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HISTORICAL STUDIES OF TRADE ROUTES AND ITEMS EXCHANGED BETWEEN MANIPUR AND BURMA, DURING COLONIAL PERIOD

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Abstract:

The article examined the commercial networks and trade commodities between Indian state of Manipur and Burma of the colonial era. The paper intends to present in the first place, a brief account of the mountain chains, which sits between Brahmaputra valley of Assam and Burma, upon which the trade routes located in this isolated region of north east India. Secondly, a description of the nature of the routes and countries which pass through these mountain chains is proposed, and may be discussed under two heads: Firstly, of those routes which start from the frontiers of the Sylhet and Cachar district of Assam to the territory of Manipur and then to the centre of the northern province of Ava through the Ningthee river in Manipur and Chindwin river in Burma. Secondly, those line of communication leading from the northern borders of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam into the Manipur valley and thence to the northern limit of the Burmese region. And also, an attempt is made to examined the utility of the many routes extending between the territory of British India into Burma. Finally, this article seeks to provides brief information about the traded items between the two countries from the pre-colonial to colonial period.

Key words: Trade routes, Mountain chains, Brahmaputra valley, Manipur, Burma.

1. Introduction: Manipur is one of the seven north eastern states of India. It is bounded by the Assam districts of Cachar to the west, the Nagaland districts of Kohima and Phek to the north, and the Aizawl district of Mizoram to the southwest. It shares its whole eastern border with Myanmar. Currently, National Highway 39 (Indo-Burma Road) runs through the town of Moreh in Manipur towards Burma. There is another Highway 53 (Old Cachar Road) towards the town of Silchar in Assam. Other state highways, such as Imphal-Sugnu Highway, Tidim Road and Ukhrul Road, are open. Geopolitically, it is not only a sensitive state, but also has strategic significance from ancient times for foreign trade and trade with Southeast Asian countries. Therefore, for a long time, the people of Manipur and other parts of Northeast India have had close interaction and ties with these neighbouring countries. Their interaction was more frequent and familiar than that of mainland India. Culturally and socially, they inspired each other. As a result, people establish a rich culture and

heritage in due course of time, which has contributed immensely to India's unity in diversity. Thus, Manipur has been connected to South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia by trade routes since ancient times; the majority of these routes traverse through the state's hills and river valleys. Immigrants, traders, invaders, missionaries, and others use these routes, engaging in economic and cultural exchange¹. People, ideas, culture, and commodities were primarily moved overland. The land route is a network that connects villages, states, and countries. In the case of Manipur, roads between the state's villages were built and maintained during King Khagemba's reign. Since ancient times, the people of Manipur, and the north eastern area in general, have maintained continuous interaction with the people of their neighboring countries. The works of numerous colonial administrators, engineers, and surveyors such as Pemberton, Johnstone, A.Phayre, Thomas Welsh, M'Cosh, and others provide limited but essential information regarding the early frontier trade. For example, in 1794, Captain Thomas Welsh said that some type of communication had existed between this northeast region and its neighbouring Southeast Asian kingdoms². Initially, the people living in and around India and Burma's border territories were economically dependent on one another for certain necessary items.

Some important products, such as salt, agricultural implements and husbandry, beads, clothing, metal cooking utensils, and so on, had to rely on each other in neighbouring areas throughout the early stages of their interactions. This, in turn, led to the rise of trade, which expanded the network of trade not only in the neighboring areas of the border, but also throughout the entire state of Manipur in particular and the north-east region in general. However, it should be highlighted that only the barter trade system was prominent at that period³ (Pegu 2003:233). Manipur's immediate neighbours, which are linked by land connections, are Assam, Cachar, Burma, China, Sylhet, Naga Hills, and others. Some major routes that connect with its bordering nations include, in the western side, Acquee route, Kala Naga route, and Khongjai route, in the southern side, Heirol route and Imole route, and in the northern side, Somrah highlands route⁴. The major modes of transportation are the ponies and other beasts of burden⁵.

2. Methodology

Historical mapping is used in the study to better understand the region's overall geographical topography, historical routes, and boundaries. The approach reveals some of the historical roads that connect Assam's Brahmaputra Valley to Manipur, and finally to Burma. Historical method had also been used to better understand other features of the routes, such as their utility and trade products. The information acquired comes from historical records and contemporary accounts. These include both published and unpublished books, paper, journals, articles, and newspaper clippings.

3. Origin of Indo-Burma Relation:

Contrary to the popular notion that ancient India lived in isolation, there are sufficient and undeniable facts that Indian played a very important role in moulding the culture and civilization of her immediate neighbours of South Asia and Southeast Asian countries. In this R.C Majumdar in his work "*India and Southeast Asia*" highlighted that it is just a matter of lesser or greater degree that Indian influence on its neighbouring countries in the spheres of its culture and traditions, or in short in shaping their civilization particularly Southeast Asian region countries of Burma, Cambodia, Java,

¹ Devi, S. Jayalaxmi(2015) Pre-Colonial Trade and Commerce of Manipur, The Manipur Historical Society, Eight Session, Standard College, Kongba, Imphal.p.62

² Sebastian, K.O (2000) Border Trade at Pangsu Pass, NEIHA, 21st Session. p.276

³ Pegu, Lakhi Nath,(2003) Trade activities of the Misings during pre-colonial and colonial period. (NEIHA, 24th session, Gauhati University.p.233

⁴ Pemberton, (1979) Eastern Frontier of India, Mittal Publication, New Delhi.p.51

⁵ Op.cit.p64

Thailand⁶ etc. Thereby one cannot deny the influence of India on its neighbours. Different scholars called this region by different names such as Greater India, Further India, India beyond the Ganges⁷ etc. Burma being located on the door step to the East Indian territory couple with accessibility by both land and the sea routes, it is obvious for the ambitious Indian adventurer to ventured and share her rich culture and tradition. Moreover, Manipur and Burma being lie on the crossroad to Southeast Asian countries, the famous international route of southwest Silk route passes through their territory and this was looked upon as an opportunity for the Indian opportunist to access the Golden Land (Suvarnabhumi) to which Indian called to Burma. It looks upon as an opportunity not only for the Indian traders but it also attracted the attention of the religious men and its rulers. Burma was the first country for the Indian to interact when she pursued her expansionist policy towards the east. Though the exact chronology of the first Indian contact with Burma is surrounded with confusion there are few assertions that claimed, in 6th century B.C.

4. General geographical descriptions of the region

The geography of Northeast India, especially Manipur, shaped its historical development, trade, transport, and cultural connections with Burma and Southeast Asia. Although Manipur was geographically isolated due to surrounding mountain ranges, it served as an important land corridor linking India with Burma, China, and Southeast Asia since ancient times. The mountain passes through Manipur acted as bridges between Indian and Chinese civilizations and enabled migration, trade, pilgrimage, and military movement⁸.

The routes connecting India and Burma passed through difficult mountain ranges, rivers, forests, and tribal territories. These routes began from the Brahmaputra valley and parts of present-day Bangladesh and crossed various hill ranges before reaching Burma. The mountains differed in height and width from place to place, with some peaks near Manipur reaching elevations of eight to nine thousand feet above sea level. The hill tracts were inhabited by various tribal communities, including the Zeliangrong Nagas, whom colonial writers described as fierce and unconquered. Traders traveling through these routes often had to pay tributes or blackmail-like payments to ensure safe passage through tribal territories. In fact, the mountain passes connecting between India and Burma were known to the civilized world from the very ancient period⁹.

The mountain system extending from Assam, Sylhet, Cachar, Tripura, Chittagong, and the Arakan frontier. These mountains divided the Southeast Asian region into different geographical and political blocks. Despite their difficult terrain, the gradual decline in altitude in some areas made trade and military movement possible between India and Burma.

Several important rivers also shaped communication and trade in the region. The Brahmaputra and its tributaries were significant, though many rivers were difficult and dangerous for navigation. The Barak River was partially navigable and connected Manipur with Assam. The Manipur River, also known by names such as Imphal Toorel and Kangba River, flowed through the Imphal valley into Burma but was navigable only by small canoes during the rainy season. Other rivers like the Maglung and Khumbat rivers also connected the Kabaw Valley and the Ningthi (Chindwin) River system.

Various natural resources are available in the north eastern region. Dense forests covered the mountains and valleys, containing valuable timber such as oak, fir, and bamboo. Geological resources

⁶ Majumdar, R.C. (1979) India and Southeast Asia, B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi.p.15

⁷ Ibid.p.1

⁸ Op.cit. p.6

⁹ Singh, N.J. (2007) (ed) Globalization and the Changing scenario of cultural interaction (Manipur Experience).p.vi

included sandstone, slate, limestone, agalmatolite, fuller's earth, and lignite coal found in different parts of the hills between Manipur and Burma. These resources were important for local use and trade.

Although Manipur's geography made communication difficult, its strategic location and natural passes made it an essential corridor connecting India with Burma and Southeast Asia. Geography strongly influenced the region's history, trade, migration, and cultural exchange.

5. Trade Routes

Manipur has been known for its geographical remoteness from the very beginning. The mountain range separating the plains of India and Burma runs more or less north-south and is a huge obstacle to east-west connection. There are nevertheless, a few mountains passes via which in the past, were the only means of connection between the two countries. The maritime routes in the Deccan were developed only with the entrance of the Europeans during the 16th -17th centuries. The human travel between India and Burma through Surma valley and Manipur began in the remote past. Sir A. Phayre mentions "The route by which the Kshetriya prince arrived in Burma is indicated to be through Manipur." "There can be no rational doubt that a big Aryan surge of highly pure blood moved from Manipur into Burma in pre-historic time," said Johnstone. There were regular routes between India and Burma which were used by the traders, colonizers and the Buddhist missionary. According to D.G.E Hall, such pathways pass through the Indian state of Manipur before reaching the banks of the rivers Irrawaddy and Chindwin in Burma¹⁰.

Manipur." Johnstone mentioned that, there can be no reasonable doubt that a great Aryan wave of very pure blood passed through Manipur into Burma in pre-historic time. It may be mentioned that there were regular routes between India and Burma which were used by the traders, colonisers and the Buddhist missionaries. D.G.E Hall mentioned that such routes were passing through the Indian state of Manipur and then to the banks of the river Irrawaddy and Chindwin of Burma¹¹.

E.W Dun¹² maintained that the village roads in the Imphal valley were similar with those of the rice growing countries and states of Assam and Burma, pointed out that the wide of the roads are just enough for one cart and difficult for two carts passing across. During the rainy season the roads are slippery due to mud and no trees along the road. Bridges across the streams and rivers were made of wood and bamboo. The roads in the hill's villages were mere paths connecting village to village. It is remarked that the routes leading towards Indian states and Burma are all passing through the hilly tracts which were inhabited by the hilly tribes.

India's Northeast region had close relation with its neighbouring countries and states since time immemorial through overland and sea routes. The region had maintained its continued relations with east and Southeast Asian countries through few trade and migration routes existed in the region leading to the north-eastern point of Burma and China and thence to countries of the region. Those routes started from the northeast region of India in the Brahmaputra valley passes through the Patkai ranges and thence one goes towards the Arunachal Pradesh and another towards the Naga hills, Mao, Imphal valley and then terminate it to the north (Bhamo) and north west (Tamu) Burma. Manipuri's chronicle's Cheitharol Kumbaba bears testimony to the used of these routes in the past by traders, immigrants, Buddhist and the Hindu missionaries across the borders. It is fascinating to know that it

¹⁰ Hall, D.G.E.1981.A History of South East Asia, Fourth Edition Macmillan Asian History Series, Macmillan Press Ltd. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hamshire and London.p.121

¹¹ Ibid.p.122

¹² Dun, E.W.1981. Gazetteer of Manipur, Vivek Publishing House, Delhi.

was through these routes that in the past people of India, Burma and China had been carried on their trading activities primarily through barter system in their respective products; it is opined that Indian traders received Silver bullion from the Chinese traders through these routes. It is also pertinent to note that most of the ethnic groups living on both sides of India and Burma belonged to the same racial group which aggravate both the countries to carry on trade and cultural connection through thick and thin over this eastern frontier region. In this regard (Choudhary 1959) provide us some information in his work 'The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelve Century A.D.' about the human intercourse of the Indo-Burma border¹³. Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh being lying on the intervening convergence between the Brahmaputra valley and Burma, its valley and hills witness to centuries of migration as the tribal communities have moved to seek new settlement. The existence of Ledo-Burma and Cachar-Tamu and its artery routes bears testimony to this that the present scenario of flourishing trade between the two nations is not suddenly happened but it's a result of aged old relations between the two nations. In this regard, the second century records of Mahabharata and the Harshacharita stated that the eastern land route was the oldest artery of the Sino-Indian relation¹⁴. During the ending era of the Ahom rule, the struggle for power among some of its officers, some power-hungry officers seek the help of the Burmese and the Burmese too without sparing the opportunity utilized the chances to expand their influence and territory. In the process, they came to this region in 1817 through the aforesaid mentioned routes. The Burmese in 1819 and 1821 used the same route when they annexed the capital of the Ahom kingdom and proceed further to expand the territory of their influence where the British had already its hand over some parts of Brahmaputra valley and harass the people of British territory. At this juncture the British came to rescue their subjects from the hands of the Burmese and also the Ahom, thereby, in the process they defeated the Burmese forces and send them to their own territory with the signing of the peace treaty at Yangdaboo in 1826 and by 1835 the whole of Assam came under the control of the British. The British also used the same routes that the Burmese forces used to go to the Burmese territory. Therefore, the various routes available in the region were being in constant used since ancient time for various purposes to have a continual relation between the two nations. There might possibly be a question in the minds of the people that, how could trade and commerce activities be possible when the two nations were in constant war. The simple answer to clear this doubt is, though most of the time both the nations were engaged in attacked and counter attacked to each other trade and economic activities was going on side by side, moreover the communities occupying the border areas are friendly to each other due to their racial affinity. Under such circumstances, trade and economic activities and cultural exchanged were inevitable since one could not produce everything that one required for living.

The ethnographical mapping of the states of the region and the legend of almost every tribal community in the region traces their origin back to either China or Burma. The Oral history of the many tribal communities of Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam traced back their origin from far away east and South East Asia. For instance, A.Z Phizo, the legendary chief of the Naga National Movement claimed that Nagas were not an Indian nor belonged to the Indian sub-continental community but came to the present abode since time immemorial from the Far East, Southeast Asia and beyond. No exception to Mizo tribe of the northeast region who traces their origin to Chinglung in China from where they migrated to the present settlement. The khasi and the Jaintia also claim their descendants from Indo-Chinese tribes. The various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur that inhabiting the same mountainous range falling into Burma have same

¹³ Dutta, Tarun,.2011. A Historical Study of the use of Patkai Hill Tracks of Indo-Burma Border, NEIHA, 32nd Session, Tripura University, Agartala.p.107

¹⁴ Borah, S. 2000 'Arunachal and Cross-country trade via the Frontier Policy' in Cross Border Trade in Northeast India, (ed.) S. Dutta, Hope Publication, New Delhi.p.102

affinities with those of Burma tribes inhabiting the same slope of mountainous range in the Burma side. Similarly, the Tai Ahom of Assam is said to have migrated in waves from Laos¹⁵.

Manipur being located on the crossroad between South Asia, Southeast Asia and central Asia, few international land routes pass through this hilly state¹⁶. Burma is one of the neighbouring countries which Manipur has commercial link since early period. Even though both the countries had been in a number of military aggressions to each other from time to time, off and on trade network continued to maintain between the two countries. Manipur-Burma trade in particular and Indo-Burma trade in general through land routes was carried out mostly through the three hilly passes namely Khoibu hills route or Heirol route, Aimole pass and Ngara Chenging route in which the first two routes leading to Tamu in Burma and the third route through kabaw valley leading to Upper Burma. All the three routes ultimately lead to Shan state, Burma, China, Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries¹⁷.

6. The routes between Assam and Manipur

The different routes by which the district of Sylhet and Cachar are connected with Manipur, and then from Manipur to the Burma territory maybe describes as follows: Those routes from Sylhet and Cachar to Manipur most generally known and frequented are that of Aquee route by which Major General Shuldham's army intended to advance towards Manipur during the year 1825. The point of departure or origin of these routes between Sylhet and Cachar with Manipur is Banskandi (Binakandi) a village at the northern extremity of the Brahmaputra valley and from where whichever routes they intended to advance.

The Aquee route is the northern most and very little frequented since the Burmese war. Its length from Banskandi (Binakandi) to Jaemugur in the Manipur valley is 86th Miles, of which the first 30th miles pass through a dense forest, intersected by innumerable streams of hardly six to eight yards in breadth, but when it is flooded it is faced with extreme difficulty in crossing. The soil is a soft vegetable mould and the numerous swamps occasionally faced with great difficulty by any men to go across were along the routes. There are five ranges of hills on which these routes penetrated.

The second route is the Kala Naga route from Banskandee (Binakandi) via Kowpoom (Khoupum) to Lamlangtong(Bishnupur) is 82½ miles. On this route only 17 miles passes through dense forest and also less intersected by streams and swamps than the Aquee route. This route has an advantage of crossing the Jerree (Jiribam) river at a distance not more than eight miles from its mouth which joins with the barak river which is navigable upto the burden(burthen) of 500 mounds. The course of the Barak River above Jerree river is covered with dense forest and therefore navigation in that area is very precarious. All the streams crossed by either the Aquee or kala Naga routes are fordable during the cold season except that of the Barak River. However, during rainy season all these streams swollen to such an extent that it is hardly fordable. The third route called the Khonjuee route passes through a country inhabited by the Khonjuee tribe. This route commences below the Khonjuee/Kooke village of Soomueeyol and crossing the Barak River passes over a tract of hilly country which attain less elevation than those hills tract lying on the Kalla Naga route or Aquee route, and then enter into the Muneepoor valley at its South-western corner. The villages on this route are few and small. With regards to water way, the Barak River being flowing through the hilly region of Manipur and terminating in the plain of Cachar in Assam and Sylhet and joined the Brahmaputra River, it is one of the networks of communication between Manipur to Assam and vice versa. There must be land-routes

¹⁵ Dutta, Tarun.,2011. *A Historical Study of the use of Patkai Hill Tracks of Indo-Burma Border*, NEIHA, 32nd Session, Tripura University, Agartala.p.

¹⁶ Kabui, Gangmumei.1991. *History of Manipur Pre-Colonial period*, Vol.1, National Publishing House, Manipur.p.11

¹⁷ Op.cit.1979. p.51

too along this river. All these routes facilitated the movement of commodities and raw materials in the region and beyond.

7. The routes between Manipur and Burma

The various routes have been describing as far as the routes or the line of communication between Brahmaputra valley and Manipur is concerned. The following discussion followed the established routes from Manipur to Burma. Thoubal town in Manipur is the general point of departure to proceeds towards the Burma frontier and the various major and minor routes most generally frequented are those of Muchee and Imole¹⁸, both of which after crossing the Muring hills pass into the Kubo valley, from there it may go towards North of Sumjok or south of Sumjok to khumbat and Kule respectively, through a valley nearly uninhabited covered from one extremity to the other with dense bamboo and lofty forest of Sal, Keo and Teak trees. The first route i.e the Heirok and the Muchee routes is from Thoubal to Tummoo covered the distance of $46 \frac{3}{4}$ miles of which nearly 36 miles lie among the hills. The total distance of the second route, i.e. the Imole route is 49 miles of which about 27 miles only pass over the hills. The routes from Manipur to Burma are unlike the routes from Cachar in Assam to Manipur and have only a few steep or precipitous passes to be overcome. On the Muchee route, after reaching the summit of the range while going from Manipur valley, the road passes over a series undulation and no single river is met. On the Imole route, there is one steep ascent and descent from the Lokchao river, however the remaining journey presents no difficulty for laden cattle. On both the routes, the supply of water is scanty and therefore it is necessary to any traveller to insure an adequate supply of this essential item.

On the north of these above-mentioned routes, there is another which leaves Manipur at Sengmiee and passing through the villages of the Tangkhool¹⁹ tribe and enters the Kubo valley at the north-western extremity, a few miles west of Sumjok²⁰. On this route there is one river crossed, the Turet, which is always fordable. Further south, through the Anal and Mueeyol Naga tribes, several routes are said to have present through which the southern extremity of the Kubo valley might be entered, however they are all so much more circuitous than those routes already mentioned above.

Tummoo has always been the principal stocked position of the Burmese garrison, when they were in Kubo valley and is a point of meeting (rendezvous) before proceeding to the territory of Burma from Muneepoor. If one has intended to reach Ningthee river then, the Ungoching hill which separate Kubo valley must be crossed or made a voyage down the Maglung river which falls into the Ningthee, which is located in the south-east of Tummoo. The routes across the Ungoching range, there are five passages between Monfoo and the Maglung river, and three passages between Maglung and the southern part of Khumbat division. The first five passages are all practicable for light armed troops and laden coolies, however, not for laden cattle, except the one which lead from Sumjok to Monfoo, and the second from Khongdong to Hueelao, on the right bank of the Ningthee. Major Grant, who is only the European officer who visited the three routes, considers it equally practicable with the other five and said even superior to it. The total distance from Khongdong to Hueelao is 49 miles, which may be covered in four marches i.e. four days. The remaining routes, all leave the Kubo valley at Tummoo and terminate on the Ningthee at Hueelao, Oktong and Ungong near joining point of Maglung and Ningthee rivers.

Of the three routes between the Maglung and the southern part of Khumbat division, the first route leads from Weetoo across the Ungoching hills to the joining point of the Maglung and the Ningthee

¹⁸ **Aimol:** Aimol is the sub-tribe of the Kuki community living in the Chandel district of Manipur, which bordersthe Tamu town of Burma

¹⁹ **Tangkhool:** Tangkhul is a major Naga ethnic group living in the Indo-Burma border area occupying the Ukhrul district in Manipur, India and Homlin and Tamu townships in upper Burma.

²⁰ **Sumjok:** Samjok is a trade centre town located in the Chindwin river valley of the Burma territory

rivers. The second route by which it is said that the British officers in Manipur always travelled extends from Sarawoongtingkool to opposite of Genduh, the principal Burmese post along the Ningthee river, and the third route from Khumbat to about two miles below genduh, through this later routes Alompra used in 1758 for the conquest of Muneepoor and it is describe by the natives as a good one. However, whenever traversed by these routes the traders or for that matter anybody have to cross Ungoching hills and it takes three days to cross the hills. The routes are in every direction covered with forest, consisting mostly of Sal, Teak and Keo trees and a great variety of bamboos. The route is wholly uninhabited. The information about the routes being wholly based on the information provided by the inhabitants of Kubo.

Thus, the total distance from Banskandee, one of the most advanced frontiers point of departure in Cachar to the right bank of the Ningthee river through the Kala Naga, Imole and Sarawoontingkool route is 203 miles. The following detail will give a better understanding about the total distance as follows

	<u>Days</u>	<u>Miles</u>
Banskandee to Thoubal	13	103
Thoubal to Tummoo	6	49
Tummoo to Sunuyachil	6	50
	<u>25</u>	<u>203</u>

From Sunuyachil through the Ningthee and Irrawatee rivers to Ava, the total distance is about 300 miles, the route by which Dr, Richardson said to have traversed.

8. Utility of the routes

There is a strategic importance of the land routes connecting India and Burma through Northeast India, especially through Manipur. Before the arrival of the British East India Company, these routes were mainly used for migration, pilgrimage, trade, and military movements. Border communities carried out barter trade to meet daily needs, while the routes were simultaneously used during conflicts between the kingdoms of Manipur and Burma.

With the arrival of the British, these communication lines became increasingly important for colonial expansion, military operations, and commerce. The British considered Calcutta as the main base for military expeditions against Burma. Among the three major routes from Calcutta to Ava (the Burmese capital) — through Assam, Manipur, and Arakan — the Arakan route was the shortest, but the Assam and Manipur routes were regarded as more reliable for the movement of troops and military supplies.

There are numerous resources available along these routes. Assam had extensive rice cultivation capable of supporting military forces within the region, though campaigns beyond the mountain barriers required supplies from Bengal. Manipur had limited resources and could support only a small number of troops, especially during unfavourable seasons when food shortages and monsoon conditions often forced retreat. In contrast, Arakan was agriculturally rich and produced surplus rice sufficient to sustain a large army for long periods.

Trade routes linking Assam, Bhutan, Tibet, Burma, China, Manipur, and Arakan strengthened relations among neighboring regions. During the reign of Raja Chourjit Singh, trade between Manipur and Burma flourished, especially between the people of the Manipur valley and those living near the Ningthi and Irrawaddy rivers. Earlier journeys through the hill tracts were dangerous because of extortion and attacks by some hill tribes, particularly the Kupui Nagas. However, after Raja Gambhir

Singh restored political stability and subdued these groups, travel between Cachar and Manipur became much safer for traders and pilgrims.

Manipur has geographical and climatic advantages, which made it an ideal meeting point for traders from Bengal and Burma. Located between the mountain chains separating British India and Burma, the Manipur valley became a natural commercial center or entrepôt for trade between the two regions. The Shans of Burma maintained friendly relations with both the people of Manipur and British officials, encouraging trade and interaction.

British manufactured goods such as textiles, handkerchiefs, muslin, glass beads, and cloth became increasingly popular among the Burmese and Shan communities. As British influence expanded in the eastern frontier, trade and demand for imported goods steadily increased. The Burmese government and the King of Ava were also said to recognize the value of commerce and trade relations.

Thus, the land routes through Manipur were historically significant not only for military and political purposes but also for trade, cultural interaction, and regional connectivity between India, Burma, and neighbouring Asian regions.

9. Trade items

Trade mainly consisted of natural products, agricultural goods, livestock, handicrafts, and manufactured items produced from locally available resources. Before British rule, trade was limited mostly to neighboring border villages, which often acted as intermediaries between Manipur and Burma. The trade system was primarily based on barter, with no strong profit motive, as both societies were mainly agrarian and produced only enough for daily needs.

Agricultural products formed the main items of exchange. Crops such as rice, chili, ginger, millet, yam, taro, pepper, lentils, and soybeans were commonly traded. Whenever harvests failed or certain goods were unavailable locally, communities exchanged surplus products with their counterparts across the border. Trade was generally carried out during agricultural lean seasons and was necessary for fulfilling daily requirements.

Apart from agricultural goods, several non-agricultural items were highly valued. Salt was one of the most important commodities. Traditional salt production at Ningel village in Manipur supplied both local and cross-border markets. Iron was another valuable item because agricultural tools and weapons depended on it. Worn-out iron tools, daos, and axes were even used as local currency among tribal communities.

Conch and cowrie shells were important cultural and economic items among the Nagas of Manipur. Since such shells were unavailable locally, they were imported through Burma and used in traditional dress, ornamentation, and as a medium of exchange. Bronze gongs made of copper and tin, mostly imported from Burma, symbolized wealth and status among Naga communities and were also used in ceremonies and bride price payments.

Weapons and tools such as Burmese daos, axes, guns, and gunpowder were also traded. Livestock including buffaloes, pigs, cows, and dogs formed another important part of exchange. Border tribes such as the Nagas, Kukis, Tangkhuls, and Chins maintained strong trade relations because of their cultural and ethnic similarities, although practices like headhunting restricted free movement into interior villages.

During the colonial period, trade expanded significantly. Manipur acted as an intermediary between Assam and Burma, exporting cattle, cotton goods, tea seeds, ivory, dried fish, silk, and other products while importing rice, oilseeds, timber, brassware, beads, silk, silver bullion, gold dust, and precious stones from Burma and China. Major trade centers such as Bhamo in northern Burma connected Chinese, Burmese, and Indian traders through annual trade fairs.

The communities inhabiting the frontier areas played an important role in sustaining transborder trade across Northeast India and Burma. Groups such as the Tangkhul Nagas, Kukis, Mizos, Singphos, Mishmis, Konyaks, and Meiteis acted as traders and middlemen, maintaining commercial and cultural connections across borders for centuries.

Manipur-Burma trade was an important economic and cultural system based on barter, mutual dependence, and long-standing regional connections. Over time, these trade networks expanded from local village exchanges into wider regional and international commercial relations linking India, Burma, and China.

Conclusion

After observing the above facts, one can say that Manipur because of its geographical location and cultural affinity there had been in constant contact with Burma for ages. The state demographical structure is the testimonial for the claimed as there are Tai culture, Aryan culture, and mongoloid culture. The state acted as a transit point for the waves of migrants from Southeast Asia, South Asia and East Asia through the various above-mentioned routes in different historical phases, thereby leading to the exchange of commodities and culture in the process. There was substantial development in the interactions between the two countries with the arrival of the British as there was improvement in the means of transport and communication and commercialization of agriculture begin.

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