out a plethora of academically-significant topics of analyses was the method and trajectory that Khagemba devised in incorporating the Muslim immigrants into the Meitei society amounting to a near-perfect social consolidation of a demographic which was historically never a part of Manipur.

As evident from “Cheitharol Kumbaba”, the Royal Chronicle of Manipur, and “Nongsamei Puya”, what started as a quarrel between two brothers, Chingsomba and Sanongba, over a broken boat led to a full-fledged war. Following the event, Sanongba consolidated his position in Cachar and, assisted by Cachar and with an army of Muslim mercenaries, invaded Manipur to establish supremacy through the process of which these Muslim men entered into Manipur. As we go by the details in Nongsamei Puya, the Muslims came from Taraf (Eastern Bengal) along with who also came 1000 elephants, 30 horses and a number of troops. They evidently settled near the bank of the river Yanggoi, waiting for the Cachar troops to attack Manipur. As it happened, the Cachar troops did not show up and, consequently, leading to the capture of these Muslim mercenaries by the then king of Manipur, Khagemba.² According to Gangmumei Kamei, most of the soldiers were not professional soldiers but common peasants who were promised rich rewards for an adventure in an unknown land.³

After the battle, the Muslim captives were directed towards the crafts and skills that they were acquainted with and where their expertise laid in, alongside which they were also rewarded land for them to settle. In exchange for their contribution of expert skills and craftsmanship, these Muslims were given Meitei women in hand for marriage following which the King gave them new surnames, on the basis of their occupation or place of settlement, as part of the process of their permanent settlement in Manipur, a process after which they were entitled “Meetei Pangal”. The first

Muslims who were given native women in hand for marriage when they settled in Manipur were Muhammad Shahni and Nuriya Shaikh. This was carried out following an event where the King received from them a beautiful wheel-made mud pot (sanapul).⁴

- Meitei women namely Maitek and Chakpram Melei to Muhammad Shahni and Petti Devi to Nuriya Shaikh.⁵

In a similar manner, when a palanquin was gifted to the king by the Muslim immigrants, the king gave Meitei women to them as a form of gratitude. The following is an example:

- Sapam Tombi to Saikh Zali (Chani), Sapam Noibi to Muhmad, Thokchom Chaobi to Jaman Khan, Thokchom Kiyambi to Kundan Khan, Wangkheirakpam Koingambi to Miyatula.⁶

Some more exemplary cases are as follows:

- Qalak Khan, Sudiya, Uliya and Manthi were given Meitei wives because of their action of presenting the King with sweets made of milk.⁷
- Kaniya, the fisherman, and Tumhila, the good hunter, were given Meitei wives for their presentations of a wallage (Sareng) and an animal to the king. Laishram Tombi was given to Punam Shaikh for presenting a new type of curry.⁸

This policy of “appeasement”, an appropriate term to be used, devised by Khagemba was initiated keeping in consideration the advantages that came with the Muslim immigrants.

As evidences suggest, during the reign of Meidingu Khagemba in the seventeenth century, there was a great development of technology in industrial manufactures.⁹ This technological development was mainly due to the coming of new migrants, particularly the Muslim settlers. Among the Muslim settlers who came during this time, some of them were experts in carpentry works with knowledge of using wooden lathe (Phundrei) for fine polishing of wood.¹⁰ Many skilled weavers from among the Muslims migrated to Manipur during this time. Because of their weaving skills the king gave them their own sagei (clan) viz Phisabam (phi- cloth, sapham- place of making).¹¹

Moreover, these Muslim men were strong of physique and were, evidently, well-acquainted with the art of weapon-making, not to mention the elephants and horses they brought and their numerical strength at large¹², indispensable resources for strengthening and consolidating the then Meitei king. Furthermore, as B. Kullachandra Sharma writes, Khagemba had every intention to inflate the population for social, political and economic reasons. He adds that the giving of Meitei women to these Muslim immigrants was a tactic devised by Khagemba to appeal to the Muslim immigrants to settle in Manipur and not run way.¹³ What Khagemba had envisaged, with this policy of his materialized after a short while, as evident from the expansion of his kingdom around the hilly areas thereafter and the very fact that he was successful in defending his kingdom from foreign invasions like that of the Kachari, Muslims and Shans of the Kabaw Valley.¹⁴

After the settlement of the Muslims, they were instantly made the king’s army in his kingdom. It is by this particular juncture in Khagemba’s reign that a well-calculated

process of incorporation of the Muslim immigrants into the Meitei society ensued. By 1606, the Muslim community in Manipur were recognized by the ruler of the land as a full-fledged part of the Manipuri society. They altogether, in a way, constituted an indispensable part of the executive-cum-administrative institution under the rule of the king.¹⁵

The Muslim settlers in Manipur, later entitled “Meitei Pangal”, were divided into two groups on the basis of their occupation – “Khunja” (Martial/ Military) and “Khutheiba” (skilled artisans).¹⁶ The “Khunja” Muslims were actively involved in the administration and protection of the Meitei kingdom. There were soldiers by occupation and it was more of an obligated designation than a choice. It was also a mandatory role for the male members of a family whose age fell between 17 and 60 to be part of the lallup. It is on this basis that they become parts of the lallup system as recruits of the kingdom.¹⁷ On the other hand, the “Khutheiba” Muslims who were engaged in skill-based occupations, as an additional role, were too recruited in the lallup in crucial times of battles.¹⁸ The Khutheiba Muslims were not mandated as such to serve in battles as was with the Khunja Muslims but, at the same time, as sources stand testimony, it wasn’t altogether much of their choice as far as their military service was concerned. In short, they were not so much recruited as they were conscripted. This piece of narrative throws an autocratic element in the description of Khagemba’s character, which can potentially taint the courteous image of Khagemba that the paper attempts to build up. Having said so, this autocratic-sounding element isn’t really something unheard of in studies of pre-colonial dynasties as it came as a part and parcel of a monarchical form of governance.

Having said so, there was yet a sub-group of people within the Khutheiba Muslims who were not recruited in the lallup in any way or form as these people held the exclusive responsibility of maintaining the gardens. Since they weren’t a part of the lallup, they gave a certain sizeable share of their produce to the king in the form of revenue as service.

It was on the basis of these occupations and roles that a hierarchy was formed within the Meitei Pangal in Khagemba’s Manipur in which the militarily-inclined Khunjas occupied the highest rank followed by the skilful workers Khutheiba and the last slot in the hierarchy to be filled by those Khutheiba who exclusively maintained gardens.¹⁹

More or less, during the reign of Khagemba, the Meitei pangal, called so by then after a near-perfect social consolidation, enjoyed a reputable high position in the social hierarchy, to be precise, the status of two “panas” of the Meitei land. Even the heads of the four emblematic localities/leikais of the Meitei land, namely, Khurai, Wangkhei, Khuwai and Yaikul, recognized them as a full-fledged “Manipuri” community, “Manipuri” being the operative word here.²⁰

The Meitei Muslims were permitted to participate in events of the kingdom, be it political or celebratory events and annual festivities or sporting events like Mukna, lamjen, kangjei, sagol kangjei etc, and other competitions of the kingdom.²¹

It is more than evident that Khagemba’s attitude towards the Muslim immigrants was not more than a policy of appeasement that he devised to reap the perks that came with these immigrants and, most importantly, it was not necessarily because he took a

strong liking to the demographic. In a crux, it was all but a well-calculated strategy of Khagemba to strengthen his governance and kingdom at large and also in a range of fields discussed in the paper. One might wonder that this strategy of Khagemba was a well-calculated one but it surely benefitted the inhabitants of the land, which altogether again brings back the narrative of Khagemba's rather affable personality as far as his interaction with his subjects was concerned. At the same time, in juxtaposition, we are again bombarded with historical evidences that suggest a strong autocratic element in his governance, may it be the episode of his gifting away of women to Muslim settlers, which brings up the whole range of issues regarding women's consent and the status of their empowerment in general, or, that the skilled worker Khutheiba Muslims were, in crucial battle times, conscripted leaving it not much to their choice, out of a range of incidents. This is, however, a rather common trend noticeable amongst rulers in history across the world and, in a way, is more comprehensible in view of the fact that, even in this post-colonial day and age, we find hints of autocracy in governing bodies and institutions across countries, developed or otherwise. In conclusion, no ruler in history, Meidingu Khagemba included, could be as cordial and courteous as contemporary sources glorify them to be. Generally, if not in the case of Meidingu Khagemba, more often than not in history, the chroniclers themselves were patronised by the monarchs which sets off a whole different debate on the degree of reliability of primary sources.

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