

Traditional Polity in Manipur

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Abstract:

The article explores the evolution of the Meitei kingship in Manipur, focusing on the reigns of various rulers and their administrative reforms. It traces the consolidation of power by figures like Nongda Lairen Pakhangba and highlights the transition from clan-based governance to a centralized monarchy under the Ningthouja dynasty. The establishment of a confederated Meitei state led to the formation of administrative departments and the appointment of officials to manage different aspects of governance. Through successive reigns, kings such as Loiyumba and Khagemba introduced reforms to meet the changing needs of the growing population and expanding territory. The article also delves into the socio-political dynamics of the era, including the role of noble clans and the imposition of royal decrees to regulate court etiquette and state affairs. Overall, it illustrates how Meitei kingship adapted to socio-political shifts while maintaining authority and stability in Manipur.

Introduction:

The historical trajectory of the Meitei kingship in Manipur unveils a narrative rich in military conquests, political amalgamations, and administrative innovations. From the decisive smashing of Khaga power by Nongda Lairen Pakhangba to the meticulous reforms introduced by subsequent rulers, the Meitei kings navigated through tumultuous times, shaping the socio-political landscape of Manipur. The emergence of Meitei kingship out of military prowess is a recurring motif in Manipuri history. The ascendancy of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba to the throne of Kangla, aided by alliances with prominent chiefs like Angom Chief Pureiromba and Luwang Chief Langba Langmaiba, underscores the fusion of martial strength and political authority. The consolidation of disparate clan systems into a confederated Meitei state marked the dawn of a new era, where the monarchy stood as a unifying force amidst diverse tribal affiliations. Central to the Meitei state's evolution was the intricate web of administrative structures crafted by successive monarchs. From the establishment of regional councils and the appointment of advisory assistants to the creation of specialized departments such as Laipham Shanglem and Khabam Shanglen, the Meitei kings demonstrated a keen understanding of governance dynamics. These administrative reforms not only streamlined state functions but also reflected the evolving socio-economic fabric of Manipur. The reign of King Loiyumba witnessed seminal developments in administrative architecture, epitomized by the introduction of the Lallup system—a cornerstone of the Meitei state administration. As the kingdom expanded its territorial footprint and absorbed diverse populations, the need for administrative decentralization became paramount. Kings like Khagemba and Garibaniwaz responded adeptly, instituting reforms that harmonized traditional practices with emerging challenges. Beyond military conquests and administrative edicts, the Meitei kings grappled with the intricacies of statecraft, navigating socio-religious dynamics and fostering cultural cohesion. The codification of royal decrees, delineating protocols for audience with the king and delineating roles within the royal court, underscored the intricate balance between authority and tradition. In essence, the saga of Meitei kingship in Manipur transcends mere chronicles of power struggles and conquests—it embodies a saga of resilience, adaptation, and innovation. As Manipur emerged as a bastion of civilization amidst a mosaic of tribal societies, the Meitei kings left an indelible imprint on the annals of history, shaping the destiny of a kingdom through the ebb and flow of time.

The Khaga power of Kangla was decidedly smashed by Nongda Lairen Pakhangba with the help of Moirang. He, however, ascended to the throne of Kangla with the support from Angom Chief Pureiromba, Luwang Chief Langba Langmaiba and Moirang Chief Apanba. The above historical event indicates that the Meitei Kingship emerged out of military might. In general, Kingship became hereditary and the law of primogeniture was prevailed. But in certain cases like the handicap of the eldest son, the absence of a male child of the reigning King etc disturbed the general norm accession.

After defeating Khabas and Poirenton, Nonda Lairen Pakhangba ascended to the throne of Kangla with strong support from the Angom Chief Pureiromba, Luwang Chief Langba Langmaiba and Mangang Chief Apamba [1]. Besides, he received a helping hand and loyalty from other tribes and the Chakpas. However, Pakhangba inherited the striated socio-political systems of Luwang, Mangang, Chinglei and Angom. On the basis of these aforementioned systems, he founded the confederated Meitei state by amalgamating, subjugating different groups and getting support from the clans. By and large, the confederacy brought to foster social relations between the clan principalities. Confederation resulted an undergo changes in clan socio-political structures that were transformed into a united higher and elaborate form. Probably, Nongda Lairen Pakhangba became the undisputed king of the confederation Meitei state. No doubt the advent of King Pakhangba marked to rise of the institution of kingship.

To a greater extent, the confederated clan chiefs were automatically degraded to the nobility status. There were also certain reserved seats which were only prescribed for the subordinate clan chief. They were entitled as Ningthou or chief but they were included in the nobility group. King Pakhangba relegated the clan chiefs to the autonomous status of their former clan chiefdom [2].

So far concern about the matter of clan administration, the Meitei king was assisted by a group of advisor assistants known as Ningthou Pangba Tara or ten regional chiefs such as Nongpok, Chingkei, Khana Chaoba, Wangpurei, Thanjing, Sampurel, Loyarakpa, Kaoburel ang Marjing. Even after the formation of the Meitei state, these group of assistants continued to hold important positions. They were selected from the 64 (sixty-four) Phamdous (sixty-four nobles of representative of the people) introduced first Meitei King Nongda Leiren Pakhangba[3].

“The newly created primary Meitei state had the following characteristic features:

1. The confederacy was brought under a common authority viz Nongda Lairen Pakhangba of the Ningthouja dynasty. A new name known as Meitei was entitled to all the subjects who accepted the confederation which was social and political.
2. A monarchical form of government with a minimum despotism but greater liberalism on the basis of equality was set up. It also granted autonomy in all matters to each and every subjugated clan chief.
3. A council of ministers consisting of subordinate clan chiefs and 64 (sixty-four) Phamdous or noble were also created. They had a strong sense of loyalty to the king.
4. The Tributary-master relationship was created between the king and the subordinate clan chiefs. The king enjoyed multiple positions i.e. social, political and religious. The king acted as the social head, political head and chief priest of the state.
5. However, the succession to the throne was reserved only for a single dynasty viz the Ningthouja dynasty.
6. The post of the subordinate clan chiefs and 64 (sixty-four) Phamdous or noble were for life long. The post of the subordinate clan chiefs was prescribed as a hereditary post, whereas the post 64 Phamdous were not hereditary.
7. The confederated clans like the Angom and Luwang clans, were not only granted respective autonomy but also given the right to preserve their respective territories, though they accepted the suzerainty of the Ningthouja.
8. The confederacy or Meitei state formation minimized the internecine warfare of different clans and tribes [4].
9. All the able-bodied persons of the state were ordeal to render all the state services either war or warfare work.

For the convenience of the administration King Nongda Leiren Pakhangba created the following departments:

1. Laipham Shanglem (department), a court of justice.

2. Kuchu Shanglen.
3. Khabam Shanglen.
4. Naharup Shanglen.
5. Pacha Loishang court dealing with women affairs and presided over by Queen Leisna wife of Pakhangba [5].

A system is not enough to safeguard and administered a kingdom for many generations. In fact, renovation of system, enactment of new program various resource mobilization are needed for a kingdom to service in an inexorable path of the civilization.

C.J. Lyall terms the kingdom of Manipur as “singular oasis of comparative civilization and organized society, set in the midst of a congeries of barbarous people, over whom its rulers exercise an authority which, if scarcely approaching the settled polity of more advanced communities, is at least in the direction of peace and order [6].

The above statement is proved by the Meitei state administrative systems and new ideas of statecraft.

Through the internecine warfare between the Meitei kingdom and other independent clan principalities and tribes were very active during the early stage of the kingdom, the Meitei kings were very active during the early stage of the kingdom, the Meitei kings were very conscious to create new state officials in order to meet the growing necessity of the pristine Meitei state Nongmainu Ahongbi wife of king Khuyoi Tompok initiated to appoint some state officials post such as Otruchanbra and Asheiba (singer) Hanjaba for Laipham Panna (administrative division) and Keitruhanba for Khabam.

Yoimongba brother of king Taothingmang was responsible to make the offices like Nakpak Hanjaba and two Nakpaklakpa for Khabam.

It is mentioned that particular man like Haorie Khunkum was appointed to the post of Iratlangba Hanjaba (supervisor of worship) for Kam Panna. It was during the kinship of Naophangba, number of the posts came to increase to handle different administrative divisions. The post of Hinyanloi Hanjaba (supervisor of boat), Shanglen Lakpa (superintendent of department) and Laichou Lakpa were especially created for Laopham area. The particular posts of Khabam Panna like Shanlakpa and Chongkhamba were also appointed king Ura Khanthouba appointed Shagonsenba. Hanchenba for Khabam Panna. King Naothingkhong also appointed Huiduhenba for Khabam Panna [7].

Ofcourse new administrative departments and posts were created by the Meitei kings in their different successive reigning periods. There were remarkable development took place at the time of Loiyumba. More or less, the primary Meitei state attained its maturity during his reign; because the birth of all the primary administrative satellite institutions of the kingdom were registered that might be regular or irregular [8].

In order to govern his kingdom without expending a single coin from state exchequer, king Loiyumba introduced Lallup (lal- war, lup- department) system the back-bone of the Meitei state administration. Under such a system all the male population ranging from 16 to 60 years were rendered to 10 (ten) days state service out of every 40 (forty) days [9].

In 1110n A.D. Loiyumba issued a royal edict known as Loiyumba Shimyen in which the distribution of socio-religious and economic functions to the various families and administrative functions and duties were mentioned. According to this decree 30 (thirty) families were assigned to weave different designs of clothes and 8 (eight) families were also allocated to look after 45 (forty-five) abodes of duties [10]. King Loiyumba was highly conscious of the continuing trend of greater decentralization by introducing elaborate division of administrative lups (division) like Khonghalup, Nongmailup, Angoubalup, Leichol Lakpa, Tolong Khoumbalup, Khurailup, Liphambalup and Khangjelugn [11].

Undoubtedly, the administrative reforms introduced by king Loiyumba were regarded as the steel frame of kingdom's administrative for about seven centuries. However, the feudal administrative system came to emerge during the kingship of Loiyumba. The existence of such a feudal system was covered with the sharing of administrative responsibility. King was no longer directly responsible to his subjects. Since the appearing of the intermediate feudal nobles, subjects were indirectly linked with the king. One the other hand, through these feudal system, royal sway sufficiency expanded to the far flung areas of the kingdom.

However, more state officials would be also required to handle the newly created administrative departments. Having developed such an idea, King Loiyumba appointed 10 (ten) state officials namely Pukhramba,

Nongthomba, Khwairakpa, Yaishullakpa, Hijangloi, Chingkhaoba Halchapa Mumangloi, Halchapa, Phamthakcha and Naikhurakpa [13].

The appointment of Pheichaoba Hanjaba of Khabam Panna was made by King Khumbomba. King TELheiba created the post of Tensu Hanba in Khabam Panna. Certain post's namely Neikhulakpa were introduced for Khabam Panna.

During the reign of king Kyamba in order to bring all round development of Panna. Therefore, he appointed Lakpas or supervisors to look after these aforementioned Pannas or divisions, Kabui 126. King Lainkaingamba introduced a post called Huiroi Hanjaba [14]. King Mungyamba also probably awarded of good administration. He set up Ametpa Loishang (the department of medicine) to govern the kingdom precisely.

To a greater extend, war could not be alone a survival means of the pre-modern Meitei state. But war was never necessary to feed her people and to defend the sovereignty of the Meitei Kingdom from any external aggression. Besides the art of administration i.e. introduction of administrative departments and post, enactment of laws and adopting of new policies became of new policies became the life value of the Meitei state.

King Khagemba probably strengthened all the administrative organs of the kingdom by launching new programme his systematic mobilization of resource would bring to increase state apparatus. As a ruler, he had strong sense of belongingness that imbibed in the mind of masses. King's involvement in various spheres such as religious matter, revenue aspects, politico-cultural aspects tended to bloom the Meitei nationalism.

The expansion of territory and absorption of foreigners to the Meitei society brought to increase of population that cause to make multiply the society brought to increase of population that cause to make multiply the workload of state administration. In order to meet the growing demands and smooth functioning of administration. King Khagemba reorganized the administration of capital city. However, the capital city area was division into four quarters namely Yaiskul, Khwai, Khurai and Wangkhei.

These four quarters were put under different lakpas (head of the city administration). It is stated that the lakpas like Wankheilakpa, Khwairakpa, Khurailakpa and Wangkheilakpa were normally appointed from the princes. Besides for better convenience of general administration of the kingdom, king Khagemba set up different Loishangs (department) such as Shamu Shang (elephant stable), Sagol Shang (royal stable), Lanmi Loishang (quarter guard of the army), Dolai Paba Loishang (department of Palanquin riders of Police), Mayang Hishaba Loishang (department of boat maker), Shangom Shang (royal dairy), Pangan Shanglen (department of Muslim), Shinga Khongbi Loishang (department of musician), Panga Phundrei (Muslim Turnir), Tlei Loishang (department of oil crusher) [15].

For proper handling of different departments, king Khagemba Initiated to create some new officers like Dolairoi Hanjaba (lead of the palanmin riders), Khabam Shanglem Lakpa (head of royal scibers).

King Khunjaoba the successor of Lainingthou Khagemba introduced a post called Lamreilakpa for Khabam Panna. Some of the administrative officers namely Pachahanba, Phamdou, Phamlup and Luplakpa appointed at the time of king Paikhomba. King Charairongba was also responsible to create the post of Anamsong Hanjaba [16].

King Garibaniwaz was well awarded of state administration. He was not only a great conqueror but also a reformist. As a head of the state, he was deeply concerned over the creation of new administrative departments and the Manipur as a powerful kingdom amongst the contemporary South East Asian states.

By making changes in the aspects of revenue and judicial departments and village and hill administrations, King Garibaniwaz systematized the administration, he introduced number of administrative departments such as Cheirap (court), Postshangba Shanglen, Hidak Phanba Shanglen, Keirup Yarekshang, Ningthousemba Yarekshang, Lanmi Yarekshang (army department), Tenyeiba Loishang (time Keeping department), Haomacha Loishang (department of hill tribes), Keibi China Loishang, Dolaipaba Panji Loishang (astrologer department) [17].

However, with the expansion of agricultural areas and introduction of irrigated canal, the records of land rights were prepared. King also initiated to introduce the department of Lourungpurel where all the records of land rights were arranged. He introduced Loukok Eba (recorder of fields). In order to make a great advantage of village and hill administrations, king Garibaniwaz created the post of Khullakpa (the administrator of village), Khunbu (owner of the village) and Luplakpa [18].

During the kingship of Garibaniwaz, for the first time Lallup system was extended to the hill areas to make effective hill administration. Since Garibaniwaz was a strong believer of Hinduism, he brought to introduce Hindu system of the ministers in the administration Manipur. He created the posts namely Jubaraj, Mantri, Senapati. In

addition to these he appointed Panna Hazari, Potshangba, Hidak Phanba Hanjaba, Chongam Ningthou, Heruhanba, Henaohanba and Lamlong Hanzaba and Hanzaba Hidan [12].

King Garibaniwaz made an elaborate arrangement specially for the royal princes to allocate them to different departments. With the commission of this Policy Bharat Shai, the seven son was made the charge of Pacha Loishang. The post of Urungpuren (forest department) was entrusted to Shatrughana Shai. The state revenue department was supervised by three princes namely Haricharan Shai, Dwilab Shai and Garibaniwaz Shai Shyam Shai the eldest son of Garibaniwaz held the post of Khwairalpa [20].

In addition to those royal decrees, administrative departments, different posts and socio-economic and political policies introduced by the Meitei Kings from time to time. Prescribes a number of rules and regulations that would be specially adopted to the King's related matters.

Those prescribed rules and regulation are given below:

1. Only the Pibas (chief of the lineage) and Piba Mathang (the second in heir to the Piba) were authorized to guard the king.
2. The low caste people should not present wearing clothe (a kind of handmade waving clothe to wear) to the king.
3. Without the Royal order, no one was allowed to come to the palace and meet the King.
4. Whenever he entered, he was not given the right to express anything before the king unless ordered or asked.
5. Only the thirty-year-old persons were declared as eligible person for state service.
6. Inside the capital, the king should always stay together with Yoibu Yoihel and Haomacha. King and his nobles should assemble in Darbar in every twenty or thirty days.
7. All the army should not hold any state office.
8. Those people who immigrated from the east and west were not allowed to enter the nearby gods Sanamahi and Pakhangba.
9. Dolaipaba was not granted to step into the royal house [21].

Different institutions, departments and reliable laws were created from time to time with the increase of population absorption of outsiders. The Manipur kings had a strong sense of the changing socio-political and religious conditions of the Kingdom. He timely responded to any development to run the state smoothly.

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