



Sharing Joys and Sorrows

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Lower Burma was annexed to the British in the first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-1826. But the annexation of Burma was not yet completed till the upper Burma was annexed in 1886 in which Mr. Thibaw, the King of Burma was captured and transported for life to Andaman and Nicobar Islands. By that time, the Chin people were not yet under control of any outsider. Neither the British nor the Burmans had any control of the Chin people till the final subjugation of the Chins in the Chin-Lushai expedition of 1889-1890. The subjugation of the Chins was also possible only after stiff resistance. The annexation of upper Burma and then the subjugation of the Chins paved the way for the better protection of the British subjects in the Burman plains against the frequent attacks and raids by the Chins on the Burman. Contact of the Chins with the Burmans was only hostile in the course of history.

However, the perambulatory part of the constitution of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma camouflaged the reality of the relationship of the Chins and the Burmans. The passage goes like this : “The people residing in the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma have throughout history lived in harmony and unity sharing joys and sorrows in weal and woe”.

There would have been no occasion of sharing joys and sorrows in the past between the Chins and the Burmans. The history of the Chins prior to their subjugation by the British was slurred by tribal wars and vendetta among the different tribes of the Chins and also between the Chins and Burmans. It was because of the wars that many tribes were pushed out of the Chinland and settled in the different parts of the Indian side. That’s why we find the cognate Chin tribes in Mizoram, Manipur, Assam, Tripura, and Nagaland in India and also Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh now. The above mentioned passage from the constitution of Burma attracts a very big question mark.

The subjugation of the Chins by British was not primarily with the intention of colonizing the Chinland and ruling over the people. This was also not economical [interest and benefit] for the British. Their interest was to protect the subjects of the British-Burma from the raids and attacks on the Burmans by the Chins who indulged in slave trade also it is historical fact that frontier people like the Kachin, Shan, Karen, and Chin lived independently in the history prior to the British period in Burma. They were fighting to regain their lost freedom up till now. One Captain. Paucin made a typical statement to the Chairman of the Frontier Areas Committee of Inquiry just before the formation of Interim Government of Burma on the eve of the departure of the British from Burma. In order to find out the wishes of the people of the frontier areas of Burma, a Frontier Areas Inquiry

Commission was formed as authorized by the Aung San-Atlee agreement in London. Paucin made his statement before the Chairman, Mr. D.R. Rees Williams reflecting the whole course of history in the relationship of the Chins and the Burmans. He cited his line of generation to substantiate his points. "We, traced our genealogical tree up to the 15th generations. During these 15 generations, we have been under this British government for one generation only. For the other 14 generations, we were under nobody. When the British troops advanced in to the frontiers of the Chin Hills, we did not surrender at once, but we fought from the Chin Hills boundary up to our village..."

What Paucin said was a fact that the Chins were never under any authority in the course of their history except under the British rule for a brief spell of time. The subjugation of the Chins by the British gave recognition of the pre-existing administrative system of the Chins. They recognized the system of the traditional chieftainship. The British restored peace in the Chinland and prevented raids on the Burmans. The British empowered the traditional chiefs of the Chins. As such, the fames of the traditional chiefs like Thangtinlian of Falam and Haucinkhup of Tonzang were well known even in Manipur among the Chin tribes. The British never interfered with the internal working system of the Chin people. The famous Chin Hills Regulation Acts, 1896 was passed just to empower the Superintendent to be deemed as the Deputy Commissioner or District magistrate and Collector and an Assistant Superintendent as an Assistant Commissioner in charge of the subdivision or an Assistant Collector of the first class as the case may be only to govern the Chin people through their customary chieftainship for administrative convenience. This was the first step in subjugation of the Chins.

The Chins did not live in harmony and unity with the Burmans prior to this period to share their joys and sorrows in weal and woe. The Chins used to raid Burmans and take captives for their slaves. Descendants of such captive slaves were among the Chins. I ever met some person in a village in the Chin State who claimed descent from such captives. In their history in brief their Burman ancestors were captured while they were ploughing paddy and take to captivity. Persons captured in raids were taken as far north as Tonglon in Manipur.

In the expedition of 1891-92, Mr. B.S. Carey, Assistant Commissioner, Burma, and Political Officer, Chin Hills led the expedition. Carey and Tuck (1932:58) mentioned how the Chins disputed the rights of the English to the Burman captives. They reluctantly released these Burman captives. After threatening and arrest of the chief, one Burman was immediately surrendered and later on two more Burman captives were sent to the camp of the political agent. The joy of keeping the Burman slaves could never be shared by the Burmans and loss of the captive through the interference of the British was also a great loss to the captors.

The contact of the chins with the Burman was remote, not cordial but strained and hostile in the history. It was the British who brought the Burmans and the Chins together under their rule and then forced to be in the interim government of Burma.

Frequently mentions of the Burman kings were made in the folktale of the Chins. They

were mentioned in the common sayings. Many plants are also known to be originated from the Burmans. Some of such references are not palatable. One folk saying goes thus: “Kawlmangpa thu aakpi'n phiatmang”. The words (orders) of the Burman king had been scratched away by a brooding hen is the literal meaning. In one of the folktale, a beautiful girl named Lengtonghoih whom a Burman king wived her transformed the Burman king into a dog. No cordial relationship of the Chins with the Burman was reflected on the folk sayings and tales so as to share their joys and sorrows and even to live in harmony and unity in any part of the Chin history. Vumson (1986: 182-183) reproduced one of the best recorded pieces of information on an earlier and typical relation of the Chins with the Burmans from the diary of Dr. E.H. East, M.D., a Baptist Missionary like this: “January 19, 1905; I am now two days hard marching south of Haka and close to the border of Burma and there is no village in the Chin Hill district of Rua Van. The old chief took me out of village and up into a high mountain and then out on the brow of it and as we stood there he stretched out his right hand and pointed out to the country below. “How” he said, “We sat and planned our raids upon the Khol Me Kwa (Kawlmi Khua or Burmese villages) before the white men came and took our lands away. Here I sat with my father and his father in the council of war as we sharpened our swords and our spears and when all were ready we continuously wended our way down and we separated into several parties and sent spies to certain village and then we camped far enough away so the dogs could not hear us. Early in the morning, while the Burmans were still sleepy, we surrounded the village and gave our war cry and killed all men, made prisoners of the women and children and brought them with us home. All cattle we took with us and all the grain. The women and children became our slaves. After these wars, we had many feasts. Now, the white men have made us slaves and we have to work hard to make our food by tilling the fields. Tell me, how long will the white men sit up here?” Many times I have been asked, “How long will the Engle mi (English) sit in our country?” “Supposed they leave you, what will you do then?” “I and my people will make war upon our old enemies as we did before then white men cam.”

The Constitution mentioned above further added that the Constitution was adopted in accordance with the wishes of the people.....which the working people of the national races have long aspired. Here, he is to be noted that the various constitutions of Burma were made by the Burmans for only. The new constitution under the military rule was said to have been adopted after holding the so-called, national referendum marked by a highly propagandized campaigns. No suggestions from the Chins was accepted for incorporation in the new Constitution by the Burmans and whatever it was there in the Constitution, it was there disadvantageously for the Chins. Not only the Chins but also other rebelling ethnic groups of frontier areas were consulted to reverse the history of the relationship with the Burmans to show the people of Burma throughout history lived in harmony and peace sharing joys and sorrows in weal and woe.

A group of Chins approached Colonel Sein Lwin, Commander, North West Command of the Burma Army at Rangoon in connection with the drafting of the Constitution under the military rule. But the Colonel curtly told the Chin representatives that they (the Chins) were backward, weak and unimportant and that they should not bother with such matters as the Constitution (Cf. Sumson 1986: 217). This is one of the many indications that the

Burmans do not only share the joys and sorrows in weal and woe throughout history but also ideas and opinions with the Chins.

References:

1. Carey, B.S., The Chins Hills (1923)
2. Vumson, Zo History (1986)