



Settlement History of The Manipuri in Barak Valley

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Abstract: It's an attempt to find out the migration and settlement history of Manipuris in this region. Settlement history is closely link with their present composite identity. Making conclusion of their emergence as distinct community in the valley by limiting only to 18th century may be a premature one. It may go beyond that. The author has used secondary resources such as Royal Chronicles, Gazetteers, Journals Magazines and relevant books in the study.

The article shall confine only to the district of undivided Cachar, on the southern tip of Assam, which at present includes three separate districts, viz Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. The plain area of these districts constitutes, what is called as Barak-Valley. It is located between the 92.15°E and 93.15°E longitudes and between the 28.8°N and the 25.8°N latitudes. The valley is surrounded by Manipur State in the East, North-Cachar Hills on the North, Mizoram in the South and Tripura and Sylhet (Bangladesh) in the West.

Barak-Valley as a whole represents a number of heterogeneous communities, whose total population is 47,91,390 according to census 2011. They are living together for a long period of time. The numerous communities of Barak_Valley are : 1. Bengali (Both Hindu and Muslim) 2.Ex-tea Garden Labourers 3. Manipuri 4. Dimasa Kachari 5. Bisnupuria 5.Naga 6.Hmar 7.Assamese 8 Khasi 9.Tripuri 11.Nepalies. Prominent communities among them are the Bengali, Hindustani, the Manipuri and the Dimasa Kachari.

Settlement of Manipuri's Cachar

At different historical stages immigrants belonging to different racial and cultural groups came to Cachar and settled permanently in this region. Over time, these migrants of distinct identities have become important ethnic groups in the social structure of cachar. According to B.C. Allen (1905:48) the earliest inhabitant of the district seem to have been Kacharies, Manipuries, Muhamadans and low caste Hindus from Sylhet. However, when Meetei settlements established in this region, we do not find an accurate answer to this particular question. Many historian believed that the establishment of Manipuri settlement in Cachar was 18th century phenomena. It is true that a good number of Manipuries settled in Cachar in the 18th century, but it does not mean that it was the beginning of Manipuri settlement in Cachar, There is a strong possibilities of existence of Manipuri settlement much earlier to that.

In support to the early emergence of Manipuri settlement in Cachar, Dr. Chandramani argued that from the western direction during the reign of king Naothing Khong (663-763 AD) the first person who came to Manipur was princes Chingurembi who became the queen of the Maharaj. Her folks, who accompanied her, settled down in Manipur Valley (Lamyamba, 1969: 66). Second evidence cited was that during the reign of Ningthou Khomba (1432-68 AD) the person who came from Tripura and settled in Manipur Valley was one Dharmaran (Ibid). The evidence given above show that matrimonial alliance between the ruling class of Manipur and its immediate western neighbouring country was also accompanied by giving settlement to those who had come to Manipur. This indicates a close relationship of Manipur with her neighbouring countries from western side. On this basis Dr. Chandramani argues that Manipurians might have established their settlements in Cachar or Tripura long back in history.

If look back at the history of Manipur, it makes us convince that at no time it remained as an insulated kingdom because of her location. Since time immemorial, Manipur has been connected by many international as well as regional routes. The hills between the Surma Valley and the Manipur Valley do not completely seal off the latter from the rest of India. From before the beginning of Christian era, there were some routes through these hills connecting Manipur Valley and the Surma Valley. There were at least three routes connecting the two valleys. The northern most of them connected Banskandi near Silchar with a placelace called Jaipur to the Manipur Valley. The middle one connected Banskandi with Bishnupur in Manipur Valley. The southernmost route connected the western bend of Barak river with Torbung, a village in the south-western part of Manipur valley (Jhalajit, 1992:2). From Manipur to Burma and to the rest of Eastern World, these routes provided ample opportunities not only to Manipurians but also to outsiders for the pursuance of their respective interests. In the expansion and contraction of Manipur regime at different stages of history, these routes provided both the negative and positive results.

During the reign of Naothing Khong (663 – 763 A.D.) through these routes, expanded his kingdom in western direction up to modern Jiribam. Also traffic on the hill routes between the Surma valley and Manipur valley increased (Jhalajit, 1992: 57). Consequently trade or commercial activities between the two valleys must have also developed. Manipur was invaded time and again, from Cachar and Tripura side during the reign of Khongtekcha (763 – 773 A.D.), Kongyamba (1324 – 35 A.D.), Kyamba (1467-1508 A.D.) and Kabomba (1524-1542 A.D.) without success. But during his rule, Chalamba invaded the western kingdom. According to Ningthourol Lambuba¹ Chalamba invaded Cachar and conquered some villages. Cachar is referred to as Thongnang Mayang in the chronicle (Jhalajit, 1992:105). Again it is recorded in the chronicle that during the reign of king Paikhomba (1666-1698 A.D.), a town in Cachar was conquered which was near a river with reddish water. The town was in the plain contiguous to the plain areas inhabited by the Bengalis of east Bengal (Ibid:129). It also recorded that during his reign trade was carried out with Burma, Cachar and Tripura.

The historical events such as marriage alliances, immigration, wars and trade and commercial activities between Manipur and her neighbouring areas, especially Cachar, together give ground to believe the beginning of Manipuri settlement in Cachar much before the 18th century.

The settlement history of manipuris in Cachar has been well documented since the early part of 18th century. Related documents can be culled out from the local as well British sources.

Since the 18th century, the political condition of Manipur remained unstable. Frequent Burmese invasions from outside and her internal crises contributed to the large scale growth of Meetei settlement in her neighbor countries². During this unstable phase, the neighbouring kingdoms, particularly Cachar, had been used as important base for making temporary settlement. On the other hand, Cachar also been used for establishing further contacts with the rulers of Tripura, Assam and Sylhet. In the process many Manipuri settlements sprang up in these regions³.

In Jai Singh's time (1763-98 A.D.) a chain of Manipuri settlement sprang up in Cachar, Tripura, Sylhet, Decca, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Nabadwip (Bengal), and Vrindavan (U.P.). The emergence of Manipuri settlements, during Jai Singh's reign in these regions may be contributed to two reasons, i.e. political and religious. Those settled in North East India, including Sylhet and Decca, were due to political circumstances. Manipuri settlements in Nabadwip and Vrindaban were purely on religious basis⁴. We may say here that all the necessary infrastructure for future settlements of Manipuris outside Manipur was laid down by jai Singh. Immediately after him, due to unstable political atmosphere in Nanipur, many Manipuri princesses and common people migrated to these regions including Cachar. After him, the waves of Manipuri's migration to the western direction accelerated. During the war between the Kachari King and Marjit Singh in 1818, number of Manipuri settlements might have further increased in Barak Valley.

From 1819 to 1826, for period of seven years, Manipur remained under the Burmese occupation. This period is known as ' Chahi Taret Khuntakpa ' in Manipuri History. During this period of seven years, the ever largest number of Manipuri left their country and took shelters in Cachar, Sylhet, and Jaintia Hills. The occupation of South Cachar by Manipuri kings during this period, before the Yandabu Treaty between the British and Burma, further encouraged Manipur's migration to Cachar. According to the treaty of Yandabu, Gambhir Singh was restored his power in Manipur, but many of the Manipuris remained backed in Cachar.

However, the immigration trend of Manipuris to Cachar and her neighbouring countries did not cease. It kept on going at regular interval. In 1844, another wave of Manipuris came and settled in Chandrapur and Sylhet (Lamyamba, 1969:8). Again in 1850, a quarrel broke out in the palace where factions of royal brothers fought for power in Manipur. Prince Kulachandra faction successfully dethroned Surachandra, the then king of Manipur. After this royal feud, Maharaja Surachandra left for Vrindaban. In his royal prigrimage, the dethroned king was accompanied by his brothers, relatives, nobles etc. The majority of his followers then settled in Cachar, Sylhet and Nabadwip (Ibid, 1969:8). This was the last migration wave to Cachar or elsewhere from the independent kingdom of Manipur. Later the sovereignty of Manipur was lost to the British power on 25th April 1891.

Manipuri Emigration from Sylhet

Those Manipuris who had settled earlier in Sylhet, later on, migrated to the British occupied Cachar in the post annexation phase, that is, August 14th 1832, for different reasons. Over population of Sylhet may be one of the prime causes for their migration to Cachar⁵. The

total area of Sylhet was 5,388 sq. miles with a population of 2,241,848 where as Cachar had 3,769 sq. miles and a population of 445,593, according to 1901 census (Gait et al, 1979:417).

In search of greener pastures Manipuris might have migrated to Cachar⁶. Second reason is that the British colonial policy had always encouraged the people of Sylhet to settle in the vast unoccupied arable land in Cachar. The third reason is that 'the defence of Surma valley was entrusted to a force called Sylhet Light Infantry with headquarter at Sylhet. It was raised in 1824 and was recruited chiefly from Manipuris who had settled in Sylhet and Cachar (Gait A.E. 1905:353). The S.L.I. was created by the British and it helped them in great deal in the Anglo-Burmese war during 1824-26. When its headquarter was shifted to Silchar, majority of them might have settled in Cachar after their service. In 1901, total Manipuri population in Cachar was 42,000 and in Sylhet District was 30,000 (Sanajaoba Naorem, 1991:326). By the time Manipuri speaking constituted the third largest group in Cachar, that is, Bengali 61 percent, Hindi 21 percent and Manipuri 11 percent' (Allen B.C. 1905:48). The above census figures show that during the British occupation Manipuri settlements in Cachar were quite substantial in number.

On the basis of historical evidences, which are substantiated by our own observation, we may conclude about the Manipuri settlement in Cachar ;

(I) we do not find a reliable data which may prove the exact year or century of the emergence of Manipuri settlement in Cachar or elsewhere in the western direction of Manipur. However, there is a strong notion about the existence of Manipuri Settlement in the 8th century A.D., if not earlier. Marriage alliance with her western neighbouring countries is a strong base for our assumption.

(II) Having relations with the area on the western side through wars or expansion policy is another reason for such a belief. In the process of invasions prisoners of war leads to another possibility of establishment of new colonies in Cachar⁷.

(III) Trade or commercial links between Manipur and Cachar, Tripura or Sylhet also might have closely associated with the emergence of settlement of those people involved in the business on both sides of the countries. Manipur having its trade link with Cachar from the ancient times, which she still continue⁸.

The emergence of Manipuri settlement in Cachar in the 18th century is well documented. We have enough data to explain the fact. The growth of Manipuri settlement in Cachar was due to unstable political situation that prevailed in Manipur because of successive Burmese invasions and her own internal crisis. Second, influence of Vaishnavism on the people of Manipur was another cause for the emergence of Manipuri settlement in Bengal and U.P. Finally, improvement of different routes which linked Manipur with Barak-Valley also contributed to migration of Manipuris to Cachar or elsewhere.

NOTES

- In this article the term 'Manipuri' or 'Meetei' denotes a same single community which speaks Tibeto-Burman group of languages known as Manipuri language or Meetei Lon. These two terms are not to be interpreted as two distinctive communities.

1. Ningthourol Lambuba is a Royal Chronicle which records about the military expeditions of ancient and medieval Manipur

2. 'Political events have conduced the growth of settlements of Manipuries in Cachar, Sylhet and Decca which in Bengal and in the United Provinces there are small colonies of Manipuris who have left their country for their countries good' (Hodson, 1989:4)
3. For instnsnce, during the reign of king Jai Singh in 1884, for the second time, the Burmese invaded Manipur under the command of 'Hsinbyu Shen, the king of Burma, himself. Th Manipuries were defeated. Jai Singh fled to Cachar and from there to Assam' (Nilkanta, 1998:1)
4. Under Jai Singh's patronage Vaisnavism reached at its peak in Manipur. When he set out for Nabadwip and Vrindaban 'on 5th February 1798, the king with a large retinue started for pilgrimage to Vrindaban, he was accompanied by his queens, 4 sons, 3 daughters and large numbers of nobles and attendants numbered 400' (Jhaljit, 1992:205). Most of them were settled in these places.
5. The total area of Sylhet was 5,338 sq. Miles with a population of 2,241,848 where as Cachar had 3,769 sq. Miles and a population of 455,595, according to 1901 census (Gait et al, 1979:417).
6. This statement has been validated by Captain Pemberton, who observed; 'They (Manipuris) continue for many years to earn a livelihood as wood cutters, fishermen and agricultural pioneers to the wealthy Zaminders of that district (Sylhet). Unable to obtain land in densely populated district of sylhet and unwilling during the continuance Gobind Chundruh's life to expose themselves to the evils of his capricious and tyrannical rule, they have come forward with alacrity, since the annexation of Kachar to the British territories and have contributed largely to the improvement which has already produce so marked a change in the general aspect of the province' (Pemberton, 1966:208).
7. Clear example is that- the emergence of Muslim settlement in Manipur valley was through capture in wars.
8. In 1868-69, Manipur imported betel nut and paan, clothes, yarns, brass and other materials, Hukas etc. Worth Rs. 1975.79 and she exported items like clothes, yarns, Manipuri baffles, Burma ditto, Manipuri ponies worth Rs. 3533.19 (Dun, 1975:62).

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