



The Migration and Settlement of the Manipuris in Assam

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(Abstract)

The history of the migration of the Manipuris from their homeland Manipur and settled at different places in the different periods of time in Assam. Their settlement can be seen in the Barak Valley, the Brahmaputra Valley and the Surma Valley (presently in Bangladesh) of Assam are the zenith of a long process events and circumstances. It is an effort to learn more about the Manipuris' history of settlement and migration in Assam. Their current composite identity is directly linked to their history of settlement. The study employed both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources were gathered through field study in the Manipuri settlement different districts of Assam and its surrounding areas. The Questionnaires were distributed and interviews were conducted with the local and dignitaries. The information, thus, collected were corroborated with the secondary sources collected from numerous published articles and books. Thus, a comprehensive account of the history of the migration and settlement of the Manipuris in Assam was formulated. Thus, in this paper tries to find out the history of the migration and settlement of the Manipuris in Assam.

Key Word: Migration, Settlement, the Manipuri people, Barak Valley, Brahmaputra Valley, Assam, etc.

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Introduction:

The People migrate when they relocate from one location to another in pursuit of better opportunities and a higher quality of life. Push factors and pull factors are the primary causes of migration. Push factors are the motivations behind someone's decision to relocate. Their own experiences living in one place provide them a compelling reason to depart from that area at a specific moment. Frequently, push factors are viewed as adverse events like unemployment, droughts, flooding, conflict, etc. Pull factors, on the other hand, are the anticipations that draw people to a new location. They are typically viewed as positive things, such as improved prospects, a higher standard of living, etc. These two factors are the key subjects of this particular issue, and they are linked to one another. Movement comes in a variety of forms, including emigration, immigration, domestic migration, international migration, and rural-urban migration, among others. But in this section, we'll talk about and emphasize immigration more. Generally speaking, it is accepted and demonstrated that the people of Manipur moved and resided in the Barak valley about the 18th century before gradually beginning to move toward the Brahmaputra valley of Assam.

The Profile of Assam:

Assam is situated in the North-East region of India – bordering seven States viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and West Bengal and two countries viz. Bangladesh and Bhutan. With a geographical area of 78,438 sq kms i.e., about 2.4 percent of the country's total geographical area, Assam provides shelter to 2.57 percent population of the Country. Most of the State's population lives in the fertile and grassy valleys of its two major rivers in the twenty-four districts of the Brahmaputra valley and the three districts of the Barak valley. The less densely populated two hill districts - Karbi-Anglong and Dima Hasao, separated the two valleys. For administrative and revenue purposes, the State has 34 districts including Kamrup (Metro) district and four districts under the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) areas viz. Kokrajhar, Baska, Chirang and Udalguri. Assam has a population of 31,169,272. Of this total 23, 21,288 live in the Rural and the remaining 3,439,240 are live in the urban areas according to the 2011 Census of India.

Assam has many ethnic groups and there are total-115 ethnic groups in Assam. Out of these total 79 (69%) identify themselves regionally 22 (19%) locally, and 3 trans-nationally. The earliest settlers were Austroasiatic followed by Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryans speakers and Tai-Kadai speakers. Forty-five (45) languages are spoken by different communities including three major language families: Austroasiatic (5 languages), Sino-Tibetan (24 languages) and Indo-European (12 languages). Three of the spoken languages do not fall in these families. There is a high degree of bilingualism.

There are 23 notified Scheduled Tribes (ST) in Assam with the Bodos (40.90%) making half of the total ST population (around 13%) of the state. The other STs (both plains and hills) include Miri, Karbi, Rabha, Kachari, Lalung, Barman in Cachar, Boro-kachari, Deori, Hajai, Mech, Dimasa, Hajong, Singhphho, Khampti and Garo, Chakma, Hmar, Khasi, Jaintia, Synteng, Pnar, War, Bhoi, Lyngngam, and Kuki.

Assam has only 10 districts up to 1981; it is reported in Administrative Report of Assam, 1981. But its number increased to 23 in the year 1991. And again, it increased up to 27 in the year 2003 by adding 4 new districts. And once again it increased up to 34 in the year 2020 by adding 7 new districts and the total number of districts in Assam rose to 34. Presently Assam has 34 districts.

The Manipuri People:

The Manipuris call themselves by the name Meetei. Etymologically, the term had been derived from the words 'Mee' + 'Atei', 'Mee' means 'Man' and 'Atei' means 'Other'.¹ According to the myths and legends of the 'Meeteis'; Tengbanba Mapu, the supreme god ordered Atinga Guru Sidaba (Creator), first man of the universe to create the world. Accordingly, he created other man than himself looking his shadow falls in the eyes of his pupil. Another version is that the Meetei God Lairen Pakhangba is symbolized in the form of a snake posture, joins his tail with his mouth. 'Mei' means tail, 'Tai' means join, hence, the name 'Meitei'.² However, it is argued among the scholars that the Meeteis had no snake-God tradition. Other version is that the word 'Meitei' comes from the word 'Mei', which means Fire God. It is also opined by the scholars that this theory is not acceptable as the Meeteis had no legend story of Fire God.³ Therefore, the view that relates the meaning of the word

Meetei to Other Man or Other People can be taken as the most appropriate. This view can be further be strengthened when T.C Hodson says that “the group name ‘Meithei’ has been derived from mi= man and thei= separate.”⁴ The Meetei community is a heterogeneous community consisting of the Meeteis ‘with its seven exogamous clans i.e. Mangang (Ningthauja), Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, Khaba-nganba, and Sarang-Leishangthem’, Manipuri Bramhins (Meetei Bramhon), Manipuri-Muslims (Meetei Pangals) and Lois (slaves or dependent group of Manipur i.e. Manipuri SC) etc. The Meeteis have the elements- Mongoloids, Australoids, Austro-Asiatics, and stains of Caucasoids, of which the Mongoloid element is the predominating factor. Broadly speaking, the features of the Manipuris are the Mongoloids. The Manipuri people belongs to the *Kuki-Chin* group of the Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongolian race. But a good admixture of Aryans and other blood groups also took place in the mainstream of the Manipuri nation. Because of its special geographical location and as a result of several religious and political interactions, Manipur became the melting point of different ethnic groups and cultures.

The Origin of the Manipuri People:

The origin of the Manipuri people is still quite obscure. Several contradicting views were advanced in tracing their origin. The ruling classes of Manipur, since the days of King Pamheiba alias Garib-Niwas have claimed for themselves as a Hindu or Western descendant and this claim is supported by state’s first group of educated elites and this view can be seen in their writings. “To them, the Manipuris are the descendants of Aryans and they quote the Mahabharata in confirmation of their claim. Most of the ancient Meetei religious Scripts (*Puyas*) were burnt at the instance of the King Pamheiba, when Hinduization process started in the 18th century. Many of the remaining *Puyas* were twisted and other rewritten or amended to give a Hindu outlook.”⁵ But this claim of a Hindu origin was rejected by R. B Pemberton who says of the Manipuris that “Manipuris were the descendants of Tatar Colony, which probably migrated from the North-west borders of China during the sanguinary conflicts for supremacy...”⁶ R. Brown also asserted that “although the general facial characteristic of the Manipur are of the Mongolian type, there is a great diversity of features amongst them, none of them showing regularly approaching the Aryan type.”⁷ But Mc Culloch has given a different view that “the Manipuris were descendant from the surrounding tribes than from a Tatar Colony from China. In support of his arguments, he had pointed out the similarities between the hill people of the surrounding hill areas and the people of the valley area. Here he specifically mentioned the similarities between Naga and Meiteis in language and dresses of the Naga fashion worn by Kings and Queens during the time of coronation.”⁸ But unfortunately, he was not able to make an explicit theoretical idea about the origin of the people. Mc Culloch’s opinion was shared by R. Brown who speculates “should it be a correct view that the valley Manipur was at no very distant period almost covered entirely by water, the origin of the Manipuris from the surrounding hill tribes is the proper and only conclusion to be arrived at. I think it probable that when only a small part of the valley skirting the hill was capable of cultivation, the hill men bordering it used to descend and cultivate the little land there then was, returning to their homes in the hills after

their harvest; as however, land increased, some few of them settled permanently in the plain, gradually increasing in numbers.”⁹

Brain Houghton Hougdsen also made an attempt to bring out the origin of the Manipuri people of Manipur from linguistic point of view. He said that “in the ‘Moitay’ of Manipur we have the combined appellation of the Siamese Tai and Kochin Chinese ‘Moy’. In other words, the Manipurian tribe, called Cossiahs by the Bengalis, belongs to the ‘Moi’ section of the great tribe called ‘Tai’ by themselves and Shanvel Syan by the Burmese, the sectional name being also foreign and equivalent to the native.”¹⁰ “Of course, the Manipuris are totally distinct from the Khasis. But it is difficult to group the Meitheis with the Tai races especially on linguistic grounds when the structure and the vocabulary of the Meithei language are so similar to those of the Tibeto- Burman languages.”¹¹ Hodson hence came to the conclusion that “two hundred years ago in internal organization, in religion, in habits and manners, the Meitheis were the hill people. The successive waves of foreign invasion Shan, Burmese, English and Hindu have each left permanent marks on the civilization, but their ultimate homogeneity with the Nagas and Kukis of the hill is undoubted”.¹² Since the advent of Hinduism, almost all the written records of the history of Manipur are ruined by the influence of Hinduism. It is with this view in mind that T. C. Hodson, R. Brown, R. B Pemberton and other writers have questioned the authenticity of the Hinduised history written after and during the 18th century. S. K Chatterji rejected the Aryan connection in his *Kirata- Jana-Krti* saying that “the Meitheis or Manipuris are the most advanced section of the Kuki-Chin people.”¹³ In the absence of historical evidences it is doubtful if the real nature of the connections and affinities between the Meeteis and the hill tribes can be traced. However, the Meeteis’ Aryan connection has turned out to be a myth which has now finally been exploded. It is also fairly well-established that the name ‘Manipur’ is very recent origin and was never in existence in the history of Kangleipak before the reign of King Pamheiba. It was given only after Hinduism became the state religion during Pamheiba’s reign.¹⁴ However, no precise conclusion could be made so far. But there is an accepted view that linguistically the Manipuris are the most advanced section of the Kuki- Chin people and their language belong to the Tibeto-Burman group and so they are of the same family with this group.

The History of the Manipuris settlement in Barak Valley:

The entire Barak Valley was referred to as Cachar in the earlier time, although at present, Cachar is one of the districts of the three districts of the valley- Karimganj and Hailakandi being the other two districts. In the post-independence period Cachar acquired another name the ‘Barak Valley’ after the name of the principal river ‘Barak’ of this region. However, in the year 1983, Karimganj and in the year 1989, Hailakandi were made two other separate districts for administrative convenience.¹⁵ Statistically, the Barak Valley covers an area of 6,962 sq. km.

The Manipuris settled in the Barak Valley from ancient time. And the Barak Valley became one of the major Manipuri inhabited areas in Assam. Early historical evidence of Manipur recorded that the first settlement of the Manipuris in the Valley took place during the reign of King Kaokhomba (411-428 A.D.), a king of Manipur, when one Chennjel Naral Panganba migrated to the Barak Valley in the 5th century A.D.¹⁶ Then, centuries after, a

limited number of the Manipuri families also settled in Khashpur. They were the relatives of the princess Induprava, who was married to King Krishna Chandra, a Kachari King of 1806.A.D. “In fact, the influx of the Manipuris took place as a group during the Burmese occupation of Manipur (1819-26 A.D.).”¹⁷ Thus, the migration and settlement of the Manipuris in Barak Valley has been discussed on three stages as under.

Since the Burmese invasion (1819) of Manipur, a section of the Manipuris had settled permanently in Assam (Cachar). Maharaj Chaurajit, Gambhir Singh and Marjit of Manipur together ousted the King of Cachar, Govindchandra, who gave shelter to them. In the beginning and they divided Cachar into three and ruled over the area. Chaurajit occupied Sonai (Dunggripur), Marjit and Gambhir Singh occupied Hailakandi (Jaffirbond) and Badarpur respectively. Gambhir Singh returned to Manipur and ruled from 1826; Cachar came into the hands of the British in 1832. After that occupation of Cachar, with the exceptions of Surma and Dunggripur ceased to be under the rule of Manipuri Kings. But, Marjit, who ruled over Jaffirbond continued his reign.¹⁸

The First stage has covered up to 1709 A.D. i.e. Pre –Hindu period before the reign of Garibniwaj (1709- 1748 A.D) in Manipur. The Second stage, which started from the Hindunization or Sanskritization period i.e. from the reign of King Garibniwas to the throne of Manipur and up to the major depredation of Burmese invasion (1819-26 A.D.) in Manipur which is known as the ‘*Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*’ or ‘Seven Years Devastation’ in the history of Manipur. The Third stage has covered up the period just after the major depredation of Burmese invasion in Manipur from 1826 to 1891 A.D.

Presently there are about 129 Manipuri inhabited villages in Cachar, 27 in Hailakandi and 16 in Karimganj districts respectively. Among these villages some villages are newly established. Besides, some other Manipuri inhabited villages in the Valley had also become extinct. The some of those extinct and gradually declining Manipuri inhabited villages are Hingor, Hathirmora, Bojal Ghat, Bhuvanagar, Ramanagar and Chinjur etc. in the Cachar district of Barak Valley. Most of the Manipuris inhabited villages in Barak Valley were situated near by the lakes, river and hill etc.

The Manipuris Settlement in Brahmaputra Valley:

In the Manipuri royal chronicle, Assam or Upper Assam or Brahmaputra Valley is referred to as ‘*Takhao*’. The name is derived from the Dikhao River, a tributary of the Brahmaputra River, following in Sibsagar district. It is on the bank of the river Dikhao that Ahom Kingdom of Assam had its capital at that time from that time onwards the Manipuris had best relation with Assam. The historical relation between Assam (Brahmaputra Valley) and Manipur began in the early part of the 15th century A.D., when the Assamese Govinda Manik and six families entered to Manipur from Assam during the reign of King Ningthou Khomba (1432-67 A.D.).¹⁹ In the year 1762 A.D. the King Jai Singh (1763-89 A.D.) offered his brother’s daughter princess Kuranganayani to Ahom King Swargadev Rajeshwar Singh (1758-64 A.D.). “In the honour of Magalau (Assamese called Manipuri as ‘Magalau’) Kumari Kuranganayani, a pond was named ‘*Magalau Jiykar Pukhuri*’ (the tank of Magalau daughter), a place which is about 6 kilometers (3 miles) down away from Gauri Sagar in Sibsagr district nearby Jorhat town. The place where the followers of the Manipuri men and

women accompanying with princess Kuranganayani had been settled came to be known as Magalau Ghat.”²⁰ Thus in this year, the first settlement of the Manipuris in the Valley was occurred.

Again, in the year 1770 and 1780, some Manipuris came to Assam. The Revolt of 1857 also affected Manipur state also. The Manipuri King Chandrakriti helped the British by offering services of the Manipuri soldiers and some of them remained in Assam. Majority of the Manipuris for the first time began to settle at Sadia. And from that place the Manipuris came to Dibrugarh, Shillong and other places. Presently, there are about 96 Manipuri inhabited villages in Brahmaputra Valley of Assam.

Some of the areas settled by the Manipuris in Karbi Anglong and N.C Hills are Satgaoun, Deyamukh Barthol, Dongka, Sildubi and Lamsakhang etc. Amarjan, Natunbasti, Hatighar, Manja, Ghariyal Dubi, Saraijan, Langhin, Diphu town and Hadiipi in Bokajan Sub-Division.

The Manipuri Speakers in Assam:

In India, the total number of people who speaks Manipuri as their mother tongue numbers is 14,66,705 out of which 12, 66, 098 (Census of India, 2001) speakers reside in Manipur. According to Census of India, 2001 outside Manipur, the highest Manipuri inhabited state is Assam. There are total numbers of 1, 54,059 Manipuri speakers in Assam (Census of India, 2001) and this figure may be varied. And lowest Manipuri inhabited state is Chhattisgarh and Union Territory is Pondicherry respectively. Looking to world context, there is Manipuri speakers in Bangladesh and Myanmar as well. The Manipuri population was 6000 in Myanmar in 1931 and 92, 800 in Bangladesh in 1982 as reported in the <http://www.ethnologue.com>. There are approximately 1.9 million speakers of Manipuri language, which used it as a lingua franca among the 29 different ethnic groups of Manipur. It also used among some ethnic groups in North Eastern India, who use it to communicate among themselves by using this language.

Presently, Assam has 34 districts. Out of these total, 23 districts are inhabited by Manipuri speakers in the state. The total number of Manipuri speaking population in the different districts of Assam according to Census of India, 1991 is 1, 26, 987 and 2001 is 1, 54,059 respectively. The highest population of the Manipuris inhabited in the state is Cachar District according to the Census of India, 1991. There are total number 84,073 populations in the district. The lowest population inhabited in the state is Dhubri district. There are only total number of 37 populations are in the district. The detail information for district wise population is not available in Census of India, 2001. The following **Table-1** will show the details information of Manipuri speakers in Assam according to Census of India 1991 and 2001.

Table -1
Manipuri Speakers in Assam, 1991 and 2001

Sl. No.	Districts	The Manipuri Speakers in 1991	The Manipuri Speakers in 2001	The Manipuri Speakers in 2011
1	Barpeta	41	In the district Profile the classification of the different languages are not analyzed. So, the data of Manipuri language speakers are also not available.	In the Census of 2011 the classification of the different languages are not analyzed. So, the data of Manipuri language speakers are also not available.
2	Bongaigaon	112		
3	Cachar	84,073		
4	Darrang	121		
5	Dhemaji	301		
6	Dhubri	37		
7	Dibrugarh	775		
8	Goalpara	74		
9	Golaghat	1,299		
10	Hailakandi	11,557		
11	Jorhat	378		
12	Kamrup	4,934		
13	Karimganj	5,005		
14	Karbi Anglong	2,913		
15	Kokrajhar	85		
16	Lakhimpur	80		
17	Morigaon	46		
18	Nalbari	58		
19	Nagaon	11,790		
20	North Cachar Hills	1,723		
21	Sibsagar	762		
22	Sonitpur	152		
23	Tinsukia	671		
	Total	126,987	1,54,059	-----

(Source: Cited in N D Hodamba 2012:p15 &16)

Conclusion:

The study on the Migration and settlement of the Manipuris in Assam required hard work and dedication in order to find the available records and scrutinizing the reasons and

causes of migration and settlement of the Manipuris in the State. In the preceding first settlement history of Manipuri community, it highlights about the history of migration of the Manipuri's in the Barak valley and Brahmaputra Valley. The First stage has covered up to 1709 A.D. i.e. Pre –Hindu period before the reign of Garibniwaj (1709- 1748 A.D) in Manipur. The Second stage, which started from the Hindunization or Sanskritization period i.e. from the reign of King Garibniwas to the throne of Manipur and up to the major depredation of Burmese invasion (1819-26 A.D.) in Manipur which is known as the '*Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*' or 'Seven Years Devastation' in the history of Manipur. The Third stage has covered up the period just after the major depredation of Burmese invasion in Manipur from 1826 to 1891 A.D. Presently there are about 129 Manipuri inhabited villages in Cachar, 27 in Hailakandi and 16 in Karimganj districts respectively in Barak Valley of Assam. And further, there are about 96 Manipuri inhabited villages in Brahmaputra Valley of Assam.

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