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Origin and migration of different communities in Manipur: a glimpse

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Abstract

This is an attempt to reflect the different communities who have been settling in a small state called Manipur. These include the Meetei, Meitei Pangal, Nepali, Bihari, Bengali, Marwari, Punjabis, Tamils and 33 scheduled tribes and other linguistic communities. The origin and migration of the earliest settlers- Meetei and tribals is shrouded in mystery. In course of time, different groups of communities came to this region, indeed, during the pre-historic days and at different points of time in history. These communities have been inhabiting at different regions. They have been interacting within themselves and others. Thus, the state of Manipur has a pluralistic society which enlivens and resorted to vibrant in every aspect of life, in different ways.

Keywords: origin, communities, Manipur, migration, ethnocentric, multiculturalism

1. Introduction

Manipur is a state located in the northeastern region of India, inhabited by several communities. These include the Meetei, Meitei Pangal, Nepali, Bihari, Bengali, Marwari, Punjabis, Tamils and 33 scheduled tribes and other linguistic communities. The prehistoric settlers are Meiteis and tribals viz; Chingmi (hill people) and Tami (valley people). They are predominantly Mongoloids. In later time the hill people are categorised as Naga, Kuki and many sections of small tribes. The valley people are classified into different groups like Meiteis/Meiteis, Pangals, Mayangs, and the Lois/Yaithibis. They comprised Manipur's population which has three major ethnic groups, the Meiteis of the valley, the Nagas and Kuki-Chins of the surrounding hills (Kabui, 1991). There are also communities belonging to different historic times, though they migrated to Manipur much later, are infact part of Manipur society, currently.

The indigenous ethnos in Manipur came from outside most probably the east and south east Asian regions at different periods of time and in successive waves of migration. Other communities who inhabited in the

soil of Manipur were also came into Manipur from different parts of outside Manipur in different historical periods and times. Migration is universal phenomenon. Relating to this Paul and Mahato (2018) have maintained;

"It touches every country in the world which became point of origin, transit or destination for migrant. Migration is a form of geographical or spatial mobility, which involves a change of usual residence of a person between clearly defined geographical units. People are moving from place to another since the ancient period. It also contributed to the evolution of separate cultures, to the diffusion of those cultures and their components by interchange and communication and to the frequently complex mix of peoples and cultures found in different areas of the world. Different facets of migration, often touch many aspects of social and economic relations affecting the areas of migration, including the migrants themselves. Various ethnic groups came to Manipur from pre-historic times down to the present day."

In modern contemporary world, its contextuality migration is domestic issue not an external, however, it is international in another sense obviously, migration law itself became globalized across multiple jurisdictions to a striking degree not just in effect or by intention but as documents as texts (Bashford, 2014).

The origin of the Meiteis and tribals (Nagas and Kukis) is shrouded in mystery. Whatever available information and traditions are scanty and unreliable. The legends and oral traditions which are related give some gleanings to the past of the community concerned.

2. Meitei (Meetei):

The Meitei State chronicle, 'Cheitharol Kumbaba' which dates back from the second quarter of the first century of Christian era, is one of the longest of its kind in India. Such royal records were maintained by different scholars, and as such, it was a noteworthy feature of this chronicle that unlike other State chronicles, there were not less than five State chronicles of Meitei state (Manikchand, 1988).

Regarding the origin of the Meetei ethnic group, it is perhaps believed that the mythological and traditional hymn and song reveal that they once dwell on the top of Mount Koubru wherefrom dispersed elsewhere (Chingtamlen, 2025).

"Awang Koubru Asuppa,
Leima-Lai Khunda Ahanba,
Nongthrei Ma-u Lingliba,
Irik Mapam Thariba,
O Lainigthou!"

Its free rendering in English.

"North Koubru, all inclusive (pervasive)
Leima-Lai first habitation,
Heaven-Flowers, all things seen established,
Blood-drops (Blood-Cell), - Planter,
O King of Gods!"

Relating to the above concept, Singh (1975) has maintained that the Manipuri legends are, however, eloquent about the fact that the first settlement took place on the Koubru Peak and the population on the hill-top really initiated the real Manipuri tradition in all important spheres of life. Even today, the diety ruling over the North Western region is worshipped by the Manipuris in the name of Koubru. A typical prayer to Lord Koubru runs as followers (Singh, 1975).

"O Koubru, our Supreme Lord;
Thou art the first settler,
Continue to bless us for ever."

It has been accepted on all hands that Manipuri civilization began taking shape on the

> *Koubru Peak which his north west of the Manipur valley with all rich grandeur and is still considered sacred by the Manipuris. It must have been several thousands of years ago that the first human settlement took place on the Koubru Peak and seeds were sown for the unique pattern of culture which became to be known as Manipur culture. We can imagine a point of time, when the Manipur valley was a vast lake, we have a legend that a powerful god drained the water collected in the valley by cutting a big hole in the Indo Burma border. This legend is supported by actual evidence of a hole of the same description, now popularly knowns as Chingnunghoot, which literally means a hole inside the mountain (*Singh, 1975).

This ethnic group, was formed by the amalgamation of the seven different but closely knit and allied principalities, once settled in different parts of Manipur, each independent of each other. The components of Meitei Confederacy are the Meitei, Khaba-Ngangba, Chenglei, Angom, Khuman, Luwang and Moirang. These apart, there existed several other tribes, such as, Mangang, Manding, Chairen, Khende, Heiren-Khunja, etc., all of whom were in course of time, merged into one or the other of the seven major principalities. The seven principalities (or even tribes) again underwent an age long struggle amongst themselves till the Meitei or the Ningthouja finally established supremacy over the rest and absorbed them one by one in a period that covered several centuries. After their assimilation, the name Meitei became the common nomenclature for all of them (Manikchand, 1988).

The seven major tribes noted above were what are now known as the seven *Salais* (clan) of the Meiteis. Each Salai consists of a number of *Sageis* or *Yumnaks* which in turn consist of a number of families. Most of these *Sageis* were so named after their trades or occupations, place of habitations, etc... The introduction of such Yumnak (surname) systems for the Ningthouja group started since the time of King Sameirang (518-568 A.D.) (Ibungohal & Khelchandra, 1967). The beginning of this literature according to Chatterjee may go back to 1,500 years or even 2,000 years from now (Chatterjee, 1976). He also compared Manipuri brand of Hinduism with the Japanese Buddhism or mixed Shinto. "The Japanese still keep up their old pre-Buddhistic religion the Shinto or 'Way of God' and the present day Japanese Buddhism is called by the name of 'Ryobu Shinto' or 'Mixed Shinto" (Chatterjee, 1976).

3. Naga

The southern Naga tribes claim their origin from 'Makhel' wherefrom they commenced their migratory route that is believed located in the Mao Sub-Division of Senapati District of Manipur. Starting from the

south western tribes, the Zaliangrong of western Manipur have a tradition that they came out of a mythical cave known as TAOBHEI. They claimed to have migrated to Makhel, then to Ramting Kabim, a village in a big gorge and then to MAKUI-LONGI, wherefrom they dispersed towards the south, west and north regions. The Mao legend points to MAKHEL TUNGAM wherefrom their ancestors emerged from the earth and refer to KHEZAKHENOMA as the centre of migration. The stone relics still exist both at Makhel and Khazakhenoma which was separated from Makhel.

The Tangkhuls of North east Manipur have two traditions. According to one of which they originated from Makhel and migrated towards the east and settled at Hundung tradition which was a dispersal point. Hudson (1911) records the Tangkhul tradition of habitation in Manipur valley and later migration from that place to the present habitat. Another tradition of the Tangkhuls preserved in their folk songs points to their migration from Samjok (Thuaugdut State) of Kabaw Valley of upper Burma and moved into Imphal valley which they left due to heat and mosquito. There are relics of Tangkhul settlements in the valley.

The Angami Nagas of Kohima is also believed to have come from Mao area, especially the village of Khezakhenoma. It is also a fact that the Mao, Pao, Chakesang and the Angamis are kindred tribes for which some authorities on the Angamis described them as quasi-Angamis. The Marams are also believed to have close affinities with the Zaliangrong. According to Hutton, "*...like other western Naga tribes, the Semas point to the south as the direction from which they came. They relate to story of Khezakhenoma stone as well as many other folk tales common to Angamis*" (Hutton, 1970), who have a very close relationship ties of affinity with the Sitlhou Thadous of Jampi Village. They still maintain their mutual customary tributes paid to each other equally on reciprocal basis till today through generations together.

Mills (1922) writes, "It is narrated that three brothers, Limachand, Izumontse and Rankhanla who were ancestors of three Phratries of the Lotha tribe came out of a hole near the miraculous stone at Khezekhenoma" .... Similarly, another tradition said, "the common ancestors of the Lothas, the southern Sangtam, Sema, Rengmas came somewhere near Mao". It is also a fact that the Rengma name for Khezekhenoma is Khein Zenyui and both the Lothas and the Rengmas agree that they were once a single tribe (Mills, 1937). The Aos and the northern tribes have the beliefs that men came from the hole in the earth. The Ao cosmology is very interesting. It has relevance to the story of creation prevalent among the Shans and the Japanese. According to the Ao legend, Lunkizungbe was the supreme deity. He was like the wind, he made the sky, he created the sun and the moon and he was the creator of man. However, the earth was created by Lichabe (Haimendorf, 1939). According to another legend "man is said to have come from the Lungterok (six stones) near the village of Chongliyumti. Six men, the progenitors of the human race, came from this place" (Smith, 1980). The Phoms also claim to have emerged from the cave at Lungterok but do not reckon themselves as Ao (Mills, 1937). The Yimchungers relate that they emerged from Moru, a village in the extreme east (Mills, 1937).

These Naga tribes occupy different areas of Manipur hills with well-maintained ethnic territory by each distinct Naga tribe. Gangmumei Kabui said (Kabui, 2001) "...till the migration of Kuki-Chin tribes during the historical period".

The oral tradition of Nagas of Manipur claiming account of their origin tells more about the migration within Manipur and trans-Chindwin region than earlier period before Christian era. It is, however, clear that the Nagas of Manipur point their place of origin to Makhel in Mao area from where they migrated to the

present habitat (Kabui, 2001). Yet, Shimray (2000) had to say that in the absence of written records, oral traditions, such as, folk song, folk tales, etc., become indispensable. According to the tradition prevailing among the Tangkhuls, they migrated to the present habitat from a place called Thaungdut (Samsok or Samzuk), situated on the west bank of Chindwin River in Myanmar as could be evidenced from their folk song which runs as follows (free rendering in English):

Tangkhuli: Kachili tunglo
Oh! Ava Samsokli tungthuiya,
Oh! Nakungana, Oh! Ili phungtung,
Oh! Ngakangana, Oh! Ili pangthang
Lungshang Makanana
Safa singaiang, Oh! mala mangni.

English rendering:

Whence thou cometh
Oh! We cometh from Ava Samsok
Oh! Ngakunga, Oh! he lifted me
Oh! Ngakanga, Oh! he carried me
Lungshang Makana
With hunting dog, Oh! he carried my bow.

The Thaungdut tradition of origin is difficult to authenticate. However, there is a general understanding among many scholars that the Mongoloid of North-East India migrated to their present habitats from China and its surrounding areas. The discovery of pleistocene fossil remains at CHOUKOUTIEN about 90 kilometres south of Peking and the subsequent findings in the Huang Ho and Yangtse Kiang river valley basins suggest the early home of the Mongoloid people found traceable is in these river valley basins. It is estimated that many tribal groups of the Northeast India must have left that place around 230 B. C., in fear of Emperor Qin Shi Huang at the time of the making of ‘Cheng Ching’ or ‘the Great Wall’ of China. Leaving China, they claimed to have settled at Thaungdut in the Chindwin river valley of Myanmar wherefrom they moved further north-westward till they reached Imphal valley where they now are found.

From Imphal valley they were again further divided into three groups who are broadly grouped as given below Shimray (2000).

1. Shokvao - Hungphun-Meizailung group (Ukhrul Tangkhul group): They are the pioneers among others to occupy their present country. There is no evidence of any settlement prior to them in the Tangkhul country;

2. Makhel - Phungcham-Lungngathan group (including the Mao and Zaliangrong Nagas apart from, Ao, Sema, Lotha, Rengma, Chekasang, etc...) AND

3. The successive wave that came after.

From the preceding paragraphs, it could be observed that there were two theories of origin of the Nagas of Manipur. One may be attributed to the ‘Makhel Origin’ and the other to the ‘Thaungdut Origin’ as per

contentions of Gangmumei Kabui and Sothing W. S. Shimray respectively. Yet, the Thaungdut origin appears to be closer to the Kuki claim of 'Cave origin' believed located somewhere in China, though some others, such as, Ginzatuang (Ginzatuang, 1973) claimed it to be in Tibet.

4. Kuki

The Kukis in general believe that they came out of China during the reign of Chinese Emperor, Chinglung or Chie'nlung, around 200 B.C. Zawla claimed that the Kukis came out of the Great Wall of China in about 225 B.C., during the reign of Shih Huangti whose cruelty was then at its height (Zawal, 1976) through the bowel of the earth or a cave called Chinlung or Sinlung by the Lushais and the Hmars or Khul by the Thadous, Paite, Gangte, Vaipheis, Simte, Zou, etc., and Khur by the Aimol, Anal, Chiru, Chothe, Kom (Gangte, 1993) etc..

5. Other Communities

In due course of time, the Manipuri Muslims or Meitei Pangan settled in Manipur since the seventeenth centaury. They adopted Meitei Language as their mother tongue and now form an integral part of society of Manipur. Many Indian Communities who migrated to Manipur at the end of the nineteenth century were the Bihari oil crushers, the Bengalis and during the colonial period, came the Marwaris, Nepalis, and after India's independence, the Punjabis both Hindus and Sikhs, Tamils and others Gangmumei Kabui (1991). Thus, Manipur with her pluralistic social fabric presents a picture of homogeneity and heterogeneity with the multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-lingual base of culture and civilisation.

6. Conclusion

Manipur is a pluralistic society consisting of three major ethnic groups namely, the Meitei, Naga and Kuki-Chin with various migrant communities and the Manipuri Muslims known as Meitei Pangal. Manipur has inherited the ethnic diversity as a legacy of her own long history. Social and cultural pluralism is the core of the social fabric of Manipur.

At present, all these communities without exception, are extremely conscious about their rights namely, political, economic, social, and cultural including their utmost well-being, moreover, they are extremely emotional. The concept of sense of belongingness, oneness, inclusivity and practising multiculturalism are completely absent from the mindset of the masses. Instead, everyone is highly ethnocentric. "*Ism*" and "this is mine" are the contextualized ethics of everyone in Manipur. It is time to formulate by framing a Policy to effectively regulate the social harmonization among the communities locally and vice versa, as a step to "breakthrough" the stereotype which is the essence of identity of any ethnic community. Let us celebrate ethnicities as a source of common strength instead of troubles and problems. Sensitization and conceptualization are equally important tools of multiculturalism subject to, defending and guarding the right of minorities- poorest of the poors. Knowing and learning to understand and also paying utmost due regard to another language, food habits, customs, religion, etc., etc. are some of the devices to be adopted, apart from intermarriages, the space to communities promoting perpetual and sustainable peace in the State. Therefore, adopting multiculturalism and to foster the same and translate into actions is perhaps the need of the hour.

Conflict of Interest: *The author declares no conflict of interest.*

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