



Historical, Legal, and Economic Perspectives on the Kabo Valley Dispute Between Manipur and Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

North-East India occupies a strategically vital position in South and South-East Asian geopolitics, with Manipur historically serving as a political and cultural bridge between the Indian subcontinent and Myanmar. This paper critically examines the historical, legal, political, and economic dimensions of the Kabo Valley, a territory whose status has remained deeply contested despite its long association with Manipur. Drawing on indigenous chronicles, colonial administrative records, treaties, and principles of international law, the study traces the incorporation of the Kabo Valley into Manipur during the reign of Meitingu Kyamba in the fifteenth century and the subsequent formalisation of Manipur's eastern boundary through diplomatic agreement with the King of Pong. The analysis demonstrates that the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), while restoring Manipur's sovereignty under King Gambhir Singh, created deliberate ambiguity regarding the eastern boundary. This ambiguity was later exploited by British colonial authorities, culminating in the administrative transfer of the Kabo Valley to Burma in 1834. Crucially, the continued payment of Sicca Rs. 500 per month to Manipur until 1949 indicates that this transfer was conditional in nature and consistent with a lease rather than a permanent cession of sovereignty. From a legal perspective, the absence of a mutually ratified treaty explicitly ceding the Kabo Valley, together with principles of international law governing territorial leases and sovereignty, suggests that Manipur's residual sovereignty was never lawfully extinguished. The study further highlights the substantial economic consequences of the loss of the Kabo Valley, a resource-rich region comparable in size to present-day Manipur. The discontinuation of compensation following Manipur's merger with India resulted in enduring economic losses. By situating the dispute within the broader context of Indo-Myanmar relations and India's Act East Policy, the paper argues that the Kabo Valley issue represents not merely a historical grievance but an unresolved legal and economic question. A renewed legal and diplomatic re-examination is therefore essential for historical justice, regional reconciliation, and sustainable peace in Manipur and North-East India.

Keywords: Kabo Valley; Manipur; territorial sovereignty; colonial treaties; Indo-Myanmar relation

INTRODUCTION

North-East India occupies a critical geopolitical position, serving as India's natural gateway to South-East and East Asia through Myanmar. Among the North-Eastern states, Manipur holds exceptional strategic, historical, and geopolitical significance, particularly in the context of India's contemporary Act East Policy. Historically, Manipur functioned as a sovereign kingdom with a long and continuous political tradition, maintaining extensive territorial boundaries and engaging diplomatically with neighbouring powers. One of the most contested and consequential territorial issues in Manipur's history concerns the Kabo Valley, a region whose political, legal, and economic status remains deeply contentious. Manipur's historical evolution predates 33 AD, when Meitingu Nongda Lairen Pakhangba ascended the throne and laid the foundations of a unified and sovereign Meitrabak (Manipur). Over centuries, the kingdom expanded territorially through political consolidation, warfare, and diplomatic agreements. The eastern boundary of Manipur achieved definitive demarcation during the reign of Meitingu Kyamba (1467-1508), following the conquest of Kabo

Valley in 1469 and a subsequent boundary agreement with the King of Pong. This agreement, commemorated through stone pillars inscribed in Meitei Mayek, formally established the eastern boundary of Manipur up to the Loichari Tillan Hills beyond the Chindwin (Ningthee) River. From this period onward, Kobo Valley also known as Kyamba Lamjao or Kyampok Lamjao remained an integral part of Manipur, except during brief interruptions such as the Seven Years' Devastation (1819-1826).

The early nineteenth century marked a turning point in the political fate of Kobo Valley. Following the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826), the Treaty of Yandaboo recognized Manipur's sovereignty under King Gambhir Singh and implicitly acknowledged its territorial integrity. However, conflicting interpretations of river boundaries, colonial administrative decisions, and subsequent unilateral actions by the British East India Company complicated the status of Kobo Valley. In 1834, despite Manipur's historical claims, the British transferred administrative control of the valley to Burma while simultaneously awarding Manipur a monthly compensation of Sica Rs. 500, an arrangement that strongly indicated a lease rather than a permanent cession of sovereignty. This conditional transfer created enduring political contradictions. From a legal and historical standpoint, Manipur never formally surrendered sovereignty over Kobo Valley, nor was the transfer ratified through mutual consent involving the Manipuri ruler. The continued payment of compensation until Manipur's merger with India in 1949 further reinforces the interpretation of Kobo Valley as leased territory. Nevertheless, in 1953, the Government of India transferred Kobo Valley to Burma, allegedly without parliamentary ratification, raising serious constitutional, legal, and international law concerns.

Beyond its political implications, the loss of Kobo Valley carried profound economic consequences for Manipur. Rich in natural resources and spanning an area nearly equivalent to present-day Manipur, the valley constituted a vital economic asset. The cessation of compensation following Manipur's merger with India resulted in a significant and enduring economic loss. Against this backdrop, the Kobo Valley issue is not merely a historical dispute but a continuing concern with legal, economic, and geopolitical ramifications, particularly in the context of Indo-Myanmar relations and regional stability in North-East India.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholarly writings on Manipur's territorial history and the Kobo Valley largely converge on themes of sovereignty, colonial intervention, treaty interpretation, and geopolitical marginalisation of frontier states. Early historical narratives, colonial records, and post-independence analyses together provide a layered understanding of the dispute. Parratt (1980) offers one of the most comprehensive political histories of Manipur, highlighting its long-standing sovereignty prior to British intervention. He argues that Manipur functioned as an independent kingdom with clearly recognised territorial boundaries, particularly during the reigns of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba and Kyamba. Parratt's work establishes the foundational historical legitimacy of Manipur's claim over the Kobo Valley. Singh (1992) examines pre-colonial diplomatic relations between Manipur, Burma, and neighbouring polities, emphasising that territorial expansion during Kyamba's reign was not arbitrary conquest but followed established norms of inter-kingdom agreements. His interpretation supports the view that Kobo Valley was incorporated into Manipur through recognised political processes.

Gangmumei Kamei (1991) focuses on boundary formation in Manipur and contends that the Kyamba-Pong agreement of 1469 constituted a formal and enduring boundary settlement. He further argues that British colonial administrators later ignored indigenous boundary systems, leading to distorted territorial outcomes. Colonial perspectives are critically examined by Pemberton (1835), whose administrative report paradoxically acknowledges Manipur's historical possession of Kobo Valley while simultaneously facilitating its transfer to Burma. This contradiction, according to Guite (2014), exemplifies colonial frontier-making practices that privileged imperial convenience over indigenous sovereignty. Brown (1874) documents Manipuri chronicles and affirms that Kobo Valley remained under Manipur's control except during brief Burmese occupations. His ethnographic observations provide empirical backing to Manipuri historical narratives preserved in royal chronicles. Singh (2005) analyses the Treaty of Yandaboo and argues that its silence on the precise boundary between Manipur and Burma created deliberate ambiguity, later exploited by colonial authorities. He maintains that treaty-based recognition of Gambhir Singh implicitly included Manipur's traditional territories. International legal interpretations are addressed by Shaw (2017), who notes that leases or conditional transfers do not extinguish sovereignty unless explicitly ratified. Applying this principle, Sharma (2010) argues that the payment of Sica Rs. 500 constituted rents, reinforcing Manipur's residual sovereignty over Kobo Valley.

Devi (2008) examines the economic dimensions of Kobo Valley, highlighting its fertile land, strategic location, and resource endowments. She contends that the economic compensation paid to Manipur indicates British recognition of the valley's material value and Manipuri ownership. Post-independence political developments are critically discussed by Sanajaoba (2001), who questions the constitutional validity of the 1953 transfer of Kobo Valley by the Government of India. He argues that the absence of parliamentary ratification undermines the legality of the decision. Baruah (2005) situates the Kobo Valley issue within broader North-East geopolitics, asserting that unresolved historical grievances contribute to regional

instability. He links the dispute to India's evolving strategic interests in Myanmar. Finally, Ningombam (2016) emphasises the contemporary relevance of the Kobo Valley issue, advocating for legal and diplomatic reassessment in light of international law and India's Act East Policy. He argues that historical justice and economic compensation are essential for sustainable peace in Manipur. These existing literatures overwhelmingly supports Manipur's historical, legal, and economic claims over Kobo Valley, while also exposing the enduring consequences of colonial and post-colonial policy decisions. The present study builds upon these scholarly contributions by integrating historical evidence with legal and economic analysis.

OBJECTIVES

The present study seeks to comprehensively examine the historical, legal, political, and economic dimensions of the Kobo Valley in relation to Manipur and Indo-Myanmar relations. It aims to trace the historical evolution of Manipur's territorial boundaries, with particular emphasis on the incorporation and administration of the Kobo Valley from the pre-colonial period through the colonial era. The study analyses key political and diplomatic developments affecting the valley, ranging from the reign of Meitingu Kyamba and the Seven Years' Devastation to the implications of the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826). It further examines the nature and consequences of colonial treaties and agreements, especially the Treaty of Yandaboo and the Pemberton Line agreement of 1834, in shaping the ownership dispute. A critical objective is to assess the legal validity of the transfer of the Kobo Valley under international law, focusing on issues of sovereignty, lease, ratification, and compensation. The study also evaluates competing arguments regarding Manipur's claim by drawing upon historical evidence, treaty interpretations, and customary practices. In addition, it explores the political status of the Kobo Valley before and after Manipur's merger with the Indian Union, including the consequences of the 1953 transfer to Burma (Myanmar). Finally, the study analyses the economic significance of the Kobo Valley, estimates the long-term losses arising from the discontinuation of compensation, situates the issue within the broader framework of Indo-Myanmar relations and India's Act East Policy, and proposes policy-oriented perspectives for addressing historical grievances and promoting regional peace and cooperation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach, drawing primarily on historical, legal, and documentary sources, and follows a descriptive-analytical research design suited to the historical and political nature of the research problem. Data for the study were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include colonial administrative records and reports of British officials such as Major Grant and Captain Pemberton; treaties, agreements, and official documents, notably the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), the 1834 agreement relating to the Kobo Valley, and associated correspondence; indigenous Manipuri chronicles, including the Cheitharol Kumbaba and other royal records documenting territorial boundaries, political events, and diplomatic relations; and legislative and constitutional documents such as the Manipur State Constitution Act, 1947, and the Manipur (Administration) Order, 1949. Secondary sources comprise scholarly books, journal articles, and research papers on the history and polity of Manipur, Burma (Myanmar), and North-East India, along with studies on colonial boundary-making, international law, and territorial sovereignty, and economic and political analyses of Indo-Myanmar relations and India's Act East Policy. Methodologically, the study employs the historical method to reconstruct the evolution of Manipur's territorial boundaries, legal analysis to interpret treaties and principles of international law concerning sovereignty, lease, compensation, and ratification, comparative analysis to contextualise the issue through analogous international cases, economic estimation to project historical compensation into contemporary terms, and content analysis to critically evaluate competing narratives. The scope of the study extends from the pre-colonial period to the post-merger phase of Manipur, while recognising limitations related to archival access, colonial bias in records, and the absence of parliamentary ratification documents concerning the 1953 transfer.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The analysis of historical, legal, political, and economic evidence reveals that the Kobo Valley constituted an integral part of Manipur's territorial and sovereign domain for several centuries prior to colonial intervention. Historical reconstruction based on indigenous chronicles and early colonial records confirms that the incorporation of the Kobo Valley during the reign of Meitingu Kyamba in the fifteenth century was achieved through conquest followed by formal diplomatic settlement. The boundary agreement with the King of Pong, marked by stone pillars and inscriptions, established a recognised eastern frontier of Manipur extending beyond the Chindwin (Ningthee) River. These findings substantiate the continuity of Manipur's authority over the Kobo Valley, except for temporary disruptions such as the Seven Years' Devastation. The political analysis demonstrates that the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), while restoring Manipur's sovereignty under King Gambhir Singh, introduced ambiguity regarding the precise eastern boundary. This ambiguity

was subsequently exploited by British colonial administrators. Documentary evidence, particularly Captain Pemberton's reports, reveals a contradiction between British acknowledgment of Manipur's historical possession of the Kabo Valley and the administrative decision of 1834 to place the valley under Burmese control. The continued payment of Sicca Rs. 500 per month to Manipur following this decision emerges as a crucial result of the analysis, indicating that the transfer was conditional in nature and consistent with a lease arrangement rather than an outright cession of sovereignty.

From a legal perspective, the analysis of international law principles relating to territorial transfer, lease, and ratification yields significant findings. The absence of a mutually ratified treaty explicitly ceding the Kabo Valley, combined with the payment of compensation, suggests that Manipur's residual sovereignty was never extinguished. Furthermore, the post-merger transfer of the Kabo Valley to Burma in 1953, without documented parliamentary ratification, raises serious constitutional and legal concerns. These findings challenge the legitimacy of the transfer under both domestic constitutional norms and international legal standards. Economic analysis further reinforces the substantive implications of the territorial loss. The Kabo Valley, comparable in size to present-day Manipur and endowed with fertile land and natural resources, represented a major economic asset. The cessation of compensation payments after Manipur's merger with India resulted in a long-term economic loss. Projection of the historical compensation into contemporary terms demonstrates that the cumulative economic impact is substantial, highlighting the material dimension of the dispute beyond symbolic or historical claims.

Comparative analysis with international precedents, such as Hong Kong and the Panama Canal, strengthens the interpretation of the Kabo Valley arrangement as a lease rather than a permanent transfer. These comparisons reveal that territorial leases often preserve residual sovereignty and impose continuing obligations, a pattern consistent with the Kabo Valley case. Thus, the results of the study indicate that Manipur's claim over the Kabo Valley is strongly supported by historical continuity, legal principles, and economic evidence. The findings also reveal that colonial administrative convenience and post-colonial political decisions, rather than lawful transfer mechanisms, played a decisive role in altering the valley's status. Consequently, the Kabo Valley issue emerges not merely as a historical dispute but as an unresolved legal and economic question with enduring implications for Manipur and Indo-Myanmar relations.

Table 1: Projected Time-Value of Monthly Rent Payable to the King/Government of Manipur for the Use of Kabo Valley (1830-2030)

| Year | Rent Projection (×4 Time Value) | Rent Projection (×6 Time Value) | Rent Projection (×8 Time Value) |
|------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1830 | 500x4 | 500x6 | 500x8 |
| 1850 | 2000x4 | 3000x6 | 4000x 8 |
| 1870 | 8000x4 | 18000x6 | 32000x8 |
| 1890 | 32000x4 | 108000x6 | 256000x8 |
| 1910 | 128000x4 | 648000x6 | 2048000x8 |
| 1930 | 512000x4 | 3888000x6 | 16384000x8 |
| 1950 | 2048000x4 | 23328000x6 | 131072000x8 |
| 1970 | 8192000x4 | 139968000x6 | 1048576000x8 |
| 1990 | 32768000x4 | 839808000x6 | 8388608000x8 |
| 2010 | 131072000x4 | 5038848000x6 | 67108864000x8 |
| 2030 | 524288000x4 | 30233088000x6 | 536870912000x8 |

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study reinforce and extend existing scholarly arguments that view the Kabo Valley as historically, legally, and economically integral to Manipur, while also illuminating how colonial and post-colonial interventions altered its status through extra-legal means. The historical continuity of Manipur's sovereignty over the Kabo Valley, as demonstrated in the results, aligns closely with Parratt's (1980) assertion that Manipur functioned as a fully sovereign polity with clearly demarcated territorial boundaries long before British intervention. The confirmation of the Kyamba-Pong boundary agreement through indigenous chronicles and colonial acknowledgements lends further support to Gangmumei Kamei's (1991) argument that pre-colonial boundary systems in Manipur were formal, enduring, and widely recognised, rather than fluid or ambiguous as often portrayed in colonial narratives. The political developments following the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826) highlight a critical disjunction between formal treaty recognition and subsequent administrative practice. Singh (2005) argues that the treaty's silence on precise boundary delineation was not accidental but strategically exploited by colonial authorities. The present analysis corroborates this view by demonstrating how British administrators, despite acknowledging Manipur's historical possession of the Kabo Valley, transferred its administration to Burma in 1834. This contradiction echoes Pemberton's (1835) own accounts, which, as Guite (2014) notes, exemplify colonial frontier-making driven by imperial

convenience rather than legal or historical legitimacy. The results thus reinforce the interpretation that colonial decision-making subordinated indigenous sovereignty to administrative expediency.

From a legal standpoint, the study's findings strongly resonate with international legal scholarship. Shaw (2017) maintains that sovereignty is not extinguished through conditional or leased arrangements unless explicitly and mutually ratified. The continued payment of Sicca Rs. 500 to Manipur until 1949, highlighted in the results, substantiates Sharma's (2010) argument that this payment functioned as rent rather than compensation for permanent cession. In this context, the Kabo Valley arrangement bears the hallmarks of a lease, preserving Manipur's residual sovereignty. The absence of a formal cession treaty or ratified agreement significantly weakens claims of lawful transfer, thereby supporting Sanajaoba's (2001) contention that the 1953 handover of the Kabo Valley to Burma lacked constitutional and legal validity. The discussion of economic implications adds an important dimension often underemphasised in earlier historical debates. Devi (2008) underscores the Kabo Valley's fertile land, strategic location, and resource potential, arguing that economic compensation itself signals British recognition of Manipuri ownership. The present study builds on this by projecting the historical compensation into contemporary terms, revealing the substantial long-term economic loss suffered by Manipur following the cessation of payments. This finding strengthens the argument that the dispute is not merely symbolic or territorial but involves tangible material deprivation with enduring consequences.

Comparative perceptions further contextualise the findings. The parallels drawn with international cases such as Hong Kong and the Panama Canal lend empirical weight to interpreting the Kabo Valley arrangement as a lease rather than a permanent transfer. As noted in comparative legal studies, such arrangements often preserve residual sovereignty and impose continuing obligations on the administering power. The consistency of the Kabo Valley case with these precedents reinforces the study's legal interpretation and challenges dominant state-centric narratives that treat the transfer as settled. Finally, situating the findings within contemporary geopolitics highlights their ongoing relevance. Baruah (2005) argues that unresolved historical grievances in North-East India contribute to political alienation and regional instability. Ningombam (2016) further contends that revisiting the Kabo Valley issue is essential in the context of India's Act East Policy, as historical justice and economic redress are integral to sustainable peace. The present discussion supports these views by demonstrating that the Kabo Valley issue remains an unresolved legal and economic question with direct implications for Indo-Myanmar relations. It confirms that the results of the study are largely consonant with existing scholarship while offering a more integrated historical-legal-economic interpretation. It underscores that the loss of the Kabo Valley was not the outcome of lawful transfer but the product of colonial manipulation and post-colonial political decisions, thereby necessitating renewed scholarly and policy-oriented engagement with the issue.

CONCLUSION

The present study has critically examined the historical, legal, political, and economic dimensions of the Kabo Valley in relation to Manipur and Indo-Myanmar relations. Drawing upon indigenous chronicles, colonial records, treaties, and principles of international law, the study establishes that the Kabo Valley remained an integral part of Manipur's territorial and sovereign domain for several centuries prior to colonial intervention. The incorporation of the valley during the reign of Meitingu Kyamba, followed by a formal boundary agreement with the King of Pong, provided Manipur with a clearly recognised eastern frontier that was acknowledged both locally and in early colonial accounts. The analysis further demonstrates that the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), while restoring Manipur's sovereignty under King Gambhir Singh, introduced strategic ambiguity regarding boundary demarcation. This ambiguity enabled British colonial authorities to transfer the administrative control of the Kabo Valley to Burma in 1834 without a mutually ratified cession. The continued payment of Sicca Rs. 500 per month to Manipur until 1949 strongly suggests that the arrangement was conditional and consistent with a lease rather than a permanent transfer of sovereignty. From a legal standpoint, the absence of explicit ratification and the presence of compensation undermine the legitimacy of the transfer under international law.

The study also highlights the profound economic consequences of the loss of the Kabo Valley. Rich in fertile land and natural resources and comparable in size to present-day Manipur, the valley represented a major economic asset. The discontinuation of compensation following Manipur's merger with India resulted in a long-term economic loss that continues to affect the region. Finally, the paper situates the Kabo Valley issue within contemporary Indo-Myanmar relations and India's Act East Policy, arguing that unresolved historical grievances carry enduring implications for regional stability. To sum up, Kabo Valley issue is not merely a historical dispute but an unresolved legal and economic question. A re-examination of the issue through legal, diplomatic, and policy-oriented frameworks is essential for historical justice, regional reconciliation, and sustainable peace in Manipur and North-East India.

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