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MATRIMONY AS DIPLOMATIC TOOL: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF 18TH CENTURY MANIPUR

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Abstract:

Manipur is one of the important states of North East India with its glorious history. The recorded monarchical history of the state begins in 33 A.D. which continued up to 1949 until it joined the Indian Union in 1949. During 18th century Manipur was ruled by three Manipuri/Meitei Kings i.e. King Charairongba (1697-1709 A.D.), King Pamheiba alias Garib Niwaz (1709-1748 A.D.) and King Bhagyachandra alias Jai Singha (1759-1761 A.D. and 1763-1798 A.D.). These kings like many other monarchies of Bharat adopted matrimony as an important tool to maintain friendly relationship with their neighbouring states like the Kachari, Ahom, Tripura, Pong etc. The royal ladies played the role of peace makers by entering into matrimonial alliances with the Kings and Princess of the neighbouring kingdoms in time of conflicts as well as peace. The political scenario of the time necessitated the Rajas to use their daughters as diplomatic tool. Thus, in this paper the researcher will emphasize on the history of diplomatic marriage alliances that were organized by the Rajas of Manipur with their neighbouring states. It will also try to understand the reasons behind arrangements of such marriage alliances during 18th century.

Keywords: Matrimony, Manipur, monarchy, diplomatic tool, neighbouring states.

Introduction: Manipur is one of the important states of North East India inhabited by numerous ethnic tribes. Manipur maintained the status of princely independent state until the Anglo-Manipur war of 1891 A.D. The recorded history of Monarchical rule can be traced back to 33 A.D. with the coronation of Meitei/Manipuri King Nongda Lairen Pakhangba.¹ During the years of monarchy, Manipur like many other monarchical states adopted both diplomacy and force to maintain relationship with the neighbouring states. The diplomatic marriage alliances were one of the most important weapons adopted by every monarchy to abstain from skirmish with their neighbours or enemies. In such process,

¹ Bihari, Nepram., (edited & translated), "The Cheitharol Kumbaba, The Royal Chronicle of Manipur", Spectrum Publication, Guwahati, 2012, p-31
Volume-X, Issue-IV

the women were used as trade in commodity in the monarchical tact. In connection to this W.S. Desai has mention that in Burma it was a tradition that in occurrence of any war between kingdoms the victorious Prince claimed as wife a daughter of the vanquished opponent. The Burmese Kings even in later years of 19th century A.D. maintained the tradition that the eldest daughter of the King must remain unmarried, as she could be offered as a matrimonial propitiation to the victorious foe in case of their defeat².

Even in ancient Bharat when there were many independent kingdoms who ruled in different territories of Northern India, we find the reference of various matrimonial alliances between royal families for political purpose. One of the most important marriage alliances was that of Mauryan King Chandragupta with the daughter of the Greek King Seleucus Nicator (General of Alexander)³. It is believed that Chandragupta Maurya received a large track of land as dowry for his Greek queen from Seleucus which enabled to extend the north western border of the Mauryan empire up to Hindukush Mountains⁴. On the other hand, the political marriage brought about friendly diplomatic bond between the two Kings.

When we look into the history of Mughals in India, Mughal emperor Akbar has adopted marriage alliances as one of the most important diplomatic tools during his reign. He married many Rajput princesses in order to stabilize his power and position with the Rajput. Even in the Pre-colonial North East India the tradition of matrimonial alliances among the monarchies were a common phenomenon.

The Eighteenth Century Manipur: The 18th century Manipur was remarkable in the history of monarchy in Manipur. It was a century of political crisis, turmoil and cultural assimilation in the traditional way of life of the people of Manipur. The period was ruled mainly by three Manipuri/Meitei Rajas, they were King Charairongba (1697-1709 A.D.), King Pamheiba alias Garib Niwaz (1709-1748 A.D.) and King Bhagyachandra alias Jai Singha (1759-1761 A.D. and 1763-1798 A.D.). The century witnessed remarkable changes in the political and cultural life of the people of Manipur. The rulers of the time had to face structural decline of the monarchy due to numerous external invasions especially from Burma and internal court intrigues. The period also witnessed the Sanskritization of the kingdom and major changes in the socio-cultural and religious life among the people. Manipur was ruled mostly by King Pamheiba in the first half of 18th century and it witnessed the most glorious period both politically and culturally. The King completed the Sanskritization of the kingdom. Hinduism was declared as the state religion by the King. However, the scenario turned disastrous soon after the death of Pamheiba in the second half of 18th century due to war of succession among the sons and successors of Garib Niwaz. It broke the unity and solidarity of the kingdom. Along with this the regular Burmese invasion

² Desai, W.S., "A Pageant of Burmese History", Orient Longmans, Calcutta, 1961, pp-5,6

³ Prabhat Preeti., "Matrimonial Alliances and Ancient Indian Polity (c. 600 BCE TO CE 650)", D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., New Delhi, 20007, p - 58

⁴ Prabhat Preeti., "Matrimonial Alliances and Ancient Indian Polity (c. 600 BCE TO CE 650)", D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., New Delhi, 20007, p - 60

and devastation of the kingdom brought about structural decline of Manipur. Therefore, in such situation development of friendly and mutual relationship with its neighbouring states was an important call of the century.

Diplomatic Marriage Alliances of 18th Century: In the politics of monarchy women of Manipur especially the royal women played an important role. They played the role of peace makers by entering into matrimonial alliances with the Kings and Princess of the neighbouring kingdoms in time of conflicts as well as peace. The tradition of matrimonial alliances with the neighbouring kingdoms were a common phenomenon in Manipur from its very early times. The political scenario of the time necessitated the Rajas to use their daughters as diplomatic tool. As such Manipuri Kings in many occasions gave numerous royal ladies in marriage to its neighbouring kingdoms like the Burmese, Kacharis, Ahoms, Tripuris, Pong etc. to maintain peaceful relationship and to stem from war-like situations. As such during 18th century the rulers of Manipur continued the tradition of wed-lock with their neighbours. However, the importance of 18th century also lies in the fact that failure of Manipuri-Burmese diplomatic marriage alliance brought about strained relationship between the monarchies. It led to severe Burmese invasion and devastation of the Manipur.

In the first decade of 18th century the first recorded wed-lock organized by Manipur King Charairongba was with that of the Burmese King and the motive was to instill better relationship. The Raja of Manipur Charairongba (1697-1709 A.D.) gave his sister in marriage to the Burmese King Sane (1698 -1714 A.D.), the last rulers of Taungoo dynasty. The royal chronicle of Manipur “Chaitharol Kumbaba” mentioned that “The month of Wakching (January) and Phairen (February), began on Wednesday and Thursday respectively. The ambassador of Ava arrived to ask for the hand of a Meitei princess in marriage on the first day of the month Phairen (February), Thursday”⁵. But, there is no mention of further proceeding of the marriage for about two years. However, in 1704 A.D. there is mention of arrival of Ava ambassador with bride price in the royal court of Manipur. The royal chronicle mentioned that “Potshangba Hanjaba Moirengjamba brought 2 elephants from Ava, one female and another male on Tuesday, the 11th. The ambassadors from Ava were welcomed by the King on Thursday, the 20th. 22 persons including Gosain Muni (mendicant) wahaiba (one who speaks or teaches) arrived”⁶. Finally, in the month of December 1704 A.D. Manipuri princess Chakpa Makhao Ngambi alias Lourebam Chanu was married to the Burmese King Sane. In regard to this marriage proposal the Manipuri chronicle called “Manipur Itihas Meitei Puran Bijoy Panchali, Garib Niwaz Charit” has recorded as interesting fact that as per the agreement between the two Kings princess Chakpa Makhao Nagambi was made the Chief queen of the Ava King. But soon she was dethroned from the rank of the Chief queen. This was considered as great humiliation towards the Meitei

⁵ Bihari, Nepam., (edited & translated), “The Cheitharol Kumbaba, The Royal Chronicle of Manipur”, Spectrum Publication, Guwahati, 2012, p-77

⁶ Bihari, Nepam., (edited & translated), “The Cheitharol Kumbaba, The Royal Chronicle of Manipur”, Spectrum Publication, Guwahati, 2012, p-78

princess. Messenger was sent to the Manipur court with the message that princess Chakpa Makhao Ngambi to be a disobedient wife. The Burmese King also asked for another princess which angered the Meitei King for such ill-treatment towards his sister. Meidingu Charairongba immediately decided to take revenge for such ill-treatment and insult towards the Meitei princess. But unfortunately, his sudden death led to drop the invasion.⁷ However, the task of revenge against the Burmese was completed by the next King of Manipur Pamheiba who is considered to be greatest King of Manipur. It is therefore, a clear view that the marriage which was solemnized with the objective to develop a friendly relationship turned out to a great failure which led to hostile relations between the kingdoms. In future course of history, there are reference of numerous instances about severe invasion and counter invasion between Manipur and Burma.

The Manipuri King Pamheiba alias Garib Niwaz also followed the tradition of diplomatic marriage alliances with its neighbouring Kingdom of the Kacharis. The marriage union with appropriate detailing is recorded in the state chronicle of Manipur, of the Meitei princess Haripriya alias Pravabati, daughter of Meidingu Garib Niwaz (1709-1748 A.D.) with the Kachari prince Ramchandra Narayan, son of Kachari King Kirtichandra Narayan (1737-1745 A.D.).⁸ The complicated political condition of the Kacharis due to aggressive military attitude of the Jayantias and the Ahoms necessitated the Kacharis to opt for maintaining a peaceful relationship with its neighbouring Meitei King. Therefore, the than Kachari King Kirtchindra Nayan sent the proposal for organizing a marriage alliance with the Raja of Manipur. He requested to handover one of the daughters of King Garib Niwaz for his son Prince Ramchandra Narayan or Sandhikari Raja⁹ in 1742 A.D. The proposal was soon accepted by the Manipuri King Pamheiba and gave his daughter princess Haripriya in marriage to the Kachari Prince. The “Cheitharol Kumbaba” records that “In the year 1666 saka or 1744 A.D., the year of Thanga Takhen... A party went to receive the prince of Mayang¹⁰ on Sunday the 28th... Sanahan with his younger brother went to receive the prince of Mayang on Monday, the 4th... The prince of Mayang arrived on Friday 18th. On the second day of the month of Ingen (July) was Saturday and the marriage “yajna” was performed. The wife of the King of Mayang was provided with a residential building on the first day of

⁷ Singh, Mangi Laishram & Longjam Mani Singha., “Manipur Itihas Meitei Puran, Bijoy Panchali, Garib Niwaz Charit”, Bhakti Shastriya Samaj, Imphal, 1966, p-35

⁸ Singh, Mangi Laishram & Longjam Mani Singha., “Manipur Itihas Meitei Puran, Bijoy Panchali, Garib Niwaz Charit”, Bhakti Shastriya Samaj, Imphal, 1966, p-107

⁹ Barman, Nalinindra Kumar., “The Queens of Cachar or Herambo and The History of the Kachchhari”, Lakshmi Prasad Barman, Barkhola, Cachar, 2007, p-126

¹⁰ W.I Singh an eminent Manipuri scholar states that the term Mayang is applied to all outsiders of non-Mongoloid origin in Manipur. As such, the term Mayang is also used to identify the Kacharis too. When the Kacharis shifted their capital at Maibong and Khaspur and they became the intimate neighbour of the Manipuris, they were generally termed as Mayangs in all the Meitei sources.

the lunar month. Sankranti of Ingen was on Monday, the 4th.¹¹ This marriage strengthened the bond between the two royal houses. In later part of the century, the kingdom of Kacharis became the favourite political shelter for the Manipuris whenever there occurred internal political intrigue or severe military aggression especially by the Burmese.

The last diplomatic wed-lock arranged by King Pamheiba was with that of the royal house of Ava¹². The failure of previous marriage and aggressive military ambition of both the kingdoms led to numerous wars waged upon each other which resulted in severe loss of financial and human life in both sides. There, in 1741 A.D. diplomatic marriage alliance was renewed between the two neighbours. The than ruling Ava King Mahadammayaza-Dipati (1733-1752 A.D.) took initiative in arrangement of the marriage. It is recorded in the Meitei chronicle "*Ningthourol Lambuba*" that, the Ava King expressed that since long years Manipur and Ava had the tradition of wed-lock. Thus, to renew the tradition I request you to give in marriage your daughter Nongleima and I myself will approach to receive the princess.¹³ The proposal was immediately accepted by the Raja of Manipur but clarified that as he does not have any daughter he can send his brother's daughter as to be the queen of Ava.¹⁴ However, in a few days the marriage of Manipuri princess Satyamala alias Nongleima was arranged with the Ava King Mahadammayaza-Dipati. This brought about a fresh mutual association between the kingdoms of Burma and Manipur. But it failed to last long as we find reference of fresh Manipur-Burma conflict in 1749 A.D. History reveals about numerous treacherous Burmese invasions of Manipur in the coming years.

The crucial period of monarchical history of Manipur began after the death of King Pamheiba in 1748 A.D. He was succeeded by his son Bhagyachandra alias Jai Singha (1759-1761 A.D. and 1763-1798 A.D.). The political condition of Manipur went through a structural imbalance due to war of succession among the sons and grand-sons of Pamheiba. Whereas, the kingdom of Burma with the foundation of the Konbuang dynasty by King Alaungpaya (1752-1885 A.D.) became one of the strongest military powers of the time who began to expand the empire by conquering the nearby petty kingdoms. The first Burmese devastation of Manipur was carried out in 1855 A.D. In 1764 A.D., the second devastation of Manipur was done by the than Burmese King Hsinbyusin (1760–1773 A.D.). The kingdom of Manipur was shattered where many were killed, tortured and imprisoned. King Bhagyachandra and his royal forces totally failed to defend the kingdom. As a result, unable to resist the enemy Raja

¹¹ Singh, Lairenmayum Ibungohal & Ningthoukhongjam Khelchandra Singh., "Cheitharol Kumbaba", Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, Imphal, 1989, P-110

¹² The kingdom of Burma was also called as Ava by the Manipuris in days of Monarchy.

¹³ Singha, Oinam Bhogeswar., (edited) "Ningthourol-Lambuba, vol-I, A Detailed History of the Kings of Manipur", Imphal, 1967, p-374

¹⁴ Singh, Mangi Laishram & Longjam Mani Singha., "Manipur Itihas Meitei Pura, Bijoy Panchali, Garib Niwaz Charit", Bhakti Shastriya Samaj, Imphal, 1966, p-126

Bhagyachandra fled from his native land took shelter at the Kachari kingdom. The “Cheitharol Kumbaba” recorded that the majority of the people took shelter at Moirang.¹⁵ Raja Bhagyachandra immediately seeks the help of the than Kachari King Sandhikari to drive out Burmese from Manipur. But his request was turned down by the Kachari King on the reason that the Kachari troops were too weak to face such a powerful enemy like the Burmese. However, on the advice of the Kachari King Raja Bhagyachandra reached out to the than Ahom King Rajeswar Singh to help the Manipuri forces to expel the Burmese from the land of Manipur and to reinstate him. The Ahom King agreed to help the Meitei King and as such he sent his armies to expel the Burmese from Manipur. It is said that the army consisted of 80000 soldiers.¹⁶ On hearing the arrival of the Ahom army the Burmese forces immediately left for their native land. After defeating all his usurpers Raja Bhagyachandra again sat on the throne of Manipur. As a gratitude for the help rendered by the Ahom King, Raja Jai Singha gave Meitei Princess Kuranganayani alias Phongdalokpi in marriage to the Ahom King in 1768 A.D. The Meitei princess was accompanied by a large number of Manipuri attendance and they were warmly welcomed and gave settlement by the Ahom King. A local Assamese historian, Sarbananda Rajkumar mentions that the Ahom King Rajeswar Singh also married two more Manipuri ladies named Bhubeneswari and Rupavatee.¹⁷

The diplomatic marriage alliance between the royal houses of Manipur and Ahom continued during the reign of next Ahom King Lakshmi Singh (1769-1780 A.D.). He remarried Kuranganayani after the death of his brother. The Manipuri queen played vital role to resurrect the Ahom monarchy from the yolk of the Moamaria rebellers in the later years. To uphold the Ahom-Manipuri relation the Raja of Manipur gave another princess in marriage to the Ahom King Lakshmi Singh. She was the daughter of the elder brother of Kuranganayani.¹⁸

The Manipuri King Bhagyachandra also organized diplomatic marriage alliances with the kingdom of Tripura or Takhel¹⁹. Raja Bgaghyachandra gave his daughter princess Hariseswari in marriage to Tripura King Rajdhar Manikya II (1785 A.D – 1804 A.D.). The marriage brought about gracious relations between the kingdoms of Manipur and Tripura. It is recorded that “On the 5th February, 1798 the King with a large retinue started on a pilgrimage to Brindavan. He was accompanied by his Queen, 3 sons and 3

¹⁵ Singh, Lairenmayum Ibungohal & Ningthoukhongjam Khelchandra Singh., “Cheitharol Kumbaba”, Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, Imphal, 1989, p- 124

¹⁶ Bihari, Nepram., (edited & translated), “The Cheitharol Kumbaba, The Royal Chronicle of Manipur”, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 2012, p-117

¹⁷ Rajkumar, Sarbananda., “Itihahase Hnuowara Chhashta Bachhar, Ahom Yugor Asom Buranji (1228-1826)”, Banalata, Dbrugarh, 2000, p-101

¹⁸ Barua, Rai Sahib Golap Chandra., (translated and edited) “Ahom Buranji, from the earliest time to the end of Ahom rule”, Spectrum Publication, Guwahati, (reprint) 1985, p-314

¹⁹ ‘Takhel’ was the name by which the Manipuris called the kingdom of Tripura.

daughters and a large number of nobles and attendants. While the King was at Leimatang, Rajdhar Manikya, raja of Tripura met the King Joy Singh and proposed to marry one of his daughters. The proposal was accepted and Rajdhar went back to Agartala to make preparation for the wedding”.²⁰ It is also believed that She was also the first Manipuri princess to enter the capital of Tripura as a queen.²¹ According to A.C. Chattapadhyay “Rajdhar married the daughter of the King of Manipur and they established friendly relation with Manipur.”²²

Conclusion: In context of the marriage alliances organized by the Rajas of Manipur during 18th century, it is very clear that the royal ladies were used as diplomatic tool. Women of Manipur played the role of peace makers. In such diplomatic marriages, the women were never given the opportunity of their choice of groom nor of their opinion. Perhaps, the royal ladies have sacrificed for the sake of their native kingdom. Whether it was Mary Stuart of Scotland or Jodhabai alias Harka Bai of Amer or the Manipuri ladies, in such diplomatic marriage alliances perhaps they did not opt for much resentment and adapted with the situation as the wellbeing and security of their kingdom lies on them. Therefore, the evidence shows women had no say in such marriage alliances and they were bound to accept and adjust with the situation of the time. It is also evident that though every marriage was organized with the objective to develop friendly relationship and to abstain from unwanted conflict but it did not always bring the desired result. In case of Princess Chakpa Makhao Ngambi, when she was illtreated by the Burmese King it strained the relationship between the kingdoms of Manipur and Burma. However, most of the diplomatic marriage alliances organized by the Rajas of Manipur during 18th century brought about decent bond with their neighbouring states. Besides political relationship there developed socio-economic and cultural transactions between the kingdom of Manipur with its neighbouring states like the Kachari, Tripura, Ahom, Pong etc. Thus, the Manipuri Rajas of 18th century had adopted diplomatic marriage alliances as one of the strongest diplomatic tools to maintain relationship with its neighbouring states.

²⁰ Sanajaoba, Naorem., (ed.) “Manipur Past and Present, The Ordeals and Heritage of a Civilization, Vol-IV, Pan-Manipuris in Asia and Autochthones”, Mittal publications, New Delhi, 2005, p-318

²¹ Singha, Sri Kailashchandra., “Rajmala Ba Tripurar Itihas”, Akkhar Publication, Agartala, 1995, p-90

²² Chattapadyay, A.C., “Progressive Tripura”, Tribal Research and Cultural Institute, Govt. Of Tripura, 2012, p-35