CHAPTER IV
HABITAT AND MATERIAL CULTURE

A large majority of the Tangkhuls live in small villages on top of the hill, on high table land and on the ridge of some spur running down from a high mountain range. The settlement pattern was determined by the socio-political situation considerably. In former times, feud, inter-village warfare and head-hunting took place among the people and in the circumstance the selection of a village site was very much determined by the defence capabilities the site offers. In the past, the people made a ditch across the spur at the upper entrance and a fence of sticks at both ends in place of a stockade. Nowadays, thorny plants are also planted around the village. Wherever possible, the selection of a village site was also governed, among other things, by the availability of water, cultivable fertile land, and transport facility. Depending on these facilities, the villages may be big or small and sometimes the villages are deserted when these facilities are not available. In places where the land is fertile and abundant, the sizes of the villages are big and when a big village could not hold its increasing population, cases are not rare where some of the inhabitant of such a big village

1. E.V. Dun, Gazetteer of Manipur, p.29; R. Brown, op. cit, p.39.
went out to establish another village nearby. When both villages bear the same name, the suffixes of "Khullen" and "Fhunnou" are used for the main village and its offshoot respectively in order to distinguish one from the other. Due to geographical limitation, most of the villages do not have large population. The number of villages in the subdivisions by size-class of population at 1971 census in Manipur East district is shown below.

**DISTRIBUTION OF VILLAGES BY SIZE CLASS OF POPULATION IN THE SUBDIVISIONS OF MANIPUR EAST DISTRICT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size class</th>
<th>Number of villages in the subdivisions of villages by population</th>
<th>North</th>
<th>Central</th>
<th>Phaisal</th>
<th>Chassad</th>
<th>South</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 200</td>
<td>3 - 1 -</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200-499</td>
<td>3 21 17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500-999</td>
<td>8 14 - -</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000-1999</td>
<td>1 5 - -</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-4999</td>
<td>- 1 - -</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5000 &amp; above</td>
<td>- - - -</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>34 66 40 52 31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

53
Out of the 223 villages in the district, 216 villages are inhabited and 7 are depopulated for want of the amenities mentioned above. Besides the number of villages where the population is less than 200 persons each is the highest. Out of the 216 inhabited villages, 122 villages or 56.42 per cent of the total have less than 200 persons each and another 30.09 per cent of the villages are under the size-class of population of 200-499 persons. Higher number of population, lesser is the number of villages. Under the size-class of population of 500-999 there are 22 villages representing 10.19 per cent of the total number of villages. Under the next higher size classes of 1000-1999 and 2000-4999, there are 6 and 1 villages representing 2.78 and 0.46 per cents respectively, and there is no village where the population is 5000 persons and above. It is bit natural to have small villages in the hilly areas because of the geographical limitations for expansion of habitational sites.

Almost every Tangkhul village is a compact type of settlement. The houses are constructed very close to one another. The fertile lands are preserved for cultivation and the residential houses are built on the infertile and rocky places. Stone walls are built on the slopes of the hill to obtain greater plinth areas for the houses. The houses are built facing any direction as there is no fixed orientation of the houses. When a village is located near
a main road, the houses are usually constructed facing the
main road. With the general improvement of roads and
transport facilities in the Tangkhul country new and be-
tter houses are coming up in those villages which are
better located from the geographical point of view.

**House Types:**

There are two broad types of houses of the
Tangkhuls. These are the modern and the traditional.
With the coming of Christianity, western education and
improvement in the economic condition of life, modern
houses having C.I. sheet roofs, well ventilated rooms,
nicely furnished interiors etc. can be seen specially in
the Ukhrul area. The traditional houses are constructed
with good timber like pine or fir, wailing and roofing
them with planks of that wood. But among the southern
Tangkhuls roofing the houses with thatching grass is
very common. The ridge pole of the gable is not in a
horizontal position, but it slopes from the front to the
rear. The pillars and beams are often of great size and
excellent quality. The door is made of a single plank
about 5 feet wide and 7 feet long. The front wall, pilla-
rs and door bear crude carvings of skulls of men and ani-
mals in rows and roughly painted in black, white and red-
dish brown. In some houses the doors are carved in hex-
agonal design and concentric circles. Two long and big
wooden shingles crossing on the gables and "horns" of
the house are requisites of the houses of the headmen.
and other rich persons. As these traditional houses have no windows, smoke escapes through the roof and door and the interior of the house is dim even during the daytime. In the old days when head-hunting was practised, human heads were kept over the main door as a sign of bravery. Skulls of buffalo and mithun were also hung on the wall as a sign of richness.

A traditional house comprises three sections. The front section is used for keeping domestic animals and for pounding paddy etc. The middle section serves the purpose of living room and kitchen. The rear section is used for keeping grains and all other household articles and personal belongings.

Nowadays, in between the modern and traditional house-types, changes here and there are discernible being prompted by urbanising influences. Granaries and kitchens are made separate from the dwelling house. Stilt-type houses having wooden floor can also be seen here and there showing evidence of Burmese influence.¹

Mention may, however, be made of the bachelor's dormitory which is widespread in the tribal societies throughout the world. Among the Tangkhuls the local term for this institution is called "Longshim" and their "Longshim" is bi-sexual, that is, boys and

¹ T.C. Hodson, op. cit., pp. 42-43
girls have separate "Longshims", and the boys' "Longshim" is called "Mayarlong" and the girls' "Ngalalong". Till the late days of the British in Manipur, the "Longshims" were constructed in each village. But with the increasing influence of Christianity, the dormitory system became to be discouraged. But custom dies hard, and though there are no separate buildings of "Longshim" the tradition lives on in a moribund state in Hundung village, where both boys and girls select the house of the most popular and beatiful girl of the village to be their dormitory.

Dress and Ornaments:

The tribes of Manipur are known for their colour­ful costume. The Tangkhuls are not an exception. The day­e day dress of the people is a simple one. What Hodson described more than half a century ago still holds good to a considerable extent. "The dress of Tangkhul men consists of a simple cloth worn round the waist and tied in a knot in front leaving the ends hanging down ........ The women wear small caps of blue cloth when working in the fields. Their petticoats reach from the waist to the knee .......... A small jacket of the style worn by Manipuri women or a single cloth of the kind worn by the men completes the costume."¹

¹. Ibid., pp.21 - 22.
At their houses and in the fields it is not rare to find men and women more or less in the type of dress described above though it is confined to a great extent to the older section of the population. Though the traditional dress has not been completely discarded, western dress has also been adopted widely. On ceremonial and festive occasions the people, specially the womenfolk display themselves in their best traditional colourful costume woven by themselves at their loin-looms. During the cold season both the sexes wear a wide sheet of cloth woven by themselves. The village elders also wear mill-made blankets often of red colour. Since the days of the British till today, red woollen blankets are distributed by the government to the headmen and other elders.

In personal decoration two traditional modes have been in disuse that many Tangkhuls of the younger generation are not aware of them. These are the wearing of a ring on the penis and tattooing of women. As regards the former Brown writes - "This consists in the wearing of a ring from an eighth to a fourth of an inch wide, made of deer's horn or ivory, which is passed over the foreskin, fitting tightly. The object of this custom, which is of great antiquity, is to prevent an erectio penis, they holding apparently that a mere exposure of the person, unless so attended, is not a matter to be
ashamed of . . . . . . This ring is assumed on reaching puberty, and is worn until death . . . . . .
This ring is removed for micturition and at night, and its size is altered from time to time as may be found necessary.1 The Tangkhul name for this ring is 'songhon' and some old men reported that they were still wearing this ring.

Among the northern Tangkhuls, tattooing of the girls when they reached the age of puberty was generally resorted to. It was done by pricking the skin with a sharp bone or thorn dipped in ink prepared with juice of a kind of creeper mixed with charcoal. The patterns adopted were two thick vertical lines on the cheeks and below the lower lip, one long and thick line on each side of the jaw bone, three vertical lines and three horizontal lines crossing diagonally on the neck, five thick vertical lines on each breast and five horizontal lines on each arm. During the tattooing operation, the girl was held firmly by some women as she writhed in pain. Curiously enough, even the whimpering of the girl followed a prescribed pattern swelling up and down in little cascades. When the entire operation was over, the girl was almost unconscious and the pain of fever continued for two or

three days. The purpose of tattooing was, apart from primitive aesthetics, to instil fear in the mind of the enemy. The tattooed women of the northern Tangkhuls were always sought after by the southern Tangkhuls, because however fierce might be their feuds, a tattooed woman, said McCulloch, "always goes unscathed, fear of the dire vengeance which would be exacted by her northern relations were she injured, giving her this immunity." 1

At the time of field work, no recent information on the practice of tattooing was available. It was reported that this practice had been given up by both the Christians and non-Christians several years ago.

The ornaments of the Tangkhuls are not elaborate. Writing about the traditional ornaments of the Tangkhuls about a century ago, Brown remarked "No metal ornaments of any kind are worn in the ears. Necklaces of beads are occasionally worn and a favourite and peculiar ornament is a loose deep collar of brass, about six inches wide of front in the neck and tapering gradually to the back where it is fastened....... In lieu of the brass collar, coloured ones of cane work are also worn of the same pattern: gaiters of matwork are occasionally worn: on the upper arm the coiled wire rings are worn ......... and on the wrist heavy solid bracelets of brass; below

1. McCulloch, op. cit., p.68.
the knee cane rings; those formerly described, are worn frequently in large numbers. Today, the traditional ornaments are seldom worn by the people except during festivals, and the wearing of ornaments is confined usually to the females who wear modern ornaments purchased from the market or made by the local goldsmiths.

**Household Articles:**

The house of a rich and educated Christian family is generally neat and clean, and the interiors are well decorated and furnished with chairs and tables. In the case of average Tangkhul families too, chairs and tables are common items of domestic articles. Many houses have benches also for visitors to sit and relax. Many do not keep wooden chests or almirahs for keeping personal things like clothes, &c. Instead, cane-and-bamboo baskets of different shapes and designs are used for keeping personal things. For keeping money, bamboo pipes are used in several houses.

As regards utensils, both earthen and metal products are used. The introduction of metal utensils is of a recent origin and the wide-spread use of the same took place after independence. Enamelled metal utensils and aluminium utensils are very popular among the people. Utensils made of stainless-steel and bell-metal which are widely used in the valley of Manipur are still not

---

1. R. Brown, op.cit., p.33
popular among the Tangkhuls living in the hills. The use of porcelain is more or less confined to the rich and westernised families.

**Tools and Implements:**

Since agriculture is the sole means of livelihood of the majority of the population, tools and implements required in agricultural operations are possessed by every household. For clearing the jungle and cutting the trees, axe and *dao* are required and almost all the households possess these tools. Another indispensable tool not only of the Tangkhuls but also of all the tribes living in the hills of Manipur is the hoe used for digging the soil at the time of sowing the seed, specially paddy. Another companion tool of hoe is the spade. For the protection of self and family, a spear is indispensable. In the old days when wild animals were rampant, no Tangkhul seldom took a journey without carrying a spear with him. Another coveted tool was the gun which a few possessed since the British days. These tools and implements are purchased from Ukhrul as well as from Imphal.

**Village Administration:**

The people living in the remote hilly regions of Manipur are closely attached to their villages. The Tangkhuls are not an exception. The village is an
important unit of the society, and the day-to-day intercourses and behaviour of the individuals are very much controlled by the village in which they live. In the ancient days the protection of the village was the sole responsibility of the people living in it. In order that the collective interests of the people are protected every village was administered by the headman assisted by a few elders within the bounds of custom and tradition. The headman and the elders not only wielded political power but also were fountainhead of tribal custom and tradition. Writing about Naga villages in general, Hodson describes: "As a general rule each village possesses at least one officer to whom the Meithei title khullakpa, is given. For convenience of administration he is often regarded as exercising secular authority, but in reality possesses in ordinary village affairs just that amount of influence to which he is on personal grounds entitled. His authority in their eyes is religious in origin and nature .......... In nearly every Tangkhul village we find in addition to the khullakpa a village officer bearing the Manipuri title of luplakpa who is the head of one clan just as the khullakpa is the head of his clan." 1

1. T.C. Hodson, op. cit., p.79
The Tangkhul word for headman or khullakoa is aunga. He wielded supreme power for administration, defence and justice. When the villagers wanted to start some work, they were required to take permission from the headman. A person could not have relation with another village without permission from the headman. The headman decided all disputes and this he did with the general approval of the village elders. The headman and the elders summoned all members of the village to assist with their counsel in disposing of any affair whether it was a revenge against another village or punishment of a member of the village for violation of the established customs and traditions, etc. For the proper administration of the village, a council of chosen members headed by the headman was formed. The Tangkhuls called such a council Hangva and the members were known as Hangvanaq. The councillors should be married persons, courageous and just. They must be persons commanding respect and confidence of the people. A headman was the highest authority in his village. In important matters he might consult the elders of the village, but he was thus the highest authority in the village and he was respected by everyone. When a headman died without leaving an heir, the widow would succeed him and other
members of the council enforced her command. No hospitality was shown to a stranger visiting a village unless he visited the headman in the first instance. Apart from deciding disputes and cases, the village council now looks after the development programmes such as the maintenance of the water supply, footpaths, construction of new paths and bridges, jhuming and terracing and the like. Besides the council decides the dates for festivals and other functions in consultation with the village priest. Among the Christians, under the title system, ten per cent of paddy harvested is contributed by every household every year. The paddy thus collected is sold to the poor people of the village at low price. In the name of the church of the village, the council is in charge of the granary where the paddy is stored and it fixes the price of the paddy to be sold. Usually membership in the council is for one generation, and with the exception of traditional office-bearers like the headman, any subsequent vacancies are filled up by common consent from among the senior male members of the village. After serving a full generation, a member will vacate his office for good.