

# AN INTRODUCTION TO MANIPUR AND THEORIES REGARDING ORIGIN AND MIGRATION OF THE ZELIANGRONG ETHNIC GROUP

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## ABSTRACT

*Manipur is a melting pot of ethnic communities. Various groups though practising different religions have similar migration stories. This paper takes a look at the Zeliangrong ethnic group. Origin and migration of the Zeliangrong people is based on the traditional legends, folk-tales, and folk-songs, etc. Some record, accounts and information were also given by a few British anthropologists and officials. Every tribe or community living in different countries claim at least a certain place or cave as the origin of human race, according to its own belief or legend. Deciphering oral histories and migration stories can bring forth surprising relationship among various communities.*

**Keywords:** Barak valley, Kuki-Chin, migration, Naga tribes, Nguiba , Zeliangrong.

## INTRODUCTION

### Geographical Setting

Manipur, one of the eight states of North East India, is a border state in the North Eastern part of India having an international boundary of about 352 km. It is bounded in the north by the state of Nagaland, in the east by Myanmar, in the west by Assam and in the south by Mizoram.<sup>1</sup> The state lies between 93.030E to 94.780E and 73.830N to 25.680N and has a total geographical area of 22,327 sq. km. of which 1,813 sq. km. form the central valley of Manipur. The state is divided into two broad divisions viz., the hills and the valley. The valley lies in the central part of the state and is surrounded by the hills on all sides.<sup>2</sup>

Manipur is rectangular in shape with the Loktak Lake in the centre of the valley. The average elevation of the valley is about 790 m. above sea level and that of the hills between 1,500 m and 1,800 m. Manipur state clearly falls within the Monsoon belt of India.<sup>3</sup> It has sub-tropical temperate climate. The annual rainfall of Manipur in 1999 was recorded to be 1719. 81mm. as against the normal rainfall of 1910.9 mm. The state has a pleasant climate.<sup>4</sup>

Manipur is connected by air with Calcutta, Delhi, Guwahati, Silchar, Aizawl and Yangon in Myanmar (although at present there is no commercial flight operating). However, roads constitute the most important aspect of transport system. Two National Highways connect the state with the rest of the country. National Highway which connects Manipur with Assam is the Imphal-Kohima-Dimapur road which is about 215 km in length. Another road of considerable economic importance is the 225 km long National Highway, the new Cachar road, connecting Imphal with Silchar in Assam via Jiribam on the western fringe of the Manipur valley. However, the state has no direct railway connection. These two highways still continue to be the main lifeline of Manipur.<sup>5</sup> In 2005, total road length in Manipur was 8648km, out of which National Highway constituted 967 km and State Highways 668 km.

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## ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION

Manipur has been traditionally a single district state with a number of sub-divisions. In 1919, the hill areas of the state were divided into four sub-divisions; one with headquarters at Imphal and three in the hills. This arrangement continued till January, 1930 when a re-arrangement of the administration of the hill area was attempted.<sup>6</sup> The sub-divisions, constituted in 1919, along with their headquarters were abolished, and the entire area of the Manipur Hills was placed immediately under the President of the Manipur State Durbar, with two sub-divisional officers to assist him; one in charge of the south and the other of the north.<sup>7</sup>

In 1934-35, the hill areas were again divided into three sub - divisions-Sadars, Ukhrul and Tamenglong. Each sub-division was placed under one officer.<sup>8</sup> With the passing of the Indian Independence Act in 1947, the British supremacy lapsed, and the administration of the hill areas remained in the hands of the Maharaja of Manipur.<sup>9</sup> However, Manipur merged with the Union of India on 15th October, 1949 i.e., two years after India secured independence.

The Constituent Assembly of India finally passed the Constitution of India on November 26, 1949. It came into force on January 26, 1950. The Indian Constitution gave Manipur the status of part 'C' state and in 1956, it became a Union Territory. After the integration of the state, the district of Manipur was divided into a number of administrative units. During 1958 - 59 the administrative units were re-organised for administrative convenience and greater decentralisation of the Governmental machinery. These units included six hill sub-divisions and four valley sub-divisions.

The hill sub-divisions were; Tamenglong, Churachandpur, Ukhrul, Jiribam, Mao and Sadar Hills, and Tengnoupal. The valley sub-divisions were Thoubal, Bishnupur, Imphal East and Imphal West.<sup>10</sup> With a view to introduce a more efficient system of administration, the Chief Commissioner (Administrator) ordered the creation of five districts - Manipur Central, Manipur West, Manipur North, Manipur South and Manipur East along with 25 sub-divisions with effect from 14th November 1969.<sup>11</sup>

The demand for statehood was made on 3rd September, 1970. As a result, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi announced in the Lok Sabha, the acceptance of the granting of Statehood to Manipur, Tripura, and Meghalaya. In 1971, the Re-organisation of North East India Bill was framed and the Act was passed in 1972. Consequently, Manipur became a full-fledged state on 21st January, 1972.<sup>12</sup> Till May, 1983 the state had six districts. For administrative convenience, in 1998 the state was divided into 9 districts namely: (i) Imphal West District; (ii) Imphal East District; (iii) Thoubal District; (iv) Bishnupur District; (v) Senapati District; (vi) Chandel District; (vii) Ukhrul District; (viii) Tamenglong District; and (ix) Churachandpur District.

## POPULATION

Manipur is the third largest state in the North Eastern Region of India in terms of size of population. The people of Manipur constitute nearly 0.22 percent of the total population of India but the geographical area is only 0.7 percent of that of India.<sup>13</sup> The population of Manipur as per Census 2011 is 2,570,390. Of this, the rural population is 1,736,236 and the urban population 834,154.<sup>14</sup>

The valley population comprises the Meiteis, the Pangals, the Nepalese, and those who came from other parts of India and settled in Manipur such as: the Bengalese, the Assamese, the Punjabis, and the Biharis, etc. The Meiteis are mainly Hindus and the Pangals are Muslims. Both the communities speak Manipuri language, one of the national languages of the country.<sup>15</sup> The Meiteis are generally Mongoloid and speak in Tibeto-Burman language. There is a sizable population who are called Meitei Pangals. Muslim migration into Manipur from other parts of India was during the reign of King Khagemba (1597-1652) but some Muslims had already settled in Manipur before the enthronement of Maharaja Khagemba.<sup>16</sup> The old Muslims who settled in Manipur prior to the reign of King Khagemba were known as "Aribam," because they were the first and oldest settlers among the Muslim community.

There are seven Scheduled Castes communities in Manipur: Loiyathibi, Dhobi, Muchi, Rabidas, Namsudra, Patni, and Sutradhar. The total Scheduled Castes population was 97042. Of this 47563 are in rural areas and 49479 in urban areas. In terms of proportion, the Scheduled Caste population constitutes 3.8 % of the total population.<sup>17</sup>

The other ethnic groups in Manipur are the Naga and Kuki-Chin tribes. There are 29 Scheduled Tribes in Manipur according to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Modification) Order, 1956 of the Constitution of India. They are the main inhabitants of the hills who include: Aimol, Anal, Angami, Chiru, Chothe, Gangte, Hmar, Kabui, Kacha Naga, Koirao, Koirang, Kom, Lamkang, Mizo (Lushai tribes), Maram, Maring, Mao, Monsang, Moyon, Paite, Purum,

Ralte, Sema, Simte, Sukte, Tangkhul, Thadou, Vaiphei, and Zou. The Naga tribes in Manipur are further divided into various sub-tribes such as the Tangkhul, the Mao, the Poumai, the Anal, the Moyon, the Zeliangrong, the Maram, the Maring, the Monsang, the Lamkang, the Thangal, the Angami, and the Sema.<sup>18</sup> The Zeliangrong Nagas are mostly settled in the Tamenglong District of Manipur, the Maos, the Poumai, the Marams and the Thangals are mostly concentrated in the Senapati District, the Tangkhuls in the Ukhrul District, the Marings, the Moyons, the Monsangs, the Lamkangs and the Anals in the Chandel District of Manipur. The other tribal ethnic group, namely, the Kuki-Chin consists of the Mizo, Hmar, Paite, Gangte, Simte, Kuki, Thadou, Vaiphei, Kom, Purum, Sukte, Zou, and the Ralte. These groups in Manipur are mainly settled in the Churachandpur district of Manipur.<sup>19</sup> Presently, there are 33 scheduled tribes in Manipur.

The state is also inhabited by different ethnic and religious groups. Of the total population living in Manipur, the tribal population constituted 7,13813 in 2001. They speak different dialects and have different ways of life. Most of the tribes are Christians who constitute 34 percent, and are mostly settled in the hills.<sup>20</sup>

### **THEORIES REGARDING THE ORIGIN AND MIGRATION OF THE ZELIANGRONG ETHNIC GROUP**

The common ancestry of the Zeliangrong<sup>21</sup> people is embedded in the legends and folklores of the tribe.<sup>22</sup> They came in contact with the British during the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-1826). The Zeliangrong tribe was brought under direct administration of the British in three administrative units: one under Manipur state; second under Nagaland; and third under the North-Cachar Hills of Assam.<sup>23</sup> This continued to function even after Independence of India in 1947. The majority of the Zeliangrong people are concentrated in the state of Manipur.

The origin and migration of the Zeliangrong people is based on the traditional legends, folk-tales, and folk-songs, etc. Some record accounts and information were also given by a few British anthropologists and officials. Every tribe or community living in different countries claim at least a certain place or cave as the origin of human race, according to its own belief or legend.<sup>24</sup> The Zeliangrong people claim their origin from a mythical cave called "*mahou taobei*" which is said to be located at *Ramting Kabin* in the Senapati district of Manipur. They believed that their ancestors after creation by god emerged out of this mythical cave. According to the legends, the entrance of the cave which was sealed by a huge stone slab was removed by a Bull (mithun) with its horn. The first man who came out of the cave was called "*Pokrei*" and the woman was called "*Dichaliu*".<sup>25</sup> One day Pokrei asked the girl to call him as uncle (Apou) in place of brother (Achaibung) as soon as she met him, while coming round a raised earthen mound (Pungbut) from the opposite direction.<sup>26</sup> In spite of this instruction, the girl through forgetfulness used to call him as brother instead of uncle for six times. At the seventh time of going round the mound the girl addressed him as uncle as soon as she met him. From that time onwards, the boy no longer treated her as his sister and presumed that the girl belonged to a different clan. Since then the marriage between boys and girls of the same clan or same line of blood relationship is not allowed among the Zeliangrong tribe. Thus, after sometime they got married and became husband and wife.<sup>27</sup> As time passed, they got children who first settled at Makhel. So the original home of the Zeliangrong ancestors is presumed to be at Makhel. Most of the Naga tribes such as: Angami, Chakesang, Sema, Lotha, Shipoumei, Maram, Tangkhul, and Rengma etc., point to Makhel as the original place from where they dispersed to other directions.

According to another theory, the Zeliangrong Nagas, like other tribes of Indo-Burma areas are said to have originated from China. According to some other versions, the Tibeto-Burman group/people initially moved towards the west and thereafter sub-divided themselves into several groups. It is said that the Mongoloid people entered Burma in three different waves and by different routes. The first wave of people who migrated from China were the Mon-Khmer races, second wave composed the Tibeto-Burman races, and the third wave was that of the Tai-Chinese consisting of Shan, Siamese, Karen, etc.<sup>28</sup> The various ethnic groups belonging to southern Mongoloid, the Tibeto-Burman, the Indo-Aryan and a sizable section of Tai (Shan) came to Manipur from pre-historic times. The ethnic groups of Manipur namely, Meiteis, Nagas, Kuki-Chin, and other communities are believed to be the descendants of those migrating people.<sup>29</sup> It is quite clear to us that the Zeliangrong Nagas like other tribes had come from two regions, namely South-East Asia, Eastern Tibet, or South-Western China.

### **THEORY OF MIGRATION**

The theory of migration of the Zeliangrong tribe and their Chieftainship is also supported by their mythological and legendary accounts. One "Nguiba", the Chief of the village at Makuilongdi was their progenitor. He had married twice because his first wife was thought to be incapable of bearing a son. His second wife gave birth to a male child named "Namgang" or "Magangtubou". After a few years, however, the first wife also gave birth to a male child named

"Kadingbou." The second wife gave birth to another male child named "Rembangbou." When Nguiba became old, he could not decide to whom he had to hand over his property.<sup>30</sup> So, to settle the matter he sent his two sons, Namgang and Kadingbou to their younger uncle who lived somewhere in Northern Koubru range. Their uncle was clever enough to deal with the matter.

Next morning he killed a cock and prepared the curry nicely. He then made two packets of rice and two packets of the curry. He tied a bull (mithun) with a rope and gave it with a packet of food to Namgang, and the other packet to Kadingbou with a dog tied with another rope. They were directed to take the food wherever the bull would stop to take water. In the judgement of their uncle, the one who would find the cock's head ought to have the right of inheritance to his father's property. The two brothers then started their homeward journey. When they reached the Koubru Mountain, they stopped to have their lunch. As they unwrapped their respective packs to eat, they found the head of the chicken in Kadingbou's packet.<sup>31</sup>

The ordeal was not yet over there. After that, they had to run a race by pulling their respective animals. The one who would reach home first and light the lamp would become the heir. So, Namgang leaving behind his food went ahead with his bull, while Kadingbou finished his food and thinking that his elder brother might already have reached home, proceeded at a leisurely pace. But unfortunately Namgang was delayed on the way by his bull. So Kadingbou reached home first and lit the lamp. As the bull could not walk as fast as the dog, Kadingbou won the two ordeals. Accordingly, he inherited his father's property and became the Chief of that village.<sup>32</sup> Namgang became very disappointed because he had to miss his father's property. He left behind his parents and went to Barak valley or Hereira village, which was the first Zeme village. While Kadingbou and his followers stayed behind, his younger brother Rembangbou and his followers proceeded southwards to vacant land. Still others went to the eastern and southern parts of the Zeliangrong areas and came to be known as Puimei. According to tradition, the Zemes were considered to be the descendants of Namgang, the eldest son of Nguiba; the Liangmais the descendants of the second son Kadingbou; and Rongmei the descendants of Rembang.<sup>33</sup>

According to various theories, the ancestors of the Zeliangrong lived at village Makhel. From Makhel, they came to a deep gorge called Ramting Kabin where they took shelter for some time. A local writer N.B. Pamei wrote that, the ancestors of Zeliangrong left their abode in Makhel and along with their belongings moved south. They crossed many mountains and survived hostile conditions.<sup>34</sup> They took temporary shelter wherever they could. After a long time, they reached a place where they were comparatively safe. It is also said that Ramting Kabin was like a cave with a single gate and this could be the reason why, some said that Zeliangrong people came out of the cave. After taking shelter at Ramting Kabin, they moved on to another site for settlement at "*Chawang Phungning*". The ancestral fathers of the Zeliangrong dwelt at Chawang Phungning for a long time. As time passed by, their numbers increased and social communication among them became increasingly difficult.<sup>35</sup> They finally left Chawang Phungning and continued their westward movement, until they came to a new place for settlement. Emerging from Chawang Phungning they came to settle down at a place which came to be known as *Makuilongdi*, near the present Oklong village in Mao west. Here they led a settled life based on shifting agriculture.<sup>36</sup> According to the oral tradition, the Zeliangrong tribe came from Longdi (Longdai). The ancestors of Zeliangrong tribe at Makuilongdi lived a rich and joyous life. The village became very populous and had reached the incredible number of 7777 houses before further dispersal or migration.<sup>37</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the ancestors of Zeme, Liangmai, and Rongmei tribes lived together at Makuilongdi for a long time. From this place, they dispersed to different directions with different names. Among the three brothers, the Rongmei tribe was believed to be the first to leave Makuilongdi and spread out taking up lands to the south ahead of the Zeme and Liangmai tribes. They were pushed ahead of these groups by waves of migrants moving out of the heartland and expanding their boundaries, as population pressure relentlessly moved them on. This southern movement would have continued unchecked, had not pressure from the forefront of the Kuki-Chin or Lushai northwards expansion turned them back again.<sup>38</sup> Formerly, the Rongmei occupied sites to the south of their present homeland, down as far as the Changphai or Champhai region of present Mizoram where they lived with Lushai as neighbours and where remains of ruined villages known as Mirongmun are still found, *Mirong* being the Lushai word for the Rongmei.<sup>39</sup>

The Zemes were the people who moved to the western side of Makuilongdi. From there, they spread to the western side of the river Barak, to south western part of Kohima district and along the Barail hill range, in North Cachar district of Assam in the 13th century. During the 16th century, there was another wave of Angami migration into the Barail hills. The Zemes being a weaker section moved downwards passing through the Barail range and started colonising beyond the hill areas.<sup>40</sup> The Angamis carried on raids against the Zemes who thus, had to migrate further and further away from

their original place of settlement, till they came down to Barail in North Cachar hills and spread to other areas. The Liangmais were said to have been the last to leave their original homeland. At some stage they themselves expanded from the heartland of Makuilongdi and took up lands south and east of the Zeme, occupying the hills in the North West corner of the Manipur state, virtually down to the borders of Rongmei area on the outskirts of Imphal.<sup>41</sup> The Liangmai were further driven from their homes in the north east by the Maram, and their original settlements were at a place called Nohemi near the source of the Barak river in the present Mao area.<sup>42</sup> Currently, majority of the Zeliangrong people are settled in Tamenglong district of the state of Manipur.

The migration stories are not only exercise in myth-making. These stories reveal a lot about the history of a community where orality is the source of transmission of knowledge about past. These stories also contain valuable information about the landscape, flora and fauna and interesting cleavage and confluence among various communities.

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