CHAPTER - I

Land and People

Manipur was formerly a sovereign country ruled by its monarchs having a glorious history of about two thousand years. The first historical king of Manipur who ascended throne in 33 A.D. with due coronation ceremony in Kangla, the ancient capital of Manipur which is still lying in the heart of Imphal was Nonda-Laien Pakhangba and the last king of Manipur in whose reign the kingdom of Manipur was dissolved and merged with Indian Union in October, 1949 was Maharaja Bodhachandra Singh. Since then Manipur became first a Part 'C' state, then a Union - Territory and finally since 1972, a state of India. Manipur is now situated on the north-eastern boundary of India bordering Myanmar. It has an area of 22,327 square kilometres with a population of 2,388,634 according to the census of 2001. As regards the size and population, Manipur is like a district of the bigger and populous states of India. But the merit of Manipur does not lie in its size and population but in its age-old remarkable and renowned culture, civilisation and the past military glories and the soldierly qualities of its people. Manipur is undoubtedly a hill state. But it has a picturesque valley which is the cradle of civilization not only for the inhabitants of the valley dwelling Meiteis but also of the dwellers of the hills who learnt much of their civilization from the culturally advanced Meiteis.
The present Manipur is bounded in the north by the state of Nagaland, on the west by the Cachar district of Assam and on the south-west by the state of Mizoram and on the south-east and north-east by Myanmar. Its boundary with Myanmar is the longest and it formed international boundary of India and Myanmar. To-day Manipur is a petty state of India. But in the days when Manipur was powerful and independent under its own sovereign rulers it had a larger area. In the east its boundary extended upto the Chindwin river now in Myanmar. The upper Chindwin district of present-day Myanmar formerly known as Kabo Valley was within the territorial boundary of Manipur. According to Pemberton, the eastern boundary of Manipur extended even beyond the Ningthi or Chindwin river. "The territories of Manipur have fluctuated at various times with the fortunes of their princess, frequently extending for three or four days journey east beyond the Ningthi or Chindwin river". Sir James Johnstone also writes that, "The territory of Manipur varied according to the mettle of its rulers. Sometimes they held a considerable territory east of the Chindwin river in subjections, at other times only the Kabo valley, a ship of territory, inhabited not by the Burmese but by the Shans, and lying between Manipur proper and the Chindwin" Government of India gave away the said Kabo valley to Burma on lease under the treaty of 1834. Manipur received a regular compensation of Sicca Rs 500/- per months from the British Government upto 1947 and from the Dominion Government till Manipur's integration into the Indian union in October 1949. Thus with Manipur's integration with India the question of the

retrocession of Kabo valley which had been a bone of contention between Manipur and Burma for a long time was sadly closed.

In the north and north-east Manipur once extended her territory up to the southern portion of the present day Nagaland state. Sir James Johnstone who had a fair knowledge of Naga Hills and Manipur by serving a number of years in these two regions as officiating Political Agent and Political Agent respectively writes, "There is every reason to believe that the Manipuris in former days did penetrate into the Naga Hills and exacted tribute when they felt strong enough to do so. All the villages have Manipuri names in addition to their own. But during the period of his decadence, just before and during the Burmese war of 1819-25, any influence Manipur may have possessed fell into abeyance. At that time it was re-asserted and Ghambir Singh reduced several villages to submission, including the longest of all Kohima"3 Ultimately the forest between the Doyang and Dhunsiri river formed the boundary between Assam and Manipur. In this boundary with Assam was reorganised by the British Government of India - "In 1835 indeed, the forest between Doyeng and Dhunsiri was declared to be the boundary between Manipur and Assam"4.

In the west, the territory of Manipur once extended up to the plains of Cachar.5 Prior to the Anglo Burmese war (1824-26) the whole south Cachar was ruled by Raja Gambhir Singh and Hailakandi by his brother Marjit Singh.6

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5. Pemberton, Of cit, p.22
After the war, Manipur’s western boundary was at Chandrapur. The treaty of 1833 entered between Raja Gambhir Singh and the British Government, Manipurs territory lying between the west bank of the Jiri river and Chandrapur were exchanged with the British territory of Kalanaga and Nungjai Hills which now formed a part of the Tamenglong District of present day Manipur.

The southern boundary was irregular and ill defined and it is not known how far Manipur in earlier times extended beyond the present boundary bordering Myanmar.

**Different names of Manipur**

This present state of Manipur was known by different names. In older days the country was known as Poirei Namthak Sharongpung, Tilli Kokton Ahanba, Mira- Pongthoklam, Mua-palli etc, in different ages. Later after Poireiton’s immigration it came to be known as Poirei Meitei Leipak or Meitei Leipak. Ever since Meitei Leipak had been the common name of the Kingdom till the name Manipur replaced it.

But Manipur was known by different names by its neighbours. The Burmese called it Kathe which terms they equally apply to the people. The Shans or Pongs who inhabit the country east of Ningthi or Chindwin river called it Cassey. The Ahoms who ruled Assam from the 13th century called it Mekhali and the old Assamese called it Maglau. The Cacharis called it Magli.

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7. Shakok Lamlen (MS)
**Physical Features**

The present Manipur may physically be divided into two main divisions — the valley of Manipur and the hills surrounding the valley. The hill tracts of Manipur covered about nine-tenths of the total area of the state while the remaining portion formed the valley.

The hills of Manipur are covered with evergreen forests consisting of different varieties of trees common to both tropical and colder climates. These forests are decorated with a number of sparkling rivers, the principal of which are the Barak, the Irang, the Makru and Lokchao. The Barak is the biggest river in Manipur. It rises from the northern hills of Manipur and flows through the Cachar district of Assam and falls into the Brahmaputra. The scenery of the hills of Manipur was indeed very enchanting especially to the eyes of the outsiders. Sir James Johnstone describes its scenic beauty thus, “I know nothing more lovely in the world than some of the forest scenery of Manipur with its solemn stillness”.

The valley of Manipur is situated in the middle of the hill tracts that encircles it on all directions. It is oval-shaped and famous for its fertility of soil. About 150 years ago, Col. McCulloch describes the fertility of the valley thus, “The fertility of the valley was so great that not a particle of manure was placed on the ground and yet year after year good crops were raised from the

8. Johnstone, op cit p. 80
same spot." The height of the valley is 785 metres above the sea with drainage from north to south.

The valley of Manipur is like a world in miniature, a wide plain surrounded by ranges of mountain ranges, a vast expanse of water resembling an island sea provided by the famous Loktak Lake. A number of rivers flow through the valley. The most important being Imphal river which ultimately falls into the Ningthi or Chindwin river. Lyall compares the Manipur valley with the Irrawady valley of the present-day Myanmar: "The valley of Manipur in several respects resembles in miniature its neighbour that of the Irrawady."10

**Climatic Condition**

Manipur enjoys a variety of climate from almost tropical to a greater cold than that of England.11 This is due to the different elevations within its borders. The climate of the valley which is 785 metres above the sea is cool and comfortable. When the heat is very oppressive in the neighbouring Brahmaputra valley and the Kabo valley, it is fairly cool in the Manipur valley. However, on account of low elevation the Jiri valley bordering the Cachar district of Assam and Moreh on the Indo-Myanmar border have excessive heat in summer.

11. Johnstone, Of Cit., p.78
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On account of the higher elevation in the hill areas of Manipur especially the northern hills where the height attain as much as 3000 metres above the sea, one may experience a very unpleasant cold especially in winter. In some of the hill areas there is virtually no hot season.

Manipur has an adequate amount of rainfall. The rainy season usually sets in May and continues up to July. But occasional rainfall occurs even up to September and October. Manipur valley having a fertile soil and an adequate rainfall produces crops of different varieties abundantly. On account of it, the valley has been rightly called the granary of the hill tribes.

Geographical Impact

Manipur is a country consisting of a fertile valley surrounded on all sides by rings of high mountain ranges. The valley is inhabited by the Meiteis while the hill is inhabited by various tribes now known as Nagas and Kukis. It was in the valley where the Meiteis developed the renowned culture of Manipur for the development of which the Nagas and Kukis, the dwellers of the surrounding have had little part to play. The valley surrounded by rings of mountain ranges, which though not impenetrable act as barrier for the Meiteis to have extensive contacts with the rest of the world. This enables the Meiteis to develop the seed of their
culture and the civilization independently in their own way. Even if they assimilate alien culture, they did it in their own fashion and never immitated blindly.

Meiteis were very industrious and this coupled with the fertility of the soil and a cool and pleasant climate brought prosperity to the country which often attracted the attention of foreign marauders. Frequent wars with the neighbouring countries coupled with the inborn soldierly qualities also make the Meiteis fine soldiers unmatched by any tribe or people in this sub continent. "The Assamese and the Cacharis are unfortunately so timid and effiminate that the defence of these countries must be provided for the great measure by extraneous means; the Nagas, the Singphos, the Khomtis and other tribes in the eastward of Assam are perhaps two little advanced in the out of civilization and of government to be able to make any effectual resistance against the numerous armies of the Burmese. The Manipuris on the other hand are imbued with all the military spirit.............."12

The people of Manipur:

Manipur is inhabited by the Meiteis, Meitei Pangals (Manipuri Muslims), Nepalis and 29 other recognized tribes who are known by their tribe names. These 29 tribes are broadly divided into two main groups- Nagas and Kukis. But the division is arbitrary as there are some tribes such as Chothe, Chiru, Kom, etc. Within the 29 tribes who refused to identify themselves with

12. Bengal Secret and political Consultations, 1824, No. 8
either of them. The major Naga tribes of Manipur consists of Tangkhul, Kabui, Kolya or Khoirao and Maring. They chiefly settled in the western, northern and north-eastern hills of Manipur. The Kukis mainly settled in the south eastern, southern and south-western hills of Manipur. The Kukis are divided into old Kuki and new Kuki. While the Meiteis called the old Kukis by their tribe name, the new arrivals are known as Khongjais. The new Kukis or Khongjais now far out numbered the old Kukis. Major new Kuki tribes are Thadou, Paite, Hmar, Vaiphei, Gangte, Simte, Zou, etc. Dun’s classification of the old Kuki consists of Kom, Anal, Chiru, Koireng, Chothe, Purum, Matak and Lamkang.\textsuperscript{13} The Meiteis Pangals or Manipuri Muslims settled in Manipur since the early part of 17\textsuperscript{th} century. The Kings of Manipur assigned them separate Yumnaks or Sageis (surnames) according to their place of habitation, occupation, etc. Those who do not belong to any of those sageis given by the kings of Manipur are not the Meitei Pangal or Manipuri Muslim. They adopted Meitei language as their mother tongue but retained their original faith.

**The Meiteis**

The Meiteis or the Manipuris are now settled in the valley of Manipur along with others such as Meiteis Pangals or Manipuri Muslims. But in earlier times they make their settlements not only in the valley but also in

the adjacent hills of Manipur. References as found in old Meitei texts like the Panthoibi Khongul, Pombi Luwaoba, Keipharol, Chengleirol, Naethingkhong Phambal Kaba, Cheitharol Kumbaba, Ningthourol Lambuba, Ningthourol Laihui, etc. bear testimony to this fact.

Though the Meiteis settled in the valley only which is about one tenths of the total area of Manipur, Meiteis formed more than half of the total population of Manipur. The first regular census of Manipur was carried out in 1881, and the result gave a total population of 221,070, of which the Meitei population was 1,30,976, while the combined population of Nagas and Kukis were 85,288. According to the provisional census of 2001, the population of Manipur is 2,388,634 out of which the Meitei population is 13,61,521.

Like their brethren Nagas and Kukis in the hills, the Meiteis are racially Mangoloid and are speakers of the Tebeto Burman language.

**Origin of the Manipur**

Reference has been made to the land, Manipur in the great epic of India, Mahabharata while describing the adventures of the Pandava hero, Arjuna, who married to Chitrangada a princess of Manipur. But there was no mention of Babhruvahana or Arjuna in the pre-Garibaniwaz chronicles and

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genealogies of the royal family, which was found by Nongda Lairen Pakhangba. Manipur’s declared Aryan connection should be observed as an aspect of Sanskritization and an attempt to gain honour in the Hindu world. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee rightly observed thus: “The legend of Arjuna and Chitrangada which is very well known in India, became, one might say, the pivot for linking up Manipur with Brahmanical Purana Tradition. The Pandits (scholars) of Brahmanical school in Manipur, backed up by the royal court and the orthodox but powerful ruling class had written volumes in support of the identification of Manipur with that of the epic, the doyen of these scholars being the great Sanskrit scholars Atombapu Sharma. A school of Indian and English scholar did not support the view but located Manipur in or around Kalinga in Orissa. Non-Brahmanical Meitei scholars forcefully and convincingly argue that Manipur cannot be identified with Mahabharata’s Manipur. Their view is that only in the eighteenth century, Hinduization brought this name (Manipur), and the original name of the Kingdom being Kangleipak, Meiteileipak or Meitobaak.

The term ‘Manipur’ is the combination of two Sanskrit words - ‘Mani’ means ‘Jewel’ and ‘Pur’ means ‘Land’. In short, Manipur literally means ‘The land of jewel’. There is a belief that the valley of Manipur was once under water. Lord Shiva pierced the hill, Chingnunghut with his trisula (trident) and out the water and thereby rendered the valley of Manipur habitable. Ananta, the serpent god was overjoyed and sprinkled the land with the sparklings gems, hence Manipur (Mani = gem or jewel; pur = land).

17. Majumdar, R.C. Expansion of Aryan Culture in Eastern India, 1966, Imphal
This belief is not known to the Meiteis in early time. But it came to introduce only during the reign of Hindunized King Pamheiba (Garibaniwaz). The valley of Manipur had been formed out of the lake. When the lake dried up in course of time it became a place fit for habitation. This theory or belief is supported by the geologists. From this theory, we come to know that all people of the valley first settled in the hills such as - in Ukhrul, Thangjing, Koubru, etc. before the reign of Meidingu Pakhangba and after too. The tribe Angom once ruled in Khangkhui of Ukhrul. Two chiefs of Angom, viz. Pureiromba and Chingshomba came from Khangkhui to settle in the valley of Manipur. Before Pakhangba’s.

**Ethnic Affinity of The Meiteis**

There are three major ethnic groups in Manipur. They are - the Meiteis of the valley and surrounding hills, the Nagas and Kukis of the surrounding hill tribes. “They are predominantly Mongoloid, with strains of other non-Mongoloid elements, who from the pre-historic times to-day speak Tibeto-Burman languages. Historical reasons greatly influenced the independent growth of these social groups with varying degrees of cultural development and civilization, of which the Meiteis among these autochthons are the most dominant and advanced community.”

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18. Khelchandra Singh, N. Pndit, Angomgee-Khonghou (M.S.)
The Meiteis belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. The word ‘Meitei’ is derived from Mi = man and Tei = separate. The ethnic name Meitei, B.H. Hodgson thought as a combined apppellations of the Siamese ‘Tai’ and the Kochin Chinese ‘Moy’ (Moy + Tai = Moytai = Moitai = Meitei) and that the ‘Meiteis’ belonged to the ‘Moi’ section of the great ‘Tai’ race.²⁰ It was derived from the creation of man by God in His image: Mi = image and Tai = modelled after God’s image = Mitei.²¹ However, this is well known to all that historically the name Meitei was used during the period of the establishment of the Ningthouja dynasty by ‘Meidingu Pakhangba’, to mean this clan or dynasty and those ethnic groups and social groups who were politically and socially integrated within the suzerainty the Ningthouja. Thus the features of the Meiteis clearly show that they belong to the Mongoloid stock.

²⁰. Quoted in T.C. Hodson’s, op. cit, p. 10.
²¹. Ibid.