



ROLE OF MANIPURIS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY BARAK VALLEY OF ASSAM (1765-1900)

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Abstract:

In the history of nineteenth century Cachar (now in Assam, India), Manipuris played a great role not only in the politics but also in the economy and society too. During the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826), the Manipur is living in the region assisted the British in expelling the Burmese from the soil of Cachar. They also took a lion's share in developing the economy of Cachar by expanding and improving cultivable land of the valley. Manipur is also deeply influenced in the society and culture of the Barak valley. But, so far, no scholar has tried to highlight a clear socio-economic and political role of the Manipur is in Cachar in its historic perspectives. This paper is, therefore, to fill up the missing part of the history of Cachar in northeast India. The source materials are archival, oral as well as secondary source books.

Keywords: *Manipuri, Manipur, Cachar, Barak Valley, British Administration, Colonial Study.*

2.1 INTRODUCTION:

In the history of nineteenth century Cachar (now in Assam, India), Manipuris played a great role not only in the politics but also in the economy and society too. During the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826), the Manipur is living in the region assisted the British in expelling the Burmese from the soil of Cachar. They also took a lion's share in developing the economy of Cachar by expanding and improving cultivable land of the valley. When the

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Manipuris of Cachar played a great role in the expansion of its agricultural land by defending against the Kuki headhunting raids, Lt. Fisher, incharge of Cachar, reported: "A great extension of cultivation and consequent increase of revenue may be expected from it not merely from the land which will be cleared by the Munnipoorees but from much large tracks which will be protected by them and which in their Present state of insecurity our unwarlike Ryuts are afraid to occupy (NAI, 1834).

On the high hopes of Lt. Fisher, H.K. Barpujari writes in Assam in the Days of the Company. He had great hopes to the revenue of Cachar, but to his utter disappointment, Fisher found in the first year of occupation that the receipt could barely meet the charge on the establishment..." (Barpujari, 1980:101). On the same area of study, Sir Edward Gait writes in A History of Assam, "His (Lt. Fisher) first care: as to cope with the eruption of the Kukis." (Gait, 1997:290). This he did by the expedient of settling along the frontier as many Manipuris as possible, who, when supplied with a few firearms, easily kept off the Kukis and so protected, not only themselves, but also the less warlike plainsmen behind them. Manipuris also deeply influenced in the society and culture of the Barak valley. But, so far, no scholar has tried to highlight a clear socio-economic and political role of the Manipuris in Cachar in its historic perspectives. This paper is, therefore, to fill up the missing part of the history of Cachar in northeast India. The source materials are archival, oral as well as secondary source books.

2.2 MANIPURIS IN THE POLITICS OF CACHAR:

Raja Chourjit Singh, coming to Cachar in 1813, applied to Govind Chandra (brother of Krishna Chandra) for assistance against Marjit Singh. Being refused, Chourjit Singh went to Calcutta, there also, being helpless, he came to Jaintia and made an alliance with Ram Singh Gambhir Singh, living in Cachar with the followers, joined the service of Raja Govinda Chandra (1813-1830). J.B. Bhattacharjee writes that Govind Chandra appointed Gambhir Singh as the commander-in-chief of the Cachar Army at a monthly salary of Rs. 50 (Bhattacharjee, 1977:262). Meanwhile, Cachar was invaded by Raja Marjit Singh of Manipur in December 1817. Govind Chandra sought the help of the British, but failed. At this juncture, Chourajit Singh and Gambhir Singh assisted the Cachar Raja and forced Marjit Singh to retreat to his own territory. Before the engagement, Chourjit Singh got the consent from Govind Chandra to handover southern part of Cachar in the event of their success against Marjit Singh. Thus, from 1818, Chourjit Singh and Gambhir Singh had been ruling over some parts of south



Cachar independently. Govind Chandra's principality was saved for the time being, but he soon found that his friends were his worst enemies. Chourjit Singh, Gambhir Singh, and Tularam (an enemy of Govind Chandra) took advantage of Govind Chandra's troubles and plundered Cachar. Ultimately, the Cachar Raja was ousted from his King compelled to take shelter at Sylhet, a British Division now in Bangladesh, and the Manipuris ruled over the whole south Cachar. Here A. C. Banerjee writes, "Towards the middle of the year 1818 the Cachar Raja was ousted from his kingdom and compelled to take shelter at sylhet" (Banerjee, 1964:214). Therefore, Chourjit Singh and Gambhir Singh started ruling over the entire south Cachar from 1818. In Manipur, Raja Marjit Singh failed to satisfy the expectations of the Burmese king and the latter' invading Manipur, expelled the former to Cachar in 1819 leading to the seven Years Devastation of Manipur (1819-1825). It was the period during which thousands of Manipuris migrated to Cachar. After some time, the three Manipuri brothers living in Cachar reconciled and divided South Cachar for themselves. Gouri Sen writes, "These three Manipuri princes split the Kachari Kingdom into three divisions and each governed one part during 1819-1823 from three new capitals- Gambhir Singh from Gumrah-Marjit from Hailakandi- and Chaurjit from Dungurirpar near Sonoimukh"(Sen, 2003:41). But in the beginning of 1823, a quarrel broke out among the three Manipuri brothers. Consequently, Marjit Singh occupied Hailakandi and Gambhir Singh possessed himself of the rest of south Cachar. Chourjit Singh left Cachar and took shelter at Sylhet in May 1823.

By December 1823, when Gambhir Singh was the virtual Raja of south Cachar, the Burmese not only occupied Assam and Manipur but also invaded Cachar from three directions viz. Assam, Jaintia and Manipur. The third Burmese party from Manipur arrived south Cachar and inflicted a defeat on the local levy of Raja Gambhir Singh. Consequently, the prince fled to Sylhet and started communicating with the British to face the Burmese aggression. At that juncture, the British Government also felt the great danger with which their frontier was threatened. They also thought of the bravery and warlike character of Manipuris who had been resisting the Burmese onslaughts for many years. On it, a report expressed, "The Munneepore country, which is inhabited by a brave and hardy race, who have frequently opposed a noble resistance to their Burmese invaders would thereby accrue to the security and tranquility of our North-East Frontier" (NAI, 1829). Again, in a letter to the Court of directors, it was stated, "Under such an emergency it was natural that every resource, however trifling, should be sought after and the reestablishment of the Munnipore dynasty seems to have been a scheme



peculiarly favoured by the late agent Mr. Scott" (NAI, 1834). Ultimately, it was accepted to join the British force by a group of Manipurians known as the Raja Gambhir Singh's Levy consisting of 500 infantry and 40 cavalymen. Lord Amherst, the then Governor General of British India, declared war against Burma on 5th march, 1824, and the Raja Gambhir Singh's Levy joined the British outpost at Badarpur (Cachar) in April of the same year. They were supplied with arms and their expenses were also borne by the British. However, they were irregulars as no pay was entitled to them.

By this time, the Burmese had built their strongholds at Talain Mountain, Jatrapur and Dudpatil in Cachar. Their number in those positions was estimated at about 8000. The British Army under Lt. Col. William Inns arrived at Badarpur on June 20 and then proceeded by water along the river Barak to Jatrapur where he arrived on June 27. On the way, with Gambhir Singh, he tried to dislodge the Burmese from the heights of Talain where the latter was strongly fortified. For three days (July 6, 7, 8) British guns fired on the stockade- Gambhir Singh with his excellent local knowledge, assisted the operation (Banerjee, 1964:253). In this battle, the Manipurians chased and captured Takheng Mitlao and Gun Singh (Manipurians) who were Burmese agents coming to arrest Chourjit Singh, Marjit Singh and Gambhir Singh (Manipuri brothers). Later, the two were killed by throwing into the water of the Barak River (Singh, 1982:223). Towards the end of October 1824, the entire Burmese Army in Cachar retired to Manipur. On the role played by Gambhir Singh in Cachar, it was stated, "Gumbheer Sing ... with whom we had negotiated, raised from among his own followers a body of 500 men, who actively cooperated with our troops in expelling the Burmese from Cachar" (Dun, 1975:43). Thus, in the First Anglo Burmese War, the Manipurians of Cachar tried their best to expel the Burmese from the soil of Cachar.

In the revolt of 1857, when the Chittagong mutineers marched towards Cachar, Manipuri Prince Sana Chahi Ahum alias Narendrajit Singh (a son of Raja Chourjit Singh), who was born and brought up in Cachar, revolted against the British by joining the Chittagong mutineers' on the Prince's participation, McCulloch, the political Agent at Manipur, expressed, "shortly after the mutineers entered Cachar, they were joined by the prince, Narendrojeet Sing, who was at large" (NAI, 1859). Though the mutineers wanted to enter into the territory of Manipur, Prince Sana Chahi Ahum seemed to have dissuaded them telling that it would be



useless to enter into it as its Rajah Chandrakirti Singh as a dependable ally of the British Government. They, thus, decided for a great revolt against the British. The Prince made full preparation for the revolt with the sepoy, coming from Chittagong. In this way, the united force fought a fierce battle about 10 A.M. at Binnacandy (Cachar) on the 12th January, 1858. In this-battle they were defeated and Sana Chahi Ahum had a serious gunshot injury. The prince now fight with some Chittagong sepoys to the territory of Manipur where they were arrested by the army of Manipur' The latter sent those arrested Chittagong sepoys to the British camp, but Sana Chahi Ahum was treated generously and brought to the capital of Manipur. After some months, the prince was sent to Cachar to face trial under the British authorities. In this regard, a report expresses:

"Narendrojeet Singh having been tried under Act No. XIV, of 1857, and having apparently been found guilty of a criminal offence ought not to be treated as a state prisoner Honourable President in council agrees with Lieutenant Stewart in thinking that it would be inexpedient to sentence the prisoner capitally. If imprisoned for life, it can only be the transportation beyond seas" (Government of Bengal, 1858).

Ultimately, Sana Chahi Ahum was transported like other rebel leaders of 1857. Besides, for the great role he played in the Revolt of 1857, this prince was recorded as a leader of 1857 revolt with a remark, "He joined the Chittagong mutineers with his followers" (NAI, 1858). Thus, the people of Cachar under the leadership of prince Sana Chahi Ahum actively participated in the revolt of 1857 to restore Cachar to its people.

In 1893, there was also a case in Cachar which had created a great unrest not only in Cachar but also in Bengal. The case was popularly known as the 'Baladhan Murder case' one midnight some persons entered into the bungalow of the Manager of the Baladhan Tea Estate, Cachar, and killed the Manager and the Chaukiar. J.B. Bhattacharjee writes, "Six Manipuris and one Gurkha were apprehended and sent to trial and the trial before the Sessions judge at Sylhet. The judge, relying upon the purported confessions obtained under heavy torture sentenced four of the accused persons to and the rest to transportation for life. Their case was taken up by Babu Kamini Kumar Chandra and in the High Court at Calcutta, on appeal, acquitted all the accused. The case had created a great stir all over Bengal. Maharshi Devendranath Tagore and other nationalist leaders of Calcutta helped Babu Kamini Kumar in



collecting funds for the case' (Bhattacharjee, 1977:249). It shows that there was a close link between the nationalist of Bengal and Cachar. Hence, the Manipurians of Cachar had their involvements time and again in the politics of India in general and Cachar in particular.

2.3 MANIPURIANS IN THE ECONOMY OF CACHAR:

Making their settlements in Cachar, the Manipurians started economic activities like agriculture, trade and cottage industries. As already stated Lt. Fisher wanted to enhance the revenue of Cachar by expanding the area under cultivation. But the Kuki head hunting raids on the south eastern part of Cachar disturbed the cultivators. On this matter, a report expresses, "The Kookies are commonly seen suddenly in the night, not so much with a view to plunder, as to kill the inhabitants and carry off their heads to be employed in religious ceremonies" (NAI, 1830). If these frontiers were to be protected, many posts of sepoy were to be established incurring heavy expenditure to the company. The authorities of the British Government then decided to exploit the capability of the gallant Manipurians living in Cachar through an advance called Tuccavi.

The objective of Lt. Fisher behind this advance was "to bring under cultivation those Pergunahs which suffered in an extraordinary degree during the Burmese war, as also those lands to the Kooky frontiers" (NAI, 1830). He cleverly planned to give this advance to the Manipurians for cultivation on the most exposed area so that they protected the area without incurring any expenditure from the company's treasury. In 1832, Fisher wrote:

"The sum of one thousand rupees which I wish to devote to tni!(rrific purpose, IPropose to advance to Purbitta Sing Rajkoomar (the brother of Ranee Induprabha) who undertakes to establish one thousand Ryuts on the most exposed part of the frontier, and defend the neighbourhood of his settlement" (NAI, 1830).

After three years, when the advance was very successful, Fisher again expresse4,"No outrages have been committed on this part of the frontier during the last three years and several Munnipoorie chiefs and others have recently offere4 to take advance for the establishment of villages similar to that of Purbitta Sing" (NAI, 1834). Consequently, Fisher requested for more fund so that the entire Kuki frontier would be protected securely. In this regard, a report expresses, "His Honour in Council has been pleased to sanction the disbursement of a sum not



exceeding 2000 Rupees in advance on loan to Munnepooree Chiefs for the purpose of enabling them to settle villages on the remaining portion of the frontier, similar to the one which has been established by Purbitti Sing” (NAI, 1834). Giving more advances to the other Manipuri Prince Tribhubanjit Singh, J.G. Burns reported on 20th August, 1836:

“The Koomar Triboobunjeet Sing has begged for a further advance of 600 Rs. for the purpose of settling some other villages on the southern frontier. He has had advances of Rs' 2638 and has been very successful in the objective in view, keeping the Kookies quiet, for there has not been any disturbance there for a long time” (Datta, 2007:2829).

Next year appreciating the role of Tribhubanjit Singh and Parbitta Singh on the economy of Cachar, G. Burns again reported on the 17th September, 1837:

“Triboobunjeet Singh and Pubitter Singh, who aided by advances from the Government have settled many families and cleared much jungle, the lumma in the South west and the latter in Sonapur to the South East of this and in locations on these borders, have been of most material benefit as a protection to more inland Taloolcs from the predatory incursions of the Kookees” (De, 2006:128)

Thus, the Manipuris played a leading protective role in the then society of Cachar making it economically sound.

Regarding other economic activities, there was a flourishing trade with Manipur in cloth and cattle like buffaloes, cows and ponies. R. Stewart reported on 9th July, 1857: "From Manipur about 1000 heads of buffaloes are brought over the hills every cold season together with a few cows and ponies." Second on the prize and the use of buffaloes and ponies of Manipur, it is stated: "Manipuri buffaloes were sold in Cachar for sums varying from Rs' 80 to Rs. L 20... the ponies of Burma and Manipur were sold at Rs. 300 sometimes. They were trained for race Purpose in the fair held at Silchar." Regarding the best cow available in Cachar and its rate, it is expressed, "The best cows in Cachar were brought from Manipur and were sold for @ Rs. 25 or 30.30 On the annual Silchar fair (Mela), I.F.Sherer reported on the 16th July, 1860, "The last Mela was attended by a great concourse of people, and the results were so gratifying, as to encourage its continuance annually. Many buffaloes, cows, ponies and goods of all sorts, and kind were brought for sale and readily disposed. In these trade activities with Manipur, some Manipuris of Cachar took a substantial role.



In cottage industries like weaving and bell metal works, Manipurians of Cachar also played a great role. J.B. Bhattacharjee writes, "In Cachar, unlike in other parts of Bengal, the natives are agriculturists. During, "off season" only, they could indulge in other professions. The bell metal utensils were prepared mostly by the Manipurians" (Bhattacharjee, 1977:201). The historian again writes on weaving, "Only the Manipurians, Kukis, Dimachas, Mikirs and Nagas utilized their leisure hours in weaving and mostly used their cottage products.. the Manipuri Khesh and Kuki pal and, the curtains knitted by the Kuki and Naga women were highly popular among all sections of the people"(Bhattacharjee, 1977:201). On the same area Ranjit Kumar Dey also writes, "Once considerable quantity of cloth worker by Manipurians, Nagas and Kukis exported from Cachar"(De, 2006:201). Hence, the Manipurians living in Cachar also had their involvement in cottage industries up to a great extent.

2.4 MANIPURIANS IN THE SOCIETY AND CULTURE OF CACHAR:

King Krishnachandra after his marriage with Queen Induprabha converted himself into a deeply religious person, Gouri Sen in his book, life in Kachari kingdom as Khaspur writes, "Govindachandra composed, Vaisnava songs like Rasalila" (Datta, 2003:107), Mrita and devotional songs in praise of Lord Krishna. Queen Induprabha organised Rasleela and built many temple of god and goddess. She organised durga pooja function etc. A market was built by under her instruction known as Rani Bazar at Cachar.

King Bhagyachandra pilgrimage to Murshidabad had been a historical event in Cachar on the way to Murshidabad he took place at Chandapur in Cachar for some day along with his followers. King Krishnachandra was highly impressed, Suhas Chatterjee in his book, A socio-economic history of South Assam writes 'Krishnachandra was highly impressed by the pompous religious feat of Bhagyachandra"(Chatterjee, 2000:98). King Gambhir Singh organised nupapala at Cachar and nupapala was performed at the Shraddha ceremony of King Krishnachandra.

2.5 CONCLUSION:

Hence, the role played by the Manipurians in the nineteenth century Cachar is really worth mentioning. They really wanted to expel both the Burmese and the British from the soil of Cachar. Their role in the cottage industry and also in the cattle trade, with Manipur



improved the economy of the region to a great extent. The Manipur also deeply influenced in the Society culture of Cachar. Therefore, the socio – economic and political role of the Manipuris living in Cachar is very important for the history of India in general and Cachar in particular.

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