

The Scheduled Caste Lois of Manipur: A Brief History

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Abstract

The term 'Scheduled Castes' generally denotes those who are socially deprived; and economically and educationally backward sections of the Hindus, even after the Constitution of India came into force on the 26th January 1950. The genesis of the Scheduled Castes in Manipur has a unique history. During the native rule, there were some sections of the Hinduised Manipuris or Meiteis who were known as Lois. They were socially outcaste and regarded as lower section of the Hinduised Manipuri society. After Manipur became a part of the Union of India on the 15th October 1949; and despite the introduction of democratic form of government which provides social equality, prohibits any form of discrimination, rule of law, and so on, the Lois in Manipur were treated as lower section of the Hinduised Manipuris. So, they were included as one of the seven Scheduled Caste communities in the lists of Manipur under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Modification) Order 1956. This paper is an attempt to trace the origin of the Scheduled Castes Lois of Manipur.

Keywords: Backward Classes Commission, *Chakpas*, *Lois*, Outcastes and Scheduled Castes

Introduction:

The term 'Scheduled Castes' was first coined by the Simon Commission in 1928 and subsequently adopted in Section 309 of the Government of India Act 1935 (Ghurye 306). The Simon Commission used the term for the people described as untouchables in Hindu society (Ahuja 364). The Commission prescribed thirteen tests (questions) for including a caste in the scheduled lists. Some important tests among the thirteen points prescribed were:

- Whether caste in question pollutes high castes by their touch or proximity.

- Whether caste in question is denied entry into temples.
- Whether caste in question is denied the use of public places like schools, wells, etc.
- Whether caste in question can be served by Brahmin Purohits.
- Whether caste in question be served by tailors (darjis), barbers (nais), washer man (dhobis), water carriers, etc.
- Whether caste in question is one from whose hands a caste Hindu can take water.
- Whether in ordinary social intercourse, a well-educated member of the Caste in question

will be treated as an equal by high caste-man.

- Whether caste in question is merely 'depressed' on account of its own ignorance, illiteracy or poverty.
- Whether caste in question is 'depressed' on account of the occupation followed. (Ahuja 364-65)

Then, the Constitution of India also uses the term used by the Simmon Commission. It generally denotes those who are socially deprived; and economically and educationally backward even after the Constitution of India came into force on the 26th January, 1950. They are within the Hindu fold because they worship the same deities of the Hindus although they were refused to enter the temples run by the high caste Hindus. Regarding the inclusion of a community or group as Scheduled Castes, Article 341 (1) of the Constitution of India says the President may with respect to any State or Union Territory and where it is a State, after consultation with the Governor thereof, by public notification, specify the castes, races or tribes or parts of or groups within castes, races or tribes which shall for the purpose of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Castes in relation to that State or Union Territory, as the case may be. The Indian President's decree relating to 'Scheduled Castes' which is known as the President's Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order No. 19 of 1950, stated that "No person who professes a religion different from the Hindu religion shall be deemed to be member of a Scheduled Caste." (Michael 72)

The Scheduled Castes in Manipur came into existence only after the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes List (Modification) Order, 1956. Under the

said Order, there were seven recognized Scheduled Caste communities in Manipur, viz., (i) *Lois*, (ii) *Kamu-Yaithibis*, (iii) *Dhubi/ Dhobi*, (iv) *Namsudra*, (v) *Patni*, (vi) *Sutradhar* and (vii) *Muchi/Ravidas*. Among them, *Lois* and *Yaithibis* are original settlers whereas the rest are recent immigrants who came to Manipur from different parts of the Indian sub- continent in the recent past in search of better livelihood. (Annual Draft Special Component Plan for Scheduled Castes 1) Of all the Scheduled Caste communities of Manipur, the *Lois* formed the most important section in Manipur. The *Loi* communities of Manipur are mainly of *Chakpa*¹ origin. So, when we talk about the history of the Scheduled Castes in Manipur, it generally refers to the transformation of the *Chakpas* into the Scheduled Caste community. The present paper is an attempt to highlight how does the *Chakpas* become the Scheduled Castes of Manipur, and in which manner some of the other so called *Loi* villages also become Scheduled Castes of Manipur.

Who are the Chakpas?

With regard to the origin of the *Chakpas*, there are a numbers of theories based on various historical sources. The ancient texts like *Chakpa Khundarol* mentioned that the *Chakpas* settled in the valley of Manipur from the era of *Hayichak*.² Thus, some local scholars opined that the *Chakpas* were originated from Manipur. According to McCulloch, a British Political Agent of Manipur, Andro and Sekmai were the main settlement areas of the *Chakpas*. They are said to be the original inhabitants of the valley of Manipur. (Ibohal 146) From Manipur, they went to Northern Burma (Myanmar). In *Sekmai Meihaoubarol Puya*, an ancient

manuscript of the *Chakpa Sekmais*, it is mentioned that one of the ancestor of the *Chakpas* became the Shan tribe of the Northern Burma. (Sekmai Meihoubarol) G.A. Grierson in his *Linguistic Survey of India*, connects Andro and Sekmai, ... with the *Sak* and *Kadu* languages of Burma. (Grierson 27-28) In support of this theory, G. H. Luce in his book *Phase of Pre-Pagan Burma, Volume I* writes, “The *Sak* languages ... once spread over the whole North Burma, from Manipur ... to Northern Yunnan.” (Luce 37)

The *Chakpas* in Manipur:

In regard to the settlement of the *Chakpas* in Manipur, it was mentioned that the *Chakpas* lived in the valley with their chieftain at *Mongba Yoisangai*, an ancient site at Kangla from the early times. The local literature like *Chakpa Khundarol* mentioned that the *Chakpas* were descended from *Chakpa, Tangba, Pangkak, Chikchikpa, Loupal, Sawang* and *Sawangnongphurol Achiba*. According to the tradition of the *Chakpas*, they were *Lairol* i.e. ancestors of the *Chakpas*. It is said that all these people did not have any offspring except Sawang who gave birth to *Chakpa, Tangba, Kasi, Hori, Hora, Nonglon, Nongphu, Menongmit, Melangmit* and *Hamengmit*. Their descendants were *Sawang, Kasi, Angba, Seringba, Ikong Seng, Oinam/Oinum, Lolang, Chirang, Wangban, Sekta* and *Kamu*. (Chakpa Khundarol)

The *Chakpas*, thus, with their chieftain inhabited at Kangla, an ancient site of the Meitei kings long before the coronation of Meidingu Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in 33 A.D. The *Chakpas* were subdued by Pakhangba. However, they continued to settle at different places of Kangla, namely Chaopuri Pung, Punsaihkhong, Ahongkei and Pulsiwa. Some section of the *Chakpas* also settled at Langching (Langjing). During this period, the *Khabas* who were one of the earlier tribes of Manipur became very powerful. Under their leader Khaba Nongjengba, they defeated Pakhangba who fled to Moirang and took refuge at *Loiren Khunbi Lok*. (Chinglen 1) The dethronement of Pakhangba from Kangla by the *Khabas* compelled the *Chakpas* who were friendly to Pakhangba to settle down at various places of Selloi Langmaiching (Baruni Hills at the eastern border of Manipur valley). They continued to settle there, forming ten *Chakpa* villages. The *Chakpas* of the Selloi Langmaiching dispersed and settled at different places in the valley of Manipur during the reign of Meidingu Lairen Naophangba (428-518 A.D.). The cause of their migration to the various places of the valley of Manipur was because of King Naophangba's threat to these people. Then, they settled at various places in the valley of Manipur. (Chakpa Khundarol)

From the *Chakpas* into the *Lois*:

It has already been stated that the *Chakpas* were the early inhabitants of Kangla prior to Meidingu Nongda Lairen Pakhangba's accession to the throne at Kangla in 33 A.D. Pakhangba became King of the Meiteis. Although they were subdued by Pakhangba, the *Chakpas* continued to settle at different pockets of Kangla. Thus, some scholars like M. Kirti stated that the term *Loi* (subdued people) was applied to these people when Pakhangba subdued the *Chakpas*. (Kirti 21-23) But it is a controversial issue that the term *Loi* was originated in this incident in which Pakhangba subdued the *Chakpas*. For, there was no record or evidence to show the term *Loi* was applied to the *Chakpas* when they were subdued by Pakhangba.

Regarding the term '*Loi*', it is to be noted that the word *Loi* came to record the first time denoting subdued and paying tribute to more powerful King during the reign of Meidingu Taothingmang (264-364 A.D.). It was recorded that the villagers of Haokha Lokha, a *Chakpa* village near Sugnu paid *Loipot* i.e. annual tribute to the King after killing Kakyen Mingamba, who was depicted in the form of a powerful bird. It is also said that he subdued the village. (Singh & Singh 3; Chinglen 37; Barmani 7) Thus, the term *Loi* and *Loi Chanba* was applied to that category of people with

reference to their dependent tributary status under the lordship of the Meitei Kings. (Budhi 41-42) However, it is not cleared that when and how all the *Chakpas* were made tributary subjects under the Meitei Kings. About the *Lois*, T.C. Hodson, an Assistant Political Agent to Manipur observed, "The *Lois*, a title applied to the inhabitants of a number of villages which are some distance from Imphal, and which are and have long been in subjection to the Meiteis, are of various origin." (Hodson 9-10) He further elaborated that they were said by the Meiteis and their own traditions to be the descendants of the autochthons of the country, who were disposed of their fertile lands by the Meiteis. (Hodson 65)

In later period, the *Chakpas*, on a number of occasions, tried to assert their independent political status against the Meitei Kings whom the latter tried to subjugate them. So, a series of expeditions sent to *Chakpa* villages by the Meitei Kings, to control the rising *Chakpas*. It shows that the Meitei Kings did not want to tolerate their independent status. Consequently, they accepted the dominance of the Meiteis. Later on, the *Chakpas* were synonymously known as *Lois* to mean subdued and tributary status. (Mangoljao 18)

Then, the status of the *Lois* was degraded due to many factors. The most

important factor was the sending of those people including bad characters to *Loi* villages as a punishment for disobeying the orders of the King and for committing crimes. In due course, the descendants of such people also became *Lois*. *Loi* villages thus became the places of confinement of those people who defied the orders of the Kings and for committing crimes. King Garibniwas alias Pamheiba (1707-48 A.D.) who was responsible for professing the Manipuris into Hinduism, deported a large number of non-converted Meiteis by treating them as outcaste section of society, to *Loi* villages. Since then, the Royal Chronicle i.e. *Cheitharol Kumbaba* constantly mentioned of deportation to *Loi* villages as a punishment. During his reign, Hinduism became the State religion of Manipur through severe methods. He forbade domestication of hen, duck and pig etc, distilling and drinking of wine, and eating meat. Those who defied the King's order were sent to *Loi* villages. (Ashokumar 32; Chinglen 211) During the reign of Bhagyachandra (1763-98 A.D.), the Hindu customs and religious practices were generally popularized and accepted in Manipur. He also sent many people who committed crimes like cow eating etc. to *Loi* villages. Hinduism, thus, in later period became very popular in Manipur and those who defied Hinduism were treated as *Lois* and sent them to *Loi* villages. For this

reason, L. Bino Devi in her book *Lois of Manipur* observes, "They might not have been known as *Lois* had they embraced Hinduism with the rest of the Meiteis. The communities were isolated from the mainstream with the title of *Lois* because they practiced the traditional religions of Meiteis when the King ordered the Meiteis to adopt Hinduism. They got the title of *Loi* for defying the orders of the King but they have retained the culture, traditions and religion of the Meiteis." (Devi 45) In recent past the *Loees (Lois)* were looked down upon and kept apart from the mainstream of the Meitei Hindu population. Thus, intermarriage and co-dining with the *Lois* was strictly prohibited. The segregation became more sharpened as it took of ritual character in the wake of mass acceptance of Hinduism by the Meiteis in the 18th Century. (Budhi 41) The socio-political status of *Lois*, thus, lowered, after the mass acceptance of Hinduism by the Meiteis.

The *Lois*, despite of their lower social status accorded, they could become Meiteis if the King was pleased, and they gave up their *Lois'* habit of food and drink. They were also entitled for consideration to be Meitei Kshatriyas after undergoing some ceremonies of an initiating nature which was known as *Lugoon Thangba* i.e. receiving the thread of Kshatriya. (McCulloch i) However, the *Chakpa Lois*

continued to profess their traditional religion. (Mangoljao 18)

The population of *Lois* gradually increased owing to the migration of various ethnic groups and the addition of war captives. Saroj Nalini Parratt, a renowned scholar on the culture of Manipur observes, "The *Loi* community has been enlarged by migrants of various ethnic origin and hill people (Manipur). Exile to *Loi* villages either permanently or temporary, was a traditional punishment of Manipuris who had committed crimes against the King and the State. Later, they became outcastes of Hindu Manipuris. Thus, there is a good deal of aristocratic Meitei blood among the *Lois*." (Parrat 4)

The King established many *Loi* villages for those immigrant *Lois* by assigning their suitable occupations or by ordering the task of defending the valley from the hostile hill tribes and the invaders from the neighbouring States. (Mangoljao 19)

The Emergence of the Scheduled Caste *Loi* Villages:

As discussed earlier, the religious policy of the Meitei Kings under the influence of Hinduism had already brought many *Loi* villages within the fold of Hinduism. As a result of it, before the British occupation of Manipur in 1891,

almost the *Loi* villages of the State got initiated into Hinduism. As they moved on that process, they became caste- Hindus occupying the status of Kshatriya caste. However, some of the *Loi* villages settled by the aborigine *Chakpa Lois* remained aloof from the mainstream of the Manipuri Hindu society. They were treated as low caste section of the society even after Manipur merged into the Union of India on the 15th October 1949. (Chaoband)

During this period, there was no demand by the socially and religiously downgraded sections of the society like the *Chakpa Lois*, non - *Chakpa Lois* for the inclusion in the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Lists of 1950. But the situation came into a dramatic change when a Backward Class Commission was appointed on the 29th January 1953 with Kaka Saheb Kalelkar, a Member of Parliament as Chairman. The Commission was appointed according to the Article 340 of the Constitution. The following terms of reference were entrusted to the Commission. (Basu 365-66)

- a) To determine any particular class or groups of people can be called Backward.
- b) To prepare a list of such Backward Communities for the whole of India.
- c) To examine the difficulties of Backward Classes and to recommend steps to be taken for their amelioration.

At the very outset, the Commission found that while the various groups came forward to represent their conditions as caste, no statistical information were available in this respect since the Census of 1951 had not collected such information. The Constitution does not recognise caste except the Scheduled Castes. So the Commission found very difficult in preparing lists. The Commission submitted its report to the Government in 1955, but the lists recommended by the Commission appeared to the Government to be too vague and wide to be much practical value. Hence, the State Governments have been authorized to give assistance to the Backward Classes according to the lists prepared by the State Government themselves. (Basu 366)

In Manipur, efforts were made both by the Government as well as the leaders of *Lois* to include *Lois* under the Scheduled Caste Lists. However, both the Government officials and the leaders of the *Lois* did not clear about the terms Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and the Backward Classes. They used the term Scheduled Tribes instead of Scheduled Castes concerning *Loi* villages. For example, in a letter sent by the then Chief Secretary, P.C. Deb, to A. Daiho, an advisor for attending a meeting of the Council of Advisors to be held on 28/10/53, it was mentioned to

discuss the claim of '*Lois*' to be included in the list of Scheduled Tribes. (Manipur Secretariat Files for the Backward Classes Commission) They did not know that only community from Hindu society could claim Scheduled Castes (now it includes Sikhs and Buddhists). Kh. Chaoba of Sekmai, then a member of the Electoral College, Manipur, 1952, called upon the representatives of Sekmai, Khurkhul, Koutruk, Phayeng, Leimaram, Tairenpokpi and Andro to discuss the crucial issue. They formed an Association of *Lois*, composed of 25 members to unite low caste people of Manipur. Kh. Chaoba of Awang Sekmai, Angom Mangi Singh of Phayeng and Kh. Tampha of Awang Sekmai were President, Vice- President and Secretary respectively of the Association. (Chaoband)

They organized meetings in many *Lois* villages including Kakching, Waikhong, Chairel, Leimaram, etc. Public pleadings were organized for the inclusion of *Loi* villages as Scheduled Caste villages of Manipur. However, in spite of such vigorous efforts, the Association did not receive much favour from the *Loi* villages except a few, namely Sekmai Awang, Phayeng, Koutruk, Leimaram, Tairenpokpi, Andro and Khurkhul. The orthodox Vaisnavite Hindu converts of those *Loi* villages strongly opposed the ideas of the Association on the ground that

if they joined the Association, they would be treated as low caste or untouchables. Thus, they refused to go along with the *Loi* Association. (Chaoband)

The Association also sent memorandum to the Commission to consider the inclusion of those non- Hindu *Loi* villages which supported the Association, under the Scheduled Caste lists. They even sent two representatives of the Association, namely Kh. Chaoba and Kh. Netra (both from Awang Sekmai) to Delhi to plead for the inclusion of the above-mentioned villages to the Scheduled Castes Lists of the Commission. (Chaoband) As a result of their efforts, Shri R.P. Bhargabha, the then Chief Commissioner of Manipur, sent a D.O. letter dated 27/9/53 to the President of Backward Classes' Commission. The documents attached to the letter stated that, "Sometimes in the year 1953, the *Loi* population numbering about 40,000 living in 7/8 villages have formed an Association and started to claim them to be members of Scheduled Caste." On the 28th October 1953, Secretary to the Government of Manipur submitted a note for discussion to the Territorial Council for discussion to decide whether they should be recommended for inclusion either in the list of Scheduled Tribes or Backward Classes in Manipur. (Manipur Secretariat Files for the Backward Classes Commission)

The Council of Advisors resolved that each Advisor will make local enquires in two *Loi* villages and one *Yaithibi* village - whether the economic and social backwardness of these communities warranted their inclusion in the list of Scheduled Castes or Backward Classes. They submitted a report on their findings to the Council before the 21st November next. Accordingly, the Advisors submitted their enquiry reports to the Council before the 21st November 1953. (Manipur Secretariat Files for the Backward Classes Commission) To settle this question, on the 29th November 1953, the Kaka Saheb Kalelkar Commission visited Manipur to investigate and identify the backward classes. When the members of the Backward Classes Commission visited Manipur from the 29th November to the 1st December 1953, they met many representatives of different communities of both valley and hills for their claims of inclusion in the Scheduled Tribes/ Caste lists of the Constitution of India. (Manipur Secretariat Files for the Backward Classes Commission)

After a detailed survey, the Commission agreed to enlist aforesaid seven villages of the valley, namely Sekmai, Khurkhul, Koutruk, Phayeng, Leimaram, Tairenpokpi, Andro and Kwatha as the Scheduled Caste villages of

Manipur as they were socio-economically backward and their life style including food habits and customs were different from the Meitei Hindus. (Manipur Gazette Extraordinary 15)

The Chief Commissioner's letter was mainly based on the resolutions of the Council of Advisors and the report of I. Sashimeren Air, Regional Assistant Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Shillong. In this report, Sashimeren Air writes "The *Lois* are to be found in the following villages situated at the foot of the hills: (1) Chakpayayleng (Chakpa Phayeng), (2) Koutruk, (3) Sekmai, (4) Laimaram, (5) Andro, (6) Kwatha, (7) Khurkhul. The term *Lois* means backward class. They are a distinct community, different in many respects from the Manipuri Meiteis, and to a great extent similar to those of the hill tribes."

This report further said, "These *Loi* villages have been treated as untouchable for the following reasons:

1. The *Lois* is not allowed to enter the houses of the Meiteis (Manipuri Hindus).
2. Inter-marriage and co-dining between the *Lois* and the Meiteis are prohibited.
3. The main occupation of the *Lois* is cultivation and distilling of country liquor.
4. The *Lois* worship goddess of nature.

5. The *Lois* cremates their deaths, in this respect they are akin to the Hindus.

They are far more backward than those of the Manipuri Meiteis and the hill tribes.

6. Socially, the *Lois* are a little better than the *Yaithibis* in the eyes of the caste Hindus. The *Lois* is backward and deserves special consideration from their conditions.

I am therefore of opinion that they should be included in the lists of Scheduled Castes." (Manipur Secretariat Files for the Backward Classes Commission)

Then, the Government of India modified All India Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Lists under Article 341's President's Notification named Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Modification) Order, 1956 and included the above mentioned villages in the Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages of Manipur. (Manipur Gazette Extraordinary 15) Thus, some *Loi* villages of the *Chakpa* origin and some non-indigenous communities of Manipur namely, Dhubi/Dhobi, Namsudra, Patni, Sutradhar and Muchi/Ravidas became Scheduled Castes communities of Manipur.

Since mid-1990s and late 1990s the residents of Kakching, Chairel and Thanga have been claiming the status of Scheduled Castes in Manipur as they were formerly *Loi* villages. At the same time, they are also

receiving Scheduled Caste certificates till date.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion, it is spelt out that the evolution of the Scheduled Caste in Manipur has a unique history. The genesis of Scheduled Caste *Lois* was from the Chakpas, an indigenous ethnic group of Manipur. After they were subdued by the successive Meitei kings, were known as *Lois* to mean subdued and tributary status. After Manipur became a part of the Union of India on October 15, 1949, and despite of the introduction of democratic form of government which provides social equality, prohibits any form of discrimination, rule of law, and so on, the *Lois* in Manipur were treated as low section of the Hinduised Meiteis. So, they were included as one of the Scheduled Caste communities in the lists of Manipur under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Modification) Order, 1956. Later on, in addition to the above mentioned *Loi* villages, the indigenous residents of Kakching, Chairel, Thanga and Moirang are, now, enjoying as Scheduled Caste *Lois* of Manipur.

Notes:

1. The Chakpas were one of the earliest indigenous settlers of Manipur.
2. The history of ancient Manipur was divided into four *Chak* or eras, namely (i) *Hayichak*, (ii) *Hayachak*, (iii) *Langbachak* and (iv) *Konachak*. There was no exact number of years for every *Chak*.

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Here, it should be noted that before the residents of Kakching, Chairen and Thaga began to claim the status of Scheduled Caste *Lois*, it is generally and legally regarded that the Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages of Manipur are Phayeng, Koutruk, Sekmai (Awang), Leimaram, Tairenpokpi, Andro, Khurkhul and Kwatha. This view comes into a sudden change when the residents of Kakching, Chairen and Thanga started claiming the status of Scheduled Caste *Lois* as per historical and Constitutional records. Their claim of Scheduled Caste *Lois* is refuted by the residents of the above mentioned officially recognized eight Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages. The claims of Scheduled Caste *Lois* by some so called *Loi* villages led by the residents of Kakching, and the counter claims by the earlier officially recognized Scheduled Caste *Loi* villages, have their own justification as per records available. Despite of opposition, now, the indigenous residents of Kakching, Chairel, Thanga and Moirang are enjoying as Scheduled Castes of Manipur.

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