Chapter - II

ETYMON OF ‘VAIPHEI’

The word “Vaiphei” have been derived from the name “Khan-Vaiphei”, the sobriquet of village Phaiza.
Nomenclature facilitates distinction. That is why persons, communities, nations, races and things around us have their own names. The meaning of certain names is obvious and accepted. There are, however, names which, though established by usage, are constantly disputed when their suitability has outlived itself, and their origin and sources are lost in remote obscurity. The word ‘Vaiphei’ is also one such name. Several contrasting verbal theories have been advanced regarding its source, meaning and scope. Each narrator or writer upholds the theory that seems to him to be most satisfactory or feasible. Till recently, the root and the meaning of this name was enshrouded with puzzling myths.

Especially for the non-Vaiphei it would be a headache to collect and bring out to light the history and culture of the Vaipheis under such confusing oral theories. In fact, no single writer has yet entirely and correctly portrayed the Vaipheis—historically, socially, politically, ethically, etc. There are good reasons for this. In the first place, the primitive Vaipheis, unlike their congeners, were rather Socratic than being Machiavellian in temperament. Most of their life, they lived a philosopher than being a head-hunter like their contemporaries. As such, they failed to make a resounding name in the historical tome of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo-Zomi people. Secondly, in contrast to their congener elders, the resourceful elders have one common trait or habit, that is, proffering words of historical importance to only
those whom they considered as reliable and reserved (not outspoken). Thirdly, the earlier Vaiphei intellectuals were lacking farsightedness, and the fervency to inquire and amass the historical facts from resourceful elders. Above all, though some of their congeners know them, they are recorded and remembered simply as the most honest and benign-natured people. Justifying this record, Saikhama (a Lushai from Mizoram) relate thus: “Once in a Mizo Conference, one Val-Upa (chief of the Youths in a Zo village) stood on the platform and make such questions to the participants – What tribes among the Zos is the most cunning/foolish? and so forth. After all the questions he had made were responded, the Val-Upa rolled his eye-balls and asked ‘What tribe among the Zos is most benign, cordial and honest?, then, at an impulse all responded with high pitch. ‘The Vaiphei tribe’”. Thus, instead of trailing and preserving their historical tracks, the Zos simply preserved only the nature of Vaipheis. All this facts brought perplexity in tracing the root of the word ‘Vaiphei’.

Notwithstanding the obstacles pointed out above, this study trudged and gathered wide range of contradicting versions, vague written records, personal files and various sources to arrived at the most credible or acceptable point.

Theory based on foreign account: Some writer blindly relied on the accounts of outsiders in spite of investigating among the people. They make an attempt to throw light by garnering the scraps found in the tomes of the Europeans. For example, some itchy writers display what Carey and Tuck wrote thus: “The Vaiphe tribe, which has now entirely disappeared from the Chin Hills (upper Myanmar), has left traces of fortifications in the north which last for many years to come….. On the summit of Lunglen peak is found the remains of an ancient Vaiphe village, which was defended in a most extraordinary manner…”

The Lunglen hill is located in the western most point of Chin Hills bordering Manipur. It stood at about 6531 feet above the sea-level.

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Further, oral history in Mizoram maintained that this Lunglen hill acquired its name only after the inhabitants (Vaiphei) left when they move farther up into the Manipur Hills. Whatever claims or versions be made in this regard, it is quite doubtful in the sense that it might have been a record from a wrong information. The theory is not credible on the following grounds:

1. The treasured legends, songs, migratory routes, etc. never contained such hill or peak, 'Lunglen' as their capital.
2. Migration of Vaiphei from the Chin Hills towards Manipur is not earlier than the 19th century A.D. as maintained by resourceful clan-elders, and chiefs.
3. The name 'Vaiphei' is acquired much later than 1460 A.D. as maintained by resourceful and knowledgeable elders.

In the light of the above points, it is likely that the name 'Vaiphei' might be a misnomer emerging from a mere misapprehension and misinformed. Moreover, this theory is quite in contrast with the traditional history maintained by trustworthy Vaiphei elders.

DIFFERENT THEORIES:

Here, let us examine some local theories tendered by few writers and judge what they worth.

One astonishing theory is that ‘Suantak people who later came to be known as 'Vaiphei’ lived... in the village of Lanakham Sailo. One day one Pawi member of the village by the name Thangvaka killed one of these Suantak people and ate the heart of the man he killed in front of the relatives. This infuriated the Suantak people....... Sensing the danger of his life the Pawi darted inside the Chief’s house and hugged the prime pillar. According to Zo custom such a criminal who seek refuge under the protection of the Chief is safe from any harm. Realizing the implication of the custom the enraged people who failed to take revenge on the Pawi felt no more desireable to continue living together in that village.... migrated from that village en-masse. This action is expressed in Lushai as "an Vai-in amphai tach a" (They left in body or exodus). Thence wherever these people live, they came to be known as "VAIPHEI" (according to the genealogy of the Sailo clan Lanakham Sailo lived during the period from 1850 to 1875)"
This theory is not credible. First, the Vaipheis had already acquired the name prior to the date 1850 to 1875. Secondly, many Vaipheis had already reached and dwelled on the soils of Manipur Hills by the period stipulated. Thirdly, few groups of Vaipheis scattered in the Chin Hills with the name Vaiphei. Some section set-up Vaiphei-veng (or Vaiphei-colony) in the heart of Tedim (Chin Hill) under the Chiefdom of Sukte Kamhau during the same period. Thus a Vaiphei song that tells the oligarchic rule of KamHau is preserved as this:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Sinthu soi ding Tual Aw'pa,} \\
\text{Dokim tu lu Am Thang'pa aw,} \\
\text{Dokim tu lu Am Thang'pa aw,} \\
\text{Vannuai lutsial a tun'na Za Tual'pa aw e.}
\end{align*}
\]

Free translation:
The stateman Tual Awn’s father.  
Generalismo Am Thang’s father; 
Generalismo Am Thang’s father,  
The collector of any riches Za Tual’s father.  
(Tual Awn’s father refers to KhoiAam, Am Thang’ father refers to Mang Gin, and Za Tual’s father refers to KamHau).7

A second and more stunning theory relates thus: “Between the Tuisha and Tiau rivers along the northern part of Chin Hills (bordering Mizoram) there is a hill range known as Vaikhawtlang-dung and also a place known as Vaikhawhmun... the Vaiphei people made it their home for a considerable number of years. Some people therefore, believe that Vaikhawtlang and Vaikhaw-hmum must have derived their names from ‘Vaiphei’.” Some other section who supported this story rather asserted that the name Vaiphei is derived from the name of the place. Albeit, this theory also seems to be best on connecting two similar sounding words. Strictly speaking, the names or places ‘Vaikhawhmun and Vaikhawtlang-dung’ are unheard and also they are never found in the oral history maintained by
the Vaiphei. So this theory can be put aside as just a cock and bull story. Frankly, this tale seems the brainchild of non-Vaiphei historians.

Another much more incredible and astounding story traces and linked the word ‘Vaiphei’ with Vaituichhun village, which is said to be somewhere in the Lushai Hills (Mizoram). According to this theory, the chief of the village was ZaPau (younger brother of Sukte Kamial). The village was within the jurisdiction of PawihBawih Sailo, an eminent Chief in the Lushai Hills. The people settling in Vaituichhun comprised of such significant tribes as Suantak, Sukte, Nguite, and Lushei (Lushai).

This Vaituichhun existed between 1847 and 1872 A.D. The villagers derived the word ‘Vaiphei’ from the name Vaituichhun, and later used it as their common nomenclature wherever they migrated. Sharply it may be pointed out that ‘Yos existed in parallel with such significant tribes as Vaiphei, Thado, Guite, etc. prior to the emergence of Sukte family (clan) in Tedim area. Further, this study never finds Vaituichhun and ZaPau as its Chief in the chronicles of Suantak, Sukte, Nguite (Guite), etc. Yet some writers are prone to support this theory blindly without having any evident.

It is somewhat ridiculous that how could the word ‘Vaiphei’ be originated from ZaPau (Sukte)’s village while ‘the Vaipheis are considered to be older tribes of the Tedim (Chin Hills)’. Truly, the Sukte Chiefs never raised any village outside the Chin Hills. Also, ZaPau was the Chief of Mualbem (Chin Hills) till the day he expired. To be candid, the generations of the Vaipheis might have outnumbered the fingers on both sides of one’s hand when ZaPau Sukte and Jiaukham Sailo were born.

Frankly speaking, all the theories we had observed seem to be merely the products of fertile imaginations. Moreover, as already said, they find no place in Vaiphei tradition.

Khaw-Vaiphei and Phaiza-village Theories:

Both are the only theories upheld and preserved by the Vaipheis themselves. Yet the two are contradicted as the other strongly claimed the existence of a village
called "Khaw-Vaiphei." Here we will observe both of them in sequence and assess if they could assist us in establishing the truth about the origin of the word 'Vaiphei.'

First, let us observe Khaw-Vaiphei theory: In support of this theory, Sonneithang Vaiphei narrated thus: "Suantak settled in a prosperous settlement called 'Khovaiphei' (Khaw-Vaiphei), which is also mentioned in the tales of other clans. A number of other clans of Kukis also settled in the village. It is believed that they are the most powerful clan in that village. Meanwhile, with the demise of the Suantakpa, his people became more hesitant to call themselves after their demised chief i.e. Suantak-te. and they were more inclined to refer themselves as Vaiphei after the name of their village. True, the name Khaw-Vaiphei is found in the traditional songs known as 'Ilan-la' or 'Hat-La' (song of triumph/song of victory). One of these songs is preserved as this:

VAIPHEI HAN-LA
Kathang e, Kathang e,
ka chun leh ka zuan
Thang nanchem bang ei chaw e.
Namtin khaw-Vaiphei lai ah,
Guallai lawi ang ka thang e.

FREE TRANSLATION:
I am famous, I am famous,
My parents held me high like a dao.
In Khaw-Vaiphei, the home of various tribes.
I am the most famous among friends.

S. Vaiphei wrote: "The Thadou people also claimed to have lived" in this Khaw-Vaiphei. The following Thadou songs depicts a part of their life among the Vaipheis in Khaw-Vaiphei. (for more details see also Annexure-XV)

SONG OF MANGKHOTINGOU
(CHIEF OF SANGNAO):
1. Kachannu leh kvangkhuo
   lun-hiem tante
2. Lailu tawh tuanlam zaw:
   theipuonte
3. Laisimlu tawh KHAW-VAIPHEI
   thil in jawt-ing
4. Suo-muol lung-ngui tin dal
   jing kathuoh sah

FREE TRANSLATION:
My mother and my villagers must have grown worried.
Unaware that I am trudging along with hunted enemy’s head.
Walking on with enemy’s head towards destination Khaw-Vaiphei.
Suffered great worried at village gate for my sake
JOLPI-TE LA (song of Jolpi villagers):

1. Siul lam ich in KHAW-VAIPHEI
   jang-ma-suan-ing
2. Ka leidou mangle chunga ka chuam e. I triumph over my great earthly foe.

Before making a scrappy comment to enter the fray, let us note the other theory straight away which also bears an interesting and a very important story. According to this theory, 'the group of people who came to be known as the 'Vaiphei' were living together with the members of other tribes in village PHAIZA, it is said that the population was so big that the village expanded breadth-wise along the horizontal saddle of the hill that from this the village acquired the nickname “Khaw-Vaiphei”.

All resourceful person within the Vaiphei community confidently held that "Phaiza" was not the first capital of the people who are said to be the descendant of Suantak, but the capital from where they frame a separate identity VAIPHEI. As said this village became very prosperous within a short span of time that several people began to rush in to make their homes. Like the Israelites, the Suantak peoples also were greatly multiplied. As a result of this the village expanded greatly in breadth-wise horizontally (or vai-phei). Henceforth, whenever there was an opportunity to mention about the village, the inhabitants loosely glorified it as ‘Our khaw-vaiphei’, ‘My khaw-vaiphei’, or ‘Our Phaiza khaw-vaiphei’. Therefore, even their neighbouring villagers too opted to call them ‘Khaw-Vaipheite’ or ‘Vaipheite’ and thus the word “VAIPHEI” evolved as the nomenclature of the people who lived in Phaiza. In fact, Vaiphei became popular in the western region of Chin Hills (Myanmar) bordering the Lushat Hills, where Phaiza village lies even today.

Moreover, the large number of clan-elders (heads), chiefs, and aged resourceful people within the community positively supports this Phaiza village theory rather than Khaw-vaiphei village theory on the ground that, "THAZING- LA" the first and oldest song ever composed by the tribe does not depict the existence of a village by the name “Khawvaiphei”, but hints that “Phaiza is horizontal and flat (Vaiphei)."
Of the many traditional songs, let us observe few of *Thazing-La* (Autumn-songs) in order to elucidate the Phaiza theory as under:

**THAZING-LA (AUTUMN-SONG):**
   *Aa. Phai-Khawzawl daw in a cham.*
2. *Phai-Khawzawl daw in cham.*  
   *Aa. Tuai cheng lim Nga leng bang e.*
3. *Phai-Khawzawl a Lal-vawnchawi, Mong bang ka pem. Aw phuangnam kammei sa bang e.*
   *Ka sutilung kawl bang a leng.*

**FREE TRANSLATION:**
Wherefrom I soar like the skylarks with my kindreds.
Aa. horizontal-Phaiza is as flat as a floor.
Horizontal-Phaiza is as flat as a floor.
Aa. all the children are as merry as floating fishes.
To horizontally-flat Phaiza a minion.
I migrated, Oh, each clan glow like a brilliant-flame in wealth.
Dear brethren, though I left horizontal-Phaiza,
I am still yearning for it.

Recapitulating all the theories indicated above, it is evident that *Vaiphei* is a nom-de-plume given to the people who are descending from a man called Suanfak. And, of all the theories, *Khaw-Vaiphei* and *Phaiza* theories are more convincing. Because they are both substantial than the rest. Considering all the theories, it is also clear enough that the word *Vaiphei* is derived and adopted as a nomenclature, from the name of a village.

From scientific standpoints, this study inclines to drop *Khaw-Vaiphei* and adheres to the *Phaiza* theory on the following grounds:

(i). *Phaiza* village is still existing today with few population in its original site, i.e., in the north west of Chin Hills, bordering Champhai town (Mizoram-east) with few miles. Whereas, the legendary *Khaw-Vaiphei* village is nowhere to be located. It left no corpse nor the tiniest remnant either in the whole Myanmar or India;

(ii). The village *'Khaw Vaiphei'* is extremely rare to be found in the traditional songs, which are the main sources for culling history by the tribals. Moreover, it is never found in the *Thazing-La* the oldest song of Vaipheis.
(iii). The *Thaden* songs which depicted ‘Khaw-Vaiphei’ are likely to be composed much later after Phaiza village was nickname as Khaw-Vaiphei. Because, Mangtingou and Jolpi village are said to exist between the middle of the 18th and the first quarter of the 19th century A.D. at the earliest possible time. (Jolpi village lies in the southwestern part of Churachandpur District, Manipur. Now, it is inhabited by Paite tribes and is renamed as ‘KangKap’).

(iv). It is a known fact that ‘there is no record or account of wars and the used of weapons made of iron among the Zo people until the 16th and 17th century A.D.’ So, it is possible that Han-La or Hat-La which is a kind of war-cry usually sung when one is victorious over a foe or dreaded wild-beast might have been composed probably after metallic tools were acquired. On the contrary, Thazing-La is usually sung in a frolicking festival called ‘Thazing-Lap(chawn)’ literally it meant ‘Autumn festival’, which used to lasted for ‘a continuous period of 4 (four) months. This kind of feast (festival) which goes on so happily to the extent of loss of the count of time can happen only under a sense of fool-proof security and complete safety.’ Thus it is clear that Thazing-La has been composed much earlier than Han-La when peace and security reigned in the land. Moreover, lyrics which are in Vaiphei dialect show that the people had already acquired the name ‘Vaiphei’ possibly by the 16th century A.D., or atleast the sobriquet ‘Khaw-Vaiphei’. Thus all this instances illuminated again that Han-La is composed only after Phaiza had got its pseudonym ‘Khaw-Vaiphei’. Moreover, it is only Thazing-La that described the topography of a village (Phaiza) which resembles the legendary ‘Khaw-Vaiphei’ village. All these evidences have shown that the word ‘Vaiphei’ was brought down by the inhabitants of Phaiza village and was popularized by themselves and was imposed upon them by their neighbours. In course of time, it evolved into an ethnic nomenclature for the people who had once resided in the village referred. Perhaps, the name Khaw-Vaiphei takes a gradual change. From ‘Khaw-Vaipheite’, it gradually transformed into ‘Vaipheiite’ and then finally into ‘Vaiphei’.
Based on all that has been garnered and mentioned in respect of traditions and literary contexts, this study is impressed to safely conclude that the appellation 'VAIPHEI' is emerging out from the spurious name of village Phaiza – 'Khaw-Vaiphei'.

Footnotes:
2. As told by Saikhama to Paoneikhai Suantak, Tuibuang Bazar-veng, Cepur.
6. Ibid : 3
11. Ibid :
14. Ibid :
15. Ibid : 3,4-
16. Ibid :
17. Based on interviews with elders and resourceful persons.
19. IPS. Vaiphei, S : op. cit., p-6-