

Nongpok Haram : The Easterners In Pre- Colonial Manipur

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Abstract : The ancient kingdom of Manipur is a cradle of human civilization and home of various groups. It was known by different names to her neighbours such as Kathe to the Burmese, Meklee to the Ahoms, Mooglei to the Cacharies and Cassey to the Shans. Since the earliest period, waves of migration had come into Manipur from different directions. They settled down in different parts of the valley and were gradually assimilated in the host society. The immigrants had contributed to the economic, social and cultural development of the state. The people coming from the east into Manipur during the reign of different Kings were known as *Nongpok Haram*. On the other hand, the people who had migrated from the west were known as *Nongchup Haram*. The paper is an attempt to give insight about the *Nongpok Haram* people. This paper throws light on the migration of the people belonging to this group. There will also be an attempt to study the process of their assimilation in the society as well as the changes they brought especially in the fields of economy.

Keywords : Assimilation, immigrants, *Nongpok Haram*, *Nongchup Haram*, Pre- Colonial Manipur.

INTRODUCTION

Manipur was an ancient kingdom with a recorded history of almost two thousand years and had always been a fairly strong, independent and stable state. It had always attracted a number of immigrants since the earliest period. They came from different directions and settled down in different parts of the valley. People who had migrated from the east into Manipur in different periods were known as *Nongpok Haram*. While those people who had come mainly from Tripura, Sylhet, Cachar, Assam and adjoining areas were known as *Nongchup Haram*. The paper deals with the group of people who were commonly known as *Nongpok Haram*. The word *Nongpok* means East and *Haram* means Direction i.e., people coming from the eastern side. Different ethnic groups viz. *Kabo*, *Awa* (*Burmese*) and *Khagi*(*Chinese*) constituted the *Nongpok Haram*. They had migrated from different places like Yunnan, Shan State and *Kabo valley* (also written as *Kabaw valley*)¹. The Meiteis used the term *Kabos* or *Pongs* for Shans. The *Pandit Loishang* (Royal Scholars Department) had recorded the history of their migration into the kingdom and it was

done under the patronage of the Kings. The first migration of these people into Manipur started during the reign of King Naothingkhong (663A.D.-763A.D) in the 7th century A.D. It continued till the reign of King Maramba(1761A.D.- 1763A.D.) in the 18th century A.D.² There were different causes for their migration into Manipur which included war, violence, favourable economic conditions and better administration in the kingdom.

Studies on the migration of the Easterners into Manipur with special reference to the process of their assimilation in the society as well as its impact in society and economy of the state have not been dealt with very comprehensively. Some scholars have written about *Nongpok Haram* in their works. These include Pandit Atombapu Sharma's *Manipur Itihas*, N.Birachandra's *Ethnic & Ethnicity in Pre Colonial Manipur Society*, B.Kulachandra Sharma's *Migration and Settlement of Manipur (From Prehistoric Age to Historical Medieval Period)* and N.Debendra Singh's *Identities of the Migrated People in Manipur*. But these works contain only a very brief account about the migration of the people from the east in Manipur. They also remain largely silent on their socio- economic aspects. Here, an attempt has been made to study these areas. The research method adopted for the paper is historical and it is based on both primary and secondary sources.

MIGRATION

As mentioned above, the Easterners first came to Manipur during the reign of King Naothingkhong as recorded in *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the Royal Chronicle of Manipur. The *Pongs* were the first ethnic group who migrated to Manipur from the east. They continued to come during the reign of different Kings. We have numerous references in *Cheitharol Kumbaba* regarding the coming of this ethnic group.

The coming of the *Khagis* (Chinese) is also mentioned in various written records. James Johnstone³ stated that a Chinese force invaded Manipur in 1250 A.D. and they were defeated by the King of Manipur. A number of them were captured as prisoners of war and they were made to settle in the Kingdom at a place called Susa Kameng. He also remarked that their descendants were living as a *Loi* community, in Kameng village, about 14 kilometres away from Imphal. The Chinese also visited

Manipur during the reign of King Khagemba in 1630 A.D. as mentioned by T.C.Hudson.⁴ Again, the invasion of Manipur in 1564 A.D. by a Chinese force under General Moyodana was discussed in *Bijoy Panchali*.⁵ According to it, they were sent by the Chinese King Peyangu. King Mungyamba(1562A.D.-1597A.D.) was ruling over Manipur at that time. He defeated the invading forces and captured a number of war prisoners who were made to settle in a new village called Khagempalli. The King named his new born son Khagemba in commemoration of this victory.⁶

*Ningthourol Lambuba*⁷ mentions about the invasion of the country of the Chinese barbarians by King Khagemba which was situated beyond the Chindwin river. Gangmumei Kabui asserted that the people whom the king came into military conflict must be the tribes living in the border of China or Yunnan province.⁸ *Ningthourol Lambuba* did not mention the name of the town invaded by the Meitei King. It was simply referred to as *Khagi Khulellel* (the Chinese town or the big Chinese village).⁹ The King was successful in this campaign and he captured its chief, Choupha Hongdei as prisoner.

Khagemba undertook several military campaigns in Kabaw valley. He invaded the state of Kyang in 1602 and 177 prisoners were captured.¹⁰ According to *Ningthourol Lambuba*,¹¹ Ayangpha, a daughter of King Mungyamba was married to the chief of Kyang. But she was ill treated by him. In order to take revenge for the ill treatment meted out to his sister, Khagemba successfully attacked Kyang and captured its chief Chou Seng and his wife Chou Soi. Moreover, a number of stone masons who were builders of temples were also taken as war captives.¹² Manipur saw the migration of Shans into the Kingdom during the reign of King Ningthoukhomba (1432A.D.–1467A.D.) and King Khagemba (1597A.D.- 1667A.D.). The main reason for their migration was the good governance of the Meitei Kings.¹³ The Shans came to Manipur in the 15th and 16th centuries A.D. when they were attacked by the Chinese from the north and the Burmese from the south. These Shans decided to settle here and they gradually merged with the local population.¹⁴

The invasion of Kyang, a Shan principality in the Kabo valley in 1470 A.D., by the joint forces of Kyamba, the King of Manipur and Khekkhomba, the King of Pong was a great milestone in the history of Manipur. The chief of Kyang along with other female members of his family were captured in this campaign. Now the

boundary between Manipur and Pong was fixed after the conclusion of a treaty between the two Kings. Accordingly, the major portion of the Kabo valley was annexed to Manipur. After his death, Manipur's hold over Kabo valley had loosened. It was King Mungyamba who again reasserted the Meitei suzerainty over it. He undertook many military expeditions in this region and successfully captured a large number of prisoners.

Various Kings of Manipur like Khagemba, Paikhomba and Garibaniwaz had undertaken a number of military campaigns in Kabaw valley. These are all recorded in *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. The chronicle also mentions about the capture of many prisoners. These war captives were made to settle in Manipur. King Garibaniwaz was the Meitei King who made maximum military expeditions to the Shan principalities in Kabo valley. The Kingdom of Ava was also attacked by him. All these expeditions were successful and he captured huge war booties which included a large number of prisoners. The invasions of Manipur by Ava (Burmese) were also recorded in *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. The Meiteis could defeat the invading Burmese forces in some of these invasions and a number of them were captured as war prisoners.

A list of the people who came from the east and settled in Manipur during the reign of different Kings is provided in the ancient text *Nongpok Haram*¹⁵. The family surnames assigned to them is mentioned in it. It also contains information about the place of their origin, the clan to which they assimilated to and the place where they were allotted for settlement. It also includes the names of the local wives they married. It may be pertinent to point out in this context that only few of them came to settle in Manipur with their wives. Pandit Atombapu Sharma¹⁶ in his work '*Manipur Itihas*' had given the names of 76 *yumnaks* or family surnames belonging to *Nongpok Haram* which included migrants from the days of King Naothingkhong (663A.D.-763A.D). The arrivals of the progenitors of the 76 surnames or *yumnaks* can be summed up as follows-

The progenitors of 2 *yumnaks* came during the reign of King Naothingkhong (663A.D.-763A.D), 1 during the reign of King Khumomba (1263A.D.-1278A.D.), 5 during the reign of King Ningthoukhomba (1432A.D.-1467A.D.), 18 came during King Kyamba's reign (1467A.D. – 1508A.D.), 3 during King Koiremba's reign (1508A.D.- 1512A.D.), 2 during King Kabomba's reign (1524A.D.- 1542A.D.), 13

during the reign of King Chalamba (1545A.D.- 1562A.D.); the progenitors of 30 surnames or *yumnaks*, the highest number, migrated in the state during the reign of King Mungyamba (1562A.D.- 1597A.D.) and 2 during King Maramba's reign (1761A.D.- 1763A.D.). However, contemporary historians including B.Kulachandra Sharma¹⁷ and N.Birachandra Singh¹⁸ have come up with a list of 57 *yumnaks* or surnames belonging to *Nongpok Haram* based on field information and comparative study of the existing texts.

Thus, it is clearly seen that the migration of the people from the east was not on a large scale and it happened over a long period of time. The migration was slow and gradual but a continuous one. The movement continued till 18th century.

SETTLEMENT IN THE VALLEY AREA

The *Nongpok Haram* people settled down in different parts of the valley of Manipur mostly in Imphal. It is interesting to know that there is still a place called Kabo Leikai in Imphal East district. It was earlier a colony of easterners and was situated in the north of the palace. It is remarkable that the maximum number of people from the east had settled down in this place after their migration in the kingdom. Gradually, they spread out to other parts of the valley. There is a village called Khurkhul which is located about 14 Kilometres from Imphal. W.McCulloch had recorded this village as Shan village and further added that the people of Khurkhul village spoke Shan language which was not the language of the state.¹⁹

SOCIO - ECONOMIC LIFE OF THE MIGRANTS

Manipur witnessed a new construction system with the coming of these migrants. The materials used for the construction of dwelling houses in the state were mostly thatch, wood and bamboo. Bricks and mortar were not generally used in the construction. Now, bricks and stones began to be used as construction materials. A number of temples dedicated to both gods and goddesses of the Meitei and Hindu religions were constructed by the Burmese artisans²⁰. The employment of Burmese artisans was of great significance. We have also references about the influence of Burmese architecture on royal dwelling houses and temples. As mentioned earlier, Khagemba had also captured some stone masons who were builders of temples in one of his campaign in Kyang, a major principality in Kabo valley.²¹

Again, it was during the reign of Khagemba that Manipur first witnessed the making of brick and it was learnt from the Chinese.²² James Johnstone asserted that brick laying in Manipur was introduced by the Chinese.²³ As recorded in *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the gate of the royal fortress was constructed with bricks in 1632A.D.²⁴

The Easterners had also contributed a lot in the development of weaving in Manipur. The Chinese introduced silk weaving in the state.²⁵ *Khamen Chatpa* dhoti, originally a kind of white silk dhoti with purple patterns and scrolls stamped on it by means of wooden blocks and still a popular male dress worn during the religious festivals of the Meiteis, was introduced in Manipur by the Chinese.²⁶

W. McCulloch²⁷ remarked that the Kabos brought the silk worm from the Kabo valley and reared it in Manipur and preparation of the silk was also done by them. According to him, even though the quality of the silk produced was quite good yet the manufactured articles did not match up to the excellence of the raw materials. T.C.Hodson²⁸ had remarked that the Kabos who had originally come from the Kabo valley in Upper Burma, were the weaver class and they wove the raw silk, which was disposed to them, into various cloths, *dhoties*, *puggris*, *Kummerbunds*, dresses for the women etc.

There was a group of people among the Kabos whose main occupation was weaving²⁹. In fact, they were renowned for their weaving skills. They not only manufactured clothes but also produced variety of products. Some of the important items were *Khagigi Khudon Khongup*, a kind of shoe or *chappal* with closed toes, *Chanduwa*, a white cloth which was kept above the ground by tying it with thread to four bamboos placed in four sides generally used during cremation ceremony, *Thakan*, a white cloth used overhead during the religious functions and *Chong*, a special umbrella of white colour used in religious or royal service. With the exception of the first one, the other three products are still being used even today in Manipur. The Kabos were also experts in making design of flower on the cloth by cutting it with some sharp tools like knife. They also did the works of spinning and dyeing of yarn.

Some of the Kabos were engaged in the profession of carpentry³⁰. They manufactured various kinds of wooden products. Among them were *Dholai*, a palanquin, *Kabo tareng*, a kind of spinning wheel, *ugi sairuk*, a wooden container

having legs, *Khurum*, a kind of wooden chappal, *lairikfan*, a table used in religious functions by the Brahmins, *Lairik makhum*, a wooden book cover. Before the invention of paper, leaves were used for writing and they were kept in such cover. They also made *Upu*, an almirah, *Kangthon*, a bed, *Mingsel ufam*, a kind of mirror stand, *ugi thaomeimakhong*, a wooden light stand, *senpot*, a kind of container where money was to be kept, *Yongkham*, a kind of loom which was quite small in size and *pangandem*, a flying shuttle etc. There was a surname among the Kabos called *Konsam*.³¹ They were mainly engaged in making various utensils and other ornamented items.

When the Easterners first settled down in Manipur, they occupied a low position and remained outside the mainstream society as was the case with most of the migrants in the kingdom. Certain restrictions were imposed on them with regards to marriage, social activities and others. They could not occupy or hold high ranking post like the head of department of offices. They were not allowed to serve the two most important traditional deities of the Meiteis – Lord *Sanamahi* and Lord *Pakhangba*.³² They were however, allowed to worship them. They were also forbidden to join the employment in the three institutions of priest, scholar priest and priestly personnel.³³

Gradually, the *Nongpok Haram* people or the Easterners were, over a period of time, integrated into the Meitei society. There were two distinct ways of their assimilation in the society. One was through marriage with local women. As stated above, most of them did not come with their wives when they first settled in Manipur. They married the Meitei ladies which facilitated their assimilation in the society. The King also assigned the Meitei surnames to these immigrants which became another way of integrating them in the society. Thus, they were gradually included in the *Salai* system of the Meiteis.³⁴ They now came to be treated as the bonafide members of the clan to which they assimilated. In this way, they were completely absorbed into Meitei social system. They embraced the same language, culture and customs of their new homeland. It is worth mentioning that one of the most important factors for the integration of these people in Meitei society was the liberal social policy of the Meitei Kings with regards to the absorption of foreign elements in the society. Although their

assimilation into the Meitei society was well recorded in the genealogy, the religious beliefs brought by them were not mentioned in the court documents. Most of them were Shans and mostly came from *Kabo* valley. Only a few were *Khagis*(Chinese) and Burmese.

CONCLUSION

The Easterners thus, migrated into Manipur over a long period of time and settled down in different parts of the valley. In the initial phase of their migration, they did not occupy equal position in the society vis-a-vis the original inhabitants (Meiteis). However, over a period of time, they were gradually assimilated into the Meitei society. They had brought many new technologies in the field of brick making, weaving and carpentry in Manipur which contributed a lot in the economic development of the kingdom.

Notes and References

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