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Agricultural Practices and the Changing Pattern of Land Holding System from Pre-Colonial to Colonial Manipur

Moirangthem Monica Devi

In contemporary Manipur, agriculture is the main economic base of the rural society. In earlier times too, such was the economic scenario as observed from various sources and accounts. Both the valley people and the hill tribes were agriculturalists even though their modes of cultivation varied. As the society was predominantly a subsistence based economy, land especially agricultural land was a big part of life. Therefore, the paper will examine the various modes of cultivation prevalent in Manipur. The paper will also be examining how the agricultural land of the kingdom was controlled and the various modes revenue collection systems that the Pre Colonial State used during that period. The paper will further discuss the course of historical development and the changes that British brought into land holding system and land revenue policies throughout the colonial Manipur.

Keywords: Agriculture, land holding, economy, land revenue, Pre-colonial, Colonial, Manipur

Introduction

In contemporary Manipur, agriculture is the main economic base of the society. In earlier times too, such was the economic scenario as observed from various sources and accounts. E. W Dun observes that in the year 1881 out of 221,070 persons engaged in different occupations, 103,937 were engaged in agriculture (Dun, 1975: 27). The nature of agriculture in the valley differs from that of the hills due to the differences in physical configuration, climatic pattern, fertility of the soils and differential technological. The valley having a stretch of fertile level land, well distributed rainfall, fair communication along with easy access to markets, favours prosperous agricultural activities. Paddy is the main dominant crop of the valley. Economic condition of the people is therefore dependent on the production of paddy from their agricultural fields. In the hills, on the other hand, both shifting cultivation and terrace farming are practiced on the slopes having limited subsistence production. Rice was and still is the staple food, grown in both hill and plain areas and its accounts for

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about 95 percent of the total food grains production of the state. However, Agriculture was heavily dependent on the monsoon, even though drainage and bunds were built for irrigation. Irrigated fields were few in numbers. The fluctuation of agricultural produce was hugely determined by the nature monsoon of the particular year.

The valley dwellers especially the Meiteis and the Meitei Pangals (Muslims) were devoted to wet rice cultivation whereas the hill dwellers took to shifting cultivation. However, some hill villages whose declivity was not too steep such as Mao, Maram and Mayang Khong etc. also had terraced fields, irrigated with water brought from considerable distance in various channels aligned to the field. T.C Hodson stated that “Nearly every tribe have some terraced fields, but among the Kabuis, Quoirengs, Marrings, and Chirus, *jhum* cultivation provides the bulk of their sustenance. The Kabuis are fortunate enough to have in the Kaopum valley an area where flat fields of the ordinary kind are possible, and there raise excellent crops.” (Hodson, 1911:51).

Modes of Land Cultivation

As I have mentioned earlier, in the valley, most of the people practiced wet rice cultivation whereas shifting cultivation or *jhum* cultivation and terrace farming were practiced in the hill regions. Most of the permanent cultivation and agricultural land was in the valley, accounting for over seven-tenths of settled cultivation and agricultural land resources, even though the hills comprise 90 per cent of the Manipur’s total area.

Many colonial officials gave a detail description of how the rice cultivation was done in the valley of Manipur. E.W. Dun refers to striking similarities between the agricultural practices of Manipur and those of East Bengal in terms of mode of cultivation, planting and transplanting of rice in the valley. Brown (1874:87) stated that:

The operation of scratching up the soil, and preparing the field for the reception of the rice seeds, commences in February, and in May they sow what is called “pung-hul” or dry seeds, cast in dry ground. In June, the rains having set in, the field is brought by successive ploughings and harrowing into a state of liquid mud, and in this the “pung-hul” is cast. The seed for the “pung-hul” is first quickened by being moistened with water and keep in a covered basket until it shoots. As this seed floats on the surface of the mud, it has to be carefully watched until it takes root, and three and four leaves spring up, in order to protect it from wild ducks and other birds. After this comes the “ling-ba” or transplanting. The seed for the plants, which are destined to be transplanted, are usually sown very close, in plots carefully prepared for the purpose. When the transplanting season arrives, the plants are pulled in handful out of the ground; the roots are by washing divested of all the earth attached to them, and having been taken to the field, they are one by one separately inserted in the mud. For a time after transplanting, they look as if they were all withered up, but they soon spring up and afford as excellent crop. If the ground has been carefully derived of weed before sowing the crop, weeding afterwards is not required.

As described above, there were three traditional methods of cultivation in the valley which are still practiced even today. These are punghul, pamphel and lingthokpa.

(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. (2) Pamphel, under this method land was first tilled to make it muddy and the field had to be properly levelled. 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 done in wet land during June and July. (3) In Lingthongpa or 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.

N. Pramodini Devi pointed out 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 174 number of Cachar troops. The war captives were made settlement in different parts of the state by giving Manipuri girls as their wives. *Nongshamei Puya* makes a reference that the cultivators among the Muslim war captives practiced the transplanting method or Lingthokpa which at first astonished the Manipuris but later became the most widely practiced method in Manipur (Devi, 2011: 154).

Therefore, it is evident that the transplanting method of rice cultivation was in fact introduced by the Muslim 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. 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 (Singh, 2012)." Agriculture technology was further developed with the introduction of plough drawn by the bullock and buffalo by the Muslims in Manipur.

Shifting cultivation, also known as '*jhum*' cultivation in Northeast India, is an ancient method of agriculture that is still practiced by tribal communities in many parts of the world. Similarly, in the hilly areas of Manipur, shifting cultivation was widely practiced, with terraced farming in foothill or low slope areas, above the adjacent rivers and streams. The practice of *jhum* in the state was closely linked to socio-economic, cultural and land tenure systems of tribal communities.

U.A. Shimray argues that, "The shifting cultivation is a way of life with the hill-communities of the North Eastern region of India. The social life of the indigenous people of this region is regulated by the '*jhum* calendar.' Even celebration of social festivals coincided with different operation of *jhum* cultivation. The practice of shifting cultivation or *jhumming* for the Nagas is not merely a subsistence agricultural activity, but closely linked with the social, customary, polity and superstition (Shimray, 2014)." Similarly in case of Kuki tribes, George Haokip argues that "Shifting cultivation was deeply rooted in the Kuki psyche, having evolved through the year, and being rooted in customs, belief and folklore. It influences the tribe's mindset. It also influences the cultural ethos of its agrarian society and social fabric. Their observation of various ceremonies or festivals was related to nature. They have given due

respect and appreciation from the dwellers for it is the provider of their sustenance and livelihood. Their traditional way of living and the tribal mindset have given respect for environment. *Jhum* for tribal people is more than sustenance, it reflects, the reason for existence (Haokip, 2009).” Many ceremonies and rituals were performed from selecting the fields till the harvest. Therefore, apart from the environmental factor that made the hill tribes to opt for this method of cultivation, we can see that there are deeply embedded cultural and social roots that they have towards shifting cultivation.

R. Brown described the *jhum* cultivation practised in Manipur which was “known by the name ‘Low Pam’ [sic. pam lou] amongst the Manipuris, is to allow the cultivated patches of ground to lie fallow in succession for a period of about ten years, jungle, chiefly bamboo and coarse grass, being allowed to grow on them (Brown, 1874: 17)”. Colonel McCulloch (1859: 45-47) also gave a detailed description of the *jhum* cultivation system practiced in the hilly regions of Manipur:

The mountain land around the village, within certain fixed bounds, is usually the property of the village. This they cultivate with rice in elevation suited to it, and with other crops in situations unfitted for the species of grain. The spot cultivated this year is not again cultivated for another ten years; it is having been found that the space of time required for the formation of a cultivated soil by the decay of the vegetable matter that again spring upon it...The spot for cultivation being determined on, he must clear it of a jungle of ten years growth...After having been cut down, the jungle is allowed to dry, so that it may be fired in season, for if fired out of season, as sometimes through accidental conflagrations happens, the crop to be raise will be most probably deteriorated, or the land even be rendered unfit for it...If the jungle has been thoroughly dried, the whole is, with the exception of the larger trees, reduced to ashes. The soil for an inch or two is thoroughly burnt, and having been scratched up with their little hoes, is mixed with the ashes and becomes ready for the reception of seed, which is sown broadcast. They measure their cultivation by the number of baskets required for seed. Across the field in parallel lines, at no great distance apart, they lay the unconsumed trunks of the trees; they serve as dams to the water which comes down the face of the hill when it rains, and prevents the soil being carried away with it. The field has to be constantly watched against the depredations of birds and wild beats, and weeds being very rapid in growth, to be frequently weeded.

Jhum cultivation in Manipur was a labour intensive and truly sustainable based type of agriculture as there was no other way of cultivation crops in those hilly regions. Many scholars have argued that the practice of shifting cultivation is a threat to ecology especially to the forest, flora and fauna etc. Traditional *jhum* cultivation has been also linked with deforestation which then leads to soil erosion, landslide, and environmental degradation. Many of the British colonial officers have also blamed that the practice of rigorous *jhum* cultivation in hilly areas of Manipur was the reason behind the deforestation that they witnessed when they came to Manipur. Johnstone observed that “Alas, I have seen noble oak forest laid low and burned for this purpose [*jhum* cultivation]. It is an abominable custom, and nothing can justify our per-

mitting it where we hold sway. That it is not necessary is shown by the Angami and some of the Tankhool [Tangkhol] tribes, who though they do occasionally indulge in this wasteful cultivation are quite independent of it, as they terrace in their hillside and cultivate the same tract for generations (Johnstone, 1896: 86).” Colonel Maxwell while describing the *jhum* cultivation that he witnessed in a Kuki village observed that “The large area in *jhum* shows that these people are industrious. It is a pity that their system of cultivation is so destructive to the grant forest at present clothing the hills (Maxwell, 1900: 44).”

However some ecologists believed that shifting cultivation by itself is not detrimental to the environment. In earlier times, the cycle of shifting cultivation which spanned over 10-15 years allowed the vegetation of the region to regenerate before the land was used again. So as long as the *jhum* cycle has duration of 10 years or more this type of cultivation did not pose any threat to the ecological stability and soils of the largely forested hill area. It is the shortening of the *jhum* cycle to an average of four to five years and the pressure on the land due to increased in population and other factors such as commercialisation of agriculture, increasing diversion towards development etc. which caused a negative consequences of shifting agriculture and the degradation of the environment such as decreasing soil fertility and crop yields and inadequate management of fallow land, deforestation etc (Nongbri, 1999: 29-30).

A significant body of literatures has shown that *jhum* cultivation with longer cycles has many advantages over other agricultural systems in the hills. Ramakrishnan holds that “The agro-ecosystem under *jhum* is often as more complex one in terms of its structure and function and therefore, more stable. Unlike modern sedentary agricultural system shifting cultivation involves a large number of crop species all grown together which are often mutually compatible both in space and time. Thus, it is ecologically superior although from economic point of view it may be considered primitive (Ramakrishnan, 1980).”

Shimray also argues that the whole process of *jhuming*: from cutting down the trees, clearing the forest, tilling of the soil etc. was practiced by the Naga tribes with great respect and reverence. Every particular activity was done in their effective season and time, nothing was done out of season. For example, “a tree is cut in its right season and right age and in the next fall, you have ten trees sprouting out of the felled parent tree making it that: a tree is born, a tree dies, but forest lives forever (Shimray, 2014).” It, basically, means that the traditional form of *jhuming* was practiced in such a way that it ensured the sustainability of the forest and the people both. No over exploitation was allowed.

Amongst the advantages of *jhum* farming is that it is mixed cropping cultivation. Farmers are known to plant up to 35-40 species on individual plots including seven-eight varieties of rice and alternate cereal crops. Other than rice which was the main crop harvested by the tribes, cotton, tobacco, ginger, oil seeds, pepper and other various kinds of vegetables were grown in the *jhum* fields. *Jhum* enables multiple cropping of several crops which provide some form of crop insurance to the *Jhumias* in the event of failure of some crops. Moreover mixed cropping creates a multi-

layered canopy above and root system below for efficient light capture and optimal nutrient use respectively (Ramakrishnan, 1993: 39-40).

Land control and land revenue system in pre colonial Manipur

The Valley

Manipur in ancient period had lineage based social and political system which was divided into seven different *salai* or clans. These seven clans were territorial based principalities. According to Gangmumei Kabui, the land was owned by the respective clans as a community. The respective chief of the clans had to protect the territory, both cultivable and non cultivable land, forest and rivers for cultivation, grazing, hunting and fishing. (Kabui, 2011:70)

With the establishment of settled life and permanent agriculture, the role of the chief became bigger and more powerful. The chief of the principality was earlier the social head of the clan (*piba*) who was also the political and military head who had total control over the clan. Later on he became the religious head as well, assuming the role of a priest performing the religious rituals for the clan. Moreover, his control over the people and the land was legitimized by many mythical stories associating the chief with divine powers. Ultimately he became the social, political and religious leader of the clan who had the complete authority over their respective land and the people. Therefore, when the Ningthouja clan or dynasty consolidated all the other dynasties, theoretically, the chief of the Ningthouja became the supreme rule or the king of whole valley, who control all the land and other resources of the valley. (Kabui, 2011:70-75)

Here it is interesting to note that the geographical distribution of the clans did help them in shaping different histories for themselves. In the middle of the fifteenth century, the whole valley of Manipur was brought under the direct rule of Ningthouja dynasty, except for the Moirang principality. The one of the reason that Moirang principality could retained their independency and autonomy for a long time was that Moirang have some ecological advantages than the other principalities. Carrying out military attacks to Moirang would have been quite hard as it was surrounded by hill ranges in the west and huge forest land in the south. In the east lies the resourceful Loktak Lake which is very rich in its flora and fauna. The vast cultivable land and the fisheries from the Loktak provided more than enough resources to sustain as an independent principality for a very long time. On the other hand principalities like Khuman lacked geographical and ecological advantages that Moirang principalities enjoyed. Khuman was surrounded by other principalities like Ningthouja, Luwang, Shelloi Langmais etc. Cultivable land or dry land agriculture was very limited. The only resource base land that Khuman had was the swampy land between the Loktak Lake and Ikop. The forests resources were not easily assessable to them as the forest surrounding the Khuman principalities were inhabited by the tribes of Marings, Anal, Moyon etc. (Kabui, 2011:71-115)

Theoretically, all the land in the kingdom belonged to the king. All the colonial accounts noted that all the land of the valley belong to the king. R. Brown stated that the whole land system of the valley starts with the assumption that all land belongs

to the king. However in reality, this was not the case. Even in the valley, the king did not enjoy a firm monopoly over all the geographical areas of his kingdom. First of all, there were large extents of uncultivated land and untouched territory in the valley which were not recorded in the revenue records. Secondly, the land in countryside or peripheral region of the kingdom which were inhabited by the *loi* communities was not under the direct control of the king in Imphal. They used to pay tribute from time to time as a notion of accepting the suzerainty of the king in Imphal. However, they had their own king or village chief under whose leadership the village was administered. The term *loi pot kaba* literary means tribute paying. The villages occupied by these *loi* communities were engaged in a specific or particular occupation of their own. For example, Sakmai village in the south east of the valley was engaged in the manufacturing of *Yu* or a type of liquor made from fermented rice. Kakching village was engaged with smelting of iron. Cheirel, Shuganu and Lameidong are the main villages engaged in the pottery making industry, probably because suitable clay are found in their vicinity. The variety of pots and utensils made in these villages are brought to Imphal by boats (through Imphal river) or by bullock carts and sold there. There is another village known as Hiroi Lamgang, in the south of the valley not far from Shuganu, which makes boats for the king. Therefore, instead of paying land tax or revenue in form of paddy as the others did, the tribute that many of these villages sent to the king consisted of these products that they produced.

In the valley, the land was divided into two kinds for the purpose of the revenue collection- the revenue free lands or *ingkhhol* (homestead land) and revenue payable lands or *Lou* (cultivated land). The *ingkhhol* are those land occupied by one or more household and gardens of an extended family and were free from revenue and could be sold at the pleasure of the owner. However, he could sell it only after asking for permission from the king. It was inheritable and transferable. Within the Imphal area, the Kotwal was in charge *ingkhhol* land where he kept a register showing the name of the owner and location of the lands. All the boundary disputes were referred to him and he settles them with the help of the *panchayat* drawn from among the people. When the head of the family died his son or sons inherited the *ingkhhol* in equal share. If he had no sons his wife or wives inherited the *ingkhhol*. Daughters had no rights or say in the inheritance of the *ingkhhol* (Howell, 1891: 1).

Of all the cultivable lands in the valley, one third of the total land was under the direct control of king, *Nimthem lou*, the land of the king. Another one third (or more than that) was in the possession of the members of the ruling family, the Brahmins and the *sepoys*. The remainder was left in the hands of the village head men, court officials etc. who hold it by favour from the king. They hold their lands on payment of the usual tax in kind. Apart from the *Ningthem lou*, A.A Howell wrote, the tax free *lou* were (i) *Sepoy lou*, land given to the king's army, (ii) *Mana lou*, land given to awardees for some or other services to the king, (iii) *Brahmin lou* (Priest), (v) *Royal family lou*, (vi) *Maharani lou* (Queen) (vii) *Pang lou* (person of distinguish service in war). The kings also used to grant land without any payment of taxes to the temple, *Lai lou*, an endowment of land for the maintenance of some temples or deities and to priest, officials and other favourites *Lugun lou*, gift of lands to the Brahmins or to the relatives of the king or to his officials, either permanently or for a specific period

(Howell, 1891: 2-4).

The tax payable land or *lou* were divided into three categories- *Pham lou*, *Touna lou*, and *Sarkari lou*. Howell wrote that the *Pham lou* were the land held by office or organisation for example land belonging to *panchayat* and Cheirap court. The revenue on such land is one pot of the crop per *pari*. *Touna lou* were the newly cultivated land. Land under *Touna lou* could be obtained through two ways- by purchasing or by taking up or clearing the jungles. For the first three years, the land was rent free. After that the land holder had to pay six pots of rice to the king. A man holding land under *Touna lou* tenure was obliged to cultivate the land every year, failing that the king could take away that land. The *Sarkari lou* as describe by the British were actually the King's private land which were cultivated by the his slaves or the common people through the *lallup* system (Howell, 1891: 3-4).

The king and other officials who hold a large amount of land required a large labour to cultivate the huge land under their direct control. They extracted labour mainly through the *lallup* system (compulsory service to the king). The land under direct control of the king was cultivated for them for the *lallup kabas* (*lallup* attendants). In return of this *lallup* service each individual was entitled to cultivate for his support on *pari* of land which is equivalent to 2 and half acres of land and was subjected to the payment of the regular tax in kind. Even though the tax paid for the land held directly by the king was supposed to be a fixed one, it varies from two baskets or *sangbai* to thirteen baskets per *pari* according to the favours of the king towards the person. Dr. Brown said that payment of taxes upon land held by the officials were as high as twenty-four baskets per *pari* (Brown, 1874: 86). When a man wished to take up new land first he had to take permission from the king who decides under what tenure the land shall be taken up.

The king appointed an official known as Phunan Salangba, who looked after all the matters related to cultivation of land, be it measurement or payment of tax or transfer of land etc. The land was subdivided into many villages, where the headmen of each village looked after the cultivation. The headman was responsible for collection of the tax payable by each cultivator. However he didn't have any rights over the land; he was merely an agent of the king (Dun, 1992: 59).

Howell further described that an officer called *Lourangba* (Officer in charge of paddy field) was given the responsible to collect revenue payable in rice whereas another officer known as *Phourangba* was responsible for the collection of revenue for *Pham lou* tenure only. The *Phourangba* not only collected the revenue he also settled the land keeping a record of who holds it, the amount of land he cultivated, the tenure he hold it on etc. When the holder of the land failed to pay the revenue within twelve month of the due date, the Phourangba reported it to the king. Accordingly, the defaulter would be given a chance to pay the revenue in cash, the amount being calculated on the actual amount of the crop at the time. If he fails to do that, the land was taken away from the holder. The revenue collection and all land related issues were *Loupanaba* (watchman of paddy fields) at the village level. He first collected the revenue or crops from the villages and stored it in granaries or *keis* and the *Lourangba* used to take rice as was required in the capital (Howell, 1891: 1-8).

Community grazing lands were rent free. Pasturelands were divided among the villages. If the cattle of one village enter the grazing grounds of another village, they were first warned and consequently brought the matters to *Selungba* who settled the case. *Selungba* was the record keeper of all the cattle in the valley. All the disputes regarding cattle were referred to him (Howell, 1891: 9). However it is hard to believe that one single person could keep in track of all the cattle in the valley.

While it was mentioned in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* and many other sources that the king used to collect some kind of tribute from the hill villages and from the peripheral villages from time to time, he never had the full authority over the hill people or their land. The king did not interfere with their administration and day to day business. T.C Hodson wrote that the lands in hills were held in several ownerships, but no person outside the clan was permitted to own land. To prove his point he wrote that “each village possesses a well defined area which is sometimes demarcated with regular boundary stones and within which the villagers possess paramount rights of hunting, fishing, if a river be included, and of development of cultivation either by marking new terraces or by *jhuming*. The right of fishing extends to the middle of the stream only, and if they catch fish in the territorial waters of another village, a small share of the ‘take’ is given to the ‘riparian owners’. In case of villages which possessed terraced fields, we find a mass of customs relating to the equitable distribution of water throughout the terraces. The highest field gets the water first and then, to prevent waste, have to let it pass on to the lower fields” (Hodson, 1911: 105-106).

The Hills

K Gailain Gam argues that the land control system of valley and the hills are quite different from each other. As already mentioned, theoretically all the land in the valley was owned by the king and was under his direct management whereas in the hills the land belonged to the village chiefs in case of the Kuki communities; and in case of the Nagas, the land belonged to the community and was controlled and managed by the village council. He further says observed that though some hill communities acknowledged the suzerainty of the king in the valley, the land control system of most of the hill tribes were independent from the valley (GailianGam, 1991:) To a large extent the relative freedom that the hilly region and their chiefs enjoyed were due to the geographical and topographical differences of the environment. Moreover, I think, the Meitei king in the valley, in fact, did not have the military and administrative capacity to directly control and govern those far reaching areas in the hills and peripheral zones.

There are many different types of land holding system prevalent among sub-tribal groups or clan among the Nagas and the Kuki tribes of Manipur. Among the Nagas, forms of land ownerships included community based land holdings through village councils, clan based land holding and individual lands. While in case of the Kukis the land was controlled by the village chief. Among the Nagas, the Moyon community, the Anals and the Mongsang Nagas demarcated their land into clan-wise for agricultural purposes. For the Rongmei community of the Zeliangrong Nagas,

some lands were held by private individuals and some others as a common property of the whole village. When the person who owned some private land died, the land was inherited to his son or sons if he had any or a close relative of his. If they can't find any close relatives of his or in some cases the land was directly handed over to the village council as a common property. There was no individual land ownership system among the Moas, the Chothes and the Tarao Nagas. In general there was no notion of land revenue system among these Nagas, as most of the land belongs to the whole community. However, if they cultivate land belonging to other villages or if a particular family cultivates land of other family, they pay to the owners in term of paddy as agreeable between the two parties (Horam, 1977:).

Khaikhotinthang Kipgen in his book *The Thadou Kukis* wrote that "All the lands to the chief, whether it be a homestead, a *jhum* field or a wet-paddy field. The chief of the village was all in all in the affairs of the village. The chiefship was hereditary" (Kipgen, 1982: 112). Regarding the revenue collecting system among the Kukis, they paid their revenue either in kind or in form of labour. In kind, each family had to pay a basket of paddy amounting around two mounds to the village chief. Apart from the rice, the chief was entitled to a fair amount of share in each brood of pigs or flows reared in the village, he was also entitled to one quarter of every animal killed or hunted, and in addition to one of the tusk of each elephant that was killed by the villagers. In labour, each household were bound to render four days of service every year to the chief especially for the purpose of cultivating his private fields. Kipgen argues that these labour services can be treated as a mini *lallup* service among the Kuki tribes. In return to all these form of payment in kind or in labour, the chief was expected to perform certain duties for the welfare and security of village (Kipgen, 1982: 74-75).

Colonial land control and revenue system

From 1891 to 1906 Manipur was under the direct rule of the British. It was the period of minority of the king Churachand. In the pre colonial period, the political agent of Manipur took the role of an ambassador of the British North East Fortier which would assist the King in various matters. However, after 1891, when Manipur was full occupied by the British, he took charged over the power and authority of the people and the land. The King was there for just name sake. The political agent became the head of administration in both that valley and hills of Manipur. In 1907, when the king reached the age of 22, the administration of the valley was handed over to him. However, his jurisdiction did not cover the hill tribes. The political agent continued to administer the hills tribe (Kabui, 2015: 21).

The year 1892 marked two significant changes in Manipur economy. The first was the abolition of the traditional *lallup* system and slavery and second was the monetization of revenue collection system. The British rulers preferred cash in lieu of *lallup* service which according to most of them was a primitive and oppressive system. The *lallup* system which most of the British officials understood as 'forced labour' was the most important form of payment of revenue in pre colonialism Manipur in form of personal service to the king. T.C Hodson said that originally, the *lallup*

system was a military organisation but consequently it was made to play an important role in the economic life of the country. The people liable to the duty under this system were the Meiteis, the Brahmins, and the Muslims. Nagas, the Lois and the *Keis* or the slave community were assigned to much heavier works. As a man reached the age of 17, he was liable enter the *lallup* and was entitle to cultivate a *pari* or two and half acres of land with the tax in kind to the king (Hodson, 1905: 59-65).

Johnstone points out that the same system was formerly existed in Assam under the Ahom kingdom. Under this system, each man in the country between the ages of 17 and 60 was bound to offer ten days service to the king out of forty days. This ten days service was arranged in such a manner that a man work for ten days and the have his interval for one month all the year round. The system was extended to the every class in the society. "Women were naturally exempted but, among men, the blacksmith, goldsmith, carpenters, etc., pursued their different crafts in the Rajah's workshops for the stated time, while the bulk of the population, the field workers, served as soldiers, and made roads or dug canals, in fact executed great public works for the benefit of the state" (Johnstone, 1896: 111).

Each *lallup* was assigned under a leadership who was known as '*Lakpa*'. The system is said to be introduced during the reign of Pakhangba. In case of sickness or disability, prior notice should be given to the authorities who will enquire into the matter. If someone wants to escape his duty he should either provide a substitute or pay a sum of amount. This sum would be used to pay for a substitute if required, or the rest of the *lallup* could use the money themselves and perform the extra work. It is said that usually twelve *annas* were paid for a man for exemption of forty days (Brown, 1874: 83).

Even though the British did away the system that they claimed as an oppressive and primitive one, they substituted it with a house tax of Rs. 2 per annum in the valley. "Homestead lands, on which are grown peas, tobaccos, chillies and other garden produce, escape all direct taxation, exception the house tax of Rs. 2 (the commuted *lallup* tax) on every house occupied by a male adult" (Administrative Report, 1893-94: 4). They even called or named the valley house tax as 'the commuted *lallup* tax'. By appropriating the name commuted *lallup* tax they not only tried to legitimize by recognising the local customs but also portraying themselves as an alternative to the tyranny of the king in the valley.

After the British occupation of Manipur in 1891, one of the most challenging works that they had to carry out was conducting land surveys and settling boundary disputes. Most of the tour diaries of the political agents were written as a survey report when they went to villages in the hills and other peripheral areas to collect revenue from them or to inspect the harvest. Captain Cole wrote "Monday, March 29th 1897: Rode out to inspect some lands covered in an application for waste land. In a large number of cases these applications are for lands lying in the village grazing grounds, or for lands really belonging to someone else and it is necessary to make personal inspections to check irregularities" (Cole, 1897: 14). In order to make all the land of the state accountable and to have a systematic revenue collection system, the British carried out a gigantic task of land surveys both in the valley and the hills.

The land was classified into household land, agricultural land, community lands for grazing and other community purposes etc. Both the agricultural land and household land were documented to individual land holdings and the document was known as *patta*. Even the village grazing land and fisheries were demarcated and documented; and were levied for revenue payment (Administrative Report, 1909-1910: 2). The village grazing grounds were demarcated with earthen mounds and boughs of some quick growing tress etc. to prevent encroachment (Administrative Report, 1907-1908: 6). The land became hereditary and sellable. Therefore, the king no longer had the ownership towards the land even though the taxes were collected in his name.

Meena Bhargava opines that “Tradition, customs and law invented by the East India Company to institutionalize and formalised its power and authority were carefully interwoven into the revenue system- whether this was for assessment, appropriation or extraction of surplus from the peasants. The company by such means hoped not only to efficiently regulate revenue but also to establish its firm and direct control over all spheres of revenue” (Bhargava, 1999: 96). The statement stands true in case of Manipur too. With the coming of the British a well regulated and strict system of revenue collection was established. The British introduced the *ryotwari* land tenure system and collection of tax in cash in Manipur. Land revenue was assessed on cultivated land in the Manipur valley only and particularly on lands under cultivation with rice. In the following years just after British occupation, the revenue of the valley land was collected for the most part in paddy, the people given the option of paying either in kind or cash (most of them opting for kind). (Adm. Report, 1893-94: 4).

From the year 1892 onwards the revenue collection system was monetised and payment of revenue in cash was made compulsory as Rs. 5 per *pari* or 2 and half acres was charged for the cultivable land, except in the case of some small valleys bordering on the main valley where the hill men resided paid Rs. 3 per *pari* on wet rice cultivation (Adm. Report, 1893-94: 4). The Administrative report recoded that “It should be noted that 1892-93 was the first year of cash collections, and that the whole revenue have been brought in to headquarters, and not collected, as last year, by summary procedure in the *mufassa*” (Adm. Report, 1893-94: 4).

In fact, land revenue as a separate sub heading began to appear in the Administrative report of Manipur only after the British occupation of Manipur in 1891. Each cultivator was given a *patta* for the land of his holding. *Patta* in the Mughal period was a written document, setting out the amount or rate of revenue demand (Bhargava, 1999: 101). In Manipur the concept of *patta* was slightly different from that of the Mughals as the rate of revenue was already fixed. The *patta* in Manipur was more of a document indicating the right of the land owners to cultivate his plot of land. The British claimed that the introduction of the *patta* system was necessary, even though it entailed an increased in the expenditure, to check cultivation, to ensure to each *patta* holder the right to cultivate his own plot of land and to hold its produce and to settle on the spot the numerous petty boundary disputes, which results from absence of any form of survey and for a punctual collection of the revenue (Adm. Report, 1894-95, 4).

The British officials often talked about how difficult it was to collect the tax as people tried to escape from paying taxes some way or the other. "The revenue was collected by clerks in the State office, but the system revealed the disinclination of the Manipuri to pay taxes unless personally visited, and the result was to leave a very large amount of arrears at the end of the year" (Adm. Report, 1894-95, 4).

Therefore to avoid accumulating arrears and much consequent trouble for the purpose of collecting land revenue, in the year 1894, Major Maxwell, the political agent of Manipur revived the pre colonial division of Manipur valley into four territorial zones or *pannas*: *Ahallup panna*, *Naharup panna*, *Khabam panna* and *Laipham panna*. An official named *Lakpa* or *tahsildar* was appointed for each *panna* to look after the affairs of land surveys, its measurement and documentations, issuing of *pattas* etc. He was helped by the political agent and assisted by petty officials like *Amins* (whose main duty was to check illicit cultivation), and *Kanungos* (who assisted in measurement of land) etc. By reviving the traditional *pannas* and *lakpas* divisions in the land revenue system, the objective of the British was to legitimize its authority and representation through the local tradition and customs. And by using the *patta* system, establishing official like *Amins*, *Kanungos*, measuring land in terms of *bigha* etc. British were trying to bring the Indian more particularly Mughal land revenue system in Manipur.

The *lakpas* were remunerated by a commission of 10 per cent on collections. In this payment the cost of the *panna* establishment was included. Maxwell mentioned that for *Ahallup* and *Naharup panna*s, the cost of the establishment was Rs. 142, and for the smaller *pannas* of *Laipham* and *Khabam*, it was Rs. 109 (Adm. Report, 1894-95: 4). However from the year 1906 onwards, *lakpas* were paid fixed salaries.

Fresh cultivation under the rules could only be taken up after their application for *patta* had been approved. However the people usually open up new land and take out *patta* afterwards. This irregular procedure caused much confusion and adds considerably to the boundary disputes. The official often complained about how people concealed their actual land holdings in the *patta*- "many a person have added much land to their present *patta*, and when asked to pay the excess revenue, express themselves quite unable to do so...A few villages, where land has been carefully measured, show that 40 per cent of the land under cultivation is not in *patta* at all, and therefore, escape taxation" (Adm. Report, 1894-95: 4-5).

However, many British officials had started having their doubts over the efficiency of the revenue collection under the *lakpa* system. They claimed that the charges or duties that the *lakpa* had to do were too large to handle. Moreover, the areas of land under by each *lakpa* were too vast for them to properly control. Therefore large amount of arrears started piling up year after year that the *lakpa* failed to deliver to the British. Captain Cole in his tour diary of 1897 wrote that "The system of *lakpa* (*tahsildars*) for the collection of land revenue does not appear to be working well and will require remodelling. Heavy arrears of land revenue and valley house tax are still outstanding for the last and previous financial year. Rs. 91048 was outstanding on 31st March, and only Rs. 16421 on this arrear was collected to the end of July. The worst defaulter of the four *lakpas* is Gopal Singh of *Narup panna*, whose arrears

amounted to Rs. 363005 on 31st March. A great portion of the arrears are irrecoverable...Finding that about Rs. 16000 of the arrears on 31st March was for the year 1892-93 and 1893-94. I have directed all the arrears of those years to be written off. It is hopeless to expect *raiyats* with another year's payments coming on to pay up arrears dating the fifth and sixth years back." (Cole, 1897)

Consequently towards the end of the year 1897, some changes were made regarding the land revenue collection system. A Sub-Deputy collector was appointed for the supervision of land revenue administration of the State. Babu Raj Kumar Rai took charge as the first deputy collector of Manipur. He proposed some changes in the revenue collection system many of which were accepted by the British. Firstly, town of Imphal was made as a separate *panna* under a *lakpa*. Secondly, every *lakpa* was ordered to furnish security amounts varying from Rs. 5000 down. Thirdly, all the connection of the *lakpas* works related to land registration was put to an end, and this work was entrusted to the Sub-Deputy Collector working through his field staff and subject to appeal to the Superintendent of the State. Lastly, the existing *Amin* establishment was abolished as they were not fully trained and functional. Instead a temporary staffs of 4 *Kanungos* and 40 *Amins*, on pay varying from Rs. 20 to Rs. 10 was organised. Moreover, a survey school was established where candidates for future *Amin* post were first trained under the supervision of Sub-Deputy Collector (Annual Report, 1897-98: 10).

Apart from the revenue from the cultivated land, every household inhabited by an adult male in the valley was to be paid a house tax of Rs. 2 per annum. No land revenue (cultivated land revenue) was payable by the hill tribes of Manipur; instead they had to pay the 'hill house tax' which was levied at the rate of Rs. 3 per house per annum." (Adm. Report, 1904-05: 2). The house taxes in the valley were collected by the *panna lakpas*. Some officials did talk about how the house tax collecting system was not quite a fair one. "This tax (valley house tax), imposed in the place of the old obligation of all Manipuris to *lallup*, came into force during this year. Its amount is Rs. 2 per house, without reference to size or number of inmates. It is a tax of very unequal incidence, being the same for sick or poor alike, and ought in good time to give place to a tax on homestead land, the *basti* of Assam. The Manipuri homestead is often of large extent, running into acres, of usually most fertile soil, and its assessment at a rate corresponding to that in force in the Assam valley would undoubtedly bring in a higher revenue than the Rs. 2 house tax, and would tax the well to do while pressing lightly on the mere occupier of a hut" (Adm. Report, 1892-93: 5).

Earlier the hill house taxes were collected by the British officials with the assistance of the village headmen for which a payment of one *anna* per rupee was commissioned to him. However in the year 1894, for the purpose of collection of house taxes from the hills, the hill tracts were divided into five territorial charges or *lam*. The five *lams* were the Moa *lam* in the north, the Tangkhul *lam* in the north east of the valley, the Tammu *lam* in the south, the Moirang *lam* in the south west and Kabui *lam* in the west of the valley. Each *lam* was under a Meitei called *lam subedar*, with seven *lambus* under each *subedars*. They were paid in cash- Rs. 15 and Rs. 7 for *subedars* and *lambus* respectively. In the pre colonial period, *lambus* were the petty officials in

the rural and hilly areas. The British claimed that “the *lambus* were previously unpaid, and numbered some hundreds, who lived on what they could extort from the Nagas by professing to exempt them from coolie work—a boon for which high prices were paid” (Adm. Report, 1893-94: 5).

Under the colonial system, the *lambus* were used for the purpose of communication with the hill villages. He was employed in almost all spheres of hill administration; he became the interpreter, the tax collector, keepers of law and order, keepers of list of houses, supervisor of public works etc. (Adm. Report, 1894-95: 5). Basically he became the eye and ears of the government. As earlier mentioned the political agent administered the hills and the *lambus* were used as their tools to control the people. The British claimed that they were providing a better form of government and protecting the tribal people from the traditional oppression and exploitation rule of the Meitei king. The political agent actually said that “I have no hesitation in saying that hill tribes in Manipur territory are happy and contended under our administration” (Adm. Report, 1895-96: 5).

Many scholars argue that, however, in reality the British rules through the *lambus* were more oppressive. The hill tribes suffered more under colonial rule as they had to bear the financial burden of the house tax which was not there in the pre colonial period. In pre colonial period, the tribute pay by the hill tribes to the king in the valley varied from a little oil seeds to some cash given as an acknowledgment of superiority to a regular payment of money (Adm. Report, 1873-74: 16). The monetisation of the economy was great hardship for them who survived on bare necessities derived from their surroundings on day to day basis. They never experience such situations under the pre colonial rule (Kabui, 2015: 21-22). One of the reasons of the outbreak of the Kuki rebellion in 1919 was against the collection of hill house tax.

Widows and elder women were exempted from taxation. There are examples of many women trying to escape the taxation by listing their houses in widow householder list. “Lately it was discovered that in many Tangkhul villages the widows houses numbered 40 per cent, as well to do Tangkhuls have seven or more wives who lives in separate houses. An enquiry elicited the fact that these women were included in the village roaster of houses as widows exempted taxation. They might possibly be termed as grass widows; but for purposes of taxation, they have been reinstated on the tax-paying list, and their respective husbands have been called upon to pay tax” (Adm. Report, 1894-95: 5). Moreover, most of the Kuki tribes were nomadic shifting their houses and villages from one hill to another from time to time, therefore it was quite hard for the officials to collect the estimate amount of hill house tax from them. However, the taxation system under British was quite strict one. Whenever people failed to pay tax for one year, arrears were collected next year. When they were unable to pay tax regularly, properties or land were ceased from them and auction off. There are plenty of examples in the Administrative reports of land being auctioning or selling off by the officials when locals failed to pay tax for two or three years. “The Sub-deputy Collector with the help of his *amins* and *lakpas* hunted up defaulters and tardy debtors and drove them in to pay their dues...I ordered all lands on

which large arrears, some outstanding for 3 to 4 years, to be put up for sale. Under these orders, 8,947 *bighas* of land were put up for auction.” (Adm. Report, 1905-06: 6). There are examples of hill people surrendering guns to the British official as when they failed to pay their taxes. For Example one official reported that- “A sum of Rs. 840 on account of 28 guns tendered as revenue in the Moirang ‘*lam*’ is included in the amount remitted...A large arrear balance from the Moirang ‘*lam*’ including 91 guns, arrived just too late for inclusion in 189-98 accounts” (Adm. Report, 1897-98: 12).

Conclusion

Moreover with the coming of British in Manipur, there was an expansion of agricultural frontier especially in the valley. Each year, large areas of both new uncultivated land and wasteland were brought under cultivation. In the year 1905 as many as 10,992 *bighas* of new land were taken up for cultivation which was increased to 19,600 *bighas* of land in the year 1907. In the year 1904, 13,026 *bighas* of wasteland were taken up of cultivation which was increased to an area of 21,302 *bighas* wasteland in the year 1907(Adm. Report, 1907-08: 6). In the year 1909-10, the area under rice cultivation was roughly estimated at 127,365 acres and that under other crops at 17,661 acres (Adm. Report, 1909-10: 6). Here we can noticed the trend that each year there were tremendous increased in area under cultivation which was partly due to the extension of cultivation and partly to the discovery of concealed cultivation during the surveys. Over all the agricultural land in the valley which was only approximately 26,500 hectares in 1891 had risen to 75,370 hectares in 1941(Census, 1961: 17).

The agenda of expansion of cultivated land did not just confined to the British era of Manipur. The primary objective of the state be it the Pre colonial Meitei king or the British officials was always the extension of cultivation, for which certain land revenue regulations were specifically formulated as an incentive for the farmers who would undertook new land for cultivation. That newly cultivated land was entitled to concessional rate of taxation. The whole system of acquiring *Taunaro lou* or land was the perfect example of this practice. By making tax free for the first three years of newly cultivated land the state was encouraging the farmers to take up new lands under cultivation.

One of the reasons of this increase in agricultural land in Manipur could be increase in population, while commercialisation of the agricultural sector could be another reason. The irony was that, the expansion of agricultural land and commercialisation of agriculture did not mean a growth in the economy of the state. Many famines like situations arose at the end of British rule in Manipur due to over exportation of rice from Manipur. From January to Match 1910, 38,030 *maunds* of rice alone were exported from the state (Adm. Report, 1909-10: 6). Here it should be noted that most of export items during colonial Manipur were forest and agricultural produce such as rice, timber, bamboos etc. Robert Reid in his book recounts that “In 1939-1940, there were substantial amount of agitation arising partly due to the economic condition and partly out of grievances of other shorts...The economic griev-

ances aroused out of a rise in the price of the rice due to excessive exports coupled with a genuine fear of a shortage of rice in Manipur, where shortage means starvation, because it is impossible to import rice at a price which Manipuris can pay. The heavy exports in turn were the result of the numerous rice mills which have sprung up in Manipur. Though the export of rice was stopped and the mills ceased to work, the agitation persisted for many months in 1940” (Reid, 1893: 91).

The intensification of agriculture and increased of land cover in agriculture also impacted the biodiversity of the valley. Numbers of many wild plants and animals started declining due to the disturbances caused in their habitat. Even though many new rules and regulations were introduced for the revenue collection system the British hardly did anything to improve the quantity and quality of agricultural production in Manipur. No new technology or tools to improve agricultural produce was introduced; irrigation system was not developed; no measures were taken up to tackle the periodical floods which would bring frequent famines in the state and no agricultural institute was established throughout their stay. Moreover, no proper evaluation was done ever on production and soil quality. Every year production was heavily dependent on the nature of Monsoon of the year. If the monsoon was good they assumed that production would be good that year. Annual surveys and inspections were conducted just to check if the peasants were paying the tax in time or not. All of these shows that the British were more interested in extracting the revenue and surplus than actually focusing on the developments of the state which they claimed to do so.

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