

Early People in Manipur

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Generally, the climate of Manipur varies according to its topographical elevation. The State is under the influence of subtropical monsoon climate. Its rainfall differs from 110 cm to 350 cm and the average annual rainfall is 74 inches to 100 inches. However, the season of Manipur is divided into four. These are Pre-Monsoon (March and April), Monsoon (May to September), Retreating Monsoon (October and November) and Winter (December to February). Usually, in Manipur rainfall starts in March. But the South West Monsoon reaches Manipur in the month of May and it continues up to October. The North East Monsoon known as the Retreating Monsoon starts in the last part of October. Thus, the success and failure of crops in the State entirely depended on Monsoon rain. It also highly influenced the occupational activities of the people inhabiting both the highland and the valley regions. According to E.W. Dun: "The climate at once rainy and temperate cover the hills in the western portion with thick forest and induces the inhabitants to grow rice, causes numerous rivers, streams and marshes, and encourage aquatic and water-loving plants. Forests in the east were not as thick as in the west. Oak replaced bamboo, first for Nageshwar, a drier climate produced a lighter and different kind of jungle. The villagers in the valley were situated on the banks of the rivers or edge of the lakes so that every household had some water near it".

According to R.D. Oldham: "The succession of beds of Manipur is of Cretaceous rocks, accompanied by Serpentine rocks which are younger than Cretaceous rocks and the associated sedimentary rocks".

These rocks belong to the Disang and Barail series. Barail series spreads in many parts of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. The Disang series is almost concentrated in the north-eastern part of the Ukhrul District and the south-eastern part of the Chandel District of Manipur and the Barail series covers considerable north-western tracts of Senapati, the south-western part of Tamenglong and Churachandpur districts of Manipur.

Between these two rock series, the central valley of Manipur with a lake of thick alluvium deposit is situated. E.W. Dun writes that: "the formation of the central plain of Imphal was due to the stream being blocked by some convulsion of nature."

However, some geologists believe that the valley was formed as a result of a lake filled up by river-borne sediments. Once upon a time, water occupied the whole of the present central upliftment in the southern mountain which brought to make a reversal drainage system through which water occupying the valley area got drained out.

With the discovery of some prehistoric sites in the surrounding hill areas of Manipur. O. Kumar Singh an Anthropologist maintains that Manipur for the first time got enlisted in the prehistoric map of the world. It profoundly influenced the social scientists of Manipur to reconstruct the scientific history of Manipur. It pushed back the history of Manipur from the Christian era early to 4000 B.C. Archaeological study deals with man and

his relationship with the environment and his recorded achievements. Prehistory is the period of man's existence since he emerged from his animal ancestry. The Archaeologists reconstructed the history of this period through the study of stone artefacts, bone tools, potteries, plants, animal fossils etc. left by them. Historians have classified the man's past into three periods prehistory, protohistory and history. In short, the written records alone cannot be sufficient to give a complete picture of the protohistorical and historical periods, so archaeological findings are used to supplement them. Archaeological research of prehistory used in Manipur is very recent and is still not fully developed. However, the explored evidence of prehistoric sites shows the prevalence of Palaeolithic, Haobinhian and Neolithic culture in Manipur. The important caves and shelter sites in the hills of Manipur that provided shelter to the prehistoric men are the Songbu cave of Chandel district (4000 B.C.), Khangkhui cave (3000 B.C.) and Hundung of Urkhul district, Tharon cave of Tamenglong district, open-air sites at Machi of Chandel district, Nongpok Keithelmanbi of Senapati district, Napachik at Wangu of Bishnupur district and Phunanching of Imphal East district [5].

According to archaeologists, the excavation sites of the Stone Age are divided into three stages such as:

1. Palaeolithic culture
2. Haobinhian culture
3. Neolithic Culture

Palaeolithic Culture

Palaeolithic tools discovered from Machi a Maring village of Chandel District are chopper and chopper-chopping. Tool types found in Khangkhui cave, a Tangkhul village of Ukhul district are chopper, scraper, scraper, cleaver, burin, blade, flake, bone tools and funeral remains. Tools like chopper, scraper, notch, graver, blade, flake and split pebbles are explored from Nongpok Keithelmanbi of Senapati District. At the Songbu cave site of Chandel District, some tools i.e. handaxe, chopper, scraper point and flakes are also found. The cultures of Khangkhui Cave, Machi Cave and Nongpok Keithelmanbi can be compared with the Late Choukoutien Culture of China whereas Songbu Cave culture will be closely associated with the South East Asian Choukoutien Culture. Between 30000 to 10,000 B.C., the Choukoutien man and Pre-Australoid man were spreading throughout the Southeast Asian regions [6]. Some of the late Choukoutien men would be inhabiting these Palaeolithic sites of Manipur. As stated above, the first habitation in Manipur would start in hill areas.

Haobinhian Culture

However, Haobinhian culture is a cultural pattern based on the tools found in the Haobinhian village of North Vietnam. In Manipur, Haobinhian tools were unearthed from different sites of Tharon cave and Nongpok Keithelmanbi. The tools explored from these areas are edged ground pebble tools, cleavers, scrapers, pointed edged-ground pebble tools, ground stone tools, proto-handaxe etc. It is believed that this cultural period will be from c. 12000 B.C. to c. 5000 B.C. It spreads in many areas of South East Asia like Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, Vietnam and Manipur. Around the c.12000 B.C. Haobinhian people entered Manipur and settled at Tharon. But

these people would establish their habitational area at Nongpok Keithelmanbi between c.6000 B.C. and c. 5000 B.C. [7].

Neolithic Culture

Both Palaeolithic and Haobinhian people of Manipur lived in the hill areas while Neolithic culture people used to settle on the hill and in plain areas. The important archaeological exploration sites of the Neolithic age of Manipur are Nongpok Keithelmanbi, Phunan and Napachik. Many cultural remains that were discovered are chisel, hoe blade, triangular axe, plain and corded ware, tripod ware, Phunana or geometric design decorated ware. The date of this culture will be around 3500 to 500 B.C. South East Asia Neolithic culture commenced from 6000 B.C. years ago and these cultural people were moving throughout this region. But in Manipur, different neolithic hoards began to enter around 3500 B.C. and it continued for several years [8]. More or less, "Manipur Valley was already inhabited by neolithic men in or around 2000 B.C. Haobinhian cultural traits point to the Austroloid who migrated to Manipur before the advent of the Tibeto-Burman Mangoloid who followed them around 1000 B.C. In different successive periods, various hoards of people entered Manipur through hill routes. On many occasions, different people went through the valley of Manipur. Before 900 B.C., one Saka prince Aviraj entered the hill route of Manipur. He crossed the valley of Manipur and reached Ava through the South-Eastern hill route of Manipur. His passage exemplifies that the hill route of Manipur has been actively used since prehistoric times. Those of the hill routes used by the people are given below:

A.

1. Heirok hill range, connected to Kabow Valley/ Shan, Ava, China and other South Eastern countries.
2. Aimol Hill range route, connected to Kabow Valley/ Shan, Ava, China and other South Eastern countries.
3. Ngarachingjin hill ranges route, connected to Kabow Valley/Shan, Ava, China and other South Eastern countries.
4. Maring hill range route, connected to Kabow Valley/Shan, Ava, China and other South Eastern countries.

B.

1. Tongjeimararil hill route, connected to Cachar, Takhel, Tripura and Western countries.
2. Khonjai hill route, connected to Cachar, Takhel, Tripura and Western countries.
3. Akui hill route, connected to Cachar, Takhel, Tripura and Western countries.

C.

1. Chingkhei Haram (north-east) hill route, connected Tekhao (Assam) and other Western Countries [9].

A large number of megaliths both stone and wooden monuments are erected by different hill tribes of Manipur. These remains of the Megalithic culture are still a living tradition among the hill tribes. Since the early time, the hill tribes such as Mao, Maram, Zemi, Liangmei, Tangkhul, Maring and Anal and others raised stone megaliths [10]. Generally, these have their legends of origination from the caves found in the hill areas. These sources of

information practically highlight the human habitation in the hill areas since the prehistoric period. These are quite similar to those erected by the tribals of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. South Indian traits are also visible at times.

Loi Khunda a literary text of the Meiteis substantially tells about the establishment of settlements on the hillocks and higher or elevated places of the central part and peripheral regions of the Valley during the pre-Pakhangba and his times. "Cheklei Phanba occupied Enathai area. Nongbal Leilchamba lived in Chingmai. Luwang Punshiba dwell in Shoirel Eemaru (Luwang Makubi area- present Kangchup area). Luwang Shelhongba also set up a habitational area at Kaoba Napachik (present Langol Hills area). Probably Luwang Koi Manoa inhabited to Thok Kachin (Langol Thongak Chingjil) Pamang Heirinba settled on Khonghampat. Nongbasu Taba who was descendant of Luwanfg lived in Kaklau Touthang (Present Touthang Village). Langjing Phela was found to dwell by Thaba Melei. Phetup Phidai Chanu resided at Thangkhu Thanglel. Chikai Pangkoiba made a habitational abode at Kangpokpi (present Imphal municipality area). Nongmainu Yaoreibee Kakla Lamcheng settled on LEipung Chara. Tanthong Lokpaiba lived in Phauwa Ching (Loijing Phaouwoibi Ching or hill) Pachi Chukok and others created a dwelling place at Loihaba Phuba Ching (hill area Phulaba – this area should be the west of the present Phubala village). Pasi Kangba Khawangba lived in the Haoman Ikai area (territory of Ithai Keiremba). Khwa Ningthou or chief dwelt in Loiya Kangbung (Kamong area). Leima Haoreima Ningthou Panthang Soinabi resided at Khura Haora Lamangdong (present Bishnupur). Kuki Ahong (another name for Thongarel) was very courageous in setting up a good settlement area at Waikok Lamhal (somewhere in the Nongmaijing hill area). Lairen Khamaloubi kamtoubu used to live in Chinga Loukhong.

Jommaibi Jomaiba resided on the Chinga and Pishum hillocks respectively. Laiki Achaoba better Known as Thongarel initiated to create a habitational site at the Waikok Lamhal area. These aforesaid areas were possibly installed in the west of the valley of Manipur.

Further, the text mentions more habitational areas set up by the different personalities. Heirem Loinai was responsible to create a settlement place at Kontha Saban (present Kontha area of Heingang constituency). Akong Tattaba Arai Kangdaba (a group of people who frequently appeared in that region where they were going to make a habitational area) inhabited to Khoimidok Ungam Phainu area. Haorang or Haook People used to reside in the Chingnangkhu Chengnunglen area. Khaba Phandongba, a chief of the Khaba clan, settled on Tongjeng Phaiphek site. Moriya Phambalcha occupied Teban Heiram Khok Kumma Noasnag and created a settlement site at Longmai Khunkhu area. Keirao Chinabok area was made a settlement site by Taliya Likhun Tola. Phunana Telheiba Koijing Koimanao descendant of Luwang took a great responsibility to set up a habitational place at Whithou Khamput Thonggroabee and Toknakha areas. No doubt, these settlement sites were mainly formed in the east of the valley [11].

Scholars believe that possibly around 2000 B.C. pre-historic man came down to the valley and they settled in valley areas. As many as seven layers of neolithic sites of Napachik were excavated. Out of these, the fourth layer has been dated c. 1450 B.C. The first layer could be between 500 B.C. to 200 B.C. According to T.C. Sharma, the

late Neolithic age of northeast India was 200 B.C. [12]. King Kangba was the first Chenglei king born at Koubru Hill and he was succeeded by his son Maliya Pjambalcha who got married to Chakpa girl [13]. The above evidence indicates that the Chakpa ethnic group lived somewhere in the valley or peripheral foothills and were contemporary to the Chengleis of Koubru. During the pre-Pakahngba period, Maliya Phambalcha was supposed to rule in 1397 B.C. [14]. As a matter of fact, the Chengleis of Koubrru range would be the contemporary of the fourth layer of the Napachik Neolithic site. Some of the hill ranges like Koubru, Laimaton, Thangjing, Marjing, Nongmaiching etc. were frequently connected to the folk tales and literacy works about the origin of the Proto-Meiteis. As stated above, the Thangjing range is the mythological and historical place for the origin of the Moirangs. It is also referred to in the tales and literacy texts that the Koubru range is also the first homeplace of seven Salais or clans. The above sentence is made more convenient by the Meitei proverb i.e. "Awang Koubru Asuppa, Leimalei Khunda Ahanba Salalik Mapal Thaba, Nongthrei Mapan Lingba" [15] (Supreme Koubru range is the first settlement site, so important and unparallel). Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba's ancient literary text records that Shelloi-Langmai tribes at first lived on the Nongmaiching hill and they performed jhuming cultivation in the hill areas [16]. It is supported by a statement given by W. McCulloch that "in pristine times the Moirang tribes came from the south, the direction of the Kookies, the Koomal from the south, the direction of the Murrings and the Looang from the Northwest, the direction of the Koupoees." The descendants of these tribes used to settle respectively in different valleys in different periods. He believed that this present Manipuri language was the genesis of the unification of the different tribes under the name of the Meiteis. It has very close similarity to the languages spoken by these tribes. He further emphasizes that during the coronation ceremony of the Meitei King, the use of Naga dresses both by Raja and Ranee and the *Yim-Chao* (big house), the royal residence of the Meitei King was made in Naga fashion. It became customary. Similarities in the preservation of some common customs, their superstitions preserved in relics and the stories of their ancestors have proved the close relationship between the Meiteis and the Nagas themselves. An apparent closeness of the original groups between the Meiteis and the Nagas cannot be ruled out [17].

B. Kulachandra Sharma developed a long history of migration and settlement of different ethnic groups in Manipur. His works are mainly based on literary, titles, archaeological findings and contemporary historical writings. Some of the ethnic groups like Chenglei, Khaba Ngangba, Nongban, and Nongyai migrated to Manipur from the east following the upstream of Manipuri rivers and settled on the Koubru hill ranges. Another Himalayan and Tibeto-Burman admixture tribe like Kabui and Maomei migrated to the Koubru hill ranges of Manipur from the west. Chakpas, a branch of Tibeto-Burman speakers who had cultural similarities with the Pyu of Burma entered Manipur from the east following the course of the Manipur River. They scatterly settled on the upper valleys of Kongba, Iril and Imaphal rivers. They mainly concentrated in Sekta, Sekmai, Andro areas etc. Other Chin ethnic immigrants are the Kharam, The Khende, The Mande, The Chairel etc. They entered Manipur from the Chin Hill region of Myanmar. They used to inhabit the southwestern region of Manipur [18].

Different scholars highlighted that during the proto-historic period, Tai-Lai or Lai ethnic groups were inhabiting to Manipur. When they came to Manipur, they were accompanied by the Wangam ethnic group. Besides, different hoards of Tai ethnic groups entered Manipur during this period.

In general, most of the social scientists in Manipur unanimously resolved that from the dawn of proto-history till the 18th century, the cradle of the Shan or Tai group was the direct northeastern neighbour of the ancient Meitei Kingdom. According to Prof. Chen Lufan, “the home of the ancient Shan people was not far from the Central Yunnan Plateau and the Shan people originated from the Homo Orientalist” [19]. He further describes the wide arc-shaped land mass stretching from the Red River to the upper reaches of the Irrawaddy River reaching as far as Manipur of India which is the region covering what is Laos, Northern Thailand, the Shan State of Burma, the Assam State of India and also the Southwestern of Burma, the Assam State of India and also the Southwestern part of Yunnan. He further says that since mankind appeared in this region, certainly the Shans settled in this region.

Of course, their settlement expanded and developed. The careful examination of the discovered cultural relics in Thailand, Lishuangbam and other places in the 1960s prove the truth of his statement.

Chen Lufan developed his theory after a detailed discussion of the unearthed series of fossils of Homo Sapiens in the central part of Yunnan. Those discovered fossils are the Kaiyuan Ramapithecus (10 million years) – Lufeng Ramapithecus (8 million years) – and Hudic (butterfly). Ramapithecus (4-3 million years) – Homo Orientalist (2.5 million years) – Yuanmou Man (1.7 million years) – Kichou man (100,000 years) – Lijiang Man (30,000-20,000 years). Homo Orientalist is considered up to now as the earliest man ever discovered on this earth. Besides, Homo Orientalist is the progenitor of the races in the eastern hemisphere. Then came the Yuanmou Man of 1.7 million years ago. In Yuanmou, there are many locations with artefacts of the Palaeolithic Age at different periods of time ranging from 6000,000 years as the upper limit to 30,000 years as the lower limit but also about a hundred remains of the Neolithic Period, scattered over the whole of Yunnan with distinctive characteristics have been discovered. From the immemorial time, Yunnan has been a region of multi-nationalities, and the multifarious culture [22].

Though anyone does not set up any archaeological evidence regarding the Shan migration in Manipur during prehistoric, protohistoric and early historic periods, the tales and literary works frequently tell about their coming. Since the Shans are the direct eastern neighbour they would have contributed a major portion of the population to build a future Meitei nation.

“Ethnologically and linguistically the Meitei are the Tibeto-Burman family of the southern Mongoloid with the Austroloid and Aryan's admixture [23]. The above is advocated by scholars. Some are discussed below.

According to B.H. Hodgson, Moitay originated out of the combined appellations of the Siamese “Tai and the Kochin Chinese” Moy [24].

G.A. Grierson gives the linguistic background that the Meitei belong to the Tibeto Burman language. He further proves that the Meitei language is included in the Luki-Chin sub-family of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. Once again, he asserts that the Meiteis have a Linguistic affinity with the Kachins [25].

T.C. Hodson states that considerably the Shans (Tai) and Mon-Khmer influence on the Meiteis culturally and politically was very active [26].

The above statements are again strengthened by the recent archaeological findings in various hill areas of Manipur that have shown the existence of Mon-Khmer elements were absorbed by later immigrants.

Mayang Kalisha belonged to the Negro-Austroid racial admixture group who entered Manipur in about the 9th Century A.D. and the Aryan elements started to migrate into Manipur from the 15th Century A.D. Of course, these Western immigrants were absorbed in the Meitei population.

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