CHAPTER II

IMPHAL: ITS HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
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2.1. NOMENCLATURE

The present city of Imphal has grown, it is said, from a small place within it, called Kangla (Fig.2). Kangla used to be the seat of the Ningthouja principality in the past. According to some scholars the name Imphal, which is of recent origin, is derived from the corruption of 'Yum' meaning houses and 'Phal' meaning a platform.¹ It literally means a platform made up of a collection of houses which were built very closely without any break. Another view, regarding the origin of the name refers to 'Inthaphal' or a stone platform of Kangla. This platform, it is said, had supernatural power and a king was required to sit on it to know whether he would be able to reign for a sufficiently long time. The researcher is of the view that Imphal might have been corrupted from 'Im-hal or Yim-hal ('Im' or 'Yim'¹ or 'Yum' meaning house and 'hal' meaning first) i.e. the dry place where houses were constructed for the first settlement.


¹ The sounds of 'Im' and 'Yim' are identical while 'Yum' is in current usage.
In ancient times before the beginning of Christian era, Ningthouja was one of the seven principalities in the Valley of Manipur. Kangla was the capital of the principality. The whole settlement around the capital was also known by the same name (Fig. 3). The name Kangla was derived from the Manipuri words 'Kangha' meaning dry and 'la' meaning land. Kangla literally means dry land. The name, perhaps, suited the past physiographic environment because it was the only dry place surrounded by lakes and marshes. Imphal originally extended from a piece of dry land on the natural levee of the right bank of the Imphal river. In the subsequent periods the Ningthouja settlement came to be known as 'Meitei'. The term 'Meitei' was applied to the whole principality as also the inhabitants of Ningthouja, while the capital retained its old name, Kangla. The practice of using a synonym for the land and the people inhabiting, was in vogue in Manipur in the past. Thus, the word Angoms stood for the Kingdom of Angom as also the people residing that principality. The various groups inhabiting the Manipur Valley were not of common affinity, and their occupation and settlement in the valley were also from different directions. The Moirangs occupied the southern side of the valley, the Luwangs and the Khabas, the northern side, the Khumals, the central part to the south of the Meiteis, and the Angoms, the eastern side
of the valley. Upto the beginning of the Christian era, the Meiteis were politically weak and unorganised. However, one Pakhangba ascended the throne of Meitei in A.D. 33. The kings following him were strong and had military organisation, and they started extending their territory at the cost of the surrounding kingdoms. The principalities of Angom, Khaba, Luwang, Khumal, etc., were subdued and merged with Meitei after a series of fights and battles. The principality of Moirang was the last to be annexed to Meitei. The Meitei kings unified the principalities to evolve a new and large kingdom called Manipur, of which Kangla was the capital. It is this Kangla, which, as stated above, has come to be known as Imphal subsequently.

2.2. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

2.2.1. Ancient Period:

The Historical evidences and legends reveal that Imphal originated as an administrative centre in the first millennium B.C. The political power gained by the reigning Ningthouja kings consolidated the position of Imphal as the capital of almost whole of the valley. Kangla, the only dry spot in the flood plain of the

+ R. Brown was the first person to call Imphal a town in 1873.
The Imphal and Nambul rivers, which was otherwise full of marshes and shallow lakes, was protected all around, and carefully retained as the regional centre throughout the ages by the feudal kings. They drained the marshes and lakes by dredging the channels of the Imphal and Nambul rivers. The marshes and dry lands in the past were covered by the primeval forest which was later removed by expanding human habitation. With the change of natural environment and subsequent filling in of the depressions by rivers and streams with the sediments carried from the surrounding hills, settlements further expanded.

Kangla's situation was such that it was protected from the east by the deep valley of the Imphal, and from the north and west by the Naga Turel and Nambul river. Such a geographic location helped it remain secure from the attacks and incursions of the outsiders, which were so common in those days. On the south, the interfluve narrowed to about 914 metres and was full of settlements. Moreover, the ancient city core was well protected by moats. Kangla was planned in the gridiron pattern like that of ancient Greeks and Romans, with north-south and east-west roads. The palace and other houses meant for the royal family, were built by the side of the roads.
laid out in a rectangular fashion. The temples, the meeting places and the playground were inside it. The parade ground was just near the western gate, called Snathong.

Before the arrival of Pakhangba (in 33 A.D.), the Ningthouja was not a prominent principality like Angom, an adjoining principality, situated to the east of the Ningthouja. When the condition of an interregnum prevailed upon the Ningthouja principality, one Pureiromba, a nobleman of the Angoms, invited Pakhangba to occupy the throne of the neighbouring kingdom of Ningthouja. But the Angoms, however powerful, did not annex the principality, although they had all the chances of doing it. Pakhangba came to Manipur with the purpose of occupying the vacant throne. His occupation of the throne was not without hardship, as one Poreiton, a leader of another migrant group, was also a contender for the vacant throne. Both of them fought, but Pakhangba finally won and occupied the throne with the sister of Poreiton as queen. The first task of Pakhangba was to consolidate the kingdom, and he succeeded in carrying out this with his wit and skill. He then took up arms against the adjoining principalities and subjugated a few of them including Angom. He made Kangla his capital, and since then it remained to be the royal
seat of the Ningthouja kings until the kings of the 18th century shifted their palaces temporarily from it to avoid the attacks by the Burmese.

Looked from the view point of present-day urban geography, Imphal was of little importance in the past, for it was the capital of a small principality. Moreover, the capitals of that time had little material foundation, and Kangla was only a small fraction of modern Imphal. The physical environment of the Ningthouja principality in particular and that of the Manipur Valley in general, was such that it was not very favourable to early human habitation because of the presence of a large number of lakes and marshes, and gregarious growth of forest. The early immigrants to the Manipur Valley, therefore, must have occupied the fringe of the valley along the foothills. It can thus be said that the population of Ningthouja must have been very small with only a few thousand souls. These settlements can be imagined as scattered villages in vast forested tracts. In general, the strongest man of the settlements must have swayed for the welfare of the weakers in the principality. Until Pakhangba's arrival, the chiefs of the Ningthouja principality were weak leaders.
2.2.2 After Ascension of Pakhangba upto British Conquest:

After the arrival of Pakhangba who ascended the throne of the Ningthouja principality in A.D. 33, there was a sudden increase of status of the kings. Pakhangba himself was thought as god because of his virtuousness and justice. He was engaged in administration and consolidation of his kingdom. Great was the responsibility of a good, versatile and powerful king like Pakhangba, especially as conditions, prior to his coming, were in utter disorder. 'From the time of Pakhangba, i.e. the first century A.D. onwards, the Ningthouja kingdom of Imphal had gradually wielded enough political power to emerge as the most prominent state in the Manipur Valley. Naturally, Kangla became the seat of political and military power, strongly supported by the agricultural economy of Imphal principality'.

Thus, it sprang up as the centre of social, cultural and religious activities for all time to come. The growing population, in its attempt to make the area a better habitat, drained the marshes and swamps. The first work of dredging Imphal and Irl rivers was taken up by king Khuyoi Tompok (A.D. 154-264), the successor of Pakhangba. The later kings also dredged the rivers.

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3 ibid.
remnants of the former lakes, called locally 'pats' were, however, seen up to the 1950's. One comes across the names of a number of 'pats' around Imphal town, which are now almost dry. The modern extension of the town is guided towards the sites of these lakes as they offer vacant ground. Moreover, the city centre has little vacant ground and price of land here is almost prohibitive. Lamphel Pat, for example, in the west of the town provides suitable ground for construction of offices, hospitals, etc. The other 'pats' also have their own values in relieving the pressure of congestion in the town.

It has been mentioned that the political power of the Ningthouja principality played a great role for increasing the importance of Imphal town through centuries. The gradual territorial integration under the Meitei kings, of separate principalities and the hills, facilitated not only the increase in the importance of Imphal town, but also brought about contacts with the peoples in the Irrawady Valley of Burma in the east, and of the Ganga and Brahmaputra plains in the west and north. Though the hills and the valley were thickly forested, the central valley lay in one of the old trade routes connecting the Indian subcontinent and the countries of South-
East Asia. Being the only plain amid extensive hilly tracts in the eastern ranges bordering India and Burma, the Manipur Valley promoted the ancient trade carried on by small groups of the Indian traders. Though their transit was very seldom because of harsh physical environment of the hills, forests and swamps, they left certain socio-cultural elements which were well assimilated by the local people. Hinduism, in the form of worshipping Vishnu, was first started from the initial presentations of a Vishnu image, to Kyamba in 1470 A.D.

The foreign policy of the kings of the three powerful principalities, viz. Khumal, Moirang and Meitei, was such that they established contacts with Burma in the form of friendship. Sometimes such friendship ended in bitter enmity and battle, leading to the downfall of one or the other principality. The strategy was such that a principality of the Manipur Valley would attack Burma and while presenting an alibi the onus would be directed to another principality, which it wanted to subdue. In the time of peace visitors came from Burma to Imphal and many from Imphal went to Burma. In the first half of the seventeenth century there was a good relation between the Manipuris and

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the Burmese, but from the time of king Pamheiba (1666-1698) the relation started worsening. He established close relationship with the then Indian States from where the missionaries of Hinduism started visiting.

The royal palace and the capital city were renovated and developed many times in the historical past. The canals and the fortifications were constructed and renovated time and again for the development of the capital and protection of the king and the kingdom.

The greatest development of the capital town was achieved during the time of king Khagemba (1597-1652) who constructed and opened ten markets, in the valley in 1614, of which four were in Imphal. The present Khwairamband Bazar was a well developed market at that time. He also constructed a brick wall on the western gate of Kangla which probably surrounded a rampart. King Khagemba planned his capital with north-south roads which crossed the main east-west road. The main road was straight and wide and ran through the Khwairamband Bazar towards the present Uripok ward of the town. The king introduced brick making for construction of houses and bridges. In this he employed the captives from China who introduced brick making in Manipur. He also made a second capital at Sugnu.

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6 ibid, p. 105.
on the southern fringe of the Manipur Valley.  

The improvement work of Imphal and its surrounding was further taken up by king Khunjaoba (A.D.1651-1666), an illustrious son of king Khagemba. The king excavated a moat on the western side of the fortified palace site, the Kangla. The moat was later on used for boat races, the greatest fun of the then Manipuris during the state festivals and functions. 'The moat with sufficiently deep water was also a great defensive measure'. Following the construction of the moat a bund was also constructed for checking the flood. 'In 1665 he dredged the silted bed of the Nambul river from Khwairamband Bazar to the Chinga Hills. In 1666 he improved the market square of Khwairamband'.

The subsequent dredging of rivers all around was taken up by king Paikhomba in A.D. 1680. He dredged the Imphal river from Loklaobung in the southern half of the town down stream towards south. He did other constructive works also for improving Imphal and its surrounding.

7 Kabui, G., loc. cit.
8 ibid.
9 ibid.
Another landmark in the development of Imphal, was the renovation of the old palace and construction of a number of temples in and around the capital by Garibaniwars (1709-1748) at the instance of his religious receptors, Santidas. A big tank, about 200 metres square, was dug and at its four corners the images of different gods and goddesses were placed. His palace, well fortified with brick walls, had four gates with the main one, the Lion Gate, facing the west. 'On the four sides of the palace there were well shaded avenues. Garibaniwas repeatedly attacked Ava kingdom in northern Burma and incurred enmity of its king who counter-attacked Manipur'. The kings of Manipur, after Garibaniwas' death, could not bear the brunt of the Burmese attacks and often had to desert the capital. Historical records show that in 1759 Imphal was occupied by the Burmese and the local king shifted his capital to Sangaithal. Subsequent Burmese attacks led to the establishment of temporary capitals at Bishenpur and Kanchipur.

It was Bhagyachandra (1763-1798) who expelled the Burmese invaders and restored Imphal in phases after having established his capital at Bishenpur, Langthabal

10 ibid.
and finally at Konthoujam Ingkhol. The last named place is in the centre of the Khwai division but to the north-western side of ancient Kangla. He dug two tanks in the Khwai area, one of which was decorated with jackfruits, in four corners and a 'Peepal' tree at the centre. This tank, with its true shape is still seen on the western side of the State Museum in Imphal. The king also constructed a temple in 1780 and dedicated it to Govindajee. These attracted the religious minded people gradually. Thus, Imphal grew as the cultural and religious centre over and above being an administrative centre.

The death of Bhagyachandra was followed by a period of political instability in Manipur because of waves of Burmese invasions. His son Madhuchandra shifted the palace to the Kangla from Konthoujam Ingkhol. Machuchandra's brother Labeinachandra restored his father's palace. The Burmese, through continued invasion and plundering, reduced the Manipur Valley to almost desolate jungles and swamos. The Burmese took away thousands of captives among whom were artisans, workers and astrologers. Because of this, many people fled to jungles. The Burmese army ruthlessly destroyed and pulled down and palaces, temples and buildings to the ground.

*Imphal, in the past, used to have four divisions, viz., Khwai, Wangkhei, Khurai and Yaiskul.*
The population of the state estimated to be 60,000 persons before the Burmese invasion, had been greatly reduced and according to one account it fell to nearly 20,000 in the valley. Gambhir Sing, a prince, liberated Manipur in 1826, with the assistance of Nara Singh, from the bondages of the Burmese. As the British did much to the Manipuris by supplying arms and ammunitions, the British hand began to appear subsequently in the administration of Manipur.

After restoration of the valley including Imphal town, Gambhir Singh selected Langthabal as his palace site because of its better location from the viewpoint of defence. A British military cantonment was also set up apparently to protect Manipur from further Burmese invasion. With this, Imphal began to assume the elements of a modern town because the British tried to introduce urban amenities to it. The seven-year devastation caused by the Burmese invaders left Imphal in a wreck. It took quite some years to reconstruct the capital. Nara Singh, who ascended the throne (A.D. 1844) after Gambhir Singh, shifted the palace from Langthabal to the old palace site of his forefathers at Kangla.

+ Administrative Report of Manipur Political Agency for the year (1907-8).
Even though Imphal was temporarily abandoned as a political capital, its growth was not seriously affected except during the seven-year period of Burmese occupation. It is because Imphal had already become an important socio-economic centre and the mere shifting of the capital could not hamper its urban growth. It may be noted that the entire settlement of the town was not shifted with the shifting of the palace from Imphal at any time. Even if the palace was away from Imphal, the ruling kings regarded this town as the centre of the kingdom and they always strived to improve the conditions of the town at any cost.

He and his successor Chandrakirti Singh renovated and fortified the original palace and rebuilt the four gates. Together with these, they also constructed the royal residences, temples, and other offices. Unluckily, the earthquake of 1869 ravaged these, including the temple of Govindaji. During this period the Khwairamband Bazar which was also destroyed by the same earthquake, was rebuilt. In 1881, the market of Singjamei Sanjenthong and Heirangoithong were opened by the Maharaja. It added much to the commercial activities of the town.

Kabui, G., op. cit., p.4.
An addition to the cultural feature of Imphal town during the reign of Chandrakirti, was the construction of the residency of the British Political Agent in (Konthoujam Impham). So long the residency was in a compound let out by a prince at Chingmeirong, a small hillock on the northern side of the town. The king ultimately permitted Johnstone, the British Political Agent, to construct his residency at Konthoujam Ingkhol on an area of 6.47 hectares. The construction of the beautiful residency was started in 1880 and it took about ten years to be completed. It added to the political importance of Imphal town. This residency was burnt during the Maniouri rebellion of 1891.

The overall picture of Imphal town, however, was quite different from that of a European town. Captain Dun gave a vivid picture of Imphal, as it was in 1906. 'On looking from the top of Langol Hill it gives the appearance of a large square clearing amid the forest, entering it we find no street and shop, no paved or metalled roads. There are no masonry walls or buildings visible. The city has no enclosing walls or gates'.

This gives an idea as to the physical environment and stage of development of

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12 Dun, E.W., Gazetteer of Manipur, Vivek Publishing House, Delhi, 1975, pp. 95-96.
Imphal town at the turn of the century. It is important to note that Captain Dun used the word 'city' as the population of the town was very large. Brown estimated its population at 35,000 persons out of the total population of 139,000 of Manipur in 1873. According to the first census of Manipur conducted in 1881, Imphal had a population of 60,000, and Manipur, 2,20,000 (Valley 1,20,000 and hills 1,00,000).

The central location of the town within the valley, together with the political powers wielded by the kings, favoured the growth and expansion of Imphal. With the development of communication system during the earlier part of this century it broadened its sphere of urban influence. Its hinterland was widened to cover the whole of the valley and the hills immediately surrounding it. Marking its regional centrality, Captain Dun remarked that every road converged upon it and it was in every sense the heart of the century.\(^{13}\)

The Imphal of Maharaja Chandrakirti, on the eve of the British conquest, consisted of a square for army parade, a 'Sanakeithel' (royal market) and a polo ground

\(^{13}\) ibid., p. 96.
where the game was played every sunday. "Between the residency ground and Sanakeithel and the great royal road, was the famous Polo Ground where the best play in the world might be seen."\(^{14}\) Imphal was demarcated in 1889 by king Surchandra in order to include the expanded areas within the town and to differentiate the urban area from the rural surrounding (Fig. 4).

2.2.3. After British Conquest:

In the last week of March 1891, the Anglo-Manipuri war broke out. The British occupied the Kangla after their victory against the Manipuris in the battle of Khongjom on April 23, 1891. With the occupation of the Kangla the administration of Imphal and Manipur was transferred to the hands of the British on April, 27, 1891.

The British conquest of Manipur is a crucial event in the urban geography of Imphal. Immediately after its annexation, the Britishers introduced remarkable modifications to Imphal in the European style - adding urban amenities, step by step, to suit their living. They formed the British Reserve - an exclusive area consisting of their residences, the markets, palace at Kangla and

\(^{14}\) Kabui, G., op. cit., p. 5.
some portions of Thangmeiband and Kabo Leikai of Khurai division (Fig. 5). The administration of the Reserve was in the hands of the Political Agent. The civil population of Khurai and Thangmeiband were evicted and the police forces were kept in the old palace.

Inclusion of Kangla within the British Reserve necessitated the construction of a palace for Prince Churachand Singh. So a palace for him and a residence for the British Resident were constructed. Thus, the new palace was constructed at a place to the east of the Imphal river and the new residence in the Konthoujam Ingkhol. It is in this year that the prince reconstructed the Langthabal Palace, which was damaged by the earthquakes of 1869 and 1880, as his summer residence. All these constructions and renovations led to a quick expansion of the town at the close of the nineteenth century and the first decade of this century.

It is interesting to note that a dual administration was going on in the then Manipur with Imphal being administered by the British Political Agent and the rest by the native prince. The British introduced telegraph in 1887.¹⁵ Schools, dispensaries and hospitals began to

be established in the town from 1872. Mr. Maxual, who was the then Political Agent and the Superintendent of the State, did a lot towards the improvement of the town. He also established a dispensary in the compound of Wangkheirakpa in 1891. The present Women's Hospital in the middle of Imphal town, the women's market, and the Sadar Bazar, and the Maxual Bazar, containing initially only nineteen shops, were all started by Mr. Maxual.

For security of the citizens in the British Reserve, he organised a civil police force for the first time in Manipur. In his effort for obtaining drinking water to the residents he got the floating materials of the Ningthem Pukhri (tank) removed. It is said that he even made proposals for laying pipe lines from the said tank to the town for supplying drinking water.

Upto the turn of the present century, the women's market was in poor condition. The shelters were roofed with thatch and were subject to constant fire as the women used kerosine and pine-oil lamps at night. Besides, the market was crowded. Similar congestion was also to be found in the Sadar Bazar. So, construction of a market was felt necessary to accommodate the excess shops. It was decided to construct a new market in the northern side of the British Reserve to accommodate the surplus.
commercial activities. The newly constructed 'Bazar' was called the Maxual Market and it initially contained twenty-seven shops. It was almost a boon to the women, Maxual Bazar was very recently renamed as Thangal Bazar. Following the construction of Thangal Bazar, the sheds of the Khwairamband Bazar were also roofed with corrugated iron sheets. It reduced the fire hazard in the subsequent years.

The supply of drinking water posed an important problem. The water of Imphal and Nambul rivers was not pure enough for domestic use because it was polluted by the ashes of the funeral pyres of the local inhabitants. People depended upon rivers and tanks for drinking water in the absence of any better alternative. The State Engineer, Mr. Michell submitted a scheme of water supply from Maklung and Palok rivers in the west of Imphal. The estimated cost for the scheme was about Rs. 2,67,000 in 1910. The work was completed in time and inaugurated in 1913 by Raja Churachand Singh.

It was in 1908, that a committee was formed to look the administration and improvement of the civic affairs of Imphal. This committee, headed by the British Political Agent had four other members nominated by the Prince. It was known as the Town Fund Committee.
and is the real predecessor of the present Municipality upto 1956. The budget of the Committee was met by the grants of the Central and State Governments and the revenue collected under different heads within the town.

"Before 1922 the palace and its surroundings were electrified by an oil engine." Supply of hydel power was started in 1933 and Cinema (bioscope) came in the same year to Imphal. With the growth of various activities, Imphal continued to remain, with ever increasing importance, the centre of transport and communication lines of Manipur (Fig. 6).

The brunt of the Second World War was great in Manipur as Manipur was a warfront. Many may have lost their lives during this period but the state gained something which would have not been achieved under normal circumstances. "It was the Second World War that put Manipur into the transport and communication map of the world". Different vehicles for mechanised transport

16 Government of Manipur, Administrative Report, 1909-10
17 Kabui, G., op. cit., p.7.
16 ibid.
including aeroplanes were introduced for war time necessity. The transport and communication lines built during the war increased the scope of modernization of Imphal. It also greatly increased the sphere of Imphal's influence and caused a sudden expansion of the town. Thus Imphal became one of the largest towns in the North-Eastern India. With the constitution of Imphal Municipality in 1956, the municipal area was minimized so that Imphal became underbound. In the later census periods, however, the boundary was extended. The modern urban amenities of Imphal, have never been satisfactory. But efforts are being made to improve the condition within the limited resources. Telephone was introduced in the year 1947. A number of banks were opened. The number of shops and cinema houses multiplied. Thus, the original natural surrounding of the town has been changed to a great extent at the cost of the ecological balance. The natural landscape has been substituted by cultural features with the sprawling growth of the town along the lines of transport and communication. It has come to be the centre of socio-cultural and economic activities of the whole Manipur and its surrounding areas.