

Garib Niwaz Wars and Religious Policy in 18th Century Manipur¹

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The former native state of Manipur is situated on the eastern border of India, between Assam and Burma. The sources for the study of its history are principally the chronicles in the Manipuri language² and secondarily the chronicles of the neighbouring peoples, the Assamese and Burmese; for the modern period the reports of British political agents and the Gazetteers also provide valuable additional information.³ In this paper I attempt to evaluate the political and religious achievements of the greatest of the Manipuri rajas, Pamheiba or Garib Niwaz.⁴

According to the sources⁵ Pamheiba was born towards the end of 1690, before the coronation of his father Charai Rongba, and himself ascended the throne nineteen years later.⁶ The popular name of Garib Niwaz was apparently not given to him until towards the end of his reign, as a testimony to his many works of benefaction to the poor. It is not this aspect of his character however which constitutes his claim to greatness: it is on the one hand his military prowess and on the other his thorough religious reformation.

1 Paper delivered to the 28th International Congress of Orientalists; see further my *The Religion of Manipur* (Calcutta 1980), pp. 143-161.

2 The most important of these are the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* (State Chronicles) and the *Ningthourol Lambuba* (Royal Annals).

3 See Brown (1874), Mc Culloch (1859), Pemberton (1835), Hodson (1910), and the various articles by Col. J. Shakespeare.

4 The reign name of Garib Niwaz which is used in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* is given as Mayamba.

5 Except where otherwise stated the data are taken from the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*.

6 There is no evidence to support the views of Brown (1874), and repeated by Gait (1963:322) and the *Imperial Gazetteer* (1908: vol. 17 p. 186) that Garib Niwaz was of Naga origin, and still less to justify Hodson's (1910:79) assertion in this connection that it was the custom for all the king's sons except those of the principal Rani to be put to death. That there was a rumour current that Pamheiba was a hill-man seems likely; this is probably to be explained however in that he was brought up away from the palace in the house of his mother, whose name, according to the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, was Ningthin Chaibi of Uchiwa. It is also possible that the rumours of this Naga origin were spread by his religious opponents (W. Yumjao Singh 1966:12).

Mayamba's military exploits ranged over a wide geographical area. Within Manipur itself it is recorded that he subdued certain hill tribes, notably the Tangkhuls, Marings and Kukis. In general however he seems to have continued his father's policy of preserving good relations with the hill peoples. Manipur's western neighbours, Tripura and Cachar, were invaded and frequent incursions were also made into the Kabaw Valley. But it was the state of Burma against which Garib Niwaz's most important campaigns were conducted.

Harvey (1925:203) records a curious incident which took place in 1717,⁷ and which marked the outbreak of Burmo-Manipuri hostilities which were to have such disastrous consequences for both nations. According to Harvey's account, Garib Niwaz sent to the Burmese king to the effect that he would present his daughter to him as Charai Rongba had done some years before. A rendezvous was arranged for the handing over of the girl in the Upper Chindwin district. On arrival however the Burmese party found no demure Manipuri bride, but an armed force of cavalry led by Garib Niwaz himself, which took the Burmese into Imphal as captives. This curious incident is confirmed by the Manipuri sources, which also amplify the circumstances. Charai Rongba's daughter had apparently been slighted by the Burmese king after their marriage, and before his death Charai Rongba had charged his son, Garib Niwaz, to avenge this insult to his sister. The request of the Burmese king for a further Manipuri princess in marriage afforded Garib Niwaz an opportunity to carry out this revenge.

7 I have throughout this paper followed the dating given in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. Harvey gives the date of this incident as 1724. Pemberton (1835:38) remarks that the chronology of Manipuri history was largely confirmed by the records of Ava, with a difference of a few years. Gait and Harvey appear to have followed Pemberton's chronology. None of these writers had access to the Manipuri Chronicles, although Pemberton did possess an ancient Shan manuscript which he had translated into Manipuri and which at a number of points confirms both the events and dates recorded in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* from 887 A.D. up to the time of Garib Niwaz. I give below a table illustrating the differences in dating between the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* and the English accounts of Pemberton, Gait and Harvey.

	Cheitharol Kumbaba	English Histories
Accession of Garib Niwaz	1709 (1631 sak)	1714
Abduction of the Burmese bridal party	1717 (1639 sak)	1724
Destruction of Myedoo	1735 (1667 sak)	1735
Capture of Sagaing	1738 (1660 sak)	1738
Destruction of Sagaing and attack on Pong	1739 (1661 sak)	1740-1 (? a further raid)
Abdication	1748 (1670 sak)	not recorded
Collapse of standard before Ava	not recorded	1749

The incident of the abducted bridal party provoked a Burmese reaction. Two attempts were made to attack Minipur. In 1718 Garib Niwaz intercepted a Burmese force and dispersed it by the force of his cavalry. A more serious threat was posed some five years later, when the approach of the Burmese coincided with an invasion from Tripera, to the south-west. The Burmese were again defeated, with heavy losses, before Garib Niwaz turned westwards to disperse the Tripuris.⁸ According to Harvey the Burmese sources record only one invasion, which was ambushed and defeated south-west of Thoubal (Harvey 1925:208).

Garib Niwaz now himself took the initiative to fulfil his charge to devastate Burma. He appears to have conducted annual campaigns designed to oppress Upper Burma. In 1736 he crossed the Chindwin, attacking and destroying Myedoo, and carrying away numerous captives (*Cheitharol Kumbaba* 83; Pemberton 1835:38 and 120; Harvey 1925:208). Similar raids were made in the following two years. In 1738 his forces dispersed a large Burmese army and penetrated deep into Burma, capturing the city of Sagaing on the banks of the Irrawaddy. According to Harvey (1925:208, also Hall 1981:407) the Manipuris occupied the Kaunghmudaw Pagoda on this campaign and destroyed every house and monastery up to the walls of Ava. The Burmese ascribed the daring of the Manipuri army to a religious fanaticism: Garib Niwaz's guru was believed to have preached to them that virtue would be obtained by bathing in the waters of the Irrawaddy (Pemberton 1835:39).

In the following year (1739), in response to an appeal from the king of Pong, Garib Niwaz again attacked Burma. The extent of this campaign is uncertain. The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* asserts that he again penetrated as far as Sagaing before being compelled to return to deal with a threat from the Maring hill tribe. Pemberton (1835:38, 119), on the basis of his Pong and Burmese sources, states that he went only as far as Myedoo, and that he suffered considerable losses. Whatever the truth of this account this was the final campaign of Garib Niwaz into Upper Burma.⁹ Apparently Burmo-Manipuri relations improved towards the end of his reign. The Manipuri Chronicle re-

8 Besides the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* this incident is described in detail in the short Manipuri work Takhel Ngamba (Conqueror of the Tripuris).

9 Pemberton (1835:40), followed by Harvey and Gait, alludes to an incident supposed to have taken place in 1749, when Garib Niwaz is said to have penetrated again as far as the Irrawaddy. While encamped opposite Ava his standard was blown down, and taking this as an evil omen he negotiated a peace treaty with the Burmese king by giving over his daughter in marriage. However according to the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* Garib Niwaz abdicated in 1748. The only campaign recorded after this date was indeed in 1749 but was conducted on behalf of the Burmese king against the rebellious Koi. This campaign is alluded to also in the *Ningthourol Lambuba*. Prior to this campaign the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* states that he escorted a maiden of royal blood to marry the Burmese king.

cords the peaceful reception of Burmese ambassador and also a sojourn of Garib Niwaz and his eldest son Shyam Sain in the Burmese capital. Garib Niwaz abdicated in favour of his son Chit Sain in 1748. The circumstances surrounding this abdication are obscure. Chit Sain was not the son of the first queen, and it turned out to be a particularly ill choice. The usual custom of primogeniture seems to have set aside for reasons which are not immediately clear.¹⁰

Soon after his abdication Garib Niwaz seems to have been hounded out of the capital. He stayed first at Ramnagar, then in the ancient capital of the Angom clan; later he moved southwards to the Loktak Lake. In 1750 he went to Burma, where he remained for about a year. In December, 1751, as he was returning to Manipur, he was met near the Chindwin by emissaries from his son, the king Chit Sain. He and his whole party, which included Shyam Sain and the ex-king's guru, were treacherously murdered. The reign which had begun with so much promise thus ended miserably, and his death ushered in a period of internal strife which eventually led to the devastation of Manipur by the Burmese.

There can be little doubt that Garib Niwaz was a brilliant military leader. Unlike some of the Burmese kings of the time he invariably led his forces in person, even on the most daring campaigns deep into Burma. One reason for the success of his forces was undoubtedly their brilliant horsemanship. Pemberton records that at this period each Manipuri kept two or three horses, and skill in horsemanship was kept alive by a form of polo, the national game. The Burmese sources also remark on the part played by the cavalry on these campaigns (see Hall 1955:324; Harvey 1925:208). It was the cavalry which made possible the lightning attacks which Garib Niwaz made, and the Manipuri Chronicle records the incredible speed with which the troops covered great distances and returned to their own territory before the Burmese could retaliate. The object of the attacks on Upper Burma was not conquest - no attempt was made to settle Manipuris there; the object was to devastate and pillage.

The Burmese, as we have noted above, attributed Garib Niwaz's attacks to a religious fanaticism, namely to the belief that to bathe in the waters of the Irrawaddy would bring virtue. To what extent do the Manipuri sources support this contention he was a religious fanatic as well as a great military leader?

10 The eldest son was Shyam Sain, who was born of the principal queen. He seems to have been especially devoted to his father and accompanied him after his abdication. The second son died in 1725. If Garib Niwaz became a sannyasin after his abdication, as seems likely, it is possible that Shyam Sain also adopted the religious life with him.

There can be no doubt that religion did play an important role in his life. His father, Charai Rongba, had taken the sacred thread in 1704. Although the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* does not explicitly say so, it is extremely likely that he adopted the Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism. According to Kennedy (1925: 78) disciples of Narottam brought this faith into Manipur during the 17th century. Since this school of Vaishnavism is now an integral part of Manipuri culture it is extremely likely that it was introduced during the reign of Charai Rongba, if not earlier. Garib Niwaz followed his father's faith.¹¹ In 1717, eight years after his accession, he was initiated by a guru, Gopal Das, together with several of his nobles. He appears to have carried out thorough religious reforms. Vaishnavism was now no longer simply under royal patronage; it became the religion of a good proportion of the population. A temple to Krishna was erected in 1722, and four years later an image of the same deity was placed near the palace pond. Ritual reforms were also carried out to conform to Hindu principles. In 1722 a public spectacle was made of those who had eaten beef, and in the following year laws were enforced to prevent the keeping of unclean domestic animals near housing areas. There seems to have been a good deal of contact with Brahmins, mendicants and gurus from Assam and other areas, which helped to spread the acceptance of Vaishnavism. Caste had not been known among the Manipuris,¹² and this agreed well with the Chaitanya school. The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* records that Garib Niwaz renewed the sacred thread in 1730,¹³ on which occasion he performed ritual bathing with his guru, and again in 1737. At this later time he was accompanied by some three hundred of the important people, and in the following year the bulk of the population took the sacred thread. From this period Vaishnavism had a considerable following.

There is some evidence from the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* that the rival school of Vaishnavism, the Ramanandi school, also attained some popularity in some circles during this period, and also that its followers were persecuted by Garib Niwaz. In 1731 the Chronicle records that "most of the followers of the Ramanandi school were punished" - although what the punishment was is not specified. Three years later (1734) a further persecution took place, and again in 1736. On the last occasion some Brahmins were exiled to Assam and a number of the king's brothers displaced or imprisoned. It is probable that the

11 Garib Niwaz is also known by the name Gopal Singh, which presumably reflects his allegiance to Krishna.

12 All Manipuris are of the Kshatriya caste, with the exception of the low-caste Loi. Exile to the Loi village appears to have been used as a punishment for the first time during the reign of Garib Niwaz.

13 For the renewal of the sacred thread see R.V. Kane (*History of Dharmasastra*: vol. II part I chap. VII).

movement had political implications. In 1740 a further persecution is recorded. On the other hand on at least one occasion Garib Niwaz himself worshipped Ram and erected a temple to Hanuman.¹⁴ His opposition to the Ramanandi school therefore seems not have been based on theological considerations. There may have been political factors involved which the Chronicle does not mention.

Garib Niwaz's attitude to the traditional religion is more problematic. It is certain that some attempts were made to destroy the *umang lai*.¹⁵ Nine such *lai* were destroyed in 1723, and some three years later the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* records that nine *umang lai* were again brought together and buried. Ritual offerings were then made near the temple of Hanuman on the spot where they were buried. There is also a tradition, which seems well founded,¹⁶ that Garib Niwaz burnt about one hundred and twenty books, some of a religious character, written in the archaic Manipuri script. On the other hand Garib Niwaz' attitude towards certain other *lai* was ambiguous. In 1723 - the same year in which he destroyed the nine *umang lai* for the first time, he made certain of the Brahmins initiate the worship of four other deities.¹⁷ Presumably this is an example of the enforced Hinduisation of the traditional gods, although there is no indication why these deities in particular should have received this special treatment. At the time of the second destruction of the *umang lai* in 1726 at least two of these gods¹⁸ were also destroyed. Another casualty in this purge was *Laiwa Haiba*.

Laiwa Haiba is interesting in that he was restored again in 1729, when a temple and an image were dedicated to him. The following year the Chronicle

14 Some Manipuri writers argue that Garib Niwaz actually became a follower of the Ramanandi school, and that the taking of the sacred thread for the third time in 1737 refers to his initiation into this school. This is claimed to be based on a Manipuri book *Senamahi Laikal*. Since this book is not available to me I have been unable to evaluate the strength of these arguments. But if Garib Niwaz did become a follower of the Ramanandi school in 1737 this would be contrary to most of the evidence in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. Tradition has it that some of the cantos of the Ramayana were translated into Manipuri during Garib Niwaz's reign, but whether with or without the king's approval we do not know.

15 Hodson (1908:66) describes the *umang lai* as forest deities, on the basis of the etymology. But the *lai* were not always associated with the forest; they were guardian or tutelary deities: "territorial gods" would be a better translation.

16 This tradition is recorded in Khelachandra Singh's *Ariba Manipuri Sahityagi Itihas*: unfortunately this book is available only in Manipuri.

17 The deities were: Lainingthou Nongsaba (Lion, King of the Gods); Yimthei Lai (obscure); Panthoibi (later identified with a wife of Siva); and Taibang Khaiba (possibly Senamahi, a diety worshipped in every household).

18 Namely Lainingthou Nongsaba and Panthoibi.

records that "the wife of a court official was escorted to *Laiwa Haiba*"¹⁹ and in 1731 a (second?) temple was dedicated, in which a stone was placed. Just a year later however *Laiwa Haiba* was "made unclean", to be restored again a few months later.²⁰ It may be significant that this humiliation of *Laiwa Haiba* coincided with the sojourn of some gurus from Cachar, and it may be that Garib Niwaz yielded to pressure to abandon the ancient god. On the restoration of the *lai* the gurus left for Burma. Presumably *Laiwa Haiba* was left in peace after this, for the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* does not record any further vicissitudes of his fortunes during Garib Niwaz's reign. Light would be thrown on the problem if we knew exactly who *Laiwa Haiba* was. The name is no longer used, but the literal meaning would be "one who speaks the words of the *lai*" i.e. oracle. *Laiwa Haiba* was therefore probably an oracular deity. That he was connected with the old religious order is certain. In Manipur there still exists a group of prophets and prophetesses, the *maiba* and *maibi*, who form a class apart and who preserve much of the traditional religion. Many *maiba* are connected with the palace court and used to deliver oracles on matters of state, concerning calamity or prosperity, epidemics, propitious times to wage war etc. It is possible that *Laiwa Haiba* was an oracular deity especially associated with the *maiba* and *maibi*. If this is so the changing fortunes of the *lai* might reflect the changing status of the *maiba* and *Maibi*, who as representatives of the old religion came into conflict with the new faith of Vaishnavism. This interpretation of the Chronicle finds some support in Hodson's comments:

At first the decrees of the king (i.e. to adopt Vaishnavism) received little obedience; the opposition to the change centred mainly round the numerous members of the royal family who were supported, not unnaturally, by the *maibas*, the priests of the old religion²¹

The ambivalence of Garib Niwaz towards *Laiwa Haiba* therefore probably reflects an ambivalence towards the old religion and its position over against the new.

However that may be, it remains that Garib Niwaz's patronage of Vaishnavism laid the foundation for this faith to become the religion of the Meiteis. If his military exploits ultimately led to the catastrophic Burmese devastations of the following years, and hence to the secession of Manipur to the

¹⁹ The meaning of this phrase is obscure. It may mean that the woman in question became a prophetess, the mouthpiece of the *lai*. In this case it would refer to a *maibi*. It is possible there may be some connection also with the Burmese custom of marriage to the *nat*.

²⁰ He is called in this place *Lainingthou Phalou Khomba*.

²¹ Hodson (1910:94): it should be noted that Hodson did not have access to the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*.

British, his achievements in the realm of religion had a more lasting effect. The Vaishnavism which he established as a state religion has remained the dominant faith of the Meiteis to the present day.

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