

Nature Of Agricultural Production In The Eighteenth-Century Manipur Valley

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ABSTRACT:

Agriculture has been a crucial component in the progress of human civilization throughout history. The state fosters agricultural development in societies where agriculture is the economy's foundation. Moreover, economists have stressed the significance of creating surplus agricultural produce to support other sectors of the economy and encourage economic growth. Consequently, examining agricultural production practices can reveal valuable insights into the overall economic conditions. The paper examines the nature of agricultural production in the Valley of Manipur, which encompasses the extent of cultivation, agricultural land system, techniques and technology employed, the range of crops grown, the agricultural labour force, the involvement of women in agriculture, and irrigation infrastructure.

Key word: *Agriculture; Land System; Rice; Irrigation; Women; Tools and technology; Agricultural labour*

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I. Introduction

Manipur has a rich historical background as an ancient kingdom with well-documented records. The state covers a total area of 22,347 square kilometres, which accounts for only 0.7% of the overall land area of India. To the north of the state lies the Indian state of Nagaland, while Mizoram borders it to the south and Assam to the west. In the east, Manipur shares an international boundary with Myanmar. Manipur can be geographically divided into two distinct parts, namely, the centrally located valley and the surrounding hills. The valley covers approximately 10% of the total land area, with the remaining portion occupied by hills. This land distribution has been a significant factor in shaping the socio-political and historical evolution of the region (Economic Survey Manipur, 2020-2021, p. 2).

Kamei (2015, pp. 8-9) emphasized the significance of Manipur's valley, stating that the valley of Manipur played a crucial role in the growth of a powerful kingdom, despite its small size. The valley's high population density, fertile land, advanced technology, and well-established socio-economic institutions contributed to the kingdom's emergence. The kingdom began as a tiny clan principality at Kangla, located in the valley's centre, and eventually expanded to encompass the surrounding hills and territories in the Chindwin basin. Conversely, political structures in the surrounding hills remained restricted to village societies or republics and did not advance beyond that point.

The eighteenth century was a significant period in the history of Manipur, marked by various changes and developments across different domains. The upsurge of Hinduism and the subsequent conversion of many Meiteis to the religion profoundly impacted the religious and cultural fabric of Manipuri society. This shift also resulted in new religious practices and traditions that blended Hinduism with local beliefs and customs. The military expansion of Manipur into upper Burma was another significant development of the period, as it extended the kingdom's territorial and political influence. In addition, the *Anglo-Manipur Treaty of 1762 A.D.* further cemented Manipur's alliance with the British East India Company, which had implications for the kingdom's future interactions with the British.

This period had nine kings ruling over Manipur, with Garib Niwaz (1709 – 1748 A.D.) and Bheighyachandra (1764-1798 A.D.) being the most significant ones with the longest reigns. Overall, the eighteenth century was a considerable change and transformation in Manipur. The rise of Hinduism, military expansion, and political alliances with the British East India Company had a lasting impact on Manipuri society. It remained a significant epoch in the history of Manipur.

II. Extent of cultivation

Due to the insufficient contemporary data, scholars investigating Manipur's ancient and medieval economy encounter a significant challenge. While there is some research on the political, social, and cultural history of Manipur, the material culture during that time still needs to be explored entirely, as pointed out by Bhattacharjee (2010, p. ix). This issue is also present in the study of medieval Assam's economic history. In this regard, Gogoi (2002, p. 58) notes that the need for more contemporary records makes it difficult to accurately describe the extent of cultivation and the agricultural system during that era. As a result, creating a map of the extent of cultivation in Manipur Valley in the eighteenth century is challenging.

Based on the evidence presented, relying on colonial ethnographers who wrote in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries may be a practical approach to better understanding the subject. First, however, it is essential to evaluate the sources and evidence presented by them critically. In a specific case, Pemberton (2015, p. 30) and Brown (2018, p. 136) estimated that approximately one-fourth of the valley was cultivated lacks statistical figures to support it, making it difficult to assess the accuracy of their estimation. The only surviving statistical data that provided a more reliable estimate comes from a manuscript by Howell in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Howell's data suggests that the total land under cultivation under different tenures of land holdings at that time was around 26,500 *paris*¹ or 66,250 acres (Howell, p. 9 1891).

It is also noteworthy that natural disasters could impact agricultural output, but the cultivated land area would remain visible even if it is temporarily abandoned. Moreover, given the lack of modern technology during this period, significantly expanding cultivation over vast regions would have been challenging and required significant effort over several years. This constraint would have applied not only to Manipur but also to other areas during this time. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the extent of cultivation in late eighteenth-century Manipur could have persisted more or less similarly into the nineteenth century. However, it is essential to note that this inference is based on limited data. Further research and analysis may be needed to fully understand the extent of cultivation in the valley of Manipur during this period.

III. Was there an extension of cultivation?

The question of extending cultivation is debated. McCulloch (2016, p. 4) argued that favourable climate and fertile soil notwithstanding, there were constraints on cultivation. Conversely, Allen (1905, p. 120) identified the primary hindrance to expanding cultivation as labour scarcity and low rice prices. On the other hand, Brown (2018, p. 137) believed that production was plentiful, allowing people to achieve self-sufficiency in their food supply, even after accounting for state rents². Furthermore, Singh (1998, 10) stated that the fertility was mainly a result of silt brought down from the surrounding hills by numerous streams, which constantly enriched the upper layer of the soil. This factor resulted in high fertility in the valley of Manipur. Even during harvest failure, the crops grown only in the Thoubal area could feed the entire valley population.

Moreover, the agricultural system focused on subsistence farming, which meant that the goal was to produce enough food for sustenance rather than trading. Therefore, the necessity for extensive cultivation might have been modestly likely driven by need rather than profit. Additionally, it is notable that the state consistently promoted and supported efforts to expand cultivated land by providing irrigation and other related infrastructure (Hudson, 2016, p. 40). The British Political Agent in Manipur noted that the expansion of cultivation was occurring steadily but progressively (Foreign Department, 1874, p. 6).

IV. Agricultural land tenure system

The valley of Manipur had a diverse range of land categories, each with its specific use and taxation status. It was classified into agricultural land (*lou*), homestead land (*ingkhoh*), grazing ground, marshes, and wasteland. Homestead land was not taxed, but the tax was levied on agricultural land, which could be further classified into taxed-free and taxed land. According to Howell (1891, p.9), only 37.5% of agricultural land was taxed, with the remaining 62.5% tax-free. Taxed land included *Ningthem /Sarkari Lou*, *Taouna Lou*, and *Pham Lou*. In contrast, tax-free land included *Royal household Lou*, *Maharani Lou*, *Lungun Lou*, *Siphai Lou*, *Mana Lou*, *Pangal Lou*, and *Lai Lou*.

Taouna lou refers to the paddy land held by peasants, which could be newly reclaimed or purchased from another peasant. The right of ownership was strong, and the king could only remove the peasant if land

¹ 1 *pari* of land equal to 2.5 acres of land

² Brown (2018, p. 136-137) stated that the average yield of one *pari* of land (2.5 acres) was about hundred to fifty baskets (1 basket = 27.2 kg or 60 pounds). Moreover, the best one could even yield two hundred baskets. Therefore, the tax in kind realized from each cultivator varies from two to thirteen baskets a *pari* annually.

compensation was paid. However, failure to cultivate regularly or pay revenue for more than a year could lead to eviction (Howell, 1891, p. 5). About 19% (5000 *paris* or 12,500 acres) of the total land under cultivation belonged to this category.

The second category of taxed land, called *Ningthem/Sarkari*, was owned by the king and was used to maintain and manage the royal household. These lands were leased out to tenants, mainly slaves of the king called *Phoongnai* and a few ordinary peasants, who paid a fixed revenue annually. This type of land was temporary, and its holding was at the king's mercy (Howell, 1891, pp. 5 - 6). About 14% (3700 or 9250 acres) of the total area of land under cultivation belonged to this category.

The third category of taxed land was called "*Pham Lou*", owned by civil officers and officials employed by the king to manage and run the state administration. These lands were assigned to them in place of their salary, and the ownership was temporary (Howell, 1891, p. 5). About 4.5% (1200 *paris* or 3000 acres) of the total area of land under cultivation belonged to this category.

The agricultural land held by the state army was called "*Sepoy Lou*". It was granted to sepoys instead of their salary based on rank and position. The holding of this land was temporary, and the sepoys could sublet it to others for a fixed amount but could not sell it (Howell, 1891, pp. 2-3). *Sepoy Lou* dominated the agricultural land tenure, comprising 33.9% (9,000 Paris or 22,500 acres) of the total land under cultivation. *Pangal Lou* and *Mana Lou* were granted to those who showed distinguished service in war and civil works and were the king's favourites. The assigned land was for the awardee's lifetime and could be inherited by their heirs, provided they paid the revenue (Howell, 1891, pp. 2-3). It comprises 11.3% (3,000 Paris 7,500 acres) of land. *Lai Lou* refers to the agricultural land granted for maintaining state Gods and Goddesses (Howell, 1891, p. 5), which comprised 1.9% (500 *Paris* or 1250 acres) of the total land under cultivation, and was tax-free. The grant was permanent and never reverted to the king.

Lungun lou was land granted to Brahmins, with each male member of Brahmin families receiving one *pari* of land upon receiving the sacred thread. If the Brahmin died, their widow could keep two *sangams*, and the remaining land reverted to the state (Howell, 1891, pp. 4-5). The granting of land to Brahmins began in the eighteenth century after Manipuri rulers converted to Hinduism (Singh, 1998, p. 17). Approximately 9.4% (2500 *paris* or 6250 acres) of the agricultural land was under *lungun lou* holders. (Howell, 1891, p. 9). In addition, a portion of agricultural land was earmarked for members of the royal household, including the queen, comprising 6% (1600 *paris* or 4000 acres) of the total agricultural land. This land was leased out to either their slaves or ordinary peasants on payment of specific revenue per *pari* annually (Howell, 1891, p. 5).

V. Land ownership

According to Brown (2018, pp. 136-137), the landholding system assumed that all land belonged to the king, who had the sole authority to grant or remove any person. However, a closer examination of the system shows that specific rules and regulations were in place. Even the king could only remove someone from their land if they paid compensation. Furthermore, citizens could inherit and sell/purchase specific land holdings. For example, the *ingkhoh* (homestead) could be inherited, sold/purchased after notifying the relevant revenue officers (Howell, 1891, p. 2). The holders of *taouna lou* had substantial proprietorship rights, and even the king could only eject them by paying specific land compensation (Howell, 1891, p. 5). However, land assigned by the king to his officials and favourites was subject to his supreme authority, and such land had no saleable/purchasable rights, only leasable rights. The king could revert to such land at any time and place.

Although the king had limited power over some landholdings, he still had the authority to evict the holders in some form. For instance, the holders of *taouna lou* had to cultivate the land continuously. Moreover, the state policy was to confiscate land if rent was overdue for more than a year (Howell, 1891, p. 5), putting pressure on the holders like semi-serfs instead of free peasants. Therefore, regarding agricultural landholding, peasants had limited proprietary rights, and the king was the proprietor of all land and could dispose of anyone as he pleased. However, anyone who wished to cultivate was not prohibited.

VI. Crops of agriculture

Rice, which served as the staple food of the people, was the predominant crop in agricultural practices, with various rice varieties³ being cultivated. Among the early rice crops were *Suji Khong*, *Kabaw Phou*, *Dumai*, and *Phourel Anganba*, while *Phourel*, *Luining*, *Kakching Phou*, *Yenthik*, *Phoungang*, *Haidup Phou*, *Moirang Phou*, *Towthabi Phou*, *Sagol Yangbi*, *Phoukok Chakhao*, *Chakhao Poireiton*, *Chakhao Engkhoh*, *Chakhao*

³ Some ancient Manipuri literature like '*Poireton Khunthok*', '*Phouoibee Lang-On*', '*Phouoibee Warol*' etc., mentioned numerous rice varieties. However, these varieties could have been extinct for various unknown reasons. Hence, by the nineteenth century, the number of rice varieties in the valley had reduced to what Brown mentioned. The number of rice varieties on the hill was much more than in the valley (Basanta, 2021, pp. 23-25).

Masapanbi, *Chakhaio Mungkhang*, and *Chakhaio Sempak* were among the late crops cultivated (Brown, 2018, pp. 133-134).

The cultivation of rice involved three primary techniques: *Phunghul* (Dry Seedling), *Pampheh* (Wet Seedling), and *Lingthokpa* (Transplanting method), as reported by McCulloch (2016, pp. 33-34). The first two methods were traditional and had been practised for centuries. At the same time, the latter was introduced in the seventeenth century by Muslim⁴ immigrants (Khan & Bhogeshwar, 1973, pp. 52-53). Some scholars also posit that the introduction of this method resulted in a significant boost to the agricultural sector during the subsequent period.

The harvesting season typically spanned from November to December, and the process of harvesting paddy, known as "*lou yeiba*," involved several steps. Initially, the matured paddy was cut using a sickle called "*Thangol*" and then bundled and left in the field to dry for a few days, a process known as "*Lou khaoba*." Once the paddy had dried, it was ready for threshing. On the day of threshing, the "*Lou Yei Phak*" or threshing mate would spread out a mat conveniently in the centre of the field, and the paddy stacks were collected and piled up on the mat (McCulloch, 2016, p. 34). During threshing, songs were sung, and offerings were made to the Gods, seeking a bountiful yield. After threshing, the paddy was transported in sacks or baskets to be stored in granaries known as "*Kei*." Wealthier families often had large granaries built at an elevated height of about two feet from the ground to prevent dampness, as noted by Allen (1905, p. 74).

Cotton, mulberry, sugarcane, tobacco, and maize were significant crops cultivated alongside rice. As mentioned by Francis Buchanan in the eighteenth century (Schendel, 1992, p. 135), cotton was widely grown in Manipur. Darrah (1885, p. 2) identified two primary varieties of cotton, namely *Lasing Angangba* and *Lasing Angouba*, which were reddish or khaki and white, respectively. However, the hillmen primarily concentrated cotton cultivation in the surrounding hills (Brown, 2018, p.31).

Sericulture, the practice of rearing silkworms for silk production, was also prevalent from early times. Despite being described as rude and primitive by Watt (1893, p. 15), the silk produced in Manipur was of superior quality. Mulberry, the leaves fed to the silkworms, was grown in a few *Loi* villages in the West and North of the valley, as noted by Hudson (2016, pp. 30-31). These villages, as listed by Pemberton (2015, p. 35), included *Leimapokpam*, *Leimaram*, *Kameng*, *Khurkhul*, *Koutruk*, *Chakpa Phayeng*, *Sagolmang*, and *Sekmai*.

Sugarcane was grown either in the foothills or in homesteads. In the eighteenth century, Manipur was known for its diverse variety of sugarcane, described by Francis Buchanan as being "as big as a man's leg" (Schendel, 1992, p. 135). Sugarcane was a crucial crop used to produce molasses (*chuhhi*), sugar (*chini*), and various snacks and sweets integral to social, cultural, and religious events. Tobacco cultivation began in the seventeenth century when Muslim immigrants introduced it. Since then, smoking and chewing tobacco have become widespread practices among people. Opium, although cultivated in small quantities, was primarily grown among the Muslim population, as Brown (2018, p. 135) mentioned. Maize was introduced to Manipur in the seventeenth century, during the reign of King Paikhomba (1667 - 1698 A.D.), when he consumed maize at a place called *Mongsangei* near Imphal (Jhaljit, 1992, p. 130). On the other hand, wheat was rarely cultivated until the nineteenth century, as it was not a staple crop. However, records from the British Political Agent indicate that wheat production increased from 25 maunds in 1869 A.D. to 250 maunds in 1872 A.D., reflecting the rising consumption of wheat among the people (Foreign Department, 1875, p. 13).

VII. Vegetables and fruits

The vegetables and fruits were primarily grown in homestead gardens. A wide variety of vegetables were cultivated, including potatoes, ginger, brinjal (eggplant), gourd, bitter gourd, sponge gourd, pumpkin, taro, pulses, peas, cabbage, sweet potato, cassava, yam, turmeric, onion, garlic, cowpea, cauliflowers, cucumber, and chilies, as mentioned by Brown (2018, p. 134). Among the pulses, *Mung*, *Kesari*, *Mugngul*, *Sagol Hawaii*, *Hawaii Mairongbi*, and *Hwai Tuchombi* were the main varieties cultivated. It is believed that some of these pulses were introduced to Manipur by Muslim immigrants (Khan, 1972, p. 19). Fruits were also an essential part of agriculture. Pineapples, apricots, raspberries, strawberries, oranges, limes, pomegranates, guavas, mangoes, jackfruit, and papaya were among the essential fruits grown, according to Hudson (2016, p. 40). There were traditions where the king and his royal household would go out during their leisure time to feast on different kinds of fruits at various places (Parratt, 2005). Overall, agriculture in Manipur Valley was diverse and included a wide range of crops, vegetables, and fruits cultivated in homestead gardens. Some of them were introduced by immigrants, contributing to the richness and variety of the region's agricultural practices.

⁴ The Meitei Pangal (Manipuri Muslim) settled in Manipur in the Seventeenth Century.

VIII. Agricultural tools and implements

Traditional tools in ancient societies have been continuously used with minor modifications to adapt to changing socio-economic conditions (Sarkar & et al., 2015, 215). For example, in the Ahom agricultural process in Assam, the tools used have remained similar with minor adaptations until recently, as noted by Gogoi (2002). Similarly, in Manipur, the tools used in agriculture have also been passed down through generations with little changes.

On the whole, as noted by Hudson (2016, pp. 42 - 43), the main agricultural implements were the *Langol* (plough), *Ukai Ananba* (smooth harrow), *Ukai Samjet* (tooth harrow), *Kangpot* (sledge), *Phou Yei Phak* (Threshing Mat), *Cheirong* (paddy thrasher or flail), *Phou-Enthok* (paddy spoon), *Hummai* (winnow), *Thangol* (sickle), *Yotpak* (Spade), *Thangchao* (large Dao). However, it is essential to note that with modernization and changing agricultural practices, traditional agricultural tools are declining nowadays.

IX. Agricultural labour and women's role in agriculture

Agricultural labour refers to individuals who work in someone else's agricultural field in exchange for wages, goods, or a share of the harvest. There are several types of agricultural labour, including wage labour, seasonal unfree labour, bonded labour, and mutual exchange labour. Mutual exchange labour involves sharing labour resources among members of a community or village, primarily for agricultural operations. This type of labour is based on a reciprocal relationship in which a peasant offers services to a fellow or neighbour peasant within the community or village, who repays the favour. The prevalence of mutual exchange labour is influenced by two main factors: the nature of the work and the ecological conditions of the region. (Karnath, 2002, pp. 222-226).

Agricultural activities are time-sensitive and require completion within specific periods, with cultivators having to perform the entire task simultaneously. According to Hudson (2016), agriculture was the primary economic activity for Manipuris, with nearly every household engaged in cultivation. As such, there was no separate profession as agricultural labour. Instead, all family members aged twelve to sixty-five were utilized as labour during the agricultural season. Despite mobilizing all available family labour, cultivators still faced labour shortages during every agricultural season, making it necessary to seek labour outside their families to complete their agricultural processes. Cultivators began to recognize the necessity of exchanging labour among themselves at this juncture. The labour scarcity was tackled by implementing a labour exchange system known as the "*khutlang system*" among village community members. Interestingly, a unique aspect of this system was the crucial role played by women in it.

The term "*Khutlang*" is a combination of two Manipuri words, where "*khut*" means hand, "*lang*" or "*lanthokpa*" means lending, and "*Subha*" refers to work. Essentially, it involves lending one's labour to another person and receiving the same in return (Devi, 2012). The *Khutlang* system had various forms, including individual *khutlang*, household *khutlang*, and group *khutlang* for women (*nupi khutlang*). In cases where a person could not attend the *khutlang* due to unforeseen circumstances, they had to hire another person to fill their position.

'*Nupi Khutlang*' was an organized but seasonal agrarian labour exclusively performed by women. However, these groups were not professionalized labourers or wage earners; instead, they formed a purely mutual exchange of labour among female members. Each member benefited from the whole group's work, which rotated among them (Devi, 2012). Interested women of different age groups in a village formed a group comprising approximately ten to twelve members. They organized themselves to carry on the primary agricultural operations, contributing outstanding service to the acute labour shortage. Thus, women played a significant role in the agriculture sector besides their daily domestic chores (Kipgen, 2010, p. 29). They equally participated in all agricultural operations and can be called "cultivators" (Devi & Singh, 2015, p. 154). Such an active role played by women in Manipuri society led Dun (1992, p. 17) to believe they were more diligent than men. Hence, *khutlang* served as the backbone of agricultural labour, with men and women playing equally important roles, although it is hardly practised nowadays.

IX. Irrigation

From ancient times, the rulers of Manipur have shown great care and interest in the irrigation system of the kingdom. They have traditionally employed various rainwater harvesting and management methods, including digging canals, dredging rivers, and constructing bunds and dams. The rulers were aware of the limited nature of water resources and understood that the absence or scarcity of water could lead to environmental stress, food shortages, and famine. The significance of irrigation can be traced back to the pre-sixteenth-century Manipuri literature called '*Tutenglon*,' which narrates the story of dredging rivers and streams for irrigation purposes (Datta, 1949, p. 2395).

The primary sources of irrigation in Manipur were rivers (*turel*), canals (*khong*), and lakes (*pat*). The rulers of Manipur undertook significant irrigation works, including dredging of river beds and streams (*turel tengba*), digging and dredging of canals (*khong tengba*), and constructing bunds and dams (*thingel*). The

Cheitharol Kumbaba (Parratt, 2005) provides detailed accounts of the construction of various *khongs* (canals). For instance, King Kabomba (1524 - 1542 A.D.) dug *Takhel Khong* in 1534, while King Chalamba (1545 - 1562 A.D.) constructed *Leishang Khong*. King Khagemba (1597 - 1652 A.D.) dug *Marong Khong* and *Keikhong Khong*. In the eighteenth century, the number of *khongs* increased, and King Garib Niwaz (1707 - 1748 A.D.) constructed three new canals and repaired several old ones. Some important canals constructed during this period include *Yaran khong* in 1742 A.D., *Poirou khong* in 1744 A.D., and *Sadang Khong* in 1748 by King Garib Niwaz. King Bheigachandra (1763-1798 A.D.) also constructed *Ningel Khong* in 1781 A.D. (Khelchandra & Singh, 1989). The dredging and digging of canals were regularly undertaken, and almost every king constructed new canals or repaired old ones to improve irrigation in the kingdom.

X. Conclusion

It is challenging to determine the extent of cultivation due to limited contemporary data, and scholars may need to rely on colonial ethnographers' accounts with critical evaluation. However, it is evident that the agricultural system was primarily focused on rice cultivation and revolved around subsistence farming. Socio-political and economic systems, such as landholding, also influenced agricultural practices. Despite these limitations, the valley's fertile soil, favourable climate, well-organized agricultural labour system, and systematic indigenous approach to irrigation contributed to high agricultural productivity, enabling the sustenance of the population's needs. As a result, the valley of Manipur developed a reasonably advanced rice culture during the period. Further research and analysis are needed better to understand Manipur's economy and agriculture during this era.

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