

Third Revised and Enlarged Edition

HISTORY OF MANIPUR

Pre-colonial Period



Gangmumei Kamei

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History of Manipur, now running into third revised and enlarged edition is a treatise by noted historian Professor Gangmumei Kamei. An authoritative work on the History of Manipur.

Professor Gangmumei Kamei is a historian and a writer. Currently, a member of Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), he was a Professor of History in Manipur University. He was awarded Platinum Jubilee Samman 2010 by the Manipuri Sahitya Parishad for his lifelong contribution to Manipur history and tribal culture. He was also awarded a National Fellowship by Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla (2010-2012). He was also a Minister in the Government of Manipur. He has written extensively on history and culture of Manipur including Northeast India and indigenous communities of the region. A social and political activist, a public academician, he gracefully combines in himself the dual role of a scholar and an activist.



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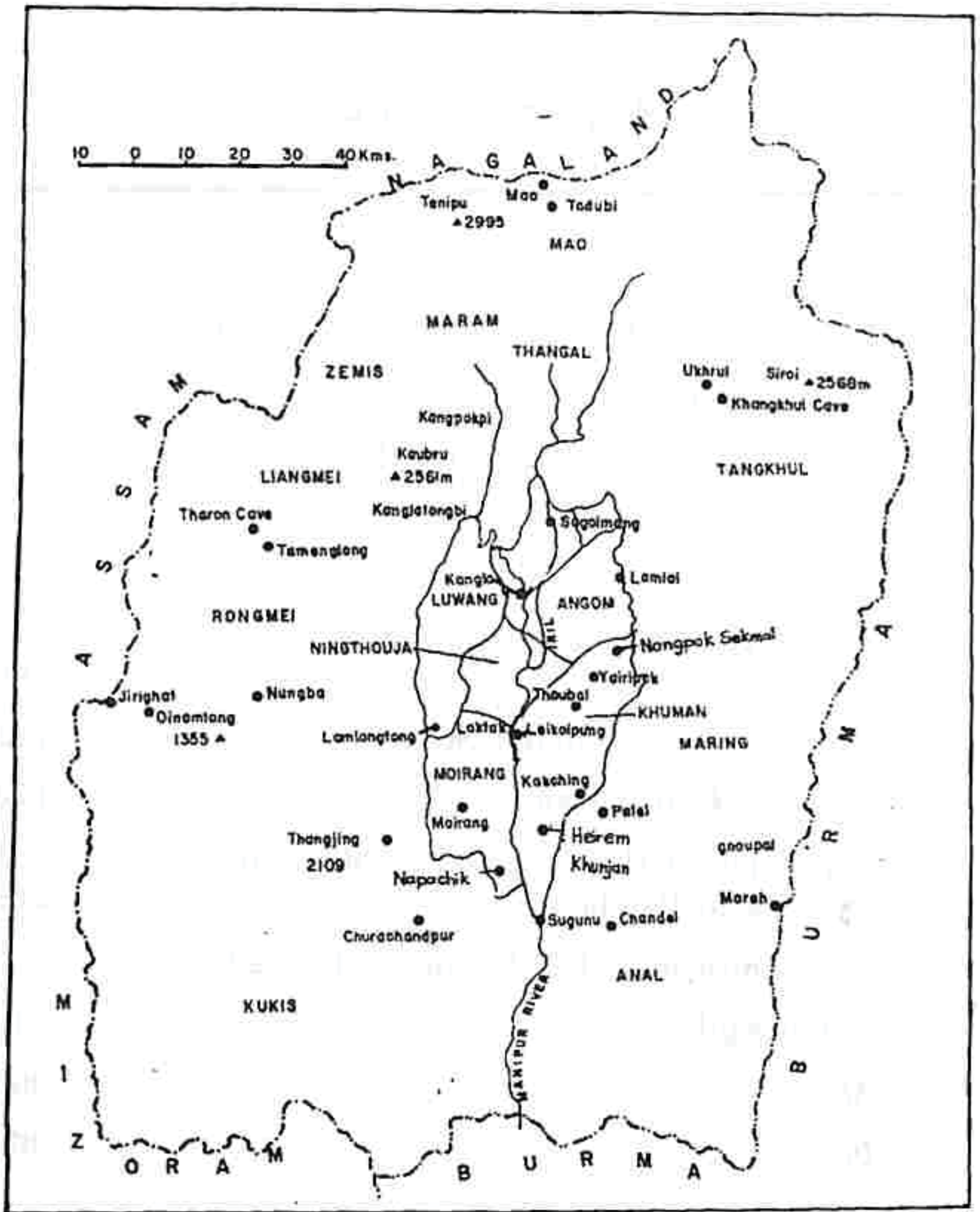
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Map of Manipur Clan Principalities

Preface to the Third Revised and Enlarged Edition

A History of Manipur published in 1991 has gone into several imprints. It has been widely circulated in India and abroad. Several Indian universities have included this book in the reading list both in undergraduate and post-graduate courses of history.

General reading public in Manipur and India have shown greater understanding of the history and culture of Manipur.

There are requests from several sources that a revised edition in paperback will be most welcome. Hence, this paperback edition. Therefore, I am thankful to the publisher Mr. M.P. Misra of Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi for the paperback edition. I wish the reading public especially the students will welcome it. Please note the change of my name.

9th March 2015
Imphal

GANGMUMEI KAMEI

Preface to First Edition

The *History of Manipur* is the story of the evolution of the culture and society of a remarkable people who built up their cradle of civilization in Manipur valley amidst the mountain ranges that divide India and Burma. The beautiful valley of Imphal which is situated on the trade and migration route between South Asia and South East Asia was a valley of cultural assimilation of the varied people who came to this hilly country in search of land, fortune, better living and glory. The author does not entertain any claim to the originality of the informations which are analysed and presented in this work. This work is indicative of the current state of research and investigation on the history of ancient and medieval Manipur. The author has made an humble attempt to reconstruct the history of the beautiful country inhabited by various ethnic groups from the very early times by utilizing the archaeological evidences, literary and historical sources. I wonder whether this historical methodology has been successful in presenting a rational history of the period. I have tried to cull the history from the myriad of myths, legends, traditions and semi-historical texts in the reconstruction of the history of Manipur. I have also tried to separate the myth and sentiment from the historical and real events. However, despite the ideal inspired by the famous German poet Goethe that the historian's duty is to separate the truth from the false, the certain from the uncertain, it is a difficult task to apply this eternal dictum. It must be confessed that the present work is my response to the challenge of teaching and research

on the regional history of Manipur and North East India in the Jawaharlal Nehru University and Manipur University. I have taken the help of a large number of scholars in the preparation of this work. And I wish to thank everyone of them. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Romila Thapar who made a significant decision in the introduction of History of Manipur in the Post Graduate courses in History in JNU Centre, Imphal. However, it was Professor Amalendu Guha who suggested that I should write a history of Manipur. I am grateful to him.

I am thankful to Dr. Lal Dena, Associate Professor, Dr. N. Joy Kumar Singh, Associate Professor and my colleagues Dr. M. Jitendra Singh, Associate Professor in the Department of History, Manipur University for his assistance in the preparation of this small work. I owe a lot to Shri N. Khelchandra Singh, the most authentic scholar of Manipur's past history and literature, from whom I got historical materials.

I used to discuss many aspects of history with Professor B.K. Roy Burman, a distinguished scholar and anthropologist with a deep insight into the historical interpretation of the past events in the global and universal perspective. My interactions with him greatly helped me in formulating my ideas on historical ecology, ethno-history, socio-cultural formation, state formation process and identity formation and identity expansion in Manipur, North East India and South East Asia. I am grateful to him.

I also utilize the services of my students who are research scholars in the Department of History, especially, Dr. L. Basanti Devi, Ksh. Shyamkanhai Singh and Dr. N. Pramodini Devi in this work. I got assistance from Dr. P. Nabachandra Singh, Assistant Professor in Manipuri Language and Literature for interpreting archaic Meitei words of the chronicles. I would like to thank Dr. S. Tomba Singh, Associate Professor of Manipuri Language and Literature and Shri S. Bhagya Singh of S. R. Institute of Manipuri Studies for allowing me to use the excellent papers of the seminars conducted by the Institute. I also thank my friend B Kullachandra Shamia for making

several historical manuscripts available to me. I am grateful to Prof. Arambam Lokendra, a perceptive scholar with whom I had the privilege of close interaction on the evolution of Meitei society and culture.

I have to say that the chapter 1, Introductory: Land and People is a modified version of my paper Glimpses in the Land and People of Ancient Manipur included in Dr. N. Sanajaoba (Ed.), *Manipur: Past and Present*. I would like to thank Principal M. Ibotombi Singh of Moirang College and his brother for the help given on the history of Moirang.

I also thank my esteemed colleague, Professor S.N. Pandey who gave a great encouragement and inspiration by making frequent queries about the progress of the book. I am grateful to all learned colleagues of History Department for providing me the necessary academic climate and circumstances for me, Professor L.B. Verma, Dr. G.P. Singh, Dr. D.N. Asopa, K.K. Das, Dr. S. Irene, N. Lokendra Singh who interacted with me on several occasions. I had the opportunity of discussing the problems of methodology and historical interpretation with Prof. Verma whose sharp mind and deep knowledge of history as a discipline have been of great benefit to me.

I would like to mention the critical observations made by Maharaj Kumar Priya Brata Singh on different aspects of history and culture of Manipur. It is because of his abiding love for the culture and history of the people of Manipur that I have dedicated this work to him as a token of love, respect and appreciation.

I must thank Prof. K.J. Mahale, Vice Chancellor of Manipur University, a profound scholar of genuine humanism and an educationist of rare quality and lover of knowledge who encourages his colleagues to widen the frontier of knowledge.

I have to acknowledge the great help given by Miss Thambalsana Kamei, Librarian of State Central Library in making any books I required available to me at any time which went a long way in completing this work.

I must thank Ch. Radheshyam Singh, Deputy Librarian of Manipur University Library and staff including R.K. Budhi

Singh and Shyamo Singh. I acknowledge the assistance I received from the authorities of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, National Library, Calcutta, National Archive, Ratan Tata Library, Delhi School of Economics, JNU Library, Central Secretariat Library, New Delhi, Vishva Bharati and Gauhati University Libraries.

I am also grateful to my wife and members of my family who shared with me the ups and downs of an academicians and social activist like me.

I must thank Editor Noyal Joseph, for his painstaking editorial works which have gone a long way in presenting this book in the present form. It was a pleasure to work with a bright and young editor, Noyal Joseph.

I thank L. Rabindranath Sharma and L. Bikram Singh, of Manipur University who took the trouble of typing my manuscripts. I also thank M. Lalgurung of my office for his devoted works. Then my thanks goes to S.K. Malik of National Publishing House, New Delhi for his kindly agreeing to publish this work.

GANGMUMEI KABUI

CHAPTER 1

Introductory: The Land and People

Name of Manipur

Manipur was an ancient kingdom which had enjoyed the fortune and glory and experienced sorrow and vicissitudes of her long history. Manipur is a cradle of human civilisation and creativity which has come under the influence of many cultures of many different ethnic groups who came at various times and contributed to the growth of the civilisation in this hilly state in India's north eastern frontier. Manipur, being a gateway of India to South East Asia, was influenced by her geographic situation and ecology in the shaping of her history and cultural development.

Manipur literally means the city or the land of gems. According to Manipuri historical work, Sanamahi Laikan, the name Manipur was first officially introduced in the early eighteenth century during the reign of Hinduised Garibaniwaza (1709-48)¹. "Mekhala" was another name of the kingdom as indicated by a coin of the same king describing him as "Mekhaleswar", Lord of Mekhala or Mekhale.² This name did not occur in the pre-Hindu literatures, especially the chronicles of the kingdom.³ Her indigenous names are Kangleipak, Poireipak and Meitrabak.⁴

In the legendary and proto-historical period, the principality which centred at Kangla, the capital of the later Meitei kingdom was known by several names which are referred to in both historical and literary works.⁵ However, this land and her people were known by different names to her neighbours, the Shans or Pongs of Upper Burma with whom she had political and cultural contacts called her Cassay, the Burmese, another eastern neighbour and rival power called her Kathe, perhaps derived from Cassay (Manipuris settled in Burma were known as Ponna), the Assamese name for Manipur and her inhabitants was Meklee.⁶ In the first recorded treaty between East India Company and Jai Singh, Raja of Manipur in 1762, the kingdom was recorded as Meckley.⁷ It was shown as Meckley by a British cartographer of the eighteenth century in Rennell's Memoir and Map of India. But the coins issued by Raja Jai Singh and his successors adopted the title of 'Manipureshwar', the Lord of Manipur⁸ while Meckley was discarded. Thus as a direct consequence of Sanskritisation, these three names, Mekhala, Meckley and Manipur were used as the names of the kingdom in the eighteenth century. Later on, a Sanskrit work, *Dharni Samhita* which was written in the reign of Gambhir Singh (1825-34) popularised the legends of the derivation of Mekhala and Manipur.⁹ It mentions the legend of Siva-Parvati-Ananta according to which Siva and Parvati performed the Ras Leela in Manipur after draining away the water in the valley through a tunnel made by Siva's trident (trisula). Ananta, the serpent god was overjoyed and took out the gems from his hood and sprinkled the land with sparkling gems; hence, Manipur (Mani = gem, pur = city or land). Another legend built around Siva was that the dead body of Siva's consort Sati, supposed to be a former incarnate of Parvati was cut into pieces by the chakra of Lord Vishnu and the torso of Sati with Mekhala (female wrapper) fell down in the land, thus Mekhaladesh (land of the Mekhala).¹⁰ These were myths created and popularised by the Brahmin scholars to give puranic derivation of 'Manipur'. Vijoy Panchali, a nineteenth century history of Manipur says that the land was called Aranya Nagar, Mahendranagar, Mekhaladesh and finally Manipur.¹¹

Manipur of the Mahabharata?

Reference has been made to a kingdom named Manipur in the great Indian epic, *Mahabharata* (Adi and Asvamedha Parvans) while describing the adventures of the Pandava hero Arjuna who married Chitrangada, a princess of Manipur, who gave birth to Babhruvahana who became the king of Manipur.

The royal family of Manipur after conversion into Hinduism claimed descent from the son of Arjuna and preceding him, many hoary puranic figures as indicated by the royal geneology prepared after Hinduisation. But there was no mention of Babhruvahna or Arjuna in the pre-Garibaniwaz chronicles and geneologies of the royal family which was founded by Nongda Lairen Pakhangba. Manipur's alleged Aryan connection should be viewed as an aspect of Sankritisation and an attempt to gain respectability in the Hindu world, specially among the royal families of India which was the normal practice of all converted ruling families either Hindus or Buddhists, in North East India and South East Asia. As S.K. Chatterjee has rightly observed, "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."¹² Apart from the concocted royal geneology, serious attempt was made to imbibe this tradition in the popular mind of the people. It may be mentioned that the Aswamedha Parva of the *Mahabharata* rendered in Bengali by Gangadas Sen was translated into Manipuri and entitled "Langoi Shagol Thouba" and sung in a ballad form.¹³

While the Aryan origin of Manipur's royal family and their Hindu subjects is now an exploded myth, the identification of this ancient land with Manipur of the *Mahabharata* (both of Vyasa and Jaimini's *Asvamedha*) and *Bhavisya Purana* is a controversial issue and draws the attention of several eminent scholars. What has been narrated in the epic is not necessarily historical but the mention of Manipur in these works may be a reflection of the expanding horizon of the geographical knowledge among the Sanskrit writers. The scholars of

Brahmanical school in Manipur, backed up by the royal court and later on by the orthodox but powerful ruling class had written volumes in support of the identification of Manipur with that of the epic, the doyen of the scholars being the great Sanskrit scholar Atombapu Sharma.¹⁴ A group of Indian and English scholars did not support the view but located Manipur in or around Kalinga in Orissa.¹⁵ A determined group of 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, Hinduisation had brought this name. The original name of the kingdom is Kangleipak.¹⁶

Mahabharata refers to the visits of Arjuna to Manipur. During his self exile, in the course of his wanderings in eastern India, Arjuna visited Anga (Bihar), Vanga (Bengal), Kalinga (Orissa) and travelled along the Mahendra mountain and reached Manipur going along the sea coast. He married Chitrangada, daughter of king Chitravahana. He stayed for three years during which a son named Babhruvahana was born. Arjuna left Manipur for South India in course of which, he rescued five apsaras, celestial nymphs from their form of crocodiles. Arjuna returned to Manipur and saw his son now enthroned as the king after the expiry of his grandfather king Chitravahana. Then he left for Dwarka. After the great battle of Kurukshetra he visited Manipur during his military campaign of the Horse Sacrifice (Aswamedha) of his brother Emperor Yudhisthira. There was a provoked battle between Arjuna and Babhruvahana in which the father was killed by his son but, the father was revived and they were later on reunited. And Babhruvahana and his mother Chitrangada went to Hastinapur and attended the Aswamedha sacrifice.

There are two versions of Aswamedha Parvan of the *Mahabharata*: Vyasa's *Mahabharata* and Jaimini's *Aswamedha*, a surviving extract. Aswamedha Parvan of Vyasa's *Mahabharata* narrates that Arjuna's expeditionary forces defeated the king of Trigarte (modern Jullundur in Punjab), then invaded Pragjyotisa (Kamarup of Assam) and defeated its king Vajradatta, son of Bhagadatta who was killed in the battle

of Kurukshetra, Arjuna invaded Sindhu, the kingdom of Jayadratha and accepted submission of his widow Duhshala with her grandson. Then he came to Manipur and fought a fierce battle against his son, after having reconciled with Babhruvahana, he invaded Rajgriha, capital of Magadha in Bihar, then Vanga, Puncha, Kerala territories along the coast, Cedi, Kasi, Kosala, Kirate, Tangana, Dasarna (whose ruler was named Chitrangada) Nisada, Dravida, Andhra, Raudra, Maihisika, Kollaguri, Gokarna Probhasa, Dwarka, Pancanada and Gandhara.¹⁷

The earlier two visits to Manipur show that the kingdom was located near Kalinga and Mahendra mountain and near the sea. But the present Manipur valley situated amidst the great mountain ranges which are a part of the eastern Himalayas forming the great divide between India and Burma is very far away from Kalinga and the sea.

Jaimini's *Aswamedha*¹⁸ gives a different version of the itinerary of Arjuna's military campaign. Arjuna invaded Mahismati, went to Vindhya mountain, Campakapuri, Bhayanaka country, Strirajya, the land of women ruler, Vriksa country where the trees had men, women, cattle and elephants in place of fruits, and then various regions where men had long ears which served as covers for their body, many eyes, feet, horse and donkey's head, then to capital of Bhisana; after this Manipur, the capital of Babhruvahana. After the defeat of Arjuna, Krishna, Kunti and Bhima came to Manipur and spent five nights there. Then Arjuna followed the horse to the land of Mayurdhwaja, Swaraswatipuri ruled by the king Vira Varman, Kuntalaka, then to the sea and to Sindhu, the land of Jayadratha.

One notices the absence of geographical contiguity in the itinerary of Arjuna's expeditionary forces which was the result of interpolation by the compilers of the great epic. The kingdoms and sites mentioned in Vyasa's *Mahabharata* and Jaimini's *Aswamedha* except a few, are quite different. Therefore, a rational interpretation of the geographical location of the places visited or conquered by Arjuna given in the two versions mentioned above, reinforced by the absence of any

evidence of Arjuna's connection with this land in the pre-Hindu chronicles of Manipur, does not lead to the identification of Babhruvahana's kingdom with the present state of Manipur.

Even R.C. Majumdar, a great exponent of Aryanization thinks that all the references made in epic and other Sanskrit literatures, to places and peoples in eastern India are reflection of the process of Aryanisation and observes the following "As regards Manipur, its identification with the present state of Manipur has been rejected by many scholars . . . Arjuna first proceeded to Mahendra mountains (*i.e.*, Eastern Ghat) in Kalinga and then proceeded to Manipur on the sea. This evidently locates Manipur in the Orissa Coast, a view taken by a number of scholars.¹⁹

It must be noted that Manipur is mentioned along with neighbouring kingdoms of north east in the Brahma Khanda of *Bhavisya Purana*: "Varendra—Tamralipti ca Hedamba—Manipurakam Lauhityas Tripuram Caiva Jayantakhyam Susangakam". This was rendered by S.K. Chatterjee as follows:

"Varendra (north central Bengal), Tamralipta (south-east Bengal) Hidimba (the Kachari Kingdom: Dimapur) Manipura, the Lauhitya (Brahmaputra tract: Assam proper) the Tripura country, the land named Jayanta (Jaintia country) and Sushanga (= North Maimansingh, Susang: (Durgapur, the seat of formerly powerful Brahman, Lord of the Marches' from the thirteenth century, still inhabited by the Haijangs, a Bengalised Garo or Bodo tribe).²⁰

Basing on the foundation of Sushanga state by a Brahmin from Kanauj, named Someswar Pathak in the end of the thirteenth century, it is hinted that *Bhavisya Purana*, perhaps was compiled in the fourteenth century. Chatterjee opines, "By that time the Meitei state had got its Sanskrit name of Manipura,"²¹ thus proposing a new theory that Manipur was a Sanskrit name used by Indian Sanskrit scholars. But since the fourteenth century, we have fairly a reliable chronicle with chronology which does not indicate any such name.

Manipur in Ptolemy's Geography

Ptolemy, a Greek astronomer and geographer of Alexandria in his *Geography of Further India* (circa 140 A.D.) has referred to a number of places, cities and tribes in North East India and Burma.²² His references are vague and identification of these toponyms and ethnonyms is by no means easy. G.R. Gerini made an elaborate attempt at such an identification. For instance, Kirhadia of Ptolemy is identified with the land of the Kiratas²³ the Indo-Mongoloid tribes covering Meghalaya, the Barak and Surma valleys and Tripura where the best malabathrum (tezpat) was available.²⁴ One may naturally include the western hills of Manipur which are inhabited by the said group of tribes where tezpat is available in plenty.

Ptolemy mentions three principalities, *viz.*, Tugma, Triglypton and Mreura. Tugma has been identified with Tammu, a former Shan principality, now a small township in the Kabaw valley of Upper Burma²⁵ which became a part of Manipur in the fifteenth century, But Gerini's further surmises that it might be a city of Manipur or Kachar is redundant and unnecessary. Triglypton is located by Gerini in Kale, another principality in the Chindwin basin south of Tammu or in Upper Kuladham in Chin Hills while Yule located it in Tripura.²⁶ With regard to Mreura, Gerini tried to identify it with the legendary principality of the Sakya clan of Moriya, supposed to have flourished in the Kabaw valley as referred to in the Burmese chronicles.²⁷ But P.C. Choudhury identifies Mreura with Manipur²⁸ perhaps because of its proximity to Tammu and Kale. His identification lacks convincing justification. Temala or Tamala of Ptolemy which is identified by the Gerini with Timira of the *Ramayana* has been located by him in the Arakan Yoma with Bassein and Cape Negrais.²⁹ Recently Ch. Budhi Singh tries to identify Timira of the *Ramayana* (Temala or Tamala of Ptolemy) with the land of the Meites. Meitei or Timei (anagrammatised from Meitei) of Manipur on the basis of Timira being a land abundant in gold and where there was silk worm rearing.³⁰ This problem will be discussed further in the subsequent paragraphs. But as Ch.

Budhi Singh himself has stated, the Meiteis are not silk breeders, their art was learnt by them from the Chinese at a later period, it will be difficult to make such an identification. According to Ptolemy, Temala was a port city and not an internal country. However, despite the difficulty to identify Manipur with any of the toponymns or ethnonymns of Ptolemy, it is very likely that this land was known to the Greek geographer and the Greek and Roman traders from whom he gathered his informations, as there was already a caravan trade between China and the Roman empire by land route through Upper Burma, Manipur, India and Afghanistan (at that time, part of the Kushan empire) by the first and second centuries of the Christian era.

Geographical Setting and Historical Ecology

Historical ecology means the changes and transformation in the ecosystem of a geographical region or a biosphere over a length of time or centuries. Historical ecology deals with time and space. It includes the human and social environment, man's continuous communion with nature and the environment. It is also concerned with the geographical and tectonic history of an ecosystem, its geographical features like mountain and river system and forests in terms of their classification and typology and man's encroachment on the ecosystem for fulfilling his needs for survival and to be prosperous by exploiting the environment for which men built up social, economic and political structures.

Manipur is a country of blue mountains and green valleys. Her natural beauty has inspired her poets and bards to praise her glory.³¹ Manipur is situated at the eastern frontier of India, on a branch of the eastern Himalayas which protrude towards the south along the Indo-Burma border. Manipur's long march in her historical development from a small clan principality at Kangla in the heart of Imphal to a powerful kingdom comprising the surrounding hills and territories in the Chindwin basin is reflected in the expanding geographical horizon of her territory. R.B. Pemberton wrote, "Manipur's

size extended or contracted according to the fluctuating fortunes and powers of her monarchs.”³² The present boundary of Manipur with an area of 22,327 sq. km. more or less remained fixed since the controversial transfer of Kabaw valley to Burma in 1834. She is bounded in the north by Nagaland, in the east and the south, by Burma, in the south-west by Mizoram and in the west by Assam.³³

Manipur is geographically divided into the hills and the centrally situated valley. The Manipur valley is a cradle of human civilisation and Alfred Lyall rightly describes it as “an oasis of comparative civilisation amidst the barbarians.”³⁴ The valley is oval shaped. 790 mtr. above sea level and surrounded by the hills in all sides. This geographic division is a determinant factor in the socio-political historical development of the land. The valley inhabited by the Meiteis is one-tenth of the total area of the state, her dense population, highly fertile land, advanced technology and better social and economic organisations led to the growth of kingdom while in the hills, the political systems could not develop beyond the village society or republics. The stiff mountain ranges and the narrow river valleys which provide secure habitat with enough sustenance to the pre-historic people are not conducive to the growth of state systems. The mountains are divided into western hills comprising the Koubru-Laimaton; Makui Longdi, Kala Naga and Vangai ranges which are the southern branches of the great Barail, while the eastern hills comprising the Sirohi and Mapithel and Yamodoung ranges are the branches of the Patkai mountain on Indo-Burma border. These enormous hill ranges appear to be insurmountable barriers for isolation; but in reality, the tracks through these ranges are the routes for both trade and human migration for the little known men of the Indo-Mongoloid race, the dark Negrito and Dravidian and the tall and fair complexioned Caucasoids who trickled into this land in search of land for habitat and livelihood, for wealth, power and glory from the pre-historic times down to the present century. The important mountain peaks are the Mt. Essau or Tenipu, the Sirohi peak in the east and Koubru peak in the west.³⁵

Geological Formation

The geological and tectonic history of Manipur can be understood as a part of the geological evolution of North East India as a unit. The region includes the Himalayas of Arunachal Pradesh and its branches along the Indo-Burma border in Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and plateau of Meghalaya and the river valleys in the region. This region has the oldest crystalline rocks of the Meghalaya plateau to the youngest alluvium. It is presumed by the geologists³⁶ that there existed a shallow sea called the Tethys which provided a geosynclinal environment in this part of the world during the lower Paleozoic and Mesozoic periods. However, the Shillong plateau of Meghalaya remained a land mass since the precambrian times. The Tethys continued to receive sediments eroded from the Archadan rocks during Paleozoic and Mesozoic periods.

“During the Cretaceous period (60 to 110 m.y.) the North East India underwent orogenic movement caused by geodynamic forces. The long accumulated sediments on the floor of the Tethys were deformed as ridges and basins. This caused the appearance of land on the one hand and deepening of parts of the Tethys on the other. . . . The orogenic earth movements producing tectonic highlights, ridges and basin were followed by periods of quiescence, prolonged erosion and deposition of an enormous scale — sediments were deposited shrinking geosynclinal shelf or newly formed lakes and lagoons.” It has been pointed out that the oldest rocks found in eastern Manipur belong to Cretaceous group, including shales, slates, siltstones and quartzite. This area experienced serpentine rocks. And the serpentine rocks are younger than Cretaceous. The limestones of Cretaceous occur near Ukhrul and Hundung. The rock types in this area are shales, mudstone and sandstones of the Disang series.

It is said that “the stratigraphy of Manipur is better understood from Eocene period (40 to 60 m.y.). The Cretaceous formations are overlain by Lower Tertiary formations belonging to Eocene period. In Chandel district, the sedimentary rocks to the west and north west of the region belong to Disang series.

The Disang and Jaintia series are overlain by the Barail series belonging to Oligocene period. These sedimentary rocks form the Barail range. The Barail series occupy a large part of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. The Barail series is exposed in the Jaintia range of North Cachar and extends to Kohima cycline. The Barail series consists of sandstone, silotone, snudstone and conglosmerate. The Barail cover considerable tracts of Manipur west and Manipur north. In Tamenglong area, the rock type are the shale sand stones of the Barail series."³⁷

The formation of the central plain of Imphal, according to E.W. Dun, was due to a stream being blocked by some convulsion of nature.³⁸ The popular notion is that the plain was formed as a result of a lake being filled up by river borne sediments. But the geologists explain that the Imphal plain was formed due to the 'uplift' in the southern mountain which led to the reversal of the drainage system and impounding of water in the area where we have the lakes and swamps.³⁹

Manipur is endowed with a large number of rivers and streams which traverse her mountains and valleys. The rivers of Manipur except the Leimatak flow from the north to the south. The Barak, the longest and largest river, starting from a point of northern hills flow into western and southern hills, then to the Cachar and the Surma valleys of Bangladesh. The Irang and the Makru of the Tamenglong area flow into the great Barak. The Imphal or Manipur river (Minno of Ptolemy) traverses the valley of Manipur, starting from the hills to the north of valley flows into Chin hills and to the Chindwin in Burma. The Imphal, the Iril, the Thoubal, the Nambol rivers which run across the valley provide the ecological environment for the Meitei civilisation. These rivers and the fertile banks provide livelihood to the people who live in their watershed systems, though during the rains, they turn into devastating demons of devouring floods and bring forth the alluvial soil enriching the fertility of the land. The Barak and the Jiri rivers in the west are navigable for a pretty long course. The Imphal river has a long mileage of navigation.

Manipur has a large number of lakes which have greatly reduced during the past one century. The Loktak lake is the

biggest fresh water lake on whose banks grew up the principalities of the Moirang and the Khumans. In the hills, in the west bank of the Barak off the Falls are a group of lakes known as the Zeilad. These lakes, river, streams and mountain peaks are interwoven in the life, culture and traditions of the people. Whoever occupying the fertile river basin are the wielders of economic power and ultimately controlled the state system.

Forests

The climate with its variations according to altitude is very healthy and the rainfall is between seventy four to one hundred inches a year. The hills of Manipur are covered with rich forests; once upon a time, the valley was also covered with forests and swamps; now it is all denuded. The forests for centuries provided sustenance for the people. The principality which had control or access to forests in the hills built up a strong government and they endured more than other which did not have such an advantage. The forests provide cultivation fields to the hill cultivator, wood, bamboo and grass for construction of houses, and daily means of livelihood. They are also hunting ground of the animals. However, over the ages, particularly since the commercialisation of forests during the colonial period, the forests have fallen prey to the axe of the shifting cultivators and the avarice of the commercial extractors which have denuded the forests of Manipur.

The entire forests of Manipur are included in the Himalayan system. Altitude is the potent ecological factor in classifying the various vegetational zones of a region, namely, (i) sub-montane zone, (ii) montane or temperate zone, (iii) sub-alpine, and (iv) alpine.

S.C. Sinha classifies forests of Manipur in the three major groups *i.e.*, Tropical Montaine, sub-tropical, Montaine Temperate.⁴⁰ The forests of Manipur are great natural resources of the region. R.B. Pemberton (1835) in the early nineteenth century was amazed by the richness of the Manipur forests. He writes, "I know no spot in India in which the products of

the forests are so varied and magnificent but their utility is entirely local, as the nature of the country precludes the possibility of transporting to foreign markets. . . The valley itself is practically free of forests although every village is surrounded by a grove of forest trees.⁴¹

Half a century later, E.W. Dun (1886) saw almost the same plentiful forests. He also noticed the effects of the climatic change on forests, agricultural practices, village settlement pattern and housing technology. He writes, "The climate at once rainy and temperate cover the hills in the western portion with thick forests and induces the inhabitants to grow rice, causes numerous rivers, streams and marshes, and encourage aquatic and water loving plants. Forest in the east is not thick as in the west. Oak replaces bamboo, firs for Nageshwar, a drier climate produced a lighter and different kind of jungle. The villages in the valley are situated on the banks of the river or edge of the lakes so that every household has some water near it."⁴²

Flora: Migration and Settlement

F. Kingdom Ward, the famous plant hunter has stated that Manipur is a part of the monsoon belt of South East Asia and naturally is included in the same ecosystem of the forests of the region.⁴³ He points out that the flora of Manipur has been identified with the flora of Assam hills. He writes, "Some ten thousand years ago, the climate of Manipur, as of all eastern India was far more colder than it is today. The vegetation must have been different; and no less so the forest. Another result of the constant wear and tear on the earth's crust of the heaving and squeezing, uplifting and sagging of the rocks is not only the gradual isolation of areas—mountain tops for example, but also the building of new line of communication between areas long divorced."⁴⁴ According to this hypothesis, ten thousand years ago the flora of the whole northern hemisphere was still struggling in the grip of the ice age during which the Himalayas were heavily iced and glaciers were formed. This led to the migration of the northern flora to the south. Luckier plants went down to the plains and

survived. Manipur has many evidences of glaciation on Siroihi and Koubru ranges. Manipur during the ice age was ringed by ice. Manipur must have been sterile at the time of maximum glaciation. And when the Sino-Himalayan ice cap vanished, the flora of Manipur was isolated on the tops of the mountains. According to Ward, "for long ages Manipur was almost completely sterilized. The problem was simple, it had no flora at all. It had been driven out by the cold. As the climate improved plant refugees began to return to their old homes from the warm south from the deep valleys and plains. These established themselves, multiplied until Manipur became a part of Indo-Malaysia flora whence the bulk of its new population was derived. . . . In fact the position of Manipur in the midst of glaciated mountains and astride one of the glaciated escape routes was peculiarly favourable for receiving contribution of flora from all directions."⁴⁵

Of the various flora mention should be made of the valuable trees like the teak on the Burmese border, the extraction of which was one of the causes of frequent conflicts between Manipur and Burma in the past, the Khasia pine available in the north east, the bamboo forests of the west, the agar which is one of the international trade commodities. The tea plants are available in the wild; in the nineteenth century and in early twentieth century, Manipur tea seeds were in great demand in Assam tea plantations. The most distinguished flora is the famous Sirohi lily (*Lilium macklinii* named after the maiden name of the wife of its discoverer F. Kingdon-Ward).⁴⁶ Of the fauna, the Indian hornbill and rarest of them all, the brow antlered deer known as the Sangai are worth mentioning.

Manipur on the Trade and Migration Route

Manipur is one of the routes between South Asia and South East Asia and Central Asia. Various ethnic groups belonging to southern Mongoloid group, the Tibeto-Burmans, the Indo-Aryans and a sizeable section of Tai (Shans) came to Manipur from pre-historic times down to the present day. The present ethnic groups of Manipur, viz., the Meiteis, the Naga tribes, the Kuki Chin tribes and other Indian communities are the

descendants of those migrating people. And Manipur and its central valley provided the ecological setting for building up a civilization. These migrating people brought with them varying degrees of technology ranging from the Old Stone Age rough stone tools to more refined neolithic and potters. With the coming of metal tools mostly bronze, copper and tin during the historical period from Thailand and Upper Burma cultural zone, the metal civilisation of Manipur was developed mostly through the trade.

According to a Chinese historian Ssu-ma-Chien (100 B.C.) Emperor Wu-Ti of Chuan Yuan period (140-134 B.C.) despatched a Chinese envoy named Chang Chien to Central Asia to establish a military alliance with Yue Chih tribes against the Huns who gave trouble to western borderland of China. The ambassador came to Ta-Hsia (Bactria) in Afghanistan in 127 B.C. To his great surprise, Chang Chien saw "clothes and bamboo" (probably Chinese silk and bamboo products) in the local markets. On enquiry he was told that these merchandise came from Szu-Chuan and another country of southern China (Yunan). These articles were purchased by merchants of Ta Hsia in India and they were brought to eastern India through Yunan and across northern India to Bactria.⁴⁷ Two centuries later, the history of later Han (Hou Han Shu) records that there was trade between China and India whose products were "elephants, rhinoceros, tortoise, shell, gold, silver, copper, lead and tin." It further records that China was in contact both commercial and diplomatic with Ta-Tsin (the Roman province of Syriya) through the central Asian route during the reign of Emperor Ho (A.D. 89-105). After a temporary disruption of this route due to the revolts of the people along it—the trade and diplomatic contact—this annal records the arrival in China in A.D. 120 of Ta Tsin of acrobats capable of working charms, breathing fire, knotting and unknotting their limbs unaided, interchanging the heads of cows and horses and dancing while juggling with a thousand balls. This gift was brought to the court of China by an ambassador from the land of Chan on the Burmese frontier (a Shan state according to P.M. Bagchi) and the petty king of this country was probably expressing in this way his desires

for the continuance of trade with his powerful neighbour to the north. He afterwards resold the Chinese products including silk to his Indian neighbours.⁴⁸

This trade intercourse was maintained through land routes across the mountain ranges between eastern India and upper Burma, two of which were through Manipur hills. L. Boulnois suggests that the route must have been by the Burma road.⁴⁹ The trade between Manipur and Yunan province of China was recorded in the *Chronicles of Manipur*, in 1630, the Chinese merchants visited the kingdom, and from them was learnt the art of manufacturing gun powder.⁵⁰ The trade continued as late as 1813 A.D.⁵¹ It has been suggested that it was roughly in this part of upper Burma that *Periplus of Erythrean Sea* placed the terminus of the annual journey made by that "scarcely civilised tribe called the Besatae small bodied men in broad flat faced and peace loving character. Once a year they came to sell their baskets of malbathrum leaves (tezpat) which were prepared on the spot and exported to India in the form of small balls".⁵² Besatae must be one of the tribal groups who sold tezpat leaves to Indian traders as they are doing now. Thus it is apparent that Manipur was in constant contact with Indian, Tai and Chinese traders indirectly with Roman traders in the early centuries of the Christian era. Influence of Chinese trade and technology was felt in Manipur, namely, introduction of silk and silk worm rearing, brick making and making of gun powder.

It is relevant to refer to the Indian trade with and colonisation in South East Asia and China. R.C. Majumdar writes, "The Indians also proceeded to Far East by land routes through Bengal, Manipur and Assam. They reached lower Burma through Arakan, and upper Burma through ravine passes in the Patkai range or Manipur hills. As already noted Chinese wares passed through land routes from Yunan and SzeChuan to northern India in the second century B.C. There are good grounds to hold that this route though difficult was frequently used in olden times."⁵³ G.E. Harvey mentions the trade routes with China; "Two (routes) were along the Irrawaddy and the Salween rivers, the third down the Chindwin river and through Manipur, took the caravan a three

months journey to Afghanistan where the silk of China were exchanged for the gold of Europe."⁵⁴ According to a tradition preserved in Burmese chronicle, *Maharaja Vamsa*, one Dhaja Raja, a Sakiyan prince settled at Manipura about 550 B.C. and later on conquered Tagoung or upper Pagan.⁵⁵ This is one of the many myths recorded in Burmese chronicles which need not be seriously discussed. It has been clearly interpreted by Gerini that the city in question was named Tagoung or Hastinapura. A.R. Pharay thinks that "the routes by which the Kshatriya princes was through Manipur which lies within the basin of the Irrawaddy. The northern part of the Kabo valley which is still called Maurera said to be the name of the tribe to which Asoka belonged."⁵⁶ Pemberton gives a description of four routes, two from India to Manipur and two from Manipur to Burma. These must have been the ancient trade routes.⁵⁷

The People: Origin of the Meiteis

Manipur's population has three major ethnic groups: the Meiteis of the valley, the Nagas and Kuki-Chins of the surrounding hills. The people are predominantly Mongoloid with some non-Mongoloid elements, who speak Tibeto-Burman languages. Historical reasons greatly influenced the independent growth of these social groups with varying degrees of cultural development and civilisation, of whom the Meiteis are the most dominant and advanced nationality.

The origin of the Meitei is shrouded in mystery and the study on the subject is greatly influenced by the religious faiths and the political ideologies of the Meiteis themselves, thus making the problem highly speculative and controversial. The ethnic name, Meitei, B.H. Hodgson in the mid nineteenth century thought, was a, "combined appellation of Siamese 'Tai' and Kochin Chinese 'Moy' (Moy Tai = Moytai = Moitai = Meitei and that the Meiteis belong to the Moi section of the great Tai race."⁵⁸

T.C. Hodson suggested that it was derived from the blending of two words; 'Mei' means man or people and 'Tei' meaning separate: Meitei = separate people.⁵⁹ Another

indigenous explanation is that Mitei (not Meitei) is derived from the creation of man by God in His image: Mi = image: Tei = modelled = Modelled after God's image = Mitei.⁶⁰ Chongtham Budhi Singh proposes that this ethnonym is a blending of two tribes of ancient China: Mei and Ti = Mei + ti = Meiti = Meitei.⁶¹ However, it is well known that historically, the word Meitei was used during the period of the establishment of the Ningthouja dynasty by Pakhangba, to mean this clan or dynasty and the ethnic and social groups who were politically and socially integrated within the suzerainty of the Ningthouja.

Aryan Origin ?

Of all the theories of the origin of the Meiteis, the Aryan origin was most enthusiastically propounded and vehemently rejected by the protagonists and their opponents respectively.⁶² This Aryan connection was an outcome of the adoption of Hinduism by the ruling family and the people of valley in the eighteenth century and resultant claim of the descent of the ruling dynasty from Babhruvahana, a scion of the Pandava hero, Arjuna of the *Mahabharata*. In spite of the best efforts of the great Brahmin scholars backed by the royalty and ruling elite it cannot be established that the Meiteis as an ethnic group or as a language is Aryan or Indo-Aryan. The fact is that they are neither of Aryan stock nor of the Indo-Aryan speakers. However, there is a historical truth that the Meitei community had absorbed the Aryan elements in its fold as many Aryan colonisers, adventurers and immigrants came to Manipur or passed through this land, as shown in the preceding paragraphs in course of their colonisation of or trade with South West China and South East Asia as Manipur was on the route of trade and migration in the past and it continues to be so even in the present century. The representatives of Aryan elements are Manipuri Brahmins and the Nongchup Haram (those immigrants from the west, i.e., India) section of the Meiteis. The Brahmins and the Hinduised Meiteis including the Meiteised Hindu Aryans helped the propagation of the claim of the Aryan origin. The identification of the

followers of Hinduism with the Aryan speakers, a confusion of a religion with a language or a race was the cause of this controversy. The Meiteis as a whole are not Aryan, but there are Aryan elements amongst them.

Mon-Khmer and Tai Connection

Hodson's suggestion of the Moi-Tai origin of the Meiteis was rejected by T.C. Hodson on the basis of the Meitei being a Tibeto-Burman language and the Tai being of the Siamese-Chinese linguistic family"³ though both of them belong to the Sino-Tibetan linguistic family. Hodson writes, "It is difficult specially on linguistic ground to group the Meitheis with the Tai race where the structure and vocabulary of the Meitheis language alike agree with those the Tibeto-Burman."⁶⁴ This ethnic blending of the Moi and Tai tribes has been described by an anthropologist as a puzzling ethnological exercise'.⁶⁵ Though not of the Tai origin, it has been conjectured that there was a relationship between the Meitei, Mon-Khmer and Tai, because of historical connection, both conquest and socio-cultural contacts which produced Tai influence on the language and culture of the Meiteis. Recent archaeological findings of the excavations in Tharon cave, Napachik in Manipur point to the existence of Mon Khmer speaking Austroloid Mongoloid people in Manipur who migrated to this land before the advent of the Tibeto-Burman speakers.⁶⁶ These Mon-Khmer elements were absorbed by later immigrants. "All the archaeological and historical evidences point to the relationship of the ancient Meiteis with the Mon Khmer and Tai people but not of Mon Khmer Tai origin of the people."⁶⁷ However the absorption of many Tai immigrants into Meitei society since the eighth century A.D. and more actively since the fifteenth century, has been recorded in the chronicles of Manipur. The clan genealogies also indicate the assignment of clan (salai) and lineage or sublineage (sagei), later on Hindu gotras to these eastern (Shan and Burmese) immigrants who are collectively known as the Nongpok Haram (The immigrants from the east)⁶¹.

Tibeto-Burman Family

G.A. Grierson in his monumental *Linguistic Survey of India* has grouped the Meitei in the Kuki-Chin sub-family of the Tibeto-Burman languages. A more appropriate name of this sub-family, in the opinion of many linguists, would have been the Meitei Kuki-Chin. Based on a historical assumption that the Tibeto-Burman and other Mongoloid groups were habitating the upper courses of the Yangtze and the Hoang-Ho rivers in China in the prehistoric times, Grierson surmises that the ancestors of the Meiteis were among their kinsmen who migrated from China to upper waters of the Irrawaddy and the Chindwin rivers of upper Burma. They lived in the Hukwang valley, the present land of the Kachins before they moved into the Manipur valley. The Kachin connection has been proved by the linguistic affinity between the Meitei and the Kachin.⁶⁹ Though the time and manner of migration cannot be easily established, Grierson is generally right in presuming that the ancestors of the Meiteis were among the Tibeto-Burman speakers in South west China, eastern Tibet and upper Burma. Hence, their affinity with the Tibeto-Burman tribes like the Nagas and Kukis who are less advanced than them. In this context, it will be relevant to note that S.K. Chatterjee, identifying the Kiratas of the later Vedas with the Tibeto-Burman Mongoloid thinks that they might have established themselves in the southern slopes of the eastern Himalayas in eastern India around the beginning of the first millennium before Christ.⁷⁰ They were the ancestors of the present Bodo-Kachari tribes of Assam, the Nagas, the Kukis and Meiteis of the eastern hills.

The Naga Kuki Connection

Greatly influenced by the linguistic and cultural affinities between the Meitei and the hill tribes of Manipur and their folklore W. McCulloch advanced a theory that the major tribes and clans of the Meiteis appeared to have been the descendants of the Naga and Kuki tribes.⁷¹ He observes, "From the most credible traditions, the valley appears to have been occupied by some tribes, the principal of which named Koomal (Khuman),

Looang (Luwang), Moirang and Meitei (Ningthouja), all of whom came from different directions. For a time, the Koomal appears to have been the most powerful and after its declension the Moirang tribe. But by degrees, the Meithei subdued the whole, and the name Meithei has become applicable to all . . . I . . . think there is . . . 'ground to conclude them to be descendants of the surrounding hill tribes. The language spoken by these tribes are in their pristine state. I conceive then, that in their spoken language, an indication of the descent of the Munniporees (Meitei) might be found. Tradition brings the Moirang tribe from the south, the direction of the Kookies, the Koomal from the east, the direction of the Murrings, and the Meitei and Looang from the north-west, the direction of the Koupooes (Kabui).⁷² R. Brown also endorsed this view of tribal origin of the Meiteis with a speculation, "Should it be a correct view that the valley of Manipur was at no very distant period almost covered entirely by water, the origin of the Munniporees (Meitei) from the surrounding hills is the proper and only conclusion to be arrived".⁷³ T.C. Hodson, writing in the beginning of twentieth century, made a bolder conclusion. "Two hundred years ago, in the internal organisation in village, in habits and manners, the Meiteis were as the hill people now are. The successive courses of foreign invasions, Shan, Burmese, English and Hindu, each left permanent marks on the civilization of the people so that they have passed finally away from the stage of relatively primitive culture with one of comparative civilisation but their ultimate homogeneity with the Nagas and Kukis of the hills is undoubted."⁷⁴

The reasons for a conclusion drawn by the British political officer turned ethnographers appear to be the tradition of common origin prevalent among the hill tribes that the Meiteis were their descendants as found among the Tangkhuls, Kabuis and Maos, the linguistic affinity between the Meitei, Naga and Kuki Chin as established by Grierson, the close connection of some Meitei clans with the hill tribes who were in the vicinity of their habitat and alleged similarity of the coronation costumes of the royal couple with that of some Naga tribes, and architecture of the coronation halls of the Kangle with the ritual houses of the¹ chiefs of the Naga tribes. The tribal

origin of the Meitei clans was refuted by many writers in the 19th and 20th centuries. True, as Ch. Manihar Singh writes, there is no legend or tradition among the Meiteis about their common origin with the tribes. But chronicles refer to the migration of individual Meitei heroes or families to the hills and conversion into the society of the Kabuis, Tangkhul and other unspecified tribes.⁷⁵ There was a process of entry of the hill tribes into Meitei social fold. We are not sure of the immediate descent of the Meiteis or Meitei clans from the hill tribes as propounded by Hodson but one cannot deny the Naga and Kuki Chin elements in the evolution of the Meiteis as an ethnic group.

Ethnic Blending of Mei and Ti Tribes?

As stated above Ch. Budhi Singh made a bold surmise that the Meitei or Timei, anagrammatised form of Meitei, is an outcome of the ethnic blending of people of Mei and Ti tribes of ancient China. As recorded in a Chinese classic, *Shu King*, "There is a place called Mei in the north of the present district of Khi, department of Wei Hui, Honan, a relic of the ancient name of the whole country. The royal domain of Shang, north of the capital was called Mei."⁷⁶ This classic describes, the people of Mei as indulging in excessive wine drinking which was introduced by a tribe called Ti to the Chinese during the reign of Yu, the founder of Hsia dynasty (2205-1767 B.C.) According to Budhi Singh, the Mei people and Ti tribe were integrated and collectively called Meitei: Meitei ethnic group. He himself has admitted no doubt that, "The place and the time and the process of ethnic formation of the compound people is, nevertheless, yet to be historically ascertained."⁷⁷ One wonders, how, in the absence of historical evidence, or even oral tradition of the blending of the two ethnic groups of ancient China could occur in Manipur valley. Again his attempt to make the oriental dualism of the fire (Mei) and water (Ti) represented by Nungjeng pond and Shuring (cave) of the Kangia, the ancient capital of the Meitei Kings to be the etymological and philosophical basis of the Mei + Ti = Meiti = Meitei is not convincing and contradicts the hypothesis of the ethnic blending of Mei and Ti tribes of ancient China.