

Seven Years Devastation (1819-1826) And The Settlement Of Manipuris Outside Manipur

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Abstract

Manipur, a small hilly state in the north-eastern part of India with an area of 22,327 sq. km., is bounded by Assam in the west, Nagaland in the north, Mizoram in the south and Myanmar (erstwhile Burma) in the east. The state is inhabited by several ethnic and religious communities. Meeteis/Meiteis, Manipuri Muslims (locally referred to Meitei-Pangals) and several other small communities reside in the valley of Manipur, while numerous tribes occupy the surrounding hills. Besides Manipur, significant population of Meetei and Manipuri Muslims are settled in Assam, Tripura Bangladesh and Myanmar. The Manipuri population moved from Manipur during the medieval times and it was caused by several factors, which include matrimonial relationships between the ruling families of Manipur and the neighbouring kingdoms, religion, political turmoil caused by struggle for the royal throne, foreign aggression, war and destruction. The political instability that developed in Manipur after the death of the monarch, Maharaja Bheigyachandra (1763-1798), led to the Burmese incursion and occupation of the valley for seven years (1819-1826), a period known in the history of the state as Chahi Taret Khuntakpa, or Seven Years Devastation. Majority of the inhabitants in the valley, the Meeteis and Muslims, fled to Barak Valley and beyond to escape Burmese carnage, while a large population was carried by the Burmese as captives. This paper, in general, traces the history of the settlement of Manipuris outside Manipur with special reference to the mass migration that occurred during the period of Seven Years Devastation. It also looks into the historical context, pattern and routes of the migration as well as the settlement process. The paper further makes an attempt to study the demographic transformation caused by the migration and map the Manipuri settlement areas.

Keywords: Meeteis, Manipuri Muslims, Tekhao, Takhel, Mekhali, Magulau, Kate, Paona.

Introduction

Settlement of Manipuris outside Manipur before the Seven Years Devastation

The settlement of Manipuris outside Manipur could be traced much before the Seven Years Devastation. In the middle ages, the monarchs of Manipur maintained friendly as well as aggressive relations with the neighbouring kingdoms. At times, the rulers developed matrimonial alliance often as a means to bring peace as well as to strengthen political relations, and there were also times when they engaged in protracted war. The monarchs of Manipur had matrimonial relations with the rulers of Cachar, Assam (Tekhao), Tripura (Takhel), Shans of Pong and Burma. These marital relations initiated, reinforced and guaranteed peace between the rulers.

It is said that the earliest matrimonial alliance between the ruling families of Manipur and Assam took place in 1536 when a Meetei maiden, Khongnanbi, was given in marriage to the Ahom king, Suhumung, by the Manipuri king, Kabomba (1524-1542). The royal chronicle of Manipur, Cheitharol Kumbaba, records that a new route to upper Assam was opened in 1536 and Khongnanbi took the route. The Ahom ruler presented an elephant called Tekhao Ngamba, an Ahom fishing trap (Tekhao Lu) and other things to the ruler of Manipur.¹ Other Meetei monarchs also forged matrimonial alliances with the Ahom ruling family. The relationship between the two ruling families greatly deepened during the reign of Bheigyachandra. He took refuge at the royal court of Ahom during the Burmese aggression in Manipur valley in 1764. Bheigyachandra also responded to the request of the Ahom king for assistance to suppress Moamoria revolt by sending his troops. Bheigyachandra also offered his brother, Gourshyam's daughter, Kuranganayani, to the Ahom king, Rajeswar Singh (1751-1764). A pond, named Mugalau Jiyekar Pukhuri (the pond of Mugalau daughter), was dug in her honour. She became a prominent Ahom queen. The Meetei attendants of the princess were settled at an area which came to be known as Magulau Ghat (Ahoms called Manipuris Magulau), presently located near the Jorhat town. Magulau Ghat is the first Meetei village in Assam. Later, the population

was shifted to Singhaduar, near the Ahom capital Gargaon. At present, Meetei villages are located at Borkolanagar, Hanchora, Singhaduar and Gargaon.

The early settlement of Manipuris in Tripura is also the outcome of the matrimonial alliance between the two ruling families. The first instance of the alliance was when Bheigyachandra married his daughter, Hariseswari, to the Tripuri king, Rajdhar Manikya, in 1798. The queen was accompanied by a Brahman priest, some musicians, noble men and maids from Manipur. They were settled near the royal palace, which came to be known as Mekhlipara (Tripuris called Manipuris Mekhalis). This alliance was followed by several others. King Krishna Kishore Manikya also married Marjit's three daughters, namely Chandrakala, Akhileswari and Bidhukala. King Birachandra Manikya had also taken three Manipuris, namely Bhanumati, Rajeshwari or Kaboklei and Manmohini, as his wives. Bhanumati, the most prominent queen, was the daughter of prince Tulajit alias Karta Singh, the son of Bheigyachandra.

The ruling family of Manipur also maintained matrimonial relations with the rulers of Cachar. In 12th century, Manipuri king, Thawan Thaba had married a Cachari princess Chingurembi. Her attendants were integrated to the Meetei community. In 1720, Cachari king, Ram Chandra Narayan, married a Manipuri princess Projabati Devi. The Manipuri attendants of the queen settled in Cachar. King Mungyamba's daughter was also married to a Cachar king. King Modhuchandra gave his daughter Indu Prabha to the Cachar king, Krishnachandra, in 1802. It may also be mentioned that several Manipuri rulers and princes took political asylum in Cachar along with their families and attendants.

Research scholar, A.K. Seram, is of the opinion that Meeteis started settling in parts of Eastern Bengal from the 18th century. The earliest settlement of Meetei families took place in Satgaon, Sylhet town, Bishgaon and Bhanugach.² Interestingly, Bishgaon is located in Habiganj district of Sylhet division. In the middle ages, it was part of Taraf kingdom. It may be mentioned that a Muslim ruler of the kingdom dispatched a force of one thousand Muslims to help the Manipuri prince, Sanongba, overthrow king Khagemba (1597-1652) in 1606. After being defeated, the Muslims were settled in the Manipur valley. However, the settlement of Meetei families in Bishgaon took place in 1804.

It is said that after the annexation of Kobo Valley in 1475, king Kiyamba entered matrimonial alliance to strengthen the bond of friendship with the ruler of Pong by giving his daughter in marriage. The rulers of Manipur even had matrimonial relations with their greatest nemesis, the rulers of Burma. In 11th century, Burmese king, Kyan Sit Thar, is said to have married a Meetei princess. Later, in 1558, Manipuri king, Chalamba, offered his daughter to the Burmese king, Bayiunaung. The Manipuri attendants of the princess were settled at Taungoo. King Charairongba's (1697-1709) daughter Chakpa Makhao Nagambi was also married to a Burmese king. Later, she was not given proper treatment by the Burmese royal family which strained the relation between the two kingdoms.³ Again in 1732, Maharaja Garibniwaz offered his brother's daughter Satyamala in marriage to the Burmese king, Mahadhammaraja Dipati, in 1749.

Religiosity also resulted in the settlement of Manipuris, predominantly the devout Meetei Hindus, in the Hindu pilgrimage centres. Meeteis, after their conversion to Hinduism, in the 18th century, started going to the pilgrim centres, such as Nabadwip in West Bengal, Brindaban and Radhakund in Mathura, UP for religious merits. It is believed that Raghunath Bhattacharya and his son, Bhabanath, were brought from Nabadwip as the priest of the Hindu deity Vishnu by king Khagemba. One of the queens of king Gourshyam (1753) is said to have settled in Nabadwip. In course of time, the devout Meetei rulers developed areas for the settlement of Meeteis in and around these pilgrim centres. It was king Chourjit who played major role in establishing Meetei localities in Nabadwip. After abdicating the throne in 1798, Bheigyachandra decided to spend the rest of his life in a pilgrim centre. He moved to Nabadwip with his retinue. From there, he further went to Brindawan, but died on the way in 1799 at Bhagabangola in Mursidabad district of Bengal.

However, it was the political turmoil, wars and devastations in Manipur which led to major settlement of Manipuris outside Manipur. Often struggle for the royal throne obligated several Meetei rulers and princes to flee to the west, mainly to Cachar, upper Assam and Sylhet.

The history of Manipur is replete with internecine wars with Burma. Manipur witnessed major and frequent Burmese aggression from around the middle of the 18th century. During these Burmese campaigns, several Manipuris were taken as captives to Burma and forced to settle there. The early

settlement of Manipuri captives in Burma took place during the Burmese aggressions in Manipur between 1755 and 1772. During these incursions huge number of Manipuri population, including women and children, were taken as captives and forcefully settled in different parts of Burma.

In 1758, Burmese ruler, Alaungpaya, led an expedition against Manipur. King Gourshyam and Bheigyachandra faced the onslaught of the Burmese at Pallel, but they were defeated. The Burmese marched towards the capital, but found deserted. The king and his subjects had fled to the surrounding hills. Alaungpaya and his army stayed at Imphal for nine days. They left Manipur as soon as they got the news of insurrection in Pegu taking along thousands of Manipuri captives, both men and women. They were settled in the districts of Sagiang and Amarapura. These Manipuris served as astrologers, boatmen, silver smiths, silk-workers, and court astrologers. Alaungpaya is said to have established a Manipuri (Kate) cavalry of 500 horsemen. In 1780, king Badawpaya brought Manipuris to Mogok and employed them in ruby mines.

Scottish Physician, Botanist and Surveyor, Francis Hamilton (1762-1829)⁴ notes in his account (c. 1808-1809) that when he was in Burma he saw one lakh Manipuri captives settling near the capital city Ava. He writes, "The Manipur priest (whom he met at Comilla) said, that the Brahmas or Burmas invaded his native country about the year 1768, and for eight years remained there, committing every kind of devastation. The country previously had contained a very great number of horses and other cattle, not above one in a hundred of which was left behind. He thinks that the Burmas carried away or destroyed 300,000 persons of different ages and sexes; and indeed it was alleged, when I was at Ava, that 100,000 captives remained near that city...At Ava I met with several Brahmans from Manipur. These had exactly Hindu countenances, and spoke Bengalese; but the common Moitays have little resemblance to the Brahmans; and, although, darker, have feature a good deal resembling the Burmas or Chinese. The language of the Moitay, of which a vocabulary has been deposited in the company's library, has a little or no resemblance, to the Bengalese, and Hindus from Bengal have been very long settled, and still retain the dialect of their original country. The Brahmans have converted the Moitay to the worship of Vishnu, under the forms of Rama and Krishna. None of them, that I saw, understood Sanskrit; but they had

books in both the Bengalese Assam, and called that country Tayko, as did also priest whom I saw at Komilla.”⁵

However, the major settlement of Manipuris outside Manipur took place during the Burmese occupation of Manipur for seven years in the first half of the 19th century.

Manipur after Maharaja Bheigyachandra

After the death of Bheigyachandra (also called Jai Singh), one of the prominent monarchs of Manipur, in 1799, the history of Manipur witnessed major political instability due to fratricidal conflicts for the royal throne. Four kings had ruled Manipur successively from 1799 to 1819. The period after the demise of Bheigyachandra has been described by R.B. Pemberton thus, “From this period the history of Muneepoor presents an unvarying scene of disgusting treachery, between the numerous sons of Jaee Sing, who in their contests for supremacy, arrayed the unhappy people of the country in hostile warfare against each other, and inflicted miseries upon them, little if at all inferior to those they had suffered at the hand of their common enemy the Burmahs.”⁶

The political situation in Manipur gave the Burmese monarch the opportunity for military aggression and occupation of Manipur valley from 1819 to 1826. The period is known in the annals of Manipur as Chahi Taret Khutakpa, or Seven Years Devastation.

Bheigyachandra was succeeded by his son, Labanyachandra (1798-1801). He had a short reign. His relatives killed him in a conspiracy to get the throne. Labanyachandra was succeeded by Modhuchandra (1801-1803), the third son of Bheigyachandra. The king’s half brother, Chourjit Singh revolted against him. The revolt was crushed. Chourjit fled to Cachar. In 1804, Chourjit invaded Manipur and dislodged Modhuchandra. The latter fled to Cachar. Chourjit (1803-1813) ascended the throne. His reign again saw the revolt of the young and ambitious prince, Marjit Singh. However, the latter failed in his attempt to get the throne and thus fled to Burma. The soft hearted Chourjit tried to make peace with his brother, but failed. Marjit conspired to get the throne with the help of the ruler of Burma, Badawpaya (1782-1819). Marjit spend seven years in the Burmese court at Ava. He developed friendship with the Burmese princes and even adopted the manners and customs of the land.

In 1813, the Burmese monarch agreed Marjit’s request to help him get the throne and dispatched a military expedition

to Manipur. Marjit led the expedition. The Manipuri forces failed to defend the Burmese attack. Chourjit and his brother Gambhir Singh fled to Cachar. Marjit (1813-1819) was crowned as the ruler of Manipur by Badawpaya by accepting his suzerainty. Marjit also ceded Kabaw valley to the Burmese king. The ambitious Marjit invaded Cachar in 1818. The Cachari king, Gobindchandra, took the help of Chourjit and Gambhir, who were then stationed in Jaintia and North Cachar respectively, to fight against Marjit. Seeing the development, Marjit retreated back to Manipur.

As years passed, Marjit began to act as an independent ruler which greatly offended the Burmese ruler. He allowed his subjects to cut teak in the Kabaw Valley. In 1818, he constructed a gilded royal palace for himself, which was regarded by the Burmese ruler as an insult to him. However, the offended Badawpaya died in 1819 and the crown went to his grandson, Bagyidaw (1819-1837). The new Burmese king invited Marjit for the grand coronation ceremony at Ava. It was customary for a vassal king to pay homage to the Burmese monarch. Fearing the reprisal he might get from the new ruler, Marjit did not attend the coronation ceremony. Instead, he gave the excuse that he was apprehending threat from his rival brothers.

Burmese incursion and atrocities

In order to reprimand Marjit, the annoyed Bagyidaw dispatched a strong force to Manipur in 1819 under the command of general Maha Bandula, who was regarded as the greatest military general of the country. Marjit was unable to defend the strong Burmese onslaught. The adequate and effective use of fire-arms by the Burmese force contributed to their success. Marjit fled to Cachar. Manipur was taken under Burmese control from 1819 to 1826 by placing puppet rulers on the throne. Huidroba Subol, Yumjaotaba alias Pitamba, Gambhir and Jai Singh ruled successively in 1821, followed by Jadu Singh (1822-1823), Raghav Singh (1823-1824) and Bhadra Singh (1824).

During the occupation, the Burmese carried out untold atrocities to the inhabitants of the valley; destroyed and set on fire the villages and royal palaces, defiled the temples and sacred sites and destroyed crops. The enemies put to death the innocent and helpless people, including old, women and children. The infants were mercilessly killed in front of their parents and took away healthy men and women into captivity

as slaves. The destruction left an enduring smear in the psyche of the Manipuris for generations.

The acts of merciless carnage carried out by Burmese on the Manipuris have become part of Manipur's folklore. It is said that the Burmese armies locked up the old, infirm and disabled persons, women and children in houses devoid of ventilations; chillies were burnt inside, which killed them due to suffocation. It's also related that the male captives were deported by tying them with an unbreakable creeper called yairi, which was pierced in their palms, while the female captives were forced to carry the heavy spoils of the war. Many died on the way to Burma. R.B. Pemberton remarked "it (Manipur) was doomed...to the devastating visitations of Burmese armies, which have nine or ten times swept the country from one extremity to the other, with the apparent determination of extirpating a race whom they found it impossible permanently to subdue (in the past)."⁷

Exodus of Manipuris

To escape from the Burmese atrocities, almost all the inhabitants of the valley of Manipur, both Meeteis and Muslims, fled for safety. Large proportion of Manipuris moved to Barak valley (Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi) of Assam, and further to Tripura and Surma valley of East Bengal, while others hide in the western hills. Several thousands of Manipuris were carried by the Burmese force as captives.

Cheitharol Kumbaba records the Burmese invasion of 1819 and its impact thus, "The year of Wakanpam Hori, Chandrapta 1031 Sakabda 1741 (1819 CE)]...In the month of Poinu (Nov./Dec.) it was reported that the Aawas had marched (against the land), all the people from the area of Khurai village and the whole land along with Meetingu Nongpok Wairang Pamheipa, marched to attack Aawa...the combat with the Aawas began...the land was devastated. Ningthem fled to the land of the Mayangs. He reigned on the throne for seven years...Pakhan Woon and Kane Woon, these two, with the intention to deceive sent a message through Chakapiyang to Yipungsi saying that they would make him the king, and thus called him down from the haos (in the hills). Yipungsi came down (from the hills), along with some Meeteis. But the Aawas deceived them and captured and took Yipungsi Jai along with three lakh Meeteis to Aawa. Kane Woon and two thousand Aawas stayed behind to live and devastate the country. They encamped at the Kangcheipung polo ground."⁸ The entry for

the year 1820 records thus: “[The year of Moirang Khenaram, Chandrapta 1032 Sakabda 1742 (1820 CE)]...The month of Phairen (Jan./Feb.) began on Saturday. It was on that day that Woon Pakhan and Woon, these two took Meeteis numbering three lakhs and left for Aawa...”⁹ The above entries show that in 1819 and 1820 the Burmese took away 6 lakh Manipuris as captives. Renowned research scholar, N. Sanajaoba is of the opinion that the number of Meetei captives taken by Burmese, which are given in lakhs in the chronicle, should be in thousands, as one lakha, by usage, could have been ten thousand.¹⁰

The Burmese aggression and occupation greatly transformed the demography of Manipur. The population of the valley was drastically reduced. It is estimated that one third of the population accompanied Marjit in his flight to Cachar, while a large number took shelter in the western hills of Manipur (Tamenglong). Several thousands of people were taken as prisoners to Burma. According to the Political Agent of Manipur, James Johnstone, Manipur at this time had just 2000 inhabitants, the remains of a thriving population of at least 4 lakh or 6 lakh that existed before the aggression.¹¹

The impact of the Burmese attack on the Muslim population has been observed by Political Agent of Manipur, W. McCulloch, in his account thus: “The Mussalman population appears, before the devastation of the country by the Burmese, to have attained a very considerable amount; but as was the case with all the other sections of the Manipuri community, the greater portion of it was carried into captivity by these ruthless invaders, and the present Mussalmans are the descendants of the few that then escaped being captured.”¹²

Assessing the overall impact of the Burmese invasions, eminent historian, Gangmumei Kamei writes, “Manipur had never before faced such a national catastrophe brought about by the Burmese conquest. The oppression and cruelties with which the Burmese dealt with Manipur had no parallel in history of Manipur. It was a sort of genocide of the Meiteis that had been carried by the Burmese reign of terror. This is known in history of Manipur as Chahi Taret Khuntakpa: Seven Years Devastation.”¹³

In Cachar, the three Manipuri princes, Chourjit, Gambhir and Marjit, joined hands and took control of the land by chasing out the ruler, Gobindchandra (1813-1830), to Sylhet. The later appealed to the British to intervene, but

refused to do so. Finally, the kingdom of Cachar was partitioned between the three princes. Chaurjit took control of the eastern portion of Cachar bordering Manipur and ruled from Soniamukh, Marjit ruled in Hailakandi, while Gambhir controlled Kalyne and Bikrampur, near Badarpur. They revenue of Cachar was shared among them.

The Manipuris, both Meeteis and Muslims, who fled to the Barak valley, were allowed to settle in the areas on the banks of the Barak river and its tributaries known as Chiri, Madhura, Jatinga, Sonai, Rukkini and Ghagra. Cachar then had sparse population, there were enough barren and fertile wastelands for the migrants to settle and take up cultivation. Majority of the Manipuris took shelter in the Barak valley, while others migrated further beyond the Barak valley. A section of the Manipuris decided to settle in parts of Tripura. Few others further went to Eastern Bengal and settled in parts of Sylhet, mostly on the banks of Khowai and Surma rivers. However, many of the Manipuris returned back to Manipur after Gambhir established his rule by driving out the Burmese.

The three Manipuri princes did not live in harmony for long. Gambhir demanded an increase of territory from Chourjit, but the demand was not fulfilled. A fight took place between the two. Choujit was defeated. In 1823, Gambhir occupied the whole of Cachar. Chourjit, along with his entourage, moved to Sylhet. Marjit was given the responsibility of assisting Gambhir, but he too moved to Sylhet in 1824. That year, Choujit and Marjit constructed the Manipuri Rajbari in Sylhet. Both of them died in Sylhet. Gambhir and his distant cousin, Nara Singh, mobilized help from the British to liberate Manipur.

Liberation of Manipur

Prince Herachandra, the son of Labanyachandra, Yumjaotaba, Gambhir and others carried war of resistance against the Burmese force stationed in the valley. Herachandra, referred to as Daku Ningthou (dacoit king), made repeated ambushes to the Burmese troops by leading a small resistance force employing guerrilla tactics.

It may be mentioned that the Burmese, after occupying Manipur, further carried arms against the Ahom rulers and controlled the whole Brahmaputra valley. During their occupation, the Burmese force carried out atrocities on the people. The period is called Manar Upadrab or oppressions of the Burmese in the history of Assam. It is said that the

population was reduced by more than half. The Burmese aggression began to pose great threat to Bengal. The Agent to the Governor General for the North Eastern Frontier, David Scott, even anticipated that Burmese forces would march from Manipur and Assam to Cachar for an onward advance to Sylhet and Bengal. The deposed Cachari king, Gobindchandra, having failed to get the British protection invited the Burmese to march to Cachar to drive away the Manipuri princes. As expected, the Burmese attacked Cachar. British made preparations to liberate Assam, Cachar and Jiantia. David Scott enticed Chourjit, Marjit and Gambhir to assist him in driving out the Burmese forces. Chourjit and Marjit did not accept the request due to old age. However, Gambhir and his associate Nara agreed to help the British in the fight against the Burmese. The two anticipated to obtain British's assistance in liberating Manipur. They took part in several battles against the Burmese, namely the battle of Tilian, Bikrampur and Dudpati.

David Scott decided to assist Gambhir in the liberation of Manipur. By Apr. 1824, David Scott and Gambhir were busy making preparations for the military operations against the Burmese. They decided to constitute a contingent of 500 soldiers. It was initially christened as Raja Gambhir Singh Levy. By Jul. 1824 recruitment of the soldiers, from amongst the Manipuris and Cacharis, was complete. Military training was imparted at Badarpur under the supervision of Col. Inns, along with Gambhir and Nara.

By Oct. 1824, the Burmese troops in Cachar were cleared. Now they were concentrated in Manipur valley and Kabaw valley. The British government decided to send a large military force in Jan. 1825 under Brigadier-General Suldham. A major preparation for the movement of the force was made, but rain and bad road hindered it. Ultimately, the plan was abandoned. Gambhir made the proposal to the British authorities to liberate Manipur with the help of his Levy. Permission was granted. Lt. R.B. Pemberton volunteered to join the Levy as he wanted to study the topography and resources of Manipur and beyond, and also to know the strength of the Burmese force.

The Levy left Sylhet on 17th May 1825 and reached the valley on 10th June 1825. The Levy attacked the Burmese troops stationed at the royal palace. The Burmese left the valley. Gambhir ascended the throne in Jun. 1826. He and Lt. Pemberton returned to Sylhet leaving a section of the Levy

under the command of Nara. British Government praised Gambhir for the achievement and gave further assistance of 1500 muskets with ammunitions. Recruitment of the soldiers was done. The Levy was officially re-named the Manipur Levy and placed under the command of Captain F.J. Grant and Lt. R.B. Pemberton. The force returned to Manipur. By then, the Burmese had left Kabaw valley leaving behind a force of 700 Shans at Tamu. Gambhir, Captain Grant and Nara went up to Tamu; finally routed the force after fighting for five days in Jan. 1826.

The Treaty of Yandaboo was signed in 24th Feb. 1826 between British and Burmese to conclude the Anglo-Burmese War. The Burmese king renounced all claims upon Assam, Cachar and Jiantia and acknowledged Gambhir as the ruler of Manipur.

Gambhir commenced his rule with great adversity. He established his rule with few thousands of male population, and a small number of women and children. Political Agent, R. Brown, notes that Gambhir established himself as the ruler of Manipur with the adult male population of just around 3000, with a small proportion of women and children.¹⁴ Gambhir encouraged the Meetei and Muslim population who fled to Barak valley and beyond to return. A section of the migrated population returned, while many preferred to stay back permanently. It is said that Gambhir promoted polygamy and early marriage among his subjects as a means to enhance the population. The number of his subjects gradually increased to 30,000. Three decades later, in 1859, the population of the valley of Manipur reached around 50,000.

Manipuri population outside Manipur

The population of Manipuris settled in Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh could be determined from the available linguistic census, which enumerated the number of Manipuri speakers. A Linguistic Survey of India was conducted from 1894 to 1928 under the supervision of eminent linguist, G.A. Grierson. As a part of the survey, the population of Manipuri speakers in Manipur and other parts of Indian sub-continent, particularly Barak Valley, Tripura and Eastern Bengal, was enumerated. The survey (1904) had given the total numbers of Manipuri speakers as 240,637. The state-wise break-up shows: Manipur State – 150,000; Cachar Plains – 42,077; Sylhet – 30,000; Hill Tippera – 18,000; Dacca – 250; Mymenshingh – 200; Sibsagar – 110.¹⁵

Language census was done as part of the general census enumeration of 1991. The report shows the population of Manipuri speakers in India as 1,270,216. The state-wise break-up shows: Assam 1,26,987; Tripura – 19,737; Manipur – 11,10,134; Arunachal Pradesh – 1137; Meghalaya – 1796; Mizoram – 1084; Nagaland – 5445; West Bengal – 824; Maharashtra – 748; UP – 576; among others.

The language census of 2011 shows the population of Manipuri speakers in India as 1,761,079. The state-wise break-up shows: Manipur – 1,522,132; Assam – 168,133; Tripura – 23,779; Meghalaya – 4,451; Nagaland – 3,947; Mizoram – 2,242; West Bengal – 2,010; among others.

Manipuris in Assam

As per an unofficial estimate, there are around 3 lakh Manipuri speaking population in Assam at present. Manipuris are scattered mainly in the Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi districts of Barak Valley. A significant number of Manipuris are also settled in Nagaon, Hojai, Golaghat and Kamrup (Metro) districts of Assam.

A researcher, K. Poram Haoramba, has meticulously documented the Meetei villages in Barak valley in 2003. According to him, there are 127 Meetei villages in Cachar district: Jirighat 3, Lakhipur 50, Sonai 22, Dhalai 11, Silchar 14, Udharband 13, Barkhala 12 and Katigara 2. There are 11 Meetei villages in Karimganj District and 15 in Hailakandi. In all, there are 163 Meetei villages in the three districts of Barak Valley.¹⁶

According to a research scholar, Rakesh Singha, most of the Manipuris settled in Brahmaputra valley, including those settled in Hojai district, migrated from Barak valley in search of better settlement areas and economic opportunities. The migration commenced from the 1920s. Meetei population is sparsely distributed in various parts of the district. At present there are 55 Meetei villages in Hojai district.¹⁷

Manipur Basti in Guwahati is also a major Meetei locality. It is said that Maharaja Churachand (1891-1941) and his wife stayed frequently at Guwahati during his trips to Shillong. He decided to purchase land there for the settlement of Meeteis. In 1923, he bought plots of land from a man named Rajput Raghunandan. The locality came to be known as Manipur Basti or Manipuri Rajbari. Today, the Basti has around 500 Meetei families. There are also few Meetei families in Birubari, Rupnagar, Bhagagarh, Kahipara, Ganeshguri,

Christian Basti, Jotia, Bamunimoidan and other areas of greater Guwahati city. Tinsukia also have a small Meetei population.

Most of the Manipuri Muslim population are concentrated in Silchar sub-division of Cachar district. There are around 50 Manipuri Muslim villages. The Muslim villages are in close proximity to that of the Meeteis. Manipuri Muslims are also settled in other parts of Assam. Salbagan is a Manipuri Muslim village in Hojai with around 100 Muslim families. In Golaghat there are three Manipuri Muslim villages of around 100 families. In Lado Bazar of Tinsukia district, there are around 15 to 20 families, while in Kamrup Metro there are around 50 Muslim families. All these Muslims migrated from Cachar in search of better land and economic opportunities.

Manipuris in Tripura

The census of 2011 has given the Manipuri population in Tripura as 30,000. Meetei population is concentrated in the Agartala Municipality, Bishakagar, Mohonpur, Jirania, Khowai and Telimura blocks of West Tripura district; Panisagar block in Dharma Nagar Sub-division, Kailashahar and Salema in Kamalpur sub-division of North Tripura district. Manipuri Muslim population in Tripura is concentrated only in Kamalpur sub-division.

Manipuris in Bangladesh

The Bangladesh census of 1991 had given the population of Manipuris in Bangladesh as 25,000. The region-wise Manipuri population shows: Maulvi Bazar – 13,000, Sylhet – 7,000 and Habiganj – 4,000. Most of the Meetei villages/localities are found in Sylhet proper in Sylhet district and in Bhanugach, Longla, Sreemangol, Dhamai, Boroitali in Maulvi Bazar district. There are also few Meetei localities in Habiganj and Sunamganj district. Majority of the Manipuri Muslim villages/localities are found in Kamalganj sub-division of Maulvi Bazar. There are also few Manipuri Muslim villages in Sadar Moulvi Bazar, Sadar Sylhet, and Chatak in Sunamganj.

Manipuris in Myanmar

There is no official figure of the population of Manipuris in Myanmar. However, it is estimated to be around 40,000 (based on an Indian Embassy official).¹⁸ According to a research scholar, A. Tomba Meetei, there were around one lakh Meetei population in Myanmar in 2005. The region-wise distribution of Meetei population shows: Rangoon – 30,000, Mandalay –

20,000, Pegu – 17,000, Bhamo – 11,000, Ava – 10,000, Katha – 9,000, Beilin – 700, Kalmeo – 600, Kalewa – 500, Keyndat – 500, Tisikhong – 200 and Namphalong – 50.¹⁹ However, the population of the community has greatly reduced over the years. The strict socio-cultural norms in Myanmar forced the Manipuris to gradually give up their age-old cultures and traditions; a process referred to as Burmanisation or forced acculturation.

According to research scholar, Mutua Bahadur, Hindu orthodoxy and strict caste rules within the Meetei society in Myanmar also contributed to the gradual dwindling of Meetei population in Myanmar. He writes, “The custom of division among Myanmarese Manipuris into Brahmins, Kshetris and Sudras was prevalent strongly among the Manipuri society. Untouchability and discrimination based on religion still exists. Since the formation of a Manipuri society about 250 years ago, untouchability and discrimination have become causes for shrinking the original population of the Manipuris. Around 1917, some Manipuris of Ahneiktaw socialized with the populace of some other communities and they were ostracized for visiting a temple of Ningthem Purohit. It means that they have become untouchables so they are not allowed to be a part of them. Even relatives became victims of this practice. Fear, shame and anguish forced them to embrace Buddhism. It became one of the causes of forgetting their mother tongue. In this way the Manipuris merged with Myanmarese social system. Today they have forgotten that they were the descendants of those Manipuris who practised medicine there.”²⁰

At present, most of the Meetei settlement areas are found in Sagaing, Mandalay and Rangoon regions. Shan state also has few Meetei populations. The Meeteis are referred to as Kate by the Burmese, while the Meetei Brahmins are called Paona.

McCulloch had noted that, along with the Meeteis, a large number of Muslims were taken away as captives by the Burmese during the Seven Years Devastation. It has been reported that Manipuri Muslim settlements are found in Mandalay Chatra Number in Mandalay region and in Tammu, near the Indian border. However, the population has, over the decades, lost their Manipuri cultural roots and identity. Except a handful of Manipuri Muslim families in Tammu, it is difficult to trace the others. They have probably been absorbed to the Burmese Muslim society. According to a census report of 2014,

Mandalay region has 1.88 lakh Muslims. Myanmar has 2.3% Muslims (Buddhist 89.8% and Christian 6.2%).

Conclusion

Several historical circumstances during the middle ages have displaced the Manipuri population, particularly the Meeteis and Muslims, outside Manipur. It has been seen that matrimonial relations that developed between the Manipuri ruling families and their neighbouring counterparts resulted in the settlement of Meeteis in Tripura, Assam and Myanmar from the early times. From the 18th century onwards, the orthodox Meetei Hindus, including the monarchs and his families, had started undertaking pilgrimage to the holy sites. In course of time, Meetei settlement areas developed around the pilgrim centres of UP and Bengal. Towards the close of the 18th century, Manipur saw political instability and a series of Burmese aggression. During Bheigyachandra's reign, Manipur faced several Burmese incursions which even forced the king to flee to Assam. Many Manipuris were taken as captives. The beginning of the 19th century further saw political disorder due to the intense struggle for the royal throne among the sons of Bheigyachandra. The Burmese king intervened by launching a military campaign. Manipur was conquered. The king fled to Cachar. To escape the Burmese atrocities, majority of the population in the valley of Manipur followed the king, while many hide in the western hills. Several thousands who could not escape fall into the hands of the Burmese. Many men, women and children were tortured and killed mercilessly, while several thousands were taken as captives. Manipur was thus greatly depopulated and impoverished. The large Manipuri population who migrated to Barak valley occupied the fertile waste lands. However, several others further moved to parts of Tripura and East Bengal and settled there. The Manipuris who were taken as captives by the Burmese force were also settled in various parts of Burma.

End-notes

- ¹ S.N.A. Parratt, *The Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur*, Vol. I, p. 52
- ² A.K. Seram, 'Manipuri (Meitei) Settlement in Bangladesh,' in N. Sanajaoba (ed.), *Manipur Past and Present*, Vol. IV, p. 121
- ³ After the birth of a son, she was deprived of her royal privileges, including the title of queen, and the king started to ill-treat her. Charairongba tried to avenge the humiliation

of her daughter, but was unsuccessful. To fulfill his father's wish, Garibniwaj invaded Burma in 1738, crushed the Burmese force and conquered Sagiang, an important city. The king marked the event by leaving a cut mark on the door of the gateway with his sword.

⁴ Hamilton was commissioned by the Bengal Government to make a comprehensive survey of the areas within the jurisdiction of East India Company. He was instructed to report on topography, history, antiquities, lives of the natives, their culture, resources, etc. After an extensive survey from 1807 to 1814, he wrote several treatises. He also served as a personnel physician of Governor General, Lord Wellesley, in Calcutta from 1803 to 1804. During the years, he also developed the Calcutta Alipore Zoo.

⁵ Francis Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, pp. 84, 86

⁶ R.B. Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, p. 44

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36

⁸ S.N.A. Parratt, *op.cit.*, pp. 81-82

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84

¹⁰ N. Sanajaoba, *Manipur Past and Present*, Vol. IV, p. III

¹¹ James Johnstone, *Manipur and the Naga Hills*, p. 90

¹² W. McCulloch, *An Account of the Valley of Manipur*, p. 14

¹³ Gangmumei Kamei, *History of Manipur*, p. 289

¹⁴ R. Brown, *Statistical Account of the Native State of Manipur*, p. 65

¹⁵ G.A. Grierson (ed.), *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. III, p. 20

¹⁶ K. Poram Thiba Haoramba, *Cha Cup Ama, Manglangi Phura Ama*, pp. 15-28

¹⁷ Rakesh Singha, 'Manipuri Settlements in the Hojai District of Assam,' pp. 74-78

¹⁸ N. Jiten, 'The Meitei Diaspora in Myanmar,' in Shukhdeba S. Hanjabam, et.al., *Manipur-Myanmar Connections*, p. 184

¹⁹ A. Tomba Meetei, 'Meeteis in Myanmar,' in N. Sanajaoba (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 91

²⁰ Mutua Bahadur, 'Manipuri Diaspora in Myanmar,' in Shukhdeba S. Hanjabam, et.al., *op.cit.*, p. 160

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