

KANGLA

The Ancient Capital of the Kingdom of Manipur



Kangla Fort

It is believed that at some time in the dim reaches of the past, Manipur was a wide expanse of water. Kangla was the first piece of dry land that rose out of the swirling liquid mass. This was because it was hallowed ground & able to surface whilst the rest lay submerged. In fact its very name has been derived from the process of its origin. In prehistoric times, Manipur was divided into a number of small principalities ruled by various clans like the Ningthoujas, Angom, Luwang, Moirang, Khuman, Kha-Nganba, Sarang-Leisangthem & others. They were constantly at war with each other for supremacy until the Ningthouja clan emerged all powerful, subjugated the rest, and brought them under a single identity, generically known as the Meiteis.

For 2000 years, the Ningthouja clan continuously ruled Manipur from Kangla until they buckled under the pressure of the British in 1891 AD. But before this disastrous collapse, this amazing fortress city had an illustrious history. Its growth & development was largely due to royal intervention. For example, Khagemba Maharaj (1597 – 1652 AD) constructed a brick wall at the western gate of Kangla, his son Khunjaoba (1652 – 1666 AD) improved & excavated a moat on the western side of Kangla. Garbniwaz Maharaj (1709 – 1748 AD) developed the royal enclosure known as ‘Sanggai Yumpham’ and made it into a veritable fort to ward off enemy attack because Manipur was at that time constantly at war with neighbouring Burma.

During the reign of Bhagyachandra Maharaj (1762 – 1798 AD), Kangla was unfortunately abandoned due to repeated invasion by the Burmese. He shifted his capital to Langthabal also known as Canchipur. For the 7 years that the Burmese occupied Manipur they radically diminished the population of the Kingdom. It is remembered till this day as ‘Chahi Taret Khuntakpa’. In 1844, the capital was once again shifted from Langthabal to Kangla, during the reign of Raja Narsing. For nearly half a century, Kangla was the capital of Manipur till it was occupied by the British in 1891.

The entire Kangla Palace Complex was planned & designed as a fortress to resist enemy attack. The rulers of the Kingdom not only ensured that more than adequate defense measures had been taken but that the aesthetic beauty of the city-fortress was kept in mind. In fact, when the Burmese withdrew their occupation of Manipur, they constructed their capital at Mandalay as a Replica of Kangla.

The Palace was protected by five gates which were guarded by sentries round the clock. Kangla was surrounded by a moat [locally known as Thangapat] which was 60 feet wide & 6 feet deep. This was filled with water & served as defense against enemy attack. During peace-time, this moat was the venue for the grand annual boat race called 'Hiyang Tannaba' in which the Maharaja himself took part. The earth excavated from the moat was used to crate a 13 foot high & 12 foot wide masonry on both sides.

Besides this outer moat, there was also another inner moat traces of which can still be seen. From the Western Gate, as you proceed eastward towards Uttra, there were as many as five different walls & five gates which had to be crossed before reaching the royal enclosure known as Sanggai Yumpham. It would not be easy for the enemy to pass through the heavily barricaded walls & the gates.

The Royal enclosure, Sanggai Yumpham, was called a Citadel by British writers because it also served as the royal armoury where canons & other arms & ammunitions were kept. It was a 200 foot square & was surrounded by a tall 17 foot wall whose remains can still be seen today. In the centre of the enclosure, stood the royal residence where the ruler of Manipur lived safe & secure.



Govindaji Temple

There were a number of royal & sacred sites inside Kangla. Among them were Uttra Sanglen – the Majestic Hall where the Maharajas of Manipur met the citizens & listened to their grievances & the Govindaji Temple which was first constructed by Raja Narsing (1765 – 1771 AD), destroyed by an earthquake & rebuilt during the reign of Maharaj Chandrakirti Singh in 1855. This temple had been the centre of Vaishnavite Culture in Manipur for centuries. Then there is Kangla-Sha the 22 foot high twin statue of a mythical beast in front Uttra. Kangla-Sha was finally blown up by the angry British in July 1891 by filling the open mouth of the beast with gun powder.



Nungjeng pat

Possibly the most prominent & sacred site inside Kangla is Nungjeng. Ancient texts refer to it as Nungjeng Pat [meaning Nungjeng Lake]. In the course of time it came to be known as Nungjeng Pukhri [meaning Nungjeng Tank] as the size of the lake had shrunk. In the prehistoric period, the present site of Kangla was a hill known as Purum Khongnem Ching.

Since the Meiteis firmly believed that Pakhangba, the ruling deity of the Kingdom, dwells inside this tank [nungjeng], it was venerated. No one dared enter the water of this tank except professional priests & priestesses called Amaibas & Maibis. When Kangla was the capital of Manipur, the Temple of Lord Pakhangba was set up near Nungjeng Pukhri. It is now difficult to pinpoint the exact spot where the temple stood. But from written records left by the Britishers, the temple was located forty yards from Kangla-Sha.

Nungjeng was once a big lake. From the hills of Kangla, seven streams known as Kha-Khong, Lai-Khong, Marang-Khong, Lilha-Khong, Phisu-Khong, Charoi-Khong & Yambi-Khong, flowed down into Nungjeng. The passage of time has unfortunately erased traces of all the streams, except one. Kangla, in fact, was surrounded by numerous lakes such as Nungjeng Pat, Porom Pat, Lamphel Pat, Lairen Pat, Kekru Pat, Akam Pat, Yaral Pat, Sana Pat, Hicham – Yaicham Pat, Keishampat, Ufong Pat and others.



The Kangla Gate

Lai-Haroba, the traditional festival of the pre-Vaishnavite Manipur, starts with a ceremonial procession originating from Nungjeng [no festival will be performed unless sanctified by sacred water from this tank]. The Kings of Manipur, from time to time used to perform an exclusive ritual called 'Pakhangba Fuhing Lakpa' to appease the God residing in Nungjeng. Once the God is propitiated, it is believed that all your wishes would be fulfilled. Common people are not allowed to perform this ritual which is reserved for royalty.

Nungjeng Pat was also known as 'Laisra Longkhon Pat' because of the immortal legend about Laisra who went fishing in the lake. This legend is enacted as an inseparable part of the Lai Haraoba festival. The story goes like this: Laisra was the Wife of Pakhanba, the ruling deity of Manipur. According to legend she dried paddy in the sun & then went to attend to other household chores. Pakhangba, assuming the guise of a serpent stirred the paddy to make it dry faster. Khaba, Laisra's father, instantly recognized that the creature was his son-in-law Pakhangba who would become a serpent during day & a human being during night. Since he hated his son-in-law, Khaba, encouraged his Grandson, Khuyoi Tompok, to kill the errant serpent which had upset his mother's paddy. The boy killed the serpent & threw it in Nungjeng Lake.

When Laisra returned, her son narrated all that had happened, describing how he had killed the serpent & thrown it in the lake. Laisra was shocked and so she took seven companions [known as seven Helois of Laisra] & went to the lake, each carrying a long [wicker basket made of split bamboo pieces used for fishing mainly used by women folk] to fish out Pakhangba. In their first attempt they caught a Muklang in their fishing basket. Laisra threw it back into the water saying "Here we come fishing, not for you but for my Lord". After that they caught several types of fishes like Sareng, Pengba, Nganoi, Tharak & others but released them one after another. Laisra had almost reached a point of desperation when she finally caught Ngaching [a shrimp] which led her to the exact spot where the dead serpent was thrown by her son. She frantically scooped the water with her long & finally brought out the dead serpent. She was so overwhelmed with joy that she removed the ring from her finger & presented it to the shrimp. The hard scale, which we now find covering the head of a shrimp, is nothing but the ring presented by Laisra.



Kangla Sha

The destruction & occupation of the capital by the British too has a long story behind it. It all began when Mr. J W Quinton, the then Chief Commissioner of Assam attacked the residence of Yuvraj Tekendrajit Bir Singh on 23RD March 1891 in order to capture him alive. But the attempt proved abortive, even as a number of civilians, unprovoked attack. Not being able to subdue the

people, Quinton attempted instead to make peace with them so he sounded the ceasefire. Five British Officers, including Mr. Grimwood, the Political Agent, entered Kangla led by the Chief Commissioner himself, for parleys with the Meiteis. Yuvraj Tekendrajit Singh & Thangal General insisted that they surrender their arms but the Britishers refused. At the point, Durbar broke up & the mob, who's near and dear ones had lost their lives in the previous night's unprovoked the officers. Later the captives were marched in front of the status of 'Kangla-Sha' & decapitated by the Public Executioner. When news of the brutal murder of the British officers reached the Government of British India, three columns of British troops from three different directions [Kohima Silchar & Tamu] were marched to Manipur. In a hand to hand encounter that followed on 25TH April 1891, the Manipuris suffered a crushing defeat & then the British entered Kangla & raised the Union Jack two days later.

On entering Kangla, the invaders not only vandalized the entire Palace Complex. Almost all the prominent buildings & structures were razed to the ground & the four miles of brick wall forming its area to a mere 263 acres. It would be interesting to recall one very strange incident when the invaders vandalized the Palace Complex of Kangla in 1891. While all the prominent structures were destroyed, the Govindaji Temple was left untouched – not in deference to the Vaishnavite sentiments of the Manipuris, but because of a bizarre reason. There were many religious books & ancient manuscripts being kept inside the temple so the British mistook the structure for a library. Hence, strict instructions were given not to touch the 'Library' while vandalizing the Palace. The invaders converted the area into a Cantonment for stationing a permanent military garrison.

It was only in 2004 AD that Kangla was handed over to the people of Manipur by the Government of India. Earlier [in 1980] it had been declared as a protected Area by the Archaeology Department of the Government of India. The ruins of the present day Kangla have been reduced to a mere 236.48 acres...the last remains of a once great city that had risen to its prime in times gone, a victim of the inclemency of circumstance.



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