



Land and people of Manipur

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Abstract

Manipur is an ancient Kingdom formerly ruled by its sovereign monarchs. It is now a state of India situated on its north-eastern boundary bordering Burma. Manipur is now a small state with an area of 22,327 square kilometers. But the merit and glory of Manipur does not lie in its size and population but in its age-old remarkable culture and civilization evolved through centuries unknown to the outside world till recently. However, one has to remember that Manipur of today is a small state of the Union of India, in the days when Manipur was independent and powerful under its east, the River Chindwin now in Burma (Myanmar) was the international river running between Manipur and Burma and in the west it extended up to the plains of Cachar. Manipur was in former days a great political power, a power that may be considered as an Asiatic Power.

Keywords: Nagas, Kukis, Meitei, Mongoloid, Chindwin, Anouba, Salai, Kouba, Koubaron, etc.

Introduction

Geographically, Manipur is divided into hill and valley. Through the valley is far smaller than the hill in area, it was in the valley where the Meiteis developed a high culture and civilization for the development of which the dwellers of the surrounding mountains have had little part to play. The geographical position of Manipur has also contributed to the formation of its distinct indigenous culture, religion and civilization. The valley being guarded by rings of mountain ranges which were not easily accessible; the Meiteis had the opportunity to blossom the seed of their indigenous customs, traditions, religion and other forms of art, culture and civilization in their own way. The isolated nature of the country and the mentality of the people having a strong spirit of independence and a sense of suspicion of anything alien also make them hard to accept anything from outside. Even if they accept an alien culture, they did so in their own fashion and were never blind imitators. For example, when Hinduism swept the valley in the 18th Century, the Meitei did not accept it in toto. The traditional faiths remain dominant in the new faiths. One hundred fifty years ago, the British Political Agent in Manipur Col. Mc Culloch observes – “In fact their observances (Hindu observance) are only of appearances sake not the prompting of the heart”. His observation is still relevant. Thus, the geographical feature of Manipur has also its impacts on the peculiar social life of the Meiteis inspite of the various waves of changes from the east and the west.

Manipur is inhabited by various ethnic groups. The Meiteis, the most dominant section, now inhabits only in the valley, the vast hill areas being reserved for the relatively smaller ethnic groups – now designated as Nagas & Kukis. But in the days of yore, the Meiteis inhabited both in the valley as well as in the neighbouring hills of Manipur. For example, the Koubru hill having fifteen ranges was the principality of the Moirang (Anouba) Salai of the Meiteis. From the name of their ancestral inhabit, the “Koubru hill” man and women

belonging to this Salai of the Meiteis are still designated as Kouba and Koubaron respectively especially when they were referring to the literary accounts and in genealogical writings.

Land and the people of Manipur

The present state Manipur was an ancient sovereign country ruled by its monarchs having glorious history and tradition of about more than two thousand years. According to Cheitharol-Kumbaba, the royal chronicle of Manipur, the first historical king of Manipur who accended throne in 33 A.D. with due coronation ceremony in Kangla, the ancient palace of Manipur which is still lying in the heart of Imphal who was Meidingoo Nongda Lairen Pakhangba and the last king of Manipur whose reign the sovereign kingdom and country of Manipur was forcibly dissolved and merged with Indian Union in October, 1949 who was king Bodhachandra. Since then the kingdom-Manipur became a Union-Territory and finally a state of India in 1972.

It has an area of 22,327 square kilometers with a population of 30, 8634 according to the census of 2010. Manipur is now situated on the north-eastern boundary of India bordering Myanmar. Regarding the size and population of Manipur is like a district of bigger and populous state of India. The merit of Manipur does not lie in its size and population but in its age old renowned history, culture, civilization and the past military glories and the soldierly qualities of its people. Manipur is undoubtedly a hill state but it has a picturesque valley which is the cradle of civilization not only for the inhabitants of the valley dwelling Meeteis/Meiteis but also of the dwellers of the hills who learnt much of their civilization from the culturally advanced Meeteis/Meiteis.

Manipur is bounded by the state of Nagaland of India in the north, by the Cachar district of Assam state in the west and in the south-west by the state of Mizoram of India, in the south-east and north-east by the country, Myanmar. Its boundary with Myanmar is the longest and formed international

boundary of India and Myanmar. But in the days when Manipur was so powerful and sovereign under its own sovereign rulers it had a larger area. In the eastern part, its boundary extended up to the Chindwin river of Myanmar but now it is in Myanmar. The upper Chindwin district of present Myanmar was formerly known as 'Kabo- Valley' which was within the territorial boundary of Manipur.

Pemberton described, 'The eastern boundary of Manipur extended even beyond the Ningthi/Chindwin River. The territories of Manipur have fluctuated at various times with the fortunes of their princes, frequently extending for three or four days journey east beyond the Ningthi or Chindwin river.' Sir James Johnstone also remarked that- "The territory of Manipur varied according to the mettle of its rulers. Sometimes they held a considerable territory, east of the Chindwin River in subjections, at other times only the Kabo Valley, a strip of territory, inhabited not by the Burmese but by the Shans, and lying between Manipur proper and the Chindwin." But India government gave away Kabo Valley of Manipur to Burma on lease under the 'Treaty of 1834'. So Manipur received only a regular compensation of Sicca Rs. 500 per month from the British Government, upto 1947 and from the Dominion Government till integration of Manipur into the Indian Union in October, 1949. Thus integration of Manipur with India, the question of the retrocession of Kabo-Valley that had been a bone of contention between Manipur and Burma for a long time was sadly closed.

In the north and north-east Manipur once extended her territory upto the southern part of the present Nagaland state. Addition to this matter, Sir James Johnstone who had a fair knowledge of Naga Hills and Manipur because he was in service a number of years in both regions as officiating Political Agent. He writes- "There is every reason to believe that the Manipuris in former days did penetrate into the Naga Hills and exacted tribute when they felt strong enough to do so. All the villages have Manipuri names in addition to their own. But during the period of his decadence, just before and during the Burmese war of 1819-1825, any influence Manipur may have possessed fell into abeyance. At that time it was re-asserted and Gambir Singh reduced several villages to submission, including the longest of all Kohima."

Mackenzie also remarks- "In 1835 indeed, the forest between Doyeng and Dhunsiri was declared to be the boundary between Manipur and Assam." It was re-organized, by the British Government of India. Pemberton writes that- "In the west, the territory of Manipur once extended upto the plains of Cachar." Prior to the Anglo- Burmese war (1824-1826) the whole South Cachar was ruled by Raja Gambir Singh and Hailakandi by his brother Marjit Singh.

After the war, western boundary of Manipur was at Chandrapur. The Treaty of 1833 entered between Raja Gambir Singh and the British Government. Territory of Manipur lying between the west bank of Jiri River and Chandrapur were exchanged with the British territory of Kalanaga and Nungjai/Nungshai Hills which was formed a part of Tamenglong district of Manipur. The southern boundary of Manipur was found not regular and not known how far it in earlier times extended beyond the boundary of present bordering Myanmar.

Archaic names of Manipur

Since time immemorial Manipur was known in different names. In early time the country (Manipur) was known as "Poirei Namthak Sharongpung, Tili Kokton Ahanba, Mira-Pongthoklam, Mua- Palli, etc. in different chaks (ages)." But after the immigration of Poireiton, it came to be known as 'Poirei Meitei Leipak' or 'Meitei- Leipak' and later known as 'Meitrabak'. Since then it had been the common name of the kingdom till the name Manipur replaced it.

Yet Manipur was known by different names by its neighbouring states and countries. Burmese called it 'Kathe' which terms they apply equally to the people. The Shans or Pongs inhabiting the country, east of Chindwin River it 'Cassey'. The Ahoms who ruled Assam called it 'Mekhali' and old Assamese called it 'Maglau'. The Cachharis called it 'Magli'. But some scholars of the Meeteis called it 'Kangleipak'. The term or name 'Manipur' had been known or used to call it after the embracement of Vaishnavism which was during the reign of King Pamheiba (Garibniwaj). During his reign he ordered the whole people of Kangleipak to embrace Hinduism (Vaishnavism or Ramandi Religion). In those days the entire people of the land had opposed and protested against him but could not be fruitful. Since the dawn of creation of the Universe both hill and valley people worshiped 'Lord Sanamahi.' Because of it they opposed new religion. It will be discussed later.

There are various indigenous people inhabited both in hill and valley of Manipur. They are the Meeteis, inhabited both in hill and valley, twenty nine tribes (recognised) they are also living both hill and valley. In later part of history of Manipur, the Meeteis inhabited mainly in the valley and the rest twenty nine recognized tribes mainly in the hill who are known by their tribe names. On the other hand Meitei- Pangal (Manipuri Muslim) came to settle in Manipur was during the reign of King Khagemba. Khagemba defeated Muslims in the very crucial battle. After then they were engaged to get married with Meitei women according to the order of the king to settle in Manipur permanently.

The twenty nine recognised tribes are broadly divided into two main groups- Nagas and Kukis. But the division is arbitrary as there are tribes such as Chothe, Chiru, Kom, ec. The major Naga tribes of Manipur consists of- Kabui, Tangkhul, Khoirao and Maring etc. They mainly settled in the western, northern and north-eastern hills of Manipur. The Kukis chiefly settled in the south eastern, southern and south-western hills of Manipur.

The Kukis of Manipur are classified into - Old Kukis and New Kukis. The Meiteis called them by their tribe names. New arrivals are known as Khongjais. The new Khongjais now far outnumbered the old Kukis. Belonging to major new Kuki tribes are - Thadou, Hmar, Paite, Vaiphei, Gangte, Simte, Zou, etc. According to E.W.Dun, classification of the old Kuki consists of Kom, Anal, Chiru, Koireng, Chothe, Purum, Mantak and Lamkang ^[1]. On the one side the kings of Manipur assigned Meitei Pangals separate yumnaks or sageis (surname) according to their place of habitation and occupation. Those who do not belong to any of those sageis given by the kings of Manipur are not the Meitei pangal or Manipuri Muslim and adopted Meitei language as their mother tongue, but retained their original faith. The Meiteis

make their settlements not only in the valley but also in the adjacent hills of Manipur which have references as found in old Meitei texts like Panthoibi Khongul, Pombi Luwaoba, Keipharol, Chengleirrol, Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba, Cheitharol Kumbaba, Ningthourol Lambuba, Ningthourol Laihui, etc. bear testimony to this fact. Although the Meiteis inhabited in the valley only is about one tenths of the total area of Manipur, Meiteis formed more than half of the total population of Manipur.

Evolution of Manipur

Evolution of Manipur is varied from one scholar to another. In fact it won't be so because there are two groups of scholars- 1) Hindunised Scholar and 2) Traditional Scholar (faith in Sanamahism). Hindunised scholars focused on Hinduism and they traced out our tradition and others basing on Hinduism. Reference has been made to the land, Manipur in the great epic of India, - Mahabharata while describing the adventure of the Pandava hero, Arjuna, who married to Chitrangada, a princess of Manipur. But there was no mention of Bahhravahana or Arjuna in the pre-Garibniwaz chronicles and genealogies of the royal family, which was found by Nongda Lairan Pakhangba ^[2]. The scholars and the orthodox but powerful ruling class had written volumes in support of the identification of Manipur with that of the epic the doyen of these scholars being the great Sanskrit scholars – Atombapu Sharma. But his hypothesis and concept is rejected and not supported by Meeteis, English scholars and almost Indian scholars-so-far.

Meitei scholars forcefully and convincingly plea that Manipur cannot be identified as Mahabharat's Manipur. This view of Mahabharata will be only in the eighteenth century and Hindunization brought this name-Manipur in place of original or evolutionary name of the kingdom. – 'Kangleipak' or 'Meitribak'. Manipur of Mahabharata will be in Orissa and Uttar-Pradesh states of India.

The word – 'Manipur' is derived from two Sanskrit words – 'Mani' and 'Pur' which means 'Land of Jewel' (Mani=Jewel, pur=lan). There is a belief from the view of Brahmanical School that the valley of Manipur was once under water. Lord Shankar pierced the hill, Chingnunghuk with his Trisula (Trident) and out the water and rendered the valley habitable. Ananta, the serpent god was overjoyed and sprinkled the land with the sparkling gems. Thus the land, Manipur comes after. But this faith is not known to the Meiteis in early periods. So there is no proof and evidence so-far. In short, it will be the product of Hindusim which influences the tradition of the Meiteis. The plain of the land Manipur had been formed out of the lake. When the lake dried up in course of time it became a place fit for settlement. This theory is common acceptance and supported by the geologist. From this theory, in early periods, we come to know that all people of the valley of Manipur first inhabited in the hills such as in Ukhrul, Thangjing, Koubru, Longmaiching, Kameng, Laimaton, Leimatak hill, etc. before the reign of Meidungu Pakhangba and after too.

Addition to this, the two fountain heads of Angom clan – namely Pureiromba and Chingshomba ruled in Khangkhui of Ukhrul. They ruled their province (kingdom) for a long time there and later came from Khangkhui to settle in the valley of Manipur, before Meidungu Pakhangba. Hence, the Meiteis /

Meeteis inhabited are in different places of the hills of Manipur.

Ethnic affinity of the Meeteis

There are three chief ethnic people in Manipur who are very industrious and settling in different places of Manipur due to their movements and work-culture. They are – the Meeties/Meiteis of the valley and surrounding hills, the Nagas and Kukis of the surrounding hills of Manipur. The word 'Naga' was introduced or entitled first by Sir James Johnstone who was political Agent of Manipur in the later part. Gangmumei Kabui describes thus: "*They are predominantly Mongoloid, with strains of other non-Mongoloid elements, who from the pre-historic times today speak Tibeto-Burman languages. Historical reasons greatly influenced the independent growth of these social groups with varying degrees of culture development and civilization, of which the Meiteis among these autochthons are the most dominant and advanced community.*"

The Meeteis/Meiteis speak Tibeto-Burman language and belong to this group. The term 'Meitei/Meetei' is derived from two words – 'Mi' means man and 'Tei' means separate which is according to the creation of the mankind with the wills of Tengbanba Mapu (Almighty God, Sanamahi). T.C. Hodson says too: "*It was derived from the creation of man by God in His images: Mi=image and Tei=modeled after God's image=Meitei.*" Since time immemorial, the Meeteis believed in Sanamahism and they worship him as their Creator and Saviour till today.

Conclusion

The Meities resemble their immediate neighbours the Naga and Kukis physically as all of them belong to the same Mongloid Stock. But, when examine the traditional religion, custom and behavioural pattern of the various neighbouring ethnic groups, it is discovered that the Meiteis are akin to such Mongoloid groups such as the Shans, Burmese, Mons, Tais, etc. various theories of the origin & immigration of the Meiteis have been put forward by many scholars - inside and outside. But all of them are hypothetical ones and none can definitely say when and from which part of the world the Meiteis came and settle in Manipur. Hence, the origin and migration of Meeties are still obscure as the accounts, traditions of their origin were lost in the midst of remote antiquity. What we can say appropriately is that the name Meitei was evolved or formed within this land, Manipur.

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