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THE ROLE OF THE BRAHMA SABHA DURING THE TIME OF MAHARAJA CHURCHAND IN MANIPUR (1900-1950)

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ABSTRACT

The purport of this paper/study will explore the role of the Brahma Sabha organization that used to exercised power under the influence of the (Hindu) Brahmins with the patronage of the King, Maharaja Churchand. This Brahma Sabha, is one strong administrative congregation of the senior Brahmins in Manipur who were well versed in scriptures, formulation and implementation of social conventions related to Hindu vaishnava religion in Manipur during the colonial period. This paper is highlighting the different formation of Hindu Brahmins Sabha exercising powerfully among the Meeteis, their too many roles and their functionaries which only were used as a weapon to torture king's political opponents under the strict influence of the (Hindu) Brahmins with the patronage of the King in Manipur. The Brahminical customs and the way of life did manage to spread not only among all Hindus but also among the other outlying tribes. Hindu society was a stratified one and the best way of staking a claim to a higher position was to adopt the customs and the way of life of the higher class.

KEY WORDS: Brahma Sabha, Maharaja Churchand, Brahmins, roles and colonial period

INTRODUCTION

Brahma Sabha was a strong administrative organization in Manipur, formed by the congregation of the senior Brahmins who are well versed in Sanskrit scriptures, formulation and implementation of social conventions related to Hindu religion. The Brahma Sabha of the palace used to exercise power under the influence of the (Hindu) Brahmins with the patronage of the King. The Maharaja or the king of the state was the head of the Sabha supported by his

royalty. Many a times the king misused Brahma Sabha as a weapon to torture his political opponents and collect unlawful levy from the common public and also the Brahmins in the royal palace enjoy a perfect royal favor. In fact, the Brahmins in the sabha had a very strong hold over the Manipuri society at that time. It was recorded that no religious or social ceremony could be performed without the guidance of a Brahmin. And No important religious or social matter could be settled without referring to the

Brahma Sabha. The decision of the Sabha was the last word in many of the socio-religious issues in Manipur. Mentioned may be made that during the time of Maharaja Bhagyachandra's reign (A.D. 1759-96), there were five important Brahmin functionaries called "*Pancha Ratana*" in Brahma Sabha Manipur. The number was increased to nine during the reign of king Chourjit (A.D. 1803-13) which was called "*Nava Ratana*" as *pyabastakari*, *Acharya Guru*, *Raj Purohit*, *Tantradhar*, *Brahma*, *Dhamandi Guru*, *Bidhya Tatma*, *Hanjaba* and *Hidang*. Above these nine important Brahmin functionaries, there were other posts of staff members in the Sabha known as *Choudhri*, *Saraswati*, *Chakravatt*, *Homashwori*, *Brajabasi Adhikari*, *Sarbvuma*, *Bedhanta Bisardha*, *Padnibesh* and *Nabvidhya*.

The number of the post of the functionary *Ratans* increased as many as up to 100 (hundred) in Brahma Sabha during the reign of Maharaja Churachand. Many of the Brahmins settled in all the *Mohallas* of the Manipur valley were getting the favour of the king and they were allowed to include in the post of the *Ratans* of the Brahma Sabha. These Brahmins were given the jobs of the ritual ceremonial work during the religious (puja) festival held and of storytelling session during the festival occasions. The presence of Brahmin on the ritual days of birth, marriage, death, feast, lying of foundation stones etc. are crucial for the Hindu Meeteis. The *mandop* in the *leikais* (locality) became the centre of vaisnava socio-cultural life. *Wari-leeba* (story telling) from the episodes of Ramayana and Mahabharata, *Lairik-ThibalHaiba* (epic recitation by a duo of verse and prose reciters) are organized from time to time which regulated the proliferation of vaishna ideology among the Hindu Meeteis.

THE ROLE AND IMPORTANT FUNCTIONARY POSTS OF THE BRAHMA SABHA

Byasbastakari- The case of purity in the *mangba-sengba* (untouchables touchable) case was handled by Byasbastakari Brahmin. His work was to do the purification ceremonial work of the mangba, case. His position was at the foremost top or was placed first in the Sabha.

Acharya Guru- Alcharya Guru Brahmin did the work of baptizing the Maharaja of the land. He held his position like that of the Byabastakari Brahmin in his field like baptizing the king and other Hindu devotees. His seat was placed separated on a *phak* (Meetei mat) placed facing eastward in the Sabha.

Raj Purohit- Raj Purohit did the work of chanting of the sacred mantras for the ruling king. He did all the ceremonial related pujas, of the Hindu devotee Maharaja, specially in the name giving ceremonies of his family and his generations.

Tantradhar- Tantradhar did the work of reading out sacred books and text in the religious Jagya (religious offerings) held to protect the people from any misfortunes happened.

Brahman- Brahman looked after the welfare of the people at large and the welfare of the Brahma Sabha.

Dhamandki Guru - This guru post was placed and given in many of the occasions in during the sankirtana held. The work of praising of the king (Pranakika) before the start of the sankirtana was done by this post holder guru. This post of Dharnandhi guru was kept preserved and allowed to functioned till the ruled of Maharaja Churachand and Bodhachandra.

Bidyaratana- The work of the Bidyaratana was to appoint the different *Ratans* of the Brahma Sabha, to appoint the Shri GovindaJi's puJari (he is the one who cooks food and served the Lord in the royal temple) and to look after the welfare of the functionaries of the *Ratans*. It was a position formed during the reign of Maharaja Churachand.

Hanjaba- *Hanjaba* Brahmin was the leader of the *Ratans* of the Sabha. His position was at the foremost top of the *Ratans*, facing north indicating that he was the king of the Brahmins. His main function was to give instruction to the Sankritan's rule and regulations.

Hidang- *Hidang*'s position was next to *Hanjaba*.

The selection of the five or nine *Ratana* in the Brahma Sabha was directly done by the king. The King wished to include *Meetei* Brahmins directly in the *Ratana* if he belonged to well-known clan, good behavior, and well-mannered, possessed good cultural life. The King also included other Brahmins and Pandits of the locality who were well-versed in Sanskrit literature and of that medal holder (*Upadhi* and citation holders) in Sanskrit education. The appointment of the important functionary of the post of the Byabastakari should only be made from the highly educated, senior most Brahmins, possessed well-mannered. He should be from the high caste Brahmin family and his married, to be wife should be from- pure/royal blood Brahmin clan, of both father and mother Brahmins. A Byabastakari Brahmin could enjoy the freedom of owning of land as landlord, carrying *Phirangii* for them by others, owning of gold platen hookah and keeping of several servant and house whole helpers. They enjoyed the privilege of getting King's gold hand chain or *Sana Khuji*, *Khamenchatpa* (Royal dresses that were worn by the king), *Resan phurit* (green velvety shirts) and *Lamthang Khutlet* (Royal women's clothes). They could enjoy travelling on pallaquine. The reigning Maharaja would bow before Byasbastakari Brahmin, Acharya Guru and Raj purohit Brahmins saluting as "May I". The Maharaja would obey the final decision made by these three functionary rattans and even

these three functionary Brahma Sabha members could cut off the relations of the king when he disobey their final resolution. The king also bears in his mind that he should obeyed them and their decisions for the welfare of the state. But afterwards the ruling king had also the priority of making these three functionaries as outcast when any of them were against the wish of the king. Vishnu devoted Brahmins could travel on white horse accompanying pey (white umbrella used by/ for the king). He could share his position when the royal *Hiyang* (Meetei royal boat) took place.

SOCIAL BEHAVIOR WITHIN BRAHMA SABHA

There were rules and regulations regulating the social behaviour of the Brahma Sabha in the Hindu Meetei society.

1. Untouchables were prevalent in the society. Hill people like tribes, Meetei Muslims, insane person and *Yaithibis* (these people were strictly outcast in the Manipuri society as they were regarded to have evolved from the brother and sister physical relationship) were regarded as untouchables. The Sradha ceremony was performed with the help of the high class Brahmin clan. Dinning together with other people and eating of food cooked by the unknown person (regarding the class and creed) was strongly prohibited.

2. Dogs and pigs were regarded as untouchables in Hindu Meetei vaishnavites.

3. People from outside the state were not allowed to share the smoking pipe with the rest of the Hindu Meeteis, the Meetei vaishnavite who had sated on the unwashed clothes and after having meal he/ she had to touched the required things otherwise they were regarded as *mangba* (untouchables) in the society. The person was allowed to sit only on the washed cotton clothes, woolen and silken clothes. Wearing trousers, passing by the persons on the way like tribes and Muslims were regarded as *mangba*, even if the Hindu Meetei wore Chandan mark on his/her forehead, stepping on the waste, excreta, dung and speaking English were also regarded as untouchables (*mangba*). Using of soaps in washing clothes was regarded as *mangba* instead people had to used the soda base liquids obtained from the boiling down of the roots of the banana plants. People had to used water directly obtained from the wax clothed filter rain water collected in a large container called *korphu* and *sanabun* (Brass made metal containers). Clothes which were worn when going to the market were kept in one side of the verandha as these were regarded as *mangba*, these clothes were washed the day after. Touching and in contact with the non- Meeteis (*Mayangs*), going up and down of the offices, entering in the hotels, cinema halls and the drama

halls were strictly regarded as *mangba* in the Manipuri society.

4. Brahmins were in the top in the social set up of the Hindu Meetei social hierarchy. Brahmins were seated at the foremost first place in the religious ceremonial positions of Sradha (death ceremony), *Utsav* (monthly or annual grand feasting), rites, rituals and festivals held. They, the Brahmins wear nine strands of sacred threads while the other common people wear only six strands. They were never allowed to touched the hookah (smoking pipe) as already touched by the people of Kshetriya clans, if so touched the Brahmins were regarded as *mangba* in the society. Brahmin women were not allowed to get in contact and married with the Hindu Meetei as they were assumed to be one amongst the seven god mothers of the earth. The marriage of the Brahmin women could happen only to the any group or any clans of the Brahmin family.

5. Meetei vaishnavites were keener on the Sabha politics of Sastra. Fasting of four times on the Akadashi day was recognized in favour of the sastra but it was not performed as directed. Instead of four, fasting of once or twice on the Akadashi day was prevalent in the society. Performing of the Sradha ceremony on the third day as directed in the Hindu Sastras, of the deceased person of those died in the battle field and biting by the snake etc. were neglected in Hindu Meetei society. The reigning king recognized the performing of the Sradha ceremony on the tenth days for the Brahmins, twelve days for the Kshetriya and fifteenth day for the Meetei vaishnavites, of the deceased person counting from the day of his/ her death.

6. There was special feature (rules) of birth and death of a person as recognized in the Brahma Sabha. The Brahma Sabha proclaimed or allowed to perform the Sradha ceremony while the same *sagei* (clan) was undergoing *yum mangba* (Meetei Hindu were not allowed to performed any ritual ceremonies while their clan was, having polluted themselves of new born and of death) of the new birth.

IMPACTS GIVEN BY THE BRAHMA SABHA

With the consolidation of the vaishnavism both in the ritualistic and social aspects, the Manipuri society faced into an oppressive force in administration strongly backed up by the imperial force. The king in consultation with the members of the Brahma Sabha took all the major decision of the religio-cultural affairs of the state and enforced the vaishnavite rule and regulations. The society was becoming hierarchical. The Brahmins and Raj kumars were on the top of the social leader. The cultural activities regulated the proliferation of vaishnava ideology among the Hindu Meeteis. The

Meeteis abstained from liquor and other intoxicating drinks. The tulsi (holy basil) plant had to be grown in each and every court yard of Meetei house. Marking of the tilaka mark was very peculiar to the vaishnavites. The whole function of the Brahma Sabha was to make a final decision on complicated matter of *mangba-sengba** case. This religious system of *Mangba-sengba* was very rigid. The Brahmins did not take water drawn by members of any other caste. An exception was made in favour of well born Kshestriyas could carry the water for the Raja (King). Brahmin women were not retailing the food articles in the bazaar. The "*Pothang*" or compulsory labour was provided by the Maharaja to the villages for the repairs of roads, school and the transport of official's baggage's honorary servants were accepted from this compulsory labour. Maharaja had imposed other forms of taxes in the name of religious duties on the unwilling subjects of Manipur. This autocratic imposition was severely criticized and the poor people had no guts to fight against the foundation of royalty backed up by the British Paramount. It was open to the Darbar to inflict punishment on the persons responsible for the disobedience of their order.

The form of taxes and duties imposed on the Meetei were as:-

Kangthourk-A subscription of half an anna per house was collected from all Meeteis except *Phumnaibals'* (courtier), sons and grandsons of certain high *phamnaibas*, husbands and sons of *Leimas* as (Rajumaris or princesses), *Ningthousageis* (clans of Rajkumars), *Sijabams*, *Duhans* (clans who work for the sabha), Brahmins, Rajkumars and *Lois* (schedule casts).

Kangchingba-All Hindu Meetei was liable to attend for *Kangchingba* (Rath yatra) celebration.

Lai Haraoba-When a *lai haraoba* (marry making of god and goddesses) was performed the *sagei* (clan) or *khul* (village locality) on behalf of whose *lai haraoba* (merry making of god) it took place, should remunerate the *Maibasang* (hut specially built for the *maiba* that is priest), the *maibisang* (hut specially built for the *maibi* that is priestess) and *Pena-Khongbasang* (hut specially built for those person who played the traditional musical instrument called *pena*) according to circumstances.

Chabok Wangol- On the occasion of the birth of a child to His Highness the Raja by any Rani, a subscription of one *pieca* (3 pies, smallest unit of rupees) per house was collected from all Meetei Hindus.

Mera Houchongba-Those tribal people or villages which had been accustomed to appear for Mera Houchongba, had to bring the usual trifliAg in kind with their curious dress and weapons, to get drunk as specialist.

Pakhangba Sang- Saba (construction of house of god pakhangba): A subscription of one anna per house was collected from the *Ningthouja salai* for the repayment and reconstruction of Pakhangba's (Pakhangba is regarded as the king of God) house.

Ram -Leela and Sivaratri: It was a compulsory provision to attend the Ram Mela (festival of Ram of Ramayana) and Sivaratri (worshipping of lord siva) ceremonies as the necessary expenses were born by the state.

Phamban Tongba (coronation of the king): All the *yumnaks* (surnames) and *khutnaibas* (those who work for the welfare of the sabha) had to do necessary work to their respective trades as the material were being provided by the state. No collection was ra ad e in case. The ten pannas (they were the division of the royal people into groups) had to do their work in shared.

Pach and Napet (person who cut hair and pierces the ear of other person): A yearly contribution of four Utongs of dhan was collected from every house in the Manipuri valley of the *Napets* and the *Pachas*.

Hijang: When *Hijang* took place a subscription of one pie was collected from the contribution of Higa-sangs (hut builds for the higas) for His Highness, the Raja and the Maharani. The Phamnaibas (ministers /courtiers of the sabha) had to build their own pavilions.

Cheiraoba (festival of Meetei's New Year): The *Cheithaba* (one royal officer who replaced the four panna (royal official groups) heads of *khurai*, *wangkhei*, *khwai* and *yaiskul*) thus selected on the last day of chaitra (the first day of Meetei month *sajibu* that is March/April) was awarded a *pari* (2 and half acre) of land for his life and was exempted from the (*lallup kaba*), a Meetei institution nearly equivalent to compulsory conscription of the modem state. The *Cheithaba* was exempted from paying the revenue of one *pari* belonging to himself till the end of his life.

Thangapat Sengba (cleaning of thanga lake): Cleaning up of *Thanga pat* was a compulsory provision for all the Hindu Meeteis.

Mandop Mats: The building of *Mandops* (big hall way building in front of temple for the congregation of the devotees) on any urgent occasion was the compulsory provision of Mats. The necessary expanses were borne by the state.

* Purity and pollution case. 6) Allen B.C. op.cit.,p-62

Kwak Jatra: On the occasion of the *Kwakjatra* the duties were incumbent on the *Keirois* at the state expense.

Chandan Senkhai: The *Chandan Senkhai* (fee imposed on the marking of tilaka) was levied with the order of the Darbar which fixed the rate from time to time. Every Hindu Meetei had to contribute the subscription of *chandan senkhai*. The fee subscribed on the impression of the *tilaka* was fixed at five annas per house. If anybody refuses to this fee subscription, the person was declared as *mangba* by the Barhma Sabha members. These *mangba* or untouchable People were not allowing cremating the death body and not allowed to perform sardha, ceremony unless and until the sabha members were given a specific amount of fee to purify them. The appointed Ratans collected the tax of *Chandan Senkhai*. The low-grade clerks of the Brahma Sabha members could also declare a person as *mangba* and he could also ostracized the people if they were given chances to purify themselves on the payment of certain fees. The ostracized people became a *lois* (schedule caste) and these *loi* people were outcasts in the Meetei society. The affected person had to make a prayer to Maharaja. A purification ceremony was done after the payment of the prescribed fee.

The taxes were as:

Authority	Redemption fee
His Highness the Maharaja	Rs.500/-
Brahma Sabha	Rs.83, 3 anna and 3piesa
Sanakhya Ahal	Rs.200/-
Ratans	Rs.50/-

The British Government did not interfere the internal administration of the diplomacy. Some of the unlawful impositions of taxes connected with are as-

Yairek Sentry (person on night vigil): The state official on duty were looked after and fed free of cost by the local village people. The official belongings were and the Government properties were also transported without any charge by the villages. They had the right to ask the local people to guard them for their safety in the night. When the clerk and other officers of the state government came to the villagers to collect taxes, which were imposed by the government, they were authorized to engage the villagers by turns for guarding the money collected from them.

Peon and Amin Chakthak (duty of the villages to feed the official peon and ainin on daily basis- If the villagers refused to obey they were declared alleged criminals and fined or sometimes put in the jail.

Jal Sambandhi (relation of water tax): Lakes were sold out in auction by the state government. In the rainy season when the lake-water over flowed, the owner was authorized to claim all the portions of land

where the lake-water spread and touched ground. This claim could be extended for an illimitable jurisdiction. Paddy fields where the lake-water touched during rainy season could be claimed by the lake-owner and could catch all the available fishes from among the growing dhan. Poor peasants were not allowed to pluck thamchet, thamna and thambou (parts of a lotus plant like fruit, leave sand root stalk) from the lake. Heavy punishment was made if they violated and a nominal fee called Sentek was subscribed.

Khewa (system of tax levied on crossing a tiny bamboo bridge): The road was worst and the people had to wade through the muddy road knee-deep. A system of tax "Khewa" was levied to pass on an *Urok-thong* (tiny bamboo bridge).

Dolaireng (tax imposed on the earring of litters): The government peons were carried in litters by the villages from one village to another during the rainy season. If the poor village refused to walk through the muddy ditches, they were whipped mercilessly and they were imposed a heavy tax on the refusal.

Wakheisel (tax imposed on the judgment made): Every case lodged in the cherap and the Sadar Pachayet courts run by the unqualified judges appointed by the Maharaja. The judges took advantage of their position and demanded *Wakheisel* from the successful party.

CONCLUSION

From the study we come to know that the Brahma sabha of the Palace was the highest authority on religious affairs in the Hindu Meeteis of Manipur. The functionary Brahmins of the sabha were the highest position holders in the society, the decision of the sabha was the only word in many of the socio-religious issues, though there exist as much as of *mangba-sengba* cases in the society. There were regular systems of institutions like the *leikai mandop* which became a centre of vaishnava socio-cultural learning through *wari-leeba* and *lairik haiba taba* as organized from time to time. The function of the Guru is of vital importance, he should be well versed in vaishnava shastra and help the people in their spiritual developed, help in the deep understanding of devotional life and the knowledge of self-realization to his disciplines. It was recorded-that the Judges and Magistrates posts were reserved for the Maharaja's near reserved and dear relatives. The *Ratanas* of the Brahma Sabha earned a lots of money extorted from the victims of the *mangba-sengba* case. Many Religious excommunications were made by His Highness the Maharaja on the advice of the Brahma Sabha in around 1939. The blackmailing scandal in the *mangba-sengba* scandal swept over Manipur in the early part of 1938. Thousands of rupees had been

squeezed from the poor village and needy people of Manipur. The Brahma Sabha was quite incompetent to deal with religious matters. The members of the Brahma Sabha was either penalized with fines or pardoned by the Manipur State Darbar for their misuse of power in dealing with religious questions. The arbitrary action of the Sabha was found unbearable by the Manipuri people.

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 3. *Kriti Singh. M. -Meetei Bamon and Brahma Sabbagi Houraklon Samna Neinnaba, Matamgi Khongthang, p- 10- 11*
 4. *Allen B.C-Gayetter of Nagaffills and Maniptw, p-61*
 5. *U- means tree, U tong was used for measuring things like rice etc. One utong was made of 12 muth, muth again was counted as measuring things contained in tightening of ones palm.*
 6. *Purity and pollution case. 6) Allen B.C. op.cit.,p-62*
 7. *Allen B.C. op.cit., p-62*
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