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## A study on identity formation and social reality in Manipur during colonial period

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### Abstract

From the beginning of the British administration the matters relating to the hill administration was entrusted to the Political Agent who was also the Superintendent of the state. In 1893, the hill area of Manipur was divided into five divisions with seven *lambus* under each Sardar. British rule introduced a separate legal system which dealt only with problem of justice for the hill people. In so far as criminal justice was concerned the Vice-President of the Manipur Durbar had powers equivalent to those of a magistrate of the first class under the Indian Criminal Procedure Code of 1898 and high court of appeal lay with the Political Agent. But in civil cases, there had no right of appeal. The hill areas and hill communities were separated and segregated from the general administration of the state on the plea that the people were not Manipuri (Meetei) in general and had entirely different customs and language. A new scheme of administration called Manipur Administration Rules 1907 was introduced under which the hill area administration was separated from the general administration and entrusted to the Vice-President of the Manipur Durbar. He performed his duty in the name of His Highness of Manipur. The article traces how organic relations amongst the ethnic communities had been segregated during the colonial period. It makes an attempt to understand the new identity formation took place and social divide occurred in the state during the colonial period. The contemporary socio-political happenings in the state could be traced to the way of British understanding the people in the state. It is a complex issue but the paper tries to identify the genesis of the new identity formation and consequent socio-political reality of the people in the state.

**Keywords:** New identity, social segregation and separate legal system

### Introduction

#### Reasons for new identity and social segregation

The management of the administration in the colonial Manipur was mainly because of the British way of assessing the people and the society of state. And their systematic attempt of accommodating the people of the Manipur within a universal typology of social hierarchies and ranking. The essential or main characteristics of tribes in the British colonial understanding were that they were primitive and had limited or restricted agriculture practice especially continued to practice jhum cultivation which was regarded as antecedent to settled agricultural practices. They depended heavily on hunting. There was absence of literacy and of a written script which were regarded as the indicative of how advanced a society was or what its relationship with the time of modernity. The tribes were again defined on the absence of an advanced form of religion and so on <sup>[1]</sup>. So, tribes were described as isolated, marginalized and socially and culturally inferior and politically powerless in comparison to the valley people <sup>[2]</sup>. Ajay Skaria argues that within colonial policy '.....the tribes were seen as primitive as they were still living in the historical time that had been left behind by more evolved societies. The caste was seen as relatively in more advanced time than the tribes. Here, then different societies could be mapped into different locations on a continuum between the 'wild' and the 'civilized' <sup>[3]</sup>. Again, there were also notion of assuming tribes to

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<sup>1</sup> Ajay Skaria, 'Shades of Wildness Tribe, Caste and Gender in Western India', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.56 No.3, 1997, pp.730-731.

<sup>2</sup> Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid History, Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.40.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.194

be associated with the forests and hills <sup>[4]</sup>. The tribes had been described as forest communities and away from the civilization associated with plains of the area. This assumption was cemented by an environmental consciousness which linked the tribal with a mystical closeness and knowledge of nature. Thus such reasons or understandings for people and its identity were crucial for the colonial rule. The ideas and generation of such ideas were basically to serve their colonial interest. Social ranking and segregation such as 'tribes' as hill people and 'non-tribes' as the plain people in the state was the reflection of the colonial rule in the state.

Such an understanding resulted in the differentiation of the people into tribes as hill people, who were considered isolated from the rest of the population. They described the hills men as less interactive, marginalized and subjugated economically and socio-politically by the plains men. The British authority and its officials on the spot who agreed and followed such ideas advanced a policy to protect and save the so called their categorization of tribes from the so called plain people.

Based on their different notion of identity, the British colonial officials reinforced sharply and exclusively defined territories or boundaries which resulted in a special area for tribal people. Areas for tribal people had a different framework of law and it was the beginning of separation from that in the rest of the country. Such steps had first been espoused in the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874 which was first applied to Bastar <sup>[5]</sup>. What was apparent was the identification of the demarcated hill districts or areas with tribes as the aborigines of the area. So it implied the existence of a substantial genetic continuity between them and the first human populations of that region. These areas were prevented from being used or rather called exploitation of the plain people.

### New Framework of Administration

The framework of the new system of administration that was introduced in the hill areas after Anglo-Manipur war of 1891 and the Manipur Administration Rules 1907 was based on the logic of protecting and saving the tribes through putting the hill administration directly under the Vice-President of the Manipur Durbar and cases involving hill villagers were tried by the British laws under British courts. So the hill areas of Manipur were in real sense kept outside the influence of the Maharaja Churachand of Manipur. So, imposition of the administrative set up brought tremendous change in the social relation in state. Above this administrative imposition, the colonial officials also encouraged and reinforced Hinduisation of the Meetei/Meitei. In fact the social segregation between the so called valley and hills were also reinforced due to the increasing 'Hinduisation' of the Meeteis and 'Christianization' of the hill people. The ideological basis for spreading Christianity to the hill people was the assumption of tribes doesn't have their own religion or if had, not advanced in the civilized world. The religion of the tribes are crude and at the most in the form of animism. The mission for spreading Christianity would help these wild people or tribes and would be easier to interact or deal with. Moreover the British rule grew more

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.40

<sup>5</sup> Nandini Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns an Anthropological History of Bastar 1854-1996*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.164.

secure and the philosophies of evangelicalism and utilitarianism cast their spell. <sup>[6]</sup>

The American Baptist Mission in Burma made the first attempt to establish their mission station in Manipur in 1836 which was not allowed due to the refusal of permission by the Raja <sup>[7]</sup>. After the Anglo-Manipuri war of 1891, William Pettigrew who worked for the Arthington Aborigines Mission Society was allowed to enter Manipur by Officiating Political Agent A. Porteous in 1894 <sup>[8]</sup>. By setting up a school he started to preach the gospel among the Meeteis. But the 'Hinduised' Meeteis took Pettigrew's preaching as a deliberate attempt to impose upon them the government's religion. When Maxwell, Political Agent who returned from furlough came to know the attitude of the 'Hinduised' Meeteis, thought trouble might arise if Pettigrew was allowed to continue his proselytizing activities among the Meeteis. The peculiar position in which the British officials were put to administer the state on behalf of the minor raja perhaps made them hesitate to interfere with the socio-religious matter of the people. More importantly, the social policy of British after the Revolt of 1857 particularly in matters of religion was apparently strict neutrality. Any departure from such policy, according to C. J. Lyall, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, would very likely be seized upon by Hindus in Bengal and elsewhere as a ground for an attack upon the government <sup>[9]</sup>. Thus, in so far as the 'Hindu' Meeteis were concerned, the British officials decided to maintain status quo and Maxwell had to serve the ultimatum that Pettigrew leave Imphal or stop his missionary work.

Later on Pettigrew who changed his allegiance to the American Baptist Mission was allowed to work at Ukhrul (hill area) among the Tangkhul Nagas and was soon engaged in the activities like education, providing medicine, materials, etc of which Peter Robb informs it's 'political importance' in order to have normalizing administration in the tribal areas <sup>[10]</sup>. He was appointed as honorary inspector of schools which he held until 1902 by Maxwell. He emphasized only elementary education as he argues that 'in spite of this conviction, however, there is the hope of a certain number being found willing, capable, and intelligent enough to accept the training needed to make them the leaders of their several Christian communities, and to be of help to the missionaries. I am establishing Christian Churches in Manipur in such a way that they themselves in the years to come will rejoice with those who have laid the foundations in seeing a self-propagating, self-supporting and self-administering body of men and women in their evangelistic and elementary education work' <sup>[11]</sup>. The state government appointed Pettigrew as superintendent of the first census of the hill territory (1910-11), through which he was able to preach the gospel in new areas. Christianity began to spread in the western part and Sardar Hills and due

<sup>6</sup> Copland, *The Princes of India in the endgame of Empire 1917-1947*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Dena, *British policy towards Manipur 1762-1947*, Imphal, Nongeen Publications, 2008, p.82.

<sup>8</sup> Manipur Administrative Report 1894-95, Manipur State Archive, Imphal.

<sup>9</sup> Dena (ed.), *History of Modern Manipur (1826-1949)*, Delhi, Orbit Publishers, 1991 p.106.

<sup>10</sup> Robb, *Liberalism, Modernity and the Nation Empire*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2007 p. 149.

<sup>11</sup> Dena, *British policy towards Manipur 1762-1947*, p. 90.

to the widening of the Church network resulted in the formation of Manipur Christian Association in November 1916.

Owing to his help for organizing a contingent for the Second Manipur Labour Corps for service in France during the First World War, on the request from H. J. Higgins the President of the Manipur State Durbar, Manipur Durbar in 1919 allowed Dr. Crozier to start first missionary dispensary at Kangpokpi, at the Imphal-Dimapur Road with the instruction from the Maharaja not to convert any Meeteis lest he was subject to deportation. Thus by 1920, mission work was divided between the two missionaries by making Pettigrew in-charge of education, North-East hills (Ukhrul) and Sardar Hills and Dr. Crozier that of the dispensary and the North-West area.

On the other hand, in 1920 Maharaja encouraged by his Brahmins started Hindu proselytizing works among the hill village communities by establishing schools and encouraging the learning of Sanskrit. For this purpose a society called Gour Dharma Pracharini Sabha was established in 1924 by Lalita Madhap Sharma and Banka Behri Sharma<sup>[12]</sup>. But the British right from the separation of hill administration didn't support such activities because it could be contradictory to the political intention of the civilizing mission. Higgin addressed in his letter to the Chief Secretary to the Governor of Assam, '.....His Highness the Maharaja proposes to carry out Hindu missionary work among the hill tribes. I do not see how we can object, though I expect it will lead to trouble'<sup>[13]</sup>. During this period, the whole Manipur hills was claimed to be the exclusive mission field of the American Baptist Mission. But the southern Manipur hills were demarcated for the activities for the Northeast India General Mission since the activities started by Watkin Robert. Thus, the Christian missionaries demarcated the separate territory or areas for their activities in the hill areas which ultimately led to religiously defined boundary American Baptist Mission proselytized the hill village that later came to be known as Naga and for Northeast India General Mission it was Kuki. So, the exclusivist policy of the British rule not only segregated the hill and valley but also amongst the hill people as Naga and Kuki. Manipur has become something of a playground for sects.

### Conclusion

In conclusion we could say that there were administrative structural changes in Manipur during the British colonial rule that basically served and legitimized the colonial interests. Royal proselytism and Christian missionary activities during the colonial period resulted in the socio-religious ranks and hierarchies and hence social segregation in the state. So there was a strong reaction against the various socio-religious oppressive policies of the local King and his favourite Brahmins who were encouraged by the British rule. The reaction to the royal proselytism and Christian missionary activities could be seen in '*Laininghanba Ehou*' (revivalist movement) of the cultural revivalism of the pre-Hindu Meetei traditional culture

associated with *Sanamahism* and sought to rediscover and reassert the religion of the past so as to be an integral part of the political movements in colonial and post-merger Manipur.

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<sup>12</sup> N. Lokendra, *The Unquiet valley*, Delhi, Mittal Publications, 1998, p.125.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Mr. Higgin, Political Agent in Manipur to G E Soames, Chief Secretary to the Governor of Assam, Registration No. 522C, Imphal, dated 21<sup>st</sup> November 1929.