

# ISSUES IN THE PURUM DEBATE

*A Dissertation*

SUBMITTED

IN

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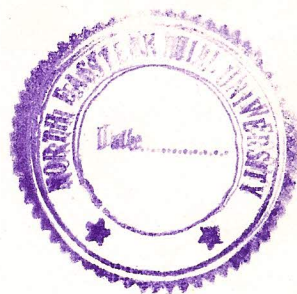
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## C E R T I F I C A T E

This is to certify that Mr. Nitul Kumar Gogoi has worked under my supervision for his M.Phil Dissertation entitled "Issues in the Purum Debate", and no part of it has been submitted elsewhere for the award of any degree.

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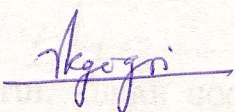


**PREFACE**

The idea of presenting this dissertation as a M.Phil thesis is the product of inquisitiveness that has been triggered off by the debate between the protagonists of 'alliance theory' and 'descent theory'. The illustrations of the Purum in the book 'Structure and Sentiment: A Test Case in Social Anthropology' (1962) by R. Needham based on T.C. Das's original monograph - 'The Purum: An Old Kuki Tribe of Manipur' (1945), have intensified the debate and much has been written and questioned thereafter in a series of articles published in American Anthropologist during 1964 to 1966.

In the first chapter of the dissertation a general description of Manipur and its tribes is outlined. The second part of the first chapter introduces the Issues in the Purum Debate; the second chapter highlights the debated issues and also tries to analyse the relevant issues in the light of the original monograph. The last chapter apprises of the contemporary Purum and presents the feelings and sentiments of the tribe.

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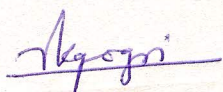
### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful to Professor P.K. Misra who has introduced me to the Purum, for the first time, through a paper designed for my M.Phil Course work. It was later, due to his sincere effort, sprouted into a research synopsis and finally bloomed into a thesis. I feel proud to admit that without his constant presence behind the anvil, I could not have given a shape to the present dissertation.

I also wish to convey my thanks to Professor Budhi Singh, Head, Department of Anthropology, Manipur University, for his continued help and support for conducting a short trip to the Purum. I thank Mr. Joseph F. Khongbuh for his sincere and prompt service to type out my dissertation.

Last but not the least, I acknowledge my gratitude to the Purum villagers for their warm welcome and accommodating nature.

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## PART - I

### MANIPUR AT A GLANCE

The valley of Manipur spreading over an area of 22,327 Km is one of the small state in the eastern frontier of India. It extends from 92.03° to 94.78° East Longitude and 23.83° to 25.68° North Latitude. The State is bounded by Nagaland on the north, by Burma on the east, partly by Mizoram and Chin Hills of Burma on the south and on the west by Cachar district of Assam. The central valley, known as Imphal valley is elevated at a level of about 785 m from Minimum-Sea-Level and is surrounded by green hills ranging from about 790 m to 3,000 m. The state has a healthy and salubrious climate with rainfall varying from 149 cm in the valley, to about 380 cm in the western hills; and temperature ranging from 0°C to 40°C. The 2,360 Sq. Km. valley is surrounded by 20,000 Sq.Km. of hilly areas.<sup>1</sup>

Once a princely State, under the British rule in 1891, Manipur had a democratic form of Government with Maharaja as the executive head in 1947, under the Manipur Constitution Act.<sup>2</sup> It attained its full-fledged

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1. Statistical Handbook of Manipur, 1985, Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Government of Manipur, Imphal.
  2. Roy, J. History of Manipur, Calcutta, 1958.

statehood on 21st January 1972. The State of Manipur, now, with its capital at Imphal, has eight districts with headquarters at Imphal (Central District), Ukhrul (East District); Tamenglong (West District); Senapati (North District); Chandel (Tengnoupal District); Churachandpur (South District); Bishnupur (Bishnupur District); and Thoubal (Thoubal District).

The State shows a total population of 14,20,953 according to the Census of India 1981. The valley has two-third of the population and the rest are scattered on the hilly areas where we find a number of tribes (3,87,977; 1981).

Agriculture is the primary occupation of the people with 88% of the total working population in the hills about 60% of the working population in the valley. Rice is popular as staple food; and minor agricultural produces like tobacco, sugarcane, mustard etc. are also found.

In the ancient time the land was known to its neighbouring people by different names. It was 'Maklay' in Rennell's Memoir; 'Kathe' to Burmese; 'Makeli' to Ahoms; 'Maghli' to the Kacharis; 'Moglan' to the Assamese; and 'Meitei Leipak' to the Manipuris themselves.

Manipur displays a plethora of races - Mongoloid races from Burma mixed with the Indo-Aryan strains from India. In fact, the State provides a congenial platform for different races and culture to mingle together. Besides the Manipuris of the valley, there are 29 mongoloid tribes, which can be broadly divided into Nagas and the Chin-Kuki-Mizo group<sup>3</sup> (but this broad classification is not always accepted by all section, for instance, the Anal now claims to be Naga).

There are six well known Naga tribes in Manipur. They are:

1. Kabui (Rongmei and Puimei; 40,257; 1971).
2. Kacha Naga (Liangmei and Zemei; 13,026; 1971), collectively known as Zeliangrong.
3. Mao (33,379; 1971).
4. Maram (4,539; 1971).
5. Tangkhul (57,851; 1971), and
6. Maring (4,589; 1971).

The Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes are:

1. Gante (6,307; 1971).

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3. Tribes of Manipur at a Glance, 1981. Directorate for Development of Tribals & Backward Classes, Government of Manipur.

2. Hmar (23,312; 1971).
3. Lushai (7,483; 1971).
4. Paite (24,755; 1971).
5. Simte (4,177; 1971).
6. Thadou (59,955; 1971).
7. Vaiphei (12,347; 1971).
8. Zou (10,060; 1971).

Besides these two major groups, there is also another group which is linguistically nearer to the Kuki-group and is numerically smaller. There is no specific name for this tribe; but they are grouped as an intermediate group.<sup>4</sup> This group consists of the following tribes:

1. Aimol (836; 1971).
2. Chiru (2,785; 1971).
3. Koireng (458; 1971).
4. Kom (collectively called Komremle; 6550; 1971).
5. Anal (now claimed to be Naga, 6,670; 1971).
- ✓ 6. Chothe (1,905; 1971).
7. Langang (2,622; 1971).
8. Koirao/Thangal (1,620; 1971).
9. Monsang (930; 1971).
10. Moyon (1,360; 1971).

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4. Ibid., p. 3.

The Meiteis or the Manipuris are a separate group with their own distinct entity. The genesis of the word 'Meitei' is from the two words - 'me' meaning 'man' and 'thei' meaning 'separate'. The old Manipuri manuscripts like 'Leithak Leikharol' and 'Poireiton Khunthak' speak about the history of the Meitei society, their customs, traditions, religious beliefs, art, culture and literature. They speak Manipuri which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family. The Meitei consists of seven endogamous 'salai' (groups).<sup>5</sup>

Society is patrilineal but women equally share the responsibilities of any economic activity. A Manipuri household is the smallest social unit with a man, his wife and unmarried children. Marriage is either by engagement or by elopement. Residence after marriage is neo-local but the youngest son of the family inherits the paternal house and looks after the old parents. Paternal property is shared equally among the brothers.

Most of the Meitei festivals are accompanied by dance, music and song. During March-April, they celebrate the 'Lai Haraoba' festival where the creation of life

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5. Roy, J. History of Manipur, Calcutta, 1958.

is depicted through dance drama led by priests (Maibas) and priestess (Maibis). This is a pre-vashnavite culture retained by the Manipuris. Holi is another important festival of Meiteis where young and old alike come out and go to the temples. Boys and girls with utmost spirit participate in 'Thabal Chouba' dance. Besides, they have a musical festival where devotional singing (Sankirtana Cholom) is very much popular. During Vasant Purnima, Sarat Purnima and Kartika Purnima, a seasonal drama, the Rasa Lila depicting the eternal love of Radha and Krishna, is performed in strict classical dance style.<sup>6</sup>

The scene on the hill side is equally colourful too. As stated earlier, the hill side is the home of the tribes where slash-burn-type of cultivation is of subsistence nature. Horticulture is also practised by the tribals. They have simple technology with hoe, digging stick and dao. Landholding is of communal ownership. The tribes of Manipur have a highly developed art of weaving.

The Kabuis of Tamendong are one of the major Scheduled Tribes of Manipur. They belong to Mongoloid stock

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6. Roy, Nilima. Art of Manipur, Agam Kala Prakashan, Delhi, 1979.

and are linguistically nearer to the Naga. The Kabuis are divided into a number of exogamous clans. Marriage is often by negotiation or by elopement.

The Tangkhuls are predominant in the eastern zone of Manipur, specially in the Ukhrul area. They are also Mongoloid with Tibeto-Burman speech. Family is the smallest social unit. The society is patrilineal and residence after marriage is generally neo-local. Paying of bride price is prevalent among the Tangkhuls and the price depends on the wealth of the parents of the girl. They have five major festivals associated with sowing and harvesting.

Among the Kukis, the important sections like Hmar, Paite are the migrants from the Mizo Hills and Burma. The different sections of the Kuki resemble each other and they are all from Mongoloid group. They are of short stature and sturdy with skin colour varying from dark-yellow-brown to yellow-olive. A Kuki marries any woman except his near kin. The residence is patrilocal but elder brothers establish their own houses after marriage.

Hmars have several clans. Linguistically they belong to Kuki-Chin group of Tibeto-Burman subfamily. Hmars are predominant in Churachandpur area of Manipur. They have similar type of family set up as found among the Manipuris.

The youngest son inherits the property of his father. They practise four different methods of procuring bride; viz. (i) by service (like the 'Yaun-Gumba' of the Chothe); (ii) by intrusion; (iii) by elopment; and (iv) by arrangement. Bride-price varies from clan to clan.

Paites resemble the Mizos in their dress and house type. They follow monogamy. Marriage between the paternal first-cousin (FBD) is allowed among the Paites.

The 'intermediate group'<sup>7</sup> like the Chothes are also linguistically nearer to the Chin-Kuki Group. They are found in Chandel District and Bishnupur District. The Chothe society is patrilineal and practise matrilineal-cross-cousin marriage. The group has seven major clans with fourteen sub-clans.<sup>8</sup> Worship of Senamahi (Sib-God) is widely practised among the Pegangs (non-Christians).

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7. Ibid, p. 3.

8. Gogoi, N.K. The Present Study, Department of Anthropology, NEHU, Shillong.

PART - II

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUES IN THE PURUM DEBATE

The Purum,<sup>9</sup> a small tribe of 303 (1936) of Manipur, has been holding a central stage in one of the most intense debate in the history of Anthropology. The debate was between the protagonists of 'alliance theory' and 'descent theory'. Alliance theory was developed by Levi-Strauss, Dumont, Needham, and others while descent theory was by Radcliffe Brown, Goody, Homans and Schneider and others.

In 1955, Homans and Schneider published a book entitled "Marriage authority and final causes"; a study of cross-cousin marriage, which was a critic of Levi-Strauss's book 'Les structures elementaires de la parente', published in 1949. These books deal with the institution of marriage and briefly the problem is that if a society allows cross-cousin marriage, then only generally it permits marriage between cross-cousins on one side and not other. Levi-Strauss gave a structural explanations while Homans and Schneider said that it was owing to

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9. Das, T.C. The Purum: An Old Kuki Tribe of Manipur, 1945.

sentiments. These explanations generated a long debate in which the Purum were used to illustrate the arguments.

Prof. Tarak Chandra Das of Calcutta University had published a book entitled "The Purum: An Old Kuki Tribe of Manipur (1945)", little realising that the book will invite worldwide attention. Before Das, the tribe has been discussed by McCulloch (1859) as a tribe belonging to the 'Kookie' stock; Brown (1873) said that it was a sub-division of Kom tribe; Hodson (1911) looked it as an old Kuki village; Shakespeare<sup>10</sup> (1912: 150-184) projected them as an old Kuki clan; Gupta (1985) defined 'Purum' as a land/territory having hills and forests.

Like any other book, Das's book was reviewed by several anthropologists and as usual they found some portions of the book not so well done as others. For example, Prabhakar found the sections as on 'acculturation' and the future of the Purum as the 'only saving features of an otherwise disappointing work' (1946: 272). Mandelbaum's review was more appreciative but was concerned primarily with the 'acculturation process', and hardly at all with the Purum social organisation (Mandelbaum,

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10. Needham, R. Structural Analysis of Purum Society, American Anthropologist, 60:75.

1947). Leach wrote of "defects in the techniques of recording" and contradictions found in it "singularly defective" as regards statements of "cultural norms", and maintained that the author suffered from an "over-anxiety to find norms and standardised behaviour where possibly none-exists" (Leach 1947).

The book's portion on social organisation came under strict scrutiny by a good number of scholars all over the world. While the debate generated by it was fading away, there came a third phase when Census of India in 1971 reported the population of the tribe Purum as nil. What has happened to them? Is it really true that a tribe that generated so much academic interest has disappeared altogether? In order to find out this the Anthropological Survey of India, in 1975, sent a team of Anthropologists to Manipur. Their findings raise new issues and throw light on the earlier ones.<sup>11</sup>

The history of the Purum debate and the current issues are the important developments in the field of Anthropology and therefore it was felt that a study of the existing literature on the Purum and a brief visit to the Purum may yield new insights into the debate.

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11. Basu, Arabinda et al. (Edited) Proceedings of the Symposium on Purum (Chothe) Revisited, (1985).

The objectives of the present study are as follows:

- (a) To prepare an exhaustive bibliography on the Purum.
- (b) To review the literature that is available and bring out the salient features of the debate.
- (c) To draw out such issues which need further investigations.

The present study is based basically on information from secondary sources such as Government and Semi-Government documents; Gazetteer, and published books and articles on the tribe in question. A short visit to the Purum was also made and primary data were collected by using research schedule and interviews.

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