LAND, PEOPLE AND THEIR FOOD HABITS

Chapter III
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A. The Land

The state of Manipur, a land inhabitate with multiethnic groups having diverse religions of which the Meiteis who are the major group occupying Manipur valley and on whom, the present studies have been made at a micro level, needs to be introduced.

Manipur, a North Eastern state of the Indian Union adjoining Myanmar lies between latitudes 23°50' and 25°30' North, longitudes 93°10' and 94°30' East. Its total area of 22,327 square kilometres can distinctly be divided geographically into two regions i.e. the valley and the hills. The valley, at an altitude of 790 metres above the sea level, is surrounded by hills on all sides, rising frequently from 1200 metres to 2000 metres. The state is bounded by Nagaland on the north, Mizoram and parts of the Chin Hills of Myanmar on the south, Cachar district of Assam on the west and Myanmar on the east.

The valley is surrounded by hills which provide a unique ecosystem. The hills are remote; many parts are still inaccessible to normal modes of transport, often taking weeks of weary travel through hazardous terrain to reach many of the places. Within the area of the state, there is an immense variety of climate and scenery, which is only equaled by the variety of types of mankind. Luxuriant growth of trees, bamboo and shrubs look the landscapes green in most part of the seasons. Many wild and seasonal ethnic vegetables grown on the hill slopes, plain and swampy lands of the State are the favourites of the people.
Plate No. 1  A relaxing old man

Plate No. 2  An old lady in her afternoon nap

Plate No. 3  A view of the Athokpam Club
Small swamps, lakes and numerous streams and rivuletes of the valley, provides various species of fishes which supplements the protein source, for the people of the State. A Meitei house is accompanied with a pond, which supplies various species of fishes, beside water for the family. Rice is the staple food of the Manipuris and it is extensively cultivated on the hills and the plains. The State records a total population of 18,37,149 (Statistical abstract of Manipur, 1992). All the indigenous people of the State speak linguistic sub-groups of Tibeto-Burman language family (Grierson, 1923).

Singh K.S. (1993) is of the opinion that, at Imphal, which has been the cultural, political and economic centre of Manipur valley since long, converges four important routes which must have linked it with Myanmar in the east, Nagaland in the north, Cachar in the west and Lushai hills (Mizoram) and part of Myanmar in the south. He further referred that, although there is no definite indication of the ethno-historical account of the original settlers of Manipur valley, it is believed that some principal communities called Chenglei, Chakpa, Khaba, Nganba, Angom etc. (Dun, 1886; Singh, 1978) took their settlements at different parts of the valley in different ages and later on these smaller principalities are consolidated under the Meitei supremacy and consequently most of these groups have become components of the Meitei as exogamous clans.

B. The Meiteis

The valley is the homeland of the Meiteis which constitutes the largest population (10 lakh approximately) of the state. There are seven exogamous clans (Salais) among the Meiteis which are known as Khuman, Luwang, Mangang, Khaba-Nganba, Angom and Sarang-Leisangthem (Chenglei). Marriage cannot be contracted within a clan.

Marriage

The Meiteis are exogamous as regard the clan or salais into which they are divided. Elopement is the most prevalent form of marriage. Nowadays, marriage by engagement have been preferred. Due to the advancement of modern communication
Plate No. 4  A view of the Athokpam Junior High School

Plate No. 5  A girl on her way to school

Plate No. 6  A group of school children
system, mileage distance for choosing a mate has considerably been increased. Any form of consanguineous marriages is prohibited. In earlier days, the boys got married at an average age of 20 years and for girls about 11 years. Due to early marriage, many Meitei couple usually has as many as 10 children and above. Nowadays, people are very aware of the benefits of a small family and thereby, marriage age has suddenly been increased as boys normally got married at the age of 30 years and above and girls at the age of about 25 years and above. This phenomenon has brought reduction in the number of children of a couple. The Meiteis are non-polygamous. Widows may remarry, but not with their deceased husband’s brothers. There is no ceremony for the remarriage of widows.

**Family**

Nuclear and joint family systems are found among the Meiteis. It is the tradition of the Meitei that the elder sons after getting married normally established their own families, while the youngest should remain in the original house with their parents. At an average, a Meitei family has 10 members approximately.

**Religion**

They are Hindus and claim themselves as belonging to Kshetriya caste of Hindu hierarchy system. This conversion took place during King Charairongba (1697-1709), who adopted Hinduism of Krishna cult. But, he made no attempt to make it a state religion. He did nothing for the Hindunisation of the Meitei society, nor he took up any measure for the destruction of traditional Sanamahi religion. But, a big change took place during the reign of Garib Niwaz (1709-1748). In 1717, he was initiated into Hinduism of Rama cult by Santi Das Gosai, a Brahmin from Sylhet. In 1724, he adopted Kshetriya caste and till now the Meitei claims them as Kshetriya caste (Nilabir S., 1991). Nevertheless, every Meitei house keeps an abode for Sanamahi-a family deity, towards the southwestern corner of the house.

**Economy**

There are many forms of industry practiced by the people who are mainly agriculturists. The Meitei economy and its components in the past were self-
Plate No. 7  A village pond

Plate No. 8  A traditional house

Plate No. 9  A modern house - note the Tulsi plant in front of the house
sufficient. The scarcity of food and the political movements relating to the elimination of the scarcity of essential commodities were of recent vintage. Handloom and handicrafts may be considered as cottage industry and secondary source of income for them. It is noteworthy that the women of the state are hard working, diligent, enterprising and made herself the more dependable mechanism of production of wealth. Sanakeithel or Khwairamband bazar of Manipur is regarded to be only women’s market in the world in the true sense of the term, considering the production, marketing and promotion of trade of the commodity in the market. It would be difficult to find more industrious women in India than Manipur (Gazetteer of Manipur, 1886). This status of economic independence of Meitei women lent to her such a degree of political and social independence, which no women of any other country had ever enjoyed. They cultivate their kitchen gardens with seasonal vegetables for their own consumption and to sell for the surplus.

**Education**

The overall literacy percentage of the state is 59.89% (61.11% males and 38.81% females) as recorded in 1992 (Statistical abstract of Manipur, 1992). The overall literacy rate of the state is low mainly due to higher illiteracy rate among the elderly members of the society. If the literacy rate is considered exclusively for the Meiteis, not less than 75% literacy rate may be expected.

**Health and Hygiene**

As a tradition, a Meitei house is always accompanied with an open outhouse, a grainary, a cowshed, a toilet, a pond and a space for kitchen garden where various kinds of vegetables are grown. Sense of cleanliness appears to be very high amongst them. As a custom, regular sweeping in and out of the house including the courtyard and daily washing or plastering of the floor with water, often mixed with cowdung, enabled to maintain cleanliness of the house. Cooking is done after taking bath with a neat and clean dress. Older persons usually take mid-day meal after taking bath. Regular washing of the clothes and using clean clothes is normally ensured.

The dwelling houses of the Meitei are all of the same form, but those of the rich are larger and constructed of with better materials than the poor. Traditionally, all
Plate No. 10  A lush green paddy field

Plate No. 11  A kitchen garden with varied vegetable

Plate No. 12  Few cabbage plantation
the dwelling houses face eastward, which facilitates in providing adequate sunlight inside the house right from the morning. Usually, in a traditional house, large open verandah is provided in which the family sits during the day, and in it all the work of the household is carried on except cooking, which is performed inside. Childbirth nowadays is usually performed in the hospital but for multiparous women, local midwife delivery also takes place. The Meitei parents nowadays have special concern for immunization programme for the children. Breast-feeding of the infants is normally practiced among the Meiteis. Parents usually seek medical assistance whenever necessary. From the overall point of view, the health and hygiene condition of the Meiteis may be said to be quite fair.

**Food Habits of the Meiteis**

The agricultural produce of the state consists principally of rice which forms the staple article of food. Rice is extensively cultivated on the hills and plains during rainy seasons. The Meiteis in general live on two principal meals a day—once around 12 noon and again at evening around 8 p.m. But nowadays, the timing has been changed as the office goers used to take lunch around 8 – 9.30 a.m. Children, however, normally takes food three and sometimes four times a day—once in the morning as a part of breakfast and subsequently at normal lunch time (9.00-11.00 a.m.), again in the afternoon and lastly at the normal supper time (7.00-9.00 p.m.). A Meitei meal consists of rice, vegetables and fish. The older Meitei people relish fish preparation but they call themselves vegetarian. Various species of mushrooms available in the hills and plains of Manipur and incidentally fermented soyabeans quite often supplement protein in a Meitei food.

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 eighteen-century. Meat, chicken or even eggs are forbidden due to Vaishnava cult of beliefs amongst them. But nowadays, the younger generation, have started taking non-vegetarian food. Again, moreover in younger age especially during childhood, no strict rules of Hinduism are enforced. Children eat every sort of food without regard to the Hindu notions of purity or impurity. Honey is taken by many who buy it from
Plate No. 13  Athokpam Road

Plate No. 14  A village market

Plate No. 15  Village Deity
(Arong Ningthou)
the market. They also like milk and various kinds of local fruits such as guava, pineapple, mango, plum, lemon etc. A number of wild and seasonal ethnic vegetables, which are grown on the hills, plain and swampy lands of the state are the favourites of the people. Almost all the varieties of vegetables grown elsewhere in India are also grown in this region. Small swamps, lakes and numerous streams and rivulets of the valley provide various species of fishes, which supplement the protein source for the people of the state (Singh, 1997). Some special features of their food habits can be summarised as follows:

(a) high intake of rice
(b) liking for fermented soyabean, fermented bamboo shoot and fermented fish
(c) liking of fish – fresh or small smoked, egg
(d) low fat intake
(e) low milk consumption
(f) high consumption of vegetable.

C. Athokpam Village

The Thoubal Athokpam village of Thoubal district is situated adjacent to National highway No. 39 i.e. the Indo-Burma road, and is about 23 kms. away towards the south west of Imphal (Fig. 1). All the inhabitants are the Meiteis. The area of Thoubal district is 514.00 sq. kms. and its total population is 2,93,958 (Statistical abstract of Manipur, 1992) of which 1,48,432 are males and 1,45,526 are females. The total literates are 1,26,361 and males outnumbered the females in literacy rate being 83,057 (65.73%) males and 43,304 (34.27%) females. From the National highway No. 39, a pakka road leads to the Athokpam village generally known as “Athokpam road” towards the western direction. Athokpam village is bounded by Indo-Burma road on the east, Arong river on the south, paddy field on the north and Ikoppat on the west. The village itself is again divided into three leikais (locality) namely Awang leikai (Ward No. 5), Mayai leikai (Ward No. 6) and Makha leikai (Ward No. 7) and is under the jurisdiction of Thoubal Municipality. Cultivation is the main occupation of the people. Handloom and handicrafts may be considered as the
cottage industry and their secondary sources of income. The village is pretty big in
size with a minimum households of 500 and above, which spreads in a linear
distribution along the village main road and by the bank of the Arong river. The
length of the village is about two and half (2½) km., while the breadth is roughly
about one (1) kilometer.

The Athokpam village comes under the jurisdiction of the Thoubal police
station, which is situated just at a distance of 1 km. from the village. The villagers
avail of the Medical facilities from the Primary Health Centre, Thoubal, which is also
located at about 2 kms. from the village. The Thoubal bazar is the main marketing
centre. But a small local market and few shops which are located by the side of the
Highway 39 provide facilities for minor marketing and shopping for them. From the
point of view of communication, education, marketing and health and medical
facilities, the village may be said to be in a much advantageous position.

A more detail information about the socio-economy and literacy profile of the
village will follow in Chapter IV.