



Interstate Warfare: A Study of Cultural Exchanges and Labour in Pre-colonial Manipur with its Neighbouring State, Burma.

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ABSTRACT

The history of state-making in southeast Asia had been frequented by the history of intra-warfare and inter-warfare raids, subjugations, enslavements, etc. Manipur's interactions and relations with its neighbouring states have also seen fluctuations from time to time leading to various inter-regional conflicts with its neighbouring states. Through this warfare, a diverse cultural space was created. This paper seeks to explore the history of Manipur's inter-regional warfare with neighbouring state of Burma in pre-colonial Manipur and how this inter-regional warfare led to the growth of a diverse space by assimilating various groups into a society, which was forcefully relocated to the place of captivity as a result of inter-state warfare. This paper also is an attempt to look at the use of war captives' power by the state.

Introduction

The history of what later came to be known as Southeast Asia is a geographical expression of a part of Asia, that consists of the present-day states namely the countries of Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, and the island states of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and east Timor. Before the 19th century, this geographical space of the Asia continent was known to the Europeans, including, Portuguese, Dutch, and English by various names including the present-day Northeast India such as *India extra Gangem*, *India beyond the Ganges*, *Farther India*, *Peninsula beyond Ganges*, *Father Peninsula*, etc. The said geographical space before the spread of Western imperialism



was composed of various numerous kingdoms, they were the kingdoms of Ava, Pegu, Arracan (Rakhine), Martaban, Tenasserim, Cassay (Manipur), Cachar, Assam, Tripura, Siam (Thailand), Pong (Shan), Laos, Cochin-China, Annam, Cambodia, and other principalities. The history of these states has been the history of constant conflicts and struggles among various kingdoms. This inter-regional and inter-state warfare for political paramountcy and dominance were followed by the captures of war captives of the defeated kingdoms. In an economy, that was agrarian-based with no continuous and proper sources of income, the pre-modern state of Manipur was a state that based its existence on raids and subjugations followed by assimilating the various groups within a society. Not only did these war captives contribute to the growth of a cultural space that was diverse, but captive men's power and labour were utilized. Thus, this paper seeks to explore the history of the kingdom of Manipur and its immediate neighbouring state, Burma and the inter-state warfare that was fought between these kingdoms, which in turn led to the growth of a diverse cultural space made up of those who were taken as the war captives by locating them to the places they were taken.

The formation of the *meetei* state under the Ningthoujas has been achieved by various raids and subjugation of clans, and hill tribes and bringing them under the political dominance of the Ningthoujas. By the mid-15th century except for the autonomous state of Moirang was brought under the rule of the Ningthoujas, most of the independent principalities were absorbed or became subordinate of the Ningthoujas. The earliest *meetei* dispersal is supposed to have taken place during the proto-historic phase during the reign of *meetei* king Kangba. Text such as *Poireiton Khuntok* discussed the settlement taken by the Chingkhong Poireiton in Manipur and its neighbouring states. Various writings have been written also dealing with the people who came from different directions and settled in the present-day state of Manipur, terms such as *Nongchup Haram* and *Nongpok Haram* denote the groups of people that migrated to the state of Manipur from the direction of west and east respectively. Other texts such as *Tekhao Lol*, *Takhel Lol*, *Kumphil Lol*, *Kshetri Lol*, *Lairikyengbam Lol*, *Ukhongsang Lol*, also deal with the migration of various groups spanning centuries in pre-colonial Manipur. In his seminal work *A Theory of Migration*, Everett Lee discussed the push and pull factors in migration. The push factors are applied when people are forced to leave their homeland such as due to poverty, and wars and the pull factors are used when people move willingly for better opportunities such as searching for a job. Various factors and motives contributed to the early *meetei* migration and settlement in other parts of Southeast Asia constituting both the pull factors and push factors as discussed above in his work on migration, factors such as social, political, economic, and religious causes led to the various settlements outside the state of Manipur, leading to the Manipuris settlement in the present-day state of Burma, Bangladesh



Tripura, Cachar, Assam. Naorem Sanajaoba includes adventurism, trade, commerce, and matrimonial alliances as contributing factors to early *meetei* emigration in his edited volume of *Manipur Past and Present*. In the recent work of Ngwee creation of the good opportunities for their living has also been discussed as a factor in the settlement of Manipuri. Other than the factors discussed above, one of the causes that heavily contributed to the growth of the Manipuris outside the state of Manipur was the inter-state warfare that frequented these kingdoms in the state-making history of Southeast Asia, leading to mass exodus to neighbouring states. Apart from desertion and taking flights to the neighbouring state, thousands were forcefully taken as war captives and assimilated into the society of the place of captivity, mostly at a level of low social status.

Manipur relations with the state of Burma, have been both friendly and hostile spanning centuries. The earliest reference to the Manipur relationship with the state of Burma was supposed to develop through trade in the 4th century CE during the regime of Khui Ningomba, Pengsiba and Naokhomba. Mutua Bahadur records the first instance of marriage between the royal houses of Manipur and Burma, as supposed to have occurred in the 11th century. *Cheitharol Kumbaba* recorded the first hostility between the two states to have taken place in the last part of the 13th century, during the regime of *meetei* king Khumomba. Gangmumei Kamei in his work *History of Manipur* wrote about the interstate warfare that began to be noticed from the reign of Khumomba (1263-1278), during his reign the Shan (Kabaw valley) invaders were defeated by *meetei* forces. *Cheitharol Kumbaba* records the capture of several soldiers as war prisoners. Manipur began to see its territorial expansion and military aggrandisement during the reign of *meidingu* Kyamba, his reign saw the conquest of the Shans of the Chindwin Basin, known to the *meeteis* as the Kabaws were conquest. Manipur relation with Burma begun to deteriorate during the reign of Charairongba (1697-1709) as a result of the ill-treatment towards the princess of Manipur. Garibnawaz's reign is remembered for various reasons but is mostly remembered for his war against the Awa and Takhen. During both the war a large number of people, soldiers and civilians were captured as war prisoners. As D G E Hall writes about Garib Niwaz, "Under Garib Niwaz (1714-54) its expert horsemen became the terror of Upper Burma. They destroyed villages and pagodas and got away with their loot before they could be intercepted". E W Dun in his work, based on Burmese chronicles also recorded the defeat of the Burmese armies by the Manipuri forces in the years 1725, 1735, 1738, 1739 and 1749, among others. The death of Garib Niwaz was followed by the declining power of Manipur with quick succession, coinciding with the rise of Burmese power under the leadership of Alaungpaya, founding the Konbaung dynasty, turning the table against Manipur as result of internal conflicts. Beemer Bryce has described the invasion of Manipur by Alaungpaya as a "momentous event that resulted in a



permanent shift in power relation between the two states''. Burmese under Alaungpaya saw aggressive expansion, well equipped with modern arms acquired from the French and the Portuguese. In 1758, during the reign of *meidingu* Gourashyam the Burmese invaded Manipur, the latter having heavily defeated, this came to be known as the *ahaalba khuntakpa* or the first devastation in annals of Manipur history. Alaungpaya is supposed to have carried away thousands of war captives consisting of boatmen, silk workers and silver smiths to the capital of Amarapoora and were assimilated into the stratum of the society. The young men and women with skills that were carried away were settled there at the Sagaing and Amarapoora. Among them were boatmen, silk workers and silversmiths. The captives that were taken also included Manipuri Brahmins, and from then astrologers at the court mostly consisted of the Manipuri Brahmins. The next big invasion is supposed to have taken on 1770 CE during the reign of Jai Singh, who was driven out by the Burmese forces, and many Manipuris were deported. In his work *Account of Assam*, H E Hamilton records the number carried away being around 30,000. Naorem Sanajaoba in an introduction to the *Manipur Past and Present*, Volume IV discussed how those forcefully deported in the first and second waves would have been Burmanised but the third wave saw resistance to total Burmanisation leading to the growth of heterogenous cultural space within the Burmese society assimilating both the practices of the Burmese and the practices of the land from where they were captured. The same attempt for total Burmanisation of the war captives has been discussed also in the work of Tomba Meetei. After a series of invasions and devastations, Manipur once again witnessed serious devastation in Burmese hand in 1819-1826, which has been recorded in the annals of Manipur history as *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* or Seven Years Devastation. Several thousands of Manipuris are supposed to have been deported to the Burmese capital Amarapoora and were put into the service of the Burmese king and the state (some were sold as slave to Arakkans). The episode of Seven Years Devastation known as *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* was the last assault the small kingdoms of Manipur received at the hand of a foreign power, the Burmese, it being the last mass exodus. It soon was followed by the Anglo-Burmese War of 1824, following the defeat of the Burmese at the hands of the English. The Burmese were compelled to sign the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, making an alteration and shift of power.

Cultural Exchanges and Impact

In *Sorarel Machana Khulkumpa* or Descent of the Scion of Sorarel on the Earth, a Shan chronicle written in an archaic Manipuri or *Meitei* script mention the westward expedition of Shamlung to the valley of Manipur during the reign of *meidingu* Naothingkhong. It is said that Shamlung in consideration of extreme poverty of Manipur territory remitted tributes and along with it directed the adoption of



certain observance in dress and diet, and also instructed to improve the habit and the manner of the people who were in a very backward stage. This episode of interaction between the Shan prince, to Manipuris a Pong prince is the earliest of the cultural exchange to be recorded between states. Cultural exchanges were found during the reign of Kyamba could have been an influence of the Shans, as many changes were supposed to have introduced after meeting the Pong king, such as the introduction of *pana* and the chronicle keeping reflects the influence of pong as it was introduced after meeting the pong king. The defeat of the combined Cachari-Muslims forces during the reign of *meidingu* Khagemba and the assimilation of the war captives led to the introduction of various cultural elements which was brought by these war captives. During this time we see the introduction of betel nuts. Influence of the Mughal cultural elements such as the practice of smoking pipe too was felt and see the introduction of the system of *Kangchup Hidak Thakpa*/ smoking pipe introduced in 1610 CE. A new style of preparing and wearing a particular type of *koyet* or turban and wearing of *lengkhangpaklei* too were introduced in 1606 CE during the reign of Khagemba. The reign of Khagemba also see the introduction of the palanquin, for the use of nobles and members of the royal family and it was recognised as the status and dignity of the officials and nobles, which was already used widely in Bengal and Assam. Agricultural technology too was improved with the introduction of the transplanting system of paddy cultivation introduced by muslim peasants who were war captives and also introduced the plough drawn by the bullock and buffalo, which was the practices bring along with them by the Cachari-Muslims. Brick making attributed to the reign of Khagemba, which he is supposed to have learnt from the Chinese. Religious syncretism or dual worship of traditional Meitei gods and Hindu gods begin to be noticed during his reign. *Sanabun* too is supposed to have been brought along with them, which now forms part of the *awonpot* of the Manipuri bride, showing a cultural impact on the matrimonial ceremonies of the *meiteis*. Flying shuttle probably too might have been brought along with them by muslims. Adoption of dragon as the state emblem during the reign of Marjit, could also be understood as a cultural influence of Burmese. Manipuri captives in Burma, particularly Kathe women, were involved in producing high-quality silk and innovating new silk designs, such as the *lun-taya acheik* textile, which is a combination of the two cultures.

Captives Manpower

“All the troopers in the (Burmese) king’s service are native of Cassay (Manipur). Who are much better horsemen than the Birmans... The Birmans (Burmese) are very fond of their arms...their gunsmiths, who are all natives of Cassay... the men who rowed the war-boats were Cassayers, or the sons of Cassayers



(Manipuris)...the superior industry and skill which they possess over the Birmans in different branches of handicrafts, supplied them with a comfortable subsistence..."- Michael Symes.

The above statement recorded by Michael Symes in his *An Account of an Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava in 1795*, is an episode recording the various war captives from Manipur that were taken to the Burmese capital of Amarapura being assigned with various tasks in the functioning of the Burmese state and in service of the Burmese king. Assigning widely varying jobs to the captives, some ended up with high-status jobs while most ended up with what was qualified as a low-status job, which was laborious, unpleasant, dangerous jobs. Beemer Bryce in his doctoral thesis has argued that the value of human labour in the depopulated region protected war captives from gross mistreatment. Regular conscription of war captives into laborious state projects was a prevailing idea among the states. The projects include such as digging canals and moats, building defensive walls, dams, dredging, etc. *Cheitharol Kumbaba* mentions that in 1534 CE, during the reign of *meidingu* Kabomba (1524-1542 CE) a *Takhenkhong* was dug by the war captives, that were captured when Takhen was conquest in 1532 CE. Similarly, various other canals were dug using war captive's manpower, e.g. in 1613 CE *Kyang Khong* was dug with the help of the people of Leikham. Similarly in 1522 CE *Mayang Pallen* was constructed. During the reign of Khagemba, Cachari-Muslim war captives were also employed to look after the horses and elephants, various departments too were created such as *Mayang Hishaba Loisan* (department of boat makers), *Pangan Shanglen* (department of Muslim), *Pagan Phunderi* (Muslim Turner), etc. The reorganisations or creation of these departments during the reign of Khagemba saw the assimilation of war captives into society. Khagemba captures stone masons who were builders of temples in one of his campaigns in Kyang. T C Hodson also refers to Chinese introducing *khamen chatpa*, *chek*/brick as a cultural element brought by the Chinese.

The utilisation of captive's manpower for various purposes was also found in relation to the captives that were taken away to Burma forcefully. Brymer Breece in his doctoral thesis has researched on how this captives manpower was used for various purposes of the state, such as Alaungpaya using captured Manipuris to renovate the region dams and canals and settled many of them without a skilled were settled as farmers to boost the economy of this emerging state. Mutua Bahadur in *Awa, Kathe and Ponna* thousands of Manipuris who were taken to Myanmar during the Seven Years Devastation were mostly skilled labourers, these captives were assimilated into different stratum of society, while mostly skilled labourers of silk, weavers, and carpenters, painters, goldsmiths, rowers, soldiers, cavalry, indigenous physicians, purohits and astrologers, etc. Captured skill horsemen served as cavalrymen in Ava's military, some even serving as a commander of the Myanmarese cavalry under the control of



Alaungpaya, king of Burma. Many Cassay's were employed as rowers on royal barges and warboats. Most captive women were assigned to the task of gathering fodder for royal animals which was considered to be low status job was assigned to the captives. Village such as Swah Keh, a Kathe settlement was incharged with supplying animal feed to the palace. Kathe soldiers in Ava's military serving as cavalrymen and boatmen.

Settlement and Assimilation

These interstate conflicts resulted in the permanently uprooting of people forcefully from one homeland to the alien land. The prisoner of wars often forced to settle in the unfamiliar environment of the place where they are taken captive. This assimilation of the captives further helps in generating a distinctive culture, with the captives also adopting the beliefs and practices of the place to which they were taken, creating a hybrid of beliefs and practices. The majority of the *meiteis* taken as prisoners of war were settled close to the palace, serving the state and royals in various ways. One of *Meitei* villages around the palace is the village of Nandawase, the literal meaning of Nandawase being 'in front of the palace'. This village is famous for its handloom product. The other village which was settled close to the palace is Minde-e-kin village, a village inhabited by descendants of the *Meitei* who were deployed in the Burmese cavalry long time back. The other villages settled close to the palace includes Kha Khetri, Awang Khetri, Bamon Khunjao, Khetri khun, Ningthem Purohit Khun, Lairik Yengbam Leikai. Many of these villages were settled with specialised skills, hype Kathe village came into existence under king Bodaopai in 1780, this village settlers were the miners of the precious stones for the state. The pattern of this settlement helped us understand the nature in which prisoners of war were assimilated, while their labour was utilised in various ways, catering for the needs of the state and contributing to the economy of the state.

Conclusion

Influenced by various factors, Manipur historically had both conflicting and friendly relations with its neighbouring states including Burma. The state's history of interstate warfare led to the assimilation of war captives and prisoners of war into the different strata of society contributing to the growth of a diverse cultural environment, at the same time contributing to the state economy with skilled labourers' input in the state making. While this study focuses on the warfare between Manipur and its neighbouring state of Burma and the resulting cultural exchanges, it is important to note that aside from conflicts, there were also cordial alliances, trade relationships, matrimonial alliances, and settlement-seeking during times of famine and wars. These factors also contributed to the growth of a heterogeneous cultural space



through the assimilation of practices and beliefs of those who were taken as war captives, creating a diverse heterogeneous shared space over a homogenous space.

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