

Ecclesiastical Courts in Manipur

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ABSTRACT

An ecclesiastical court is a specialized court with a definite jurisdiction primarily in spiritual or religious matters. Historically, these courts held considerable powers especially during the middle ages. Generally, in all early societies, law and religion were hardly distinguishable from each other. The establishment of ecclesiastical court as a separate judicial institution is hard to find. But, they represent an intersection of faith, tradition as well as legal authority thereby shaping the course of socio-religious and governance. However, they had non-judicial functions as well. Every society had their own mechanism or institution to regulate the socio-cultural and religious affairs to enforce their cultural values. In Manipur since the early days of Christian era, separate and distinguished ecclesiastical institution based on traditional value system existed. With the introduction of Hinduism, new institution based on Hindu philosophy also came into being. In this paper an attempt is being made to analyse the features of ecclesiastical courts that existed in Manipur and how they could co-exist in their own spheres harmoniously.

Key Words: 1. *Meitei*: Dominant ethnic group of Manipur, *Maiba & Maibi*: Local *Meitei* priests 2. *Sanamahism*: Traditional religion of the *Meitei* people, 3. *Ningthouja*: Ruling dynasty of Manipur, 4. *Chatlam Lutin**: Customs & conventions of the *Meitei people*, 5. *Maichous*: Traditional scholars, 6. *Loi* people: Low caste people, 7. *Bamon*: Manipuri Brahmins.

Introduction:

Historically, Manipur was predominantly a small mountainous kingdom having a long history of her own. Since time immemorial, Manipur had been served as a meeting ground for different groups of people. The multi-racial character of the Manipur provided a unique cultural and a life pattern which had never affected its own unanimity as a nation. Before the Christian era, the Imphal valley was divided into seven independent clan principalities. After a long and hard struggle for domination among the clan principalities which lasted for about fifteen centuries, all the clan principalities were integrated into a single unified kingdom under the *Ningthouja* dynasty. Thereafter, the power of this small kingdom incorporated the surrounding hills and transformed itself into a regional power in the south-east Asia under Garibniwaz (1709-1748 A.D.). During his long reign of forty years, Manipur attained the zenith of her glory.¹ However, it was during his rule that Hinduism also came into prominence and began to eclipse the traditional belief system under Sanamahism. Since then Manipur became the meeting ground of two cultures which was manifested in the socio-cultural and religious affairs of the kingdom.

Generally, in all early societies, law and religion were hardly distinguishable from each other. The establishment of religious courts as separate judicial institutions are hard to find. But in Manipur since early days, separate and distinguished ecclesiastical court existed. In course of time, they became one of the essential units of judicial system in Manipur.² Under the traditional system, the religious activities were entirely controlled and performed by certain section of people who were known as the *Maiba and Maibi* by establishing their separate institution called '*Maiba and Maibi Loishang*'. This institution began to function as an ecclesiastical court. But it also had other non-judicial functions as well. According to N. Pramodini Devi, these courts also could exercise other social responsibilities and dealt with cases relating to the customs and traditions of the people of Manipur.³ Of course, they were not judicial courts as such in the strict sense of the term.

As stated above, it is a well known fact that Manipur professed two types of religion- Sanamahism and Hinduism. There was also a small Muslim population in Manipur since the 1st half of the 17th century. The traditional Meitei religion which is known as *Sanamahi* religion is an age old faith of the people of Manipur whereas, the Hinduism started infiltrating into Manipur as an off shoot of the all India movement in the 15th century and attaining its maturity by the 18th century.⁴ Thus, since then Manipur experienced religious pluralism. Though, there were many differences in the system and content of the two faiths, however, they reconciled each other on many areas. That led to the flourishing of the two faiths independently in their own style for many centuries till date. Accordingly, there were two types of ecclesiastical courts in Manipur - *Maru Loishang and Brahma Sabha*.

Maru Loishang (Pandit Loishang):

As an ecclesiastical court, the *Maru Loishang* was the custodian of the *Sanamahism*, the traditional Meitei religion. It was the responsibility of this institution that the age old rules of *Chatlam Lutin** was maintained and strictly adhered to. The office of the *Maru Loishang* was in the vicinity of the palace, inside the present Kangla Fort. It was known as the *Nongdamba Shanglem or Nongdamba Maru Shanglen*. However, this institution began to be known as the '*Pandit Loishang*' since the time of king Charairongba (1697 - 1709 A.D.) by substituting the word '*Maru*' with '*Pandit*' under the influence of the Hinduism.⁵ Since ancient times, as a custodian of traditional social customs and usage, the *Maru Loishang* decided all cases connected with the traditional system in the socio-religious life of the people of Manipur. It is said that the *Maru Loishang* existed since the time of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in the first century A.D.⁶ The administrative head of the *Maru Loishang* is commonly known as *Pandit Achouba* or the Great *Pandit*.

Besides the duty of being the custodian of the traditional religion, the *Maru Loishang* also imparted informal education to the youngsters in the traditional way. It teaches how to inculcate the spirit of law- abidingness to the people. Moreover, it also teaches different trades and life skills to the people. In other words, it was the education department of the state. However, generally in early days, more attention was given to physical training than to literary education. Another important assignment of the *Maru Loishang* was the maintenance of royal chronology and the royal edicts on

various aspects. According to N. Ibohi Singh, the office of *Lairik Yenba* (clerks) was under the *Maru Loishang*. This office also recorded the order of the rulers, copied books and replied all type of foreign correspondences.⁷ The remuneration of the members of the *Maru Loishang* were four *Paris* (about 10 acres) of land each, free of revenue given by the concerned rulers.

Composition of Maru Loishang:

Traditionally, the *Maru Loishang* was composed of many *Phathis* (*Pathis*) or, *Maichous* (learned man). Later on after the influence of the Hinduism, they came to be known as '*Pandits*'. During the time of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in the first century AD, *Wangkhei Pandol Lakpa*, was the administrative head of the *Maru Loishang*.⁸ During his reign the *Maru Loishang* was composed of the following *Maichous* like *Tangakha Mariba*, *Lalhang Ngamba*, *Wangam Tengthanba Nahaba*, *Moirang Chamba* and *Poinaota*.⁹ These members of *Maru Loishang* were the learned and the *Maichous* who were well versed in the social custom and tradition of the people.

Strength of Maru Loishang:

The strength of the *Maru Loishang* varied from time to time according to the wishes of the concerned rulers. During the reign of Pakhangba, it was composed of six eminent *Maichous*. But, during the reign of Khagemba (1597 to 1652 A.D.) the numbers of *Maichous* were increased to eleven. They were *Apoi Macha*, *Okramba Sanamahi*, *Yunnam Tomba*, *Khaidem Temba*, *Salam Sanaba*, *Moirang Sathi*, *Khonga Khun Tesipa*, *Kabui Tolpa*, *Lanshonbi Phouti*, *Laishram Tonu Mushiram* and *Lairikyengbam Monsumei*.¹⁰ But, again, during the time of Garibniwaz (1709 - 1748 A.D.) the number of members were reduced to only nine *Pandits*. They were *Lourebam Khongnangthaba*, *Langol Lukhoi*, *Ganak Thenggra*, *Yambem Phongale*, *Wangoi Khema*, *Wangoi Baji*, *Moirang Lalhamba*, *Ningombam Akong* and *Nambol Thonghi Maiba*.¹¹

Jurisdiction of Maru Loishang:

Being the custodian of the customs and usages of the people, the *Maru Loishang* dealt with cases connected with the *Meitei* personal law. The *Meitei* personal law is predominantly based on the sociological jurisprudence of the *Meiteis*.¹² It dealt with cases relating with the forbidden such as various forms of close blood marriages which are known as *Yek -tinnaba*, *Shairuk - tinnaba* and *Pen - tennaba* etc. The *Maru Loishang* also tried cases connecting with the *Umanglais* (Sylvan deities) that were worshipped by different *Meitei* clans since time immemorial. It could inflict punishments like excommunication, banishment, sending to *Loi* villages etc. Its area of jurisdiction also covers both the hill and plain people who professed the principles of *Sanamahi* religion.¹³

Brahma Sabha:

After the advent of Hinduism in Manipur, the *Brahma Sabha* became one of the foremost institutions having a great significance in socio - religions and political affairs of Manipur throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, it lost its political significance with the ravages of time and it remained only as a socio-cultural and religious institution till today. Primarily the *Brahma Sabha* was the custodian of social and religious life of the Manipuri Hindus and Manipuri *Brahmins* only. Since its inception, the *Brahma Sabha* acted as an important ecclesiastical court to settle disputes connected with the Hindu religious interpretations. Besides, this court dealt with such cases where the Hindu social and religious system was concerned.

Establishment of *Brahma Sabha*:

The establishment of the *Brahma Sabha* was of recent origin in comparison with that of the *Maru Loishang*. This institution was established only during the reign of Bhagyachandra (1759 - 97 A.D.). According to N. Ibohal Singh it was instituted only in 1777 A.D.¹⁴ With the establishment of the *Brahma Sabha*, the hold of Hinduism in Manipur was strengthened manifold. However, as ecclesiastical courts both the *Brahma Sabha* and the *Maru Loishang* worked independently side by side in their respective chosen affairs without any antagonism. But, before the establishment of the *Brahma Sabha*, the *Maru Loishang* dealt with those cases connected with the religious matters as the sole ecclesiastical court. But, after the Hinduisation of Manipur the *Brahma Sabha* became an essential socio-religious and political institution in the life of the Manipuri Hindus and Manipuri Brahmins. However, the two *Loishangs* came into existence side by side as a religious and legal institution of Manipur.¹⁵ Both the institutions had to deal with respective customary laws on various religious matters. As a matter of fact, the *Brahma Sabha* interpreted all the socio-cultural and religions matters from the stand point of Hindu philosophy whereas the *Maru Loishang* interpreted the same from that of the *Sanamahi* religion. Like the *Maru Loishang*, the *Brahma Sabha* was also instituted within the palace enclosure and the members of this court also received four *Paris* of land each free of revenue from the concerned rulers.¹⁶

Composition of *Brahma Sabha*:

Since its inception, the *Brahma Sabha* was composed of Brahmin *Pandits* only. Even the Manipuri Hindus were not accommodated in the functioning of the institution itself. The functioning of the *Brahma Sabha* was thus completely monopolised by the Manipuri *Brahmins*, who were commonly known as '*Bamon*'. On the other hand, the *Pandit Loishang* was consisted of not only the Meiteis but also the Brahmins. This is the beauty of the *Maru Loishang*. The president of the *Brahma Sabha* was known as '*Guru Byabasthakari*'. The members of *Brahma Sabha* were all well versed in the Hindu *Shastras and Vedas* besides the socio-cultural life of the Manipuri Hindus and Manipuri Brahmins.¹⁷ All the members of this court were selected by the concerned rulers. Sometimes, special assignments were

given to some of the members of the *Brahma Sabha* in various royal rituals. In some cases assignments were given at different temples both in and outside Manipur.

Strength of *Brahma Sabha*:

The actual strength of the *Brahma Sabha* is yet to be ascertained. It depended upon the wishes of the concerned rulers. However, generally, among others it was composed of nine members who were known as '*Naba Ratna*' - Nine Jewels.¹⁸ They were *Guru Byavasthakari*, *Acharya Guru*, *Rajpurohit*, *Tantradhara*, *Bramha*, *Dhamandi Guri Bidya Ratna*, *Hanjaba* and *Hidang*. Besides them, there were some other members of the *Brahma Sabha* who were all selected from among the prominent Manipuri Brahmin lineages and hold different posts in the institution. During the reign of Churachand Maharaja (1891 - 1941 A.D.), there were about one hundred members of the *Brahma Sabha*.¹⁹

Jurisdiction of *Brahma Sabha*:

The Jurisdiction of the *Brahma Sabha* covers the socio - religious cases connected with the Manipuri Hindus and Manipuri Brahmins only. Generally, the *Brahma Sabha* discussed and decided cases connected with '*Sradha*' ceremony (death ceremony), anniversary performances of the death and the like.²⁰ It could inflict limited punishments like excommunication, banishment, sending to *Loi* villages etc. According to Manipuri Hindu system, religious offences are called '*dosa*' or, '*apradha*'. A person who commits a '*dosa*' is condemned and treated as an outcaste.²¹ The person who break taboos in food and marital relationship is often excommunicated and sent to *Loi* villages.²²

Conclusion:

From the above facts circumstances, it may be concluded that since ancient time ecclesiastical court existed in Manipur. They served as the champion of *Chatlam Lutin* and took the responsibility of upholding and maintaining traditional value system in day to day life of the *Meiteis*. From the eighteenth century onwards, with the advent of Hinduism in Manipur, another ecclesiastical court also came into existence as the custodian of the Hindu way of life of the converted people. But, the two ecclesiastical courts came into existence side by side as a religious and legal institution. Moreover, both the institutions dealt with respective customary laws on various religious matters. This is indeed one of the most significant social phenomenon in the cultural history of Manipur and a unique character of religious harmony in a pluralistic Manipuri society.

Notes & references:

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