



# MAPPING THE MEANS OF TRANSIT IN MANIPUR: FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY

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## Abstract

*The hill routes of Manipur were known to the civilised world since the pre historic period. These routes provided the main links between India and China through Burma. The traders and merchants from both the countries used to pass through this state during those days. The hill-girted valley of Manipur was well decorated by winding routes especially for trade and commerce and frequently traversed by the invaders. These hill routes were among the hill routes in the world. In this paper, an attempt has been made to identify the historical transit routes in Manipur connecting mainly on east and west but also on north of the state. It tries to integrate the geographical facts about important routes of Manipur from historical perspective.*

**Key Words:** Transport, Communication, Manipur, traders and merchants.

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## 1. Introduction

Manipur is a state that lies in one of the easternmost corners of India bordered by Myanmar in the east and south east, by Nagaland on the North, by Assam in the west and by Mizoram in the south. It has a geographical area of 22,327 sq. km. The Hill routes of Manipur were known to the world since many decadal eras. These routes provided the main links between India and China through Burma. The traders and merchants from both the countries used to pass through this state in those days (Sharma, 1960). The hill-girted valley of Manipur was well decorated by winding routes especially for trade and commerce and frequently traversed by the outsiders. These hill routes were included in one of the most famous hill routes in the world (Sharma, 1960). People from India travelling to Southern China and other South East Asiatic Countries passed through Manipur (Sharma, 1960: 31). In his Mahabharata, Jaimini had mentioned that Manipur was full of palatial buildings and was

was very rich in wheeled vehicles (Singh, 1966). It is written in Gerini's Researches on Ptolemy's Geography, p. 66 that "The northern part of the Kubo Valley, in the Upper Chindwin district which is the direct route from Manipur towards Burma, by which the founders of that dynasty, must have arrived is likewise, according to Sir A. Phayre, called Maurya; and is referred to as a district under the name of Mweyin, its Burmese equivalent, in the Po-U-Daung inscription (Singh, 1966).

Yumjao Singh has given his opinion though there was lack of accuracy that "The route described by Jaimini from India to Burma is the same route by which the early Indian civilization and colonists used to enter Burma and further east, through the present Manipur and thus there is no doubt that Jaimini's Manipur was our present Manipur. It is indeed a very wonderful fact that waves of Buddhist missionaries passed through it from the earliest days still this small kingdom of Manipur did not follow that religion (Singh, 1966).

It is considered that since the early period, some of the hilly regions may have been under water and some of the plains were higher than we find today. Manipur may have been a lake and a flat valley. Some of the

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scholars like R. K. Jhalajit Singh mentioned some hill routes of Manipur in his path-breaking book, *A Short History of Manipur*, published in 1965 that “The hills between the Surma Valley and the Manipur Valley do not completely seal off the Manipur Valley and the Surma Valley. From before the beginning of the Christian era, there were some routes through these hills connecting the Manipur Valley and the Surma Valley. At least three routes were connecting the valleys. The northernmost of them connected Banskandi near Silchar with the place now called Jaipur in the Manipur Valley. The middle one connected Banskandi with Bishnupur in the Manipur Valley. The southernmost route connected the western bend of the Barak River with Torbung, a village in the south-western part of the Manipur Valley. One or two routes were connecting the Brahmaputra Valley with the Manipur Valley. But they were more difficult. Likewise, several routes were connecting the Manipur Valley with what is now called Upper Burma. People from the rest of India could go to the Manipur Valley by one of the routes. After resting there as long as they liked, they could reach Upper Burma by one of the routes. Once they reached Upper Burma, they could go to Lower Burma or China” (Singh, 1965). Jyotirmoy Roy talked in his book, *History of Manipur*, about the Col. Gerini’s Researches on Ptolemy’s geography as “According to Burmese Royal chronicles (Maharaja Vamsa) Dhajaraja, a king of Sakya race, settled at Manipur, about 550 B.C. and later on conquered, old or upper Pagan” (Roy, 1958).

The hill routes were used by various groups of people viz. traders, invaders, pilgrims and colonisers from different countries. Further, D. G. E. Hall said in his erudite work, *A History of South-East Asia*, about “a road connecting Lower Burma with India via the bank of the Irrawaddy, the bank of the Chindwin and Manipur” (Hall, 1955). Lt. Gen. Sir Arthur P. Phayre wrote “The route by which the Kshatriya princes arrived is indicated in the traditions as being through Manipur, which lies within the basin of Irrawaddy. The northern part of the Kobo valley, which is the direct route from Manipur towards Burma, is still called Mauriya or Maurira, said to be the name of the tribe to which King Asoka belonged” (Phayre, 1883).

G.E. Harvey mentioned, in his *History of Burma* about the Hill Routes of Manipur as “Upper Burma lay inaccessible, true, it was nearer to China, which from second century before Christ used trade routes through Burma, Two were along the Irrawaddy and Salween rivers; the third, down the Chindwin river and through Manipur, took the caravans a three months’ journey to Afghanistan where the silks of China were exchanged for gold of Europe”.

The evolution of transport in Manipur may be visualised on the conventional pattern of periodisation

of Indian History and History of Manipur as three periods namely 1) Ancient Period (900 BC to 1074 AD) and 2) Medieval Period (1075 AD to 1835 AD). In this context the Modern Period is not included. As such the Ancient Period may be divided into two as (a) Pre-Historic Ancient (900 BC – 32AD), and (b) Historic Ancient (33AD -1074 AD). In this context, various transportation features, viz, (a) general regional orientation, (b) Means of transport and conveyance, and (c) the nature of traffic have been portrayed with available map based on available information concerning those periods.

## ANCIENT MANIPUR (900 B. C. – 1074 A. D.)

As the proper documents and information are lacking regarding the ancient period that prevailed in Manipur, however from the available data and information from different sources, it is thus periodised the Ancient Period from about 900 BC to 1074 AD. However further to make synchronised the written history of Manipur, the Ancient Period is further classified into two as Pre Historic Ancient Period (900 BC – 33 AD) and Historic Ancient Period (33AD – 1074 AD).

### Pre-Historic Ancient Manipur (900 B. C. – 33 A. D.)

#### General Regional Orientation

It is very difficult to ascertain the exact age of Manipuri civilization and settlement by the then population. But there are evidences to prove directly or indirectly that Manipur had been settled and populated since the 6th century B.C. or even 8th century B.C. “There can be no reasonable doubt that a great Aryan wave of very pure blood passed through Manipur into Burma in the pre historic times” (E.W. Dun., *Gazetteer of Manipur* p. 15). By about 900 B.C., Abhiraj, a prince of Sakya dynasty had travelled through Manipur Valley and settled at Ava (Burma). Col. Gerini in his Researches on Ptolemy’s Geography writes, “in about 450 B. C. Dwijwaraja, a king of Sakya race, traversed through Manipur from the southern part of the valley and conquered and ruled at Manipur (Gerini : Researches on Ptolemy’s Geography page 421-426). In about 543 B.C., a group of Talaing people from Kalinga had also passed through the hill routes of Manipur and settled in Burma. D.G.E. Hall, in his History of South East Asia mentions of a road connecting lower Burma with India via the bank of Irrawaddy, the bank of Chindwin and Manipur. From about the 2nd century B.C., there was a regular trade route from China via Manipur, Assam and upper India to Afghanistan and Europe. From before the beginning of the Christian era, these routes were used by traders, colonisers and invaders. During 108 BC, a long distant good road was constructed by Emperor Uti of Southern China to connect Yunnan

Province with Manipur. ( *Nandalal Sharma., Meitrabak p. 32, (a) S. K. Latureate-Chinese-their History and Culture p. 111 & R.M. Nath –Background of Assamese Culture p. 85*) From about 2nd century BC, there was a regular trade route from China via Manipur, Assam and Upper India to Afghanistan and Europe. There were some routes through the hills of Manipur connecting the Surma Valley and the Brahmaputra Valley with the Kabaw Valley. Based on the available sources from Nandal Sharma's Meitrabak and other books and reliable sources the following table which has been prepared to depict the different routes/hill routes connecting the different countries prevailed in Manipur since the pre-historic times.

**TABLE 1: ANCIENT ROUTES OF MANIPUR**

Type of the hill routes	Name of the routes	Important countries and places connected
First –	1. Heirol Route via Machi	Kabaw, Ava (Burma), China and South-Eastern Countries of Asia
	2. Aimole Route	same as above -
	3. Ngarachingjen Route (Ngariyan Route)	same as above -
	4. Maring Route	same as above -
Second -	5. Tongjei Maril Route (Old Cachhar Road)	Cachar, Tripura, Sylhet, Assam and other far western countries
	6. Ngaprum Chingjen Route	same as above -
	7. Khongjai Route	same as above -
	8. Acqui Route	same as above -
Third –	9. North Eastern Route (Tekhao Route)	Assam, Nagaland and other western areas in Assam

**Source:** Sharma, *Meitrabak*, p. 29, 1960

People from different parts of India could easily enter the Manipur valley through one of the routes of the Second order, and they could easily reach the Kabaw valley through one of the routes of the First order. These routes were used by traders, colonisers and invaders before the beginning of the Common Era. In the early period, Manipur was one of the gates through which there was cultural flow between India on one hand and Burma and South East Asia on the other. The hill routes of Manipur were used by Aryan colonisers for going to Burma and the Far East. Thus the early land routes between India and Burma passed through this hill state. The hill routes in Manipur are very much old like other hill routes in the world. Thus these hill routes are very much important and travellers, traders, pilgrims or colonisers are to pass through these hill routes for going to China or Burma on the east and India, Afghanistan, Europe on the west. It is thus those who are to go India and other countries on the west and Burma, China and other South East Asiatic countries are compelled to pass through Manipur.

### Means of Transport and Conveyances

It may be assumed that Land transport was the only

means of transport for movement of people and goods in Manipur those days. The river transportation with the help of small country boats or dug out logs might be in used mostly in the valley for movement of goods as well as people. But the boats were not large enough to carry more than 20 maunds (8 quintals). Most of the hill routes as well as the roads in the valley were unpaved. The rivers were bridged by bamboo and wood. Such bridges were suitable only for laden animals, men and women and not for the wheeled carts. In the valley areas, the roads were exactly like those of Assam and Burma and other rice growing countries. They were raised a few feet above the rice field, wide enough for one cart, but not sufficiently broad to allow two carts. The hill routes were too narrow and steep, at some places suitable only for foot passengers and laden mules.

### Traffic

The main traffic consisted of silk textiles and silk goods, bamboo and cane products, gold and horses. These goods were sent to the western countries as well as to Burma and China. Traders, armed forces, pilgrims, especially the Buddhists were the main source of passenger traffic. The following maps are also prepared to depict the probable routes connecting different places and countries through Manipur.

### Historic Ancient Manipur (33 A. D. – 1074 A. D.)

#### General Distribution Pattern

Though there is lack of historical evidences or records and the reign of different kings and social structures in Manipur before the Christian era, it is presumed that the same hill routes and valley roads were utilised by the then rulers since 33 A.D. Pakhangba, the first Manipuri king, ascended the throne in 33 A.D.

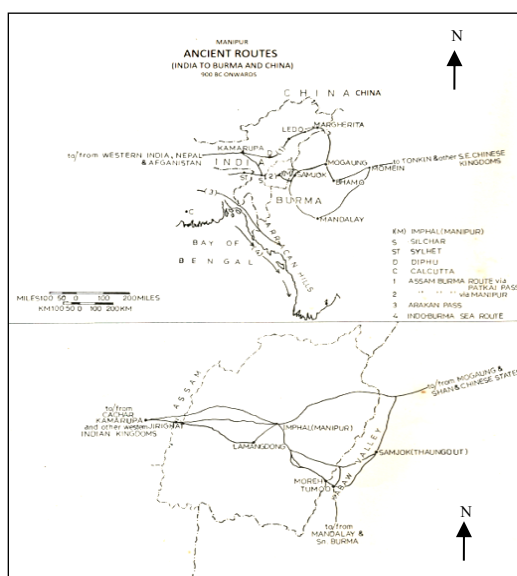
The existence of the hill routes helped the Indian princes and immigrants to come and settle down in the Manipur Valley. Some of them moved further east and entered into Burma and established their kingdom there. Thus, these hill routes were used throughout the ancient and medieval period by the then invaders, immigrants and traders. During 777 A.D., Shookanpha, the King of Pong traversed in the valley of Manipur and later on conquered Cachar, Tripura and finally reached his home land in Yunnan through Tongjei maril route, Manipur valley and then the Aimole route to Pong (Sharma, 1960: 32-33). In about the end of 8<sup>th</sup> Century AD, a traveller described the condition of the road leading from Yunnan to Manipur as "First, the route starts from Tokin (a famous town in Yunnan) and reach Yunnansen. Then proceeding towards west the route reach Chaukoleng town in between Shivel and Shelbuin rivers. From Chaokoleng the road bifurcates into two, the first road/route leads to near the Irrawaddy river along the plains of Shebuin river and here found the "LO" in the Burmese frontier. Then

crossing countries of hill tribes, the road reach Shilly town in between Tanga and Mandalay. Then reached Taomin (Pagan) and then Prome (Shrikshetra), the Burmese capital. From Prome the traveller crossed the Chindwin River and Kabaw valley and finally reached Manipur. "The second route diverging from Chaokoleng town proceeding towards Tengchong (Momin) town, crossed the "Mee" ranges and reach Bhamo in the Irrawaddy basin. Then crossed the Longshuwan River and then Chindwin River and finally crossed the Kabaw valley then Manipur (Sharma, 1960: 42-43).

### Means of Transport and Conveyances

In the early period, the hill routes and the valley roads were the main arteries of movement. In addition to the existing routes, the succeeding kings had constructed a few more roads in the valley section. King Ayangba (821-910 AD) had constructed a road in the eastern part of Imphal. It served the people of Manipur for many centuries and is still existing. After the reigning king, it was named Ayangpalli. It forms the eastern boundary of Imphal Municipality (Singh, 1965: 55). In those days Manipur was divided into seven principalities, which used to have perpetual conflict among them for supremacy. Very little progress was there on the construction of road due to fights among the principalities, of course which were connected each other by roads and water routes.

### Map 1: ANCIENT ROUTES (DURING 500 BC ONWARDS)



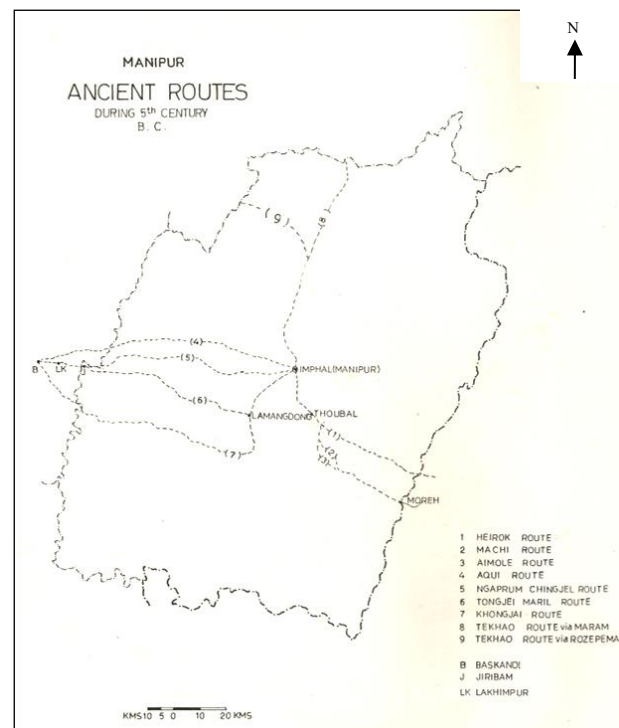
**Source:** Transport Network in Manipur - A Geographical Analysis, MU

### Traffic

The main traffic during the historic ancient period

comprised of immigrants and pilgrims. There were little trade and commerce among the principalities of Manipur and each one was independent of each other.

### Map No. 2: ANCIENT ROUTES (5th BC)



**Source:** Transport Network in Manipur - A Geographical Analysis, MU

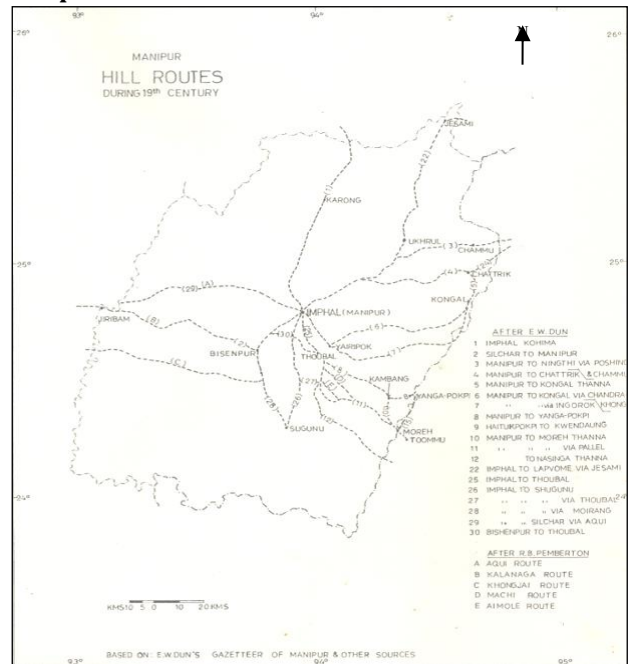
### Medieval Manipur (1075 A. D. – 1835 A. D.)

#### General Condition of Transport and Trade

With the accession of king Loiyumpa (1074-1122 AD), there was a marked improvement on the economic and political conditions of Manipur. Even though there were political disturbances and fights and invasions from outside, roads were constructed by the successive rulers. In 1536-37, King Kapompa (1523-42 AD) opened a new route to Assam. It facilitated the cultural contacts between Manipur and Brahmaputra Valley. During the reign of King Khagemba (1597-1652 AD), in 1639, the roads were improved for better transportation of goods and other traffic. Forests, infested with wild animal, were a great hindrance to the construction and expansion of communication lines. King Paikhomba (1666-98 AD) improved the road from Chinga to Mongsangei in 1675. He maintained trade with Burma, Cachar and Tripura.



### Map No. 4: HILL ROUTES DURING 19th CENTURY



These three routes were the main passes for trade and commerce and movement of people and military personnel between Manipur and British India during the medieval period. Other three routes connected Manipur with the Kabaw valley in Burma were:

- i) The Muchee (Machi) (route started from Thoubal in Manipur valley via Hieerok (Heirolk) and Muchee to Tummu (Tamu) was about 48.3/8 miles (74.6kms).
- ii) The Imole (Aimole) (Route between the same points of Thoubal and Tummu was about 49.6/8 miles (80 kms). This route has few steep and precipitous passes to overcome.
- iii) There was another hill route north of the above two routes, which leaves Manipur at Sekmai (Nongpok Sekmai) passed through the villages of Tankhool tribes, entered the valley of Kabaw a few miles west of Sumjok.

91-96

of Khumbat division. Of the five routes, the first leads from Samjok to Monfoo, the second from Khongdong to Hueelao and the fifth route starts from Tummu and terminate on the Ningthee at Hueelao, Okhong, Ungeong near the confluence of Maglung with Ningthee.

### Means of Transport and Conveyances

Laden animals and ponies were the main means of conveyance of goods. Dug-out boats were used for movements of men and materials by river transport, mostly in the Imphal and Iril rivers. Bigger sized boats were used in the Barak and Jiri rivers.

### Traffic

Traffic mainly passenger traffic was contributed by pilgrims, immigrants and troops. There were frequent wars and invasions from Burma and south eastern states of China, which led to more movements of troops on these hills. Other traffic included the traders, and merchants who carried silks, various forest products, spices, Sandalwood, etc.

### CONCLUSIONS

There are a good number of hill routes in Manipur which have been in used till now. These routes were once the world's most famous and important route not only for pilgrims but also for traders, colonisers and invaders. Besides one of these routes is also a branch of Southern Silk Route where the silk of southern china is carried to the western countries for sale. But it is certain and true to say that Manipur was frequently visited by merchants, traders, pilgrims, invaders through the diverse hill routes existed in Manipur proving that wave of civilisation was flourished in this hilly state.

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