



## EXAMINING THE ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES AND THE ADMINISTRATIVE INVOLVEMENT OF THE MEITEI PANGAL IN MANIPUR

**\*DR. MD. NAZIR AHAMAD**

*\*Assistant Professor, Department of History Pravabati College, Mayang Imphal, Imphal West, Pin 795132*

### INTRODUCTION

The transition from foraging to farming is one of the turning points in the history of mankind. The seasonally mobile life of hunter gatherers, who collected food, was replaced by settled life of farmers, who cultivated crops and raised domesticated live stock. When the man began to lead permanent settled life they produced food and gave up the habit of moving from one place to another place in search of food. The fact remains that the shift from nomadic to sedentary life led to the growth of population and village settlement, the development of crafts such as pottery and metallurgy and eventually to centralize city states and urbanization.

The knowledge about the beginning of the production of food is derived from reports of excavation. At the early stage of food production, people did not know reading and writing. This period is known as pre-history, the history of mankind before the existence of written records. Archaeologists refer to the associated features about the beginning of food production. Earthen pots backed in fire were the earliest utensils for the cooking food. Polished stone tools came to be used during that period for different purposes e.g. grinding wheat and barley etc. The beginning of food production coincided with the domestication of animals too. But cultivation began earlier in the Indian sub-continent. Most of the early agricultural communities used small quantities of copper tools. These people are known as Catholic communities because they used stone tools along with a few copper tools. The important point to be noted here is that in the food gathering stage animals were killed and consumed immediately. However, at the stage of food producing and when the people domesticated animals, now animals were reared to act as walking larders that could be used in times of scarcity. When food production and animal domestication combined as a mode of life it amounted to a revolution. This new agricultural economy expanded at the expense of the old foraging way of life. Mehrgarh near the Bolan Pass in the Baluchistan, a province of Pakistan is the earliest agricultural settlement in the Indian sub-continent. In another word, the only Neolithic settlement in the Indian subcontinent, attributed to 7000 B.C. which furnishes the first clear evidence of agricultures and domestication of animals is Mehrgarh.

Marxist categories five socio-economic formations - (1) In Marxist communal in which all the means of productions and all the products were considered as common assets, (2) The slave owing to which was the result of the breaking up of the clans into sub clans and families into sub-families and growth of the private ownership, competitions and conflicts arose for ownership in which slave labourers were engaged in the mode of productions, (3) feudal system was associated with full-fledged agriculture that the state functionaries who were assigned large stretches of land exercised judicial, administrative and military powers. They owned the products produced by the labour of serfs. Thus, they became the owners of all means of productions and products. (4) In the capitalism, the capitalist monopolized all the productive forces and products consuming the toils of works. (5) In communism, all the powers were vested in the workers in which all were brought in the public sector. M.J. Herskovits also gives the idea that there is no society without methods of production, distribution, consumption and some form of exchange.<sup>1</sup>

It is said that “the reliable information on important aspects of the economy of early Manipur is not adequately available, although the archeological and literary sources are helpful in tentatively reconstructing the basic features of economy. The archaeological finds in the prehistoric caves at *Khangkhui*, *Tharon* and *Napachick* indicate the use of neolithic and bone tools. These findings point to the existence of a hunting and food gathering economy in the region at the point of time. The excavation at *Napachik* site further reveals the prevalence of agricultural practices and settled life in the Manipur valley.”<sup>2</sup> According to *Thirel Layat* the earliest people who lived in the caves and their livelihood depended upon the fauna and flora, with the lack of knowledge of using fire and rice, used “*Chaktum*” (probably fruits and others) as their food and barks of the trees as their clothes.<sup>3</sup> K. Ruhini Kumar Sharma and O. Ranjit Singh write, “The prevalence of settled cultivation and its accompanying tools and technology are considered as important keys for the archaeologists and historians to understand the economy of the local communities. The Manipuri Chronicles and other literary texts recorded the discovery of indigenous variety of paddy, invention of agriculture, practice of shifting cultivation, development of bronze and iron technology and the making of daos, axes and hoes for agricultural and allied purposes.”<sup>4</sup>

**Agriculture became the primary effort as the economy activity** was transformed from the food gathering to the food producing stage. In ancient Manipur, primary occupation of the people was agriculture. The economy practices of the pre-colonial Manipur may be called as traditional economy. Traditional economy means the model or structure of economy of the past as practiced by a community which has been passed down through successive generations which has been preserved or was preserved and continued even in the present time also.<sup>5</sup> It is remarked that “In the early period of its civilizational ontology the mode of cultivation was primitive and production was for local consumption only. Tradition and myths as recorded in a number of literary texts indicate that the ancient Manipuris practiced shifting cultivation”<sup>6</sup>*Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba*<sup>7</sup> mentions about the shifting cultivation. The text itself writes down that the *Shelloi Langmai* Tribe of *Nongmaiching* hill was shifting cultivators. *Loiyumba Shilyel*<sup>8</sup>, the edict of King Loiyumba (1074-1122 A.D.) records the adoption of wet write cultivation by the Meiteis. Many ancient Meitei texts including *Cheitharol Kumbaba* refer to several irrigation works and dredging the rivers and making canals to drain out the stranded water from low lying marshy areas of the central Imphal valley.<sup>9</sup> In *Poireiton Khulthokpa* a reference is made to paddy cultivation in the valley of Manipur.<sup>10</sup>

Dr. Oinam Ranjit Singh holds the view that “when the agricultural technology was improved with the introduction of transplanting system which is known as *Lingthokpa* of paddy cultivation by the Muslim

immigrants from Bengal enabling to increase production in Manipur. Prior to the coming of Muslim in Manipur only two methods were adopted i.e., (1) *Punghul*, under this method, the land was to be tilled first and the seeds were sown over it again and finally the seeds were covered with soil by one more tilling. It was done in the month of May and June, and this method was applied in dry land and (2) *Pamphel*, under this method land was first tilled to make it muddy and the field had to be properly leveled. Seeds were soaked with water and packed into an air-tight bag till the seeds germinated. Then the germinated seeds were sown properly. *Pamphel* was adopted in wet land during June and July. In the transplantation method, the farmer at first had to grow the paddy in nursery and then transplanted to the field. This method of cultivation was more productive than *Punghul* and *Pamphel*.

Agricultural technology was improved with the introduction of the transplanting system of paddy and plough drawn by the bullock and buffalo by the Muslims peasants in Manipur. This may be regarded as one of the greatest contributions of the Meitei Pangal towards the economic development and progress of the kingdom of Manipur.<sup>11</sup> Dr N. Pramodini Devi pointed that king Khagemba's period marked a turning point in Manipuri History. Prior to his reign there was no trace of transplantation method of cultivation. Khagemba defeated his younger brother Sanongba who revolted against him with large number of Cachar troops. The war captives were made settlement in different parts of the state by giving Manipuri girls as their wives.<sup>12</sup> *Nongshamei Puya* makes a reference that the cultivators among the Muslim war captives practiced the transplanting method which at first astonished the Manipuris but later became popular and the method was widely practiced in Manipur.<sup>13</sup>

K. Ruhini Kumar Sharma and O. Ranjit Singh assert that "much information about the land tenure system or the land holding pattern, rates of revenue or rent for different categories of land, extent of cultivation the valley, etc, which are indeed very important for analytical study of the economy in a historical time frame. However, colonial writers and officials have left behind some useful information of the subject<sup>14</sup>." E.W. Dun reports that out of 221, 070 persons engaged in different occupations 103, 937 were engaged agriculture.<sup>15</sup> According to R. Brown "the whole land system of the valley starts with the assumption that all the land belongs to the Raja and is his, to give away or retain it as he pleases".<sup>16</sup> The Meitei Pangal being exclusive resident of the valley enjoy more or less the same facilities from the state of Manipur like the Meiteis. They were also bound to abide by the rules and regulations of the state.<sup>17</sup> The lands and valley came to be divided into (1) *Inkhol* (homestead) and (2) *Lou* (agricultural land). The agricultural lands were classified as *Ningthou Lou*, *Lugul Lou*, *Shiphailou*, *Mana Lou*, *Pangal Lou*, *Lai Lou*, *Touna Lou*, *Sarkari Lou*, *Maharani Lou*, etc.<sup>18</sup> Varieties of rice were grown in Manipur which included early and late crops. *Tumi*, *Kabo Phou*, *Phourel Anganba* etc. were included in category of early crops. *Phourel*, *Luining*, *Yenthik* etc. were varieties of late crops.<sup>19</sup> R. Brown asserts that varieties of crops had been sown by the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>20</sup> The migrant Muslims popularly known as Meitei Pangals introduced improve technology including of paddy transplantation etc. They also had expertise in the work of gardening. Acknowledging their expertise in gardening *Hauwai Engkhol Mayum Sagei* was given to them by the King of Manipur.<sup>21</sup> They opened a garden called *Ningthem Inkhol* at *Khumidok Heinou Khongmenbi* where they planted varieties of fruits and vegetables.<sup>22</sup>

**Phourungba, the paddy collector was appointed to collect the land revenue which was fixed by the king of Manipur** in consultation with *Lourungpuren*, the chief settlement officer from time to time according to the category of land.<sup>23</sup> Thus land revenue varied from time to time and land revenue was fixed on the basis of the category of land. It seems that if the land was more fertile, higher tax had to be paid. If the land was less fertile, less tax was to be imposed. *Touna Lou* and *Sharkari Lou* were cultivated by the common people of Manipur by

paying tax to the king for using land. The Meitei Pangal peasants who cultivated the crown land or land belonged to the state or the king had to pay land tax to the state/king like the Meitei cultivator. The king of Manipur entrusted the work of cultivation of the royal land to the Meitei Pangal. They also produced varieties of food crops and commercial like rice, chillies, pumpkins, ginger, potatoes, cucumber, onion, cabbage, cauliflower, beans, pulses, peas, etc.

The Muslims who settled down in Manipur, being a minority they depended for their means for earning livelihood in soil of Manipur by adopting traditional economy activities of Manipur. The agricultural products in the early period of Manipur were mainly rice with some other food grains. It indicates that agriculture became primary occupation of the people of Manipur since ancient time as the rice being the staple foods of the Manipuris. The profession of fishery was also equally important. In this regard N. Ibobi remarks that fish constituted the most important food item for the native people of Manipur, second to rice.<sup>24</sup> The Meitei Pangal had adopted traditional method of earning livelihood in an agrarian economy. The important factor which fostered their integration with the Meiteis in the economy life was because of the marriage of the Meitei ladies.<sup>25</sup> Because of their skill in agro-economy and the place of their settlement, the Meitei Pangal had better advantages for quick economy development and growth. They mainly settled down near the river banks of Iril river, Nambul river, Thoubal river, Imphal river etc and lake sides namely *Ikop Pat*, *Loktak lake*, *Loushi Pat*, *Kharung Pat*, *Heiningsoi Pat*, *Iroi Pat*, *Ngangou Pat*, *Porom Pat*, *Waithou Pat*, *Qazi Pat* etc. The land located near the river banks and peripheries of the lakes are more fertile and more productive which lead to economy growth and development of the people who lived at those places. By employing their skill in the agricultural work on the fertile land where they settled, they produced more food grain like paddy, vegetable, etc. They also did fishing work as they were expert in fishing. Md. Latif Shah, supporting this view asserts that fishing profession also became a very important source of income for the Muslim in Manipur.<sup>26</sup> History reveals that fishing industry plays a very important role in social and economic life of the ancient kingdom of Manipur. Since ancient time common people as well as royal class were carried on fishing in the lakes, rivers etc., which are evidence from ancient Manipuri texts namely *Panthoibi Khongul*, *Khongchomnupi Nongarol*, *Moirang Kangleirol* etc. *Khongchomnupi Nongarol* mentions that six youths known as *Haoku Pakhang* used to catch fish in the lake called *Haoku Soi* and sell to fishwives.<sup>27</sup> McCulloch furnishes about the method of fishing as “The *Loktak*, the great resort of these aquatic birds, is covered with floating islands. Under these, amongst the roots of the vegetation of which they are formed, fish, in the cold weather collect in great numbers, and are caught in the following manner: An island, having been cut into a manageable size, is pushed to a part of the lake where the water is not very deep, and where the bottom has been paved with stones. There it is fixed by means of long bamboo stakes; and when the fish have collected in sufficient quantity a long strip sufficient to surround it is cut from some other of these floating masses of vegetation. With this the asylum of the fish is surrounded, and a row of stones being placed on the edge nearest the island, that edge sinks, down to the prepared bottom, whilst the rest remains upright in the water and thus forms a wall all round. The fish are now driven out of their sanctuary; if small they are taken in nets, if large they are speared by torchlight”.<sup>28</sup> T.C. Hudson remarks that “As a large portion of the valley is still under water, and as fish forms an article of food of the Meithe community, the gentle art gives employment to many people. At present the state enjoys a large revenue from the fisheries, but there is no monopoly in consequence of the wise policy of reserving a number of jheels and *pats* (lakes), which are open to the public at certain times of the year. The *Loktak*, the great lake of the south end of the valley, is free, and the price of the product of the private fisheries is regulated by the competition of the fishers of the *Loktak*. There are varying methods in use in

accordance with the needs and capabilities of the different localities weirs, fishing baskets, traps, spears, nets, are all used, and all show a high degree of suitability. The women fish with a square net suspended from a central pole by four strings at each corner, and dip the net well under the turbid waters of the edges of lakes or ditches, and slowly raise it till the catch rises above the surface of the water, when they smartly bring it out.<sup>29</sup> Oinam Ranjit Singh and E. Nixon, also stated that “fish constituted one of the most important food items of the people of Manipur. Fishery was an immensely important profession since the early times”.<sup>30</sup>

**Ngarunghanbawas in charge of fishery department.** The Meitei Pangals, as they lived near the lakes and river banks they did fishing. The lakes and rivers are the centres of fishing industry where varieties of fishes are available in those places. Next to the rice fish become a very important food items from which fishing profession also considered as a very important source of livelihood not only the Meiteis but also the Meitei Pangals. A lake called *Kazi Pat* was given to *Tolen Qazi Ipham* for his life time by the then king Gambhir Singh as a reward for his valuable service in the Anglo Burmese War (1824-1826) which clearly indicated that fish or fishing centre is very important in Manipur right from the ancient time. In those ancient days even today fish is given as a mark of respect, honour, gift etc. and used for ritual purpose in the Manipuri society. So Meitei Pangal by engaging the vocation of fishing they could earn their livelihood and this profession became an indispensable means of earning the livelihood as well as their income right from their first settlement in Manipur till today.

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