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Research Article

The forms of Agricultural practices: pre-colonial Manipur, India

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural practices are not just a way to make a living in Manipur; they also represent a vital element of the region's cultural history. Agricultural practices can be traced back thousands of years to the inception of early human habitation. In India, agricultural practices can be traced back its origins to the Indus Valley Civilization and even earlier in certain regions of southern India. Since the dawn of human Civilization, the domains of agriculture and human settlements have been deeply interconnected. However, most historians and scholars have focused more on political history than on social and economic developments. Nevertheless, a robust economy is essential for the establishment of a strong and prosperous nation, thereby necessitating a thorough analysis of Manipur's economic history. Historically, the economy of India relied heavily on agriculture, with revenues generated from agricultural practices supporting infrastructure, defense, and territorial augmentation. Similarly, the inhabitants of Manipur exhibited a significant dependence on agricultural practices, highlighting the need for in-depth research into its agrarian systems to understand the region's medieval society better. The paper attempts to present a particular configuration of the agricultural practices and its economy that prevailed in Manipur from the early times to the pre-colonial period.

Keywords: Agrarian, assignment, cultivation, economy, feudalism, grant, revenue.

1. Introduction

Manipur is located in the northeastern part of India, possesses a 350 km international boundary with Myanmar to the east and southeast flanks. The state, encompassing an area of 22,356 sq. km, is topographically divided into hill and valley regions. Since ancient times, Manipur has served as a residence to diverse ethnic groups, each distinguished by its distinct languages, cultural practices, traditions, and dietary customs. The population includes communities such as the Meitei, Meitei-Brahmins, Meitei-Pangal (Manipuri Muslims), Kuki, Naga, and Mayang (non-native Indians). Among these communities, the Meitei have historically been the most dominant, forming the majority and holding political power from the 1st century C.E. until the mid-20th century. Although a few tribal groups also reside in the valley, it is predominantly inhabited by the Meitei, Meitei-Pangal, and various other communities, including migrants from mainland India. Conversely, the hilly regions are inhabited by various tribal groups that live in the hill areas.

Over the centuries, Manipur has experienced an influx of population from different ethnic origins, including the Southern Mongoloids, Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryans, as well as a substantial presence of Tai (Shan) population. Later arrivals included Brahmins and Meitei-Pangal (Muslims), who settled in the 15th and 17th centuries, respectively. More than thirty recognized tribes have lived in Manipur's hills since early history. Many among these communities maintained their habitations throughout the medieval period, and some continue to reside in their traditional regions to the present day. The history of Manipur Meities is chronicled in *Puyas* or *Puwaris* (stories about our forefathers), namely, the *Ningthou Kangbalon, Cheitharol Kumbaba, Ningthourol Lambuba, Poreiton Khunthokpa, Panthoibi Khongkul*, etc. in the archaic Meitei script. Evidence of Neolithic culture at Napachik suggests an early agricultural economy, indicating settled life in the Manipur valley.

2. Objective and methodology

The objectives of the paper are to assess the origin and the development of agriculture and its various forms of practices. The primary objective of this study was to examine the use of traditional knowledge by paddy farming communities. The paper is also to find out new facts, interpret literary sources in light of the information gathered from field investigation, and compare and bring them together. Personal interviews with the senior persons and literary sources provide precious details. Historical events and other valuable information are also obtained from the literature. It also gives precious information about the ways of agriculture and local rituals and practices regarding it and progress of their lives with it. The paper is reconstructed after comparisons with the field work report and other sources.

3. Discussion

Agriculture is believed to have originated in regions such as Asia and Egypt before dissemination across other parts of the world, including Europe, Africa, and the Americas. The inception of agricultural practices is thought to have begun between 9000 and 7000 B.C.E. in the Middle East.[1] During the early Neolithic period in India, people relied predominantly on wild foods like fruits, vegetables, nuts, and animals, with no knowledge of agricultural practices. Gradually, they evolved from modes of subsistence based on hunting and pastoralism to agricultural practices by adopting crop cultivation and animal domestication. The development of agricultural practices was closely linked to technological innovations, particularly the shift from stone to metal tools. The adoption of copper-based tools and weaponry became widespread in Northern India, marking a significant advancement. The Indus Valley Civilization, or Harappan Culture, represents India's first urban society, with archaeological findings such as terracotta figurines, bones, seals, and pottery offering insights into their economic, social, and religious practices.[2]

Agriculture has been a fundamental occupation for humans since ancient times, involving the cultivation of soil, growing crops, raising livestock, and producing essential resources like food, clothing, and other materials. The study of agricultural practices and technological innovations has been indispensable for archaeologists and historians to understand the economic and social frameworks of historical communities. In Manipur, the archival documentation and Meitei literature highlight the inception of paddy cultivation, the emergence of agricultural practices, the implementation of shifting cultivation, and the utilization of bronze and iron tools like daos, axes, and hoes. The Meitei literature suggests that the early Meitei population primarily engaged in shifting cultivation.[3]

From ancient times, Manipur has evolved through various stages— transitioning from a Neolithic food-gathering society to the advent of early agricultural practices, eventually developing into a stratified peasant society by the 17th century. Throughout this evolution, the Meitei population established a stable social framework that was shaped distinctly by ethnic, economic, religious, and cultural influences. A salient feature of this system was the *Lallup*, a unique institution in Manipur that played a crucial role in the domain of agriculture, land allocation, and the generation of state revenue. Furthermore, it also functioned as a form of compulsory labor for the king, akin to what the British denoted as “bonded labor”. Additionally, those under the *Lallup* system served as soldiers during wars and maintained peace in the state, resembling the knights of medieval European feudalism. This dual role has prompted some historians to contend that Manipur manifest the characteristics of a feudal society, while others associate it with Karl Marx’s theoretical framework of the Asiatic Mode of Production. Due to Manipur’s diverse administrative and geographical structures, it is plausible that different modes of production may have coexisted concurrently.

Manipur’s society was primarily agrarian, with peasants gradually losing status as a landed aristocracy emerged. Labor was divided systematically, with occupations assigned based on surnames during King Loiyumba’s reign in 1110 C.E. The *Loiyumba Sinyen* text documents these assigned roles. In return for their services to the court, the king granted them land for sustenance and state revenue.[4] *Loiyumba Shinyen* has projected a well-organized society and economy of Manipur.[5]

Marx's ideas about how society is structured can be examined in Manipur, which is a part of India. It is because king Loiyumba transformed the society by his division of labour. The people, originally peasants, transformed into skilled artisans and began providing feudal service (known as *lallup*) to the king. As a result, the power of the nobles grew stronger, and a well-defined social hierarchy was established. The king, who had taken on not only political leadership but also the roles of social and religious head, as well as economic controller, regulated the priestly class. His reforms in the economic structure of Meitei society laid the groundwork for the feudal system, which persisted until the late 19th century.[6] Karl marx identified a similar unchangeable rigidity in the way Indian villages are organized: “As previously mentioned, the provost of the place, the judge, the water-surveyor, the brahmin, who oversees religious worship, the astrologer, who is also a brahmin and foretells the days of good and ill omen, the smith, the carpenter, the potter, the washerman, the barber, the physician, the dancing girls, the musician, and the poet also receive proportionate shares of the village's total income.”[7]

4. Land system in Manipur

Since ancient times, agriculture has played a pivotal role in the economic framework of the inhabitants of northeastern India. Every village unit in Manipur exhibited self-sufficiency, with the majority of the population living there. People began clearing waste lands, cutting forests, establishing new settlements, and cultivating agricultural land as a result of the growing strain on the soil. The Manipur valley was characterized by its remarkable fertility. Additionally, the agricultural fields were also designed to receive regular water supplies through the development of canals, artificial reservoirs, and irrigation systems through various riverine as well as monsoon rain. The people were knowledgeable regarding the use of manure. For agricultural practices, endeavors powered by buffalo or oxen, a plough was employed. Pulses, beans, and rice constituted the main crops cultivated in Manipur. The people of Manipur cultivated their fields and gave a portion of the harvest to the state since the King was the land's true owner. The majority of small-scale farm holdings were tended by the owners themselves. In return for a set wage, the laborers were engaged to cultivate King's vast tracts of arable land. Furthermore, in exchange for half of the yields, the owners also lent the sharecroppers their land.

The geographical differences between the hills and valleys of Manipur led to varied agricultural practices, land allocation frameworks, and revenue structures throughout the pre-colonial era. In the hill regions, land was collectively owned by clans, with no transfers permitted outside the clan. The villages had clearly marked boundaries, often signified by stone markers, granting residents exclusive rights to engage in hunting, fishing, and agricultural practices—whether through terraced farming or shifting agricultural practices (jhuming). Water distribution among terraces followed equitable customs, though techniques varied slightly between villages. The economic structures of the villages were primarily primitive and self-sufficient, producing little surplus beyond the requirement for basic subsistence. However, over the time, the emergences of surplus production facilitate market development and gradually improved the villagers' economic conditions.

According to Brown, the landholding system in the valley was based on the principle that all land belonged to the king, who alone could grant or revoke rights.[8] Land was categorized into three types: (a) *Ingkhol* (homestead land), (b) *Lou* (paddy or agricultural land), (c) *Sanjabung* (village grazing grounds). Revenue-free agricultural lands were classified as *Ningthoulou, Lailou, Lugunlou, Manalou, Shipailou, Pangal lou*, and *toloplou*, granted by the king in return for services. Taxable lands included *phamlou, tounalou*, and *sarkarilou*, allocated for revenue purposes.[9] Officials such as *lourungba, loupanba, phourungba*, and *lamchaba* oversaw these lands, which were assigned by the king in exchange for state service. Village nobles, often titleholders, were major landowners, granted land for their administrative roles. Holders of *taounalou* enjoyed significant ownership rights-even the king could only evict them with compensation. However, lands granted to officials or favorites remained under the king's ultimate control, with no sale or purchase rights-only leasing was permitted. The king could reclaim such lands at any time.

While the king's authority over certain lands was restricted, he retained the power to evict holders under specific conditions. For instance, *taounalou* holders had to cultivate the land continuously, and overdue rents for more than a year could lead to confiscation, placing peasants in a semi-serf-like dependency rather than as free landowners.[10] Therefore, although peasants had limited ownership rights, the king remained the supreme landowner, possessing the capacity to allocate land according to his discretion—though agricultural practices was never prohibited for those willing to engage in farming.

5. The practice of agriculture

Since ancient times rice have been the staple crop of the valley and the most important agricultural produce of Manipur. People of Manipur also cultivated tobacco, sugarcane, indigo, mustard, varieties of vegetables like Potato, onion, pumpkin, paper, peas, cabbage, beans etc. and fruits like pineapple, mango, banana, lemon orange, jackfruit, grapefruits, etc. Animals such as horse, cow, buffalo, goat, horses and poultry were domesticated. Even Wax, cotton and elephants teeth formed the part of the tribute paid by the hill tribes.[11]

Historically, the shifting cultivation was common in both hills and valleys until stable paddy cultivation was introduced around the 3rd century C.E. in Lamdeng by *Chingkhong Poireiton*.[12] In response to these advancements the Luwang chiefs and other valley communities adopted settled agriculture, which continues to this day whereas the hilly region continued with shifting cultivation. The cultivation practices include land preparation, seed selection and treatment, seedling management, planting methods, water management, and weed control. Puddling which involves tilling the wet soil to create a layer of mud, which helps in water retention, weed control, and prevents nutrient loss and leveling a method in which the fields are leveled to ensure uniform water distribution and prevent water stagnation in patches, which can hinder germination and crop stand are the most essential steps in the cultivation of rice.

Agricultural practices of rice in Manipur also follow a systematic and ritualistic approach, with practices adapted to the region's geographical conditions. The agricultural cycle for paddy cultivation, known as *louuba* in Manipuri, begins on *Phairen Panchami*, which is the fifth day of the month of *Phairen* (usually February), considered an auspicious day for cultivation. The Farmers start their operations by engaging in tilling or ploughing the land. If early monsoon rains occur during *Phairen*, *Lamta* (March), or *Sajibu* (April), cross-ploughing is done. In *Kalen* (May), if the weather is sunny, repeated ploughing (*Kalen-khoiba*) breaks

the soil into finer particles. Upon the accumulation of rainwater in the fields, excess water is efficiently drained to allow the soil to decompose, enhancing fertility. An additional steps known as, *ukai-takpa* (soil leveling), further enriches the agricultural land by bringing subsurface soil to the upper layers.[13] After these steps the cultivation will be started by managing the water level a day was fixed for sowing of rice in the prepared field. As the plants grow gradually, the farmer will look after the field intermittently for better growth. The weeding will be done whenever necessary but mainly before the paddy plants start to bloom. The water level had to be checked occasionally too.

5.1 Methods of Cultivation

Rice cultivation in the region of Manipur valley involves various methods according to the situation or geographical condition of the place and water system. There are different opinions about the types of methods used in rice cultivation. But seed casting is the most primitive and traditional method of rice cultivation since ancient period. Due to varied fertility of the soils, different cultivation techniques emergedas well, including transplanting (*Lingthokpa*) and broadcast sowing (*Punghul*) but most of the cultivated areas of land adopted transplantation methods. Rice cultivation in the region Manipur valley generally involves three different primary methods.[14] They are:

(i) Punghul/Pumhul (Dry Seed Casting): The earliest method, where dry seeds were dispersed over tilled soil and subsequently followed by another round of tilling for coverage. This technique was typically done during the period of *Shajibu* (April-May) and *Kalen* (May-June), and it is posited that this methodology was introduced by Poireiton. *Punghul* or broadcast rice was practiced since time immemorial before transplantation. "In June the rains having set in, the field is brought by successive sloughing and harrowing into a state of liquid mud and in this '*Pung-hul*' is cast. The seed for the '*Pung-hul* is first quickened by being moistened with water and kept in a covered basket until it shoots".[15]

(ii) Pamphel (Wet Seed Casting): This technique, utilized in higher-altitude agriculture fields, involves soaking seeds in water for germination before being sown in muddy soil. This technique was predominantly carried out during the period of *Enga-Engen* (June-August).Broadcast sowing, an ancient practice, and involved soaking seeds until germination occurred subsequently followed by dispersing them in rain-soaked fields.

(iii) Lingthokpa (Transplantation): This technique, introduced by Muslim immigrants during King Khagemba's reign (1597–1652 A.D.), involved growing seedlings in nurseries before transplanting them to flooded fields.[16] Seedlings are carefully uprooted from the nursery and transplanted into the puddled field. Before transplantation of the nursery rice plant the land was plough and reduced the ground to a puddle of mud and carefully manure with cow dung and sweeping before rain. Transplanting included the activities of tilling, applying of manures, and preparing muddy fields before planting nursery-grown seedlings. While rice cultivation has long been part of Southeast Asian culture, including Manipur, the technique of paddy transplantation was brought by Muslim immigrants. This method has demonstrated significant advantages for flood-prone or irrigated fields. Initially, Seeds were grown in nurseries and later transplanted to prepared fields. Over the years, this technique became prominent in the valley regions, reducing reliance on the traditional *pumhul* (dry seed casting) method.[17]

The initial two methods are traditional, while *Lingthokpa* was introduced in the 17th century by Muslim immigrants, significantly boosting agricultural productivity. This transformation in agricultural practices marked a significant evolution in Manipur. King Khagemba enhanced agricultural practices by integrated the paddy transplanting system introduced by Muslim peasants, who were war captives. Later these communities were called Meitei-Pangal. These peasants also brought innovations such as bullock and buffalo-drawn ploughs, as well as an early days maturing paddy variety called *Taothabi* (a red-tailed paddy) in 1634 C.E., which was particularly well suitable for waterlogged fields.[18] The practices of the cultivation method resembled those utilized in Eastern Bengal. However, a misunderstanding arose when the Meiteis mistakenly believed the Muslims were attempting to escape while transplanting seedlings, leading to their deportation to the Kabow border.[19]

5.2 Shifting cultivation

In the hilly regions of Manipur, tribal peoples practiced shifting cultivation, a primitive method where land was cleared, dried, and burned before sowing seeds. The practice of Terrace farming became prominence only in the 19th century in the hilly region and adopted it widely. And also R. Brown meticulously documented 19 rice varieties cultivated in Manipur during the early 19th century.[20] For shifting cultivation a particular plot was first cleared by cutting down the growing trees, shrubs, bushes etc. during the winter season usually from November to February in the preparation of the field. These unwanted plants and grasses were piled up into heaps and allowed to dry in the sun and branches fit for firewood or other constructive purposes were stacked along the side of the field's path. These were to be taken home after clearing the plot thoroughly all the grasses, weeds, etc. were burnt to ashes and then scratched up with little hoes to manure the soil by it. Then the seeds were sown scattering throughout the field by hand. But the Kuki tribes did not sow their seeds in this manner. They preferred to dug up the soil with hoes and then put in a few seeds in the ground-holes. It was then covered up with soil.[21]

5.3 Harvesting

The Harvesting process refers to the (*louyeiba*) that occurs between November to December. The farmers employ sickle (*Thangol*) to cut mature paddy, known as *Lou khaoba* subsequently allowing the paddy bundles to dry in the field, and later thresh them on a mat (*Lou YeiPhak*).[22] This Threshing process is often accompanied by melodic songs and rituals to invoke a good harvest. This practice is still continued in some remote areas even though it is now gradually replaced by machines with the modern technology. The harvested grain is then stored in elevated granaries (*Kei*) to mitigate the risk of moisture accumulation.[23]

6. Agricultural Implements

The Manipuri people traditionally utilized simple and cost-effective agricultural tools. Pemberton wrote "The plough consists of a curved piece of wood, the front of which is shad with iron, fitted with a pole when drawn by a pair of bullocks or a pair of shafts if intended for a buffalo. The harrow is a long-toothed rake drawn over the fields by a bullock though sometimes its place is taken by a heavy log, which presses down weeds and rice alike".[24] The *Langol* comes in two distinct form: one featuring with a single plough attached to the pole and another incorporating three or more ploughs. The single-plough type is more commonly used and occasionally functions without an iron tip.

Historical documentation indicate that iron ploughs were produced in specific *loi* villages of Manipur, utilizing the indigenous iron ore sourced from Thoubal District and Kameng village.[25] These communities crafted various tools, including axes, hoes, ploughshares for agricultural practices, as well as spears and arrowheads for protective measures. The prominent centers for iron production included villages within Thoubal and Kakching districts, such as Kakching Khunou and Langathel.[26]

Traditional agricultural implements in ancient societies have persisted over time with slight modifications to suit evolving socio-economic needs.[27] For instance, the Ahom community in Assam retained similar farming tools with minor adjustments until recent times, as observed by Gogoi in his book.[28] Similarly, the agricultural tools used in Manipur have been passed down across generations with minimal changes. As highlighted by Hudson the primary farming tools in Manipur include the *Langol* (plough), *Ukai Ananba* (smooth harrow), *Ukai Samjet* (toothed harrow), *Kangpot* (sledge), *PhouYeiPhak* (threshing mat), *Cheirong* (flail), *Phou-Enthok* (paddy spoon), *Hummai* (winnower), *Thangol* (sickle), *Yotpak* (spade), and *Thangchao* (large dao).[29] However, in the agricultural practices, these traditional implements are gradually becoming less common because of modernization and evolving of various modern technologies.

T.C. Hodson documents the various agricultural tools traditionally used by the Meitei community, including the *Kangpot* (sledge), *langol* (plough), *Ukaianalbi* (smooth harrow), *Phaointok* (paddy spoon), *humai* (winnowing fan), *ukaisamjet* (toothed harrow), *chairong* (paddy thresher or flail), *thangol* (sickle or small rounded dao), *yot* (spade), *thangchao* (large dao), and *yeinaphak* (threshing mat).[30] Oxen and buffalo were the most essential livestock for farming.

During the period of harvest, villagers engaged in collaborative efforts to assist each other in cutting and transporting crops, reflecting the profound interdependence and collective ethos within the community. A traditional system of mutual assistance, known as *khutlang*, was prevalent in the realm of agricultural work.[31]This involved groups of women of varying ages pooling their efforts to aid one another each in various farming tasks. This practice, which constitutes a form of reciprocal labor exchange, emerged from the constraints of limited manpower, thereby ensuring that families could meet their agricultural needs without the necessity of monetary payment.[32] Subsequently, participants would reciprocate the labor when others required assistance in their agricultural fields. This system was based on mutual agreement among neighbors and relatives. Women, in particular, organized themselves during key activities like paddy transplantation and harvesting, collectively working in each other's fields.

In later periods, a remuneration-based labor system called *namatnekpa* emerged. *Namat* referred to the temporal span of labor, divided into two shifts: the first extending from dawn until midday and the second from afternoon until dusk. Both men and women were hired for agricultural tasks, receiving wages known as *khutsumal*. However, women workers were received lower wages, reflecting the widespread gender-based wage disparities that persisted until labor movements in Europe brought reforms.[33]

7. Conclusion

For the people of Manipur, agriculture was not only their livelihood but also an integral aspect of their cultural identity. An effort has been undertaken to present a methodical analysis of various dimensions of the pre-colonial agricultural framework of the Kingdom of Manipur in the discussion above. Traditional economy which refers to the economic practices prevalent in Manipur's prior to pre-colonial existed in Manipur based on agriculture. Additionally, Manipur's villages had their own subsistence economy and established a foundation for urban life. A self-sufficient village economy gave way to feudalism and colonialism in Manipur's agrarian system. The Manipur's agrarian systems, including the types and conditions of peasants, land ownership, intermediary conditions, political economy, the roles of officials and privileged classes, irrigation techniques, crop patterns, the existence of feudalism, slavery, and land rights, etc gradually

developed with the passage of time. The majority of the people were engaged in agricultural practices, and agriculture was their principal source of income. Villagers used to live in great harmony and peace with one another.

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