

Manipuris in Barak Valley: A chronological investigation on migration and settlement

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The southernmost districts of the province of Assam - Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj constitute the Barak Valley, and, it, being a part of the Surma Valley, is an extension of Gangetic plains¹ of Bengal. Prior to the British annexation of Cachar plains in 1832, Cachar and Hailakandi formed a part of Heramba Raja comprising North Cachar Hills, Hojai-Davaka area, and the hill ranges of Jiri frontier. In this paper, an attempt is made to study the process of historical sequence of the migration and settlement of the Manipuris in this valley.

In the dense forest tracts adjoining Manipur, and Barak Valley, there existed trade routes and innumerable foot tracks which served as inter-communication in the past. In the context of Indian trade with and colonisation in South-east Asia, R.C.Majumdar stated that in ancient times, Indians proceeded to Far East by land routes through Bengal, Manipur and Assam.² Periplus of Erythraean Sea mentioned that Kirrahadae and Sesatae lived in the hills of Assam including Cachar and Tripura and the people of Sylhet traded with them in Malabathrum.³ Sesatae⁴, supposed to be one of the tribal groups⁵ of Manipur sold malabathrum leaves to Indian traders. In 11th century, there was a route from Pattikara kingdom of East Bengal to central Burma through Cachar, Mizo hills and Manipur⁶. In medieval times, flourishing trade centres sprang up at Mohung-Dijua and Rangarung, Mohung-Dijua was place situated on the frontiers of Ahom and Kachari kingdoms and at this place, the Ahoms, Nagas, Kacharis and Manipuris exchanged their goods.⁷ Ratna Kandali Sharma Katakai, and Arjun Das Katakai, the messengers of Ahom king, Rudra Singh, visited Tipperah Raja's court on three occasions between 1709 A.D. and 1715 A.D. On their way to Tipperah court they had seen at Rangarung (Jirighat, which was then in Tipperah kingdom) many Manipuris selling gold, bell metal utensils and cloths to the Kacharis and Tipperahs.⁸ The existence of the trade routes and growth of

flourishing trade centres where the Manipuris were selling their commodities lead to the conclusion that the Manipuris had frequented the valley, and a few of them might have settled there at least temporarily for commercial purpose or for any other reason since the beginning of the 17th century.

Folk tradition of the Manipuris of Barak Valley also points to their early settlement in the Barak Valley during the Muhammedan rule. There is a custom prevailing till today that when a person dies, the ground for cremation of the body is purchased from the owner of the land. In practice, the land is purchased from the badshah (Emperor whose name is not mentioned) with a belief that the land had belonged to him when their ancestors came to settle here. But, regarding the precise relation of Manipur with her western neighbours, and the historical sequence in the state chronicle 'Cheitharol Kumbaba' is not very clear till the beginning of the 18th century. Though it contains very little information, it is no doubt that since long back, Manipur had her relations with Takhel (Tipperah) and also with the Mayangs (Bengali speaking inhabitants of Sylhet and now generally applied to all non-Manipuri speakers of India). Her territory on the western front had fluctuated various times with the fortunes of their princes and frequently for three or four days journey upto the plains of Cachar.⁹ King Kabomba (1523-1541) is said to have conquered a portion of Cachar¹⁰. Mungyamba entered into matrimonial alliance with the Mayangs.¹¹ Shanongba, brother of king Khagemba, being aggrieved at his brother's treatment fled to Sylhet and with the aid of his brother-in-law who is said to be the ruler of Cachar, invaded Manipur.¹² But, he was killed in action, and the Muslim soldiers who were taken prisoner gradually took Manipuri wives and gave rise to a new community of Manipuri Muslims or Pangan. Shanongba's invasion, according to Cheitharol Kumbaba took place in 1606 A.D. Barak Valley was then in the possession of different race of people. There was a petty Koch kingdom with its headquarters at Khaspur.¹³ The Kacharis who reasserted their independence from the Kaches occupied the territory which lay west of Silchar including Hailakandi¹⁴. In the south, a little distance from Barak river, there was the boundary of Tipperah kingdom from Rangarung (Jirighat) upto Longai (Karimganj) along the foot hills of Barak Valley. Part of Karimganj district was conquered by Hussain Shah of Bengal, and the rule of the Pathans was followed by the rule of the Imperial Mughals.¹⁵ By

1612, they captured Heramba fort at Asuratikri and Pratapgarh and posted a Mughal Thanadar at Badarpur.¹⁶ But, the territories on the eastern parts of Sylhet were not ruled directly by them but by the local chiefs.¹⁷ Perhaps Shanongba might have entered into matrimonial relation with one of the local Muslim chiefs of the eastern parts of Sylhet.

The Vaishanava moment which began to penetrate into Manipur since 15th Century became deep rooted during the reign of Garib Niwaz (91709-1748). Under the influence of Shantidas Adhikari, a Vaishnava preacher who came to Manipur from Sylhet side¹⁸, the king declared Vaishnavism as a state religion, and forced his subjects to accept it. Those who opposed were fined and driven away.¹⁹ The fact that some people had to leave Manipur and settle in Cachar is of great significance.²⁰ Garib Niwaz is also said to have snatched a portion of Barak Valley from the Tipperahs.²¹ Thus, if the folk tradition of the Manipuris is not mistaken, early Manipuri settlement in Barak Valley may be dated back from the beginning of 17th century, and, by the early part of 18th century, it became clear that some people went to settle in Cachar under the king's order. But, the place where they had settled is not known and as such their number would have been very small. Whatever it may be, it is no doubt that Manipur through religion and commerce maintained a relation with neighbouring Muslim areas of Sylhet during the time of Garib Niwaz²². On the other hand, belief in folk tradition also cannot be discarded easily.

Internecine wars among the descendents of Garib Niwaz brought the invading Burmese army into Manipur. Nearly most of the princes with the exception of a few, who ascended the throne of Manipur after Garib Niwaz took occasional refuge in the Barak Valley. From 1768 to 1826 A.D. Manipur was conquered by the Burmese times out of numbers. Large scale migration of the Manipuris into the Barak Valley took place during this period. Unable to resist the Burmese attack, Jai Singh fled to Cachar where from he went to Ahom court and with the aid of Ahom Raja he regained the throne of Manipur. His son, Madhu Chandra usurped the throne after murdering his brother Labanya Chandra. Very soon he was expelled by another brother Chaurjit. Madhu Chandra gave his daughter Induprava to Krishna Chandra, the Kachari king.²³ This marriage alliance brought

trouble to Kachari king from his relatives - the Manipuri princes. Madhu Chandras's attempt to regain the throne with the help of Kachari king ended in his death. Marjit, another brother, sought Krishna Chandra's help but when his request being turned down by the latter he went to Rangoon and very soon became the master of Manipur with the Burmese help²⁴; while Chaujit and Gambhir Singh with their followers took shelter in Cachar. Marjit then, attacked Cachar with 10,000 men to strike vengeance upon Govinda Chandra, the successor of Krishna Chandra for his alleged stealing of a pony while he was in Cachar for some years back.²⁵ Chaurjit and Gambhir Singh stood by the Kachari king at this critical moment, and repelled the invader. But, at the end of this trouble, Chaurjit possessed a large part of the Barak Valley, and he dissuaded his brother Gambhir Singh to desert the Kachari king. The two brothers, joining hands with Tularam, the hill chief committed atrocity in the Raja's territory and forced him to escape to Sylhet²⁶. In 1818, Marjit too, being expelled by the Burmese, fled to Cachar and he was warmly received by the two brothers. The three brothers, then occupied the whole of Cachar and repartitioned among themselves. Chaurjit ruled the tract east of Tilain hill from Sonaimukh, Gambhir Singh got the land which he ruled from Gumrah, and Marjit ruled Hailakandi from Japhirbond.²⁷ Differences arose among the brothers when Gambhir Singh demanded an increase of territory, Chaurjit then retired to Sylhet declared himself the Raja of Cachar.²⁸ Marjit also fled to Sylhet in 1824 when a big force of Burma began to invade Cachar.²⁹

The presence of the Burmese forces in Cachar led to the outbreak of the First Anglo-Burmese war. After the conclusion of the war, Gambhir Singh was restored on the throne of Manipur, and Govinda Chandra also returned to Cachar as a ruler under the British protection. But, Gambhir Singh who had strong desire for the acquisition of Cachar made steady penetration into Cachar particularly in the west of the river Barak inhabited by the Nagas.³⁰ In 1827, he occupied Chandrapur, a village to the east of Bashkandi which is said to be reserved for and possessed by the Manipuri Rajas³¹ since the time of Jai Singh. But, he could not give any documentary evidence in favour of its possession to the British authority. However, he was assigned the area due to the persuance of David Scott who had preveiled upon Govinda Chandra for a period of fifteen years, for

construction of a government magazine.³² The desire of Gambhir Singh was thereby whetted, But his appetite was never appeased. The indulgence of the British government led Gambhir Singh finally to lay an axe on the kingdom of Cachar, and the Kachari Raja was treacherously murdered in April, 1830. Considering that it would be mischievous to allow Gambhir Singh to profit by a crime, the British government annexed Cachar in 1832 and the portion of Cachar from the western bend of the river Barak to Jirighat was ceded to Manipur.³³

The immigration of the Manipuris did not stop even after the annexation of Cachar by the British. As a result of internal strife and dissention, several scions of royal family along with their followers came to Barak Valley on every occasion of charges in person on the throne of Manipur. Chandra Kirti, the son of Gambhir Singh fled to Cachar in 1844 and stayed at Silchar with his mother after an abortive attempt on the life of Nar Singh had failed.³⁴ Likewise, when he, along with his supporters sneaked into Manipur, and assumed power in 1850, Debendra Singh, son of Nar Singh then fled to Cachar.³⁵ This state of affairs continued till the British occupation of Manipur in 1891.

The internal strife and dissension, and more precisely, the Burmese imperialism were responsible for the migration of Manipuris into the Barak Valley. When Marjit fled to Cachar, nearly one third of the population of the Manipur valley went along with him to escape from the Burmese torture.³⁶ Finally when the Burmese left Manipur, the number of adult male population did not exceed 300037 out of five lakhs. Large number of people had been killed in action or had fled for safety to Cachar and Sylhet. During this period of Burmese aggression, colonies of Manipur refugees grew up in different parts of Cachar, Sylhet and Tripura. Some of them even went as far as Dacca for safety.³⁸

The occupation of Cachar by the Manipuri princes, and the presence of Burmese force caused large scale depopulation of the most prosperous villages of Cachar, Pemberton wrote,³⁹ the country of Cachar was the area on which several Muneepooree brothers, Choorjeet, Marjit and Gumbheer Singh contended for supremacy; and as might have been anticipated, the inevitable result of their disputes was the most serious injury to the country, from the cessation of agricultural pursuits, and the flight of a very considerable portion of the inhabitants to the adacent districts of Sylhet, Jynteeah and Tripurah. More-

over, the attacks of the Kukis became so frequent that these led to the desertion of many villages, and the Burmese invasion completed the havoc.⁴⁰

The Manipuri refugees who had fled from their country during the Burmese aggression had permanently settled in Cachar. The reason for their settlement in Barak Valley was mainly the economic factor. During the seven years devastation of the Burmese occupation, agriculture, and industries of Manipur were completely ruined⁴¹. The country presented a gloomy and desolate appearance. It seemed that if they returned they had to initiate from the scratch.⁴² Moreover, the fear of Burmese reinvasion demoralised them to return. Those who were averse to the system of government in their native country had also decided not to return, and had obtained grants of land in Cachar.⁴³ Flourishing villages had been established on the banks of Madhura Nulla by the Manipuri sepoy from Sylhet Light Infantry who had resigned that service, and invested the capital in the soil.⁴⁴ The new Manipuri settlers also consisted of the individuals and their descendents who fled to Sylhet during the disastrous period where they earned their livelihood as woodcutters, fishermen and agricultural pioneers to wealthy Zaminders from whom they suffered every injustice.⁴⁵ Unable to obtain land in the densely populated district of Sylhet, and also unwilling to settle in Cachar during the tyrannical rule of Govinda Chandra, they had come forward with alacrity when the British gave encouragement to the new settlers after the annexation of the valley.⁴⁶

Captain Fisher established a number of Manipuri villages in the eastern part of Cachar. Besides, he adopted a judicious plan to check the ravages of the hill tribes on the plains by locating as many Manipuris as possible on the frontier, who, when supplied with a few muskets, not only protected themselves but also those of less bold and hardy people in their rear.⁴⁷ The early Manipuri settlers obtained grants of jungle land to be held revenue free for a thousand days, and after that period it was subjected to assessment. They used to clear the jungle, and cultivate the land until the first demand for revenue was made. Then they abandoned the land, and took another piece of jungle. The land which they had made valuable was later occupied by the Bengalis.⁴⁸ Very soon they realised that the practice was unprofitable, and they began to settle permanently on their grants.

Among the settlers, the Manipuris ranked the most valuable whose enterprising industry had produced so marked an improvement in the country of their adoption. In 1833, Captain Fisher represented the Manipuri settlers as "pre-eminent for their industry and enterprise, as cultivators; and for orderly quite demeanour, on all ordinary occasions."⁴⁹ But, on the other hand, the Manipuri princes, given shelter and hospitality became a constant source of problems for the British authority. Some of them were given pension for maintenance of their livelihood.⁵⁰ But, while residing in the Barak Valley they did not remain idle, and for quite a long period they longed for regaining the throne of Manipur. The situation became grave when some of them joined the mutineers of 1857, and some even invaded Manipur.⁵¹ The British tackled the problems of the princes by keeping strict vigilance on their movement and preventing their entry with arms into Manipur. When detected, they were sent to prison, and transported to safe distance from the frontier.⁵² Such a policy of the British seemed to have been adopted from the exigency arisen out of security of eastern boundary by creating Manipur a buffer state between the British India and Burma. But, it heavily taxed the Cachar treasury.

Notes and References

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