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In-Migration: Identity, Conflicts & Challenges in Manipur

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Abstract

The history of migration in Manipur can be classified as before and after the arrival of the British. Prior to the arrival of the British, Manipur was a princely state and its kingdom was extended up to Kabow Valley of present Myanmar. Migrants are the resource as well as the source of resource conflicts in the state. It is commonly known in literature that Manipur culture was transformed from the Meitei society. This paper has two objectives: (1) historically contextualising the migration in Manipur and its impact on its socio-cultural arena especially on the Manipuri identity; (2) the issue of return migration during Covid 19. The study is based on secondary sources i.e. from census and other government reports. During the course of the study therefore, reference has been made to books, articles in newspapers and on the web besides also government data on population and migration. There have been many challenges faced by Manipur as a cause of migration. There was a fear psychosis created by certain civil society organisations of the state being demographically overwhelmed, which was not true. The consequence of which, however, was deepening of the divide that existed between various ethnic groups of the state.

Keywords: Manipur, In-Migration, and Conflict

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In-Migration: Identity, Conflicts & Challenges in Manipur

Pradeep C Nair

Introduction

In recent decades, world over, migration from one place to another has emerged as a significant constituent of population composition and change. It has influenced every aspect of life from its place of origin to the destination. In India, its impact has been felt particularly in the Northeast region of the country. There have been apprehensions of small ethnic communities of the region getting overwhelmed by huge inflows of migrants. That is why the demands for restrictions like the Inner Line Permit System for management of migration. The Inner Line Permit System itself is a regulation that restricts entry of people other than the ones who are indigenous in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and now, lately, Manipur. In Manipur, there was a demand for the Inner Line Permit System for over three decades. The primary fear was of getting weighed down by migration. This demand has now found traction in Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura for the same reason. It is interesting to note that there is a low mobility of migration within the states of Northeast region as compared to the rest of the country. While Arunachal Pradesh is the only state having percentage of migrants higher than the country average, the lowest mobility within the state is observed in the states of Manipur, Meghalaya and Nagaland (Lusome, 2020). The state of Manipur lies to the Eastern extreme of North-east India. Bordering it are Burma (now Myanmar) to the East and South, Nagaland to the North and the states of Assam and Mizoram to the West and South-west respectively. It's very peculiar location has ensured centuries of interaction with Burma given that its borders with Nagaland, Mizoram and Assam are more hilly and difficult. The state is divided into two distinct regions, the Hill and Valley regions. The Hills are mostly occupied by the tribals; Nagas and Kukis who are largely Christians and in the valley region reside the Meiteis, who are Hindus. A certain section of the peoples residing in the valley are Muslims and are known as Pangals. They too speak the Meitei language. The tribals in the Hills speak languages that are mutually unintelligible. The Valley occupies only one-

tenth of geographical area, while the Hill areas occupy ninety percent of the landmass. Any citizen from the Hills or rest of India can settle in the Valley including Nepalis, tribals, non-tribals, Meiteis, Pangals and any migrant people. However, Hill districts are exclusively for tribal people of Manipur and no other people (valley and other parts of India) can permanently settle in these regions. About sixty percent of the population of the state of Manipur resides in the valley while forty percent resides in the hills (Society, 2016). There is therefore high spatial pressure in the valley districts and valley people are often challenged with this type of land resource conflicts.

This paper has two objectives: (1) historically contextualising the migration in Manipur and its impact on its socio-cultural arena especially on the Manipuri identity; (2) the issue of return migration during Covid 19.

The study is based on secondary sources i.e. from census and other government reports. During the course of the study therefore, reference has been made to books, articles in newspapers and on the web besides also government data on population and migration.

Historical Perspective

The history of migration in Manipur can be classified as before and after the arrival of the British. Prior to the arrival of the British, Manipur was a princely state and its kingdom was extended up to Kabow Valley of present Myanmar. Migrants are the resource as well as the source of resource conflicts in the state. It is commonly known in literature that Manipur culture was transformed from the Meitei society. In due course, the Brahmin migrants were assimilated and occupied a respectable status, identified as "Meitei Brahmins" under the one roof of Meitei society. Since the arrival of Hindu missionaries and saints, Manipuri society was formed by amalgamation of Hindu culture and indigenous cultural elements (Meitei, 2016). The history of modern Manipur begins with the introduction of Vaishnavite-Hinduism in 18th century along with the

arrival of the Bengali migrants in the state. Before the advent of the British in the 19th century in Manipur, there was hardly any contact with mainland India. However, after the Anglo Manipur war of 1891, migration commenced. Most of the migrants were peoples from lower castes represented by the Vaishyas of Varna System such as Telis, Hazam, Sahu, Das, Baniya, Yadav etc. The children of those migrants such as the Telis, the Nepalis, the Marwaris, and Bengalis now live as normal citizens of the state. Chronologically, the migrants may be again divided into two types – those that arrived before merging of the state with India and those that arrived after the merger. The migrants who arrived to Manipur before merger were foreigners since they were covered by Foreigners Act of the Constitution of Manipur (framed in 1947).

Prior to the arrival of the British, it is said that immigration into Manipur took place in the form of war captives. There was an extraordinary case in 1606 A.D when king Khagemba of Manipur imprisoned Muslim sepoy and imported them. These sepoy finally settled in Manipur by marrying Manipuri girls. The invasion of Khagemba against Burma in 1630 A.D also brought war captives to the kingdom (Meitei and Arunkumar, 2017). Before the British in Manipur, the Indian folks had less communication with the people of Manipur due to geographical isolation from the mainland India.

Decadal Population Growth & Distribution

Having had a peek into the history and the early migration pattern in Manipur, it is also necessary to see the decadal population variation that has happened in Manipur since the beginning of the twentieth century (*Refer Table 1.1 below*). Manipur has been having high decadal population growth since 1901 according to Census, India; it has always been higher than the national rate. Census of 1961, revealed that, the decadal growth rate of Manipur was tremendously high at 35 percent against the national growth rate of 22 percent only. It may be remembered that Manipur joined the Indian Union in Oct 1948 only; resultantly a better comparison of the variation in populations of Manipur and India should be seen from the 1951 census and onwards. Glaring is the fact thus that between 1951 and 1961, there was a quantum increase of 23 percent for Manipur, while for all India it was nine percent. This is very evident from Table 1.1

Table 1.1

Decadal Variation in Population – India and Manipur 1901 – 2011

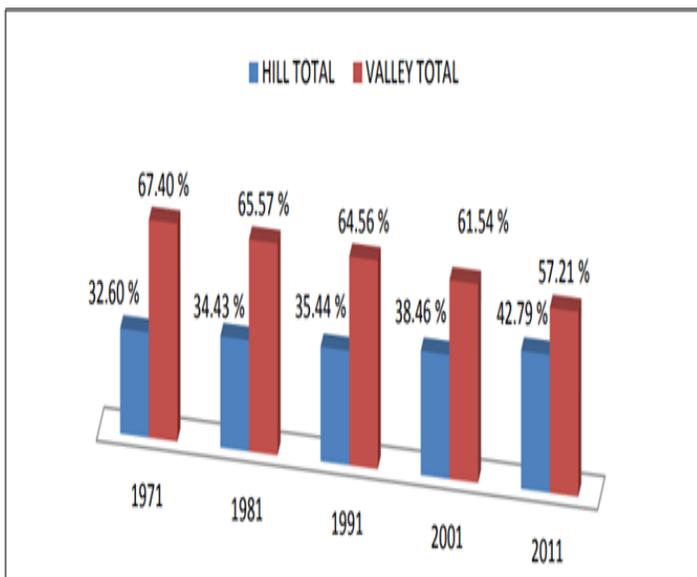
Cen- sus Year	MANIPUR			INDIA
	Number	Variation		Variation
		Absolute	%	%
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1901	284465	0	00.00	00.00
1911	346222	61757	21.71	05.75
1921	384016	37794	10.92	00.31
1931	445606	61590	16.04	11.00
1941	512069	66463	14.92	14.22
1951	577635	65566	12.80	13.31
1961	780037	202402	35.04	21.64
1971	1072753	292716	37.53	24.80
1981	1420953	348200	32.46	24.6
1991	1837149	416196	29.29	23.87
2001	2293896	456747	24.86	21.54
2011	2855794	561898	24.50	17.64

Source: Census of India (2011)

Hill- Valley Population Distribution

Having discussed the dynamics of the geography and the population distribution, it is important to see how the demographics have been distributed in the Hills and Plains of Manipur. As seen from the graph below (*Graph 2.1*) the percentage of population in the valley has always been higher, despite land being at a premium. That may be due to the thick forests and the tough terrain in the hills. However, with every passing decade, the percentage of the valley population is falling, but that is marginally. This is observed in Graph 2.1, below.

Population distribution in the hills and plains in Manipur



Source: Government of Manipur, Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Economic Survey of Manipur (2020)

Migration growth in Manipur vis a vis neighbouring states

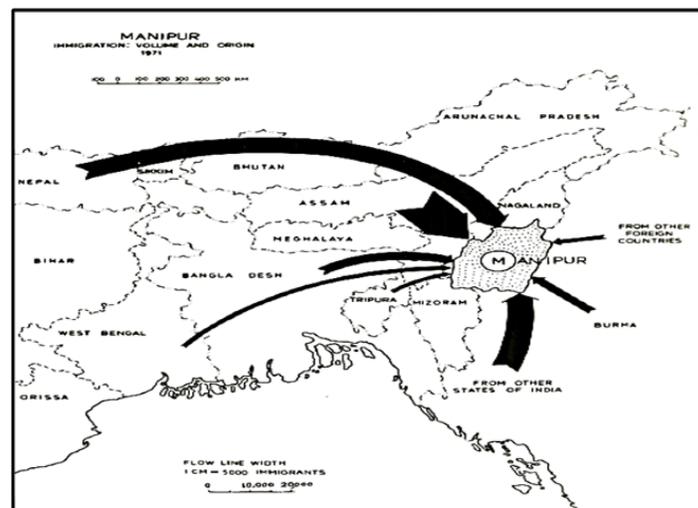
Apart from the historical background to the migration that has been brought out earlier, we also need to look at the migration that has happened in Manipur in the past hundred years or so. The Manipur valley has a temperate climate, fertile soil and many water bodies including the Logtak Lake (the largest fresh water lake in the North-east). This along with the availability of many other natural resources has made migration an attractive proposition. The above data is representative of the recent migrants. The major variance noted in this is amongst the Bengali and the Nepali migrants. While in the first case the first generation migrants are almost seventy-four percent, in the case of the latter it is only about ten percent. In fact, what holds true for the Nepali migrants also holds true for Hindi, Bhojpuri and other migrants, where the subsequent generation migrants outnumber the first generation ones (Note: The first generation migrants are migrants by place of birth while subsequent generations are not migrants by birth place, their fathers or grandfathers were born outside Manipur, migrated and settled in Manipur).

In-Flow

Migration has been observed to be increasing in Manipur since the 1960s. It has been particularly so because of the demand for labour, both skilled and unskilled. This is despite the insurgency that had increased post 1980s. In Map 1, shown below, it is observed that migration to Manipur has happened from Nepal, Bengal, Assam as

also from the Chin State and Sagaing region of Burma (now Myanmar). Manipur with its ample natural resources had a natural pull for people arriving from all these regions.

Map 1



(MapSource: https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/67709/12/12_chapter%205.pdf) (Accessed on 14th Oct 2020)

The Case of Neighbouring States

Migration is not peculiar only to Manipur in the North-east. Seen in the context of comparing the in-migration figures of the states that are in the immediate neighbourhood of Manipur, that is Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland, it is observed that the figures for Manipur are not alarming (Refer Table 1.2 below). In fact, it is lowest among all of them with a growth rate of 24.6, which of course is a tad higher than the national average growth rate of 21 (Note the decadal growth being mentioned here is for the decade 1991-2001). Nagaland's population growth rate has been shown at 64.3 which is unusually high for any state in India. In a paper written by Ankush Agarwal and Vikas Kumar, they have mentioned that the Census substantially overestimated Nagaland's population during 1981-2001 and, by implication, questions the sanctity of the Census (Ankush Agarwal, 2012). Incidentally, all these four states have the Inner Line Permit System, which is very restrictive for in-migration, yet all these states have higher in-migration than the average for rest of the country. This, despite the fact that there are very few industries or employment opportunities in these states.

Table 1.2

Population Summary & Migration of Neighbouring States of Manipur 1991-2001

State	Population 1991	In Migrants from other states 2001	Out Migrants 2001	Migrants from foreign countries 2001	Net in Migrants 2001	Migrant Rate(per 100) 1991-2001	Growth Rate of population 1991-2001
Arunachal Pradesh	864,558	71,789	12,507	2,931	62,213	7.2	27.00
Nagaland	1,209,546	33,594	51,857	1,752	16,511	1.4	64.53
Mizoram	689,756	22,599	31,739	8,436	704	0.1	28.82
Manipur	1,837,149	4,529	30,867	182	26,156	1.4	24.56
India	846,387,888	16,826,879	16,826,879	740,867	740,867	0.09	21.54

(Source https://censusindia.gov.in/Data_Products/Data_Highlights/Data_Highlights_link/data_highlights_D1D2D3.pdf, accessed on 10 Oct 2020)

Challenges Due to Migration

Migration is a reality that has to be accepted. World over, no physical barriers or legal rules have been able to arrest migration. Many say that it retards growth and development because of ambiguous civil or geographical divisions and the resulting conflicts thereof. Some of the conflict theories do elucidate how when there is scarcity of resources, the migration of any additional population will always result in pressures. When the Indian constitution was imposed in Manipur soon after it merged with India, it was hard for the people of Manipur to accept people that they considered as foreigners now as internal migrants. Seen again from a purely Manipuri perspective, either the British or Bengali or Bhojpuris or Nepalis were now to belong to the same description of immigrants. Even now it is a continuing debate over inclusion and exclusion of people of Manipur who have the right to claim themselves as sons of the soil. Among the sizeable migrants of Manipur, the Punjabis, Marwaris, Bengalis, Bhojpuris, Sahus, Nepalis, Baniyasetc make up the bulk (Meitei and Anand kumar, 2017). The Bengalis are usually the descendants of those educated servicemen including officers accompanied by the British. The Telis were the traders dealing with

grocery items employed by the British when there was the intention to introduce capitalist market in the state. The Nepalis were brought as sepoys and labourers, some by British and many others by Manipuri kings. All these migrants began to be collectively referred to as “Mayang” which means a foreigner or an outsider (derogatory). People are demanding to administer a system for systematic identification for the welfare of the people of Manipur having different identities. Since the people of Manipur were never directly involved in India’s freedom movement, it became difficult to accept and more importantly identify with the large numbers of people that began migrating into the state. It gave rise of conflicts between the new migrants and the native people. There was sense of paranoia that was spread by the JCILPS that there would be a demographic overwhelming that would happen with the indigenous people getting outnumbered by Mayangs. Tripura, Assam and Sikkim were being quoted as examples for this. Eventually, the ILPS was introduced in Manipur in Dec 2019, but the scars of the differences between the indigenous people of Manipur and the outsiders have remained, if nothing it has only aggravated the sense of scepticism between them. Further, the Nagas and the Kukis were never in favour of the ILPS in the first place, hence its introduction has widened the chasm between these hill residents and the plainsmen, the Meteis. Today therefore there are a number of conflicts smacking issues in modern Manipur. There is also a current trend of revivalism movement for traditional beliefs and culture that is happening in Manipur. It is said that many sections have given up the Vaishnavite traditions and are undergoing transformation. They are doing this by giving special emphasis to Manipuri traditional systems and beliefs. An example is the Holi Festival, which has been replaced by ‘Yaoshang’ Sports rather than the traditional playing with colours. Another example is the Durga Pooja which is being replaced by ‘Panthoibi Eratpa’.

The Amorphous Manipuri Identity

From the time of independence, the above-mentioned migrant people are assumed to be foreigners by the people of Manipur. This was because of the fact that they were once documented under the Foreigners Act of Manipur. When the Act was revoked after Manipur was merged, people’s perception could not be instantly removed. At different intervals, there were social upheavals. The ethnic uniqueness of the indigenous people of Manipur; largely the uniqueness of the Meteis, Nagas and Kukis began polarising the people of Manipur further. Next followed the call to stop migration which was shepherded by the Joint Committee on Inner Line Permit System, which began backing the inclusion of the Inner Line Permit System in Manipur. The JCILPS

was a Kangleipak, a Community Based Organisation, it claimed that seventy-one percent of the total voters in Jiribam Sub Division were migrants from different parts of India and other countries (<http://e-pao.net/>)! The FRIENDS (Federation of Regional Indigenous Society), another Civil Society Organisation based in Manipur in 2013 urged that the circumstance where migrant voters enjoying franchise and largely observed in Jiribam Constituency of Manipur is at stake! They even claimed that some of these migrants are imported by local political leaders for their own political advantages. The fact is that Jiribam is located adjoining the Cachar Valley of Assam, in the plains, resultantly it is easier for people from not only Assam, but also those from Bangladesh and other North-east states to migrate.

Covid 19 and Return Migration

The Covid pandemic and the subsequent lockdown that commenced in Mar 2020 saw many from the North-east stranded all over rest of the country. When the lockdown gradually began re-opening in June 2020, a reverse migration was noticed in the North-east like in the rest of the country. While at the national level, maximum reverse migration took place into Central India, the North-east too had a sizeable number of migrants returning. The services sector in particular, like the hotel and travel industry (largely staffed by people from the North-east) saw large job losses and the resultant rush back home. In the North-east, Manipur has three times more people migrating than those immigrating. However, post the onset of the pandemic, not only did the number of migrants out of Manipur decrease, also many returned back. Given hereunder is a data of the Return migration to the North-east amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

Return Migration amid Covid-19 pandemic (Northeast)

States	Returnees	As on	% of inter-state out migration - 2011
Arunachal	16,000	July 2nd, 2020	42.8
Manipur	28,000	May 31 st , 2020	37
Meghalaya	24,150	July 30 th , 2020	34.4
Mizoram	11,541	July 20 th , 2020	38
Nagaland	17,157	July 7 th , 2020	37.5
Tripura	25,566	July 18 th , 2020	29.8

(Source: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7585351/>, accessed on 4th Oct 2020)

As seen above, while the data is for the period unto July 20, what stands out is that the largest number of return migration in the North-east is to Manipur at

28,000 returnees. Manipur also has amongst the highest percentage of inter-state migration. The return migration however is unlikely to stand for long. Gradually as the nation will get into a vaccine overdrive and numbers of Covid 19 cases will decline, economic activities will gradually re-commence. The threat of impending successive waves of the pandemic as also increased human interactions with the forthcoming festive seasons are likely to impede the return migration. After all, people cannot endlessly be away from their jobs and the unemployed will continue to seek jobs elsewhere

Conclusions

Manipur situation is very complex and the complexities is growing over time. The following conclusions may be drawn based on the study:

- Historically, migration in Manipur can be classified into the pre and post British period. Before the arrival of the British, the migration was largely restricted to the entry of Vaishnavite Hinduism torch-bearers and the slaves that were brought by the Manipuri Maharajas from Burma and the Cachar region of Assam. Their numbers were not much. However, post the merger of Manipur with India, the migrants have increased, mostly for economic reasons.
- A decade after its merger, Manipur had a decadal population growth of over 35% which was amongst the largest for any state then. It now has stabilised at 24% and is lesser than the national average.
- While the migration growth in Manipur has been large amongst the North-eastern states, it is also the case that many people have migrated out of Manipur too for jobs, studies and their own economic upliftment.
- There have been many challenges faced by Manipur as a cause of migration. There was a fear psychosis created by certain civil society organisations of the state being demographically overwhelmed, which was not true. The consequence of which, however, was deepening of the divide that existed between various ethnic groups of the state.

Migration is the most capricious component of population growth besides being the most sensitive to economic, political, and cultural functions. World over at many places there have been calls for arresting migrations. Often these demands are raised by groups that are self-centred in their vision. If anything, migration has only led to an overall development of the society given that the society always has the tendency to pick up the best practices that exist from the other new group that entered the society. Speaking specifically about Manipur, we may think of the status

of these migrants of Manipur in two ways – one is from the context of Indian mainstream as a nation and the second from the context of Manipur. In both these contexts migrants have both attitudes of majority and minority groups respectively. An integrated Manipur is what shall be the dream of every citizen of the state.

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