

THE MEITHEIS

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THE MEITHEIS

BY

T. C. HODSON

INTRODUCTION

SIR CHARLES J. LYALL

FOREWORD TO THIS EDITION

M. HORAM



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THE MEITHEIS



BY

T. C. HODSON

LATE ASSISTANT POLITICAL AGENT IN MANIPUR AND
SUPERINTENDENT OF THE STATE
FELLOW OF THE ROYAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSTITUTE

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

SIR CHARLES J. LYALL

K.C.S.I., C.I.E., LL.D., M.A.

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Foreword

Recently there has been a widespread interest in the North Eastern part of India. It is in the fitness of things therefore that T.C. Hodson's excellent book on the Meitheis (*The Meiteis*) published 67 years ago should go into its second edition.

I am more than conscious of my impertinence in writing the foreword to a book which was written many years before I was born, and yet I do this with great joy and will use this privilege to introduce the writer and the subject of his book to readers who do not already know them.

During his office as the Assistant Political Agent in, and Superintendent of the princely state of, Manipur, T.C. Hodson collected much material "without any idea of publication". An Administrative Officer by choice Hodson was also an Anthropologist of note. After his retirement from the British Administrative Service he served in the East London College where his two books on Manipur (*The Meitheis*, 1908 and *The Naga Tribes of Manipur*, 1911) were published. Later, he was Professor of Anthropology at Cambridge. The latter book, because of the nature of its subject lacks the clarity of the former; dealing as it does with the four major Naga tribes, the Maos, Maram, Tangkhul and Kabuis and minor tribes like Marings and Lois etc. But though *The Naga Tribes of Manipur* may be a confused book, appearing more so to anyone not familiar with the Naga hills, *The Meitheis* is a well-written book which continues to serve and inform scholars and lay readers alike.

It is strange that since Hodson's days so little of any lasting value has been written about the people of Manipur. In fact there are no studies of the minority groups like the Manipuri Muslims or the Kukis, as also nothing on the Meiteis barring a few skimpy and far from scholarly booklets.

Manipur, an erstwhile princely state, is situated in the extreme border of North-Eastern Indian territory bounded by Burma on the east, Nagaland on the north and Tripura on the West. Manipur covers an area of 8,628 sq. miles of which 700 sq. miles constitute the valley where the Meiteis live. The rest is the homeland of various hill tribes.

✓ Manipur has been in the limelight due to the unique nature of its social and political development. In spite of its strategic importance as a sensitive border state the problems of Manipur have not received prompt attention and the sort of wise and expert handling these merit. Also, it is difficult to account for the absence of any serious research projects since Independence covering the changing societies in Manipur, especially when the North Eastern Areas are glibly referred to as the gold-mine for researchers in sociology and anthropology. While its neighbour, Nagaland, has received attention from all quarters, even the scholars seemed to have passed by Manipur without a second look.

Since the advent of orthodox Hinduism, the Meiteis are claiming descent from Arjuna, one of the Pandavas. I reserve my comments on this debatable issue and am citing a few characteristics that the Meiteis possess in common with the hill people, specially the Nagas. In all certainty before the coming of Christianity to the hills and Hinduism to the plains, both the hill people and the Meiteis were animists. The pantheistic practices in the valley, for instance, are known severally, "Imung Lai", "Umang Lai" and "Sena Mahi" etc. Conversion to Hinduism in the valley took place in the 15th century and after ; to quote Hodson : "Hinduism is of comparatively recent origin, though the records of the Brahmin families in Manipur claim, in some cases that the founder of the family settled in the valley at so remote a date as the middle of the fifteenth century". About 300 years ago, the Meiteis had a religion, and set of habits, customs and manners, the vestige of which is still to be found in the non-Christian Naga villages today.

It is also accepted among a section of the people that the Prince who adopted Hinduism as the Meiteis' state religion

was a Naga who took the title of Gharib Niwas and ruled Manipur for 40 years. The food and drink habits of the Meiteis were once like the 'wild Nagas' of the hill. Another point to be noticed is the use of 'spear' and shield' which distinctly remind of the Naga warrior's dress. An examination of the coronation of the Meitei King and Queen reveals that they had to dress like the Nagas and hold a *dao* and a spear: otherwise the ceremony was declared invalid. Sir James Johnstone writing in his book *Experiences in Manipur*, comments: There can be little doubt that some time or other the Naga tribes to the north made one of their chiefs Rajah of Manipur, and that his family, while, like the Manchus in China and other conquerors, adopting the civilization of the country, retained some of their old customs. This is shown in the various practices at the installation of a Rajah, when he and the Ranees appear in Naga costume; also that he always has in his place a house built like Nagas', and wherever he goes he was attended by two or three Manipuris with Naga arms and accoutrements."

Coming to linguistic considerations, we find that a number of Meitei words are similar to words in various tribal dialects. For example, house is *yum* or *im* in Meitei dialect, *ein* in Burmese, *ki* in Angami Naga and *aki* in Sema Naga dialects. Eye is *mit* in Meitei dialect, Tebeten—*mik*, Tangkhul Naga—*mik*, Kuki—*mit* and Konyak Naga—*mug*. Pig is *Ok* in Meitei dialect, Tangkhul Naga—*hok*, Ao Naga—*ak*, Chang Naga—*ok* and Phom Naga—*ok* and so forth.

The Meiteis have suffered greatly because of successive waves of foreign invasions, first by the Burmese and later British and the Japanese during the Second World War. The fourth Burmese invasion resulted in such a colossal devastation that the then Meitei King Gambhir Singh had to flee to Cachar for seeking British Assistance. Eventually the British conquered Meitei valley but the Meiteis never quite accepted this. The Meiteis revolted against the British and as a result two of their great leaders, Yuraj Tikendrajit and a Naga General Thangal among others were executed. Early from 1943 to 1945 till the end of Second World War, Manipur, both hills and valley, became virtually the battlefield where the Japanese

and the Allied Armies fought bitterly. Besides bringing untold misery to Meiteis and the Nagas these happenings also resulted in social and political upheavals the consequences of which are increasingly made manifest and the total impact of which deserves to be studied.

The Manipur was once a princely state and later became the first Territorial State in the North East to enjoy greater autonomy, it has precious little to show by way of any meaningful progress : it remains economically backward and politically unstable. Due to two main factors, namely, lack of political maturity and poor relationship between the hills and the valley, Manipur has had as many as three spells of Presidential Rule during a short span of ten years. Manipur remains an unknown area to most Indians and one reason for this may well be the absence of books about the peoples and problems of Manipur.

All of which brings us back to T.C. Hodson's *The Meitheis* now being reissued in new edition. It has been and will remain the major source-book on the subject and will continue to assist scholars, administrators and lay-readers alike in understanding a complex area and its people.

Though the book is being reissued unchanged from the first edition the spellings of certain names could be changed to their current and better known forms; viz , Meitheis, to Meiteis Mannipories to Manipuris, (Mannipore to Manipur), Kookies to Kukies, Murrings to Marings. Sengmai to Sekmai. etc.

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January 10, 1975

PREFACE.

THE AUTHOR desires to offer his sincere gratitude to those whose help has enabled him to complete this monograph. The chromo-lithographic illustrations are the work of Mr. W. Griggs, and have been prepared by him from designs (based on actual photographs) by Mr. Fred Andrews, Head of the Department of Arts and Crafts at the Battersea Polytechnic, and formerly Principal of the Art School, Lahore, and by Miss Theodora Hodson, of the Slade School of Fine Art, University of London, University College. The coloured illustrations of the Folk-Tale, "Khamba and Thoibi," are reproductions in three-colour process by Messrs. John Swain and Sons, Ltd., of pictures painted by Bhudro Singh, a Manipuri artist.

Last but not least, the copious Index is the work of Mrs. Eileen Mitchell, whose labours are most gratefully acknowledged.

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The translation of the Ningthauröl or Meithei Chronicles, of which much use has been made, is by Babu Nithor Nath Banerji. They have also been translated by Babu Umes Chandra Ghose, but the latter work has been lost.

INTRODUCTION.

A RECENT writer on the tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley * has asserted in forcible language that, "unfortunately for science, no steps are being taken to record the rare vestiges of prehistoric society which still survive here, but which are now being rapidly swept away by advancing civilization. . . . This unique mass of material which is available for solving important problems, lying at the very base of civilization and culture, is being allowed to disappear unrecorded. This regrettable fact has been repeatedly represented during the past few years, without practically any result."

The complaint is unjust; the bibliographies appended to the series of Ethnographical Monographs, of which the present volume is one, will show that there exists a large mass of materials dealing with a considerable proportion of the Indo-Chinese tribes of Assam. It is true that some of the most important of these are "buried away" in Gazetteers, Census reports, and contributions to the Journals of learned societies. But those who make it their business to investigate anthropological problems may surely be expected to search among such obvious sources for the information they desire. In India Gazetteers and Census reports are the appointed places for recording the results of inquiries into the characters and institutions of the various elements of the population. Such literature is scarcely likely to command a wide circulation in

* Lieut.-Col. L. A. Waddell, in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Part III., 1900.

any country, and writers who deal with it are necessarily confined to the means open to them of perpetuating the results of their investigations in the official publications of the Government. Nor is it true that "no steps have been taken" since 1872, when Col. Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* was published, to extend our knowledge of these tribes. In 1881 Sir Charles Elliott, shortly after assuming the government of the Province, issued instructions for the compilation, not only of grammars, vocabularies, and phrase-books of the languages of all the leading tribes of Assam, but also of records of their customs and institutions. The result is a series of works dealing with the tribal languages of which the Province is justly proud, and records of customs and usages which, though doubtless capable of further extension (which they are now receiving), are of great anthropological value. The linguistic work done is indeed the principal fruit of the orders of 1881; but this is by no means, as Lieut.-Col. Waddell asserts, "of secondary importance." Without an understanding of the language of a tribe there can be no adequate investigation of its institutions; the speech is the expression of the mind of the people who speak it, the measure of their culture and outlook upon the world around them. It is, moreover, more especially in Assam, with its vast diversity of ethnic stocks, the only safe index to the affinities of a tribe with its neighbours, and, in the almost complete absence of historic record or remembered tradition, to the migrations which have brought the various units to their present sites.

So far as concerns the subject of the present monograph, the Meithei or dominant race of Manipur, Lieut.-Col. Waddell is least of all justified in his complaint of insufficiency of record. We first became well acquainted with the Meithei in the Burma war of 1824-26. On the conclusion of hostilities, the inhabitants of the reconstituted State of Manipur (which had been overrun and annexed by the Burmese, and recovered

its independence as the result of our operations,) were carefully described by Captain R. B. Pemberton in his excellent *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, printed at Calcutta in 1835. A dictionary of English and Manipuri, compiled by Captain Gordon of the Manipur Levy, was published in 1837. But the most exhaustive presentment of the State and its peoples is contained in the *Account of the Valley of Munnipore, and of the Hill Tribes, with a comparative vocabulary of the Munnipore and other languages*, by Major William McCulloch, printed at Calcutta in 1859. Major, afterwards Lieut.-Col., McCulloch was a man of culture and literary ability, and his work (of which Lieut.-Col. Waddell makes no mention in his brief notice of the Meitheis*) has ever since its publication been the chief authority on its subject. Col. McCulloch, who was the son of the well-known political economist Dr. J. R. McCulloch, was born in 1816, and went to Manipur as Assistant Political Agent in 1840; he became Political Agent in 1845, and held that post, with a year's intermission, until 1867. In this long period of twenty-seven years he acquired a most intimate knowledge of the State and its inhabitants; he married a Manipuri lady, of the family of Raja Nar Singh; and he exercised supreme authority over the Kuki tribes subject to the State, who inhabit the hills to the south and west of the valley of Manipur. After his retirement he settled at Shillong, where I enjoyed the privilege of his acquaintance, and died there, in his seventieth year, in 1885.

Colonel McCulloch's account of Manipur is not unknown even to British anthropologists. It is referred to by Mr. J. F. McLennan in his work on *Primitive Marriage*, and has been cited by Lord Avebury in his book on *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man*. He was succeeded as Political Agent by Dr. R. Brown, who was the author of a *Statistical Account of Manipur*, printed by Government at

* Pp. 60-61.

Calcutta in 1874. This work incorporates most of McCulloch's information, with useful additions by Dr. Brown himself. It is an accessible book, and was widely distributed by Government on its publication; Lieut.-Col. Waddell does not mention it. Another contribution to the ethnography and history of the State was made by Mr. G. H. Damant of the Indian Civil Service, whose papers were published in the Journals of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Royal Asiatic Society.* Mr. Damant was greatly interested in the archaic literature of Manipur, and in the problem of the relation of the various Indo-Chinese races one to another. He met his death at Khonoma in the Naga Hills in 1879. The terrible events of 1891, which brought the little State prominently before the British public, led to a fresh development of descriptive literature in the books of Sir James Johnstone (for several years Political Agent in Manipur) and Mrs. Grimwood. These are not important contributions to scientific ethnography, but they—especially the former—contain interesting information as to the characteristics of the people.

It will thus be seen that the Manipuris have received no small share of attention in the past, and that the interest shown in them by investigators compares favourably with that aroused by the inhabitants of many other more accessible parts of India.

The author of the present monograph has wisely taken as his basis the accounts of Colonel McCulloch and Dr. Brown, and has noted where they need supplementing and completing, and the changes which have occurred during the past half-century. From his practical acquaintance with the administration of the State and its subject tribes, and his intimate knowledge of the Manipuri (as well as of the Thado Kuki) language, he has been able greatly to enlarge the field of our information; and the latter half of the book, dealing with the

* See the Bibliography.

traditions, folk-lore, and folk-tales of the Meitheids, and with their linguistic affinities, will be found to contain a mass of new and interesting matter.

It was my fortune to visit Manipur only once (in February, 1888) during my service in Assam, and I am thus acquainted with the subject chiefly by hearsay. But I have always taken a lively interest in this singular oasis of comparative civilization and organized society, set in the midst of a congeries of barbarous peoples, over whom its rulers exercise an authority which, if scarcely approaching the settled polity of more advanced communities, is at least in the direction of peace and order. The valley of Manipur in several respects resembles in miniature its neighbour, that of the Irawadi. In both the civilized people who occupy the central settled and organized region are nearly akin to the wild folk who inhabit the hills which enclose the alluvial plain. But while Burma has accepted the mild and gentle religion of Buddha, and thus profoundly modified the original animistic cult, Manipur has been taken into the pale of Hinduism, and has imposed upon itself burdensome restrictions of caste and ritual from which its greater neighbour is happily free. In both countries, however, the older religious ideas still survive beneath the surface of the philosophical systems borrowed from India, and in reality, sway to a large extent the lives and sentiments of the people. The State has recently, after sixteen years of British administration, been committed to the government of the Prince who was chosen to fill the vacant throne after the events of 1891; and it is greatly to be hoped that its future may be happy and prosperous, and that it may exercise an increasing influence in winning to civilization the wilder tribes which recognize its authority.

C. J. LYALL.

May, 1908.