

## King Bheigyachandra: The Protector of Manipur

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### Abstract

King Bheigyachandra who ruled in Manipur (c. 1759- 1761 A.D. and 1763 – 1798 A.D.) was a brave and skilful warrior, deeply religious, and patron of tradition and culture. He defended the kingdom of Manipur from the Burmese incursions even though he was in exile in some times. During his times, he subjugated the surrounding hill tribes and they accepted his suzerainty. He was one of the most skills diplomatic kings of Manipur. He for the first time made a treaty with the East India Company through his emissary Haridas Gossain with Henry Vansittart, the Chief of the Chittagong Factory on 14 September, 1762 at Chittagong Factory. Due to his diplomatic policies, he drove away the Burmese from Manipur on a number of times. This paper is an attempt to describe and discuss his military valour as well as his diplomatic policies.

**Key Words:** Ahom, Awa, British, Burmese, Manipur and Tekhao

### Background:

King Bheigyachandra was one of the important epoch-making kings of Manipur. He was known by many names. The hill tribes called him Chingthangkhome. The people of Assam (Tekhao) called him Jaysingh, the Vaishnavs called him Karta. He was the fortunate one who was able to facilitate the nirupam of Shri Govinda, and the dedication of the Maharas Dance popularly known as Ras Leela. For this, he was called Bheigyachandra – the fortunate one. He was a devout person, possessing the qualities of a ‘Rishi (Saint)’. Thus, the lofty name Rajarshi was given to him. He is known to all by a combination of these last two names: Rajarshi Bheigyachandra (Jamini 5).

He was, no doubt, a great warrior. In the early years of his reign he fought with the Burmese and subdued the warring hill tribes as evidenced by the Chronicles. But he was destined to go down in history not as such a character but one with a divine

halo, the god’s chosen hand for the spread of his name and grace. He ultimately found the Burmese too strong for him and sought the help of the Assamese king Swargadeo Rajeshwar Singh to drive them out in 1765 A.D., and thus enjoyed a long reign upto 1798 A.D. though intermittently disturbed by the Burmese. This wide span of thirty-three years in nothing but a record of his firm devotion to Shri Krishna and pursuit for the spread of his profound faith by constructing temples and evolving sacred dances and music. The previous work has already brought him into focus as a ‘Rajarshi’ who could, without hesitation; give up the throne, the coveted object of every prince, for fulfilling his pious desire. Due to his faithful effort, there emerged a picture of the king as divinely gifted and marked out for instilling the faith of Krishna in the heart of the Manipuris. (Manihar 157; Kamei 319)

Thus, even though he was a great warrior, his main achievement during his reign was

the consolidation of sanskritisation policy started by King Garibniwaz (1709 -1748 A.D.). Propagation of Gauriya Vaisnavism, installation of the various images of Govindaji in the various places of the valley of the Kingdom of Manipur, and the introduction of the world famous Ras Leela etc. were the important socio – religious features of his period. And it had brought a complete transformation in the social and cultural life of the people of Manipur i.e. he made the people of Manipur to profess Vaisnavism willingly (Jamini 5). In other words, he popularised Hinduism in Manipur.

### **Objectives of This Paper:**

The main objectives of the present paper are:

- i. To describe the military achievements of King Bheigyachandra;
- ii. To trace a brief history of how he defended the kingdom of Manipur from the onslaught of the Burmese incursions.
- iii. To describe his diplomatic policies.

### **Methodology of This Paper:**

The methodology followed in preparation of this paper is mainly descriptive and historical methods. For the collection and analysis of the present paper, it is mainly based on secondary sources. Even though secondary sources are the main available sources, the paper tries its best to make it original one especially in approach and in the treatment of the subject.

### **Results and Discussion:**

#### **A. King Bheigyachandra as the Defender of Manipur:**

In 1759 A.D., King Gourshyam abdicated the throne in favour of his younger brother

Bheigyachandra with whom he had an understanding that each one of them would have a rule of five years in rotation. It was (also) suggested that since Gourshyam was a cripple, he abdicated the throne for the younger brother. (Kamei 313; Bormani; 116 - 118; Cheitharol Kumbaba122). But the truth associated with his ascension to the throne also coincided with the defeating of the invading the Burmese army at Leishangkong by him. After defeating the Burmese, the fleding King Gourshyam and the people returned to the kingdom from the hills and he abdicated the throne in favour of Bheigyachandra to recognise Joy Singh's i.e. Bheigyachandra's bravery. (Cheitharol Kumbaba 122; Bormani 118; Kamei 313; Iboongohal 176)

Bheigyachandra had a very short reign of three years as he once again abdicated in 1761 A.D. as a Brahmin Brahmacharya was killed by his servants. As atonement, he stepped down from the throne and his elder brother Gourshyam once again became the king. In September, 1762, Gourshyam died and Bheigyachandra again became the king. (Bormani 121-22; Cheitharol Kumbaba 123-24; Kamei 313)

During the period of three years of his short reign, Bheigyachandra displayed exceptional vigour and competence in restoring the kingdom to normalcy and to a position of strength. He destroyed all the relics of Burmese conquest including a victory memorial marking the conquest of Manipur at Thaugdut. (Kamei 313) He also subdued the warring hill tribes of Manipur as evidenced by the chronicles. (Manihar157)

In 1764 A.D., the new Burmese king Hsinbyusin (1760-73 A.D.) invaded

Manipur in the Kabaw Valley. The Manipuri forces were defeated at Tamu. Then, the king himself went to the field and fought against the Burmese at Kakching but was defeated. The king fled to Cachar and then to the Ahom kingdom in Assam which was known as Tekhao by the Manipuris. The country was devastated by the population. The most of the population took shelter at Moirang. (Cheitharol Kumbaba124; Kamei 316-17)

Here it must recall that the invasion by the Burmese and driven out of king Bheigyachandra from Manipur was done under the sinister plan adopted and the treachery of his maternal uncle Khellei Nongnang Telheiba, the chief of Moirang. Manipur was under Burma for five months and Khellei Nongnang was made ruler of Manipur during this period. (Bormani123-125; Kamei 317; Iboongohal 176)

During his shelter at Tekhao, Bheigyachandra's skilful diplomatic move enabled in getting help from Ahom King Swargadeo Rajeshwar Singh for the liberation of Manipur from the Burmese. King Swargadeo Rajeshwar Singh agreed to send an expedition to Manipur to drive away the Burmese. (Bormani132; Kamei 319; Jamini 9; Manihar 137)

Before the invasion of Manipur with the help of the Ahoms, King Rajeshwar asked King Bheigyachandra that how many soldiers were required for driving out the Burmese from Manipur. In this question, King Bheigyachandra said before going to Manipur with the Ahom army, he would go first to Manipur to ascertain whether the people of Manipur still loved him or not. Then, he proceeded to Manipur pretending he was a hill tribe man. In this journey to Manipur, he made close contact

with the chiefs of the western hill tribes of Manipur. He reached Lamlangtong (later known as Lamangdong and now Bishnupur or Bishenpur), and from there he searched for his lost friends. He sheltered for a few days at Ningthoukhong, then went to Kwakeithel in search of his beloved friends and the planning to drive away the Burmese from Manipur. Then he returned to Tekhao i.e. Ahom Kingdom. (Bormani132-135 ; Kamei 320)

In 1767 A.D., King Bheigyachandra with help of 80,000 soldiers of Ahom came to Manipur to drive away the Burmese from Manipur. Unfortunately, due to bad roads, tiredness of a long journey to an unfriendly topography, the most of the Ahom soldiers were rested at the bank of the Mirap River, and then proceeded to Manipur with only strong 10,000 soldiers to Manipur. They reached at Sangaithel where he met his loyal friends and citizens. Then, there was fierce battle between the King Bheigyachandra and the Burmese. In this battle the Burmese were defeated and his sinister maternal uncle Khellei, the chief of Moirang and the titular ruler of Manipur during those Burmese occupations in Manipur was killed when he returned from a marriage ceremony from Awa – the capital of Burma in those days. In this battle, his two sons Labeinachandra and Modhuchandra were rescued from the Burmese captive. Thus, he regained the throne of Manipur. (Bormani135-36; Cheitharol Kumbaba125; Kamei 320; Iboongohal 176-77) Two years after Bheigyachandra's rule to Manipur in 1769 A.D., the Burmese invaded Manipur again at the instigation of Haobam Keibiram, and Ghanashyam and Jogindra. The last two were working in Awa. King Bheigyachandra fled to Mayang Leibak

i.e. Cachar and then to Takhel (present Tripura) and Haobam Keibiram ruled Manipur. (Bormani136; Cheitharol Kumbaba 125 ; Kamei 320-21) Bheigyachandra became king again by driving out the titular king. In 1772 A.D., the Burmese invaded Manipur again at the request of Manshenba, the son of Khellei Nongnang Telheiba, to revenge the killing of his father. This time also, King Bheigyachandra fled again to Takhel. During this time i.e. the Burmese occupation in Manipur, Wangkhei Binodrom became the titular ruler of Manipur. (Bormani136-17; Cheitharol Kumbaba128; Kamei321 ; Iboongohal177)

On *Kalel*<sup>1</sup> 12, 1775 A.D., there occurred an unprecedented flood in the valley which was known as ‘Wangkhei Hatakki Ising’ (flood of Wangkhei in the proverb of Manipur). (Iboongohal177) In 1776 A.D., King Bheigyachandra reached Manipur on the 16<sup>th</sup> *Phairen* (a Manipuri month which generally falls in February) and overthrown Wangkhei as the ruler of Manipur. In that year, he became the king of Manipur again making Lamangdong as his new palace. (Bormani 137; Cheitharol Kumbaba129; Iboongohal 177) The Burmese under Hsinbyushin continued to harass Manipur by minor skirmishes till 1782 A.D. But by 1782 A.D., Manipur became completely independent again. And Singu Min’s (son of Hsinbyushin who ruled 1776-82 A.D.) attempt to invade Manipur proved to be futile as Manipur remained as unconquerable as it the beginning. (Kamei 321 ; Jhalajit164) For forty years, Bheigyachandra move from place to place to defend against the Burmese invasions and liberate Manipur from the Burmese. His struggle to fight against the Burmese was a saga of patriotic

fight for the liberation and independence of his kingdom. That is why Prof. Gangumei Kamei rightly says that “Bheigyachandra was more a liberator rather than a conqueror”. (Kamei 321)

After the return to normalcy, King Bheigyachandra like any other king of Manipur turned his attention towards the hill tribes. He subdued the warring hill tribes of Manipur. There are many references in Cheitharol Kumbaba, the Royal Chronicle of Manipur and Ningthourel Lambuba, (Bhogeswar edited) the Royal Chronicle of Manipur for the expedition against the hill tribes and to the acceptance of his sovereignty by the surrounding hill tribes of Manipur. (Kamei 321 ; Manihar157)

## **B. Bheigyachandra as a Diplomatic King:**

### **1. Treaty with East India Company:**

King Bheigyachandra was also a good diplomatic king. His diplomatic skill was first evident at this signing of a Treaty with the East India Company in 1762 A.D. to help him in the war against the Burmese. The treaty was signed by his emissary Haridas Gossain with Henry Vansittart, the chief of the Chittagong Factory on 14 September, 1762 at Chittagong Factory. The treaty was approved by the Bengal Government on 4 October, 1762. (Kamei, 2015:314) The Treaty has Nine Articles. Even though, most of the provisions of the Treaty are definitely favourable to the English, this Treaty shows the remarkable skill of King Bheigyachandra because the Article of 8 of the Treaty writes, “That the said Jay Singh (Bheigyachandra) shall not enter into any accommodation with the Burma Rajah without the advice and approbation of the

English nor shall the English enter into a separate and distinct treaty with the Burma Rajah without previously advising the said Jay Singh.” But due to unavoidable circumstances, the British could not help king Bheigyachandra and they retreated on their way to Manipur. (Kamei 316 ; Mangoljao XII) Thus, the great epoch making the Anglo-Manipur Treaty which may provide the British military help in defeating the Burmese in future came into as a failure due to its non-implementation.

## **2. Alliance with the Ahom Kings:**

Another vivid example of King Bheigyachandra’s diplomatic skill was his alliance with Ahom king Swargadeo Rajeshwar Singh. After the failure of the Anglo-Manipur Treaty, 1862, and at the same, after the defeat against the Burmese invasion in 1764 A.D., instead of trying re-new contact with the British, he wanted to take help from the Ahom. After he fled from Manipur, he went to Maibong, the capital of Cachari kingdom, and then he went to Ahom kingdom. There he was able to get the support of Kritichandra Barburua, a powerful minister and practically the king maker of the Ahom court. Both king Bheigyachandra and king Shandhikari of Cachar went to Rangpur, the capital of the Ahom kingdom. Bheigyachandra sought the help and friendship of the Ahom kingdom by offering the hand of princess Kuranganayani, his niece and daughter of late King Gourshyam. In this procedure, Kritichandra Barburua, at first, introduced King Bheigyachandra as a Hindu king of Manipur and a descendent of Barbruvahana, son of Arjuna of the Mahabharata, and then recommended to the Ahom King Rajeshwar to accept the proposal of matrimony from the king of

Manipur. King Rajeshwar accepted the proposal. Since King Bheigyachandra was a fugitive king, all the expenses of the royal marriage of his niece with King Rajeshwar were borne by Kritichandra Barburua who acted as the bride’s father. With such skill and finesse befitting a king of a cultured kingdom, King Bheigyachandra affected a friendship with the Ahom ruler who agreed to send an expedition to drive away the Burmese from Manipur. So, in 1767 A.D., King Bheigyachandra with the help of 80,000 (finally with 10,000 strong and healthy) soldiers of the Ahom regain the throne of Manipur by driving the Burmese and killing the titular ruler Khellei Nunngang Telheiba. (Bormani 126-132; Kamei 319)

## **3. His Contact with the Hill Tribes of the Western Hills of Manipur:**

King Bheigyachandra’s diplomatic skill was also evident from his contact with the hill-tribes of western hills of Manipur and his people of the valley to drive away the Burmese from Manipur before his actual mission to drive away the Burmese from Manipur with the Ahom army, he went to Manipur disguising as a Kabui, a hill tribe of the western hill of Manipur, to ascertain the people of Manipur still loved him or not. In this journey, he at first met the chiefs, talked with them to ascertain their minds to help the king in driving away the Burmese from Manipur. Thus, he sought the cooperation of the hill tribes of western hills of Manipur in defeating the Burmese. (Bormani 133)

## **4. His consolidation of His Royal Servants:**

Just like the hill tribes of the western hills of Manipur, he reached at first from the western hills at Lamangdong (present

Bishenpur town) Keithel (= Bazar) where the womenfolk praised the exiled King Bheigyachandra and expressed their love for the king to rule the kingdom again. They gifted many items to him, and then he went to Ningthoukhong, south of Lamangdong in search of his loyal servants viz., Khumbong Chandramani and Nandalal the two brothers. After that he went to Kwakeithel, presently at Imphal, to search his long time friend Kabichandra. He reached Kabichandra's house at night. At first Kabichandra could not recognise King Bheigyachandra. After a little interaction with King Bheigyachandra, Kabichandra recognised the King, and then they embraced each other. Bheigyachandra rested the night at Kabichandra's house and in the early morning, he returned to Tekhao to liberate Manipur from the Burmese occupation. (Bormani 134)

### **5. His Military Assistance to Ahom King Gourinath:**

The military assistance given to the Ahom king during the Moamuria or Mayamaria rebellions by King Bheigyachandra was also good diplomatic move. Here it must remember that when the Moamuria rebellions occurred, the panic stricken King Gourinath appealed for assistance to the neighbouring rulers of Manipur, Cachar and Jaintia. The rulers of Cachar and Jaintia refused to respond. But King Bheigyachandra still remembering the valuable assistance he had received from Ahom King Rajeshwar Singh in liberating Manipur from the Burmese occupation. To show his gratitude indebted to the Ahoms, he agreed to help King Gourinath during the Moamuria rebellions. (Bormani 148 ; Iboonghal 177-179) In 1786 A.D., a more serious rebellion broke out. Due to this

rebellion, Ahom King Gourinath was compelled to flee the Gauhati, and in the meantime, he sent messages to the neighbouring kingdoms including Manipur for help in suppressing the rebellion. King Bheigyachandra sent a small force to Assam but it was not effective and returned to Manipur. (Kamei 322) Again, in 1790 A.D., he along with his son Madhuchandra accompanied by 500 cavalry and 4000 infantry went to Tekhao to help Gourinath. The combined force of Manipur and Ahom Prime Minister Purnanandi attacked Rangpur, the strong hold of the rebels. But the attack failed as the Maomurians scored a victory. (Bormani 198; Kamei 322; Iboonghal 179) Thus, even though his military help to the Ahom King Gourinath was not a successful one, it showed his diplomatic greatness.

### **Major Findings:**

The main findings from this paper are highlighted as follows:

1. In compare to the Burmese, the strength of the Burmese army and their weapons were better than the Manipuris.
2. There were, in those days, hatred, animosity, instigation against the Meitei Kings by the Moirang Chiefs who were Manipuri Kings' relatives.
3. There was a mutual understanding between the two brothers in Gourshyam and King Bheigyachandra regarding the 5 (five) years rotation of ruling the Kingdom of Manipur.
4. King Bheigyachandra was a great warrior even though he was not a conqueror and he never accepted any defeat against the Burmese. So,

whenever he was defeated by the Burmese, he again and again recovered the Kingdom from the Burmese.

5. King Bheigyachandra was also a great diplomatic king. His diplomatic skills were evident from his signing of a treaty with East India Company, his alliance with the Ahom kings, his association with the chiefs of the western hills of Manipur, his love for loyal servants and the people of Manipur.

### Conclusion:

King Bheigyachandra who had many names, was one of the most important kings of Manipur. He was a great patriotic ruler of Manipur because despite his numerous defeat against the Burmese, he always able to defeat the Burmese with his diplomatic skill. Even though, he was a great warrior, he was mainly famous for his contribution and popularisation of Vaishnav Hinduism in Manipur.

**Note 1:** *Kalel* is a Manipuri month which usually falls in April-May.

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