

Economic Dimension of the Meitei State Formation

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Conceptual Frame

The economic factor has been identified by the scholars globally as crucial in the formation of early states. In the state formation studies the researchers look into the beginning of inequality and stratification in the early egalitarian ethnic societies with the emergence of private property and interest groups as the starting point of enquiry since the political organizations were founded on property and territory. The state as a higher form of political organization came into existence when the economic relations were further sophisticated by privatization of resources and extraction of surplus by the dominant groups in the society. The acceptance of the mythical charter or the 'divine right' in the medieval period strengthened the assumed authority of the rulers globally, while in Indian subcontinent the Brahmanical myths concerning the supernatural origin of the ruling families contributed to royal legitimization since ancient time. The common factor in all state formations was the surplus (generation, extraction and redistribution). Therefore, the crucial issues in state formation studies are labour process, surplus generation and the social differentiation. Several case studies in recent decades have confirmed the assumption of Lewis Henry Morgan and Friedrich Engels that the form of labour processes, the manner of extraction of surplus and the method of redistribution of surplus determined the social and polity formation processes in early societies. Morgan

had considered the state 'as a political organization founded upon territory and upon property',¹ while Engels found that "at a definite stage of economic development, which necessarily involved the cleavage of society into classes, the state became a necessity because of this cleavage."² Henri J.M. Claessen and Peter Skalnik's *The Early State*,³ which covered twenty case studies from all the major regions of the world, suggested the progress in production and promotion of surplus, tributes and affluence to be the major factors that inspired development of early institutions into statehood in almost all cases. Similarly, Surajit Sinha's *Tribal Politics and State Systems in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North Eastern India*,⁴ which included eleven case studies and seven of these from Northeast India, identified 'Surplus Generation, Extraction and Redistribution' as a governing factor in the state formation processes in Northeast India in the pre-colonial period.)

The emergence of states from the indigenous ethnic social base was indeed a significant development in the history of Northeast India during thirteenth to eighteenth century A.D. The stratification in the Koch, Dimasa (Kachari), Meitei, Jaintia and Tripuri societies was magnified on the basis of differentiated landholding and individualized income. The process started when the notables at the clan or village levels emerged as chiefs and extended their sphere of influence and control by subduing other clans, tribes and communities. The Jaintia, Dimasa and the Tripuri rulers commanded control over the fertile plough cultivating rice lands in Sylhet, Cachar and Tripura plains respectively. The Meitei state in Manipur was primarily the product of inter-clan feuds within the Meitei ethnic groups in the Manipur Valley over the occupation of agricultural land and the state was established when the Ningthouja chiefs gained control over the fertile rice lands in the northern plains by over-powering the chiefs of other clans. The Koch rulers possessed the extensive and fertile plain lands in Lower Assam-Northern Bengal region and controlled the important river channels and the trade routes. The Ahoms experienced the early processes of state formation before their advent in the Brahmaputra Valley and they built the most powerful state in the region by military conquest. The Sanskritization or Hinduization formalized the social stratification and legitimized the royal supremacy in all cases. In final forms, the states were able to develop elaborate apparatus for sustenance and surveillance. Besides land holding

and agriculture, the states generated income by control over trade and through tributes from the subordinate chiefs and taxes paid by the subjects.⁵

The surplus was generated primarily through appropriate technological innovations. The rulers generally did not disturb the norms of self-regulation of the tribal and other ethnic groups, particularly in the hilly segments of the states, and accepted from the tribes only nominal tributes. The plains segments were the principal economic zones. The skilful peasants, artisans and traders from outside were induced by the rulers to immigrate and settle down in their territories subject to regular payment of rent and cess in cash and kind. They also encouraged the artisans to develop specialized crafts and the traders to establish trade centres. However, the rulers and their subordinate chiefs redistributed, though partially, the regenerated wealth through the organization of feasts and sacred festivals, building of temples, construction of tanks and dams, and various other means of public welfare in specific cases.⁶ As regards the role of surplus in state formation, Amalendu Guha observed, "No tribe leaped to statehood while it was still at its pristine stage. Before that it needed a sedentary agricultural population, with a degree of division of labour and social stratification, as the starting point. Statehood emerged only when a community was itself capable of yielding a surplus sufficient for the maintenance of a non-producing public authority, or of systematically appropriating such a surplus in the form of tribute from a neighbouring community. Smaller the surplus, less elaborate was its public authority structure. In the north east Indian context, tribal state formations, early or medieval, were also expected to be based on either their own or others' surplus-yielding wet rice cultivation, rain-fed or irrigated. Such wet rice cultivation was possible with or without the use of cattle-powered ploughs. However, in India it was mostly the plough that ensured a relatively large surplus and therefore, also a higher form of political organization. Larger the surplus, more developed was the state."⁷

The objective of this paper is to examine the economic dimension of the Meitei state formation in Pre-colonial Manipur in the stated frame; and in so doing, we have liberally used R.K. Saha's "State Formation Among the Meitei of Manipur"⁸, besides other works, for an understanding of the Meitei social organization and the emergence of kingship from that ethnic social base.

Emergence and Sophistication of the Meitei State

The emergence and sophistication of the Meitei State under the leadership of the Ningthouja chiefs was the most significant development in the history of Manipur in the pre-colonial period. The state bloomed in the thirteenth century and till the end of the eighteenth century Manipur was an independent kingdom. It was only in the nineteenth century that the British gradually established its suzerainty over the kingdom and Manipur became one of the Princely States within the British Indian colony. When the British came in contact with Manipur, there were six ethnic groups in the valley, viz. Meitei, Loi, Yaithibi, Brahmin, Bishnupriya and the Pangan (Muslim), and there were as many as twenty-nine tribes belonging either to Naga or to Kuki (Mizo) stocks in the hills that surrounded the valley. The state formation occurred in the valley, and the kings subsequently established their control over the hills. Of the six ethnic groups in the valley, the Meitei, Loi and the Yaithibi were possibly endogenous communities, while the Brahmin, Bishnupriya and the Pangan were of exogenous origin. In the state that eventually emerged the king, who belonged to the Meitei group, occupied a pivotal position and all the groups (then only Meitei, Loi and Yaithibi) were structurally interrelated and assigned functional roles. The groups (Meitei, or Loi or Yaithibi) had their own chiefs at the levels of the clans or communities and the people strengthened the hands of their respective chief due to the necessity to occupy more fertile lands for agriculture, which was the principal occupation for all the groups. The able bodied male persons were enlisted as soldiers under the command of the chief as soon as the conflicts between the clans and groups began for the occupation of land and expansion of settlements. This was the beginning of the state formation process. Initially the Loi group was very powerful and they occupied some fertile portions of the valley. In course of time, the Meitei under the leadership of the Ningthouja chief became most powerful and they pushed the Loies and the Yaithibis to the less fertile peripheral areas (in the foothills). They also gave settlement to the Bishnupriyas (who immigrated from beyond the western hills, i.e. Cachar side) in the marshy lowlands. The Kukis, who came down from the hills, were recruited in the police force of the Meitei chiefs and allotted lands for settlement in the marshy

areas. The later immigrants from the east and the west were also settled in the same marshy region in separate villages. The Pangans, who were prisoners of wars from the west (Cachar side), were allowed to settle in the riverbanks as they were expert agriculturists and they taught the Meiteis the method of paddy transplantation. Each group held a specified tract of land and the chief of a clan was the owner of the land under the control of that clan, while others were only users. After the establishment of the kingship, the King became the owner of all land.⁹

The Meitei society was divided into seven patrilineal clans, called *yek-salai*, viz. Ningthouja, Angom, Luwang, Khuman, Khaba-Aganba, Chenglei, and the Moirang. Each *yek-salai* was subdivided into many *yumnaks* (maximal lineages) and each *yumnak* into numerous *sageis* (major lineages). Each *sagei* was further divided into a number of *chagok*, which comprised of families within three generations. As a first step towards state formation each clan (*yek-salai*) developed into a principality under the chief. The Ningthouja chief, in course of time, subdued the chiefs of Angom, Luwang, Khuman, Khaba-Aganba and Chenglei to establish the kingship. However, Moirang guarded its principality for sometimes to be merged eventually into the Meitei kingship at a later date. In course of time, all the groups in the Manipur Valley (endogenous or exogenous), who had migrated to Manipur till about the sixteenth century, were integrated into the Meitei lineage structure. It came to be believed that the ancestor of the Ningthouja clan came to this earth earlier than the ancestors of all other clans and it was accepted that this fact of seniority made the Ningthouja chief senior-most in the Meitei society which the members of all other lineages were obliged to recognize. A hierarchy on the basis of seniority of the ancestor was maintained at various levels of the social organization. The position of the chief became hereditary following the law of primogeniture. The senior most man in any unit in terms of genealogy became the chief of that unit. Thus *Piba* was the chief of *sagei* (major lineage), *Pibaren* was the chief of *yumnak* (maximal lineage) and Ningthou was the chief of *yek-salai* (clan). The *Pandits* (scholars or priests) played an important role in the process as they maintained the genealogy of the various clans. As a result, the structurally segmented Meitei society in the valley became uni-cultural, whereas the villages were generally uni-clan. The Meiteis had their

own traditional religion (*laining*) in which the ancestor worship (*apokpa khurumjaba*) was the predominant ritual for each household and the *Maiba* (priest) and the *Maibi* (priestess) played very important role. After the emergence of the kingship the king looked after the defence of the kingdom and the maintenance of law and order, while the religious and social matters were dealt with by the *Pandit Laisong*, which was the highest court of the literati and consisted of the priests and the priestesses. The *Pandits* maintained the records, and the *Puiyas* (old manuscripts) maintained by them are considered as the most important source for the history of Manipur.¹⁰

There are also chronicles, of which *Chaiterol Kumbaba* (the state chronicle) is perhaps the most popular. According to the chronicles, God *Pakhangba*, the son of *Sidabamapu* (the Supreme Father, who does not die), was the first Meitei king. It is thus believed that the royalty in Manipur had a divine origin and all the kings of Manipur are the descendants of the God King *Pakhangba*. The method of enlisting all the able bodied male persons between the age of 16 and 60 years as soldiers, which started during the chieftaincies, was continued after the emergence of kingship. The chronicles suggest that the Ningthouja chiefs were fighting with other clans till about thirteenth century, defeated them one by one, and they were able to subdue the fifth chieftaincy (Khuman) by thirteenth century. The Meitei king fought with the Moirang chief during 13th to 18th century and this last chieftaincy also ultimately merged with the Meitei kingdom in 18th century. Kanglai, the original seat of the Ningthouja chiefs, became the capital. The king was first called *Lainingthou* and in the *Saka* year 1646 (A.D. 1724–25) the title was changed to *Maharaja*. An elaborate and hierarchical administrative structure gradually developed over the centuries by stages as the state expanded and reached its final form. The Barak basin in the west was the natural route of communication and the Kabaw Valley provided the outlet to Burma. The Meitei ruler Naothingkhong (7th–8th century A.D.) married a princess from beyond the western hills. The Ramanandi Vasnavism had entered Manipur before eighth century, and a large number of Brahmins migrated from the west in the fifteenth century. It is learnt from a copperplate issued by king Khongtekcha (8th century A.D.) that *Hari* was considered as the Supreme God and the worship of Siva and Durga was also popular. King Kyaamba (1467–1508)

built a brick temple of Visnu at Bishenpur. However, Charai Rongba (1698–1709) was the first Meitei king to be formally initiated to Vaisnavism. Gareeb Niwaz (1709–48) tried to make Ramanandi Vaisnavism the state religion but he failed to do so due to the opposition of the traditional Meitei *Pandits*. Maharaja Jai Singh (1759–63) accepted Gauriya Vaisnavism and declared it to be the state religion. Maharaja Bhagya Chandra (1763–98) maintained close contacts with the Goswamis of Bengal and he popularized Gauriya Vaisnavism among the masses. He also persuaded the *Pandits* to accept the new faith. This brought about significant changes in the Meitei society and the structure of the state in Manipur. The Brahmins became preceptors and priests; they gave ritual services to the palace and thereby attained the highest social status. They were settled in the capital region and in the Meitei inhabited heartland and at least one Brahmin family was settled in almost every village in the valley. The Brahmins and the temples were gifted land by the kings.¹¹

The emergence of the Meitei kingdom in the thirteenth century was by and large a case of indigenous growth from chieftaincy to state. However, in that phase of development also the traditional Meitei religion played an important role through the institution of *Pandits* who might have played important role in establishing the divine origin of the ancestor of the ruling Ningthouja family through the legend of God King *Pakhangba* and in maintaining the genealogy of the various lineages. The ancestor worship was a dominant practice in the traditional Meitei religion. The ancestor of a clan was believed to have originated at a particular time, day, month and place and for the worship water had to be brought from the place of origin of the clan, where the ancestor of the clan was also born. This ritual ensured the loyalty of the Meiteis to the ancestors and legitimized the authority of the descendants of the earliest clan (Ningthouja) represented by the king. The possibility of influence from outside in the pre-thirteenth century phase also cannot be altogether ruled out since a copperplate of Khontekcha in the eighth century mentioned about the prevalence of the worship of Hari, Siva and Durga. In the fifteenth century the Brahmins immigrated to Manipur in a considerable number and in the same century Kyaamba (1467–1508) built a Visnu temple at Bishenpur. The Vaisnavism gradually became a popular religion in Manipur, and in the eighteenth century it became the state

religion. The Brahmins became priests and preceptors, and the ecclesiastical authority moved to the hands of the Brahmins. Those associated with the ritual services in the palace were settled in Kangla, others mostly in the more fertile northern plains along with the Meiteis, while each village in the valley generally had a Brahmin family. However, although Vainavism was made the state religion and the Meiteis en masse accepted the new faith, they simultaneously practiced many of the rites and rituals of their traditional religion. The ancestor worship, for example, never lost its popularity. On the contrary, the rulers found in this ritual the legitimacy of the lineage structure that justified the rule of the Ningthouja chief. The *lai haraoba* was adopted as a state festival and it signified the hierarchy in the society.¹²

In the meantime, the Meitei rulers came into formal contacts with the states and principalities outside Manipur, particularly in the west, namely, Cachar, Tripura, Assam and Cooch Behar. The relations with Burma were sometimes hostile and sometimes friendly. The Meitei princes and princesses were married in the ruling families of Cachar, Tripura and Assam. There were also commercial and diplomatic relations with the neighbouring states and territories. As a result of these contacts and systemic interactions, there were some changes and modifications in the Meitei state structure during sixteenth to eighteenth century. The boundary of the state was also gradually expanded by establishing control in the hill areas and it called for systemic accommodations. The subjugation of the hill tribes possibly began in the twelfth century. The Meitei chiefs fought with the hill chiefs during twelfth to the fifteenth century and forced them to pay tributes as token of acknowledgement of the authority. The later kings like Charai Rongba (1698–1709) and Gareeb Niwaz (1709–48) consolidated the authority by maintaining friendly relations with the hill chiefs. A dance performance (*haochongba*) by the tribes in the palace became an important annual festival.¹³

Surplus: Generation, Extraction and Redistribution

The Meitei supremacy in the Manipur Valley began with the establishment of their control over the fertile agricultural land. The three endogenous ethnic groups, viz. the Meitei, Loi and Yaithibi fought each other for a long time for control of the valley.

To begin with, the Meiteis occupied the northern plains that were the most fertile area in the valley and they pushed the Lois and the Yaithibis to the peripheral foothill zone which was least fertile. Among the exogenous groups, the Bishnupriyas, who were perhaps the first from outside to advent in the Manipur Valley after the establishment of the Meitei dominance, were allotted land in the less fertile marshy regions. The Pangans (who were war captives) were expert agriculturists and they were expected to teach the Meiteis the technique of paddy transplantation. Therefore, they were allotted land in the banks of the rivers. The Brahmins were the last to arrive, but they were favoured as priests and preceptors. Therefore, they were accommodated in the northern fertile plains along with the Meiteis. The people who were subdued or those who had to undergo punishment for offences, the immigrants and those captured in wars and others who were not liked by the kings due to various reasons were forced to settle in the marshy lowlands. The tribal communities, who came down to the valley, were also settled in the same region. The people in the valley were generally more prosperous than the hill tribes as the valley land was more fertile than the hills. The people in the hills depended on horticulture and shifting cultivation, whereas in the valley plough cultivation (both dry and wet varieties of paddy) was in practice. However, within the valley population also there was a social stratification resulting from the yielding capacity of the land under occupation. The high status Meiteis and the Brahmins, who lived in the most fertile northern plains, which was the best for agriculture and generating surplus, were wealthier than any other group. In addition to agriculture, the handloom was almost household for the Meiteis and considered as a respectable craft. The Pangans lived in the riverbanks and they grew vegetables, besides depending on agriculture. The peripheral region, occupied by the Lois and the Yaithibis, was least fertile and often inundated by floodwater. Therefore, the agricultural yield was not enough for subsistence. The people in this region, therefore, had to resort to growing pineapples in the hill slopes, rearing goats, fowls and swine, liquor distillation, poultry farming, pot-making and producing charcoal. Many of them also worked as palanquin bearers for the members of the royal family and the aristocracy. The marshy lowlands occupied by the Bishnupriyas, low-status Meiteis and others, was also less

fertile in comparison with the northern plains. Moreover, flood was a perennial problem in this region. Therefore, the people in this region not only depended on agriculture but also on other occupations like fishing, basketry, salt-making, lime-making, iron-work and such other professions which the high status Meiteis would refuse to perform. Many villages were obliged to render manual services to the king and the high officials. Theoretically, the king was the owner of the land and the subjects were only users. In the process the king was placed at the pivotal position in the state and the social structure as the accommodation of the various ethnic groups in a pan-Meitei lineage structure had structurally interrelated all the ethnic groups through the institution of kingship.¹⁴

King Loiyamba (1074–1112) had issued a *Shinyen* or royal edict in the eleventh century distributing economic and administrative functions to the groups, villages and lineages and this arrangement was partially modified from time to time by kings Kyaamba (1467–1508), Khagemba (1597–1652), and Gareeb Niwaz (1709–48). The content of the *Shinyen* issued by King Loiyamba shows that this royal decree assigned social and economic functions to various families (*yumnak* or surname), duties to priests and priestesses, and held selected families responsible for maintenance of the shrines of deities (*umanglai*). The items mentioned in the *Shinyen* are too many and the list of families too long. For example, the traditional weavers were divided into two categories, viz. weavers and dyers. Thirty families were identified for weaving different types of clothes and eight families were given the duty of dyeing the yarns in various colours. Fifty-five families were assigned the duty to look after the maintenance of the religious shrines. The selected families of priests (*maiba*) were allotted the responsibility of worship of various deities. One hundred and one families of priests and priestesses (*maibi*) were assigned the responsibility of curing diseases by administering herbal medicines and performing ritual sacrifices. A state department was created for profitiating six guardian spirits for protection of the king. Ten state officials were appointed for the management of land.¹⁵ This *Shinyen* was indeed a significant step forward in history of formation of the Meitei state. Almost two-third of the Manipur Valley and five of the seven Meitei clan-principalities were already under his rule. The reforms and innovations introduced by him became a model

for the rest of the valley and the principalities that were to join the kingdom in the later years. On the other hand, the specific functions and duties for specific families with a particular surname or clan name decreed by Loiyamba inducted the system of specialization on hereditary basis for the entire Meitei society. In other words, this might have served the Meitei society as a prototype of the caste system, which was essentially an economic and functional division of the society. The king was already the owner of land, while the introduction of the offices for the management of land ensured regular flow of revenue and the king's control over the people. The material production and economic functionaries needed for the state were taken care of by the *Shinyen* of Loiyamba. As the state expanded and matured further, the later kings issued additions to the *Shinyen* to take care of emerging needs and to further sophisticate the state machinery in the later years.

Alongside the development of agricultural economy, the Meitei society passed through a process of professional specialization and the institutionalization of the social stratification, first within the original Meitei group and then in the entire 'Meitei-ized' population in Manipur Valley. A regular gradation of the entire population emerged by the time the king was placed at the apex of the society.

This gradation was initially on the basis of status in the social hierarchy, but in course of time it became identical with one's occupation and profession and the type of service one was capable of or bound to render to the king and his subjects. The king was himself entitled to three types of services from the people, viz. *fandom* (honourable/prestigious services), *lalup* (essential services) and *laipot* (dishonourable/manorial services).¹⁶ The chiefs, priests and the selected favourites of the king, particularly those who had marital connection with the royal family and were appointed to high offices, formed the aristocracy and served the king by performing 'non-labourious prestigious services' (*fandom*). They enjoyed the privileges of personal servants (*loi-il*), families assigned to work as servants (*yuj-tinnaba*) and the services of the villagers to carry luggage while on tour (*pothang*). The Meiteis who were not included among the aristocrats became the commoners. These common Meiteis were divided into four *panas*, each under a *pana hazari*. The *panas* were required to provide *lalup* service to the king. King Loiyamba first introduced this *lalup* system in the twelfth

century. The objective was to meet the demand of labour and army. It was indeed a military organization, but in time of peace the arrangement was utilized for manual service to the king. The kings used the *lalup kabas* for reclamation of fallow or wastelands and extension of cultivation. Under the system, every able-bodied male between the age of 16 and 60 had to be enrolled as soldier (*lalmee*). Excepting war period, the individuals in every *pana* group were required to give ten days service in every forty days by rotation. The *pana hazari* maintained the attendance and reported about the attendance and conduct of the *lalups* to the *lalup chingbe* (an official in the palace). When the number of Meitei villages multiplied, the duty of taking attendance was entrusted to the village headman (*hanjaba*). The peace time *lalup* service included those of personal attendants, cultivation of land under direct control of the king, construction of houses and roads and bridges, collection of construction materials, and looking after the horses, ponies and cattles.¹⁷ In fact, the *lalup* system was the backbone of the state's economy. The scholars have noticed in this system some elements of forced labour and rudiments of slavery.¹⁸

Besides *lalup*, the war captives and the captives from the neighbouring areas were also used as slaves by the kings and high officials. Some of the kings possessed 1200 to 1500 such personal servants and attendants.¹⁹ The degraded Meiteis rendered *laipot* (dishonourable) services to the king. The outcaste (punished for social offences), the immigrants who were settled in marshy lowlands, and the Lois and Yaithibis, who formed the degraded groups, were required to render the *laipot* services. They had to do such work, which was despised by the common Meiteis, and they were also required to pay tributes. They manufactured silk-thread, collected iron from the iron ore, distilled liquor, fished in the lakes, prepared wooden posts, beams and canoes, collected grass for the royal stable, did gardening in the palace compound, or worked as *kei* (slave).²⁰

The artisans like the goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters and the brass and bell metal workers emerged from the ranks of the Meitei society. It is not impossible that the markets and the neighbouring areas influenced the technological innovations and refinement. The possibility of the introduction of certain arts and crafts by the immigrants, who were assimilated in the Meitei society including some artisans from beyond the western borders,

also cannot be ruled out. It is not known whether Manipur had indigenous sources of gold, brass and other metals needed by the artisans or these raw materials were imported from outside. The use of plough for cultivation might have initiated the conflict for the better lands and thereby the state formation processes, but it is not known whether it was indigenously developed or introduced by some early immigrants. Weaving was more or less household in the Meitei society. However, some of the *yumnaks* (maximal lineages) of each clan specialized in tailoring different types of garments.²¹

The pattern of land holding, encouragement to agriculture, external trade and the professional specializations contributed to surplus generation. At the same time, the kings also resorted to extractions in the forms of labour and taxes and tributes. All the land in the kingdom theoretically belonged to the king. However, one third of the total land was under his direct control, and another one-third (or more than that) was in the possession of the members of the ruling family, the Brahmins and the sepoys. The kings used to grant land to the priests, temples, officials and other favorites either permanently or for a specified period. The commoners were only the users of the land on payment of taxes. The kings required a large labour force to cultivate the huge land under their direct control. They extracted labour mainly through the *lalup* system. The land under direct control of the king was cultivated for them by the *lalup kabas*. In return of this *lalup* service an individual was entitled to cultivate for his own support one *pari* (2.5 acres) of land, but he was required to pay a tax in kind for that land. The tax varied from two to thirteen baskets of paddy per *pari* per annum. The favorites were required to pay only two baskets, but from the commoners twelve baskets of paddy were realized on an average for each *pari* of land. In times of war and other emergencies the demand for tax used to be higher than the usual. The relatives of the kings, Brahmins and the sepoys were not required to pay any tax for certain fixed proportions of land in normal circumstances. However, they were required to pay about twelve baskets of paddy as tax for land cultivated beyond the fixed proportions. In emergency periods the demands could be as high as twenty-four baskets. The kings also allowed the Meiteis to establish new villages in reclaimed lands on payment of usual taxes. This privilege was not extended to others.²² Besides the *lalup* system, labour was

extracted through *laipot* services also from the degraded Meiteis, Lois, Yaithibis and others. These groups were also required to pay tributes in kind or cash. A certain quantity of all the products had to be paid by them to the king as tribute. The king realized from them thirty per cent of the manufactured salt, and for fishing in the lakes the individuals had to pay two to four rupees per month towards the end of the nineteenth century.²³ The tributes were collected from the hill tribes also. The hill chiefs paid tributes in the form of clothes and other products of the hills. They were also required to provide food for the officers and their attendants who went to the hills for collection of tributes. King Charai Rongba (1698–1709) introduced an annual dance performance (*haochongba*) by the tribes in the palace. During this festival the king offered food and drinks to the tribal chiefs and received from them gifts and tributes.²⁴ The kings also derived income from the markets and by regulating the external trade.²⁵

The Meitei kings also followed the principle of redistribution in the form of public welfare activities. The ideology that the king was the protector of the land and the people, and after Vaisnavization, the champion of the new faith, ensured him the support and loyalty of the people. He was the owner of the land, and the usufructuary right given to the people was a privilege granted by the king and could be withdrawn by him. In addition, the kings undertook public welfare schemes from time to time and provided relief to the subjects at times of distress. King Kyaamba (1467–1508) built a Visnu temple at Bishenpur. His successors built such temples in Kangla and other places. Jai Singh (1759–63) built a temple even in Navadwip (Bengal), which was a place of pilgrimage for the devout Vaisnavas in the medieval period. However, although the kings and the people embraced Vaisnavism as the new faith, the traditional culture of the Meiteis also flourished alongside the Vaisnava practices. In fact, there was a blending of the two traditions by spontaneous adjustments.²⁶ The ancestor worship continued to be a compulsory ritual for every family.²⁷ The *lai haraoba*, a village festival in which the village gods and goddesses are collectively worshipped, was organized every year at the patronage of the kings.²⁸

The kings also pronounced their appreciation of the tribal culture through *haochongba dance*, which was organized in the palace annually.²⁹ The kings also extended patronage to the

scholars and the court poets produced several important literary works, including chronicles. Kyaamba and his successors in the sixteenth century opened routes to Assam, Cachar, Tripura and Burma that gave a fillip to trade and commerce. The draining out of the water from the marshes at the initiative of the Ningthouja chiefs was an old practice and the later Meitei kings continued this practice as an agricultural measure. King Khungasba (1652–66) improved the markets, reclaimed forests, constructed dams and repaired the channels. Jai Singh introduced land surveys and developed the salt wells.³⁰ The kings also used to adopt pro-people measures during famines and natural calamities. The *Chaitarol Kumbaba* recorded a series of famines during sixteenth to eighteenth century due to floods and draughts. The kings provided relief and rehabilitation to the victims in those hours of need, and sometimes exempted the people in the affected areas from payment of taxes. They used the *lalup kabas* to clear the water channels and to drain out the floodwater. The rituals were performed and the *pujas* offered to propitiate the nature against calamities, which included milking 108 cows before the images of Radha and Krishna to invite rain during draughts.³¹

Resume

It is indeed difficult to study the economic dimension of the Meitei state formation processes in Manipur due to the extremely limited nature of the source materials, particularly for the earlier phases of development. The chronicles, archaeological remains, and the numismatic evidence are relevant mostly for sixteenth to eighteenth century A.D. Nevertheless, a careful analysis of the recorded data would reveal that the process was almost similar to the neighbouring areas or the findings of the major studies on the basis of which our conceptual frame has been developed. In the Meitei case, the endogenous groups, viz. the Meitei, Loi and the Yaithibi, might have experienced the autonomous growth and social stratification at early stages of privatization of land and resources at the levels of individual families and clans. The introduction of plough cultivation might have brought about significant strengthening of the Chieftdom and the growth of principalities for each clan. The introduction of the high-yielding plough cultivation was definitely a technological innovation for

an agricultural economy. The conflicts for command over more fertile agricultural land might have started at this stage and the numerically more powerful Meitei group might have established its control over the northern fertile plains by pushing the Lois and the Yaithibis to the periphery. The possibility of external influence on this technological innovation cannot be altogether ruled out, although there is no acceptable historical evidence to substantiate the external contacts of Manipur in early times. Nevertheless, the ethnographic accounts suggest the Southeast Asian Indo-Mongoloid roots of the Meiteis.³² The role of Southeast Asian traditions and influences in early social formations was, therefore, natural in the Meitei case. On the other hand, although the Manipur Valley is surrounded by the hills, the trans-Barak basin provided a direct route across the western hills to the Barak Valley, which is geographically an extension of the Indo-Gangetic Bengal plains. There are traditions and chronicles suggesting that the Bishnupriyas, Pangans and the Brahmins had immigrated into Manipur through this route in the later periods. It is also a historically accepted position that the plough cultivation moved eastwards from the Indo-Ganga Valley (Northern India) with the migration of the agricultural communities.³³ Therefore, it may not be wrong to assume that the plough reached the Manipur Valley from that direction. The exogenous influence, through immigration and trade, might have worked in the development of art and crafts and professional specialization of the artisans within the endogenous groups. Nevertheless, the conflicts among the groups, and also between the various Meitei clans, continued for a long time till the Ningthouja clan established its supremacy over all other clans and groups.

A number of factors facilitated the emergence of this Ningthouja supremacy, of which most important was the control over the northern fertile agricultural plains. In course of these conflicts and local wars, the Meiteis organized the war force and developed the apparatus of governance by stages. The Pakhangba legend contributed to the acceptance of a supernatural or divine origin of the Ningthouja chiefs. This phenomenon of mythical charter was indeed universally crucial for the emergence of kingship in early societies. While the Pakhangba legend is common for the entire Meitei group, each clan had a legend of its origin. These legends of origins of the various clans, and the practice of

ancestor worship in the Meitei society, decided the seniority of the clans or the precedence of certain clans over the others. This established the superiority of the Ningthouja chief on the ground of heredity also. In these processes the traditional Meitei priests played a very important role. The assimilation of the various groups, including the immigrants till about fifteenth century, in the Meitei society (or to say, the 'Meitei-isation') and the social differentiation and occupational gradation resulted in the emergence of a pan-Meitei lineage structure in which the king was solidly placed at the apex. This hierarchical social order was further strengthened with the universal acceptance of Vaisnavism as the religion of the state and the people. This might have completed the process of emergence of the Meitei state as one among so many in the pan-Indian Brahmanical model of state formation.

The historical evidence clearly suggest that land was the most important factor of production and surplus generation in the agricultural economy of the Meiteis. The rudiments of slavery in the form of *lalup* and *laipot* systems provided the labour needed for agriculture and various manufactures or commodity production. The formal assignment of social and economic functions to individual families by King Loiyamba was indeed a very important step forward towards commodity production and social sustenance. The sericulture and weaving became almost household in the Meitei society. Trade added to the economic prosperity and supplemented the agricultural income. The land holding and various other sources ensured higher income for the ruling, aristocracy and other privileged groups. The social differentiation gradually came to be recognized on the basis of property, income and status. The kings generated substantial income from the land under their direct control, which was cultivated without wages by the *lalup kabas*. They also earned considerable income through the tributes, taxes and cesses collected from the commoners. The kings commanded the loyalty of the masses by redistribution of a portion of the generated surplus through public welfare activities like construction of roads and bridges, temples, dams and canals, and by granting tax remissions and material relief to the victims during flood, draught and other natural calamities.

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