JOHN PARRATT

Wounded Land

Politics and Identity in Modern Manipur

A Mittal Publication

In *Wounded Land* Professor John Parratt assesses political developments in Manipur from the accession of Maharajah Chura Chand in 1907 until the present day. The first part deals with the growth in political awareness in the first half of the twentieth century, and the popular reactions to feudalism and colonialism. After a detailed examination of the circumstances of the merger with India in 1949, the book then goes on to examine critically the crises caused by the militarisation of the state, insurgency, civil rights abuses, and the failures of government. A final chapter deals with the events of 2004 and assesses prospects for the future of the state.

Rs. 550

PROFESSOR JOHN PARRATT (*b.* 1938) was until his retirement in the School of Historical Studies at the University of Birmingham, U.K. He has taught and researched extensively in Africa, India, and the Pacific, and is the author of numerous books on the interaction of religion, politics, and culture in the developing world. Together with his wife, Dr. Saroj N. Arambam Parratt, he has published several scholarly papers and two books on Manipur, *Queen Empress vs. Tikendrajit : The Anglo-Manipur Conflict of 1891* (New Delhi, 1992) and *The Pleasing of the Gods, Meitei Lai Haraoba* (New Delhi, 1997).

ISBN 81-8324-053-4

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MITTAL PUBLICATIONS
NEW DELHI (INDIA)

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First Published 2005
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ISBN 81-8324-053-4

5012
1/12/05

Showroom:
4594/9, Daryaganj,
New Delhi - 110002
Phone: 23250398

Published and printed by Krishan Mittal for Mittal Publications,
A-110, Mohan Garden, New Delhi-110059, India.
Tel.: 25351493, 25351976 *Telefax:* 91-11-25351521
E-Mail : mittalp@ndf.vsnl.net.in *Gram* : Mittalbux
website : www.mittalpublications.com

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s there has been a growing volume of literature on the problems of the northeastern region of India. In particular the question is now being addressed more openly why it is that this 'periphery of the periphery on the road to nowhere,' as Verghese in his valuable summary of the region aptly puts it, contains so many separatist movements, and why civil unrest, military repression, and political instability have become endemic. Part of the answer to this question lies in the very distinctiveness of the region, which has engendered a sense of alienation from India as a whole. Historically the northeast was never part of the great empires of the sub-continent, and it was scarcely brought under the umbrella of the construct of 'India' until the British advances into Assam at the beginning of the 19th century. This different historical tradition was reinforced in 1947 by a sense of geographical isolation. With the excision of East Bengal from India the region lost its main outlet to the sea, causing the disruption of a regional economy which had been built up over more than a century. The northeast thereafter was joined to India only by the tenuous link of the Siliguri corridor, a narrow neck no more than 14 kms wide, so that now only 1% of its borders is shared with India. This geographical isolation remains to be properly addressed, despite the legacy of communications links built up during the Second World War. Its sense of isolation however goes much deeper than the merely physical. It has been reinforced over the last half century by a narrow form of ethnocentricism which has assumed that the Hindi speaking 'Aryan' tradition represents the only valid form of Indian identity. The resulting integrationist policies, which lasted until comparatively recently, thus pressurised a region which is ethnically, culturally, and linguistically quite distinct to conform to the patterns of the Indian heartland. While the distinctiveness of the Dravidian south had to recognised, the peculiarities of the Mongoloid

cultures of the northeast (which have an equally venerable history) have still not yet been fully acknowledged. As Verghese comments (1997:281), 'the dominant Aryan bent of national thinking has accommodated the Dravidian reality but has yet to appreciate the Mongoloid feature of the Indian ethos.' It is symptomatic of this that though Mongoloid languages comprise the single largest language group in India, none was listed in the 8th Schedule as an official language until as late as 1993, when after years of lobbying and demonstrations Manipuri was finally included. Nor does the northeast share the dominant Hindu tradition which underlies the Indian national ethos. It is only the Brahmaputra and Manipur Valleys which were extensively hinduised. In the latter Hinduism is a comparatively late comer,[1] and Meetei society today shows many signs becoming post-Hindu as ethnic identity becomes entangled with religious identity. As long ago as 1980 Sarin (1980:116) could claim that 'of late the Meiteis are refusing to be recognised as Hindus', and the revival of the pre-Hindu religion continues apace. The hill areas of the northeast were never hinduised and are today mainly Christian, with Mizoram and Nagaland estimated at around 90% Christian, and Manipur and Meghalaya also having a substantial Christian presence. Arunachal Pradesh's peoples seem largely to have withstood more recent efforts of Hindu missionaries, and it also has a substantial minority of Chakma Buddhists settled there after 1947.

One of the main factors that lies behind the widespread lack of understanding of the northeast region is what one might term the fallacy of the concept of the 'mainstream.' Naorem Sanajaoba (1988:22) quotes a telling remark of Sunanda Datta-Ray: referring to the ignorance of Indians in general about the Mongoloid heritage of the northeast Datta-Ray writes: 'Deep in the Indian psyche lies the belief, lately encouraged by obscurantist political groups, that Bharat is really Aryavrata, or the Hindi heartland, and that outlying districts which do not conform to its manners, customs, language and religion are colonial possessions, and must be ruled as such until they can be absorbed in a superior code.'[2] Mongoloid peoples of the northeast frequently claim that in the rest of the country they are regarded as foreigners, and that an attitude of misplaced superiority and disdain has characterised their treatment by 'mainstream' Indians. The perceived parochialism of successive Indian governments, taken together with a widespread ignorance about the region, even on the part of well educated Indians,[3] has encouraged a 'them and us' mentality on both sides which has been a significant contributory factor to civil unrest and armed conflict. As late as 1988 one of the

Central Government's own reports could speak of a 'two way deficit of understanding with the rest of the country.' The northeast region consists of some 7.5% of India's land area, and has roughly 4% of its population. However, it is unsurprising, since it is separated from the rest of the sub-continent by its history, geography, ethnicity, cultures and languages, and for many by its religion, and since it was only marginally affected by the independence struggle, that it should resist being identified the 'mainstream' as defined by Delhi.

Within the last decade or so, however, a new factor has intruded which promises to herald a radical reorientation of the role of the northeast. This region, formerly regarded as little more than a convenient buffer against potential aggression from the east, is now increasingly coming to be seen positively as the gateway to the emergent economies of China and the Pacific Rim, which many economists believe will come to dominate world trade in this present century. This new 'look east' policy finds its clearest practical manifestation in the ambitious plans for a grand Asian Highway which will link India - through Assam, Nagaland and Manipur - to Myanmar, Thailand, and of course China.[4] This development in fact represents a return to ancient trade routes through the region which probably go back to pre-Christian times (Leach 1954:38; Pemberton 1835:37-8; Verghese 1997:368). Such an international communications network will hopefully help to transform the hitherto neglected economies of the region, which (aside from Assam) have been seriously underexploited. These ambitious plans on the part of the Government of India, however, presuppose overcoming the wide-scale lack of trust, and violence which has resulted both from the activities of separatist underground groups and from the attempts of the Indian security forces to suppress them. Significantly the Vajpayee government made an offer of unconditional peace talks to all militant groups. Apart from the NSCN, which has had an ongoing uneasy truce to facilitate talks involving among other things its claims to territorial expansion, these overtures by the Government of India have been dismissed by nearly all militant movements. However all sides are agreed that only a political solution (as opposed to a military one) can free the region from the vicious spiral of violence and underdevelopment which has blighted the lives of its population for more than half a century.

It is hoped that this book may make a modest and limited contribution to this debate. It is in every sense a micro-study, focussed almost entirely upon the tiny (by Indian standards) state of Manipur,[5] with its land area of only around 8500 square miles and having less

than a quarter per cent of India's population. Manipur is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state. The fertile valley is the traditional home of the Meeteis, who comprise about two thirds of the total population of just over two million. The hill areas which surround the valley, and which comprise almost 90% of the state's land area, are 'tribal' lands, inhabited by some thirty different ethnic groups, loosely grouped as 'Naga' and 'Kuki.' There is in addition a substantial minority (around 11%) of Meetei Muslims, as well as increasing migration from the Indian sub-continent. Manipur, like Tripura, is a former princely state the borders of which have remained undisturbed since colonial times. The origins of the kingdom of Manipur probably go back to the first century of the Christian era, and its existence as a powerful kingdom is well attested from at least the 15th century CE. Up until the 20th century it played a significant role in the international politics in the region, having relations with various states within Burma and China as well as with the other kingdoms which are now part of India. Manipur's contribution to south Asian culture has also been remarkable. The *Cheitharon Kumpapa* is probably the oldest court chronicle to come out of the sub-continent. Written in *Meetei Mayek*, an indigenous uncial script and representing quite a different language family from Sanskrit, it traces the history of the Meetei kingdom from its origins down to the death of its last maharajah in 1955, and from the 15th century events are meticulously dated.[6] Manipur is also famous for its dance (now considered to be one of India's 'classical' dance forms). The *Ras Lila* is based on the dance patterns of the pre-Vaishnavite indigenous religious festivals (Parratt & Parratt 1997:36-46). Politically Manipur has the distinction of being the first state on the sub-continent to have held free elections under adult franchise, and to have established a constitutional monarchy with an elected legislature. Manipur thus has a well defined history and identity, which it has - albeit at times precariously - retained after being absorbed into the Indian Union. It is therefore an appropriate field for a micro-study. We have only tangentially, and where it seemed essential for an understanding of Manipur's own internal dynamics, attempted to deal with the wider context of India's history and politics. While this may be a limiting factor it has hopefully enabled debatable generalisations and inappropriate comparisons to be avoided.

Scholarly historical writing on Manipur has only recently begun to emerge. A first generation of indigenous writers on Manipur generally pursued an agenda which saw Manipur as simply part of the sanskritic Indian tradition. A pioneer in this respect, who had considerable (if quite unmerited) influence on his generation, was

Phurailatpam Atombapu Sharma. Atombapu was a brahmin whose voluminous writings attempted to show that the Meeteis were Aryans and identified Manipur with the Manipurna of the *Mahabharata* (see further below, chapter 2). In the 1940s and 1950s Atombapu's theories were utilised by the emergent pro-Congress elites, who agitated for Manipur's incorporation into India (see eg. RK. Jhalajit Singh 1992). This stance is increasingly coming to be seen as special pleading, and a manipulation of history in the interests of a political programme. As Hussain (1998: III 14) commented, 'The Aryan origin of the Manipuri royal family is now an exploded myth.' The one scholar at the time who argued seriously for the uniqueness of the Mongoloid civilisations of which Manipur is a part was the great Bengali polymath Suniti Kumar Chatterji (see Chatterji 1956, 1962, 1965). In the past two decades there has been a good deal of meticulous research done on the history of Manipur. Most of this work, however, sees the history of Manipur from the post 1949 perspective of the state's incorporation in India, and we still do not have a sustained account which interprets Manipur from the perspective of southeast Asia rather than south Asia (though see N. Sanajaoba 1995a). Historically Manipur was as much a part of the story of kingdoms and states to its east, and the political accident of its now being within India has seriously skewed a balanced understanding of its culture and history.

Also problematic is the fact that much of the scholarly research we do have often reflects a specifically Meetei perspective, rather than a pan-Manipuri one. This is true also of the *Cheitharon Kumpapa*, which is the court chronicle of the Meetei dynasties whose capital was in the valley of Manipur. While it contains many references to peoples we would today call 'Naga' or 'Kuki' its focus was firmly on the exploits of the Meetei kings. The hill peoples had no writing until the advent of the Christian missionaries at the very end of the 19th century, and their perspectives have too often been marginalised in modern scholarship on Manipur. This is now beginning to be addressed (see eg. N. Sanajaoba 1995). The comparative neglect of tribal voices has aggravated antagonism between the hills and the valley, and has been exploited by underground movements with irredentist ideologies. However the divide between hill peoples and Meeteis is a comparatively modern phenomenon. From the *Cheitharon Kumpapa* it is clear that the political entity we now call Manipur was from very early times a single one, which embraced the hills along with the valley. There can be little doubt that all the main groups in Manipur today, now commonly designated as Meetei, Naga and Kuki, have common ethnic roots in migrations from southern China. Indeed the oral traditions of several

clans claim that these groups were descended from three brothers, and Meetei oral literature indicates that the Meeteis dwelt in the hills before taking up their present location in the central valley. The nomenclature is also problematic. Meetei historically designated one of the nine clans (*yeks*) that settled in the valley, and which eventually gained suzerainty over the others.[7] Meetei is now used to mean all the clans which came under Meetei rule. Naga is a relatively late term applied to hill people by others. The earliest records of the British officers normally use the proper clan names, such as Tangkhul, Angami and so on, and do not generally use Naga as an all inclusive term. The present-day meaning of Naga, in the sense of a group of clans which are believed to have a common history, culture and polity, is a 20th century construct and derives from the desire to posit a unified political identity. Ironically this politicisation of the term was only possible because Christian mission education enabled communication between diverse groups through the common medium of English, for (unlike Meetei and Kuki) Naga dialects are not mutually intelligible (as Horam 1988:29 points out 'Nagamese' is a pidgin language, a conglomeration of Assamese, Bengali, Hindi and Naga dialects). The situation regarding the Kuki is even more complex. The term was used by the British to replace the earlier 'Lushai' - a word originally referring to the most aggressive clan of the group - to cover Kuki, Chin, Mizo and Zomi clans. The term Kuki, like Naga, also developed in the course of the search for a common identity between clans of various origins (Zehol 1998).[8] The Mizo-Kuki groups have a greater cultural and linguistic unity than Naga clans (Gangumei 2002:27). Some of these groups have a long history of residence in Manipur, others were settled by the British and Manipur rajas in the 18th and 19th centuries.[9] As Gangumei (1995:29) notes some clans are in culture midway between the Nagas and Kukis, in that though they speak Kuki-Chin languages they share some cultural traits with Nagas. Among these he lists the Maring, Moyon, Anal and Lamsang.[10] One may presume that a lengthy period of proximity to Naga clans resulted in the borrowing of aspects of their cultures. Furthermore, the aggressive naga-ising by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak/Muivah) (NSCN I/M) in particular has constrained some communities, formerly classed as Kukis, into the Naga fold.[11] Thus the use of the terms Naga and Kuki within Manipur are problematic from an historical point of view, and the intrusion of ideological political meanings into the terms in the second half of the 20th century further complicates their usage.

Equally confusing has been the imposition of the term 'tribe' to

qualify groupings of clans as either 'Naga' or 'Kuki', since this implies an inappropriate unity of a *Volk* rather than a collection of different clans. Where this nomenclature implies the submerging of clan identity within the larger tribe it bears some similarity to the 'genocide by definition' about which Geertz complained (1973:275). Some of the larger clans have resisted incorporation in either the pan-Naga or pan-Kuki movements, and have instead preferred to retain their proper clan names. Among these are the Tangkhul (Naga) and the Thadou (Kuki). The designation of the hill peoples of Manipur as Scheduled Tribes under the Indian constitution raises other problems.[12] For Christian tribals it savours of being incorporated into a caste system which is quite alien to their traditions, whereas for the Meeteis it has been perceived as exacerbating the division between hills and plains. However these are terms that are now so much part of the current debate that it is difficult to avoid using them. I have tried as far as possible to employ them in a neutral non-ideological sense except where this is clearly stated.

Manipur ceased to exist as a fully independent kingdom in 1891, when a palace revolution resulted in the intervention of the British power. The story of the events of 1891 is the stuff of a Hollywood movie - bungled colonial politics, the defeat and possible mutiny of Gurkha troops, the beheading of five high ranking British political and military officers, a massive invasion, and manipulated trials of the princes (Parratt & Parratt 1992). For Manipur its effects were traumatic. A minor with no claim to the throne was selected to be king and for nearly two decades colonial officers ruled the state. I take as the point of departure for 'modern Manipur' Chura Chand's accession to the throne, at the age of 21, in May 1907. While half the chapters in this book may be regarded as 'historical,' this is not intended to be a history of modern Manipur in the traditional sense. Rather I have been interested in what might be called the running themes which emerge from that history and are still affecting the contemporary situation. As T.S. Eliot put it, 'history is a pattern of timeless moments.' I have interpreted this to mean that crucial events of the past provide peoples with a 'sacred memory' through which the equally critical situations of the present are seen. Memory - however it may be mythicised - shapes present attitudes, and becomes a paradigm through which the challenges of the present are perceived and addressed. A failure to take the wounds of the past seriously frustrates the attempt to find solutions to present maladies. Several themes have been developed in chapters 2-8. The most recurring of these is oppression and reaction to it. In Manipur's case this

oppression was both external - the imposition of British colonial control over the state and the de facto loss independence - and internal - the continued feudal control of the king and his appointees in domestic matters (chap. 2). The first, colonial control, issued in violent protests, especially in the hills (chap. 4). The second resulted in a complex struggle between the king, the new elites, and the popular grass roots movements. The former class divisions within Manipuri society underwent a change as the old extended royal family - the rajkumars - were effectively sidelined after 1891 and replaced by the new educated elites who sought to dominate politics and culture (chapt. 3). The elites in turn found themselves challenged by popular movements, both from the socialist movement that arose from within their own ranks and from the spontaneous uprising of Manipur's women (chapt. 6). An additional important factor in the struggle for a new identity was religion. As the Meeteis had adopted Vaishnavism as part of their culture in the 18th century so the advent of Christianity in hills provided the tribal population with a new sense of identity in the 20th century (chap. 5). At the same time an influential minority of Meeteis were discovering that brahminism also could be deeply oppressive and were seeking their own roots further back in their pre-Hindu religion. Upon this little world the Second World War broke with brutal fury, and from its ruins Manipur emerged in 1947 with its pre-1891 autonomy restored (chap. 7). Since 1949 the pattern of timeless moments has been repeated. Independence and autonorny were lost to its giant neighbour (chap. 8) and the protest movements against the British in the first half of the 20th century have been mirrored by militant movements against Indian rule since 1949 (chaps. 9-10), with deeply damaging consequences for the ordinary people (chap. 11). The exploitation of both land and people by an elite minority (now including politicians) continues (chap. 12). The potential division between hills and plains looks back to religious differences and colonial policies (chap. 13). Thus post-1949 conditions throw their shadows backwards, and have their parallels in the period before the merger of Manipur into the Indian Union. The final chapter discusses events which occurred in 2004, while this book was being completed, and which have given some glimmerings of hope that out of violence and tragedy the beginnings of a peace process may be inching forward. But it remains that if there is to be a serious attempt to heal the wounds of present day Manipur it will require a frank analysis of the mistakes of the past as well as a willingness to address with honesty and integrity the ills of the present.

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. The Meeteis adopted Vaishnavism only in the 18th century as the result of the conversion of the ruler, Garib Niwaz: see S. Parratt 1980 and 1989. I use throughout the spelling 'Meetei' which the Government of Manipur has now adopted in place of the earlier 'Meitei.'
2. To similar effect see Chaube's provocative paper (Pakem 1997:30) in which he argues that the idea of a 'mainstream' is a myth which violates the historical consciousness of the northeast.
3. This is hardly surprising given the virtual absence of references to the northeast in the older standard histories: sadly it was still possible for a well reviewed scholarly work with the title *The Idea of India* to be published in 1997 which, apart from a very few passing asides, contains no discussion of the significance of the northeast region.
4. Recent plans now envisage the inclusion of Mehgalaya and Arunachal Pradesh in the highway links.
5. 'Manipur' is not the name originally used for the kingdom by the people themselves. In the earliest treaty with the British in 1762 it is called Meckley. The treaty of Yandaboo, made in 1826 between the British and the Burmese (without consultation with the Manipuris) designates it as 'Munnipore' and this spelling is followed by Pemberton (1835), the first published report on the area. In 1868 Raja Chandra Kirti called his country Mahe.
6. See Saroj N. Arambam Parratt *The Cheitharon Kumpapa: the Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur, annotated translation and original text* vol. 1 (London 2005): volume 2 is in preparation.
7. It is the story of this Meetei (in the limited sense of the term) dynasty which is contained in the *Cheitharon Kumpapa*: some of the other clans preserved their own written and oral traditions.
8. In Myanmar the designation 'Chin' seems to be preferred, and the homeland of 'Chinram' claimed by insurgent movements includes parts of Mizoram and Manipur: see Sakhong 2000.
9. Hence the distinction which John Shakespear made between the 'Old' and 'New' Kukis, a classification which few would accept today except as referring to the time of settlement.
10. Of these Hodson (1911) listed only the Maring as Nagas.
11. Gangumei (2002:29-30) comments: 'As the Naga movement was more powerful (ie. than the pan-Kuki movement) and deeper, the tribes who are Kuki-Chin speakers, but having strong cultural affinity and geographical proximity and homogeneity, are completely confirmed with the Naga constellation. The Naga-ising process is still a continuing phenonmenon.'
12. Interestingly Albert Minz (1996) explicitly regards Mongoloid tribals as a separate group, quite distinct from tribals elsewhere in India.