Chapter 3

AN OVERVIEW OF THE LAND AND THE AIMOL PEOPLE

3.1. Environmental setting:

Manipur, one of the states of India, on the North-Eastern region, lies between 23°50' and 25°41' N latitude and 93°02' and 94°47' E longitudes. The state is fringed by the Nagaland on the North, Myanmar on the East and South, Assam on the West and North-west, and Mizoram on the South-west (Map. 1, 2).

3.2. Physiography:

Geographically the state of Manipur can be broadly classified into two parts the valley and the hilly. Of the total area of 22,356 sq. km, nearly 90 percent are covered by the hills with dense forest, while the rest part of the state area lies at the flat alluvial plain known as the Manipur valley.
Map 1: Position of Manipur in India
Map 2. Map of Manipur showing the distribution of Aimols in the districts
The hilly regions lies almost at varying degrees of altitudes ranging in between 762 m and 3048 m above the mean sea level and connected occasionally with the spurs and ridges of lower elevation between them (Ansari, 1976). The ranges show irregular serrated ridges with occasional rise of conical peaks, flat cliffs. The ranges on the west of the valley adjoining the Cachar district of Assam assume to be a more open and rolling character which shows various small flat plains through numerous streams flow as rivers.

The valley regions are of alluvial plain forming an elongated basin with an average elevation of 763 m above the sea level. The widest portion of valley lies at the centre and tapers towards north and south and thus, the valley shows a gradient slope towards the south that numerous streams and rivers flow from the north towards south. There are series of marshes in the southern portion of the plain some of which, Loktak, Waithou, Pumlen, Phumlou, Loushi, Ikop pat etc. may be mentioned.

3.3. Climate:

The state lies in the sub-tropical region. Monsoon type of climate with some variations in various parts of the state due to difference in elevations experienced in the state. Usually, the state enjoys with a temperate climate in both the valley and the hills.
The seasons of Manipur may broadly be divided into three, such as a) Cold season (October to March), b) Hot season (April to mid-June), and c) Rainy season (mid June to September). During the cold seasons, the wind blows from the north-east direction and it lowers the temperature of the region even up to $0^\circ C$. In December and January, which form snowfall, sometimes reach at the rate of half an inch per night at some higher altitudes such as Koubru and Ukhrul. The annual rainfall measurement for the Imphal valley is 143.7 cm and it could increased to 224.9 cm for the Thanlon etc. (R.P. Singh, 1982).

3.4. The Aimols - an overview:

The Aimols are one of the indigenous tribes living in Northeast India with distinctive cultural traditions, customs, beliefs, social systems etc. Etymologically the term Aimol means ‘root’. ‘ai’ is a small ginger plant, which is found on the spur of hill - ‘Mol’. This place is said to be somewhere in the present Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram. The oral tradition (unwritten history) traced the Aimol ethno genesis to an uncertain cave at Khweps from which the people had been believed to have emerged out under the Earth.

The population of Manipur may broadly be divided into four major groups – a. the Meiteis, b. the Manipuri Muslims, c. the Nagas, and d. the Kukis. The broad division of the tribes of Manipur into Nagas and Kukis is based particularly on the language and culture. These major two groups
occupy definite areas in the hill ranges. The Nagas occupy mostly in the northern hilly region and the Kukis on the south hilly ranges. Among the Kukis, they have been grouped into two a. the Old Kuki and b. the New Kuki group. The Aimols are belonged to the Old Kuki groups (Dun 1886, Shakespear 1912).

The ethnic affinity of the Aimol has been placed amidst most of the neighboring tribes of southern part of Manipur bordering Burma now in Myanmar and the Lushai and had classified as one of Kuki-Chin-Mizo (Lushai) group by many writers. Few reports on Aimol tribe of Manipur have been made earlier by the British administrators (Grierson 1904, Brown 1873, Shakespear 1912, McCullock 1859). Although, these reports have provided some important information related with their origin, and aspects of their social organization, it has neither fulfilled the needful to study in-depth details on the socio-cultural aspects nor did gave any information related with their demography and population genetics of the tribe. A brief review of the available reports are given here.

Brown (1873) pointed out that the Aimol tribe originally belonged to the hills lying south of the Manipur valley and the only remaining Kuki tribes of importance. He classified the sub divisions of the tribe as Keirup, Aimol, Chiru, Purum, Quoireng (Koireng), Mundung, Karam (Kharam) and Laikot. They are now scattered in the three southern districts of the State. A belief that most of the southern tribes of Manipur have been migrated from the Chin Hills of Burma, has also been referred by R.K. Das (1985). Shakespear (1912)
marked the appearance of the Aimol in Manipur in 1723. He classified Aimol, Anal, Chawte, Kolhen, Lamgang, Purum, Tikhup and Vaiphei........ etc. under the Old Kuki clans of Manipur and said to sharing resemblance to each other in many respects, although they live in separate villages and never intermarry.

On the basis of a more or less similar characteristics in the language, cultural and traditional practices etc. they have formed an association for those similar tribes under the nomenclature Kom-Rem. Those sub-tribes are i) the Aimol, ii) the Chiru, iii) the Koireng iv) the Kom and v) and the Purum. Each of them constitute a minor group among the tribal communities of Manipur. But these tribes are recognized as separate units by the government (Scheduled tribes, Order 1950, Article 342, Clause I of India).

According to mythological history, it is widely believed that the group of people who later were known as Aimols first lived in a place called "Meetinbung Satinbung" in Aimol dialect, which stands for a place where mankind and wild beast lived together. It is believed to be somewhere in modern Mongolia. They later moved from Mongolia to modern China and settled at a place called "Khokheng" which means-a village like the shape of the plate. The settlement of Khokheng is mournfully sung in funeral song by the Aimol aged folk singers before the advent of Christianity. It could be a plain valley encircled by hills. But after the death of king Sihuangte of China in 250 B.C, the mountaineer people of this province where the great wall of China stood now, started to leave for some new places. The Aimols entered into the thick forest of Myanmar and settled down at Chinlung or Sinlung and
then to Lushai Hills in modern Mizoram, then to Tipperah (Tripura) or Takhen, and from Takhen to Manipur. During this journey, there is a great possibility that the Aimols explore different directions, and eventually, we find them in and around Northeast India.

According to the mythological oral tradition As they came out of the cave, a tiger blocked their way despite many attempts. Two clever persons Pu Korthangpu and Korthangpi weaved a cloth named Laijting having the same color as the tiger. Taking help of appearance of the woven cloth, PuKorthangpu convinced the tiger that they were of the same kind and proposed friendship. The tiger did not eat him. The tiger was then killed with spear while it was tamed. From there, passing many places of Tripura, they went to Burma where the advancement was checked by Kabaow Shans.

While examining the above statements as well as the folklore there is no satisfactory evidence to locate about the original land or the place, where the Aimol tribe came from and the exact period of their entry into Manipur. Both the above two theories leads to China as the source of origin of the Aimol who took their migrating routes to Chin hills now at Myanmar, and Lushai hills (border of Manipur and Mizoram) then afterwards reach to the hills of Churachandpur at Churachandpur district, Manipur. However, these theories aim to have based more on speculation. But, still then it appears to be certain that they come through the Chin and Lushai hills.

They are mainly concentrated in the Tengnoupal Sub-division of Chandel district of the State and occupy foothill areas bordering the valley in
the south-eastern part. The villages wherein the Aimols are mostly distributed in the state of Manipur are Aimol Khullen, Aimol Chandonpokpi, Aimol Tampak, Chingnunghut, Aimol Khunyai, Aimol Saitu, Aimol Kombirei, Aimol Ngairong, Aimol Khudamphai and Sibong-Khudengthabi (Map 3). In Chandel sub-division of the same above district there is one Aimol village named - Unapal is found to be distributed (Map 4). It is one of the hills districts of Manipur. It is bounded by the north by Thoubal, south and east by Myanmar and on the west Churachandpur district. According to 2011 census the district has a population of 144,028 and growth rate 19.03 percent (2001-2011). The district inhabited by various tribes such as Anal, Maring, Thadou, Mayon, Monsang, Aimols, Gangte and Chothe etc.

In Churachandpur district they are scattered at Kha Aimol and Aimol Louchulpung villages. The district lies in the southern part of the state. The district bordered by Mizoram state on the west Chandel district on the east, Bishnupur district on the north and Myanmar on the south (Map 5). According to 2011 Census the district has a population of 271,274 and growth rate 19.03 percent (2001-2011). The district is inhabited by various tribes such as the Mao, Maram, Thadou, Kabui, Kom, Tangkhul, Aimol, Anal, Paite and Chothe etc.
Map 4. Map of Chandel District of Manipur showing the distribution of Aimol in Chandel Sub-division

Map courtesy: Administrative Atlas, Manipur, Census of India 2011
In Senapati District Aimols are distributed in one village -Tuikhang Aimol village. The district is the smallest and lies in the northern part of the State (Map 6). Although the district as the smallest in term of its size (area), yet its population wise it has the largest population. According to the 2011 Census the district has a population of 354,972 and growth rate 25.16 percent (2001-2011). The district inhabited by various tribes such as the Mao, Maram, Thadou, Ziliang, Tangkhul, Maring, Aimols etc.

The distribution pattern will certainly show that the tribe does not occupy a well-defined territory and that they have shifted their settlement sites from place to place in the past.

The ethnic affinity of the Aimol has been placed admits most of neighboring tribes of southern part of Manipur bordering Burma and Lushai hills . The Aimols is generally classified as one of the members of Kuki-Chin-Mizo (Lushai) group of tribe inhabiting the chin hills of Burma. The Lushai hills and the hills of southern Manipur (Shakespeare, 1912, Shaw, 1921 and Das 1985). According to Das (1985), most of the tribes inhabiting the southern region of Manipur are believed to have migration the chin hills of Burma. He believed that the Kukis, Mizos and chins originally lived in the same land. Steward (1855) described two groups of tribes on the basis of their supposed arrival . They are the Old-Kukis and the New Kukis. Some Old Kukis migrated from the jungle of "Tipperah" , the hill country south of the Cachar while others come from the adjoining areas of Burma.
Map 6. Map of Senapati District of Manipur showing the distribution of Aimol in Saitu Gamphazol Sub-division

Map courtesy: Administrative Atlas Manipur Census of India 2011
Brown (1873) included Aimol along with the Kairup, Purum, Quoireng (Koireng), Mundung, Chiru, Karam (Kharam) and Laikot tribes as a sub-division of the Kom tribe. He opined the origin of the tribe as the Kom tribe originally, it is said, belonged to the hills lying south of the Manipur valley. During the reign of Gambhir Singh, it is also referred that the Koms suffered from the aggressions of the Khongjai and Lushai tribes and that they sought refuge in other parts of the hills belonging to Manipur.

It has been observed that the tribes of Manipur have grown more conscious of their separate identity in recent times than they were before. Das (1985) as pointed out that the social boundaries of the tribals are changing fast and with this there has been an attempt to shift political loyalties as well. He further mentioned that tribes, such as Anal, Aimol who now prefer to call themselves as Naga but originally belong to the Kuki group. Benjamin (1990) has mentioned about the establishment of Kom-Rem organization in 1927 at Kangpokpi under the name of “Students’ Conference”. This Kom-Rem includes Aimol, Chiru, Koireng, Kom and Purum, who resemble one another in many respects. They were known as Nagas during the Manipur State Darbar whereas J. Shakespear called them as Old Kuki in his book “The Lushei Kuki Clans”. Benjamin further mentioned that the Kom-Rem tribes have not joined any major tribes like the Naga, the Kukis or the Mizos. According to Shakespear (1912), the Aimols made their first appearance in 1723 and had come from Tipperah. Again to quote J. Shakespear, the Old Kuki clans (in which Kom-Rem tribe are included) of Manipur seem to have been the first to move, as records of their appearance are found in the Manipur Chronicles as
early as the sixteenth century”. He classified the Aimol along with the Anal, Chawte, Chiru, Kolhen, Kom, Lamgang, Purum, Tikhup and Vaiphei… etc. under the Old Kuki clans of Manipur and said to sharing resemblance to each other in many respects, although they live in separate villages and never intermarry.

It is claimed that the Kom-Rem tribes neither joined nor allied with the major two leading communities of Manipur viz, the Nagas and the Kukis (Benjamin Kom, 1990). They have been having a common organization and association in their religious and political activities under the names of The Kom-Rem Baptist Churches Association Manipur and The Kom-Rem Union Manipur in 1927 and 1947 respectively. The first one deals with the basic upliftment of the community. The second one deals with the political activities of the community. Benjamin (1990) also claimed that the Kom-Rem people have a common dialect known as Kom-language. However, it seems that out of those five Kom-Rem sub-tribes, the Aimol along with another tribe the Anal are now prefer to call themselves as Nagas (R.K. Das, 1985).

Linguistically too, they are classified amongst the Old Kuki branch of Kuki section, Burmic Division of Sino-Tibetan Language. However the Aimols prefer to live independent of any affiliation and prefer to maintain a distinctive identity of their own. Embracing all their villages they formed in 1991, the Aimol Tribe union for promotion of solidarity and safeguarding of it's identity.
3.5. Social System:

The Aimol society exhibits a patriarchal and patronymic feature of society. Linguistically the Aimols are characterized by dual variation: *Sutpong* and *Khurai*. Furthermore, the tribe is divided into 5 main clans, which are further sub-divided into sub-clans. The clans are: 1. Chongom (with 3 sub-clans) 2. Laita (3 sub-clans) 3. Lanu (4 sub-clans) 4. Chaithu (no sub-clan) and 5. Shongthu (2 sub-clans). Though not restricted, Aimol villages are often clan-based. As such, Unapal, Satu, Kha-Aimol and Sibong-Khudengthabi are Chongom villages, Kumbirei, a Chaithu village, and Tampak, a Lanu village.

The Aimol clans possess totems of their own, which are associated with their ancestry. Of the clans mentioned above - Chongom, Chaithu and Lanu belong to *Sutpong* dialect group. Although the history of migration of the *Khurais* remains obscure, yet there is a widely accepted view that the *Sutpong* migrated from Myanmar (Burma), tracing their first settlement in Sibong-Khudengthabi (also popularly known by the name *Sutpong* itself) in India which then migrated upward to the present day Saivom and Pallel areas.

Typically, the Aimols are unique in their naming system. Names of persons are ascribes keeping in view the clan the persons belong to. However, it does not strictly imply that names of persons necessarily connote the clan. Though not in all cases, some terms connote the clan attachment.
For instance, if a name bears or starts with - Rui, it is understood that the bearers belongs to Chongom clan. Similarly, ‘Sum’ is understood as belonging to the - Chaithu clan.

Next chapter follows with Results and Discussion.