



Origin Migration and Settlement of the Chiru Tribe

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Abstract

Chiru is one of the indigenous tribes of Manipur that has its own culture, tradition, legends, folklore, folktales, folksongs, languages, religion, beliefs etc. They show predominantly mongoloid features, and speak Chin-Kuki language of Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. The Chiru shows affinity with other kindred tribes viz. Hmar, Kom, Purum, Aimol, Koireng, Puimei, etc. The core argument of this paper is that the conspicuous issues among the contemporary tribal people of north-east India are their ethnic identity and division. Knowing and understanding the origin, oral history, and oral literature of one's own tribe is a must as it replicates the identity of the people itself. The paper is also an attempt to depict the facts about the nomenclature or the term "Chiru" and the related theory. This paper will also throw light about Chiru Tribe which will, hopefully, facilitate further research and study.

Keywords: Chiru, origin, migration, distribution and settlement.

Introduction

Chiru is one of the smaller tribes of Manipur state, India. They have their own distinct culture, tradition, legend, language, social norms, costumes, aesthetics, religion, endogamy and beliefs that constitute the precious assets which have been handed down from their ancestors. The nomenclature or the term 'Chiru' is derived from the historical settlement sites "Chibu" most probably a place or region somewhere in China. Another name of this tribe is Reim in local dialects. Its literal meaning is "simple man" referring to a person of this tribe who has his own distinct peculiarity of innocence and holiness. It is accordingly known as "Reimfung Sanai" (people of Reim)¹. The Chirus inhabit some thirteen villages on the hill slopes of the western side of the Manipur valley. They are predominantly agriculturalists and practice shifting cultivation as the main source of economy. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman ethnic group. The Chirus speak a language which belongs to the Old Kuki sub-group of the Kuki-Chin languages which include Rangkhoh, Bete, Hallam, Langrong, Aimol, Kolren, Kom, Cha, Hmar, Anal, Hiroi-Lamgang and Purum². The Chiru tribe is recorded to have been living in Manipur since the 12th century A.D." Among the so called 'Old Kuki' group were included tribes like Mayon, Monsang and Lamgang, who were already in Manipur since the first century A.D. When Poireiton migrated to Manipur, Tarao, Aimol, Chiru, Chothes, Kharam, Koireng were already there in Manipur in the 12 century A.D. Therefore, these tribes inhabited Manipur centuries earlier than the new waves of immigrants which moved into Manipur during the time of Nara Singh, the Raja of Manipur³. Chiru tribe has also been recognized as a scheduled tribe by the government of India since the year 1950. According to the census of 2011(Directorate of census survey Government of India

Porompat Imphal East), the population of Chiru tribe living in Manipur is 8599 consisting of 4395 male and 4204 females⁴.

The Chiru tribe like other ethnic groups of the North East India possesses a rich culture, tradition, mythology, legends and folk tales of the origin, history, costumes and culture.

The main objective of this piece of work is to illustrate the creation, origin and migration of the Chirus and their present settlement in Manipur. Most of the data are collected from some selected elderly men, women, scholars, writers, etc through personal interviews. Secondary information such as books written by scholars of the same tribe helps a lot in authenticating the information provided by the personal interviews.

Origin of the Chiru Tribe

The myth of the origin of human beings is more or less common to all the tribes of Northeast India. Historically, they have different theories of the origin and migration based on their folklore, folktale, and folksongs narrated down from one generation to another generation. But, in the case of the origin of the Chiru tribe, it is quite peculiar and different from other tribes. According to the ancestors, legends, and oral literature handed down to us by the progenitors from generation to generation about the origin of the Chiru, the supreme God (petheiin) did make a Chiru male and a female in the mist, out of a lump of mud the exact location of which is not clearly known and not revealed. The Chirus firmly believed that the so called mud was from a very distant and low-lying location of this planet earth. The spot is known as Nungaishor(used for saturated ash or making soda for curry substance) in Chiru language with a firm belief that its shape is like that of a household haikhup (a kitchen basket which are similar to cone in shape). The said Nungaishor was usually used in the kitchen

for the purpose of making soda. A Nungaihor is a small basket; its upper portion was somewhat round and wider narrowing down the bottom. From a place somewhere on this planet which was in the shape of a basket. The tribe flourished and expanded in all directions of the globe till today. That low-lying marshy area which was in the likeness of a basket is believed to be the original asset or abode of this tribe. The tribe believed that they originated from the location from where land snail (Kongnap) did originate. A traditional big house called SeiirIn which was like a dormitory was constructed. On the roof of the house just above the main door was a wooden signboard of a pregnant woman embossed with a mollusc tentacle (beard). This SeiirIn has its etymological significance on the part of origination of this tribe since the creation time of Chiru tribe¹. It is clearly seen and found in folklore, folktale and folksong handed down from the progenitors. It has also been mentioned in their tradition, folklore and folksongs which were passed down from one generation to another.

Few instances which support this theory in their folksongs are as given below:

In Chiru

1. Eh... kunga hongthoia
Eh...vaipa nang sum in
Eh...en ranga hoite aom roler sui
Eh...enrang hoite aom, eh ...udunga lam siri
Eh...enrang a hoite aom roler sui
2. Eh...eh...kunga hongthoia
Eh... vaipha nang sum in
En...enrang hoiteaom, roler sui
Eh...enrang hoiteaom, eh ... akhanga lamsiri
Eh enranga hoiteaom roler sui
3. Eh...eh kunga hongthoia
Eh vaipa semro veiro
Eh...enranga hoiteaom
Rolesui,...enranga hoite aom
Eh...vaipa semro, vei ro roler sui
Hoi sa sa, hoi sa sa. sa...¹

Ho ho, ho ho
In the beginning as aliens
Thou immigrated long, long ago
Seven fathoms each in length
So charming, so gracious thy houses were
As greeny groves of breezy bamboos
Ho ho, ho ho!
In the beginning as aliens
Thou immigrated
Long long ago
Long long ago

Ho ho, ho ho
As immigrant, as aliens
Thou came in the past, O chiru!

Seven fathoms in breadth
Thy dwellings were like
The majestic bamboo groves
The majestic bamboo groves!

Ho ho, ho ho
O new comers, foreigners
Thou came long ago, O aliens!
Narrate thy tales
Speared thy evangel,
The saga of thy emigration
The bamboo groves do way
Showing its charms and grace
Showing its charms and grace

According to the cosmology of the Chiru tribe, the Supreme God (petheii) is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. The Supreme God is also known as Kapa Petheii (God of universe). He is the ruler of both earth and heavenly kingdom. With this belief in the Supreme God, the Chiru tribe has been worshiping the Patheii by offering cooked rice, green vegetables, fruits, domesticated animal's food like cow, sheep, goat, dog, pig and hen etc. Till today the Supreme lord commands the expansion of the lineage¹. This is the belief of this tribe, a belief which has been set into the social fabrics since the day of yore. The population of the Chiru tribe is gradually increasing day by day. This is what the oral literature reveals and passes down from generation to generation. The so called folklore, folktale, folksong of the Chiru tribe are still alive narrating human association and communication with God, goddess, animals and births. All these contribute to the mystique of the Chiru tribe.

Migration:

The Chirus settle here in Manipur as one of the oldest indigenous tribes. "Chiru Ngam-ye Areng pu Thumkangpu Fa-ye", which is depicted from the Cheitharol Kumbaba page 26, the Royal chronicle of Manipur proves that Chiru is also one of the original settler in Manipur¹. According to the precious account of our ancestral oral literature narrated down to us from generation to generation, the Chiru migration started from Mongolia, a country which lies in between Russia and China⁵. It is firmly believed that the mass immigration of Chiru is from Mongolia along with other Tibeto-Burman group moved through different regions of China, upper Burma across the Chindwin and Chin Hill; then they moved to Mizoram then to Tripura. Again, they came back to Mizoram moving to and fro and coming to Assam. At last they came to Manipur. In other words, Chiru belongs to the first group of migrants along with their neighbours Anal, Marring, Aimol, Chothes, and so on, and may be termed as old-Kuki group³. But now these tribes are in Nagas. Folktales and Folksongs of the Chiru tell us of this tribe recounting the hero who took arms against the Chinese king. Folktales also tell us of the Chiru workers who took part in the construction of the Great Wall of China in the 6th century B.C. After settling in china for number of years they moved to other

place within the land of China. Migration took place which led to the idyllic hilly region known as “Chibu” where the tribe settled at last. The hill “Chibu” being the eponym, made the tribe known as Chiru¹. This is what the forefathers told in the oral literature and the tales are still being recited. It is believed that, the Chiru tribe settled there with natural gift of crops like paddy, fruits, vegetables which were found abundantly. It is also said that all the Chiru people were happily living together in one accord.

There is one theory regarding the naming of tribe Chiru. This theory has been a very popular theory which has been brought forth by many writers. This theory claims that after settling in India, one English man and political agents of British emperor a question to the chiru man what is the name of your tribe? As Chiru man who is illiterate thought they were asking him where they had originated from. So, the man answered that they had come from a place called “Chibu”. The political agent of the British emperor heard it as “Chiru” and so wrote it down as “Chiru” instead of Chibu. From then on, the tribe’s name is recorded Chiru tribe in the census record book, till today.

At present there are fifty five indigenous tribes in China. The unique tune of their folk songs is, to some extent, very near to that of the Chenthilan (a folk songs of Chiru). The similarity is found now and then in the Chinese television C.R.I.

After many years, they cross the Chindwin River and migrated toward the Chin hill of Myanmar (Burma). In the Karen and Chin state of Myanmar many familiar languages similar to the Chiru language are still surviving¹. Thereafter, the nomads proceeded to Mizoram and settled there for a long period of time. Again, they went to live to Tripura, (Takhel) and settled there for a long period. Solengreipar is a Chiru national flower which is derived from the word Takhel. In Manipuri, the flower is known as Takhellei and its botanical name Zingibaraceae or common ginger lily³. Similar dialects’ and similar facial features are still found in Tripura. Again they return back to Mizoram. Thereafter, this tribe went to Assam, so still today one Chiru village called Budon Chiru in Cachar district were remain in Assam. From Assam they finally came to Lounglebaishou in Churachandpur district. Loungleibaishou is a place bordering the state Mizoram where the Bairak river flow in Tipaimukh, Churachandpur district Manipur. It is believed that Lounglebaishou is now within the jurisdiction of the present town Zelhang where the forefathers settle years ago. But in Chiru language Zelhang is pronounced as Selang. From there, they spread to different places of Manipur. It is well supported by the folk song called Selangphai¹.

In Chiru

1. Eh-shelang phai oh yodele...eh
Eh-khulo sum ser soknati...eh
Eh-marang soknati...eh
2. Eh-shelang phai oh yodele eh...

Khulo reipon soknati eh
Khulo kunuman kichoina¹

O shelang valley
How lovely thou art with the charms!
Thou art the vale
The dale of gold and silver

O shelang valley
A lovely terrain thou art, a lovely dale yielding copper dish
A precious land giving fine yarns.
Thou art the giver, the giver of my mother’s dowries.

There is another theory that explains the reason why the population of Chiru is small. This theory claims that, while migrating from one place to another hacking their ways through thick jungles. As marks of their tracks, the nomad went on by cutting down different kinds of trees standing on their ways. It is said that, the Chirus cut a “muk tree” (plantain tree) on their ways. On seeing the black colour of its sap the followers came to know that some nomad had already preceded them. So the followers retreated to go in that direction. It is also said that the other nomad cut “Kokmathing tree” (wild varnish tree) on their ways. On seeing the white colour of the varnish tree, the followers of the Chiru tribe who were reluctant to go found a new trodden path thinking that, pieces of the wild varnish tree are white in colour and seemed to have been cut recently. So, they followed this route and some of them trooped to Ukhrul and resided in the No Man’s Land in between Myanmar and Ukhrul in the east¹.

Settlement

The origin and migration of the Chiru indicate their movements from one place to another in search of prosperous and peaceful place to live. The Chirus inhabit some thirteen villages situated on the slopes of the hills on the western side of the Manipur valley. Quoirengs, Chirus, Marrings, smaller tribes are found in the hills bordering the valley². Presently, there are thirteen Chiru villages in Manipur. They enjoy all rights of ownership of the land, property, culture, all facilities provided by the government and administration in spite of the fact that they are scattered in different districts of Manipur³. Even though Chirus are sparsely populated they preserve unity of the ethnicity and cultural integrity. The following are the Chiru villages in Manipur. Lamdangmeii-Lungmou and Dolang-Touyang Chiru villages are in Nungba Sub-division of Tamenglong district. The Chiru villages which are located on the western hill range of Imphal valley are: Kangchup Chiru, Bungte Khuleiin, Bungte Chiru, Thangthilon- sadu Chiru, Thangjing Chiru- Faishe ek, Nungsai Chiru, Dolang Khunou-Khouirouk. Dolang Khunou lies on the top of the Laimaton hill range overlooking the western hill ranges. Chawangking Chiru which was established in the year 2001, when the Chirus from Waithou Chiru village fled to take shelter to Liangmai village during Indo-Naga ceasefire. These villages are in the Senapati district. Charoi Khuleiin lies within

Henglep sub-division of Churanchandpur district near Loktak Hydro electric project. Uran Chiru and Waithou Chiru villages are in Senapati district lies to the eastern hillside of the Imphal valley³. At least 20 household of Chiru are also settling within Chinglamei village of Kom. Langdangmeii Chiru village shares its boundary with Thangal Kabui village in the west, Charoi chakotlong in the north, and Sangji kabui village in the south. This village itself is contiguous to Bitiang kabui village. The Dolang village lies very close to Langdameii village with Sangji kabui village in between them which is the north of Dolang, to its western side is Thangal kabui village and toward the south lies Zaojangtek kuki village. The Charoi khuleiin is also near the Kabui village of Thenjang, Mazuron etc near Loktak Hydro electric project. The Nungsai village lies on the western hill slope of Bishnupur³. It shares boundary with Parengba and Chinikon Kabui villages. The Chiru settlement area is just in between the Kabui in the north and various Kuki tribes in the south.

The pattern of settlement of the Chiru villages looked almost similar with that of Rongmei. In Assam state, there is one village known as Budon Chiru village Punji Kamranga, part-1, Lakhimpur. Some few households are also settling in Sachu colony Dimapur and Julukei town in Paren district of Nagaland. A Village known as Chiru Reim colony or "Happy valley" is in Imphal near Langol Tarung Thangmeiband. These are the present settlements of Chiru tribe in North east India¹.

Conclusion

The present paper has been able to recover all the primary objects of the study such as the origin of Chiru tribe, their

migration, their distribution and settlement which have been narrated down from the ancestors through legends and oral literature. The precise and detailed myths of the origin, migration, and oral literature are considered as the mythological heritage of this tribe. Chiru, perhaps, like many other groups aspires to grow and preserve the cultural heritage of their forefathers in keeping with the changing scenario of the contemporary world. The history of the Chirus from the mythical through the recorded past to the recent past is characterized by a quick considerable population movement.

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