CHAPTER-2

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE LAND AND PEOPLE
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2.1 NAME OF THE STATE AND ITS HISTORY

Manipur, one of the seven states of North-Eastern India is a gateway of India to South-East Asia. The literal meaning of Manipur is "the land of gems". Lord Irwin expressed the name of Manipur as "Switzerland of India". According to a Manipuri historical work *Sanamahi Laikan*, the name Manipur was first officially introduced in the early eighteenth century during the reign of Hinduized Garibaniwaz (1709-49). Manipur has very few recorded history. According to researchers, *Pakhangba* ascended the throne of one of the seven principalities in 33 A.D. and was responsible for laying the foundation of a long dynasty which ruled over the scene till Manipur came under the British rule in 1891. On 15th October 1949, Manipur was merged in the Indian Union as part "C" State. This was replaced by a territorial council of 30 elected and 2 nominated members. Later, in 1963, a Legislative Assembly was established under the Union Territories Act, 1962. The status of the Administrator was raised from Chief Commissioner to that of Lt. Governor from 16th December 1969. Ultimately, the status of full fledged Statehood was bequeathed to Manipur on 21st January, 1972 whereby it became the 20th State of Indian Union.

2.2 GEOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT OF MANIPUR

Manipur lies between 23°50' and 25°30' North and Longitude 93°10' and 94°30' East and consists of 7000 square miles of hill territory, and of
1000 square miles of level country forming the broad valley, to which the Manipuris have given the name Meitei Leipak or Meitrobak. The total area of Manipur state is 22,327 sq. km. Geographically, it is divided into two tracts viz. the hills consisting of five districts and plains with four districts. It is bounded by Myanmar on the east, Nagaland on the north, Assam and Mizoram on the west, and the Myanmar and Mizoram on the south. It is a country of Blue Mountains and green valleys. The valley which is 2600 ft above sea level is oval shape and surrounded by the hills on all sides. The valley inhabited by the Meiteis is one tenth of the total area of the state.

The climate with its variations according to altitude is very healthy. The rainfall of the state is seventyfive to one hundred inches a year. The hills of Manipur are covered with rich forests. These forests are mixed tropical one with evergreen varieties. The most distinguished flora is the famous ‘Siroi lilly’ (Lilium maciientia, named after the maiden name of wife of its discoverer, Kingdon F. Ward). Of the fauna, the ‘Sangai’ the brow antlered deer is worth mentioning.

2.3 COMPOSITION OF THE POPULATION
AND THEIR OCCUPATION

The total population of the Manipur is 2,388,068 (Dinamani, 2001). The state is inhabited by three ethnic groups, namely Meiteis including the Meitei Muslims and scheduled castes in the valley, and the Nagas and Kuki-Chin tribes in the hills. People are predominantly Mongoloid. Manipur is an agrarian state. Manipur’s unique location-bordering the Myanmar provides it
the unique advantage of acting as the Gateway to the East. It can be pointed out that the changing economic and industrial climate of Manipur provides opportunities to investors and entrepreneurs by creating integrated investors a friendly environment within the framework of multilateralism through the WTO regime.

The main profession of the population is agriculture, weaving, fishing; and other cottage industries are the main supplements. Employment in the Government and the Semi-Government establishments and institutions forms hardly 5% of the employment statistics. The main profession of a substantial section of the population in and around Imphal is weaving. The main population of the entire population of Thanga, covering several islands in the Loktak lake is fishing and collection of singhara (Heikak). The villages in the bank of Loktak have the mixed profession of agriculture and fishing. The resources of human labour for road construction, hill cuttings, and similar unskilled labour, are confined to certain group of villages along the Indo-Burma Road. The cottage industries, viz, carpentry, black smithy, gold smithy, tailoring, embroidery, bamboo and cane work also support a small section of the population. The transport industries for which the Manipuris have a special fascination give a considerable employment to a large number of drivers, fitters and managerial staffs. Thousands of women both in urban and rural areas supplement the income of their families by active participation in the small business sectors of the main market.
2.4 ETHNOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF MEITEI

2.4.1 Origin of Meitei

A number of scholars and researchers attempted to trace the origin of Meitei ethnic group. And accordingly varied versions and theories emerged as to explain the origin of this particular community. Followings are some of the theories put forward for explaining the origin of Meiteis.

The theory of Aryan origin of Meitei says that this ethnic group is the descent of Babruvahana, a scion of Pandava hero, Arjuna of the Mahabharatta. This view of the origin of Meitei is rejected by the protagonists on the basis of the fact that Meitei are neither ethnically nor linguistically Aryan. However, historical evidences suggested that Meitei community had absorbed the Aryan elements in its fold. There is also a view of Mon-khmer Tai origin of Meitei. But, all the archaeological and historical evidences point to the relationship of the ancient Meiteis with the Mon-khmer and Tai people but not of Mon-khmer-Tai origin of the people. G.A. Grierson proposed that the ancestor of the Meiteis were the kinsmen of Tibeto Burman and Mongolian tribes who migrated from China to Burma and lived in the Hukwang valley, the present land of the Kachins, before they moved into Manipur valley. The Kachin connection has been proved by the linguistic affinity between the Meitei and the Kachin. W. Mc.Culloch (1959) suggested that Meiteis are the descendents of Hill tribes of Manipur. R. Brown (1874) also supported this view of origin of Meitei from the surrounding hills of
Imphal valley. It is not sure of the immediate descent of the Meitei clans from the hill tribes as proposed by Hodson (1908) but one cannot deny the Naga and Kuki Chin elements in the evolution of the Metei as an ethnic group. Following the version put forward by Singh (1995), Meitei ethnic group was formed by the integration of Ti and Mei tribes of ancient Chinese history under certain circumstances. Singh himself has admitted no doubt that 'the people and the time, and the process of ethnic formation of the compound people are, nevertheless, yet to be historically ascertained'. In contrasts to all these views, a handful of local researchers on the basis of local documents written in archaic Meitei script, correlate the origin of Meitei with the myth they have created.

Considering all these views and beliefs we can say that it is highly speculative and controversial to give a conclusion to the origin of Meitei and so further research and discussion is required in order to give a generalize consensus which can scientifically explain the origin of the Meitei Community.

2.4.2 LANGUAGE AND SCRIPT OF THE PEOPLE

Meitei speaks Manipuri or Meitei Lon which is belonged to Tibeto Burman family. Manipuri or Meitei Lon is the only language on the eastern border of India, which has its own script. However, under the influence of Bengal Vaisnavism and British rule, the people accepted the Bengali script for their language. Most of the people can speak and understand English and Hindi language.
2.4.3 RELIGION, ART AND CULTURE:

Meitei had their own tradition of worshipping their ancestors and local deities. However, after proselytisation majority of the Meiteis follow Hinduism as their religion. There is also a group of revivalists who follow pre-Hindu beliefs and practices. They are popularly known as “Meitei Marup”. One of the interesting points is that one always finds in every Meitei house the worship of Sanamahi (the Meitei God). Women possess the rare quality of balancing their own religion and the religion coming from outside. They are loyal to both. They celebrate both the festivals of Meiteism and Hinduism.

The cultural heritage of the Meitei admits of two broad layers viz, the Vaishnavite phase since the 15th century A.D. The pre-vaishnavite phase has got Lai Haraoba Festivals done before more than three hundred sylvan deities, a form of ancestor cum sylvan gods and goddesses, worship lasting normally about ten days with the Maibis and Maibas as directors and star performers, much in the style of Tantric worship, in which thousands of villagers participate with dances, music, games and sports. The Vaishnavite festivals include Holi, the greatest festival in the valley known as Yaoshang, the Ratha Yatra, Janmasthan, Durga Puja, Diwali, Nata Sankritans (the great sacrifice Mahayajna) and Ras Leela like Kunja Ras, Maha Ras, Vasanta Ras, Nitya Ras and even Diva Ras. The Sankritans, Rasleelas represent the supreme flowering of the Vaishnava faith and constitute a unique contribution to Indian culture.

The art of Meiteis can be seen in sculptures also. Drawing, painting and sculpture usually co-exist and are inseparable. The products of today are
mainly confined to types of doll-making of wooden, earthen, paper and cloth products at the time of exhibition. They depict artists such as drum player, Khamba and Thoibi in dance, Radha Krishna Jugal Milan, sword man, spearman etc. Among the artist design of Meiteis, the mentionable are, the fearful figures painted on the long shield used by spearman (called chung), floral designs over the handle of war sword and such as the case with Pena tiddle and the Pung (drum).

2.4.4 MARRIAGE, FAMILY AND DESCENT:

Meiteis of Manipur lived in a patrilineal society. They observed caste endogamy and clan exogamy. There are seven exogamous clans namely, Ningthouja, Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, Kha Nangba and Chenglei. A woman merges into her husband’s clan after marriage. But there are cases on record of marriage between Brahmins and Meitei girls.

The general rule is somewhat relaxed now-a-days however general population prefers to observe the existing rule of marriage. Angoms were not allowed to marry with Khaba Nganbas, Moirangs or Luwangs. Moirangs were not permitted to marry the Khaba Nganbas, and one or two families of Chenglei clan. Further, there is a rule of general application that a man may not marry a woman of the clan from which his mother came. The prohibition goes no further than one generation. Engaged marriage is the most preferred and accepted form of marriage among Meiteis. However, marriage by elopement has been found very common among them. Meitei follow patriarchal and patrilocal system. The father is the central figure in the family,
all the authority is vested upon him and lineage is traced through him. As regard to the inheritance of the property, immovable property is equally distributed among the sons while the movable properties are inherited by the youngest son if he stays with parents till their death. But among the scheduled castes or Lois the youngest son gets the house and land but movable property is divided among the sons. Now-a-days daughters also get their parents properties in the form of gifts. Nuclear family is the most common type of family in the society of Meitei.

2.4.5 FOOD AND DRINK:

The chronicles contain ample evidence of the change in the diet of the Meitei section of the population which is due to the introduction of Hinduism at the beginning of eighteenth century. The earlier reigns seem to have been one long feast with hecatombs of fat cattle and oceans of spirituous drinks, even culminating one more than one instance in fatalities due an excessive appreciation of good cheer. They then lived like primitive tribes each tribe regarding only its special taboos, and each individual abstaining only from the private taboo. But the official adoption of Hinduism not only removed the ban against milk but created many prohibitions to which new converts eagerly submitted. Animal flesh is forbidden and all spirituous liquor or intoxicants are accused. However a change in the habit of food and drinks is found to be seen after getting modernized and under the influence of westernization. The staple food of Meitei consists of rice, vegetables, and meat. They take two meals a day, one in the morning and the other at night. They take vegetable curry regularly. Fish is considered to be a common food item of Meiteis. Fish is found to be used in every meal of Meiteis either fresh or in dried form.
Some of the food items that are not found among the Indian population except among some north eastern tribes are bamboo shoots (*Ushoi*), fermented bamboo shoots (*Soibum*), fermented fish (*Ngari*) and fermented soyabean (*Hawaichar*). Cow-milk is the most commonly used nutritive drink of Meiteis. They also drink tea and coffee. Dr. Brown (1974) mentions that Manipuris, both male and female, are inveterate chewers of pan suparee and tobacco is used by all classes and ages, and tobacco is used and smoked as in Bengal.

### 2.4.6 A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF MEITEI WOMEN:

Meitei women are generally of medium stature ranging between 131-164cm (the present result) having long silky hair and fair complexion of a yellowish colour. They are more alike the women of Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, China and Japan.

The dress of the women is quite different from the Indian as well as the western women. It consists of a loin clothe passing through the lower body (waist to ankles), a blouse and a clothe covering the upper body. The clothe covering lower body is called *Phanek* and that of upper body is called *Inaphi*. The modern educated working women adopted the wearing of *inaphi* in a saree manner, more alike to Assamese woman for convenience and practical reasons. But unmarried girls too wear *phanek* and tops although now adays many have started wearing day modern dresses like skirts, shalwar and pants also. Meitei women play a major role in the productive process of the state and they have always become subject of admiration from the foreigners and sociologists. It is a common sight, in rural areas to see women working in the paddy fields from early morning. Rice cultivation depends heavily on women’s labour. Majority of the women in the rural areas below sixty years of age engaged in the paddy
fields. And they perform their labour mostly in teams called khutlang. Most of them earn money by working extra hour in the paddy fields of others. The income from this source is considered to be a part of the family fund. Apart from this, women look after the vegetable gardens of their campus by preparing soil for planting. Planting is done by older women, and watering the plant is responsibility of younger girls. In the evening, these older women go to the bazaar to sell the products of their gardens. Weaving is another source of income for women both in rural and urban areas. Exchange of the product of the state is managed by women. It is common sight to see small market by the roadside of the state. In these bazaars women always congregate at an early hour. They maintain their families with the income from this small trade. Embroidery, rice pounding, fishing and helping in constructing works are other economic activities of women. Now-a-days the economic contribution made by the educated working ladies is immense. Many of them work in Government departments and in teaching professions. They are not only contributing economically but also engaged heavily in household duties. Inspite of these immense economic contributions, the status enjoyed by them is low. More than 95% of the women are either suppressed or desire to remain inferior to men. In reality, they have a much inferior status than men. A wife or a daughter may be earning more or contributing more towards the maintenance of the family but the husband or the brother appear to be more precious to the other members.

In the political sphere also, Meitei women always stood in the forefront of every movement. Meitei women are the most populous demonstrators who participate as the agitators in every big problem of the state regarding the law and order situation. History of the state witnessed a number of important movements of women. They are also contributing to the eradication of social evils.

This chapter is followed by the Materials and Methods of the study.