



## **From Lineages To Kingship: Socio-Economic Foundations Of The Early Meitei State**

**Dr. Heisnam Nilkant Singh** Associate Professor in History Y. K. College, Wangjing (Manipur - India) Email: [nilkantheisnam1665@gmail.com](mailto:nilkantheisnam1665@gmail.com)

---

### **Abstract**

The genesis of the early Meitei state in the Imphal valley of Manipur represents a critical phase in the historical and socio-political development of the region. This study examines the processes through which kinship-based societies gradually transformed into a centralised political authority, highlighting the interplay of ecological, demographic, and socio-economic factors. In its earliest phase, families and lineages provided the fundamental organisational structures for settlement, occupation, and ritual practices. Over time, these units coalesced into larger clans, which controlled land, resources, and religious authority, thereby establishing the structural foundation for emerging political hierarchies. Archaeological evidence from Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites demonstrates the presence of settled agriculture, surplus production, and organised communities, which underpinned socio-economic stratification and facilitated leadership evolution. The study further explores the transition of local chiefs into kings, who combined political, military, and ritual legitimacy to consolidate multiple clans under centralised governance. This process was driven by internal consolidation, inter-clan competition, and demographic pressures, illustrating a distinctive pathway of state formation rooted in local ecological and cultural conditions. While the development of the Meitei polity aligns with broader theoretical models of early state evolution, such as surplus accumulation, stratification, and warfare, it also underscores the unique role of kinship structures, clan alliances, and indigenous cultural practices. Unlike many early states that emerged primarily through external conquest, the Meitei state evolved largely through internal dynamics, reflecting both the opportunities and constraints of its geographic and social environment. The findings of this study contribute to a nuanced understanding of early political systems, demonstrating how universal principles of state formation interact with local traditions to produce distinctive regional trajectories. The Meitei state thus serves as a valuable case study for examining the synthesis of ecological, social, and cultural factors in early state evolution.

**Keywords:** Meitei state, Imphal valley, kinship, clan organisation, early state formation, socio-political evolution

### **Introduction**

The emergence of the early Meitei state represents a defining moment in the historical trajectory of Manipur, a region situated in the fertile Imphal valley and encircled by hills that both protected and challenged its inhabitants. This geographical setting, combining abundance with vulnerability, created conditions conducive to both settlement and conflict. The emergence of the Meitei polity, like other early state formations globally, was a gradual process shaped over time by the interplay of ecological resources, population dynamics, economic developments, and interactions with neighbouring societies. In its

earliest phase, Meitei society was structured around kinship, with families and lineages serving as the basic units of organisation. These units provided the foundations of village life, which gradually expanded into larger socio-political entities. Over time, kinship-based groups crystallised into powerful clans, or *salai*, which exercised authority over land, resources, and religious practices. This transition from family and lineage structures to organised clans demonstrates the adaptive strategies through which communities ensured survival and stability in a challenging environment.

The consolidation of political authority in early Manipur was a cumulative process that reflected the interplay of internal and external forces. Surplus agricultural production and population growth created opportunities for stratification and centralised control, while inter-group rivalries and warfare acted as catalysts for political unification. Leaders who combined military skill with organisational capacity emerged from within these kinship networks, gradually transforming from lineage chiefs into rulers with broader territorial and administrative authority. The ascendancy of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in the first century CE stands as a pivotal moment in this process. His victory over rival groups and his success in uniting diverse clans under a single authority marked the first historical manifestation of the Meitei state. His reign not only institutionalised the principle of kingship but also formalised clan alliances and established a system of governance that laid the foundation for continuity and resilience in the centuries that followed. Understanding the genesis of the Meitei state requires attention to both universal theories of state formation and the unique features of Manipur's historical experience. While global models often emphasise the role of surplus, stratification, and warfare, the Meitei case highlights the importance of kinship structures, clan organisation, and indigenous traditions in shaping political authority. The convergence of ecological abundance, demographic change, and inter-clan competition produced a distinctive path to statehood, one that was simultaneously embedded in broader anthropological patterns and deeply rooted in the cultural and geographical context of the Imphal valley. This paper examines the processes of kinship organisation, clan consolidation, socio-economic transformation, and conquest that collectively shaped the structural evolution of the Meitei state, situating the case of Manipur within wider discussions on early state formation and indigenous political systems.

### **Review of Literatures**

Theories of state formation have remained a central concern in political anthropology and historical sociology, with early scholars offering evolutionary, materialist, and functionalist perspectives. Herbert Spencer (1975) advanced a theory that drew from biological evolution, contending that states emerged through mechanisms resembling natural selection, where warfare and conquest acted as the driving forces consolidating political authority. Similarly, Lewis Henry Morgan (1968) outlined a unilinear model of human development, progressing through stages of savagery, barbarism, and civilisation. For Morgan, the state arose primarily from the transformation of tribal confederacies into more centralised forms of governance, as exemplified by his study of the Iroquois League and references to the Aztec polity. Building on Morgan, Friedrich Engels (1884) emphasised the role of economic production, surplus, and stratification in shaping the institutionalisation of political authority. Morton H. Fried (1973), however, refined these evolutionary frameworks by stressing that states were not inevitable outcomes of human progress but emerged specifically from stratified societies influenced by ecological and cultural contexts. Similarly, anthropologists such as Robert Carneiro, cited in Cohen and

Service (1978), argued that circumscription, population pressure, and warfare together acted as catalysts for political centralisation. These classical perspectives framed state formation as a universal process, yet they also allowed space for local variation shaped by geography and social organisation.

In the context of South Asia, scholars began to adapt these theories to explain region-specific trajectories of state formation. Romila Thapar (1983) highlighted the role of agricultural expansion, kinship organisation, and surplus production in the growth of early polities on the subcontinent. Archaeological studies reinforced this view by demonstrating the significance of settled agriculture and technological advancements in facilitating complex social organisation. For example, O. Kumar Singh (1983) examined Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites such as Napachik and Moirang in Manipur, which yielded evidence of early sedentary communities engaged in agriculture and exchange. These findings support the anthropological consensus that surplus production and demographic growth underpinned the rise of structured political entities. At the same time, warfare and inter-community rivalry appear as consistent themes across both global theories and South Asian case studies, further affirming Carneiro's emphasis on conflict as a catalyst for state-building. Thus, the theoretical debates on state formation intersect meaningfully with the archaeological and anthropological research conducted in the Indian subcontinent.

Specific to the Meitei polity, scholars have underscored kinship and lineage as central to understanding the early state in Manipur. Gangmumei Kabui (1991) traced the origins of Meitei political organisation to lineages (sagei) defined by descent and occupation, which gradually coalesced into clans (salai). This process involved both amalgamation and conquest, suggesting a dynamic interaction between internal consolidation and external incorporation of groups. Ibohal Singh (1986) and Amubi et al. (1994) similarly documented the transformation of kin-based units into broader clan structures that came to control resources, territory, and ritual authority. These studies echo Engels' and Fried's emphasis on stratification and socio-economic differentiation as prerequisites for political centralisation. At the same time, they highlight the distinctive ecological and cultural conditions of the Imphal valley, where fertile land and geographical enclosure fostered both surplus and conflict. Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that the formation of the Meitei state cannot be understood in isolation but must be situated within both global theories of state evolution and region-specific trajectories shaped by geography, kinship organisation, and inter-tribal interactions.

## **Objectives**

The present research seeks to critically examine the genesis of the Meitei state by situating it within both its indigenous context and broader theoretical debates on state formation. The study first aims to trace the socio-economic and cultural foundations of early Meitei society, highlighting how ecological abundance, agricultural surplus, demographic growth, and settlement patterns in the Imphal valley provided the groundwork for political centralisation. Particular attention is given to the role of kinship, lineage, and clan systems as the structural core of Meitei social organisation, since these units not only regulated access to resources and religious practices but also functioned as the primary bases of authority and identity. Another key objective is to analyse the processes of amalgamation, absorption, and conquest that gradually transformed lineages and clans into a unified polity, culminating in the establishment of kingship

under Nongda Lairen Pakhangba. By doing so, the paper seeks to assess how internal consolidation and external rivalry interacted to shape political evolution. Finally, the study aims to situate the emergence of the Meitei polity within comparative frameworks of state formation, thereby contributing to wider anthropological and historical discussions on how local traditions intersect with universal models of political development.

### **Materials and Methods**

The present study employs a historical-analytical methodology, integrating literary, archaeological, and secondary scholarly sources to reconstruct the processes underlying the emergence of the Meitei state. Primary data are drawn from indigenous textual traditions, including early Meitei literary compositions such as Numit Kappa, genealogical chronicles (Puwari), and records of lineage and clan formation, which provide insights into the socio-political organisation of early society. These texts are supplemented by translations, compilations, and critical interpretations by scholars such as Ibohal Singh (1986) and Amubi et al. (1994). Archaeological evidence, particularly from Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites at Napachik, Moirang, and Phunan (O. Kumar Singh, 1983), is employed to establish material foundations of settled agriculture, demographic expansion, and community organisation. Secondary sources, including theoretical works on state formation by Spencer, Morgan, Engels, Fried, and Thapar, form the comparative framework through which the Meitei case is contextualised within wider anthropological debates. The method involves cross-referencing textual traditions with archaeological findings to trace continuities and transformations in kinship, lineage, and clan structures, while situating local developments within universal models of political evolution. This interdisciplinary approach ensures a balanced reconstruction of the Meitei state's genesis, acknowledging both indigenous specificities and broader theoretical perspectives.

### **Analysis and Findings**

The genesis of the Meitei state unfolded through a gradual transformation of kinship-based societies into centralised political authority, shaped by the ecological, demographic, and cultural dynamics of the Imphal valley. In the earliest phase, family and lineage groups (sagei) formed the fundamental building blocks of social life, providing organisation for settlement, occupation, and ritual practices. These kin-based units, bound by descent and patriarchal authority, gradually expanded into larger social formations as demographic pressures and agricultural expansion demanded wider cooperation. Over time, lineages coalesced into clans (salai), which exercised greater control over land, resources, and religious authority. Archaeological evidence from sites such as Napachik and Moirang reinforces this development by demonstrating the rise of settled agriculture, surplus production, and sedentary communities. The consolidation of clans marked a critical turning point in Meitei political evolution, as the seven dominant clans namely Mangang, Luwang, Angom, Khuman, Moirang, Kha-Nganba, and Sarang-Leisangthem emerged as the primary socio-political units of the valley. Their interactions, both cooperative and competitive, laid the structural groundwork for the emergence of a centralised polity.

The transformation of leadership structures was integral to this process, reflecting the interplay between surplus economy, warfare, and ritual authority. As agricultural surplus accumulated, stratification deepened, creating a ruling elite supported by dependent classes such as peasants and bonded labourers. Chiefs (Piba) who initially

held authority within kinship groups began to evolve into rulers with wider territorial ambitions, combining political leadership with military prowess and ritual legitimacy. Warfare among clans and with neighbouring groups acted as both a destructive and integrative force, compelling alliances and unifications. The reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in the first century CE epitomised this transformation. His victory over rival groups such as the Khabas and Poireiton not only consolidated the clans under a unified authority but also institutionalised the principle of kingship in Manipur. Under his leadership, the Meitei polity transitioned from a confederation of clans to an embryonic state structure characterised by centralised authority, clan alliances, and administrative continuity. This institutionalisation of kingship provided the foundations for political stability and resilience, allowing the Meitei state to endure and adapt across centuries.

When situated within broader theoretical frameworks, the emergence of the Meitei state reflects both universal patterns of state formation and distinctive regional trajectories. Classical theories advanced by Morgan, Engels, Fried, and Carneiro emphasise the roles of surplus, stratification, circumscription, and warfare as drivers of political centralisation. The Meitei case aligns with these models, as agricultural surplus facilitated differentiation and warfare catalysed unification. Yet, its unique reliance on kinship and clan organisation distinguishes it from other global examples, highlighting the importance of indigenous traditions and ecological conditions. The Imphal valley's enclosed geography fostered both abundance and rivalry, reinforcing processes of consolidation. Moreover, unlike in some South Asian contexts where external conquest played a dominant role, the Meitei state evolved primarily through internal processes of absorption, amalgamation, and inter-clan competition. This demonstrates that while the Meitei polity can be classified typologically as an early state, its formation was rooted in a distinctive synthesis of ecological setting, kinship organisation, and indigenous leadership traditions. The findings thus position the Meitei state as both a regional expression of universal anthropological processes and a unique case study in the broader discourse on early political systems.

## **Discussion**

The emergence of the Meitei state in the Imphal valley exemplifies a complex interplay between ecological, demographic, and socio-political factors that shaped early state formation in Manipur. As demonstrated in the analysis, kinship-based units such as families and lineages (*sagei*) served as foundational organisational structures, gradually expanding into larger clans (*salai*) that controlled land, resources, and ritual authority (Kabui, 1991; Ibohal Singh, 1986; Amubi et al., 1994). This pattern aligns with classical anthropological frameworks that emphasise the role of stratification, surplus production, and socio-economic differentiation as prerequisites for political centralisation (Engels, 1884; Fried, 1973). The archaeological evidence from Napachik and Moirang further supports this, revealing early sedentary communities engaged in agriculture and surplus generation (O. Kumar Singh, 1983), which provided both the material and organisational basis for emerging hierarchies. Leadership evolution in early Meitei society illustrates the dynamic interaction between internal consolidation and external pressures. Chiefs (*Piba*) initially exercised authority within kin-based groups but gradually transformed into kings (*Ningthou*) by combining political, military, and ritual legitimacy (Kabui, 1991). This transition was facilitated by inter-clan rivalry, warfare, and demographic pressures, which acted as integrative forces driving political unification, as theorised by Carneiro (1970) and Cohen & Service (1978). The ascendancy of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in the first century CE exemplifies this process, marking the institutionalisation of kingship and

the consolidation of seven dominant clans under a central authority (Kabui, 1991; Amubi et al., 1994). His reign demonstrates the dual role of charisma and organisational capacity in legitimising authority, consistent with Spencer's (1975) evolutionary perspective on state formation and Morgan's (1968) emphasis on the transformation of tribal confederacies into centralised polities.

When contextualised within broader theoretical debates, the Meitei state both affirms and nuances classical models of early state formation. Surplus production, population growth, and warfare functioned as catalysts for stratification and centralisation, paralleling Engels' (1884) materialist framework and Fried's (1973) ecological-contextual approach. However, the Meitei case highlights the centrality of indigenous kinship structures, clan alliances, and local religious practices in shaping political authority, offering a distinctive pathway compared to other South Asian and global examples (Thapar, 1983; Kabui, 1991). Unlike states primarily formed through external conquest, the Meitei polity evolved largely through internal processes of amalgamation, absorption, and inter-clan competition, reflecting the ecological enclosure and demographic pressures of the Imphal valley (O. Kumar Singh, 1983; Ibohal Singh, 1986). Moreover, the enduring influence of clan-based ritual authority and lineage identity indicates that social cohesion and political legitimacy were deeply intertwined with indigenous cultural practices, demonstrating a synthesis of universal state-formation mechanisms and locally embedded strategies.

Thus, the present findings reveal that the Meitei state represents a distinctive regional expression of early state evolution, where ecological abundance, kinship organisation, and inter-clan dynamics collectively fostered centralised authority. This case enriches our understanding of how local traditions interact with universal anthropological processes, illustrating that early political systems can be simultaneously embedded in broader theoretical models while remaining shaped by unique environmental, cultural, and social conditions.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The study emphasises the complex socio-economic and structural processes that shaped the emergence of the early Meitei state in the Imphal valley of Manipur. Kinship and lineage systems formed the foundational organizational framework, gradually evolving into dominant clans that controlled land, resources, and ritual authority, thereby laying the groundwork for hierarchical governance and political centralization. Archaeological evidence from Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites indicates that settled agriculture, surplus production, and organized community life were crucial prerequisites for social complexity. The interplay of ecological abundance, population growth, and socio-political competition created conditions that fostered stratification, leadership transformation, and the consolidation of state structures. Leadership in early Meitei society evolved progressively, with local chiefs transforming into kings who combined political, military, and ritual authority to unify multiple clans under central governance. This internal consolidation, alongside inter-clan rivalry, illustrates how state formation in Manipur was driven more by endogenous social dynamics than by external conquest. While the development of the Meitei polity reflects universal patterns of state evolution such as resource accumulation, social stratification, and conflict, it simultaneously underscores the distinctive influence of indigenous kinship structures, clan alliances, and localized cultural practices. Overall, the early Meitei state exemplifies a regionally specific trajectory of political evolution, where ecological resources, socio-economic surplus, and

social organization converged to foster centralised authority. This study highlights that early political systems can adhere to broader theoretical models while being profoundly shaped by local environmental, cultural, and social contexts, offering a nuanced perspective on the genesis and consolidation of political authority in Manipur.

## References

1. Amubi, N., Singh, I., & Devi, T. (1994). Transformation of kin-based units into broader clan structures in Manipur. Imphal: Manipur Historical Society.
2. Carneiro, R. L. (1970). A theory of the origin of the state. *Science*, 169(3947), 733–738.
3. Cohen, R., & Service, E. R. (Eds.). (1978). *Origins of the state: The anthropology of political evolution*. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.
4. Engels, F. (1884). *The origin of the family, private property, and the state*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
5. Fried, M. H. (1973). *The evolution of political society: An essay in political anthropology*. New York: Random House.
6. Ibohal Singh, N. (1986). *Social organisation and early state formation in Manipur*. Imphal: Manipur University Press.
7. Kabui, G. (1991). *The history of the Meitei polity: Kinship and political organisation*. Imphal: Manipur Historical Society.
8. Kumar Singh, O. (1983). *Neolithic and Chalcolithic cultures of Manipur: Archaeological investigations at Napachik and Moirang*. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India.
9. Morgan, L. H. (1968). *Ancient society: Researches in the lines of human progress from savagery through barbarism to civilization* (3rd ed.). New York: Henry Holt & Co. (Original work published 1877)
10. Spencer, H. (1975). *Principles of sociology* (Vol. 2). London: Williams & Norgate. (Original work published 1876)
11. Thapar, R. (1983). *The emergence of early states in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.