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MEITHEI LITERATURE.

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(*Read at Meeting, December 20th, 1911.*)

I HAVE for long had it in mind to examine Meithei literature, but it was, and still is, my purpose to examine it rather from the aspect of philology than from that of folklore. Dr. Grierson remarks¹ that the Manipuris are mentioned in the Shan chronicles as early as 777 A.D., and that their form of speech gives the impression of possessing a peculiarly archaic character. We know, too, from the same high authority,² that it sometimes agrees more closely with Burmese, and even with Tibetan, than with the Kuki-Chin dialects spoken all around it.

Mr. Damant³ gives the following account of Meithei literature :—

“The most important MS. is called the “Tākhelgnamba,”⁴ and contains an account of the wars between Pamheiba, *alias* Garib-Namaz, [Gharib Nawaz], king of Manipur, and the Rājā of Tiparah. The copy in my possession contains 45 leaves written on both sides. The next in importance is the “Samsokgnamba,”⁵ which is a history of the war between Charairongbā and his son Pamhaiba of Manipur and the kings of Burma and Sumjok. It contains 36 leaves. The “Lānglol,” a short MS. of ten leaves only, is a treatise on morals, intermixed with proverbs and maxims, and would probably be interesting as throwing light on the customs of

¹ *Linguistic Survey of India*, vol. iii., part iii., p. 8.

² *Loc. cit.*

³ Quoted in *Linguistic Survey of India*, vol. iii., part iii., p. 21.

⁴ Takhel is Tippura ; *ngamba*, to conquer.

⁵ Sam sok is Sumjok, Upper Chindwin district.

the Manipuris before their conversion to Hinduism. The only other MSS. of which I have been able to obtain information, are the "Meiyāng-gnamba,"⁶ an account of the wars between Manipur and Kachār, and the "Salkau", a treatise on cattle and the respect to be shown to them. The above seem to comprise the whole literature of Manipur; but it is just possible that further search may reveal one or two other works. The MSS. are all written on a coarse, but very durable, kind of paper, with pens made of bamboo; paper blackened with charcoal on which they write with a soapstone pencil is also used. The character has now been almost entirely superseded by Bengali, and indeed but few of the Manipuris can read it. A national chronicle is, however, still kept up by the guild of priests, "maibees"⁷ as they are called, in which every event of importance occurring in the country is regularly recorded."

Mr. Damant is of opinion that the old Manipuri alphabet was introduced from Bengal in the time of Charairongba, who flourished about 1700 A.D. A local tradition which I collected declares that the art of writing was acquired from the Chinese who came to Manipur about 1540. There can be no doubt that the local character belongs to the Devanagari group, and is therefore of Indian origin. The word to write (*i—ba*) is derived from the root *likh*, of which the provenance is not in dispute. That root *likh* survives in the word *lairik*,⁷ a document, and the prefix *lai*, unless I am much mistaken, means divine, because mysterious or potent. "Taught as we are," says Tylor,⁸ "to read and write in early childhood, we hardly realise the place this wondrous double art fills in civilised life till we see how it strikes the barbarian who has not even a notion that such a thing can be." It is greatly to be regretted that Mr. Damant's collection of Meithei literature was lost after his

⁶ *Meiyang*, foreigner from the west or Cachar.

⁷ *Maibi*, priestess; *maiba*, priest (cf. *The Meitheis*, pp. 109-10). *Lai rik* in Meithei; *lai-li* in Thādo Kuki.

⁸ *Anthropology*, p. 167.

murder in 1879. I have been able to identify the historical works which he mentions as parts of the Ningthaurol or Royal Chronicles of Manipur, and to this day the Meitheis love to hear tales of the great days of their glories when their armies swept to the walls of Ava, or of those later, sadder times when the hated Burmese ravaged their fair land and drove their king Chingtungkomba into exile among the hills.

The literature of the Meitheis shows clearly the influence of both Shans and Hindus. In Assam, as in Manipur, historical documents are still extant. Indeed, the "Assamese word for a 'history' is *buranji*, which is an Āhom word ... literally ... 'a store of instruction for the ignorant.'"⁹ "The remarkable series of historical works which forms the glory of Assamese literature is no doubt due to the influence of the Āhoms."¹⁰ The progress of Hinduism in Manipur was at first slow, but the Raja Pamheiba or Gharib Nawaz formally adopted Hinduism and made it the State religion about 1720 A.D. We may ascribe to Hindu influence the mass of religious literature which, translated into the vernacular, or at least into a vernacular dialect, serves as a vehicle for religious instruction. But of far greater interest for the folklorist is the native literature, of which I have been able to give one or two specimens in an earlier work.¹¹ The best, because the least contaminated, piece I know is the tale of Nūmit kāppa, the story of the slave who shot the sun. There were in ancient times two suns, so that slaves had no rest, for there was no night. He made a bow and arrows, and after trial of his skill succeeded in shooting one of the suns, but to the horror of all the land the other sun took fright and hid himself, so that all was darkness. Then magical rites were performed by which the sun was persuaded to come back to give light once more to earth. There is much in this tale of interest to students of magical rites and practices. Of another style is

⁹ *Linguistic Survey of India*, vol. ii., p. 67. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. ii., *loc. cit.*

¹¹ *The Meitheis*, pp. 125 *et seq.*

the tragic tale of Khamba and Thoibi, which, as Colonel McCulloch says,¹² never fails to rivet attention. The scene of this tale and the place where it was originally sung is Moirang, still a large village, on the western edge of the Logtāk or great lake of Manipur, which in manners and customs is in many respects distinct from the generality of the Metheis. “The hero and heroine are persons said to have flourished hundreds of years ago. Thoibi is the daughter of the Moirang chief’s brother. She loves Khamba, a lad poor in worldly riches, but rich in personal beauty, of good descent, great modesty, courage, strength, and agility. Thoibi is a young lady of unsurpassed beauty, and Khamba, having seen her by chance whilst boating on the Logtak, loves her at first sight. But the course of true love never did run smooth. A person named Kong Yamba saw Thoibi’s love for Khamba, and, wishing to gain her for himself, he used all the means that a powerful connection gave him to crush Khamba. The various perils through which Khamba has to pass and the constancy of Thoibi form the burden of the song. After having won his foot-race, speared his tiger, caught his wild bull, and been tied to the foot of an elephant, Khamba gains Thoibi, who also passes through various troubles. The end is tragical. Khamba doubts his wife, and, trying her fidelity, she, not knowing who he is, spears him. Some of the characters introduced in the tale are very good. The constant repetition of this tale only seems to increase the desire to hear it. Thoibi is regarded as a goddess, and that Khamba was a man of giant proportion is held to be incontestable. This idea that Khamba was of giant size is not derived merely from his celebrity in song: that their ancestors were giants is believed by all.” To this day at the temple in Moirang are preserved the robes of Thoibi. In style they are of the fashion still in vogue. The material is silk, very heavy and handsome, with an embroidered edge which does not differ in any

¹² *Account of the Valley of Munnipore etc.* (1859), pp. 26 *et seq.*

essential from the patterns now employed for the decoration of the ordinary *phanek*. These folk-tales are chanted, to the accompaniment of the *pena* or fiddle, in a high-pitched key with a crooning nasal tone. Though the actual words of the ballads are not now intelligible to the common people, everyone from old familiarity knows the purport of the passages ; they know when to laugh at the witticisms of the comic characters and when to be moved to tears by the sad misfortunes of the hero and heroine. The *iseisakpa*,¹³ the man who makes the song, is more often than not ignorant of the comfortable art of writing, and trusts to his considerable powers of memory. Variations, even gags, are permitted within certain limits. I have seen and collated three versions, which differ slightly in very unimportant details, but agree in all the points which Colonel M'Culloch mentions in his summary.

To the class of religious poetry due to Hindu inspiration belongs the tale of the sufferings of the gentle Saint Dhananjoy. He was a prince of the Kubo country, and forsook his duties to the State for the joys of family life with his wife and two sons. Meditation and divine worship were more to his liking than court business. His brother feared that he was plotting against him, and sent men to burn him and his. They escaped to the jungle, and wandered there for many days, houseless, hungry, worn with travel over rough stones. Vanu, the beautiful wife of the saintly prince, went to the river bank to beg for food, but was captured by a Mohammedan trader and a Chinese jeweller, whose boat was moored close by. She left her cloth on the bank to guide her husband and son in their search for her. At last they came to a place where was a village, but on the far bank of a mighty river. The prince swam across with his elder son, and was swimming back to fetch the sleeping baby he had left behind when a huge fish swallowed him in full sight of his elder son. Presently a *dhobi*

¹³ *Sei*, song ; *sak* or *sā*, to make.

(washer)woman came down to the river to ply her trade, and saw the handsome boy. The childless woman took pity on him, but, despite her entreaties, he would tell her nothing of his tale till she had fetched his baby brother across. She swam across with her wooden wash tub, and brought the baby across in it. She took the boys home, and, being childless, she and her husband adopted them. It chanced that some Doms caught a huge fish in their nets, and took it as a present to the king of the land, which in the tale is called Sapra. When the fish was cut open, the king and his courtiers were amazed to see therein, in the attitude of meditation, the saintly prince, to whom the monarch at once offered his throne and his daughter. The holy man would have neither, but asked only for a place to build him a house and for food. Then it fell out that the boat of the traders came to the place where the *dhobis* lived, and moored at their ghat. By local custom it fell to the turn of the foster-parents of the two boys to watch the boat, but the boys begged hard to be allowed to relieve their aged friends of this task. They sat on the bank by a fire, and talked together of their lost parents, and of a sudden heard their mother's voice calling them to the boat. They released her from the chest in which the traders had thrown her, intending to present her to the king. The traders haled them to the king's court for a breach of duty, but they told their tale, and the king sent for the saintly prince, who hastened to claim his wife and sons. The wicked Mohammedan merchant and the Chinese jeweller forfeited all their wealth as a punishment for their cruelty to the poor princess. This moving tale is obviously of foreign origin, but, while it starts from Kubo on the east, it takes us to the rivers on the west, for there are no Doms in Burma. In Assam the Doms are fishermen; elsewhere they carry out the dead, and are sweepers or professional thieves.¹⁴ The great river must be the Brahmaputra. Yet

¹⁴ Cf. Risley, Crooke, and Thurston, s.v.

it is on the Irrawaddy rather than on the Brahmaputra that Chinese traders will be found. The kingdom of Sapra is temptingly like Chapra, which is a very long way off in far Bengal. We have references to Saraswati, the Goddess of Wisdom, but there are also many references to Meithei deities, for whom the easy methods of Hindu proselytization has found a place. The tale is written in language which is fairly modern. There are, however, archaic words and phrases in it, and its structure is in general not modern.

I have elsewhere¹⁵ given extracts from the Ningthaurol or Royal Chronicles of Manipur. Their historical value is really much greater than many people are willing to allow. If their chronology is difficult, they are honest enough to let us into the secret, for it is made quite clear that they have been condensed, revised, and redated more than once. Let me give you some extracts, taken at random, from the translation which was made by my orders and under my supervision years ago.

“ENGLISH ERA, 1605-06. In the year 1527 Sak,¹⁶ Shanongba came from Cachar side with large numbers of troops to invade Manipur, but Khagenba defeated them and took one thousand captives, including their leaders, with thirty elephants and one thousand rifles. He settled the captives and made them work as buglers, drummers, *dhobis*, mahouts, and syces for horses. He introduced the system of polo game, and reformed the dresses of Manipuris. He introduced the system of using turbans and *lomkhangpoak*, a kind of head-dress used at the time of Lomjel and Hiāng festivals. Of this same prince we read that on the year 1531 Sak, he took possession of the village of Kubomoksha, and took the headmen of that village captive. He made his favourite ladies to put on military dress, and sported with them in the intoxicated state. He arrested the headmen of the villages of Maringshaipot, Shainem, Kadow, Youngkhol, Koshong, Namshi, Narum, Makhal, and Chingshow when they came to see him in his palace. He introduced the system of smoking tobacco-in pipes.”

¹⁵ *The Meitheis, passim.*

¹⁶ Bengali era.

You will observe that this merry monarch was a contemporary of King James, whose *Counterblast to Tobacco* was published in 1604. We get more detail as we go on. In the year 1641 Sak, or our year 1719-20, Gharib Nawaz being king, it is stated that

"Formerly the Manipuris used to bury the dead bodies within their own house compounds, but the Raja Gharib Nawaz issued orders throughout the country to dig out all the graves and to remove the skeletons from their compounds. In the same year a new temple was built for the Goddess Senamahi. In 1723 this reforming king issued strict orders throughout the country preventing the subjects from worshipping idols of Manipur, and he destroyed the eleven temples for the worshipping of the idols of his ancestors. Formerly the Manipuri *maibas* used to do the works of priests for the worshipping of the idols of Manipur, but Raja Gharib Nawaz dismissed the *maibas* from their posts, and Brahmins were appointed in their place to worship the goddess and gods called Noongshaba, Eumthai lai, Panthoibi, and Taibong Khombi. In this year the Burmese attacked and invaded the country, but were repulsed.

In 1794-5 the Maharaja visited the house of Eumnam Muntry. Thakur Biddaratna came back from a trip to the Ganges. Twenty-five men came back from Burma. A messenger arrived from Tippera. There was a polo game between Wankhairākpa and the men of Ahalūp, Nahārūp, Khābum, and Laifam pannahs, but the Wankhairākpa won the game. A large number of men were sent to bring down timber from the hills. Chorjit came back from his trip to the Ganges. The uttra house¹⁷ was built. There was an earthquake in November. A slave of Laisangthem was transported to Shuganu for murdering his wife. Wankhairākpa went to inspect the Chothe Nagas village. Tarao Palli Nagas caught a rhinoceros, and presented it to the Maharaja. The Maharaja of Tippera arrived in Manipur with his wife and children. Chothe Nagas were sent back to their village. Khe-laram went to recall Kubo Khullakpa from Tippera. The Raja personally inspected the place for building his palace at Khorikhul,

¹⁷ A building inside the Pāt or Royal Enclosure in Manipur.

and the palace was built there. The Kurnabed (ear-piercing) ceremony of the sons of the Rajas Bhagga Chandra and of Tippera was performed on the same day, together with the holy thread ceremony. There was a ceremony at the new temple of Nityananda. There was a dispute between Erom Murari and Damudar. Murari accused Damudar as a Naga by birth, which resulted in fighting. Both parties were arrested and brought before the king. Murari with ten of his men was transported to Moirangkai and Waikokloi. Kubolumbu Senapati arrived from Tippera, and was transported to Moirang for making war at Tippera and killing many men there."

On the eminent authority of Shakespeare we have it that on the eve of the Ides of March, B.C. 44, strange sights were seen in the streets of Rome, (*Julius Caesar*, Act ii. Sc. 2):—

“A lioness hath whelped in the streets ;
And graves have yawned and yielded up their dead ;
Fierce, fiery warriors fight upon the clouds,
In ranks and squadrons and right form of war,
Which drizzled blood upon the Capitol ;
The noise of battle hurtled in the air,
Horses did neigh, and dying men did groan,
And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets.”

Strange omens of dire import, too, have been observed in the streets of Imphāl.

“ENGLISH ERA, 1891-2. Sak 1813. The year of Thongsangba Durlov Singh. On the 13th Wednesday in the palace here a god’s *dolai*¹⁸ with flags came down from the sky before the Bejoy Garode at 10 o’clock in the morning. It disappeared at the distance of forty feet up from the ground. The people witnessed the scene, and the matter was reported to the Maharaja. The next day the *maibas* were called in, and the Maharaja asked what sort of a *dolai* it was. Wangkhai Pandit replied that it was Pākhangba’s *dolai*. The nine arms or gear of Pākhangba will come down in the Kangla compound. The *dolai* was the first thing to come, and after this the whole country will be in happiness for a long time. Nongmaitemba Pandit seconded him, and advised the

¹⁸ Doolie.

Maharaja to worship Pākhangba. Touri Ashoiba Hidang said their prophecy might hold good, but to him it appeared that next year a calamity would come. . . . The *maibas* were in such disagreement as to the purport of this omen. . . . Then the Panjees were called in, and the Maharaja asked them what they thought of the appearance of the *dolai*. Kamalakanto, Wahengba Thabal, and Sarang Jugol Singh said,—“O, Maharaja, unforeseen events have been witnessed. This is an ominous sight. This will bring no good to the Maharaja or to his subjects.” The Maharaja asked how these evils could be removed. Kamalakanto advised the Maharaja to offer tulsi (sacred basil) leaves and boiled rice with milk and sugar to the gods, and to feed the Brahmans. On that day the moon was enveloped with red and black and green mists. On the following day the sun was covered with mist at midday. 11th Sunday, news of the arrival of British troops in the north arrived.”

There were guilty consciences in Manipur then, for the columns from the north and east and west were hurrying fast on Imphāl to avenge the murder of the Chief Commissioner and his companions.

Some of the passages are as dull as a parish magazine; others are full of good stuff; but I am profoundly convinced that by the strictest modern tests there is plenty of good history here, and much of it is good direct history. There are dates, precise dates—year, month, and day—to satisfy the most exigent modern dry-as-dust historian. There is real life in it. If battles and bloodshed abound in parts, there is also a record of the events, domestic and social, that stirred the hearts of the people—it is a psychological as well as a historical record. Some time or other it may be possible to publish these chronicles as they stand, to collate them with documents from Assam, Tippera, and Burma, and to give to the world which is interested in such things a curious record full of valuable matter for the student of the evolution of semi-civilised societies.

T. C. HODSON.