CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

The eighteenth and nineteenth century social and polity formation in Manipur represented not only a continuation of the system which was initiated with the beginning of the Ningthouja rule but was also partly a result of the evolution that had been going on prior to the advent of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba of the Ningthoujas in the first century A.D. But what we witnessed during the eighteenth century was a compact political entity was a developed and mature version of the socio-economic evolution.

By the eighteenth century Manipur under its ruling class the Meiteis was a compact political entity encompassing one of the largest geographical area in its historical period and within it a heterogenous composition of diverse ethnic groups. Being blessed by a favourable physiography and climatic conditions, the fertile river valley of Manipur and its tributaries provided excellent conditions for the mergence of a prosperous rice economy. The immigration of Muslim population who were war captives in the beginning of seventeenth century had represented an improvement in the productive forces. As advanced wet-rice cultivation group, with the knowledge of the use of
animal drawn plough and better implements who introduced transplanta-
tion technique, the Meiteis were successful in bringing the dis-
parate tribal groups in the periphery of Imphal valley, who still cul-
tivated through slash and burn, using mainly hoes, within their mode of production. The resultant increase in productivity enabled to sus-
tain a large population and a raising state apparatus which helped to carry out the dominant functions of the state viz, security, appro-
priation and distribution of the surplus. The control over the distribu-
tion of land and labour enabled the state to intervene in production process. The requirements of the wet-rice economy such as reclama-
tion of lands through cutting down of forests, soil levelling and con-
struction of river embankments for flood protection were carried out under the initiative and supervision of the Meitei state. Incidentally, these functions enabled the state to acquire legitimacy in the eyes of its subjects.

Land, the dominant means of production in an agrarian economy, theoretically and practically belongs to the state, who also undertook its distribution but not on any equitable basis. In the prevailing sce-
ario of land abundance and scarcity of labour, the Meitei state was heavily dependent on the labour service of its subjects— the Lallos. Hence, in Manipur not only the land but the subjects were also consid-
ered the property of the state. Appropriation thus took in the form of compulsory periodic labour services to the state. The state therefore not only get in kind but also received in kind and services. The surplus
thus went in for direct consumption by the ruling class. At the peasant micro-economy, most of the consumption requirements of the peasants and his family, who possessed their own means of subsistence, were satisfied within the household itself. Handicraft constituted a secondary occupation of the peasant and his family.

With hired labour for production virtually impossible and labour abundant, the volume of agricultural and non-agricultural production was totally dependent on supply of labour. With outputs limited by the supply of labour and with peasant output circumscribed by state restrictions and feudal labour services, by the nineteenth century the economic system was characterised by stagnating productivity.

Although there is disagreement between colonial writers and scholars over the relative freedom the peasants enjoyed, the fact is that the peasants were under bondage to render compulsory labour services to the state. It must be pointed out that though slavery in a mild form was prevalent in Manipur and in the context of the labour shortage slaves were used for productive purposes by the higher classes, however, appropriation by the state did not take the form of slave labour. The restricted amount of wet rice land and the burden of the state services made it difficult for the peasants to go for any extensive surplus production. Production was thus mainly for immediate consumption. Items like paper, cloth, and silk etc. were produced by the peasants to satisfy the exchange needs of the state. The marketing network that developed was largely to satisfy the exchange needs of
scarce goods. Villages were thus more or less self-sufficient economic units with their artisans and craftsmen needs satisfied within the unit. In other words, there was a unity between agriculture and craftsmanship brought about the division of labour which was not yet strict.

The mode and appropriation by the Meitei state in the form of feudal labour services not only determined the level of production and development of a marketing network it also determined the level of trade and commercial activities within and outside the kingdom. The because of limitations imposed by the mode of appropriation, the range of trading activities at various levels were also limited. Within the peasant micro-economy most of the demand for crafts and artisan services were satisfied within the household. With a self-subsistence economy and absence of division of labour in the form of occupational class except for Loi community, the trade and marketing network that developed were essentially rudimentary in nature. The major trade ventures, if any, with outside states were regulated and controlled by the state itself.

As wet rice cultivation requiring collective effort at cultivation, the economic needs provided the rationale for a political organisation of the Meitei. Economic appropriation and distribution being the dominant activity of the state, the political structure was responsible for the smooth functioning of economy and largely dependent on its successful organisation. Owing to his successful role in the organisation of production and distribution of surplus, kingship had acquired despotic
powers. The hinduisation of the polity added to the sanctity and ideological indispensability of his role. The feudalisation of the political structure was also manifest in the creation of numerous offices linked to the Meitei state by ties of patronage and political dependence. The Hinduisation process in the eighteenth and nineteenth century introduced a further hierarchical element in the class based social structure. The brahmins came to occupy a very high status position. The Meitei aristocracy along with the high state officials because of their political status and power enjoyed a position of prestige. As new converts to Hinduism and intensification of sankritisation process the entire Meitei population was accorded the status of the Kshatriyas. However, the hill tribes who constituted a large chunk of population was not allowed to enter the Hindu fold which had a negative ramifications and affects the consolidation of the polity.

An integral aspect of Meitei social formation was the perpetuation of the ideology of kingship. The king was not only seen as the guarantor of welfare and protector of his subjects but also as the guarantor of fertility and higher returns of land. Since the king was above his people, he also had great responsibilities towards his subjects. These were, security, distribution and redistribution of land resources, irrigation and to ensure the economic prosperity of the community. The kingship ideology was reinforced by the sanction of priestly class. Perpetuated by the monarchy and supported by the priestly class this ideology established hegemonic effect on the people. The ruling class
also found it politically expedient to give sanction to the class ideology to reinforced its claim to rule and monopolise the high officious of the state. The high officials were confirmed and consolidated in their privileged position by generous grant of land and high positions.

A major contradiction that appear to have emerge in the second half of eighteenth and early nineteenth century was the low level of surplus. Whereas the state political apparatus and administrative structure continued to grow the basis of surplus seemed to remain narrow. The nature of the dominant mode of appropriation in the field of services had a restricted influence. The intensification of sankritisation had a more telling effect on the production process. The Lalloys who were essentially peasants were more grown towards the round the year festivities rather than production. It also weakened the martial tradition of the militia. Technological backwardness coupled with repeated Burmese depredations and exodus of population compounded the problem. People are more interested in listening to Bhanjans, Kritans, watching Ras Lillas rather than taking up arms. For the successful perpetuation of social formation what was essential was a large base of labour manpower in a natural economy, a small ruling class attached to the Meitei crown by ties of loyalty and a strong ideology of kingship. The latter meant the success of the Meitei king in providing security and success in the appropriation and distribution of surplus the political expediency of aligning the priestly class resulted in the growth and development Brahma Sabha (Council of Brahmins) emerged as an—
other power centre for regulating social and religious practices under-
mined state’s authority and prestige.

Owing to the nature of the system secular landlordism in Manipur
failed to emerge. Since the power of the nobility depended on their
offices and their estates were resumable by the state their growth could
be watched and checked by the state. But the stumbling block in the
further development of the forces and production relations of the
Meitei state. As already seen, the state intervened in the production
process – for mobilising labour for land reclamation etc., to supplying
scarce consumption items to its subjects. This was aimed at perpetu-
ating the system by preventing the growth of any developments detri-
mental to the perpetuation of the system. In fact the Meitei kings based
on the divine kingship concentrated theoretically on the power of the
state into themselves.

The existing surplus then prevented the growth of power ful
social classes. Whenever the state perceived any signs of such emer-
gence, it tried to curb it. In other words by checking such manifesta-
tions of development of productive forces and production relations in
the social structure, the state tried to restrict the growth and further
advancement of feudalism. In trying to maintain its status quo it gradu-
ally lost its vitality.

In the ultimate analysis the eighteenth century social formation
in Manipur represented the peak of Meitei feudalism although by Eu-
ropean as well as Indian parameters it still remained as quasi-feudal. It
was by and large a time of its own – in a category by itself. The evolution of the Meitei state/polity for a long period of centuries was by and large tribal. In the subsequent centuries the tribal mode advanced but not to the extent where it could overwhelmingly become feudal. Therefore it is not very surprising that some features which are characteristic of the Marxian concept of Asiatic Mode of production were traceable in Manipur. After all the Asiatic Mode of Production is only an advanced stage of the tribal mode in transition to feudalism. Therefore, although feudalism in Manipur was gradually maturing, with its features becoming strongly manifest, the Meitei state persistent in checking its further development held back some traces of tribalism from disappearing altogether. This structural dilemma coupled with Burmese depredations and resultant British interventions gave rise to the crisis which ultimately brought about the collapse of the system.

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