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# TRACING THE ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION IN ANCIENT MANIPUR: RE-EXAMINING THE PAST

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***ABSTRACT***

***The economic history of ancient Manipur reveals a gradual transformation from subsistence-oriented activities to a more differentiated agrarian, craft-based and commercial economy. The period between the 6th and 8th centuries AD was particularly significant in this process, as wet-rice cultivation expanded in the valley, shifting cultivation continued in the hills, agricultural surplus increased, and systems of irrigation, drainage, taxation and labour organisation developed alongside the growing political authority of the state. At the same time, advances in pottery, metallurgy and other craft technologies contributed to occupational specialisation, while internal and external trade connected Manipur with neighbouring regions of India and Southeast Asia. This article re-examines these developments by bringing agriculture, technology, trade, markets, taxation and labour into a connected historical framework. It argues that economic transformation in ancient Manipur was not a linear transition from a primitive to an advanced economy. Rather, it was a process of adaptation in which different ecological zones, technologies, systems of exchange and forms of labour coexisted. The emergence of an agrarian surplus provided an important material foundation for the expansion of political authority, while commercial interaction facilitated the movement of commodities, technologies and ideas across regional frontiers.***

***KEYWORDS: Ancient Manipur; agriculture; cultivation; trade; markets; metallurgy; taxation; labour***

## INTRODUCTION

The economic history of ancient Manipur has often remained secondary to studies of its political institutions, dynastic history and cultural traditions. Yet economic processes were fundamental to the transformation of Manipuri society and the emergence of a more organised political structure. Between the 6th and 8th centuries AD, Manipur experienced significant changes in its mode of production, agricultural practices, technological knowledge, trade relations and systems of revenue extraction. The period witnessed the growing importance of

wet-rice cultivation in the valley alongside the continuation of shifting cultivation in the hills. Agricultural production was increasingly supported by irrigation and drainage, while the development of surplus strengthened royal authority, military organisation and religious patronage.[i]

The economic transformation of ancient Manipur should therefore not be understood merely as an increase in agricultural production. It involved changes in the relationship between people and land, the development of specialised technologies, the organisation of labour, the emergence of markets, the circulation of commodities and the increasing involvement of political authority in economic affairs. The development of wet-rice cultivation, for example, required the management of water, land and labour, thereby creating conditions for greater institutional coordination.

The archaeological and literary evidence further indicates that the economy had deeper roots than the 6th century. Archaeological investigations at Khangkhui, Tharon and Napachik have revealed Neolithic and bone tools associated with early subsistence practices, while the excavation at Napachik provides evidence of settled life and early agriculture in the Manipur valley.[ii] The economic history of ancient Manipur must consequently be viewed as a long process of adaptation in which earlier subsistence practices gradually interacted with agriculture, craft production and exchange.

This article seeks to trace that transformation by examining six closely related dimensions: agriculture and agrarian expansion; irrigation and agricultural technology; craft production and metallurgy; trade and markets; currency and exchange; and taxation and labour. It argues that the economic transformation of ancient Manipur resulted from the interaction of ecological adaptation, agricultural intensification, technological development and expanding systems of exchange, which together created the material foundations of an increasingly organised state and society.

## FROM SUBSISTENCE TO AN AGRARIAN ECONOMY

The earliest stages of economic life in Manipur were closely connected with the exploitation of natural resources. Archaeological evidence from caves and habitation sites indicates the use of stone and bone tools and points towards a hunter-gatherer economy. The archaeological excavation at Napachik in Wangoo is particularly significant because it provides evidence of Neolithic culture, settled life and early agricultural activity in the valley.[iii]

The emergence of agriculture represented an important change in the relationship between human communities and their environment. Instead of depending primarily upon naturally available resources, communities increasingly modified their surroundings to produce food. This transition was not uniform across the region, however. Ecological differences between the valley and the surrounding hills produced different agricultural practices.

Wet-rice cultivation became increasingly important in the central valley, whereas shifting cultivation continued in the hills. The NaothingkhongPhambalKaba, for example, refers to shifting cultivation practised by the SelloiLangmai on the slopes of Nongmaiching, while wet-rice cultivation was associated with communities inhabiting the plains.[iv] The coexistence of these two systems demonstrates that ancient Manipur possessed an economically diverse landscape rather than a single uniform mode of production.

The expansion of wet-rice cultivation was especially consequential. Rice cultivation in the valley required greater coordination of irrigation, drainage and labour. According to K. Ruhinikumar and OinamRanjit, the development of wet-rice cultivation contributed to the emergence of an agrarian surplus, which in turn strengthened royal authority, military organisation and religious patronage.[v] The economic and political histories of ancient Manipur were therefore closely interconnected.

The emergence of surplus should not, however, be interpreted simply as a technological achievement. It also reflected changes in social organisation. Agricultural production on a larger and more regular scale required communities to coordinate labour and manage water resources. Economic production consequently became increasingly connected with collective institutions and political authority.

## AGRICULTURE, LAND AND WATER MANAGEMENT

The development of agriculture in the Manipur valley was closely associated with the management of water. The geographical characteristics of the central valley made irrigation and drainage particularly important. Seasonal flooding during the monsoon and waterlogging in low-lying areas could interfere with cultivation, while the same water resources could be used productively through appropriate management.

The royal traditions of Manipur record river-dredging and drainage projects designed both to reduce flooding during the monsoon and to reclaim water from marshy areas during the dry season.[vi] Such activities suggest that the economic transformation of the valley involved deliberate modification of the physical environment.

The significance of these projects extends beyond agricultural technology. Water management required labour and coordination, and this created opportunities for political institutions to participate directly in the organisation of production. The state could therefore exercise influence not merely by collecting revenue after production but by contributing to the conditions under which production itself took place.

The relationship between agriculture and political authority consequently appears to have been reciprocal. Agricultural expansion increased the availability of surplus, while political institutions were increasingly able to organise labour and manage resources required for agricultural production.

This relationship is also reflected in the evidence of taxation. The text *Mashil* is said to record rates of revenue imposed on agricultural fields, providing an indication of the importance of settled cultivation in the valley.[vii] The existence of agricultural dues suggests that production had become sufficiently regular for the state to claim a predictable share of the agricultural surplus.

## AGRICULTURAL TECHNOLOGY AND THE EXPANSION OF PRODUCTION

Technological change accompanied the development of agriculture. The ancient literary traditions refer to the use of bronze and iron for the manufacture of tools such as daos, axes and hoes. Daos and axes were employed for clearing forested areas, while iron hoes were used in cultivation. Before the widespread use of iron implements, Neolithic celts were used for agricultural activities.

The significance of these implements lay not simply in their material composition but in the possibilities they created. Forest clearance could expand the area available for cultivation, while stronger implements could facilitate the preparation and management of agricultural land.

The literary traditions also associate the development of agriculture with the domestication of cattle. At the same time, the absence of explicit references to plough animals in some pre-Pakhangba literary traditions cautions against assuming that fully developed plough agriculture existed from the earliest period.[9] It is possible that due to the development of metallurgy and contacts with neighbouring regions, iron ploughs drawn by bullocks may have been used during or before the eighth century, particularly in the context ofNaothingkhong's reign.[viii]

This distinction is important for reconstructing economic change. Technological transformation did not necessarily occur at a single moment. Agricultural tools developed incrementally, and different techniques could coexist. Mortars, pestles, winnows and different forms of baskets are also mentioned in *PoireitonKhuntok*, demonstrating the technological requirements of processing and storing agricultural produce.[ix]

## CRAFT PRODUCTION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPECIALISATION

Economic transformation also involved the development of specialised crafts. Pottery provides important evidence for this process. Archaeological excavations at Napachik have yielded tripod pottery, corded ware and related artefacts, while other sites including Sekta, Irengbam, Meitram and Phunan have produced additional evidence for the antiquity of pottery production in Manipur.[x]

The evidence further associates pottery with particular communities. The Chakpas are identified as among the earliest known potters, while pottery production was associated with places such as Andro, Phayeng and Chairel. Hill communities such as the Tangkhul and Paomei also possessed distinctive pottery traditions.[xi]

Pottery was essential for cooking, preservation and storage. Its importance to everyday economic life therefore extended beyond craft production itself. The existence of specialised pottery communities indicates the emergence of occupational knowledge and a degree of economic interdependence between producers and consumers.

The development of specialised crafts suggests that the economy was gradually moving beyond direct subsistence. Individuals and communities could devote greater attention to particular productive activities because agricultural and other forms of production created a basis for exchange.

## METALLURGY AND ECONOMIC CHANGE

Metallurgy represented another important dimension of technological and economic transformation. Literary records associated with the 6$^{th}$ to 8$^{th}$ centuries mention iron, copper, bronze, silver and tin. King KhuyoiTompok is associated in the source tradition with the production of iron at Kakching, gold at KongbaMeirombi and copper at Shibong.[xii]The development of iron technology had particularly important economic consequences. Iron was used to manufacture agricultural implements, military equipment and building materials. The development of blacksmithing therefore connected agriculture, warfare and construction.

There are two possibilities concerning bronze technology in Manipur - bronze may have been locally developed as an alloy of copper and tin, or bronze technology may have entered the region through trade with Upper Burma and Thailand.[xiii] Whichever interpretation is preferred, the evidence demonstrates that technological development cannot be separated from wider systems of exchange.

The production and circulation of metal objects also indicate the existence of specialised knowledge. Metallurgical communities occupied an economically important position because their products were required by farmers, warriors and other sections of society.The association of Kakching with iron production is particularly noteworthy. The presence of ironworking there illustrates how specialised economic centres could develop within particular geographical locations. Such centres were potentially connected to wider networks through which raw materials, finished products and technological knowledge circulated.

## TRADE WITH NEIGHBOURING KINGDOMS

Ancient Manipur maintained trade relations with neighbouring regions including China, Burma and the Shan/Tai states. These connections facilitated the movement of commodities as well as technological knowledge.[xiv]Bell-metal gongs and other metal implements were possibly obtained from Upper Burma and Thailand, while the production of iron at Kakching suggests the existence of local metallurgical traditions alongside imported technologies. The distinction between imported and locally developed technologies is therefore important in understanding economic transformation.

Trade was consequently not simply an exchange of commodities. It was also a means through which technological practices and new forms of material culture entered Manipur.Political contacts also facilitated commercial and cultural exchange. Economic interaction therefore operated within a wider framework of diplomatic relationships.

## THE EMERGENCE OF INTERNAL MARKETS

The expansion of agriculture and craft production also contributed to the development of internal trade. Agricultural surplus could be used to meet state demands, while remaining produce could be sold in markets. The surrounding hills supplied wood and other resources for construction and craft production, including boat building.[xv]

A range of cottage industries - particularly weaving, pottery, ironwork and bamboo work - served the needs of local communities. The *CheitharolKumbaba*has cited the establishment of nine markets at Moirang, which was an important commercial location.[xvi]The evidence for markets is important because it demonstrates that ancient Manipuri economic life involved more than household production. Surplus could circulate beyond the immediate producing household or community.

Agricultural communities often exchanged food products with craft producers, while hill communities supplied forest products and other resources to valley settlements. The emergence of markets should therefore be understood as part of a wider process of economic integration within Manipur.

## BARTER, COINAGE AND THE NATURE OF EXCHANGE

Trade in the early period was primarily conducted through barter, with goods and commodities serving as media of exchange. The claims that King Pakhangba introduced a formal coinage system and issued coins of different denominations are regarded as lacking sufficient corroborating evidence.[xvii]The so-called "coin of Pakhangba" referred to by T. C. Hodson is consequently interpreted as potentially symbolic rather than as evidence of an established royal coinage.[xviii] At the same time, W. Yumjao Singh discovered coins bearing Sanskrit inscriptions and dating to the Samvat era. P. Gunindra interpreted these coins as remnants of external trade rather than coins issued for internal circulation by the kings of Manipur.[xix]

This evidence is important because the absence of an established indigenous coinage system should not be equated with an absence of commercial activity. Barter could support substantial exchange networks, particularly where commodities themselves served as units of value.

## AGRICULTURAL SURPLUS AND THE REVENUE SYSTEM

The emergence of agricultural surplus had important consequences for the relationship between the economy and the state. A state required resources to maintain political institutions, military forces and administrative structures. In ancient Manipur, these resources were obtained through a combination of labour, agricultural produce, forest resources and tribute.

The *LoiyumbaShinyen* is identified as an important source for understanding revenue collection in ancient Manipur. During the early development of the Meitei state, revenue was not initially demanded primarily in the form of agricultural taxation. Instead, obligations were fulfilled through the Lallup system, involving compulsory service to the crown.[xx]

With the expansion of settled agriculture, the state increasingly imposed agricultural dues, including a specified quantity of paddy. The development of agricultural taxation demonstrates a significant transformation in the relationship between production and political authority. The state was no longer simply dependent upon the direct service of its subjects; it could increasingly extract a predictable share of agricultural production.

The collection of revenue involved officials responsible for forest resources, tribute and other forms of payment. *Lambus* functioned as collectors and intermediaries between the king and subjects. Revenue could therefore be collected in monetary form, in kind and through labour obligations.[xxi]The economic structure of ancient Manipur was consequently characterised by multiple forms of extraction rather than by a single taxation system.

## LAND, LABOUR AND THE LALLUP SYSTEM

The relationship between land and labour was central to the economic organisation of the early Manipuri state. The Lallup system, initially associated with military organisation, became an important means through which labour obligations were rendered to the crown. T. C. Hodson remarked that cultivated fields were held individually, whereas non-arable land retained communal and collective characteristics.[xxii]

This distinction is important for understanding the agrarian economy. Land relations were not necessarily uniform throughout the kingdom. The use and ownership of cultivated land could differ from the management of forests, grazing areas and other non-arable resources.The economic system consequently combined individual cultivation with communal resource use and state claims over land and labour.

The Lallup system also demonstrates that labour itself functioned as a form of economic resource. The state could obtain productive and military services without relying entirely upon monetary payment. Such arrangements were particularly important in an economy where monetisation was limited.

## CONCLUSION

The economic history of ancient Manipur reveals a gradual and multidimensional process of transformation. From the archaeological evidence of early subsistence and Neolithic agriculture to the development of wet-rice cultivation, craft specialisation, metallurgy, internal markets and long-distance trade, the economy evolved through continuous interaction between people, environment, technology and political institutions.The expansion of wet-rice cultivation in the valley was particularly significant. It generated surplus and required organised irrigation, drainage and labour. This created a stronger economic foundation for the development of political authority. Shifting cultivation continued in the hills, however, demonstrating that economic transformation did not produce a uniform agricultural system.

Technological development further enhanced productive capacity. Pottery, ironworking, bronze technology and agricultural implements contributed to occupational specialisation and economic interdependence. Metallurgical knowledge, particularly the ironworking associated with Kakching, demonstrates the importance of specialised technological communities.

Moreover, trade connected Manipur to wider networks extending towards India, Upper Myanmar, China and the Shan/Tai regions. These networks facilitated the circulation not only of commodities but also of technologies and cultural practices. Internal markets, including those associated with Moirang, provided mechanisms for the circulation of agricultural and craft surpluses within the region.

At the same time, the limited evidence for indigenous coinage demonstrates that commercial development did not necessarily depend upon monetisation. Barter remained an important form of exchange, while coins found in Manipur may in some cases have represented external commercial connections rather than a developed royal currency.

Finally, the transformation of the economy strengthened the relationship between production and political authority. Agricultural surplus enabled the state to claim revenue, while the *Lallup* system allowed it to mobilise labour. Land, taxation and labour thus became important components of state formation.

The economic transformation of ancient Manipur was therefore neither sudden nor linear. It was a layered historical process in which subsistence practices, agriculture, specialised crafts, regional trade, barter, taxation and labour obligations coexisted and interacted. Re-examining the evidence in this manner allows ancient Manipur to be understood not as an isolated frontier economy but as a region possessing its own systems of production and exchange while simultaneously participating in wider networks linking the Indian subcontinent with Southeast Asia.

## ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

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