

Revisiting the Royal Chronicle of Manipur: A Historiographical Analysis

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Abstract: *This article undertakes a historiographical analysis of the Royal Chronicle of Manipur, a critical text that documents the history, culture, and governance of the Manipur kingdom. By examining various interpretations and scholarly debates surrounding the chronicle, the study highlights its significance as both a historical source and a cultural artifact. The analysis explores how the chronicle has been utilized by historians to construct narratives of Manipur's past, focusing on themes such as identity, sovereignty, and resistance. Additionally, the article critiques the methodologies employed in the study of the chronicle, considering the impact of colonial and post-colonial perspectives on historical interpretations. Ultimately, this work aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the Royal Chronicle's role in shaping the historical consciousness of Manipur and its relevance in contemporary discourse on heritage and identity.*

Keywords: Royal Chronicle of Manipur, Manipur history, cultural heritage, historical narratives, identity and sovereignty

1. Introduction

Manipur, located in the northeastern corner of India, is known for its long extent of written history. Chief among them is the multi-volume Royal Chronicle of Manipur. It provides an exhaustive account of the country, beginning with the wedding of its eponymous lord, Pakhangba, and up until the early part of the colonial period. No serious attempt, though, has been made in historiography to understand the chronicle itself. This paper will explore the chronicle in both its narrative and interpretable forms. The central theme of the paper is the historical transformation of the people who inhabit the valley over the millennium, as it emerges from the royal narrative.

There is indeed a need to explore the Royal Chronicle of Manipur. The absence of such an attempt is particularly striking given the place of the history of Manipur in the historiography of the region and histories of broader scale. This history of a region like the Northeast on the eastern frontiers of India—I prefer to call the place by this generic term—assaulted with the history of religious empires around it forms an interesting problem in itself. There are major questions that have underpinned the field of the study of history: periodization, the making of an Indian identity or different identities—primordial to primates, adivasi to civilizational, regional to sub-continental and the development of socio-economic formations. They have all been reflected in responses to the question of historical change in the valley. This is the problem with which I engage in the paper. It is here that an analysis of the text of the kings, their identity—and not showing mere ethnographic continuity—is signified critically. Because these are the very people who have lived the change and have, in turn, given meaning to it. The emergence of the category offers an imaginative response to seeking to comprehend change in the experience of the colonial state from the obverse side of it. Certainly, kings write history: the ooze and muck they seek to cover. Such topographies of time are what I attempt to solve the coming together of.

Background of the Royal Chronicle

Northeast India is rich in traditional literature. It is a region of diverse cultures and micro-history. It has a long history of traditional literature, customs and traditions, oral history, music, and the performing arts. Oral tradition is an important means of preserving the memory of any community. This is more so in a society like that of Manipur, which never had a script of its own until the inception of the Meetei Mayek in the early 18th century. The Royal Chronicle of Manipur is an important part of its traditional literature.

The Royal Chronicle of Manipur is popularly known as Cheitharol Kumba and is composed in the Meeteilon language; it is the classical language of the Meetei people of Manipur. Cheitharol Kumba is one of the most significant texts devoted to the historiography of Manipur. The present form and contents of the chronicle reflect the time span between the Pakhangba period and the time of King Naophangba, who lived in the early part of the 15th century. Cheitharol Kumba suggests that the chronicle has been compiled by a number of learned men, and the recording of events was gathered and collated over a long period of oral transmission. In this sense, Cheitharol Kumba can be looked upon as a veritable reservoir of traditional lore and myth merging into history.

The Royal Chronicle of Manipur is definitely a product of a theocratic state, and it became an essential aspect of the fundamental cultural authenticity and the basic religious and philosophical expression of the people of Manipur. It also reflects the notions of life of harmony, interdependence, and survival rooted in the society and polity of bygone days. The Meetei society is a product of socio-political developments in the broader Indian experience. The Meetei past was a golden era of independence and freedom, and this long historical account bolstered the morale of the people of Manipur to preserve their motherland and to fight against odds and aggression. Later, it was also looked upon as a reference

for the expansion of the Meetei from their ancient historical abode.

Historiography of Manipur

Martin describes the historiography of Manipur as evolving through two different interpretations. According to him, while the first interpretation formed by British officials and military officers in the 19th and early 20th centuries sought to account for the past of Manipur using historically "dead" analytical categories such as "ancient invasions from the West," "brave warrior chieftains," and "feudal conflict," the second interpretation sought instead to question the historiographical and philosophical constraints of those "dead" analytical categories. This marks the distinction Martin discusses. For example, in a radical argument, an underground revolutionary writer claimed that the recorded histories of Manipur were by no stretch of the imagination true. He argued that the Meiteis (or Meeteis), the followers of Sie Liepak Kangba, reigning in Manipur from remote antiquity and still thriving at the time of composing this message, are very much a part of the Kuki-Chin lineage family who had nothing to do with the exalted Aryan race. But, as Idi Singas, the Meiteis did when they embraced Hinduism.

In what appears to be a point-for-point refutation of the initial work, it has been mentioned in great detail the preparatory and printing processes of the book, besides the considerable expenses incurred, stating further that "I cannot explain or prove effectively... in a convincing manner pertaining to the logical nature found in his version." What we gather is that these works and the documents recorded therein appear to encompass two main themes: historical orthodoxy and royal chronologies. Histories connecting the geographical area now known as Manipur State are diverse. The seventeenth century A.D. and eighteenth-century A.D. appeared to be pivotal centuries during which we have, what we believe to be, written histories officially composed under the name of authors, covering a general history of the region from Ao Iryenba onwards in one narrative. Although these narratives have individual predilections rooted in the larger socio-political circumstances of that time, there are a number of common threads running through these accounts. These common events include the establishment and conversions to Hinduism, and the chronicling of successions and non-related families particularly connected with members of the Royal family. What is important to note is that these compiled narratives go into the explicit history of one Kangleipak family, the Chittagonian family from the section of Varalik or Pakhangba until the present day. Historical events such as the reigns of Kulachandra, Pamheiba, Charairongba, Gharib Nawaz, Garibnawaj, and Biptos Panthoibi can be detected in the chronicles and manage to find mention in some later works. They believe that deciphering these component sections, in the way they have been indicated, is relevant in informing us how we should appropriate the Kangleipak source in exemplifying the dominance, discrepancies, and the loci of legitimation of a text of problematic history. With regard to the severally classified contradictory accounts left to us by the narrators involved in these matters, our readings in this paper will

demonstrate the local variability in meanings produced by various actors in the appropriations of these sources, which have subsequently effloresced as intertextual works.

Key Historiographical Approaches

The study of Manipur, for many years, identified itself with two centralized tenets of historiography, namely nationalist and teleological discourses. With the publication of the royal chronicle, followed by a series of courtly accounts, many were found to lose themselves in intricacy and details. Over the years, the chronicle has changed its image and ventured through many historiographical trends, such as the nationalist and post-colonial perspectives, and constructing numerous other unconventional representations, such as ethnographic representations, gendered narratives, and identity politics. Scholars of the past were historian-administrators *ex officio*, busy charting the genealogy of the royal families, the religious-political establishment, and the consolidation of a hybrid culture.

A minimalist approach cloaked with a post-revisionist stance delineates a vibrant pre-colonial era that made a complete break from the colonial and postcolonial historical paradigm. The royal chronicle, however, ushers into a cabinet of extraordinary value and reflection of the cultural traditions of the people. As many scholars focus on the fabric of historical facts and reconstructions of plausible accounts, the chronicle and its commentary provide certain meanings that reflect the interpretation of the narrators. Each perspective focuses attention on the historically inscribed power structure and its cultural ownership and representation. The update of the documentary and principled readings does not only revisit the history of Manipur, but also reveals the potentialities of the texts as sources. Moreover, the different readings interrogate the extent to which power-knowledge games are actively played in the poetics and politics of representing 'us' and 'others'.

The Royal Chronicle of Manipur

The Royal Chronicle of Manipur, also known as Cheitharol Kumpaba, is not only the most ancient among the existing chronicles preserved in India, but also the longest, and therefore, the most informative source of the political, social, and cultural history of Manipur. The Royal Chronicle is a compilation of both native and foreign events conceived in prose and poetry. It provides a comprehensive narrative of incidents from both pre-historic and historic periods down to the 20th century, when the last king was made to sign the controversial Merger Agreement, annexing Manipur into the Indian Union. It links the remote past with the present on the basis of the genealogy of the ruling dynasty. The Royal Chronicle describes, in detail, the exploits and achievements of the Meitei kings and their contributions to the enrichment of our race with a new religion, improved knowledge regarding medicine and surgery, fine arts, music and dance, sport and games. Their contribution to the building of the physical infrastructure and in the development of Manipuri society is also narrated at length. The narrative of the Royal Chronicle of Manipur

either adopts or initiates a particular narrative of the royal lineage, the foundation of the capital, wars with Cachari and Barman kings, the establishment of good governance and an ideal society, proselytization and the spread of Hindu and Islamic values. Moreover, the Chronicle narrates the recipe for social governance peculiar to Manipur, often citing historical myths surrounding the reigns of sorcerer kings and the defeat of Kongyus by the royal kings. In addition to this, the chronicle records how custom and customary values are understood by connoting a historical narrative which censors certain practices in order to lay the claim for the virtues of a particular realm or of a chronologically earlier period. Personal anecdotes, stories, and folktales became historical facts as narrated in the Chronicle. Again, tales with a local endowment were evaluated as benchmarks in writing a comprehensive history.

2. Overview and Significance

The Royal Chronicle of Manipur—Cheitharol Kumpapa—recorded the events regarding the reign of the kings of Manipur. The Cheitharol Kumpapa focuses on describing the accounts of the kingship and the social and organizational framework within which it finds its expression in Manipuri society. It is composed primarily of three historical perspectives: an ethno-history about the Manipuri tradition and their lineage of the kings of the country down to the chronicler's time; an institution of the king's review on the succession to the throne; and a detailed account of several Manipuri kings in consonance with the specific periods of their reigns. These narratives envelop the facts and events of Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular, circular in Volume I of the Cheitharol Kumpapa. It expounds directly on the events and facts encountered with the neighboring political peers enclosed in Uttaranthar of Volume II of the chronicle. The narrative is about the kings of Manipur, their personal conflicts, and the process of state building during certain crucial events of Manipuri society.

The Cheitharol Kumpapa is the single major surviving source from indigenous Manipur; consequently, the importance of the text to whatever extent is regarded as a primary source for the study of the contemporary history of Manipur by the wielders of the relevant academic disciplines, particularly Manipuri scholars and historians. Aside from being recognized as a primary source for reconstructing innumerable traditional customs and mores cultivated in the society of Manipur, the Cheitharol Kumpapa epitomizes significant and cherished culture of the state, such as traditional governance and administration; other traditional customs like payment of land revenue, literature, indigenous religion, traditional marriage, etc. Further, the study of the Cheitharol Kumpapa makes authentic research on the obsolete social structure of Manipur in general and Southeast Asia in no particular order. Various episodes from the Cheitharol Kumpapa find corroboration in the neighboring contemporary studies. Despite being so popular, there is a critical side to this document as well. These texts often contain problematic and incorrect assumptions. These assumptions can include errors, widely believed

constructions of events, or simple common cultural myths held by certain people.

3. Methodological Framework

Apart from understanding the text investigated within the purview of various methodologies of interpretation, the present analysis allows us the space to combine disciplinary approaches from social and economic history, literary and aesthetic analysis, and cultural studies. We understand that the problem of history is as much about the factual nature of the past as how its articulation in prose constitutes values that would also become authoritative to both their contemporaries and the present historian. Our approach to the Revisited Chronicle is designed to offer ways to comprehend the shifting significance of the role of 'the state' as much as to offer developments in its institutions. This methodological understanding also postures us to consider the historian's ethical responsibility to the communities with whom we engage in the construction of our interpretive analysis. First, we inaugurate our analysis to include the study of select primary sources, with the Revisited Chronicle receiving its central thematic treatment. Of course, the study also relies on an extensive range of secondary literature on Tangkhul narratives, history, and oral epics, as well as literatures that recover the region's social and economic history. This is a necessary part of our research investment to offer a comprehensive reading of the Revisited Chronicle. Our study raises concerns that would help us rethink our understanding of Manipur's history. The compelling question that this approach concerns is in the manner history is societal. In itself, the Revisited Chronicle is an instrument, a society of cultural and political life. This study is, therefore, not just about the Tangkhul past, but equally the invention of a certain type of historiography, regnant and hegemonic in the text, citizenship, and knowledge of 'distant' historical societies - a world of signification concerning languages and peoples today often abandoned or marginal to the contemporary disposition of knowledge.

4. Conclusion

The above chapter is an analysis of the Royal Chronicle of Manipur and explores new approaches to using it in scholarship. We have discussed possible future research directions on the chronicle, including ritual historiography, orality and public performance, and group identities negotiation as represented in the narrative. In much of the existing studies on the history of the ex-kingdom of Manipur, the Royal Chronicle seamlessly figures as a normative historiographical base for the region. More importantly, these studies in effect leave the impression that the Chronicle, as the ultimate truth on Manipur's past, demanded uncritical acceptance. However, we have shown how, because it creates its own dialogue and dissent, the Chronicle in effect speaks to the people, uniting history and memory in giving meaning to the past, to the present, and to possible futures for the society. Historical truth is not an absolute of the unproblematic past. As we have striven to demonstrate in this chapter, the narratives contained in the oldest part of

the Royal Chronicle do not resemble any of the current historiographies on Manipur, mainstream or alternative. Hence, a long research agenda in discussion of the Royal Chronicle of Manipur. This would involve, for example, academic points of entry such as 'ritual historiography', which probes the ways in which ritual performance engages with history and memory to assert, validate, and legitimate political and social institutions and events. It could also be more anthropological in a historical sense, or cultural studies in which we examine expressions of orality and public performance in the Chronicle at different times of composition, the structure and intention of form and narrative, the unspoken asides, the resulting silences, and the resultant debates. As with diasporic writings more generally, the Chronicle is also a significant point of entry for studies in the discursive technologies in negotiations of individual, group, and community identities in varied socio-historical and political negotiation.

Yet in all the above, nowhere has the Chronicle been examined with all the theoretical and scholarly rigor we apply to ECH, for the simple reason, as we have been constantly reminded, no one really knows about Manipur! This chapter ends by arguing for historicizing the mutuality of scholarship and political structures that animate and will continue to animate future debates on this source. It remains that interdisciplinary research requires a readiness for contest and for being able to fundamentally critique the discourses in one's own scholarly tradition that await. While acknowledging that we have critiqued current literature, it also cannot be doubted that this would be richer with an understanding of Meitei, the language, and the more masterful a grasp of the Chronicle and the highly allusive nature of its narratives, the more it can reveal new vistas in Manipuri history. Research into this source will expose the tip of an iceberg, the ultimate potential and meaning of which is contingent upon the persistent, critical engagement with Manipur's rich, even if periodically re-narrated, historic past in the numerous available primary sources.

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