

Chapter-2

Background of Manipur

Manipur has over 2000 years of long ancient history. In the earlier period, Manipur had been princely kingdom, ruled by the king as a full-fledged country. In the history of the ancient record Manipur lost its independence and was ruled by the Awa (Burma) now Myanmar from 1819 to 1825. This period was known as “Chahi Taret Khuntakpa” (Seven Years’ Devastation). With the help of the British, Manipur regained its independence from the hands of the Awas. From this time Manipur established its relation with the British. After the war against the British, Manipur had lost its Independence in the hands of the British in April 1891. Then Manipur was occupied by the British as a part of the British Empire upto 1947. On the 14th August, 1947 Manipur became free from the British rule. Again on the 20th September, 1949 Manipur has forcibly been annexed to India. Then on the 15th October, 1949 Manipur became a part of Indian Union as a Union Territory and became a state on the 21st January, 1971. Manipur has lived its own lifestyle, religion, culture, topology, administration, philosophy, language, social structure, dress code, social norm.¹

1. Sarangthem Boramani Singh, Meitei Ningthourol (Imphal: Sarangthem Boramani, 2000), pp. 14-26.

The Geography of Manipur

Manipur consists of hills and valleys. The Manipur valley may be called a valley of the valleys. Manipur is situated in the eastern most part of the north-eastern hilly region of India. It is a landlocked isolated hilly state having a distinct geographical entity. It is almost rectangular in shape with a valley spreading over an area of 2,007 sq. kms. The Loktak Lake, the biggest fresh water lake in the north-eastern India is in the southern part of the valley.²

According to the 2001 census, the total area of the state is 22,327 sq. kms. which constitute only 0.68 percent of the total area of the Indian Union. The population of the State is 22, 93,896 including estimated population of 3 sub-divisions of Senapati district in 2001, which represent only 0.22 percent of the total population of India. It is situated between 92°58° E and 94°45° E Longitudes and 23°50° N and 25°42° N Latitudes. The average elevation of the valley is 790 meters above the main sea level. The hills spread from the north to the south direction with an average height ranging between 1,500 and 1,800 meters. Some of the hills on the northern parts of the state have a height of around 3,000 meters. Manipur has tropical temperate climate depending upon elevation. The climate of Manipur is enjoyable. The state enjoys the influence of sub-tropical monsoon climates. Many places of hills and valley enjoy a temperate climate. Rainfall is about 207.77 cms. The hottest place in Manipur is located at Jiribam and the highest rainfall areas are situated at Ukhrul and Tamenglong districts. The state has sub-tropical monsoon, mild winter, dry

2. Lairenmayum Iboongohal Singh, Introduction to Manipur (Imphal: S. Ibochaoba Singh, 1987), p. 1.

winter, hot summer.³ The slope of the valley is from north to south. The presence of the mountain ranges not only prevents the cold winds from the north from reaching the valley but also acts as a barrier to the cyclonic storms originating from the Bay of Bengal. There are four major river basins in Manipur state, the Barak River Basin (Barak Valley) to the west, the Manipur River Basin in central Manipur, the Yu River Basin in the east, and a portion of the Lanye River Basin in the north. The total water resources of Barak and Manipur river basins are about 1.8487 Mham (million hectare meters). The overall water balance of the state amounts to 0.7236 mham (million hectare meters) in the annual water budget. The Barak river, the largest river of Manipur, originates in the Manipur hills and is joined by a number of tributaries such as the Irang, the Maku, and the Tuivai. After its junction with the Tuivai, the Barak River turns north and forms the border with Assam State, and then enters Cachar in Assam just above Lakhimpur. The Manipur river basin has eight major rivers: the Manipur, the Imphal, the Iril, the Nambul, the Sekmai, the Chakpi, the Thoubal and the Khuga. All these rivers originate from the surrounding hills. Almost all the rivers in the valley area are in the mature stage and, therefore, deposit their sediment load in the Loktak Lake. The rivers draining the Manipur hills are comparatively young, due to the hilly terrain through which they flow. These rivers are corrosive in nature and assume turbulent form in the rainy season. Important rivers draining the western area include the Maku, Barak, Jiri, Irang and Leimatak. Rivers draining the eastern

3. M.T. Laiba, The Geography of Manipur (Imphal: Public Book Store, 1992), pp. 110-111.

part of the state, the Yu River Basin, include the Chamu, Khunou and other short steams.⁴

The soil cover can be divided into two broad types, viz. the red ferruginous soil in the hill area and the alluvium in the valley. The valley soils generally contain loam, small rock fragments, sand and sandy clay, and are quite varied. On the plains, especially flood plains and deltas, the soil is quite thick. The top soil on the steep slopes is very thin. Soil on the steep hill slopes is subject to high erosion, resulting in gullies and barren rock slopes.

The state is bounded on the north by Nagaland, on the east by Surma tract and upper Chindwin of Myanmar (Burma) on the south by Chin Hills (Myanmar) and Mizoram and on the west by the Cachar district of Assam. To the south west, north west and west is Assam. According to the physical feature, the state may broadly be divided into two parts. The Manipur valley which forms the great highway between the British provinces of Assam and Cachar on one side and the Kabow valley which now belongs to Myanmar (Burma) on the other.⁵ The hills comprise five districts, namely Senapati, Tamenglong, Churachandpur, Chandel, and Ukhrul, while the districts of Bishnupur, Imphal East, Imphal West, and Thoubal fall in the valley. The hill ranges are the off shoots of the Himalayas which constitute the northern boundary of India. The highest peak, i. e., Koubru is the lowest point of the

4. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

5. Alexander Mackenzie, "Manipur," in N. Sanajaoba (ed.) *A British Anthology*, (New Delhi: Akansha Publication House, 2003), p. 300.

Himalaya range, the hill range while proceeding from it diverges to the north of Manipur but completely converges to the south of Manipur. The hill ranges in the south extend as far as Mizo Hills and the Arakan Yomas till they meet the Bay of Bengal at Cape Negrais in Burma. The Imphal valley is a plateau with an elevation of about 2,600 ft. above the sea level.⁶

According to E.W. Dun, Manipur was called in different nomenclatures by the Burmese, Cachar, Assam and Shans. The Burmese called Meeteis as 'Kathay', the inhabitant of Cachar called the Meeteis as 'Moglie', whereas the people of Assam called them as 'Mukli' and 'Kassay' by Shans etc.⁷ There was no sub-division as existing in present set-up of administration division, and rather it was treated as a single district state under the Chief Commissioner of Assam. However it can be observed that from the period of 1899 to 1900 or so the area known as Manipur state had 6 Panahs as administrative units perhaps for collection of state revenue. The Panahs were 1) Ahallup, 2) Naharup, 3) Khabam, 4) Laipham, 5) Imphal and 6) Sadar collection and they were put under the control of a Tahsildar/Dewan more or less a Sub-Deputy Collector alike. As history tells, Manipur was a princely state ruled by Rajas and Maharajas successively and Imphal being the capital of Manipur State, from the earlier times. Out of the 6 Panahs the first five might be described as the Panahs in the plains and the remaining one in the hills as a whole. But Panahs boundaries could not be defined in the map.

6. M. Kirti Singh, Religious Development in Manipur in the 18th & 19th Centuries (Imphal: Manipur State Kala Academi, 1980), p. 3.

7. E. W. Dun, Gazetter of Manipur (Delhi: Vivek Publishing House, 1975), p. 1.

In respect of population the Imphal West district occupies the largest population size with 444,382 sharing 19.37 percent of the total population of the state while Tamenglong district becomes the least one with 4.86 percent. In the remaining seven districts, three are in the valley and four in the hills. Imphal East has a total population of 3, 94, 876, Bishnupur and Thoubal have the total population of 208368 and 364140 respectively. Among the hill districts, Senapati is the most populous one with a total population of 283621 including estimated population of three sub-divisions. Churachandpur and Ukhrul have a total population of 227905 and 140778 respectively. Chandel has the total population of 118327.

The People

Manipur has been for centuries the shelter of diverse communities. Manipur has several ethnic communities and tribes are found all over the state either exclusively confined or scattered or co-existing. In addition to the native population people of different groups including those migrated from different parts of India and Nepal also inhabit it. Multiplicity in ethnic composition and demographic variation in the state have substantive similarities with the kind of equation the mainland India has with the rest of the country. In fact Manipur can be aptly characterized as a miniature India.⁸ The central valley is the most fertile and the most thickly populated areas. The area of the plain is approximately 2230 sq. km. and remaining 20126 sq. km. are hills. A major

8. Bhagat Oinam, "Patterns of Ethnic Conflict in the North East- A Study on Manipur," in Economic and Political, Weekly, 24th May, 2003, p. 2031.

difference however lies in the land and people relationship. The valley of Manipur has now assumed a cosmopolitan character. The Meetei-Pangals (Manipuri Muslims) are, however, numerically preponderant. The state's land law does not allow the Meeteis and other non-Tribes to buy land in the hills and settle. That is nine-tenth of the states area has been reserved for the Scheduled Tribes. The tribal population comprises thirty three recognized Scheduled Tribes. In addition to these there are also some smaller Sub-Tribes demanding constitutional recognition as separate tribes. The Meeteis constitute the majority of the State's total population. The Meeteis live mostly in the valley and in Jiribam in the western limit of Manipur. Majority of them profess Hinduism. The Muslims who form the second largest majority in terms of their population size has a total population of 1, 67, 204. The Muslims are to be found chiefly on the fertile tracts of land between the Imphal river and the Iril river. The Tribal population is mostly Christians with some traces of Rongmei, Purum and few other tribes practicing their traditional religion.⁹ The hill regions of Manipur have been the ancestral home of the hill tribes. The recognized 33 tribes inhabited in Manipur are 1) Aimol, 2) Anal, 3) Angami, 4) Chiru, 5) Chothe, 6) Gangte, 7) Hmar, 8) Kabui : (a) Puimei and (b) Rongmei, 9) Kacha Naga: (a) Zemei and (b)Liangmei, 10) Koirao, 11) Koireng, 12) Kom, 13) Lamkang, 14) Mao, 15) Maram, 16) Maring, 17) Any Mizo, 18) Monshang, 19) Moyon, 20) Paite, 21) Purum, 22) Ralte, 23) Sema, 24) Simte, 25) Sukte, 26) Tangkhul, 27) Thadou, 28) Vaiphei, 29) Zou and four others recognized scheduled tribes under Orders (Amendment) Act of 2002. Three

9. Ibid.

Scheduled Tribes inhabit Tamenglong, the majority group in the district is Kabui and the minor groups of Thadou and Gangte. In Churachandpur as many as thirteen Scheduled Tribes are found scattered. The major-groups among them are Hmar, Paite and Thadou. The minor groups are Anal, Chothe, Kabui, Kom, Vaiphei, Zou, Mizo, Gangte, Simte, and Ralte. Senapati District has thirteen Scheduled Tribes scattered all over. The Schedule Tribes that constitute the major groups are Mao, Maram, and Thadou. The minor groups are Kabui, Tangkhul, Maring, Chiru, Kom, Koireng, Vaiphei, Kacha Naga, Sema and Koirao. Chandel is inhabited by fourteen Scheduled Tribes. The major groups of the district are Anal, Maring and Thadou. The minor groups are Lamkang, Zou, Gangte, Moyon, Monshang, Aimol, Chothe, Purum, Mizo, Tangkhul and Kom. Representatives of most of the Scheduled Tribes are found in small numbers in the remaining four valley districts of Manipur. The major group in Ukhrul district is the Tangkhul and minor group is the Thadou.¹⁰

The country was divided into six pannas, Ahalup (the club of the old men), Naharup (the club of the young men), Laipham (abode of the gods), Khabum (belonging to Khaba or bitter, from Khaba), Hitakphanba (gatherer of tobacco), and Potsangba (watchmen).

The Meeteis: Their Ethnic Origin

The Ethnic origin of a group or race is hardly traceable. The origin of the Meeteis is also very difficult to find out. The origin of the Meeteis is

10. T. S. Gangte, *The Kukis of Manipur: A Historical Analysis* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2003), pp. 34-35.

altogether chaotic and not quite clear. One reason for it is the destruction of the Puyas (the ancient Books of the Meeteis) by burning and assimilation in religion of the Meeteis. The following view and opinion are to study the origin of Meeteis by scholars and learned persons.

The origin of the Meeteis is that the Meetei race originated from the surrounding tribes of Nagas and Kukis. In this point 'Mc Culloh' in his book entitled "Valley of Manipur" writes, "From the most credible traditions, the valley appears originally to have been occupied by several tribes, the principal of which were named Khumul, Luang, Moirang and Meithei, all of whom came from different directions. For a time, the Khumul appears to have been the most powerful, and after its declension the Moirang tribe. But by degrees, the Meitheis subdued the whole and the name Meithei has become applicable to all the Moirang tribe from the south, the direction of the Kookies, the Khumul from the east, the direction of the Murrings and the Meitheis and Luang from the north-west, the direction of the Koupoous.¹¹

Further, the view that the origin of Meetei was from the surrounding hills tribes was fully supported by T.C. Hodson in his book entitled 'The Meitheis' as he writes, "The ceremony denominated Phumbankaba or 'ascending the throne,' is performed in Naga dress, both by the Rajah and Ranee, and the Yim Chau, or great house, the original residence of the Meithei

11. Mc. Culloh, Valley of Manipur (Delhi: Gain Publication, 1980), p. 4.

Chief, is, though he does not now reside in it, still kept up, and is made in the Naga fashion.”¹²

The above two points were different from the view of G.A. Grierson and R. B. Pemberton. In the book “The Linguistic Survey of India” Vol.-III, part-III by G.A. Grierson it is mentioned that the Meeteis or Manipuris belonged to the Tibeto-Chinese dialect speaker group. This means that Meeteis belong to the Tibeto-Chinese and their origin was at the beginning part of the Chinese rivers like Yangtze and Hoiang-Ho in China. And they spread up to Irrawady and Chindwin River Bank. And some of them had spread to the Himalaya hills range and some others had gone through the bank of the Brahmaputra in Assam and settled.”¹³

And then R.B. Pemberton also mentions that the Meeteis originated from the China, Tatar colony and they had intermarried with surrounding hill people. In his book, entitled “The Eastern Frontier of India” it is mentioned that “..... the Muneepoorees of the present day we may safely conclude them to be the descendants of a Tatar colony, which probably emigrated from the North west borders of China during the sanguinary conflicts for supremacy, which took place between the different members of the Chinese and Tatar dynasties, in the 13th and 14th centuries”¹⁴

12. T. C. Hodson, The Meitheis (Delhi: Low Price Publication, 1989), p. 6.

13. G. A. Grierson, The Linguistic Survey of India, Vol.-III, Part-III, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968), p. 92.

14. R. B. Pemberton, The Eastern Frontier of India (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1979), p. 36.

In the view of physical structure and appearance, the Meeteis are distinctly Mongoloid. In support of this point R. Brown writes “Although the general facial characteristics of the Manipuri are of the Mongolian type, there is a great diversity of features amongst them some of them showing a regularity approaching the Arian type. Among both men and women the stature is very various, differing about as much as is found among Europeans”¹⁵

And also Saroj Nalini Parratt also mentions that “physically the Manipuris are distinctively Mongoloid in appearance, which suggests that their origin should be sought further east”¹⁶

Another point in the origin of Meeteis is that Meeteis were formed by the combination of the two words Siamese ‘Tai’ and Kochin Chinese ‘Moy’ community. This view was expressed by Brain Houghton Hodgson when he remarks, “In the Moitay of Manipur we have the combined appellations of the Siamese ‘Tai’ and the Kochin Chinese ‘Moy’. In other words, the Manipurian tribe, called ‘Cossials’ by the Bengalis, belong to the ‘Moi’ section of the great tribe called tai themselves and Shan Vel Syan by the Burmese, the sectioned name being also foreign and equivalent to the native”.¹⁷

In relevance with Brain Houghton Hodgson’s point T.C. Hodson gave his opinion in his book entitled ‘The Meitheis’ He thus writes, “..... while

15. R. Brown, Statistical Account of the Native State of Manipur (Calcutta: Mittal Publication, 1975), p. 57.

16. Saroj Nalini Parratt, Religion of Manipur (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd., 1980), p. 2.

17. T.C. Hodson, The Meitheis, n. 12, p.10.

Shan influence has exerted as great an influence over the culture as over the politics of Manipur, it is difficult, especially on Linguistic ground to group the Meitheis with the Tai races when the structure and Vocabulary of the Meitheis Language alike agree with those of the Tibeto-Burman races.”¹⁸

The Meeteis community had its own story about the creation of universe. The theory of creation of the universe was almost based on God & deity of the Meeteis settled from the beginning of the creation of the universe and it is mentioned in the Puyas (ancient books of the Meeteis) like Leishemlon Ariba Puya and also other Puyas. According to the local legend and manuscripts the Meeteis were believed to be the descendents of Lord Chingngu Khoiyum Yaibirel Shidaba (the Almighty of the Universe).

The Meeteis are of Mongoloid race with small eyes, fair complexion, and rudimentary beards. Majority of the males usually do not exceed 5'7" in height whereas the females are on an average about 4" shorter than males. Men are muscular and stout with well developed chest and hard limbs. They possess enormous stamina and muscular power. Hair is generally coarse and black. Very few grow beard and moustache but it is not in fashion. The women are beautiful with improved Mongoloid features like slightly sharp facial features. Meetei women can be easily distinguished from hill women. The complexion is usually fair but in general the women are either fair whitish or dark. The hair growth of the women is luxuriant. Some unmarried girls prefer to bob their hair

18. Ibid.

and across the forehead cut in circle. Some others keep long hair, parted at the centre and combed backward.

The traditional dress of a man is pheijom (white dhoti), pungyat (kurta) and kokyet (turban). Their dresses are distinct and specific for particular ceremonial occasions. The woolen or endi or silk shawl is wrapped round the body over the white kurta and dhoti. No other dress is allowed on ceremonial occasions like luhongba (marriage) or swaradha ceremony (death ritual). Young people and office goers use to wear pants, shirts and coats. The women dress themselves with a peculiar skirt called “phanek”, which is wrapped around the waist up to the ankles and furit (blouse) and innafi (Chadder) to cover the upper portion of the body.

Agriculture is the main occupation of the Meeteis. Therefore some rituals are concerned with it. The paddy goddess is called “phouoibi”. The ploughing must commence on the panchami festival. The goddess is invoked by the ‘Maiba.’ The rice and flowers are mixed and wrapped in a plantain leaf. It is then taken to the paddy field and the mixture is sprinkled on all four sides. Weaving and basket making are the main interests of the Meetei women. In every house, there is a loom. Women weave the cloth not only to meet the requirement of the family but also to earn money to sustain the family. The women are experts in the art of weaving. In agriculture Meeteis are much more advanced and self-sufficient in food grains right from the historical times. Fishing is taken as a hobby as well as a profession.¹⁹

19. Khomdon Singh Lisam, Encyclopaedia of Manipur, Vol.1, (New Delhi: Kalpaz Publication, 2011), pp. 308-317

Culture

Manipur has immensely contributed to the composite culture of India. She is open to external influences of the east and the west inspite of her geographical isolation from the rest of India. Its culture under the able kings has retained its distinctiveness amidst the give and take with countries of the world. For administrative purpose Manipur was under the Governor of Assam during the British regime, religiously it belongs to Bengal but linguistically and culturally it is independent.

The culture of Manipur is the product of various forces-natives, Aryanism from the west and the Mongoloid from the eastern countries. Aryan culture penetrated by also degrees into the Meetei community, the hybrid race formed by the integration of such streams along with the people of the east and the west settling in the valley while the Nagas and Kukies of the hill areas remained comparatively unaffected.

Manipur is distinguished from other parts of India by such features as the marketing by women, women police organization (at a time when probably it did not exist in any other part of India), observance of the distinction between formal and informal dress, use of phanek (lower garment of women), wonderful practice of music and dance, abundance of tantric and love of freedom. Polo, of which Manipur is the mother, represents a special aspect of Manipuri culture.²⁰

20. M. Kirti Singh, Religious Development in Manipur in the 18th & 19th Centuries, n. 6, pp. 99-100.

Festivals are almost characteristic of this place. An outsider if he stays long enough will find that its cults and festivals are special to them. Special traits of Meetei culture as of any other people will be found not only in their ethnic features, but also in habits of dressing clothes, taking food and in sports and religious gatherings, rites, and fine arts. The various festivals of Manipur are Lui-ngai-ni, Ningol Chakkouba, Yaoshang, Ramjan Idd, Kut, Gan-ngai, Chumpha, Christmas, Cheiraoba, Kang and Heikru Hidongba. Most of these festivals are usually celebrated on the basis of lunar calendar. Almost every festival celebrated in other states is observed here and it makes Manipur a mini metropolis.²¹

Ningol Chakkouba, a social festival of the Meeteis and many communities of Manipur where the married ningol (women) are invited (Chakkouba-literally calling to a meal; for dinner or lunch) to a feast at their parental house along with their children. Besides the feast, gifts are given to the women and to their children. It is the festival that binds and revives the family relations between the girls married away and the parental family. Nowadays, other communities have also started celebrating this kind of a family-bonding festival. It is held every year mostly during the month of November. Sometimes it falls in October. “ningol” can mean a family’s woman or a girl child and is not necessarily married.

21. M. Kirti Singh, Religion and Culture of Manipur (Delhi: Manas Publications, 1988), p. 151.

Yaoshang is one of the colourful and biggest festivals of Manipur, now it is mixed up holi festival. The actual name of Yaoshang is “Yawol Shang” in remembrance of Manipuri god “Pakhangba’s” play often in a small hut. It is celebrated for five days starting from the full moon of “Lamta tha” the last month of Manipuri calendar (February/March).

The hill dwellers consisting of various tribes (Kuki, Naga, Hmar etc) in Manipur are Christians and they celebrate Christmas for two days with prayers, reading of gospels, eating, singing of hymns, lectures on Christ, sports etc. It is usually observed on 24 and 25 December. The Kuki are the second largest people in terms of population, next to the Meetei people. Few of them are living in the plain area but most of them have been living in the hill areas from generation to generation. Nowadays, one can find a small but rapidly expanding Meetei Christian population both in the urban and rural areas.

A post harvest festival predominantly celebrated by Kuki-Chin tribes in Manipur has become one of the leading festivals of the state. Kut is not restricted to a particular community or tribe but the whole state populace participates in merriment. November 1 is a state holiday for Kut celebration. The festival is marked by various cultural events such as traditional dances, folk dances, songs, sports and the most popular, Miss Kut contest. It is a festival of peace and thanksgiving to the Almighty for the harvests.

Gaan-Ngai is the greatest festival of the Zeliangrong people. It's a 5 day long festival and is usually performed on the 13th day of the Meetei month of Wakching as per the Meetei calendar of the lunar year.

The Manipuri Muslims observed Ramjan Idd in the very spirits of joy and festivities as in other Muslim world. During this month the Muslims practice denial by taking a fast, abstaining from eating and drinking, and from pre-dawn till sunset. After the second day of shawwal, when the new moon is visible they break their monthlong fast which is also popularly known as Id-UI-Fitre. They offer prayers at the mosques, have delicious dishes, exchange greetings and call on the friends and relatives. Ramjan is the ninth month of the Hijri year.

Mukna (Manipuri wrestling) generally regarded as one of the manliest of sport has been popular among the Manipuris from time immemorial. Mukna, is the Manipuri style of wrestling played between two male rivals for trial of physical strength and skills. The game is played between two rivals of the same physical built, weight and age. It has got fundamental rules and regulations. There are specific techniques such as Ningnong (Hip throw) to left and right, Longkhrou (specific throw by twisting opponent's calf) left and right, Khudong (throwing the opponent by raising him high), Khu-Theibi, chepching, Kaplak Koibi, Heibongkabi, Ngakthi Chappa, Suptek, Chaokot etc. For each of the

specific techniques (Lous), there are also counter 'lous.' The person who never got defeated by his rival is known as "Mukna Jatra."²²

Mukna Kangjei (Khong Kangjei) is a game which combines the arts of Mukna (like wrestling) and Kangjei (Cane Stick). The ball of the Mukna Kangjei is made of seasoned bamboo roots. The game is played by two teams each consisting of seven players. All players hold a natural cane stick with root, gradually increasing the size of the root, to the length of about seven inches to play the ball made out of seasoned bamboo roots of approximately a diameter of four inches. The players put on Mukna Kisi Phijet (dress of cloth knot) to secure protection and holding each other. At present a short pant is added below kisi (like cloth belt with knots). The game starts by throwing the ball in front of the Panjenbas (leaders) of the two teams standing face to face to each other on the line.

Sagol Kangjei (Polo) is a gift of Manipur to the world. Sagol Kangjei was a favourite game of the kings and princes in Manipur. In ancient times, Manipuris played it as many as 100 on each side like a miniature battle under the patronage of the kings. Horses were used in the game of polo, and teams of riders tried to hit a wooden ball across the field with a long wooden mallet. Sagol Kangjei is associated with the God of the Chenglei tribe, Marjing, to whom the stick along with the ball is still offered in worship. The traditional

22. Khomdon Singh Lisam, Encyclopaedia of Manipur, Vol.3, (New Delhi: Kalpaz Publication, 2011), p. 824.

Lai Haraoba festival of Manipur has a sequence dealing with the search of bride (Lai Nupi Thiba) on the part of Maibi (Priestess) with the Polo Stick in hand and mimicking the neighing of a horse.

Hiyang Tannaba (Boat Race) is a traditional game of the Manipur. This is held during the month of November. Hiyang Tannaba is believed to have started during the reign of Meidingu Naophongba (428-518 A. D.). A Chenglei King named Thangyi Tabung Khongdoubu introduced the festival of “Hiyanglei Kumsab” for the welfare of his community under the divine advice.²³

Arambai Hunba is also a traditional game of Manipur. The people of Manipur are experts in and fond of riding horse specially those who are in the village near the breeding areas. Since the ponies are easily available, the young boys get the chance of riding ponies without saddle on horseback. Sometimes they ride horses using a rope in place of regular bridle throwing branches of small trees in place of Arambai. This practice helped the Manipur Arambai force as a martial art which was very much required during the advance and withdrawal of forces. This game was very popular as an indigenous game of the youths of Manipur.

Kang is played by both Meetei males and females in Manipur. Manipuris believe Kang is a game played by Goddess “Panthoibi.” “Kang which is a flat and oblong instrument made of either ivory or lac. Normally

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 824-825.

each team comprises 7 partners, the game is also played as a mixed-double contest. In olden days kang was played during summer, starting from Cheiraoba (Meetei New Year). Presently the game is played in several tournaments throughout the year. Manipuris religiously adhere to its timeframe as popular belief holds that if the game is played beyond its given limit, evil spirits invade the mind of players and spectators. It is played under a shed of building on a mud floor (court) smoothly leveled to suit the course of the 'Kang', the target on the court. It is well marked for the respective position of the players of both sides to hit the target on the court.

'Thang-Ta' is a traditional martial art of Manipur. 'Thang' means sword and 'Ta' means spear. The other name of Thang-Ta is "Huyen Lallong" (Art of warfare). In fact this is the art and science of fighting a war. Three warriors- Paona Naol Singh (Paona Brajabashi), Ningthoukhongja Poila and Loukrakpam Sana Mityeng were great warriors and great masters of Thang-Ta. They have founded a distinct style of Thang-Ta. Thang-Ta integrates various weapons like the sword, spear, dagger, etc. with the internal practice of physical control through soft body movements co-ordinated with the rhythms of breathing. The aesthetic aspect of the martial arts of Manipur demands a great deal of balancing and body control. It makes a person physically and mentally so alert and well integrated that he becomes virtually impregnable. The Thang-Ta techniques are very complicated and must be seen to be appreciated. Many western ladies used to cover their eyes, grasping for breath

at the climax of the Thang-Ta presentation. The Master used to give warning to the performers.²⁴

The traditional Meetei houses are well adapted to the climate conditions of Manipur. The roofs are normally two sloped. It is made of the wooden posts and beams covered with thatched roof or corrugated tin sheets. The walls of both types are of reeds plastered with a mixture of earth, stems of paddy and cow dung covered with thatched roof. All dwelling houses face eastward in which direction they have a large open Mangon (front verandah).

A standard Meetei house is known as “Yumjao Ka manga” means five room house. The doors and windows are made of wood. The rooms are airy, spacious, and very clean. Every family has a fairly spacious house divided into different compartments and a separate cowshed for those who have cows and a separate latrine. The main big house is divided into many compartments- Mangons (Front verandah), Ningolka (Room for unmarried daughters), Mayaika (Middle room), Funga (Fire place), Sanamahi Ka (room for Sanamahi) and Chakhum (Kitchen). Mangon is the verandah that is the front side of the house which is used as drawing room. The right side of the Mangon is allotted for the seniormost member (father or grand father) of the house. A kouna fak (mat) is always spread over there. Excepting the senior most member, no outsider is allowed to sit on this mat.²⁵

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 827-828

25. *Ibid.*, p. 315.

Language

Meeteilon or Manipuri Language is spoken basically in the state of Manipur and also this language is the official or state language of Manipur. It is the mother tongue of the Meeteis of Manipur. And Meeteilon is the only language of both ethnic people inhabited in the hill and the valley of Manipur. Manipuri language or Meeteilon is an old and developed language having its own literature and script. At present there is a renewed interest shown by the new generation in the use of the original script and its inclusion in the VIIIth Schedule of the constitution of India.

From the ancient period, in Manipur many little ethnic groups or clans had spoken different dialects. These different dialects of different little ethnic groups or clan have summed-up of their dialects and formed the Manipuri language. It is testified by P. Gunindro in his book “Manipur Culture da Mityeng Ama, vol-I” when he writes, “*Yelhoungeidagi lamdamsigi mapham kayada leitaminaduna leiraklaba apik apikpa kanglupsing adugi khetnaba wahei kaya leirammi. Makhoi aduna amaga amaga punsinnakheduna ngasi Manipurgi lol gi pukkeibu hena marang kaiba enak khunba ama oihanbada achouba mateng ama oirakkhe*”²⁶ (From the ancient in this place many small ethnic groups have settled with their different dialects and vocabularies. They had combined together and helped a lot to form the present rich Manipuri language or Meeteilon.)

26. P. Gunindro, Manipur Culture da Mityeng Ama, Vol. I, (Imphal: Poknapham Publication, 2000), p.83.

The attempt to find out the exact origin of a language is not an easy one as language is undergoing changes from time to time. So, Manipuri language was first spoken about 2000 (two thousand) years back.

*“Asumna meeteilon asi chaorakna chahi 2000 rom lamdam asida ngangnaraklabha lolne. Maram asina lolgi masakta amadi wahanda ahongba/ ayonba kaya lakkhre/ lakle, masigee wahei pukeida ningthouja, khuman luwang, angom, moirang, naga, kuki, pong asinachingbagee wahei kaya changkhre. Samna hairabada mayamsina punsinlaba masak aduna meeteilol gee houjik oireba masak asi oirebane”*²⁷ (Thus Meeteilon was spoken about 2000 year long back in this place. For this reason, this language has changed in the features and dialect. And amply this language has assimilated with little ethnic groups like Ningthouja, Khuman, Luwang, Angom, Moirang, Naga, Kuki and Pong. In short they combine together and form the present Meeteilol or Manipuri Language).

Further, Manipuri Language or Meeteilol is identified for the time being with the language of the Chinese, Tibate, Awa (Burma). They have added something in the Manipuri language and also they have the same group of language and are included in the Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese group. This is due to the fact that the neighbouring countries were related with Manipur by traders. This point is supported by I.S. Kangjam in his book “Longee Wareng.”

27. S. Tomba, Meeteilongee Sahitya Amasung Banan (Imphal: Manipuri Writers Association, 1998), p. 2.

He writes, *“Tibet, China, Burma na chingbagee londagee Meeteilonda changshillakpa wahei pumnamak makhal ashigee manung channa lei. Hairiba lonshing ashi Meeteilonga lon kanglup amatani, haibadi Sino-Tibetan natraga Tibeto-Chinese haina khangnaba kanglup adugee lon ngaktani. Lonshing ashidagee Meeteilon da changlakpa wahei pangyam yamde. Khara changshillakliba ashi lon kanglup tinnaba yelhoungeigee matamda sha-lan, lalon-etik ki mari leinarambanani”*²⁸

Another view of the identification of Manipuri language or Meeteilon is in the Linguistic Survey of India, Vol.III, Part-III by G.A. Grierson holds that Meeteilon belongs to the Kuki-Chin group of the Burmese branch of the Tibeto-Burman family. This point is again supported by S.K. Chatterji in his monograph, ‘Kirata-jana-Krti’ by M. Kirti Singh in his book “Religious Development in Manipur in the 18th and 19th century” that “A problem over which opinion is sharply divided among the scholars is the origin of Meitheil Language G. A. Grierson in his Linguistic Survey of India, Volume III, Part III holds that Meitheil with its considerable old literature is affiliated to the kuki-chin group of Burmese branch of the Tibeto-Burman family. S. K. Chatterji supports this view in his monograph, ‘Kirata-jana-Krti. The reason they adduce for this view Meitheis is an important link between the Tibetan and Burmese, Bora and Dimasa as two Sino-Tibetan Tribal language of Assam, presents an affinity with Meitheis both from the view point of grammar and vocabularies”²⁹

28. I. S. Kangjam, Longee Wareng (Imphal: Kangjam Ibemu Devi, 1977), p. 187.

29. M. Kirti Singh, Religious Development in Manipur in the 18th & 19th Centuries, n. 6, p. 23

Another source of Manipuri language or Meeteilon is the influence of Indo-Aryan language like Sanskrit or Bengali in the 17th, 18th and 19th century.

Manipuri language is derived from Sanskrit language and its grammar is based on Sanskrit grammar. In the field of Linguistic they have established the similarity between colloquial Sanskrit and Manipuri words. Sanskrit and Manipuri myth and legend followed the same theme. Manipuri language with its script contains maximum number of words of Sanskrit origin. Sanskrit has contributed to and enriched the vocabulary and grammar of Manipuri Literature after coming of the people from the rest of India in large number. The construction of Manipuri grammar on the model of Sanskrit is the great achievement of Manipuri Brahmans. To say that the earliest form of Meithei language has developed out of Sanskrit is a hypothesis which at the moment cannot be proved or disproved.³⁰

By the close of the seventeenth century, Manipuri came into contact with Indo-Aryan language and when many of the vocables of the letter have been adopted their use too has been mostly in the pattern of simultaneous placing of two synonyms as in the old practice, that is a Sanskrit or Bengali word followed by its Manipuri equivalent.³¹

Many sources of origin of Meetei language or Meeteilon have been pointed out but no one can know the origin of language. The Meetei Alphabet was first in stone inscription installed by King Kyamba, the Meetei King

30. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

31. Ch. Manihar, A History of Manipuri Literature (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2003), p. 6.

(1467-1508)³² and Meetei Manuscript was started during the reign of King Khagemba (1597-1652).³³ Meeteilon is used for referring to this language by Meeteis in their day-to-day life. Meeteis are the plain people of Manipur who have settled in the valley of Manipur. Seven clans have constituted Meeteis. It is not only the mother tongue of the Meeteis but also of the Brahmins, tribes and Muslim who have settled in Manipur. It is regarded as lingua franca. It is also spoken in Assam, Mizoram, Tripura and countries like Myanmar (Burma) and Bangladesh by the Meeteis.

Literature

In the Manipuri tradition, the origin of its literature is treated as of unknown antiquity. The date of archaic Manipuri, of which the modern Manipuri is an offshoot, goes back, according to W. Yumjao Singh, to about 3400 years ago or to the age of the Epic. While spoken language occurred very early, it was in 33 A. D. that written language really began among the clans of Manipur, especially among the Luwangs, the Angoms, the Khumans and the Moirangs. In 33 A. D., the Nimthouja Principality under Pakhamba with its settled condition did provide a favourable atmosphere for the development of dialect and literature.³⁴ Other events like agriculture and pottery as practiced by other clans, i. e., the Luwangs, the Angoms, the Khumans and the Moirangs were powerful aids to such an advance in Literature. In the struggle for

32. Sarangthem Boramani Singh, Meitei Ningthourol, n. 1, p. 47.

33. Ibid., p. 56.

34. W. Yumjao Singh, General Remarks on the Manipuri Language (Imphal: W. Lalmani, 1968), p. 3

supremacy among the principalities the Nimthouja came out triumphant and absorbed other principalities. The Nimthouja dialect became the predominant language of Imphal valley. In the process of integration, it embraced words from the clans of the valley as well as from the hills. The Nimthouja language promised to be a great force in bringing about co-operation and solidarity among the people.³⁵

Meithei has a script of its own called Meithei Mayek (Manipuri alphabet). The script is the cherished contribution of the Meithei to the culture and brotherhood of Sino-Tibetan group. The books written in Meithei script reveal that literature was at first oral as it was transmitted in this way before the use of writing.³⁶

Early Manipuri literature has developed richly on so many subjects: (i) the historical, (ii) poetical, (iii) philosophical, (iv) religious, (v) astrological and (vi) apocalyptic group. There are some books which do not fall under these categories. Many works have been written on them by a rare galaxy of masters of culture. Some representative books of early period that had come down to us are as follows:

Cheitharol Kumbaba: Kumbaba is the court chronicle. The meaning of the word means the account of years. It sets out briefly in a solemn diction, the reign of kings from 33 A. D., important events, eclipses of the sun, the moon,

35. T. C. Hodson, The Meitheis, n. 12, pp. 8-9.

36. G. A. Grierson, The Linguistic Survey of India, Vol.III, Part-III, n. 13, p. 86.

earthquakes, epidemics, etc. The actual keeping of it has been a familiar one to the kings since the fifth century, A. D. Special kind of development was made in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Numit Kappa (the shooting of the sun): This is an allegorical work which gives an account of the shooting of the Sun by a man called Khwai Nongjenba Piba. This scene when interpreted would mean that Khwai Nongjenba Piba experienced enormous difficulties in serving two brothers of the Angom clan who ruled in the central portion of Manipur Valley. The two brothers are spoken of as two Suns in the Book.³⁷

Poireiton Khunthokpa: The book is supposed to have been written in the third century A. D. The anthropological aspect of ancient Manipur has been set out in it. The words written in archaic Manipuri had to be construed in the allegorical sense. The real fact underlying the ostensible meaning describes how Poireiton and his horde including men, women and children colonized the area between the Langol hill and the Koubru hill and brought the primitive people within the pale of civilization.³⁸

Khomjom Nubi Nungaron: Khomjom Nubi Nungaron written sometimes after Poireiton Khunthokpa narrates two legends. The first legend is said to narrate how the six girls of Luwang family and their lovers became the six pleiads and orions in the sky by the wish of Soraren, the king of gods. The

37. H. Mani Singh, Lamdai Ngamdai Puya Meihouba, Vol.1, (Imphal: H. Mani Singh, 1960), pp. 118-130.

38. W. Yumjao Singh, An Early History of Manipur (Imphal: W. Lalmani Singh, 1966), pp. 99-109.

second legend shows how an unfortunate lady named Haosi Namoinu who received sorrows in the hand of her stepmother was transformed into a cricket by the gods. We are struck immediately by the similarity between this story and the tale of Tejimala.³⁹

Numban Pombi Luwaoba: Numban Pombi Luwaoba is a well-known mythology of early literature and a number of stories are associated with him in different Puyas. He was the son of Luwang Kumthiba. He married a beautiful maiden of celestial bearing called Kaubru Namoinu. She died prematurely. He loved her heart and soul. He made a terrible vow that he would not perform the funeral rites. So the chance of her coming back to life was open. Since he broke all the laws of god and man, Leinung Thongaren, the god of death sent his two brothers to fight Pomb Luwaoba. Being a strong man he defeated them (emissaries of death) and put them in a dungeon. The time for the return of the soul to the place of death being postponed, the god of death himself came. The hero asked for the favour of the restoration of Namoinu's life with devotion. This was granted by the loving god. It conveys the moral lesson that even death has no power to part the lovers.⁴⁰

Chainaron: The Manipuri life is regulated by its distinctive code and usage. The description of chivalry and fighting is embodied in a book called Chainaron, said to have been written in about the time of Thawan Thaba (1195-1231). We are told in it that the right of private vengeance was accepted within

39. M. Kirti Singh, Religious Developments in Manipur in the 18th & 19th Centuries, n. 6, pp.28-29.

40. O. Bhogeshwor Singh, Ningthourol Seireng (Imphal: Granthakar Publication, 1967), pp. 147-163.

some limits. If two heroes quarrelled they would fight to the death privately or in the presence of the king and nobles. Appeal to arms was an ordeal to test the innocence of the parties.⁴¹

Loyumba Silen: A well known text-book on distribution of labour called “Loyumba Silen” has survived from the time of Loiyamba (1074-1122 A. D.). It gives a lengthy discussion on the particular occupation for every family. According Loiyamba’s mandate, the king, the queen and the nobles have their own code of conduct appropriate to their station in life. The rights and duties of a noble are those of an ordinary subject. It was in fact the traditional order of Manipuri society, a society which by the help of it formed a homogeneous polity inspite of the diverse ethnic and social groups of all ages and characters. Within its frame-work, the Manipuris maintain their civilization and protect the country from external aggression and terrible anarchy. In ancient and medieval Manipur, the people followed it in its completeness.⁴²

We have also original manuscripts dealing with the genealogical trees of different families of different clans. Traditions, folk-tales and proverbs survived the predominance of Bengali and Sanskrit. The Meithei literature is valuable from the point of view of philology and history as we have books of this time.

41. N. Khelchandra Singh, Chainarol (Imphal: N. Khelchandra, 1988), Theme of the Book.

42. O. Bhogeshwor Singh, Ningthourol Seireng, n. 40, pp. 147-163.

Manipuri for Meithei language has been the state language at least by about the third century A. D. It has been a policy of the kings to adopt its language and script in striking coins, recording inscriptions and compiling chronicles. It is rich in philosophical and military terms. Many songs and stories have been preserved through it. Serious attempts were made to develop this language by the kings. But they did not adopt it in their relations with East India Company. The English versions of the treaties of 1762, 1833 and 1834 were found.⁴³

43. N. Khelchandra Singh, Ariba Manipuri Sahityagi Itihas (Imphal: N. Khelchandra, 1969), pp. 17-24.