

Slavery – A Historical Study**Dr. Sh Shantibala Devi***M.A. Ph. D. Associate Professor, Department of History, N.G. College, Imphal, India***Abstract**

One of the earliest socio-economic institutions of Manipuri society is the system of slavery. It is a universal social evil having its origin in the hoary past. Regarding the origin of slavery in Manipur, though the tradition claims its existence since time immemorial, available sources indicates the introduction of the system since the reign of King Kyamba, (1497-1508). This study attempts to highlight the nature and extent of slavery existed in Manipur before the 19th century and also to analyse the different functions and contribution of the slaves to their owners as well as to the States. Slaves were utilized by the State and by the individual slave owner for a variety of purpose. However, one important feature of slavery system in Manipur was that slavery in the state seemed to be quite different from that of the systems which were practiced in other parts of the world.

Key Words: Socio-economic, universal, hoary past, King Kyamba, slavery system

Introduction

The system of slavery is one of the earliest Socio -economic institutions in the world and also a universal social evil having its origin in the hoary past in which the element of force or compulsion is inbred. In this regard, A.R. Banaji states in his *Slavery in British India* that the origin of the institution of slavery could be traced an adoption of Medieval Latin Slaves identical with the racial name Sclavus, the Salvonic population in parts of central Europe having been reduced to a servile condition by conquest (Qtd. in Thakur 28). He further asserts that the name slave was originally given to a person of Salvonic race who had been reduced to captivity or Subjection and after the Slave had been vanquished they became slaves... (28). under this system, a slave was a person who entirely belonged to the master and

not the master to the person. In another sense, a slave was the property of another person (Singh 216).

Ancient literary sources like the Vedas, Kautilya's Arthashastra, Smritis and the epics reflect a flood of light regarding the existence of the institution of slavery in India in ancient times.

As found in other ancient societies, the system of slavery also existed in this State starting from early times as the fact is revealed from the ancient literary sources and accounts left by British scholars. But opinions are varied regarding the origin of slavery system in Manipur. Eminent scholar N. Iboi Singh in his *The Manipur Administration* ((1709-1907) it is strongly observed that slavery in Manipur was introduced for the first time during the reign of King Kyamba (1467-1508) (216).

But according to another historian and Scholar, N. Birachandra, in his book, *Ethnic and Ethnicity in Manipur*, the System of slavery started to practice in Manipur from the pre- Christian era onwards and the earliest type of slavery existed in this state was the Phungga Naais (102). He further states that the Phungganaais were Slavish household couple (husband wife and their offspring's), in regular slavery by birth (102). In this regard, the view of another scholar B. Kulachandra is that when the Section of Phungganaais turned up the nomenclatures of the whole community of Naai (Ningthou naai, Leimanai and Phungganaai) is appeared to antiquate and no appellation is also seemed to introduce to use in place of the old fashioned term, Naai (99).

In the light of the above approaches of different scholars, it can be assumed that the system of Slavery started to practice in Manipur prior to the reign of King Kyamba (1467-1508AD). In this context, references of the existence of Slavery in ancient puyas (texts) like *Panthoipi Khongkul* and *Loyumpa Silyen* may be worth mentioning (Chandra 38 and Imo 18). Further it can also be revealed that two types of Slavery viz, Phungganaai and Naai or Minai (Temporary or irregular Servants) were existed in Manipuri Society prior to the emancipation of slavery by the British in 1892.

The study attempts to highlight the nature and extent of slavery in Manipur and also to analyze the uses and functions of the same to the contemporary Manipuri society.

Classification of Slaves

On the basis of their location, slavery was broadly categorized into two kinds Manungloi Minai and Mapalloi Minai. The Manunglois were slaves from the valley area whereas the Mapallois were slaves from the hills. The different kinds of Naais existed in Manipuri society before 1892 were Ningthou Naai, (Slave of the King), Leima Naai (Slave of the Queen), Aun Naai (dowry slave), Lai Manai (Slave of the deities), Minai achanba (Slave who was the absolute property of the master), Aselba (temporary slaves), Ayokpa, (slave for maintenance of the palace), Lengpul (one who temporarily shouldered hardships), kei, (low caste Manipuri slaves engaged as store keepers), and territorial slaves (Singh 217). Besides slaves, viz., Chaubok, phunin and Tengkhan were also included in the category of slaves. Chaubok was the illegitimate child of unknown father adopted by the King as slaves and Phunin was also the child born as a result of illicit relationship between the mistress and her servant (Singh 217 and Dhananjay 8). Among the different types of slaves, Ayokpa, Chaubok, Phunin and Thengkhal were the phungganaais (Birachandra 106-107). Other slaves of Phungganai class were Hidakphanba (person who attended to the huka) and Potsangba (persons who acted as watchmen) (Hodson 67). Among the servants in the royal households, there were peculiar slaves who occupied respectable and coveted positions in the society. Niyaaibi and Haoreima, also known as Ipis were the maid servants who took important roles and responsibilities in the maintenance of code, conduct and

etiquettes in the royal household. Not only in the palace of Meitei Kings, Niyaaibis (Ipis) were also employed in the royal household of the chiefs of Angom and Moirang clans (Bhogeswor 10). Niyaaibis were acted as Khonglois (messengers), Dolaipabis (Khelchandra 260) (bailiff) and thongsang meiringbis (to keep watch at night at the door) of the Queen (Bhogeswor 10).

Among the valley slaves, some Loi villages were also included in the category of slavery. The Ningthou Naais and Leima Naais settled in the Villages of Wangban Ningthou Naai, Thanga Ningthou Naai, Yairipok Leima Naai, Kakching Leima Naai, etc. In this community a number of people coming from different parts of India, viz, Nongchup Haram are also mingled with in later years (Birchandra 109).

Mapalloi Minai Phungga (Slaves from the Hills)

The Mapallois were slaves from the hill areas of Manipur. Hodson states that the hill people occasionally sold themselves but more frequently they were sold by their relatives (90). The Nagas also practiced slavery. For hill man also debt was the important cause of slavery. Slavery in the hills was of two kinds, either it was the absolute property of the buyer or for a temporary period (Singh 223).

Origin and Development of Slavery

The process of slavery has assumed different forms in different socio-economic and political set ups over the long period of human history. The element of force or

compulsion is ingrained in the system of slavery (Thakur 1). In the words of Arnold J. Toynbee:

“Slavery is a non-Voluntary system of personal relations resting wholly upon force”

But such approach of the same scholar can be applicable partly in case of the origin and development of the institution of slavery in Manipur. Because a person could become a slave either temporarily or permanently, voluntarily or forcibly. In the early stage, the system was confined to a few persons but in later years, it was exploited by unscrupulous persons by starting to employ slaves as an instrument for the enjoyment in life. The main causes for slavery in early times were insolvency and large scale indebtedness. In the pre-colonial period, the economic status of the people of Manipur was generally low. Besides, as a result of the emergence of new socio-religious norms and values in the State, performance of religious rights and rituals were obligatory in every household. As most of the people had little extra money to meet the unseen incidence they had no means to raise their income immediately thereby compelling them to submit to others for loans and advances. Thus, a number of persons were reduced to slaves as they offered themselves just for a small loan or used to sell even their wives and children in rescue of their own hardships (Ali 24-25). Another cause of indebtedness was mainly poverty. In this way insolvent debtors voluntarily became slaves of the creditors (Singh 219).

Debt was not the only cause of reducing a person to slavery. Another factor of

slavery was laziness. Because of the liberal treatment of the masters towards their slaves, poor but lazy persons instead of working hard, reduced themselves or their children to slavery in rich families (Brown 91).

Crime was also another cause of slavery in Manipur. For committing certain crimes like theft, cow lifting, horse stealing criminals were sometimes forgiven of severe punishment instead they were reduced to slavery. In some cases of theft, when the culprit was caught but the goods not recovered in full, he and his family might be seized and sold until the entire cost of the goods was recovered (Singh 221).

War and conquest in ancient Manipur were also responsible for the growth of slavery in the State. Instead of annexation of territories wars in ancient times in certain cases were followed by collection of war booties and war captives. King Khagemba captured Mussalman invaders who came to Manipur and King Garibniwaz also captured Burmese war captives in almost all his expeditions against Burma and reduced to slavery. Besides other factors responsible for slavery were adultery, offering of the slaves by Loi villages and chiefs to the King etc.

As mentioned earlier, the tradition of slavery started to exist since early times in Manipur. In the reign of king Naofangba (428-518A.D) State granaries (Keis) were started to built and slaves were employed as the store keepers (Keirois) (Birchandra 226). It began to increase in the reigns of later Kings and during the period of King Garibniwaz, the institute of slavery

became very broad and the number of non-Manipuri Slaves increased considerably (Singh 225).

Functions and Uses of Slavery

Slaves were of great uses both by the state and individual slave owners in a variety of aspects. A number of ancient texts known as Puyas (in which the writers were anonymous) such as *Loina Shillon*, *Shang Panbagi Mashin*, *Mashin*, *Minaai Phunga Panba Shillon*, etc reflect the various duties and functions discharged by the slaves according to their class or category. According to *Shang Panbagi Mashin* (Manikchand 50). The main functions of the three Phungnaais, viz, Ayokpa, Chaopok Phunin were to offer plantain plant, leaves, banana, Sugar cane, Vegetables and medicinal plants like peruk (Indian penny worth), Uchi Shumban (*Eclipta prostrata* Roxb.) Lallukok (a medicinal small plant), Chenggum (Mushroom), etc for the royal purposes (Ibid). Besides arrangement of the items and ingredients necessary for the rites and rituals to be performed in case of death among the members of royal family were the other obligatory duties and function allowed to them (Ibid).

The Akam Naga supplied ginger and Kuhi, (a kind of tree which the bark was used for dying) whereas the Anal Nagas offered ropes, cotton, chillis, turmeric, pulses and Mustard seed to the King (Singh 225). The Heirem Khunjan offered blankets and paddy to the king. The Nungphi and Shugnu paid in tribute pines and fish as well. The slaves also guarded the royal barns (keis), cultivated the royal lands, did technical works like brick making,

extracting salt water, dyeing of clothes, etc (Ibid). In this way, in the economic point of view also, the slaves were the backbone of the State.

Administration of Slavery

Ancient scripture Phamlon refers that Naai Khurakpa was the institutional head of the affairs and business of the former slaves and servants (Kulachandra 60). It is also stated that he looked after the administration regarding the judicial affairs of the slaves (Ibid). Naaikhurakpa sat in Naharrup (Kulachandra 60). Besides, Naaipha Raakpa, was also the institutional head of the affairs and business of the slaves who were lately converted from war captives (Ibid). In this context another eminent scholar Nandalal Sharma in Meitrabak also refers that in later years, a separate department especially for the phungganaais were also set up viz. Phungganaai Loishang under a Phungganaai Sanglakpa (Panam Ningthou Senba) (20). His office was related to the Pacha loishang, the court of females. In later years, i.e. after the 18th Century, particularly during the reign of king Debendra, the masters of the slaves were deprived of the right to sell the children of a slave couple (Singh 115).

Inclusive Development

In different phases of history several kings of Manipur emancipated and liberated the Naais and allowed them to merge into the Social fold. As mentioned above, some slaves were appointed as keiroi in the reign of King Naophanba. King Naothingkhong established Keiroi Village and the Villagers were free from slaves (Gaurashyam 375). King Garibniwaz

liberated those Naais who could pay their debt. It was during the reign of the later Kings who followed king Garibniwaz that a number of keis, lois and Naais were emancipated from Slavery and allowed to merge into the Manipuri Social mainstream (Birachandra 116). Thus, with the occupation of Manipur by the British in 1891 the institution of slavery was abolished.

Conclusion

In the concluding part of the paper it can be observed that the system of slavery started to practice in Manipuri society from early times. Phungganaai was the earliest type of slavery existed in the State. The nature of Slavery prevalent in Manipur was of a mild form but slaves in Manipur occupied a humble position in society. Phungganaai were not allowed to get coveted and high post in the state office. Not only the King, queen and members of royal families and nobles but also commoners employed slaves before 1892. Slavery originated and developed due to a number of factors like debt, poverty, committing crimes (antisocial and illegal acts), defeat in wars, adultery, etc. Voluntary and involuntary were two broad classifications of slavery. In the later years, the institution became much enlarged due to several factors. The categorizations of slaves was according to the nature of their employment.

One of the unique features of slavery existed in Manipur was that unlike the other institutions of slavery prevailed in different parts of the world, the system was not based on caste, creed and race. Subsequently many non-Manipur slaves

were also absorbed into the Manipuri society. But in later years, from the colonial period i.e. 1892 all the slaves of the kings and individual owners were liberated and were allowed to form a separate class and settle at different places.

Though slavery in ancient Manipur is an unjustifiable and inhuman act today, it has

several uses in the socio economic aspects if it is observed in the contemporary point of view. But the tradition of slavery is totally different with the current egalitarian socio-economic order which the democratic machineries of today promise to construct.

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