

EXAMINING THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN ANCIENT MANIPUR: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The political history of ancient Manipur between the 6th and 8th centuries AD represents an important phase in the transformation of clan-based political organisation into a more consolidated monarchical structure. The period witnessed the growing influence of the Ningthouja lineage, the political integration of neighbouring clan principalities, the consolidation of kingship at Kangla, and the increasing use of warfare, matrimonial alliances, and diplomacy as instruments of political expansion. Rather than viewing the emergence of the Meitei polity as an abrupt transition from chiefdom to monarchy, this article argues that political consolidation was a gradual process in which clan authority, royal legitimacy, military power, ritual institutions, and control over territory interacted with one another. The present study highlights the reigns of Naophangba, Sameirang, UraKonthouba, Naothingkhong, and Khongtekcha, whose political activities illustrate different stages in the consolidation and expansion of the early Meitei kingdom. The article also examines Kangla as both the political centre and sacred landscape of the kingdom and considers the importance of matrimonial alliances and external contacts in shaping the political order.

KEYWORDS: Ancient Manipur, Meitei polity, Ningthouja, clan, kingship, Kangla, political consolidation

INTRODUCTION

The political history of ancient Manipur cannot be understood adequately without examining the clan-based organisation that preceded the emergence of a more centralised monarchy. The early political landscape consisted of several principalities, each possessing its own leadership, territorial interests and political identity. The gradual emergence of the Ningthouja lineage as the dominant political power was therefore not simply the establishment of a monarchy but a prolonged process of negotiation, conflict, alliance and integration among competing political groups. K. Manikchand's discussion of the evolution of the Meitei state is particularly useful for understanding this transition from a clan-oriented political structure towards a dynastic state.¹

The political developments associated with the 6th to 8th centuries AD should consequently be examined within a longer historical process. The establishment of kingship, the consolidation of the Ningthouja lineage, the

control over Kangla, the incorporation or subordination of neighbouring principalities, and the development of administrative institutions collectively contributed to the formation of an increasingly organised political system. Gangmumei Kamei's reconstruction of the pre-colonial history of Manipur provides an important framework for examining this development, particularly the political activities of the early rulers and the relations between the different principalities.ⁱⁱ

The present article examines these developments with particular emphasis on the political structure of the early Meitei kingdom. It argues that the political consolidation of ancient Manipur rested on four closely related foundations viz. clan organisation, dynastic kingship, military and matrimonial alliances, and the ritual-political significance of Kangla. External relations with neighbouring regions further widened the political horizon of the kingdom.

CLAN PRINCIPALITIES AND THE EARLY POLITICAL ORDER

The early political organisation of Manipur was deeply rooted in the clan system. The principal clans, or *salais*, constituted important units of social and political organisation. The principalities associated with the Ningthouja, Luwang, Angom, Khuman, Moirang, Khaba-Nganba and SarangLeishangthem formed an important part of the political landscape of the valley. Their leaders exercised authority over their respective communities, and political relationships between them could range from cooperation and matrimonial alliance to open conflict.ⁱⁱⁱ

The existence of several autonomous or semi-autonomous principalities suggests that political authority in early Manipur was initially dispersed rather than concentrated in a single sovereign institution. T. C. Hodson's observations on Meitei society are useful in this regard because they reveal the importance of kinship, village organisation and customary institutions in structuring political and social relationships.^{iv} The early polity should therefore not be understood through the model of a fully centralised territorial state. Political authority was distributed among chiefs and rulers whose influence depended substantially upon lineage, personal authority, military strength and relations with other clans.

The clan chiefs were not merely social heads. They could exercise political and military functions and were capable of entering into alliances with other principalities. The political importance of such chiefs continued even after the emergence of a stronger Ningthouja monarchy. This indicates that the development of kingship did not immediately eliminate clan authority. Instead, the emerging monarchy incorporated, subordinated or negotiated with existing centres of power.

K. Manikchand's treatment of the evolution of the Meitei state is significant in demonstrating this process. The emergence of the Ningthouja dynasty should be seen as a process of political consolidation in which an initially dominant clan gradually extended its influence over other principalities.^v The political history of early Manipur was consequently characterised by a continuous interaction between centralising tendencies and the autonomy of constituent clans.

EMERGENCE OF NINGTHOUJA POLITICAL POWER

The rise of the Ningthouja lineage represents the central development in the formation of the early Meitei polity. The political importance of the lineage became particularly pronounced with the consolidation of authority

around Kangla. The traditions concerning NongdaLairen Pakhangba and his successors portray the Ningthouja rulers as gradually establishing authority over the valley.

The importance of Pakhangba in the historical memory of Manipur is partly associated with the political unification of dispersed principalities. Although traditional accounts contain substantial mythical elements, they preserve an important political memory: the emergence of a ruling lineage capable of claiming authority over several previously competing political communities. Gangmumei Kamei places considerable emphasis on the expansion and consolidation of the early Meitei state and the political importance of the Ningthouja rulers.^{vi}

The process was neither peaceful nor linear. The competition for political supremacy resulted in conflicts between the Ningthoujas and other principalities. The struggle for control of Kangla was particularly important because possession of the political centre carried both territorial and ideological significance. The traditions concerning the displacement of earlier groups from Kangla and the subsequent restoration of Ningthouja authority indicate that political control over the capital was a decisive element in the establishment of dynastic legitimacy.

The consolidation of Ningthouja power became more pronounced during the reign of Naophangba. His reign is particularly significant because political authority was reinforced through both dynastic relationships and the suppression of competing political forces. Kamei's account places Naophangba within an important stage of political consolidation, when the Ningthouja ruling house strengthened its relations with neighbouring clans.^{vii}

KINGSHIP, SUCCESSION AND POLITICAL LEGITIMACY

The institution of kingship in ancient Manipur combined hereditary principles with customary, ritual and political considerations. The principle of primogeniture appears to have been important, but succession was not necessarily automatic. Political legitimacy could be contested, and disputes over succession could involve members of the ruling family, clan leaders and the wider political community.

The succession dispute associated with Naophangba illustrates the complexity of early kingship. The contest between Naophangba and NaophangAhanba indicates that hereditary descent alone did not necessarily settle the question of legitimate succession. The traditions surrounding the dispute suggest the involvement of customary procedures and a broader conception of political legitimacy.^{viii} Such traditions are significant because they reveal that kingship was not simply a private possession of the royal family. The acceptance of a ruler appears to have depended upon a combination of genealogy, customary legitimacy and political support.

The concept of divine kingship also contributed to royal legitimacy. Later traditions connected the Ningthouja rulers with Pakhangba, thereby providing a sacred genealogy for the ruling dynasty. S. K. Chatterjee's comparative discussion of religious and cultural traditions is relevant to the interpretation of these narratives, particularly the relationship between political authority and religious symbolism in early Indian traditions.^{ix}

At the same time, the political authority of the king remained dependent upon relationships with clan leaders. The ruler could not necessarily exercise effective authority without the cooperation or submission of powerful principalities. Kingship was therefore simultaneously dynastic, political and relational.

MATRIMONIAL ALLIANCES AS AN INSTRUMENT OF STATE FORMATION

One of the most important mechanisms through which the Ningthouja rulers expanded their political influence was matrimonial diplomacy. Marriage alliances created political connections between ruling houses and helped transform potentially hostile relationships into cooperative ones.

Naophangba's marriages with women from the Khuman and Luwang principalities are particularly significant. Such marriages were not merely domestic arrangements; they served political purposes by establishing links between the Ningthouja ruling house and other influential clans.^x Matrimonial diplomacy subsequently remained an important feature of the political history of the early kingdom.

The political significance of marriage alliances becomes even clearer in the reign of UraKonthouba. The relations with the Khuman and Moirang principalities were reinforced through marriage, while kinship connections also helped maintain political communication with groups associated with the Angoms and other communities.^{xi} This practice suggests that the early Meitei state employed flexible political strategies rather than relying exclusively on military conquest.

Matrimonial diplomacy also helped the Ningthouja rulers gain recognition beyond their immediate territorial base. A royal marriage could transform a potentially antagonistic clan into an ally, while also providing the ruling house with access to networks of kinship and political influence. In this respect, marriage functioned as an instrument of state formation.

WARFARE AND TERRITORIAL CONSOLIDATION

Military power constituted another major foundation of political consolidation. The early rulers repeatedly engaged in campaigns against neighbouring principalities and communities. Warfare served several purposes: territorial expansion, acquisition of wealth and tribute, establishment of political supremacy, and the demonstration of royal authority.

The reign of Sameirang is particularly important in this context. According to R. K. Jhalajit Singh, the period witnessed aggressive political expansion by the Ningthoujas and conflict with neighbouring principalities.^{xii} The Angom-Ningthouja conflict demonstrates that the consolidation of political authority involved competition among powerful clans. Following their defeat, the Angoms were required to acknowledge Ningthouja supremacy while retaining a degree of political identity.

The military activities of UraKonthouba continued this pattern. His reign combined military deterrence with diplomatic engagement. The political order was therefore maintained through a combination of coercion and negotiation rather than through conquest alone.^{xiii}

Naothingkhong represents another significant stage in the military expansion of the kingdom. His campaigns against communities in the surrounding hills demonstrate the growing capacity of the monarchy to project military power beyond the immediate central valley. Kamei's account of Naothingkhong's reign highlights both the military activities of the king and the expanding political relationships between the valley kingdom and surrounding hill communities.^{xiv}

Military success also had an ideological dimension. Victories enhanced royal prestige and could generate wealth, captives and tribute. The ruler's ability to protect the kingdom and defeat rival chiefs strengthened his claim to political authority.

KANGLA AND THE SACRED GEOGRAPHY OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY

The political importance of Kangla cannot be separated from its religious and symbolic significance. Kangla developed into the principal seat of the Ningthouja monarchy and gradually acquired a position at the centre of the political and sacred imagination of the Meitei community.

Ningthoujam Dinesh Singh's study of Kangla emphasises its historical development and its significance as a centre of political authority.^{xv} The association of Kangla with sacred traditions gave political control over the site a meaning beyond ordinary territorial possession. The ruler who controlled Kangla was not simply occupying a capital; he was claiming the principal centre of political and ritual authority.

The political significance of Kangla became particularly pronounced during and after the reign of Naophangba. The consolidation of Ningthouja authority around Kangla helped transform the site into a dynastic centre. The political and sacred dimensions of the site consequently reinforced each other. Royal authority derived legitimacy from association with the sacred centre, while the sacred status of Kangla was strengthened through its continued occupation by the ruling dynasty.

The relationship between kingship and sacred geography therefore provides an important explanation for the stability of the Ningthouja monarchy. Political authority was embedded within a cultural landscape that connected the king, the capital and the divine order.

ADMINISTRATION AND CONSOLIDATION OF ROYAL AUTHORITY

The development of a stronger monarchy was accompanied by the gradual organisation of administrative institutions. Although evidence for the administrative structure of the early kingdom is limited, later traditions and chronicles indicate the existence of officials and differentiated responsibilities.

The development of administrative offices became particularly visible under Naothingkhong. The organisation of officials and departments suggests that royal authority was becoming increasingly institutionalised. Such developments are important because they indicate a transition from personal and clan-based authority towards a more structured system of governance.

The emergence of revenue arrangements was closely connected with this development. The expansion of settled agriculture increased the capacity of the state to mobilise resources, while compulsory labour and other forms of service provided the monarchy with additional means of maintaining political and military institutions. Ruhinikumar and OinamRanjit's discussion of the pre-colonial economy is useful for understanding the relationship between agricultural production, surplus and the growth of political authority.^{xvi}

The political significance of this development lies in the increasing ability of the monarchy to convert economic resources into administrative and military power. Political consolidation was therefore not merely ideological; it depended upon the state's capacity to mobilise labour, resources and revenue.

POLITICAL EXPANSION AND THE SURROUNDING HILL COMMUNITIES

The growth of the Meitei kingdom involved sustained interaction with communities inhabiting the surrounding hills. The relationship between the valley kingdom and hill communities was complex and cannot be reduced to a simple pattern of domination. It included warfare, alliances, tribute, migration and political incorporation.

The early political landscape suggests that hill communities could exercise considerable political influence. The traditions concerning chiefs associated with the Koubru and SelloiLangmai areas indicate that political authority was not originally concentrated in the valley. Over time, however, the Ningthouja rulers increased their influence over surrounding territories.

The expansion of the kingdom was gradual. The initial territorial base was concentrated in the Imphal valley, while subsequent rulers extended their influence towards neighbouring areas. The political significance of this expansion was considerable because it increased access to resources and strengthened the strategic position of the monarchy.

The interaction between valley and hill communities also contributed to the formation of a wider political system. The kingdom was not an isolated valley polity; it developed through sustained interaction with communities occupying different ecological and political zones.

EXTERNAL RELATIONS AND THE WIDER POLITICAL WORLD

By the later part of the period under consideration, the political horizon of Manipur extended beyond its immediate geographical boundaries. Contacts with Bengal and the Shan states demonstrate that the kingdom was becoming increasingly connected with neighbouring political formations.

The evidence concerning the arrival of Shan princes in Manipur is particularly significant. Accounts associated with Naotheringkhong refer to contacts with the Pong/Shan region, although the precise chronology of these encounters remains debated.^{xvii} Such evidence nevertheless indicates that Manipur occupied a strategic position between the political worlds of north-eastern India and mainland Southeast Asia.

The significance of these contacts was not confined to trade. Diplomatic encounters could involve the exchange of political information, cultural practices and technological knowledge. External relations therefore formed part of the broader process through which the Meitei kingdom negotiated its position within a wider regional political environment.

The geographical position of Manipur was especially important in this regard. Its location between the Brahmaputra-Barak regions and Upper Burma created opportunities for interaction with both western and eastern political centres. The development of these relationships should therefore be regarded as an important dimension of the political history of ancient Manipur.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS UNDER NAOTHERINGKHONG AND KHONGTEKCHA

Naotheringkhong's reign represents a particularly important phase in the political consolidation of the kingdom. His military campaigns demonstrated the growing strength of the monarchy, while his administrative measures indicate an increasing degree of institutional organisation. The combination of military authority, administrative

reform and external contacts suggests that the early Meitei state had developed beyond a loose confederation of clans.

The reign of Khongtekcha, although comparatively brief, provides evidence of continuing political competition. His successful resistance to the Moirang invasion illustrates the persistence of inter-clan rivalry even after the Ningthouja monarchy had become dominant. The political structure remained therefore dynamic rather than completely centralised.

The Phayeng copper plate, traditionally associated with Khongtekcha, has also attracted scholarly debate. W. Yumjao Singh published the inscription in his archaeological study, while GangmumeiKabui subsequently examined its historical significance and authenticity.^{xviii} Because the authenticity and chronology of the inscription have been questioned, it should be used cautiously. Nevertheless, the controversy itself demonstrates the importance of critically evaluating the available evidence for reconstructing the political and cultural history of early Manipur.

CONCLUSION

The political situation in ancient Manipur between the 6th and 8th centuries AD was characterised by a gradual movement towards political consolidation rather than the sudden establishment of a fully centralised monarchy. The early political order was rooted in clan principalities, each possessing its own leadership and political interests. The emergence of the Ningthouja lineage gradually altered this balance and produced a more durable dynastic structure.

The consolidation of the Meitei polity rested on several interconnected processes. First, the Ningthouja rulers strengthened their position through political and matrimonial alliances with other clans. Second, military campaigns enabled them to defeat or subordinate competing principalities and extend territorial influence. Third, the control of Kangla provided the monarchy with a powerful political and sacred centre. Fourth, administrative and revenue arrangements gradually strengthened the institutional foundations of royal authority. Finally, contacts with Bengal, the Shan states and other neighbouring regions expanded the political horizon of the kingdom.

The reigns of Naophangba, Sameirang, UraKonhouba, Naothingkhong and Khongtekcha reveal different aspects of this transformation. Naophangba was particularly important in strengthening dynastic alliances and consolidating the Ningthouja position; Sameirang and UraKonhouba contributed to territorial and political expansion; Naothingkhong demonstrated the growing military and administrative capacity of the monarchy; and Khongtekcha's reign reflects the continuing contestation of political authority among the principalities.

The political history of ancient Manipur should therefore be understood as a process of negotiated state formation. Kingship did not simply replace clan authority. Instead, the early Meitei state developed through the incorporation, subordination and alliance of existing political communities. The resulting political order combined hereditary kingship, clan authority, military power, matrimonial diplomacy, ritual legitimacy and control over a sacred capital. This combination provided the institutional and ideological foundations upon which the later expansion of the Meitei kingdom was built.

ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

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