



INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY IN PRE-COLONIAL MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a humble attempt to highlight the slavery system of Manipur. The word 'slave' means a person who is the property of another person and is forced to work for his master. This system became an important phenomenon of the human civilization since early time and it became an established institution within the different classes of society. In Europe it had appeared from ancient time and commonly existed thought the early medieval period. Similarly, the institution of slavery in Manipur had a distinct existence. It was locally known as "Phunganai". Thus slavery was of long standing institution which can be traced to the reign of king Kyamba (1467-1508). It continued as a recognised institution until the British government officially issued an order to abolish the system in 1892. During those days of prevailing the slavery institution, the system was not confined only to the royal palace but spread all over the state and it became a distinct of society's structure.

KEYWORDS: *Slave, Debt. Adultery, laziness, criminal.*

INTRODUCTION

In Europe it had appeared from ancient time and commonly existed through the early medieval period¹. Similarly, the institution of slavery in Manipur had a distinct existence. It was locally known as "Phunganai"², Thus slavery was of long standing institution which can be traced to the reign of king Kyamba (1467-1508)³. It continued as a recognized institution until the British government officially issued an order to abolish the system 1892⁴. During those days of prevailing the slavery institution the system was not confined only to the royal palace but spread all over the state and it became a distinct feature of society's structure.

GENESIS OF SLAVERY

In the early period, the slavery system was restricted in extent. Clothe, Waihem and the Purums were the only three hill tribes that were used as slaves in the time of Kyamba⁵. These slaves helped the king to discharge his royal functions efficiently. As time passed, the demand for slaves increased, and the number of slaves in employment increased. Some common factors for widening the slavery system were to reduce to slavery from

war prisoners, embracing slavery from debtors for their due money and selling of children on account of poverty. During the reign of King Khagemba (1597 - 1659 AD) about one thousand Muslims were taken captive and turned them to royal servants⁶. He subdued some tribes of Mahui Laloi and Makhai Khunjao and reduced them to slavery. Many migrated people particularly from the east were reduced to slaves e.g. seventeen people from the east who settled at Andro became slaves during the time of King Paikhomba (1666 - 1697)⁷.

With the ascension of Garibaniwaz to the throne of Manipur the institution of slavery (Phunganai) became more prominent. As Garibaniwaz was a great conqueror, he invaded particularly Burma many times, and returned with numbers of captives. Undoubtedly the captives were reduced to slavery: Secondly, he broadened the institution of dowry slaves (Aun - Nai). When a princess got married, giving of slave as a part of her dowry was a common practice⁸. Thirdly, in his time foreigners were encouraged to take shelter in his palace and became his slaves⁹. Fourthly, he had supplied many slaves to sylvan deities (Umanglai) for process of worship. During the reign of Chandrakirti (1850 - 1886 AD) slavery reached its water mark and the number of slaves amounted to in between 1200 - 1500. Moreover, he tried to organize the slavery system in a systematic manner. He made a census of entire slavery system to get an actual number of slaves¹⁰. To consolidate the institution into a uniform and peaceful unit, the slaves who had no clans were amalgamated into different clans.¹¹ This system existed till Major Maxwell, the British Political Agent announced the abolition of slavery on 29th April 1892.¹² Though officially slavery was abolished, slavery continued to exist in the rural areas till the middle of the twentieth century.

CAUSES OF SLAVERY

In ancient world, there were different kinds of slaves, hereditary, those born in the household prisoners of war, reduction to slavery from debtors and embracement of slaves from culprits.¹³ Indebtedness, laziness, criminal activities, adultery and conquest were main causes for slavery in Manipur.

DEBT

In Manipur, both in the hills and the valley, debt was the most important cause of slavery. If a debtor could not repay the credit, he might become a slave through an agreement to serve the creditor until such time as the debt was liquidated. Thus, debtors who were unable to repay their credit voluntarily became slaves of the creditor.

Before 1891 the transfer of a slave to other family prevailed if one could pay the debt.¹⁵ another interesting point is that after a debtor died, all the children of the deceased might inherit the debt and even the children might become slaves of the creditor.¹⁶

Poverty was not the only cause for indebtedness customary ceremonies such as Shradha and funeral expenses were also responsible for it. Sometimes a mother sold her children to meet her husband's funeral expenses and even the selling of a wife by her husband to meet financial needs occurred.¹⁷

The hill people, particularly the Tangkhul, practiced the system of slavery. Among the hill people as well, debt was the most important cause of slavery. The primary cause of indebtedness among them was the need to meet the expenses of marriage.

. "For instance, a Tangkhul (a very common case) married a girl of another village, thereby incurring a debt of forty rupees to the father of the girl, that being the price of a Naga bride. The man being not able to pay, his father in law said, 'sells you and pay me'. This was done, and the man paid forty rupees to his father in law and worked as a slave of his creditor until he cleared the debt. The wife probably worked and supported the family".¹⁹

LAZINESS

Laziness was also considered one of the causes responsible for slavery. Instead of laboring hard to improve their lives, many individuals opted to serve in other families merely to obtain daily meals. If they were not debtors, they became slaves under the condition that they were fed and clothed at their owner's expense.

CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES

Many persons who committed in crime might be reduced to slaves in Manipur. For instance, when a thief was caught, if the culprit could not repay the goods, he and his family might be sold until the entire cost of the goods stolen was recovered. If any wealthy person or noble wanted to purchase them they would be sold like cattle.²¹

CONQUEST

In earlier days, when Manipur was under the reign of kings, after winning a war, the collection of war booties and war captives were more important than the annexation of territory. For instance Garibaniwaz often collected war captives particularly from Burma.²² Undoubtedly the captives had no alternative than becoming a slave.

ADULTERY

There was a customary law prevalent in Manipur that those involved in incestuous love or illicit connection with near relatives, were forced to become a slave and sent to distant places.²³

The tradition of the employment of slaves in Manipur began from royal families. In the early time the slavery system was confined to the royal families. But in course of time the system expanded to every part of the land. During the time of King Chandrakirti who alone employed more than one thousand slaves, the institution of slavery reached its high watermark. As stated by R Brown, in the palace, slaves could be categorized under three heads viz. i)Tengkul (Tangkhul or hill tribes) ii) Ayokpa (preserved) and iii)Kei

i.Tangkhul (Hill Tribes)

According to N. Khelchandra, slaves known as Minai Phunga were divided into two categories: Mappaloi Minai Phunga and Manungloi Minai Phunga. The slaves who belonged to the hill people, particularly the Tangkhul, were classified as Mappaloi Minai Phunga.¹⁴ They were engaged only in work outside the palace dwelling. Their chief duties included gardening and cleaning the homestead. At times, they were also employed in hewing stones and making vessels from that material.¹⁵Manungloi Minai Phunga were slaves from the valley, comprising the Ayokpa and Kei

ii. Ayokpa

The Ayokpa group was the Raja's permanent slaves. Ayokpa came into existence when frequent changes of owner took place. "On a change taking place in the rulers of the country, it was formerly the custom to seize the slaves of those who had held office, and to divide them amongst the adherents of the new Raja. This practice, when the changes of ruler become so frequent as it latterly did, was found to entail upon individuals more hardship than the worth of the slave. Slaves, therefore when seized, were not distributed amongst adherents, but made to work for the Raja under the name "Ayokpa".²⁶

In the royal palace another kind of slave also existed, they were Lengpul (one who shouldered hardship temporarily).²⁷ they were temporary slaves who were reduced from punishment or indebtedness. They could be freed after they paid back the borrowed money or completing the stipulated time given to them for service.

Among the Ayokpa group of slaves, based on the workload assigned by the state, there were three distinct categories of slaves under different names, namely: (a) Hidakphanba, (b) Potsangba, and (c) Pinai or Lei Manai.

(a) Hidakphanba

The Hidakphanba were assigned the duty of preparing the Raja's hookah.

(b) Potsangba

Potsangba were assigned duties to keep the royal house neat and clean.²⁹ some of them helped the Raja for his personal needs. They were divided into different groups for separate works. Some of them would sweep and clean the royal house and yard. Some of them had to prepare Raja's bathing materials and even they washed the dirty clothes of Raja.

a) Lei Manai (queen's slave)

Most of the male slaves were accompanied by their wives.³⁰ The wife of the slaves was known as 'Pinai' or female slaves. This group of slave consisted the female slaves only known as Pinai. Their main duties were to look after the royal children, to wash the cloths of the queen and even they prepared the water for the bathing of the queen.³¹

iii. Kei

This group consisted of people from lower castes. Their main duty was to guard the royal granary (kei) and to supply and pound rice for the Raja's household.³² The successive ruling kings established many royal Keis or granaries in different places. For instance, in the reign of Chalamba (1545 -1562) Keis were established at the villages like Achanbigei, Chabung Kei and Changang Kei, guarded by slaves.

ADMINISTRATION OF SLAVES

The Phunganai Shanglakpa was the superior officer who supervised the institution of Minai Phunga. He classified them into different sections for various types of work. Each section of the slaves was under the control of a Phunganai Hanjaba. The duties of the slaves had to be personally supervised by him The territorial slaves

known as Keis who lived in villages were under the control of village headman and they were assisted by the village elders.

The employment of slaves in the families was confined not only to the royal families but spread all over the state. This expansion of slavery in a locality or village was possibly an outcome of the assigning of slave to the nobles as well as the following two slave institutions a) Awun Nai(slaves given as dowry) b) Lai Manai (slaves of deity).

a) Awun Nai (Slave given as dowry)

When a princess got married, giving of dowries along with slaves was very common since the early time in Manipur. For Example many slaves including ten Mayang Phungas³³ were given as dowry at the marriage of Tamphasana the daughter of Raja Garibaniwaz. The Awun Minai cultivated the land which was given as dowry and they also had to do the other household works of the owner.

b) Lai Manai (Slave of the deity)

Since the early period, the practice of appointing servants to serve the forest deity by the king prevailed in Manipur. During the reign of King Chandrakirti in 1865, five slave servants were engaged to construct the hut of the god Pakhangba

CHARACTER OF SLAVES AND THEIR DUTIES

The slavery system may properly be divided into two categories. One was the temporarily purchased slaves and second was permanently obligated slaves. The first category of slave were temporarily engaged and could be freed after completion of his or her obligated stipulated time repayment of the obligated debt. But the second category could never abandon their status of bondage which was extended to their children also.

Slavery in Manipur was domestic in nature. The slaves were generally engaged in Valso engaged in agricultural work. In Manipur from ancient time the slaves were treated as movable like cattle.³⁵ E.W. Dun was reluctant to called the practice prevailing as property 'slavery' and he thus observes: "The name of slavery however, as it appears the European ideas is perhaps too harsh a name for the mild form which most, if not in all instance obtain in Manipur".³⁶

Thus, there was a distinct character of slavery in Manipur. In Europe the class of slave was divided by caste. But in Manipur, the creation of slaves was not based on blood or races. Slaves could be from any clan and every slave could claim his/ her freedom after repayment of certain amount to owner. In certain cases they were manumitted from slavery by the master when he serves dutifully for a period of time.

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FOOTNOTES

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7. Ibid., p. 217.
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30. N. Khelchandra and L. Ibungohal, op. cit., p. 366.
31. R. Brown, op. cit., p. 91.
32. E. W. Dun, op. cit., p. 26.