CHAPTER – III

HISTOGENESIS OF SETTLEMENTS

The historical accounts of the early settlers of Manipur cannot be traced in much detail in its obscure past. The political condition that prevailed in the pre-Christian era has not been maintained by the rulers so amply. In the absence of detailed archaeological and anthropological investigations, it is difficult to carve out the early history of the settlement of the valley of Manipur and its surrounding hills. So most of our study on early forms of settlements has to depend upon traditional beliefs, custom and usage, folk-lore and other legendary history of the state. Therefore, it is hard to find out the systematic records for tracing the actual dating of the first human settlements in the state. However, based on available literature archeological findings and mythological background, an attempt has been made to trace the historical growth of settlements and rural landscape. In fact, the study of the origin of settlements and their spatial distribution in terms of evolution reveals the entire early history of the occupation of the land.

3.1 Mythological Background

According to one legend, in the beginning the Manipur valley was under water. Nine Laipumthou (Gods) and seven Lainuras (Goddesses), all working together made sixty four hillocks. Then Lord Shiva with his consort Parvati landed at the top of the Nongmaijing hill to play Rasa Leela¹ in the valley of Manipur, which he found still submerged under water. Lord Shiva with his trident made a hole through the southern ranges and provided an outlet for the excess water, which gradually drained out and the valley of Manipur emerged into being. Thus

¹ Rasa Leela is a religious dance drama.
the present narrow ravine to the south of Sugnu town becomes undeniably known as ‘Chungunghoot’, which literally means hole in the hills.

References to this area are also found in the great epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. According to the Hindu Mythology and Manipuri Puranas, the rulers of Manipur believed that they were the descendents of Arjuna, the third Pandava of the Mahabharata. The story of Arjuna’s visit to Manipur and his marriage with princess Chitrangada is well-known. When Arjuna visited Manipur for the second time, he was opposed and defeated by his own son, Babhrubahan. Thus her civilization must have existed earlier than the 4th century B.C. when the Mahabharata was written. Some early writers assumed that the present areas of Sagolband (Ward No. 7 & 8) and Uripok (Ward No. 6) of Imphal Municipal area are the places, where the sacrificial horse for Aswamedha Yagya of Arjuna had been captured by his son Babruvahan. Thus it has been observed that there might have been settlements in and around Imphal during the days of the Mahabharata.

The above episode appears probable in the light of geographical facts. After the battle of Kurukshetra, following the sacrificial horse of Ashwamedha, Arjuna went to many places including Kalinga, that is the present Orissa. From there he moved north-eastward along the sea shore and came to Manipur once again. The shore line, which at present is in Sunderbans. The Pandava prince moving eastward from Kalinga, following the sea shore, might have come towards the Surma valley, where the Gangetic plain ends abruptly. For him the most inviting place would have been, once again, the valley of Manipur. In this way, the Manipuri and Hindu mythologies are linked together.

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3 Religious Sacrifice and oblation.
For the present study the evolution or the histogenesis of settlements of Manipur can be evaluated through three periods:

(A) Ancient Period

(B) Medieval Period

(C) Modern Period.

3.2 Ancient Period

During ancient period, the hilly tracts of the Manipur were heavily forested, whereas the valley were covered with grass and reed jungles with poisonous snakes, animals etc. Such a condition is available even today in and around the Loktak lake. Thus in pre-historic times, the valley was unsuitable for human habitation. The numerous lakes and fens were infested with Pythons and poisonous snakes. There was periodical inundation in the monsoon because the newly formed rivers could not drain the valley properly. The danger of water borne diseases and of malaria was very great. The soil was dump and because of the miasma the danger of the diseases of the lungs was always present. The climate was very humid and the winter was long, foggy and very cold. So, human settlements, during this period were on the hills, particularly on the hills near the valley. Neolithic finds, so far discovered by archeology, are on the hills.

Further historical evidences reveal that there is a distinct history of occupation of the small mountain girt oblong shaped valley of Manipur by the surrounding tribes, possibly in the first millennium B.C. The hilly region which was previously densely forested was gradually cleared up for human habitations. There might have been incidental occupation of the bordering ranges of the state by the nomadic tribal groups which are supported by hunting and shifting

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1 The present Loktak lake, occupying the southern part of the valley is said to be the remnant part of the original lake that occupied the whole of the present central plain of Manipur.

cultivation. However, it was not very clear as yet what the type of settling in the early times was, but man must have been for a long time in hunting-gathering stages in this area. If we look to generalise the settlements of the bordering ranges prior to the occupation of the valley, three peaks viz; (1) Koubru, (2) Thangiing and (3) Nongmaiching can be taken up for brief discussion since these are closely related to the festivals of the Manipuris and their original religious rituals.

Koubru and Thangiing were the group leaders and the kings of the ranges after their names, widely separated parts of the same range but bordering the valley. That Koubru was one of the first settlers, is expressed by the first two lines of a song.

"O Koubru, supreme lord of the north, the first settler of the settlers"

Many legends as to the settlement of the northern part of the valley are related to Koubru and the Koubru range. When Koubru reigned over the Koubru range there was parallel settlement in the Luwang principality. A Luwang prince of the name of Nongban Pombi Luwaoba, married Koubarol Namoinu⁷, an adopted daughter of Koubru, who was also identified as Leinaotabi. Thongarel, the God of death, sent to create the habitation of the valley, his brother Poireiton and his wife Leinaotabi, both of them were supposed to have come out of the foot of the Koubru range. This legend further gives the origin of the seven salais⁸ or groups of the valley settlers as sons of the Luwang prince while other legends point to Pakhangba as ancestor. The common origin and subsequent wide distribution in different geographical areas are not supported by the folk tales of the tribes and also by the progenitory tales of the Moirangs.

Thangiing peak of the Thangiing range situated to the south-west of the present Moirang town, was a spot of cave settlement of god Thangiing and his group which became the Moirangs much later. Thangiing later introduced settlement in the periphery of the Loktak lake at Moirang

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⁸ The Seven Salais were the Mangangs, Khuman, Luwangs, Moirangs, Meiteis, Angoms and Khaba-Nganba. The present day inhabitants of Manipur valley belong to one of these seven clans, which had their principalities in different parts of the valley.
THE STAGES OF SETTLEMENT IN MANIPUR VALLEY

Fig. 3.1
which becomes almost synonymous to god Thangjing. The ‘Thangjing Lai Haraoba’, a traditional celebration of merriment in the name of god Thangjing and other important gods of the valley, is performed in the month of May (Kalen-tha) every year. The rendering of the first line of the song often sung there –

"O Thangjing God,  
the father of fathers,  
king of the kings”

This view has an indication of the origin of the Moirangs from this god which descended down from the already mentioned bordering range. All events of Moirang in different generations, are also closely related to this god and Moirang remains to be the treasure house of the present Manipur literature and culture. The Nongmaiching (corrupted from Langmaiching, meaning hill of the Langmai people) is another cave settlement spot of the past, situated east of Imphal city. The hill was settled by different people in different times, though the last one of celebration was its relation with Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi, the god and goddess of the east, which are still worshipped by the Manipuris on the ‘Baruni’ day.

The circumstances mentioned above are also true for the other people on the border ranges of the valley. The occupation of the low hills like the Nongmaiching and of Luwangs, was the clear case of the first ever nearing the valley by the groups though they did not immediately settle in the valley.

As the last of the sequence, people might have taken up settlement in the valley, possibly in the foot hills, a transitional zone of both the physical environments, the hills and the valley (Fig 3.1). The gravity of the circumstances can be judged from the statement of Mc. Culloch and R. Brown who have propounded their views that the people who live as occupant or inhabitant in the valley had their origin in the neighbouring hill tribes.

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9 Mc culloch, W., “Account of the Valley of Manipur” Gian Publication, Delhi, p.4.
From an examination of the ancient historical record it appears that the settlement in
the Manipur valley began by about 500 B.C. The first settlers were the Mongoloid people who
migrated from what is now called Upper Burma. Originally with a small percentage of population,
they have scattered in the surrounding hills.

In course of time they came in contact with another race (the Aryans). The Indo-Aryans
arrived and settled in the Manipur valley by about the 3rd century B.C. The early Indo-Aryans
who settled in Manipur came without womenfolk because it was inconvenient for women to
travel across the hills covered with forests. The early Indo-Aryans, therefore, married local
Mongoloid women.10

Pakhangba, also known as Yabistha, was the first great king of Manipur, who ruled the
state from A.D. 33 to A.D. 153. The history of Manipur for several centuries after Pakhangba
is dark. For reliable information on the history of this Kingdom, the most authoritative source
is the state Royal Chronicles called Cheitharol Kumbaba, which maintains an account of major
events of kings. The Ningthourol Lambuba gives an account of the queens of Manipur. The
Ningthouja principality in the first and the second centuries A.D. covered only what is now
Imphal West District. Pakhangba and his immediate successors did not have moved over Imphal
East district or the Thoubal district or the Bishnupur District. So the description given in Ningthourol
Lambuba applies properly only to Imphal West.11. If this was the condition of Imphal west in
the first and the second centuries A.D., we have no doubt that the condition of other parts of
Manipur, at this time, was the same or a little worse. (Fig 3.2A). As much of the Manipur was
covered by forests, lakes and fens in this period, the human settlement was sparse. Besides
diseases and natural calamities, there was also the danger from wild animals, particularly tigers,
wolves and poisonous snakes. The growth of population was therefore slow. On account of
the thick forests which covered the hills, the population was still more sparse in the hill areas.

11 Jhalajit Singh, op. cit., p.5.
Fig. 3.2
3.3 Medieval Period

Regarding expansion of human settlements in the Manipur valley in the early medieval period, there were two problems. The first was the super abundance of lakes and fens and the consequent damp soil and the damp climate. Historical evidences reveal that the site of the present Govindajee temple, M.B. College and All India Radio was a shallow lake in the late medieval times. Later it became a fen on account of silting and became habitable land. The second was the super abundance of woods. The Manipuri King Tathingmang alias Jalajatya (264 A.D.) took up the project of dredging the entire course of the Imphal river upto the point it leaves the Manipur valley. The entire basin area of the Imphal river covers practically the whole of the Manipur valley. As a result of the dredging of the Imphal river, the lakes and low-lying marshy area of the region became more manageable, flood control became easier, and the soil became less damp. Thus the expansion of settlement in the valley area became more populous.

Cleaning of woods for expansion of human settlements was taken up during the reign of the next king Khui Ningomba alias Khaga Deep (A.D. 364-379). Protection of human life from dangerous wild animals also became a little easier. In fact, during this period the Manipur valley became a little better place to settle in.

According to a well known book called “Poireiton Khunthok\textsuperscript{12}” written about the 10th century mentions the Anals, the Moyons, the Marings and the Tangkhuls, more or less in their existing settlement areas. It is, therefore revealed that there were settlements of these peoples on the hills of the southern, south-eastern and north-eastern parts of Manipur Fig. 3.2(B). Thus by the end of 1074, there were human settlements all over the Manipur valley and the adjoining hill areas.

Thus, in the late medieval period there were great expansion of settlements both in the valley and the hill areas of Manipur. From an account in the Royal Chronicle and in the Chronicle "Ningthourol Lambuba", it was confirmed that there were villages of hill people or Loibi (i.e. the hills bordering the Manipur valley on the west). During the reign of Thawan Thaba (1195-1231) at the invitation of the Khumans, fought with the Heiren Khunjans and defeated them. This account in the Royal Chronicle conclusively proves that that during 1195-1231 even the southernmost part of the valley was settled.

In due course, the ancestors of the Manipuri Brahmins, the Kshetrimayum and the Lairikyengbams migrated from other parts of India to Manipur and settled in the Manipur valley permanently.

Some Shans of Upper Burma also were absorbed in the Manipuri population. Thus the population of the Manipur valley increased with the passage of time. Ancient and medieval Manipur did not place any restriction on immigration whether from the east or the west. The immigration from the west continued right up to even now. But immigration from the east ended with the end of the reign of Khagemba (1597-1752). As settlements in the valley increased on account of the increase of population, more and more forests were cleared, settlements further expanded in the succeeding reigns of Pitambar Charai Rongba and Gopal Singh Garib Niwaz (A.D. 1709-1748).

After the death of Garib Niwaz the power of Manipur greatly declined between 1755 and 1826. During this period Manipur suffered from a series of Burmese invasions, as well as from internal dissensions. This is known as the dark period of Manipur. In 1819, the Burmese King Alaungpaya invaded Manipur and the "Seven Years’ Devastation" followed. During the seven years’ devastation, the Manipur valley became a vast jungle once more as in the centuries before the beginning of the Christian era. Tigers and other wild animals which were in the thick forests covering the hills came down to the Manipur valley and roamed freely.
3.4. Modern Period

3.4.1 Pre-Independence Period

Gambhir Singh, with the assistance of the East India Company, defeated the Burmese and became the King of Manipur in 1825. From this time onwards, population grew once more. Jungles were cleared bit by bit and human settlement grew more. The British influence had a slow and steady rise in Manipur between 1825 and 1891. Manipur acted as an independent Kingdom under the sphere of British influence. The Political Agency was opened there in 1935 and it continued to function up to 1891. In 1851 the British Government instructed the Political Agent to guide the Raja in his administrative affairs. This meant wider powers for the political Agent. In 1886, not so long before the British annexation of Manipur in 1891, Capt. Dun wrote an authoritative and comprehensive study of Manipur entitled "Gazetteer of Manipur". It was given brief account of about 700 villages of the state and is one of the most reliable book of its land and people.

With the arrival of the British (1891), the network of settlements and associated cultural landscape was substantially improved Fig. 3.2(C). Under the British rule, peaceful environment, security of life and prosperity was established in the state. It brought appreciable change in the nature of the origin and growth of settlements. Many appreciable changes occurred in the nature of the origin and settlements with the development of modern transport as a factor for evolution of settlements of this State. Most of the larger villages were sited along the main roads and banks of the rivers.

During the British regime the construction of Imphal-Dimapur metalled road opened new avenues of employment which led large number of people to migrate to this state from other parts of the country.

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3.4.2 Post-Independence Period (after 1947)

This period witnessed maximum growth of settlement in the state. Extension of the network of modern means of communications and the development of social facilities like education, medical and other facilities encouraged further development of rural settlements in Manipur since Independence. In the most parts of the state, new villages came into existence and the people started moving out of their old and dense village premises and settled in the more open and virgin areas near the farm lands Fig. 3.2 (D). Improvement in agriculture as a result of land settlement, rapid extension and metalling of inter-district roads and construction of major bridges etc., led to the rapid development of settlements. This apart, the establishment of administrative centres such as district, tahsil (Sub-division) thanas and headquarters also encouraged the development of settlements. Most of the rural market centres were the outcome of the proximity of the road network. Thoubal, Kakching, Churachandpur, Nambol, Moirang, Bishnupur, Wangjing, Yairipok and Lilong market may be cited as examples. Since Independence many changes have been obvious in the settlement pattern. A number of district and village roads have been extended during this period. Thus the post independence period witnessed a fresh spurt in the growth of rural and urban settlements. The transformation of many villages into towns and towns into major urban centres led to a remarkable change in the settlement system of Manipur.

Moreover, the entire physical, social, economic and political set-up is in the process of change or transformation, which contrasts with the slow development during British regime. Firstly, the organisation of the development blocks in 1956, provided avenues for the area development. As such, at present, there are 38 tahsils, 34 C.D. Blocks, 33 towns and 2391 (2001 census) villages. All the above facilities and integrated area development planning have influenced the origin, evolution, cultural landscape and rapid growth of population and settlement of the state under study.
A close and minute study of the toposheets supplemented by personal field-work has highlighted the fact that the plan of the villages has been mostly adjusted to the relief features of the region. Some villages are built on good lands that are slightly raised above flood level, some are on the river levees and others along the edges of the hill slopes. Thus in selection of sites, man is usually guided by some attractive and restrictive forces of the physical setting and among these physical elements the role of roads and rivers in the distribution of settlements is the most significant.

The physical factors are not alone sufficient to explain the patterns of rural settlements. Economic factors like markets, means of transport and communication have also mattered to self-sufficing village community. Cultural elements such as temple, mosque, tanks etc. have also some influence in the layout of the villages. These are some of the important factors which have influenced the evolution or the histogenesis of settlement patterns in the Manipur valley and its bordering ranges. To sum up, it may be conclusively revealed that although a large number of settlements of the state had their origin in the ancient period, their growth and expansion have mostly occurred during the late medieval and modern period. Thus, the settlement system of Manipur has the legacy of the past.