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MARRIAGE DIPLOMACY BETWEEN THE STATES OF MANIPUR AND BURMA, 18TH TO 19TH CENTURIES

Memchaton Singha

The organization of marriage alliances among the ruling families during the days of monarchy were a common phenomenon across the world. Marriage diplomacy was also practiced by the Rajas of Manipur and Burma in the pre-colonial period. Both Manipur and Burma succeeded in maintaining their status as independent princely states until the British occupation by in the last part of 19th century.

Burma or Myanmar is a Southeast Asian country who shares its international boundary Bangladesh, India, China, Laos and Thailand. In India, the four North eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur are the immediate neighbours of Burma. Like many others, numerous diplomatic matrimonial alliances were made with their neighbouring kingdoms by the Rajas of Burma and Manipur during their days of monarchy. In this connection eminent scholar W.S. Desai has mentioned that in Burma it was a tradition that in the event of a war, the victorious prince claimed as his wife, a daughter of the vanquished opponent. The Burmese kings even in later years of the 19th century 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 a defeat.¹ The Rajas of Manipur gave numerous Manipuri/Meitei ladies in marriage to the kings and princes of neighbouring kingdoms like – Ahoms, Kacharis, Tripuris, Pong etc. and *vice-versa*. Every marriage alliance was backed by political motives. Such marriage alliances in many occasions ratified peace among rival monarchs and helped them to develop mutual political, social and economic relations between them. The marriage alliances that were organized between the states of Burma and Manipur during the 18th century needs special mention as the outcome of these marriages brought about great changes in the course of history of both the kingdoms. The impact was so great that its political effects were felt even in the 19th century. It was only the interference of the British in the first half of 19th century that brought to an end the long run Manipuri-Burmese conflict.

In the history of diplomatic marriage alliances organized between Burma and Manipur, the Rajas of Manipur organized matrimonial alliances not only with the Rajas of Central Burma but also with many other tributary Shan states of Burma like Pong, Kabo, Kyang etc. As compared to Burma, the territorial size of Manipur was small but the rule of strong and efficient Rajas

in Manipur compelled the kingdoms to maintain good relationship. The Manipuri-Burma political interaction which included matters pertaining to commerce, prisoners of wars and territorial was supplemented by numerous matrimonial alliances making socio-economic and cultural engagements a continuous process. References speak of trade between Burma and Manipur during the 4th century A.D. where traders from Manipur visited not only Burma but also China on horseback.² As the name 'Manipur' is new nomenclature, in the early years the Burmahs called the Manipuris *Kathe* and the *Shans*, or those who inhabit the country east of the *Ningthee* or *Khyendwen* river, referred to them as *Cassay*, of which the term the Burmese word *Kathe* is a corruption.³ To the Manipuris the kingdom of Burma was known as *Ava* or *Awa* or *Aawaa*. G.E Harvey also says that after the foundation of *Ava* by *Thadominbya* in 1365 A.D., *Ava* was usually the Burmese capital for the next five centuries. Therefore, the English and the Chinese referred to Burma as *Ava*.⁴

The first instance of matrimonial alliances between the royal houses of Manipur and Burma is recorded in the 11th century by *Mutua Bahadur*, an eminent scholar of Manipur mentioning that the *Pagan King Kyan Sit Thar* had a Manipuri princess as his wife.⁵ It is very difficult to trace the authenticity of this event as the history of the countries for this time was not written properly. The next marriage organized between the two royalties is recorded in the state chronicle of Manipur "*Cheitharol Kumbaba*" that "In 1559 saka (1637 A.D. /C.E) *Tourangbi*, the wife of King of *Ava* left for her country."⁶

However, the most impactful Manipuri-Burma marriage alliances with abundance of detail are found during the 18th century. The most complicated period of relationship between the two states also started in this century with a frequent attacks and atrocities. The first instance of wedlock in this century took place in 1704. In the month of February 1704 envoys were sent by the *Ava King* with a marriage proposal to the King of Manipur. It is recorded as "*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.⁷ A few months later in the month of December *Meitei* princess *Chakpa Makhao Ngambi* was given in marriage to the Burmese King. W.S. Desai has recorded the name of the Burmese King as *Sane* (1698 - 1714 A.D.).⁸ He was a contemporary of the two ruling Rajas of Manipur, i.e. *Meidingu Charairongba* (1697-1709 A.D.) and *Meidingu Pamheiba* alias *Garib Niwaz* (1709 - 1748 A.D.). The available historical sources are silent about the reasons for the marriage alliance when the rulers of the states were busy stabilizing their own kingdoms.

However, a reasoned speculation can be made by analyzing the political situation of the two dominions and their relationship. Manipur during the last years of 17th and beginning of 18th century was at the height of its power and glory under King Charairongba and Pamheiba. On the other hand, Burmese King Sane ruled a scattered kingdom which was on the verge of decay. King Sane was one of the last rulers of Toungoo dynasty. Therefore, as compared to Burma the political condition of Manipur was much more strong and stable. Therefore, in order to avoid conflict with Manipur the Burmese King must have adopted the policy of appeasement by arranging marriage alliances. On the other hand, King Charairongba who was busy setting up a permanent administration in the country did not want to indulge in conflicts with any of his neighbours. Thus, it appears to be a diplomatic move that the Rajas of both the kingdoms adopted keeping in mind their own domestic interests. Though the marriage helped the monarchies to maintain a mutual relationship in the initial years of the marriage, the Burmese King Sane ill-treated his Manipuri wife and she was demoted the status of 'Chief Queen'. The reason for which is mentioned in an 18th century Manipuri chronicle called "Manipur Itihas Metei Puran Bijoy Panchali, Garib Niwaz Charit" that the Meitei princess was accompanied by eleven beautiful girls as her personal attendants. The King wanted to marry the eleven girls but it was rejected by the attendants of the Meitei queen. In this situation, the Ava King blamed Chakpa Makhao Ngambi for their rejection and dethroned her from the status of Chief queen and drove her out.⁹ The news of the incident angered the Meitei King and conflicts between Manipur and Ava became inevitable. King Charairongba made full military preparations for an attack on Burma but the mission remained unmaterialized due to sudden death of the King.

Thus, the marriage which was arranged with the motive to develop good relationship between Manipur and Burma proved to be a failure. The outcome of the event led to a deterioration of Manipur-Burma relations. However, the responsibility to take revenge on Burma now rested on Meidingu Pamheiba (1709-1748 A.D.), son and successor of King Charairongba of Manipur. He was regarded as the greatest King in the history of the state. Despite his brutal raids over the Hills of Manipur, Kacharis and Tripura, his raids against Burma are remarkable. The contemporary Burmese rulers of Meidingu Pamheiba were - King Sane (1698-1714 A.D.), Tanninganwe or Hsibyushin (1714-1733 A.D.) and Mahadammayaza-Dipati (1733-1752 A.D.). The Manipuri-Burma contact was revived with the accession of Burmese King Tanninganwe. Meidingu Pamheiba was waiting for an opportunity to revenge the insult meted out to his aunt Chakpa Makhao Ngambi by the Burmese King. The opportunity arose when the Burmese King Tanninganwe with an aim to revive a good relationship with Manipur in 1716 sent his

ambassadors to the royal court of Manipur to ask the hand of one of the Meitei princess for him. The marriage proposal was immediately accepted by the Meitei King. Meidingu Pamheiba conveyed to the Ava emissaries that the Meitei princess will be sent to Burmese lands next year but the princess would have to be received at the confluence of the River Ru and the river Ningthee on the appointed day or Chindwin river.¹⁰ As such, at the stipulated time and date the Burmese King sent 300 Burmese nobles, women, soldiers and servants.¹¹ On the other side, a heavily armed Meitei soldiers came to the decided location. The people of two parties met at the determined river spot where the Burmese were attacked severely by the heavily armed Meitei forces. It is recorded that Unungta Khullakpa (chief) was captured along with 90 men and 11 women alive.¹² This betrayal of the Meiteis had serious shock on the Burmese. In retaliation, the Burmese forces in few months led an invasion to Manipur. In this encounter the Burmese forces were defeated by the royal army of Manipur. The mutual attacks became much more regular and aggressive with the passing years. In 1723 Manipur faced the gravest danger when the kingdom was attacked by the royal forces of Tripura on south west side and the Burmese in the east. In this encounter the Burmese forces outnumbered the Meiteis but Meidingu Garib Niwaz himself went to fight the Avas at Wangjing and became won. This victory was followed by another victory against the invading Tripuris. Repeated Meitei attacks generally began from 1735, nearly a decade after the previous encounter. A major expedition captured the village Myedoo near Moo river and more than a hundred prisoners were taken. In retaliation to this serious attack of the Meiteis, the Burmese invaded Manipur in 1737 but they were again defeated by the royal forces of Manipur. Garib Niwaz conducted the most brutal expedition of Burma in 1738. About the atrocities of Meitei forces G.E Harvey has recorded that the Meitei forces burnt every house and monastery under the walls of Ava and stormed the stockade built to protect the Kaunghmudaw pagoda, slaughtering the garrison like cattle in a pen and killing a minister of the Hluttaw Council, the old doors of the pagoda's eastern gateway show a gash made by the sword of Garib Niwaz when he was forcing an entrance.¹³ Mention is made of another invasion of Burma in 1740 where many of the Avas were killed and many of them were captured.

A turning point in the history of Manipur-Ava relation took place in 1741 when we find the record of another marriage alliance organized between the two royal families. In order to end the continuous warfare, the ruling Ava King Mahadammayaza-Dipati (1733-1752 A.D.) sent emissaries to the court of Manipur with a proposal to offer one of the Meitei princess for the Ava King. The event as recorded in one of the Meitei chronicle "Ningthourol Lambuba" is that, the Ava King expressed that since long years Manipur and

Ava had the tradition of wedlock. Thus, to renew the tradition he requested to give in marriage the Manipur king's daughter Nongleima whom he himself would receive as the princess.¹⁴ Garib Niwaz gave his brother Wangkheirakpa's daughter, princess Nongleima alias Satyamala in marriage to the Burmese King. However, W.S Desai and the state chronicle of Manipur recorded a slight different version of the event. According to Desai in 1749 Burma was again attacked by Manipuris. On finding the huge Burmese army who were prepared for defense of the kingdom they retired from Burma after presenting a young daughter to the Ava King.¹⁵

In the history of matrimonial alliances between Burma and Manipur this was the last mention of marriage between the two royal houses. In the coming years the history of relation between Burma and Manipur records many Burmese raids on Manipur and of its devastation. The continuous run of wars between the two states during 18th and 19th centuries were both the direct and indirect consequences of the failure of the matrimonial alliances that was organized between the two kingdoms at the beginning of 18th century. The Toungoo dynasty of Burma was endangered by frequent Manipuri invasions under its King Garib Niwaz at the first half of 18th century. However, with the founding of the Konbuang dynasty by King Alaungpaya (1752-1885) during second half of 18th century, the kingdom of Ava became one of the strongest military powers by the time who succeeded to expand his territory by conquering many nearby kingdoms. On the other hand, the political condition of Manipur began to break down after the death of Garib Niwaz. The continuous wars of succession for the throne among his sons and grandsons led to chaos and disorder in the country. The new Burmese King Alaungpaya was fully prepared to avenge its enemy Manipur for their cruel raids and atrocities done in preceding years. Burmese Kings Manipur had to face numerous devastating attacks by the Burmese in the second half of 18th and the first quarter of 19th century. The first devastation took place in 1755 which was followed by attacks in 1758, 1764, 1769 and 1782. The invasion of Manipur by the Burmese in 1764 under their able King Hsinbyushin was so fierce that the than ruling king of Manipur Bhagyachandra (1759-1762 and 1763-1798) had to flee from his kingdom and it took around four years for the King to regain his lost throne. The most striking Burmese raids of Manipur took place in 1819. The Burmese forces devastated the country of Manipur for seven years from 1819 to 1825 the which led to destruction of the Manipur kingdom and of its population. The Meitei monarchy was destroyed and it was only after the conclusion of Anglo-Burmese war and signing of the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 that Burmese interference in the kingdom of Manipur came to an end.

Despite an established practice of forming matrimonial alliances, the diplomacy of marriage failed to prevent devastating conflicts between Manipur and Burmah in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

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