

**MANIPUR
TRIBAL
SCENE**

STUDIES IN SOCIETY AND CHANGE

RAJAT KANTI DAS

THE BOOK

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The question of tribal identity in Manipur affords unusual dimensions owing not only to the numerosity of the tribal communities, but also to their susceptibility to confusing interactions and often contradictory political pulls. Identity here is increasingly becoming an expression of a social assertion of the self, or a reflection of change, which may be socio-economic, may be normative or ideological.

Rajat Kanti Das' book, with its primary focus on the tribal communities of Manipur, (the State on the eastern frontier of India), seeks to investigate the highly complex problem of tribal identity vis-a-vis the Meiteis—the valley people who socially, economically and politically dominate the regional scenario. Thus, departing from the oft-appearing studies on tribal customs, the volume is a painstaking effort to evolve an analytical framework for a true appreciation of the ethnographic realities in Manipur. The author also strives to examine the importance of the principles of social organisation, highlighting how kinship, marriage and other ritual ties have gone a long way in shaping the structure of tribal societies. In addition, Rajat Das takes a look at the processes of historical growth and cultural dynamics to identify the trends of social change in Manipur and to show how it is influencing the lives of the tribals, largely inhabiting the hills.

The book, developed from the author's research papers published during the last fifteen years, provides a scholarly perspective to the Manipur tribal scene, and, as such, will be invaluable to the students and researchers of social anthropology.

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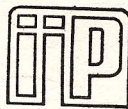
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Manipur Tribal Scene

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RAJAT KANTI DAS



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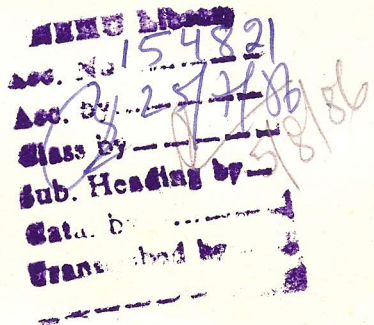
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“Perhaps, through realising human nature in a shape very distant and foreign to us, we shall have some light shed on our own.”

—Bronislaw Malinowski

Preface

THE purpose of this book is to unfold a little of the richness of social anthropological data to be had in Manipur, the state on the eastern frontier of India. Although the book is mainly about the tribes of Manipur, it also seeks to examine their relationship with the Meitei, the valley people dominating the scene. For the tribes the Meitei factor has grown considerably in importance. The amount of anthropological field work put in by the author in the course of last fifteen years or so bore fruit in the form of a number of published papers and articles. The present volume is mainly a collection of those papers, not in their original form but in a revised and in some cases modified and enlarged form. However, it is not a loose collection of papers. The papers, are arranged in such a way so as to present a coherent picture. Still, the whole exercise is nothing more than a brief introduction intended to initiate a student of social anthropology into the field of Manipur. Here one should not look for any exotic phenomenon, scintillating ethnographic description of tribal customs. It strives at working out an analytical framework to understand the ethnographic reality. A tall order indeed. There are deficiencies, unavoidable repetitions, inadequacies in the presentation of data, but one hopes that there is no dispute about the basic aim of the book. The author would consider himself amply rewarded if this modest venture does not escape the type of criticism it deserves.

It is clear that many persons have collaborated at different stages to make this a success. I am particularly indebted to my colleagues, past and present, in the Department of Anthropology, D.M. College of Science, Imphal, for all the help and cooperation they had extended to me during field work and at the time of analyses. L. Rajendra Singh, O. Kumar Singh, Dr. K. Saratchandra Singh, Dr. Ch. Budhi Singh, Dr. Kamkhenthang, R.K. Ranjit Singh, Mrs. Sakhitombi Devi, Md. Latif Shah, H. Nabakumar Singh merit special mention. My indebtedness to R.K. Ranjit Singh is even more because he was my constant companion to the field. Moreover, the paper on the Loi is based on his field work. The whole Departmental staff proved generous in its assistance. Prolonged discussion with persons belonging to other disciplines opened many new fields. I am indebted to so many that I could not just list them all. However, some deserve mention. They are, Gangumei Kabui, Meijihlung Kamson, Mangthoi Thaimai, Dr. K.B. Singh, Y. Chandicharan Singh, B. Gangte. My association with Dr. B.K. Roy

Burman has always been rewarding to me. I have been immensely benefited from this fortunate association. My wife Sutapa Das has rendered a lot of hard work on large parts of the original manuscript. It is also my duty to acknowledge the assistance received from my friend Atul Bhowmick, Lecturer in Museology, Calcutta University. I am grateful to Shri M.C. Mittal of Inter-India Publications for keeping a sustained interest in my work. I acknowledge my indebtedness to Shri O. Kumar Singh for the preparation of a list of books, papers and accounts as source materials for Manipur. I have simply reproduced his work. Lastly, I can only say that I have tried to bring out the best with the materials at my disposal and within the limits of my own capacities.

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SECTION ONE
INTRODUCTION

Manipur : Its Geographical Limits and Ethnic Composition

MANIPUR, lying between latitudes 23°50' and 25°30' N and longitudes 93°10' and 94°30' E, is bounded on the north and west by the State of Nagaland, the North Cachar hills and Cachar district of Assam, on the east and south by Burma including the Somra tract, the Kabaw valley and the adjoining areas and the Chin hills. On the south-west corner lies Mizoram. Manipur comprises an area of 22,346 sq. km. and a population around 14 lakhs (the provisional census figure of 1981 is 14,33,691), of which the tribal population accounts for approximately 30 per cent of the total population. In the geographic classification it may be simply divided into a valley at the centre and the hills surrounding it. These may also be referred to as lowland (*tampaklou*) and highland (*chinglou*). The two regions set the geographic limits for two types of cultural phenomena. From the geological point of view, the valley is of recent origin. It might have been formed out of 'a large lake which has been gradually filled up by deposits from the surrounding heights'.¹ It may also be conjectured that the forest trees once covered the valley of Manipur in the same way as they do the Kabaw valley of Burma. But today they have almost completely disappeared. The rich alluvial soil of the valley is a boon for the cultivators. No doubt, quality of land differentiates production possibilities to a great extent. The production individuality of a community largely depends on it.

The valley is the homeland of the Meitei (*Meiteileipak*). It appears that originally there were some principalities like *Khumal*, *Iawang*, *Moirang* and *Ningthouja*, each one of which occupied a particular area. *Ningthouja* enjoying king's status must be the one which has been termed *Meithei* (*Meitei*) by McCulloch. It used to control the Imphal area. McCulloch has used the term 'tribe' to these principalities. He observes :

"From the mosi credible traditions, the valley appears originally to

have been occupied by several tribes, the principal of which were named Koomul, Loyang, Moirang and Meithei, all of whom came from different directions. For a time, the Koomul (Khumal) appears to have been the most powerful, and after its declension, the Moigang tribe. But by degrees the Meithei subdued the whole, and the name Meithei has been applicable to all".²

It may be safely concluded that initially the valley was not dominated by a single powerful Meitei state and that there were more powerful states in the Burmese region like the Shan state which might have some indirect control over Manipur as well. McCulloch, while commenting on Captain Pemberton's report on a Shan account, states :

"The records of Munnipore (Manipur) contain a long list of chiefs, unaccompanied, however, by any notice of their actions, further than the occasional killing of distinguished members of adverse tribes, through whose fall the Meithei influence was increased. But by a Shan account of the Shan Kingdom of Pong, considered authentic, and quoted by Captain Pemberton, it appears that Samlong, a brother of the Pong King, in returning to his own country from Tipperah in 777 A.D. descended into Munnipore valley at Moirang, the chief village of the tribe of that name. Moirang appears to have been then independent, but certainly not prosperous, for so trifling was the tribute Samlong obtained, that he ordered it to be offered to the deities of the place. From Moirang, Samlong proceeded to Meithei. He found the Meitheis in the same miserable condition as the people of Moirang and excused their paying tribute..."³

Obviously, the Shan Kingdom of Pong had assumed considerable importance during that period. With its capital at Mogaung, it could exercise control over a wide area extending from North Burma to Assam on the one side and Kabaw valley to Yunan province on the other. Ultimately the Kingdom was almost completely absorbed in that of Ava (Burmese) and gradually the Meitei Kingdom rose to prominence. It speaks volume about the sustaining power of the new Kingdom that it could fight successive battles with the Burmese almost on equal terms. Of course, in this task they got the support of the British Government, with whom the Meitei King Joy Singh performed an accord. Though Hinduism was introduced a short time before the reign of Gureeb Nawaz in the earlier part of the eighteenth century, it did not arouse much enthusiasm among the masses immediately after its introduction. Only towards the end of the century it could make some impact among the

masses. It must, however, be pointed out that the people only followed King's instance and the introduction of Hinduism was the reflection of his influence over them. There was hardly any scope for the mass of the people to go against the wishes of the King, who was almost like a demigod to them. But though Hinduism was adopted, they did not give up their original mode of ancestor worship and a large number of gods in the pantheon. The snake god *Pakang-ba*, from which the royal family claims descent, is still worshipped as a symbol of identity. Hinduism could not change the value system or the basic premises of the Meitei society. Its effect was only superficial imparting a gloss over the core. Hinduism has left its mark in ritual pollution, ceremonial elaboration and purification, outward manifestation of religious devoutness, but the overall effect is only marginal. They were probably drawn towards it because it could provide them with a stamp of distinctiveness, a sense of superiority to the tribal cultures all around them by acquiring a higher religious knowledge. All these may appear meaningless now.)

The Manipur hills are the abode of tribes. Some of them are found in the valley also, where they live under the shadow of the Meitei. But, obviously, the valley was never their forte. There are as many as 29 scheduled tribes in Manipur. They are, the Aimol, Anal, Angami, Chiru, Chothe, Gangte, Hmar Kabui, Kacha Naga, Koirao, Koirang, Kom, Lamgang, Mao, Maram, Maring, Mizo, Monsang, Moyon, Paite, Purum, Ralte, Sema, Simte, Sokte, Tangkhul, Thadou, Vaiphei and Zou. Although the Sema and Angami, two tribes of the Naga group, are shown in the census, they do not constitute compact tribal groups in Manipur. They have few individuals in Manipur who, it seems, have taken up residence here after marriage. The same is the case with the Sokte, who for all practical purposes remain a Burmese tribe. For the sake of convenience only, the tribes can broadly be classified into two major groups—the Naga and the Kuki. Besides the Mizo, who form a separate group by themselves, the Maring may also be considered to have an independent status. In recent times, of course, there has been a tendency on the part of the Marings to associate themselves with the Naga group. Stewart (1855) describes two groups of tribes of the Kukis on the basis of their supposed arrival. They are the old Kukis and the New Kukis. Some old Kukis emigrated from the jungles of 'Tipperah', the hilly country south of Cachar, while others came from the adjoining areas of Burma. The New Kukis entered Manipur in small groups. The Old Kukis include tribes like the Aimol, Anal, Chiru, Chothe, Gangte, Koirao, Koirang, Kom, Lamgang, Paite, Purum, Simte, Vaiphei, Zou, Hmar of Manipur and the Hrangkhul, Beite of Cachar district of Assam. In the Mizo hills the Hrangkhul and Beite are collectively known as Hmars. The term 'Hmar' is used by the Mizos to denote tribal immigrants in the Mizo

hills. The New Kukis are represented by a single tribe, the Thadou. The Thadou initially occupied the southern hills, from where they spread in different directions. Nearly allied to them, at least from the linguistic point of view, are the Paite, Gangte, Sokte of Manipur ; and the Ralte of Manipur and Mizo hills. The term 'Kuki' has a loose connotation now. The erstwhile Kuki tribes show their apathy to this term. Only among the Thadou it is used in the context of a larger political identity. Generally, the Naga tribes live in compact, big-sized villages in east, north and west districts of Manipur. The Kabuis (Rongmei) occupy the hills between Cachar and the valley of Manipur on the west. It was reported by McCulloch that 'the whole of this tract was formerly thickly studded with villages, some of them of considerable size.'⁴

McCulloch went on further to say that most of the tribes of Manipur 'were much more numerous than they are at present, and not further back than thirty years ago, some of them, who are now represented by but one or two small villages in positions far removed from their former ones, occupied larger tracts...'⁵

It is more than one hundred years that McCulloch had made these observations. Even after giving allowance to such factors as warfare, large scale migration, natural calamities, epidemic diseases, absorption of the tribals into the Meitei society was always a possibility. The Tangkhul, another populous Naga tribe, occupy the eastern hills. They were one of the most powerful tribes of the hills as far as the Chindwin. Their warlike character could be gauged from the fact that at least once a big Burmese detachment was sent to contain them. Their villages near the valley were more exposed to Meitei interference, but in spite of that they were able to retain their distinctive entity. The Tangkhuls in the north and those south of them reveal some differences, which may at best be termed regional differences. West of the Tangkhuls are the Mao and Maram tribes. They might have belonged to the same stock, but they were at deadly feud against one another for a long time. The concentration of the Kacha Naga villages is towards north-west. But they have a wider distribution in Nagaland and North Cachar hills of Assam. In Manipur they have established a political alliance with the Rongmei (Kabui). The so called Kuki tribes are mainly concentrated in south and Tengnoupal districts. Almost all the Maring villages are distributed along the northern part of the Tengnoupal district. Small tribes, such as Chiru, Koireng, Koirao, Kom, Chothe occupy the intermediate position between the hills and the valley, or to be more precise, the last stretch of the hills where it meets the valley.

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2. *op. cit.*
3. *op. cit.*
4. *op. cit.*
5. *op. cit.*

2

Socio-cultural Background of the Tribes of Manipur and Delimiting the Fields of Inquiry

THE TRIBES of Manipur do not stand at 'widely varying levels of cultural and social complexity'. Yet there is cultural diversity at some level, which indicates different contact situation at different times. The historical perspective in the growth of a tribe of Manipur can never be lost sight of. Because of continuing contacts with some societies, it is possible that some parts of a tribe's culture have differed from the neighbouring cultures. And here the role of the Meitei cannot be undermined. By virtue of their dominant position they probably influenced the course of the tribal history in Manipur more than the tribes themselves did. But however successful they might be in exerting political influence, it could not affect the 'core' of tribal cultures. If culture simply means 'a distinctive way of life', the tribes were definitely not without it. But today in a situation where some tribes are vying for political power at the regional level and at the state level, while the smaller ones are desperately trying to safeguard their interests, how far it is possible for a group to lead a 'distinctive way of life' is a matter to be seen. However, there is still a distinctive focus on culture as a manifestation of group identity. All the tribes are virtually obsessed with the question of identity at the higher group level or at the individual group level. Now identity can operate either as a broad cultural symbol or as an indicator of the pragmatic aspect of a people's behaviour. As David states :

"Identity is a cultural sign that operates both as a symbol, with semantic meanings, and as an index, with pragmatic meanings."¹

Geertz defines identity on the collective level as a 'corporate sentiment of oneness',² The point is why it has become necessary for the

tribes of Manipur to prove and assert their identity. No doubt, it is one of the proximal problems of today and the problem is not limited to the tribes of Manipur alone. The problem of identity has become a more or less worldwide phenomenon and almost all the communities, irrespective of whether they are tribes or not, are involved with it in some way or the other. In Manipur it has assumed a special dimension because of the situation created by so many tribes of different size and political pull in interaction with themselves and with the Meitei, the dominant community of the state. (Identity here is just an expression of 'a social assertion of the self', or a reflection of change, which may be socio-economic, may be normative or ideological. As pointed out by David, all these changes are structural changes and involves outside factors like growth of industry, extra village occupations, demographic displacements, radicalization of major political parties and so on. By now it must be clear that not only the tribes but the Meiteis are equally involved with the question of identity. So apparently the relationship between the Meitei and the tribal groups is based on a common purpose. But the two cannot be equated simply because of the fact that they are not in the same power stratum. A further proof to that was the movement launched by the Loi, the scheduled caste of Manipur, to establish a new identity of their own. It was not simply an attempt to ventilate their grievances but to ensure that their interests in the socio-economic field were not in any way affected by the political prerogatives enjoyed by the Meiteis. It is no wonder that the Meitei, by virtue of their being the numerically and economically dominant group, would exercise greater political power. But while dealing with the tribes the Meiteis cannot afford to be too assertive because of the mode of distribution of tribes, who occupy the hills around the valley at the centre. The valley is only one-third of the state's total area. This is then the situation in Manipur which a social anthropologist will find himself in. And it would require 'scrupulous, subtle and sensitive scholarship' in his assessment and analysis of the situation created by the multiplicity of cultures, each expressing itself in a particular context.

X The social context in which a particular tribe operates is partly its own creation and partly the result of external factors. So the first task before the author is to isolate the important organizing principles of social relationship and see in what respect they could be considered important in structuring the society. At least three factors could be identified at the basic level. These are marriage, kinship, and ritual. Kinship is the pivot on which rests the whole society, but its 'ultimate source is marriage'. The importance of marriage and kinship are examined with reference to the Kabui and Thadou, the former representing the Naga and the latter the Kuki group. The social groups organized by

kinship assume a special significance in every tribal society. One should not, however, attach too much importance on the forms which the kin groups take in one society or another. As far as the tribal groups of Manipur are concerned, they do not differ markedly on this point. The forms of kin groups are almost the same in every tribal society. It is because of the size that the process of segmentation becomes more extensive in some cases. Evidently, the level of segmentation is partly governed by the size of the group. The principles involved in the formation of kin groups remain more or less the same in every case. Kin groups need to be studied in a specific context. It may be useful to examine the role of kin groups in providing the organizational structure for certain cooperative activities. Kin groups are set against one another and the existence of one is dependent on 'its structurally defined adversaries'. A kin group is important to an individual's life because it confers on him a set of rights, obligations and with these a particular identity. The cooperative activities that the members of a kin group are required to follow cover almost every aspect of life. Honigman states clearly what the group may confer on its members. He states :

"It gives them rights to property, interests in rearing children, land and ancestral shrines, or specific duties to perform. A kin group significant in its members' lives involves them in economic and religious undertakings, makes them dependent on one another for affection and emotional security, or compels them to provide each other with legal help when needed. Kinship groups engage people around tasks and interests."³

Following Murdock it may be possible to distinguish two types of kin groups, *viz.*, consanguineal kin groups and residential kin groups. The rule of descent governs the former, while the rule of residence is the determining factor in the case of the latter. Consanguineal kin groups are simply referred to as descent groups, which form an essential component unit of the traditional tribal social structure. An analytical study of the consanguineal kin groups with reference to the Maring in particular should be of special interest.

Although the tribal societies of Manipur show some variations in the dominance of ritual in social life, it has a significant role in setting the tradition-bound economic and social order. It is ritual which could inculcate a sense of continuity of traditional social relationships. As a matter of fact, popular traditions have a strong ritual base and it is widely acknowledged that popular traditions are more meaningful to a group than the social structure itself. In the tribal examples that the author has cited this aspect of the ritual has been highlighted. In the

present situation nobody can expect the tribal groups to continue their own independent ways based solely on traditional values and customary usages. The population is increasing and no tribal group can subsist only by its own efforts. There might not have been fundamental changes in the tribal cultures so far, but such a possibility cannot altogether be ruled out. There are already indications to that effect. The subject matter of social change appears to be more meaningful than ever. There is need for change and there is also the tendency for culture to persist. The former has to overcome the latter. It may also mean that social change should transcend and subsume tribal limits. The tribal groups of Manipur were previously integrated into more or less self-reliant societies, but in these times they cannot remain oblivious of what is going on around them. They brush against one another, interact with one another either consciously or unconsciously. While recording the general trend of changes that has swept the tribal groups of Manipur, the author has felt the necessity for micro-level studies to understand the depth of structural changes. A study of changing relations in a Thadou village has been included mainly with the idea of stressing the need for further studies in that direction. It cannot claim to have given any guideline as to how such studies are to be undertaken.

It may sound a bit old-fashioned to say that Manipur provides a happy hunting ground for the anthropologist, where he can find so many tribal groups of different size and different political affiliations, each displaying a sense of cultural exclusiveness. Of course, his immediate concern would be to identify the basis for sentiments of tribal identity, which has even influenced the modern politics of the new state in a big way. But that is not at all. One has to take cognisance of the culturally heterogeneous background of the situation. At the very basic level, a tribe presupposes a more or less natural order and a social anthropologist is uniquely privileged to unravel it. It is up to him to determine what rule should guide his study. The main task before the social anthropologist is not only to identify the patterns or social forms in question but also to show what they actually mean. The latter is, however, far from easy. Today, one is faced with a situation where discrepancy between social principles, ideas and the actual situation is on the increase. There is undoubtedly a need for a more dynamic concept of cultural system. It may be possible to sort out traits and complexes of traits that may be used to find similarities and differences in the composition of tribes. Still, only the presence and absence of cultural elements do not mean much. One should be able to identify the basic institutional fields of relationships, which could be linked to the overall tribal organizational pattern. The pluralistic, culturally heterogeneous setting,

in which a tribal group operates, further contributes to lending vigour and meaning to the traditional institutions. But one should not make too much out of cultural pluralism. The diversity and identities of specific groups may be investigated with the help of it, but nothing more than that because all types of social interactions cannot be explained on the basis of cultural differences alone.

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