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Short Review Paper

Examining the relationship between people and their environment in Pre Colonial Manipur

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Abstract

Manipur is situated in the eastern boundary of India, on the branch of the eastern Himalayas which protrude towards the south along the Indo-Burma border. The state can be physically divided into hilly tracts that surround the plain areas on all four sides and the flat alluvial valleys. The state is inhabited by various ethnic groups such as Meiteis, Nagas, Kukis etc. and has a diverse culture. Manipur is home to many natural landscapes and varied flora and fauna such as the Loktak Lake which is the largest fresh water lake in India with its vast biodiversity; Siroy lily and Dzukou lily which only blooms in the Siroy and Dzukou valley of Manipur. The Keibul Lamjao National Park of Manipur is the only floating park in the world which is home to the endangered brow-antlered deer locally known as sangai or the dancing deer exceptional for its long antlers. The objective of my paper is to study the relationship between people and their environment in Manipur in pre-colonial period. The manner in which the various communities and tribes of Manipur understood and incorporated nature in their day-to-day life will thus be examined. The paper will attempt to examine the different concepts of sacred groves as well as the role of various flora and fauna which played an important role in shaping society in Manipur. I have used various primary sources i.e. the Chronicles and Colonial accounts, archival materials such as Administrative Reports, Political Agent's Diaries etc. as well as secondary sources which deal directly or indirectly with the ecological history of the region.

Keywords: Manipur, environment, sacred groves, flora and fauna, Loktak Lake, Keibul Lamjao National Park.

Introduction

The Keibul Lamjao National Park in Manipur is home to the endangered brow-antlered deer locally known as *sangai* or the dancing deer exceptional for its long antlers. The Keibul Lamjao National Park is also the only floating park in the world, which is located in the southern part of the Loktak Lake (Bhishnupur District of Manipur). The Loktak Lake is the largest freshwater lake in India. The lake is very rich in its biodiversity and was designated as Wetlands of international importance under the Ramsar Convention of 1990. Two thirds of the total park is formed by the *phumdi*, which is a series of floating islands formed by masses of vegetation, organic matter and soil, one fifth of which is above water and four-fifths are below the surface of the water bodies. The Loktak Lake is a breeding ground of varieties of fish and many birds that migrate from the Irrawady-Chindwin River basin in Myanmar. The lake is also habited by numerous waterfowls, both local and migratory. For many people, the Loktak Lake continues to be the only source of livelihood, especially for those fishing communities living in the floating huts built on the *phumdi*[1].

The British claimed to have first discovered the *sangai* in 1839. This was by an English official, Lt. Percy Eld. In 1844, the deer was scientifically named after him as *Rucervus eldi eldi McClelland*. By 1951, the *sangai* was listed as an extinct species. However in 1953, it was rediscovered by the environmentalist and wild life photographer E.P. Gee in the present Keibul Lamjao National Park area. A total number of six deers were found in the region. Subsequently, in 1954, due to the persistent efforts of E.P. Gee, the *sangai* was declared a protected animal, and its habitat, Keibul Lamjao, was declared a protected sanctuary, covering an area of about 52 sq. kms. The sanctuary was officially gazetted in 1966, and in 1977 the Keibul Lamjao National Park came into being under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. The state government of Manipur declared the *sangai* as the state animal in 1989[2]. In 2003, according to the latest census conducted at the park around 180 deers were found. This shows that the animal is an endangered species till today. The deer is still vulnerable to natural calamities as well as human destruction. Even though hunting and killing of the *sangai* is prohibited and is a punishable offence, many still hunt the animal for the meat.

The efforts made towards the conservation of the *sangai* since colonial times till date reflects not only its ecological significance but also the important place it has had in the cultural history of Manipur with many legends and folktales about the animal. According to most of the legends, the *sangai* represents the binding thread between humans and nature.

Therefore, the slaying of the *sangai* was regarded as an act of breaking the cordial relationship between human and nature, an unpardonable sin. By respecting *sangai*, humans are actually respecting nature. *Sangai*, no doubt is thus a significant symbol of the cultural heritage of Manipur[3].

Ecological knowledge and practices of the people

In this paper I will be examining the relationship between people and their environment, their knowledge and understanding of the nature with an especial focus on flora and fauna of the region. Franky Varah in his article "Situating the human relationships with nature in the Tangkhul Naga's lifeworld" argues that among the Tangkhul Nagas of Manipur, nature was often regarded as possessing human qualities, or sometimes as supernatural beings. Humans and nature occupied unclear boundaries in which they were interconnected by a network of values and interaction[4]. Nature worship was one of the main tradition prevailing among all the Manipuri communities, be it the Meiteis or the Nagas or the Kukis. There are several deities dedicated in the name of the natural phenomenon like the sun, the moon, rain, forests, sky, thunder, eclipses and even natural calamities like earthquakes and floods etc. Most of the local deities of Manipur are in fact derived from these natural phenomena. Different communities or tribes had their own tradition of nature worship and different stories behind it. However it is to be noted here that, among all the tribes, nature was worshipped in form of human. For the Meiteis, the god of sky is known as Atiya Guru Sidaba who is also the god of celestial bodies; the deity of paddy is known as Phaoibi. The Mao Nagas also worshipped the sun and the moon and believed that they are good deities, while the Quoirengs believed that the celestial objects were very dangerous deities as an excess of sunlight destroyed the *jhum* crops[5].

T.C. Hudson noticed that at Maram, a Naga village, there was a legend concerning the rain deity, who was said to be a man of the village, who knew the art of rain making. The Kabuis believed that the thunder and lightning which accompanied the rain storms were caused by "the flash and clang of the massive bracelets on the arm of an unmarried girl, Kidilumai, who dances in heaven, as she danced on earth, for joy at the welcome rain[5]." The Tangkhul Nagas believed that thunder and lightning were caused by an angry deity who stamped in anger on the ground[5]. Rain compelling or calling ceremonies were part of cultivation ritual for almost all the communities in Manipur including the Meiteis, though rituals were different according to each tribe.

The Meitei mythology believed that the whole valley of Manipur was nothing but a vast lake. Gradually it started drying up and people around the surrounding hilly areas descended to settle in the valley. There was a slightly similar legend among the Tangkhul Nagas and the Mao Nagas. They believed that the world was once filled with water with no hills, no trees and that the deity imprisoned below the earth made such huge efforts to escape that hills emerged. The Mao Nagas believed that the sky was a male deity and the earth a female, and that an earthquake was as it were their conjugal embrace, whence all fertility, all growth on the earth had its origin. The earthquake deity of the Mao Nagas was known as Pekujike. The Quoirengs also believed that a deity named Kampinu made the hills for the Nagas to live there, and an earthquake occurred when a piece of rock is cut away to mend the deity's house below the earth[5].

In this way we can say that the cosmological world of the society was deeply imbued with an awe and reverence for nature, in both the tribal and non-tribal Meitei society. In the pre-colonial Manipuri society, people were not only dependent upon nature for their economical and physiological needs but also for their psychological and spiritual well being.

Ecological prudence or the notion of sustainable use could be seen in Manipuri society in many forms. Some of these practices are still relevant in present days. There were taboos on cutting down some trees and plants on some specific days. For example, it was a taboo to cut down bamboos on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, and new moon days, banana trees on Saturdays and all trees were not to be felled on Fridays. The love for fish and other aquatic animals such as crabs, snails, and other crustaceans which were and still are very common items in the food among the Manipuris are well known. However, many of these were forbidden to harvest or eat during certain periods, perhaps with a motive of sustainable harvesting and conservation[6].

Ponds in every household for rain water conservation; it was a traditional form of rainwater harvesting system was much in practice during the pre-colonial times and continues to be in use today in most of the rural areas in Manipur. While the people in the hills depended on becks, basins and springs for survival, the people in plains depended mostly on rivers ponds and springs. For daily consumption each household in the Meitei community had at least a pond for fresh water storage, and rainwater harvest. Trees and plants were not chopped down or cut during flowering season, it was a taboo to cut trees or plants during flowering or fruit bearing season. It was also forbidden to pluck any leaves or fruits at night.

Besides these practices that inadvertently or consciously aid ecological conservation, folklores about nature continue to impinge on the manner in which people act towards nature. For instance, a folklore called *Hijan Hirao* which is sung at the end of *Umang lai haraoba* described the lamentations of the tree parents of a young tree that had grown tall and strong and consequently had been marked to be felled for making a boat. Finally, the tree parents bless their young son and ask him to make a sacrifice. Ksh. Premchandra said that *Hijan Harao* is the muted and unheard voices of trees, plants and other natural forms trying to tell us their own journey of life, their pain and agony etc. He further argues that this lamentation had probably been incorporated in Lai Haraoba to exploit the idea of nature as a vital force and also the Manipuri tradition of attributing human

feelings to plants and animals. It also acts as a powerful poetic instrument which reveals the age old Manipuri tradition of protecting the ecosystem[7]. Perhaps because of this folklore, it is a custom for the Maibas-Maibis (priests and priestesses) of Manipur to always ask forgiveness of a tree whenever it is felled whatever be the purpose[6]. The ritualistic ceremony before the felling of a tree signifies an act of communicating with the tree showing respect and admiration for them. The poem symbolised the close relationship that people had with nature. It further gives massage of sustainable use and conservation of forest.

Similarly, among all the Naga tribes of Manipur, the customary observation of *genna* which means ban or prohibition as an important form of worship and a crucial feature of religious life was prevalent. During *genna* observation, all activities such as hunting, fishing, tree and grass-cutting etc. were strictly forbidden. It was intended to promote good harvesting as well as to give a period of relaxation and regeneration to the trees and animals.

The merit of this beliefs system and practices for the preservation of the ecological system were also seen in the reverence of nature such as the sacred groves. It is such beliefs that had led to the sustained relationship between the people and nature that preserved for centuries.

Position of fauna in the society of Manipur

The Meitei folktales of the were-tiger, the Tangkhul Naga folktales of 'three brothers, a tiger, a spirit and a man borne of the first women and the clouds of the sky', in another popular folktale of Khama-Thoibi of Meiteis, there is a story of a kind ox that took care of an orphaned brother and sister named Khamba and Khamnu and many more other stories tell us that animals especially the wild game were, apart from the celestial world and the natural habitat, a big part of the cultural beliefs of Manipur. Even when the British arrived in Manipur many of them were clearly surprised by the presence of numerous varieties of animals in such a small region. T.C. Hodson gives us a description of various fauna that he observed in different parts of Manipur.

For the lover of sport the valley is a veritable paradise. In the cold weather the numerous lakes and *jheels* are covered with wild duck, teal, geese, snipe, and in hills woodcock and rare pheasants are to be found. The eastern edges of the Loktak Lake afford a home of the brow-antlered deer, while the vastnesses and thickets of the lofty mountain peaks shelter the timid *serao.* The valley towards the Loktak Lake during the cold season positively swarms with wild fowls, especially geese. Both the geese and ducks met with in the valley are fine birds, and make good eating.

The wild fowl, especially the geese, nearly all migrate to the hills during the hot weather; they are said to proceed to a lake in the hills about three days north of the Manipur valley[8].

R. Brown also went on to describe in great detail the variety of four legged animals and birds that were found the state. He wrote,

Elephants exist in large numbers both to the north and the south of the Manipur Valley, also in the Jiri forest. The hill men hunt and kill them for the flesh and tusks. Leopards are few in numbers. There are several varieties of wild cats. There are two varieties of bears, one small and one large. They are both black and are mostly found in the north. Wild goat, wild pig and porcupine are plentiful. Wild buffalo and will cow or Methana are mostly found in the south of the valley. Deer are found in large varieties-brown colour, probably Sambar, small red deer, ravine deer, barking deer etc. Rhinoceros are found only in the hills to the east and south. Flying lemur, mole and rats were common...Several varieties of otters and monkeys are found. Fox, birds, jungle-fowl, partridge, quail, snipe, hawks, kites, black crow, doves, eagles of a black colour are said to be found in the highest peaks; owl, parrots, small birds are in great varieties[9].

Apart from all these different kinds of birds, rats and reptiles were also said to be found in Manipur. The presence of numerous fauna had disadvantages at times. Destructions and chaos caused by these animals in villages were well recorded in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* and the colonial sources too. Occasional visits of tiger and leopards attacking the cattle and even humans in villages are recorded in the royal chronicle[10]. T.C. Hodson also noted that "Of mightier game there is the tiger, a rare visitor to the byres of the plainsmen, now and then a leopard ravages the cattle, and up to the British occupation elephants were caught in the valley"[5]. Villagers were rewarded for the destruction of tigers according to circumstances, the rewards varied in value from a present of land and a robe of honour to small rewards in money, cloths and salt.

The above mentioned descriptions tell us that the bio-diversity of the region was very rich and the day to day lives of the people were very much embedded with the nature.

Hunting of Wild game and its rules and regulations

These wide ranges of fauna did encourage the people in both the valley and the hills to adopt hunting of wild games as a supplementary means of their livelihood. Moreover, welcoming a guest with a meal of the hunted game was considered as a sign of pride and dignity in Manipur society especially in the tribal regions. Bhudha Kamai argues that like their compatriots in the hills, the Meiteis, too, before their conversion to Vaishnavism, used to eat animal meats. There are frequent examples (in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*) of hunting expedition carried out by the king and his officials. For the Manipuris, hunting was not done for the meat, but as a social activity with much cultural values among the communities. Thus, skilled hunters were actually prized[11]. Tiger hunting was seen as a matter of pride and

courage, embedded in almost all of the heroic legends and folktales. The art of hunting was associated with a trial of strength and valour of among the tribes, an achievement which would earn a reputation in various spheres of social and cultural life. A man possessing with good skill of hunting and warfare inevitably acquired a position of influence in the community.

Moreover, as I have mentioned earlier both the valley and the hills depended mainly on agriculture; they thus also hunted animals and birds to stop them from destroying their agricultural crops. Tigers were common in the valley and the hills. The tigers were also seen as a threat to the expanding agricultural frontier especially in the valley. In order to keep down the number of tigers, an arrangement was in existence all over the country for trapping them; this was done by *keirups* or tiger clubs, who surrounded the tiger with a net. There were also scouts, called *whiroi* whose duty was to mark the lair of the tiger, which was surrounded by the *keirup*. A similar kind of institution existed in the Moirang principality of Manipur, known as *sharung hanba*, which controlled all the hunting activities of Moirang principality[9].

R. Brown further describes the mode of capturing tigers in Manipur. He informs us, "As in Bengal, when the lair of a tiger has been noted and marked, it is surrounded by a strong rope net, and information is at once given to the authorities. The officer of the *lallup* in which the tiger is found makes arrangements for its destruction; first, however, information was given to the king in case he might want to kill the animal himself"[9].

Brown further went on to discuss about hunting practices. He wrote the best time for deer shooting was in March, at which time the grass jungle was burned, and the young grass shoots up; at other times the deer retired into the hills. It was that time, when the jungle was being burned, that the wild boars were very dangerous to the neighbouring villages. Driven out from their shelter by the fire, were apt to run amuck and attacked all before him.[9] Therefore, hunting expeditions were organised during these period in many villages. Elephants were captured in concealed pit-falls, and killed with spears. Elephants and horses were economically important animals as they were major tradable items which had a total royal monopoly over it. However, the hill-men hunted and killed them for the flesh and tusks.

Even though many of the hill-tribes were dependent on hunting as a means of sustenance, hunting for sport was also common among them. The Nagas and the Kabuis hunted in large numbers. Dogs were also used in hunting trips to track the animals.

There was a rule among all the tribes that if they killed the animal outside the boundaries of the village land, the other village where the animal got killed, was entitled to a share of the game if any of its men were present at the kill. The *khul-lakpa* or the chief of the village had a customary right to a portion of all the game and to a royalty on all the fishes that were caught by any of the villagers[5]. R. Brown remarked that amongst the Kabui tribes, the man who first wounded the animal was entitled to its head, which he hung up in his house as a trophy[9]. T.C. Hodson stated that among all the tribes hunting was prohibited during the cultivation season and the game had thus a close season which was extremely beneficial for the animal population to multiply, for they had no halt as to killing does.[5] In the pre-colonial period, fishing was also prohibited during the cultivating season from the time of sowing to the harvesting time among all the tribes of Manipur[5]. R Brown noted that no trade was carried on in wild beast skins, and the *fera natura* contributed nothing towards the wealth of the state[9]. E.P. Gee had recorded that prior to 1891 (arrival of the British in Manipur) the *sangai* was "preserved by an order of the royal family of the Meitei clan, and any person who was proved to have killed a *sangai* was imposed a fine or heavy punishment, which could even result in the chopping off of the hands[12]."

Conclusion

Therefore, it can be noted that in the belief system of Manipur, culture and tradition has always had a very close connection with nature in some form or the other. Nature and ecology were not seen in isolation but as a part of their existence. People had a spiritual belief system towards the nature as well as a cultural code of respecting the nature. Madhav Gadgil also pointed out that "preservation of biodiversity demands an unequivocal respect of the folk culture. There is an abundant amount of evidence to support the fact that societies based on folk culture with their subsistence based economies exhibits a number of practices that promotes sustainable use of biological resources and conservation of nature"[13]. Preserving various knowledge and practices covering totemic beliefs, various customary restrictions such as *gennas* and establishment of scared groves and forests etc. will not only help in protection and conservation of the species and the habitat, but also symbolised and strengthen the ecological knowledge of our various traditional communities.

Nature worship was one of the main tradition prevailing among all the Manipuri communities, be it the Meiteis or the Nagas or the Kukis. In the pre-colonial Manipuri society, people were not only dependent upon nature for their economical and physiological needs but also for their psychological and spiritual well being. The concept of ecological prudence was very much incorporated in the belief system of the Manipuri society in many forms. Some of these practices are still relevant in present days. Besides these practices that inadvertently or consciously aid ecological conservation, folklores about nature continue to impinge on the manner in which people act towards nature. Therefore, nature and ecology were not seen in isolation but as a part of their existence. People in Manipur had a spiritual belief system towards the nature as well as a cultural code of respecting the nature.

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