

THE ETHNO-ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY OF SEKTA, MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

The Koubru is regarded as one of the first settlement area of the Meiteis including Chakpa of Sekmai, Andro, Sekta, etc. According to ancient literature Chakpa khunda khunthok, the Chakpa group is the earliest settlers in Manipur. The inhabitants of Chakpa once occupied Kangla. However, their ancestors were driven from there by Pakhangba. According to Chakparol as it accounted as there were ten villages of Chakpas in Langmaiching during the reign of king Naophangba. The available historical record tells that Sekta had an independent political organisation. The original Sekta people were one of the Chakpas who settled at Sekta sometime after the Pakhangba in the first-second century A.D. The Cheitharol Kumbaba records, the defeat of the Sekta by the King Loiyumba and the capturing of six war captives. Some archaeological remains have already been reported as beings unearthed accidentally from Sekta. Much other study also we found about the early habitation in Sekta.

Key words: *Cheitharol Kumbaba, Chakpa, Archeology, Sekta, Secondary Burial & Excavation.*

Most of the Neolithic sites discovered so far are on the slopes of the hills. Not a single site has been found in the valley itself as during Neolithic times the valley as either occupied by lake water or wherever it has receded the exposed land was unfit for human occupation due to its marshy nature. This appears to have happened around the middle, of first millennium B.C. As the drying up of lakes in the valley started sometime around 10000 years back all the stone ages sites are found on the hill top. A.K. Sharma, who was the Director Excavator at Sekta, opines that Shrinking of the lakes in Manipur valley, the last phase of which happened some time during 7000 B.C. and stripping of hill slopes lead to weakening of South west monsoon and comparatively intensified winter monsoon. After the shrinking of the lakes the drainage pattern that emerged lead to the formation of Imphal, Iril and other river system in the valley. All these rivers and their tributaries normally flow from north to south. These

rivers are still cutting deep into the sand silt and clay deposits of the valley as could be ascertained from the study of the Iril River near Sekta.¹

As such it was thought desirable to search for archaeological sites of early historical period along the banks of the newly formed rivers. During the course of exploration a number of sites were located on the two banks of Iril River in 1991. One of the sites already known and protected by the state Archaeology, Department of Arts & Culture at Sekta was selected for the first ever detailed archaeological investigations in Manipur. Though there are at least six burial mounds and a sprawling habitation site at Sekta, only one mound was located and protected by the state Archaeology, Department of Arts & Culture.²

As far as historical archaeology is concerned, there are very few sites found excavated in this region as yet. The earliest inhabitants of the northeastern region are assigned to the middle Pleistocene period as attested with the findings of Paleolithic from its different arts including *Songbu*, *Khangkhui* and *Tharon* cave of Manipur. A K Sharma, archaeologist, presented his paper titled, '*Heritage of North East India*' which highlighted the rich archaeological heritage of NE as evident from the excavations at *Sekta*. Prof L. Kunjeswori Devi of Manipur University presented the prehistoric archaeological remain in her paper and recent discoveries of Stone Age culture of *Kathong* Hill Range at Chandel District.³ As the evolution of human history relates with the beginning of ethnic groups one must know the society of the past.⁴ As per evidence available, *Sekta* also at least a couple centuries before the beginning of Christian era, was a sprawling habitation site.⁵ Their rich culture and the centuries old traditional folk art and songs can also be depicted in their handloom woven clothes and the handicrafts that they make till date.⁶ The concept of the use of these data and information in archaeology is not a new one. The results of exploration work pertaining to the megalithic culture of thirteen different tribes of Manipur. On the basis of the exploration conducted in almost all the districts of Manipur.⁷ The social values of cultural legacy of the northeast Indian state are reflected in the lifestyle of the inhabitants. Manipur society does not follow the social stratification of the traditional Indian society.⁸

The Archaeological and Literary sources reveal that North Eastern of India and Manipur in particular are the homeland of different communities since early period. Archaeologically, Manipur may be among the most intensively investigated region in the country. Archaeologists' studies also have focused on the manufacture and use of ceramics, architecture, food and other types of material and non-material culture. North-East India in general and Manipur in particular is a treasure house of archaeological wealth right from the beginning of civilization in the Indian sub-continent. Manipur is one of the eight states in North-East India situated in the eastern corner connecting with South-East Asian countries through Myanmar. Due to its geo-physical and geo-

politics many ethnic groups from neighbouring countries entered Manipur in intervals of time since prehistoric period. History communicates the story of the past to the public through archaeological findings, written documents, oral narration etc. The Archaeological Survey of India explored and excavated a number of sites throughout the length and breadth of the country, particularly in remote and inaccessible areas of North-East India. The credit goes to the excavation of the early historic sites of Sekta in Manipur. The Chakpas worshipped Koubru for every occasion: birth, death or marriage. Hence, they are considered as the earliest settlers in the valley. They might have come from Makhen and Koubru. The inhabitants of Chakpa once occupied Kangla. Their ancestors were driven from there by Pakhangba, the first king of Manipur recorded in history. It is supported by a place named Chakpa Yenkoung. Much other study also we found about the early habitation in Sekta. In this process of history Sekta Archaeological Living Museum is one of the medium which communicates history to the people of Manipur in particular and that of the remaining Indian states in general.⁹ The present day Manipuris such as Meitei, Naga and Kuki tribes belong to Mongoloid race. In the field of prehistoric archaeology, Manipur is still in its infancy. It is evident from the prehistoric relics and finds that the period of Manipur split into three cultural phases, i.e., Paleolithic, Haobinhian and Neolithic.

Sekta village (Long 94° 24'N, Lat 24° 53' 24") is located at a distance of 16 km north-east of Imphal East District on the left bank of Iril River (tributary of Manipur River). The site Sekta, at least a couple of centuries before the beginning of Christian Era, was a sprawling habitation site with at least six well demarcated burial areas. Now due to heavy ploughing almost the entire habitation area has been destroyed with patches of 35 to 40 cms of deposit left at some places. Some archaeological remains consisting of ancient coins, bronze vessels, rings beads, earthen pots have already been reported as beings unearthed accidentally from Sekta. The handmade pottery of modern potters in Manipur also exhibit comparable characters with those of the Sekta pottery. These findings show the sequence of cultural period on the basis of cultural remains and collect dating samples for ascertaining the chronology of each period.¹⁰ As per the available historical record, Sekta had an independent political organisation. The original Sekta people were one of the Chakpas who settled at Sekta sometime after the Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, a mythical ruler of Manipur in the first-second century A.D. according to *Pakhangba Khunthok Puya*. The Cheitharol Kumbaba records the defeat of the Sekta by the King Loiyumba (1074-1122 A.D.) and the capturing of six war captives including Chakpa Tao and Angkom Tao.¹¹ Later, the Sekta was merged into the Meetei kingdom and it became part of the Khabam Pana only during the reign of Garibniwaz in the 18th century A.D.¹² Since then Sekta was considered as one of the villages of the Meetei kingdom. This amalgamation of the Sekta people in the 18th century is also confirmed by the discovery of a

square coin in the VIth Period of the 1991 excavation.¹³ Such coins with the legends assignable to Garibniwaz were discovered earlier this mound.¹⁴

Out of six only one burial mound was located, excavated and protected by the State Archaeology. The excavation at the Sekta burial site revealed important information of the burial customs of the Sekta people and their social and economic life. This has helped archaeologists and historians to reassess the historical process of the people of Manipur.¹⁵ It is the pioneering work of AK Sharma who excavated the Sekta Kei mounds in 1991. His book '*Manipur-The Glorious past*' which is the outcome of the excavation reveals that there are evidences of habitation by people in and around Sekta. He also further stated that in the remote past people have selected Sekta for habitation. Thus, in our study also we find about the early habitation in Sekta.¹⁶

The Sekta Mound provided a deep insight into the practice popularly accepted as the secondary burial. This historically and archeologically significant site located on the left bank of Iril River has been declared a protected archaeological place. Presence of at least 6 burial mounds in Sekta indicates that it was a fairly large settlement with sizeable population. A practice of secondary burial ground was discovered, which lends important information about the people burial customs, their economic condition and social lifestyle.¹⁷ The outcome of this excavation revealed tremendous artifacts related with burial of the dead. The excavation was carried out purely on scientific method and it lasted for three months. Remains of human skulls, silver and copper masks, bell metal casket, pottery, porcelain, semiprecious stone ornaments, metal implements of brass, copper, and iron and the like of the 1628 CE have been discovered.¹⁸ Archaeological evidences indicate existence of human settlement at this site in the 14th and 15th centuries A.D. The discovery of the metal implements testifies to the fact that the inhabitants of the region were well versed in metallurgy in the 14th and 15th centuries, and jeweler items, porcelain and pottery items signify a prosperous economy and a cultured social lifestyle. *Sekta* also had trade links with *Burma*, according to archaeological evidence.¹⁹ Explorations and excavations conducted by ASI in collaboration with the State Archaeology, at Sekta in 1991, had for the first time brought to light, apart from scores of sites, archaeological evidences of glorious past cultures of early historical period. As a prominent historical site, Sekta is always referred as Sekta Kei in many chronicles of Manipur like Cheitharol Kumbaba, Ningthourol Lambuba etc. There were raise mounds concentrated around the present Sekta Museum, which is among one of the mounds. *The Sekta Museum* has attraction of tourists, historians and archaeologists alike. By the beginning of the 1990, archaeological research in this region has been intensified and few protohistorical and historical sites have been excavated. The Sekta excavation was one of the major excavations conducted in Manipur and yielded results which have far reaching importance for proper understanding of early history of Manipur.²⁰ Among the six mounds, only this site was jointly excavated in the year 1991 by a team of

Archaeologists from Exploration and Excavation Branch, Nagpur Circle, Archaeological survey of India collaboration with Superintendent of Archaeology and Department of History, Manipur University. It is preserved as a *Living Museum*.

The Sekta Mound is an excavated site, which attracts thousands of archaeologists and behavioural scientists in search to understand practices and procedures of burial customs of the Sekta people. It witnessed the deep insight into the practice popularly accepted as the secondary burial but eventually these activities slowly faded away. Sekta Mound locally known as “Sekta Kei” is preserved as a living museum and protected as a significant historical and archaeological site. The historical hotspot is located at Sekta, on the Imphal-Ukhrul Road. Explorations and excavations conducted by A.K.Sharma in 1991 and O. Kumar Singh in 1994 on behalf of the ASI in collaboration with the State Archaeology, at Sekta, for the first time brought to light, apart from scores of sites, archaeological evidences of glorious past cultures of early historical period. Being the first detailed archaeological investigation in the area, it was received enthusiastically by the scholars, students and common people of Manipur. In this excavation includes full analyses of the pottery, the metal work and the objects from the burials, the environmental evidence and all other finds.²¹ It is a living testimony to the history of Manipur and is one of the ancient places. Age-old typical Meitei villages can still be seen in Sekta and this is an ideal place with a unique natural description.²²

The finding from the Sekta excavation includes both handmade and wheel made pottery with various designs and motifs, shapes and sizes, along with a good quantities of antiquities from each burial is indicative of the fact that people were economically prosperous. The well laid urn burials from top to bottom shows that Sekta has a well organized society practicing meticulously the social norms and customs established by the people. Many other antiques like beads of semi precious stones, copper ornaments, glass, terracotta, brass and iron objects all these show slightly that these Sekta people knew metallurgy of these metals. By judging the nature of the findings from these three months long excavation the Director of the excavation and the Government of Manipur had decided to preserve the excavated site as a living Museum for the benefit of the younger generation of Manipur. Then the Office of Superintending Archaeology ultimately built a living Museum with shade surrounding the whole excavated area by retaining all the finding insitu.²³

All the pots of local origin are handmade with the beater and anvil technique; Decoration pottery; the interning of skulls and bone fragments into jars suggests the practice of secondary burial; the grave goods vary from one burial to another; the burials were done by depositing the earth to cover the pots; the soil characters of the mound was formed during different climatic conditions of humid to

less humid and dry period and the present exposure of eight burial layers can be regrouped on the basis of the pottery into three cultural periods.²⁴ The Sekta excavation, 1994 reveals many hitherto unknown archaeological evidences of Manipur. The following observations are tentatively made; however, these may confirm or alter by future works.²⁵

Excavations conducted at one of the burial sites yielded the following results which have far reaching importance for proper understanding of the early history of Manipur.

- a. Urn burials of seven periods were encounter.
- b. All the urn burials of all the periods are secondary burials.
- c. Each burial has at least 6 to 7 pots.
- d. Almost all the pots interned are handmade except in period I & II.
- e. The number of pots interned show increasing trends from period I to period VII.
- f. Human skulls with copper mask covering their face were found to intern inside the pot.
- g. Terracotta, paste, and semi-precious stone beads, brass and copper rings, bangles, bracelets, bell metal miniature pots, iron implements and bell metal relic casket of Buddhist origin has been recovered.
- h. Other handmade pots have variety of mat, cord pinched, stamped, criss-cross, sunray and fish bone designs.
- i. All the skulls kept in the pots were found to be facing south-west.

It appears people of Sekta were making pottery locally. Bulk of the pottery recovered is hand made with several designs and shapes. Several patterns of mat design, cord impressions, fish bone impressions, tortoise shell impressions, punched designs, stamped designs, etc. are available. Pots are mostly jars, bowls, platters, vase and dishes with straight and flaring rims. Wares of red, black & red and grey have been encountered. Presence of at least six burial mounds indicates that there were either more than one set of people living in Sekta who had their own separate burial area or possibly the society was divided into different strata may be of occupational basis who had their own burial grounds.²⁶ But this needs to be verified by excavating at least 2 to 3 more burial mounds in the area. As none of the bone fragments show any burning mark, it appears that after the death of the deceased, the body was either buried or exposed to open air and fragment of important bones were later collected and deposited inside the urns.

The burials which contained objects like weapons for defence such as spear head, dagger s, etc. or chillum normally did not contain copper bangles and vice versa is indicative of male and female burial practices.²⁷ As the hill ranges in the western side of Manipur are lower than their eastern counterparts, it was but natural for people

from western side to establish contacts with the very fertile land receptive people of Manipur than those from the east. The discovery of jeweler's items, porcelain and pottery items signifies a prosperous economy and a cultured social lifestyle. Sekta also had trade links with Burma, according to archaeological evidence.

In order to ascertain the availability of pottery in the habitation area and to find out whether there is any difference in the types of pottery from burials and habitation area, small trenches were taken up in the fields. From the lowest levels plenty of fine red ware shreds were recovered. Apart from the pottery tripod legs, a piece of glazed ware and some cattle bones with cut marks were recovered. The limited dig has revealed a lot of information about the burial customs of Sekta people and about their social and economic life hitherto not known. The excavation has also cleared many unfounded misgivings that prevailed among the historians of Manipur.²⁸ Recovery of large number of handmade and pottery with mimeos designs, shapes and sizes and good quantity of antiquities from each burial is indicative of the fact that people were economically prosperous. The well laid urn burials right from the bottom to the top show that Sekta had a well organised Society practicing meticulously the social norms and customs established by the people. Finding of copper, brass and iron objects shows that they had the knowledge of metallurgy of these metals.

In conclusion, the present study to some extent will help in preservation and promotion the rich culture and traditions. Thus, the present proposed work will try to highlight the aged relating to the evolution of archaeology through archaeological findings as well as available literary works. The excavations include full analyses of the pottery, the metal work, the objects from the burials, the environmental evidence and all other finds. All the communities collectively possess a wide variety of material and cultural properties that form a rich repository of Manipuri culture and civilization. Further exploration of the site by conducting test digging at selected places is necessary to recover the hidden cultural relics and to study the materials thus collected and to do necessary analysis to determine the probable age of the site.

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