

FORMATION OF MEITEI POLITY: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Once, a monarchial state Manipur occupied an important place in the historical mainstream of South East Asian countries. Culturally, Manipur is closely related with South East Asian countries. She is bounded by Nagaland in the north, Chin hill in the south, Burma in the East and Assam in the west. Manipur lies between $23^{\circ}47^1$ N and $25^{\circ}41^1$ N and longitude $93^{\circ}06^1$ and $94^{\circ}18^1$. She has connection to their neighbouring countries from the ancient past especially Burma, Asia and Tripura. Manipur is regarded as the gateway to South East Asia. Meitei is one of the ethnic groups of Manipur with distinct groups. Shan is also one of the ethnic groups of Burma. From the earliest period onwards, Manipur was named differently by her neighbouring kingdom. The origin of the Meitei, is still in obscurity as varied theories, views and opinion have been postulated and propounded by scholars.

Key words : Ningthouja, Mangang , Luwang, Khuman, Moirang

INTRODUCTION:

In history, state formation is the process of evolution of people or a social group occupying a territory into a political society through different stages of social and economic functions. This Political society is the state. There was an evolution of a pristine (primary) state over a long period of time in ancient and medieval Manipur – the process of state formation was evolutionary in character.¹ The evolution of the state was through a transformation of the lineage based, clan chiefdom of the Meitei to the state. The state formation was also a process of cultural evolution. In the view of the Romila Thapar, ‘a state is generally associated with political authority which functions within a territorial unit, delegates its power to functionaries, is financed by revenues collected from those who contribute on an impersonal basis to its maintenance and act as an instrument of integrating social segments identified not merely by ritual roles but also economic function.’²

The Meitei in ancient Manipur developed a lineage based social system, and the politics, which as they ultimately emerged, were clan chieftains and clan principalities. In the early historical text, the Meitei are found to have been divided into seven clans. The historical texts make references to a large number of pre – Pakhangba a chiefs and rulers who ruled in different periods of the traditional Meitei Age known as ‘Chak’. The clan was both a social and Political institution. This duality in the nature and function of the clan is a unique feature of the Meitei lineage system. Gangumei Kabui stated that the clan or lineage is known as ‘Salai’ which literally means (sa = sagei = lineage and Lai=ancestral god).³ Each clan had a delineated territory which became the political space of the clan chiefdoms. All the clans speak Meitei language which was an outcome of the political hegemony of the Ningthoujas. With the foundation of the Ningthouja dynasty, the social and political development of the Meitei was centered on the ruling dynasty. There are seven clans viz. Ningthouja, Khaba Nganba, Sarang – Leisangthem (Chenglei), Moirang, Luwang, Mangang, Angom. As Angom, Moirang, Khaba – Nganba and Chenglei were inexistence before the coming of the Ningthouja dynasty. Each chief of a clan – Piba was protector of the clan lands. The establishment of the Ningthouja Kingdom with the seat of authority at Kangla, in the heartland of the Manipur valley by Nongda Lairen Pakhangba marked the beginning of the Meitei state. Before that there was no Meitei and all the clans were ruled by different chiefdoms. He propounded the Meitei as the chief of the Ningthouja dynasty. The legendary Kangla complex was the capital of Manipur up to 1891. The royal family describe Nongda Lairen Pakhangba as the founding monarch of the royal family – given the title of Meidingu – Lord of the Meitei.⁴ The word ‘Meitei’ applied to the people who were directly descended from the Ningthouja dynasty. Later the kings subsumed all the clans under the Meitei. The recorded history of Meitei of Manipur commenced from 33 A.D. in the reign of ‘Nongda Lairen Pakhangba’. He was the founder of the Ningthouja Dynasty. Under his rule all the seven clans in Manipur began to merge into one.

NINGTHOUJA CLAN:

Nongda Lairen Pakhangba was the founder of the Ningthouja dynasty. He was known by different names such as ‘Laitingthou Apanba’, ‘Leinung Lonja Pakhangba’, ‘Ningthem’, ‘Sana and Leinung Lonja Ariba’ also as Meidingu Nongda Lairen Pakhangba.⁵ Meidingu means as King. Puya ‘Sakok Lamlen Ahanba’ mentions that Yaibirok was the mother of Pakhangba. He was the founder of the Meitei. In the Royal Court Chronicle, it was also mentioned that Nongda Lairen Pakhangba became the King at Kangla in 3135 Kalaybda. He was married to Laisna, sister of Poireiton. The forty-fifth year of Pakhangba’s reign was the beginning of the Sakabada era.⁶ After ascending the throne, he tried to integrate all the Clans into the Meitei Kingdom. The Ningthouja clan came to be known as ‘Meitei’ and they established a powerful Meitei Kingdom. According to ‘Ningthoural Lambuba’, the Mangang group were absorbed into the Meitei kingdom when King Naothingkhong (663 -763 AD) defeated

their chief 'Konkhucha' and subjugated them.⁷ In the manuscript 'Thiren Layat' and 'Poireiton Kunthok' suggests that the Angom and Chenglei Clan were in existence before the time of King Pakhangba. The Angom invited Pakhangba to come and occupy the throne of Kangla, but the Chenglei invited Poireiton to occupy the throne of Kangla.⁸ Kangla lies in the heart of the Imphal valley. The Meitei society believed that once the valley of Manipur was flooded by the Leimatak River. This was the first place to dry up. Thus Kangla became the place for habitation.

It was believed that the four Clans i.e. Angom, Moirang, Chenglei and Khaba Nganba originated from the pre-historic times. But, none of the texts clearly mention the exact date of the origin of the Clans. Pakhangba was defeated by the King of Khaba 'Nongjenba' and fled to Moirang Kingdom.⁹ With the help of Moirang, Pakhangba later occupied Kangla permanently. Nongda Lairen Pakhangba defeated the Khaba and submerged them under his clan. From 33AD to 1949, upto the reign of Maharaj Budhachandra the Clan of 'Ningthouja' control Kangla.

Manikchand mentions that during the time of King 'Naothingkhong', there was a small tribe called Mangang who inhabited 'Loiching Phouoiching'. The 'Naothingkhong' invaded and defeated the 'Mangang' chief 'Konkhucha Atinga'. Thus the Mangang came under the Meitei.

NONGDA LAIREN PAKHANGBA:

Many Manipuri texts such as 'Pakhangba Naokhangba' and 'Poireitin Khunthok' state briefly that Poireiton was a prince in Khamnung country (the land of the dead). He was the brother of Khamnung King 'Thongaren'. Gangumei Kabui says that when Poireiton marched towards Kangla, Pakhangba heard about his march and confronted him on the way. Poireiton was defeated by Pakhangba. Simultaneously Tongaren, the elder brother of Poireiton came to the Imphal valley. He came with his sister Laisna and gave her in marriage to Pakhangba. This was a diplomatic matrimonial alliance. Poireiton was made the village chief while Kangla was controlled by Pakhangba. The coronation of Pakhangba was performed on the 1st day of the Meitei month of 'Kalen' (June /July).¹⁰ The Chief of Angom, Luwang, Moirang and Khuman clans fetched water from the Nongjeng pond and prepared a bath for the new King and Queen. At that time only Khaba was under the Pakhangba and all the clans were independent having their own territory. Pakhangba was the first coronate historical King of Kangla. The royal court chronicle mentions that Meitei Kings collected war booties such as weapons, wealth's, captives etc.¹¹ During his reign, Pakhangba also conquered many groups such as the Chakpas of Sekmai, Andro, Khurkhul, Chairen, Thoubang etc. who were skilled in the art of pottery. During his time many

of the migrants came to the Imphal valley such as Thongaren, Poireiton and Nganhumthong. Thongaren group settled at Nonglen Chingkhong and came to be known as 'Naharup'. According to W. Yumjao Singh, the Poireiton group came to be known as 'Ahallup' and settled at Lamdeng. The Nganhumthong group settled at Tanglihan according to Gangumei Kabui.

KHABA NGANBA CLAN:

The Khaba were once a very powerful group ruling over Kangla. The Khaba had a series of fights with Nongda Lairen Pakhangba. The territory of Kangla which was ruled by the Khaba, was bound by the Langol Hills in the west, Khonghampat in the North, Nongmaiching in the East and Lamdaibung in the South.¹² The founder of the Nganba Clan was Thongaren who rule Kangla in pre-historic times. Initially the Khaba and Nganba Clans ruled over different areas. From the time of Nganba Chikliba, Khaba had assimilated into the social and political fabric of the Nganba group.¹³ After the defeat of the Khaba by Pakhangba, both Khaba and Nganba Clans merged and came to be Known as Khaba Nganba. Pakhangba defeated the Khaba Clan with the help of the Moirang Clan. The Khaba clan now came under the Ningthouja Dynasty of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba.

CHENGLEI OR SARANG LEISHANGTHEM CLAN:

The founder of Chenglei Clan was Nungou Yumthangba. It was believed that once Chenglei Clan also ruled at Kangla. The Chenglei Clan is also known as Sarang Leishangthem Clan. According to 'Wakaklon Thilel Salai Amaiba Pukok' Puya, the Sarang Leishangthem or Chenglei settled on the banks of the Nungjen inside Kangla.¹⁴ The approximate boundary of their habitation was the Nambul River to the North, the territory of Khuman to the South, the Nongmaiching hill to the East and the Valley area to the West.¹⁵ During the time of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, the Chenglei Clan became weak. They were merged under Pakhangba. Most the scholars believe that the Chenglei was the oldest of the ethnic groups. It was also believed that one 'Athingkok' was the progenitor of Chenglei. Pakhangba invaded the Chenglei principality. Even though he also conquered Chenglei, the Chenglei preserved their separate identity for a long time. In 'Ningthoural Lambuba' it was mentioned that upto the seventh century AD. Chenglei's had their own principality. In the time of the Meitei King 'Naothingkhomba' (585AD), the Chenglei were conquered. But upto that time, the Chenglei had a separate political identity. According to the Cheitharol Kumpapa, King Meetingu Punsipa (1404 – 1432) conquered the Chenglei and the Chenglei merged with the Meitei.

MOIRANG CLAN:

The founders of the Moirang Clan were 'Nganghumthak' and 'Nggangmingshing'. The Moirang Clan settled near the Loktak Lake. Their territory came to be known as 'Ngangoi' and 'Kege-Moirang'. It was bounded by Moirang in the East by Loktak Lake and Khuman Territory, Ningthoukhong, Lammangdong in the South, Thangjing hills and Leimatak Basin in the West, Manipur River or Turel Achouba in the Southeast.¹⁶ The seven Kings from Fang Fang Panglenhanba who possessed divine power were regarded as the incarnations of Thangjing.¹⁷ Thangjing was the God of Moirang clan. The Moirang had their own tradition and ruled from pre-historic times. In the eighth Century, the Moirang invaded the Meitei principality. But the King Khangtekcha (763 – 784 AD) defeated and killed all the invading Moirang warriors.¹⁸ Even at this time, Meitei did not rule directly over the Moirang. The Moirang remained sovereign until the middle of the fifteenth Century.

In the time of the Meitei King 'Punsiba' (1432 – 1467 AD) Moirang was conquered. The Moirang King 'Sanahanba' was killed. The Moirang Clan became weak but still they were not directly ruled over by the Meitei. During the reign of the Meitei King Jai Singh also called Bhagyachandra (1763 – 1798 AD), the Moirang Cheif 'Khellei Nungng Telheiba' revolted against the Meitei King with the help of the Burmese. In this revolt, Jai Singh was defeated at the hands of the Moirang and fled to Assam. After some time, he returned and fought the Moirang. From then onwards, Moirang came under the rules of the Meitei.

ANGOM CLAN:

The founder of the Angom Clan was Pureiromba. Angom firstly settled at Nongmaiching Hill. Their territory consisted of Kasom Yanngphu in the East, Telou Channa and Lamlai in the North, Paknung ang Angom Leikai in the West, Yairipok in the South.¹⁹ Angom was a powerful Salai and had many conflicts with the Ningthoujas. The Angom Clan established their own principalities before the arrival of Pakhangba but Pakhangba conquered the Angom. Despite this the Angom maintained a separate political identity. In the Court Chronicle, it was mentioned that Sameirang (518CE) the Meitei King attached the Angom Principality by killing 'Kwakpa Thawanthaba' the King of Angom.²⁰ The Angom Clan grew weak but later recovered and became very powerful and challenged the Meitei. As a result, the King of Meitei and the King of Angom established a friendly relationship. Conflict continued but by and large the relationship between them was good. The Angom Clan maintained their own political structure. In the 7th Century, after the death of King 'Konhouba' (568 CE) the Angom invaded the Meitei Kingdom and overran the kingdom for 5 years.²¹ In the reign of Naothingkhomba (663 AD) the Meitei King again occupied the throne of Kangla. But the Meitei King allowed the Angom to retain their

separate identity. From the time of King Charai Rangba (1698 – 1709 AD), the Angom Clan finally came under the Meitei permanently when they were defeated by them (Meitei King).

KHUMAN CLAN:

The founder of the Khuman Chan was Poreiton. The territory of the Khuman include Hou Langoi Lamanhanbi covering Hiyangthang, Langthabal, Heiyen, Keirak, Wabagai, Meijarao, Mayang Imphal, Wangoi, Pumlun, Pairipok, Shikhong, Thoubal TamdingTentha, Wangjing and Tentha, Lammangdong Phojing, Khariyan, Chinggon, Ningombam and Namkunjin. Their Capital was originally at Thoubal which was later shifted to Meikoipung near Loktak Lake and Moirang territory, Heirok hills in the east and in the South by Chairen, Lokkha-Haokha and Kangla Kingdom in the North. The descendants of Poreiton became the Khuman and Luwang. ‘Singtapung’ the son of Poreiton had two sons i.e. Areng and Pamingnaba.²² The descendants of Areng founded the Khuman Salai and Pamingnaba became the Luwang Salai. The Khuman and the Luwang did not inter-marry as both of them were descendants of a common ancestor. There is a theory that mentions, that Khuman was born to one Khana Chaoba popularly called Wangbaren. Further, it mentions that the name of the first King of Khuman was King ‘Khoijanba’.²³ In the ancient text ‘Keiroi’ it is mentioned that Khuman started its Clan from Luwang Ningthou Punsiba. As Luwang Ningthou Punsiba had two sons Lungba and Thongngaiba. Thongngaiba or Ngai became Luwang and descendants of Lungba became Khuman. Another theory is that there was a lady called Nganu Thumbi. Her son Matu Senba became the King of Khuman. Most of the scholars believed that Khuman were the descendants of Poreiton. For many centuries, the Khumans established their Capital at Thoubal. In the seventh century the Khuman Chief Aden Laiphengba shifted the Capital to Nongyai Leikhoipung (Mayang Imphal).²⁴ During the reign of the King Thawan Thaba (1193 -1231 CE), the Khuman were suppressed by the Meitei but allowed to have their own political identity as the Meitei did not want to directly ruled over them. Later, the King of Khuman ‘Aden LamyaiKaikhinba’ voluntarily came to the court of the Meitei King and handed over the administration of his kingdom to the King of the Meitei i.e. ‘Kongyamba’ (1324 – 1335 CE). From that onwards the Khuman came under the Meitei. These are various theories related to the origin of the Khuman clan.

LUWANG CLAN:

The founder of the Luwang was Poreiton. The grandson of Poreiton i.e ‘Pamingnaba’ became the leader of the Luwang Clan. One of the ancient Langtai Khuya mentions that the territory of the Luwang was from ‘Liklaleima Chengjin to Hou-Thangwai’. As Hou-Thangwai covered the area of Lamden, Kameng, Mayang Langjing, Terak, Urak, Cherang, Luwangsangbam, Khonghampat, Chengin, Sekmai, Khoiri Villiage and Lamphel

on the West of Imphal.²⁵ During the reign of Meitei King 'Noathingkhong Phambal Khaba' (663 AD). The King's father-in-law sent him to the land of Luwang to learn crafts and knowledge of statesmanship from Luwang Ningthou Punsiba. The Luwangs were ruling independently for a long time, as the Luwang King lived in his capital at Maloubi Ching (Loiching). The Luwang Ningthou Punsiba was the bravest King of the Luwang but he died in the seventh century. After that the power of the Luwang principality declined. In the eighth century CE, King Panthek Shoknaiba became the King of Luwang. His kingdom was invaded by the Khuman King, Chingkhong Thengraiba and the Moirang King, Ura Khundaba.²⁶ Luwang grew weak and came under the Meitei. Luwang principality merged into the Meitei kingdom after the 10th century AD.

It can be concluded that the Meitei king ruled from Kangla which grew into a formidable fortress city through the 18 centuries of its existence. They established their completed control over the forest rich plain areas of the basin of the Imphal and Iril rivers, and acquired enough resources to strengthen and expand the boundary of the state. The Meitei state extended till the 8th century A.D. when King Naothingkhong kingdom came into contact with the Shan of Pong in upper Burma. The King divided his kingdom into 6 administrative units known as 'Pana'. The 'Pana' system on which was based the Lallup service continued to exist till the 19th century. Lallup was the manifestation of the emergence of feudalism in the social, political and administrative structure of the Meitei kingdom.

King Kiyamba introduced the practice of recording Cheitharol Kumbaba and the Cheithaba System of counting years from 1485 A.D. He also streamlined the Pana system – establishing two new Panas i.e. Ahallup and Naharup. Evolution of the Meitei state over 1500 years is the story of the formation of a pristine state.²⁷ Pakhangba had organised the Meitei into a single society, this society became a nationality in King Kiyamba's reign. Meitei was the nation; the state was called Kangleipak, renamed as Manipur in the 18th century A.D. The rise of the Meitei state was one of emergence of a political society by integration and assimilation of large numbers of ethnic groups into a large society with a common language under the leadership of the Chief of one of the original groups. According to the Cheitharol Kumbaba, Manipur is one of the longest surviving kingdoms not only in the North East but the entire Indian sub-continent. The state formation from the 33 A.D. onwards was fully evolved by the time of the accession of King 'Charai – Rongba' (1698 – 1709). The Meitei created by the Ningthouja Salai became the most powerful. Even in the present society, all the seven clans are still under the Meitei confederacy.

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