



**MIGRATION AND EVOLUTION OF NAGA TRIBES IN MANIPUR**

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**ABSTRACT**

Manipur which is located at North East region of India is largely inhabited by four groups of people viz; Meitei, Meitei Pagal (Muslim), Nagas and Kuki. The Naga and Kuki are the main inhabitants of Hills in Manipur. The Naga tribe have migrated over period of time to Manipur. Hence, it is not certain as to how many generations have passed since the first Naga settlers arrived in their present settlement. It is quite possible that they migrated from mainland of China, followed the route along the rivers to Myanmar, and retreated to Naga Hills and other parts of India. However, it was also noted that from the mythical and legendary point of view, the Nagas emerged from the bowels of the earth. Their migration can be traced only from the folk songs, stories and legends which are handed down from generation to generation. There is very little published information with reference to these migrated tribes. This review paper explains the theories of the origin and evolution of the migrated Naga tribes in Manipur and also focuses to explain the origin and evolution of two main Naga tribes of Manipur viz; Tangkhul and Maring Naga.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Manipur is situated on the tertiary ranges of a branch of the eastern Himalayas running south and forms part of the compact physiographic unit following the great divide between the Brahmaputra and Chindwin valleys. North east India holds the key to understanding the scope, depth, dimension and cultural diffusion between South and South East Asia which played a crucial role in transforming the northeast Indian ethnographic canvas from prehistoric times. Manipur appears to have absorbed Bronze Age cultural traits from Thailand and Upper Burma where indigenous early metal age culture developed at a comparatively early date around 4000 BC. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Manipur](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Manipur)).

Manipur is the land of various types of people speaking different dialects and languages. Most of them are of Tibeto-Burman origin except perhaps Bishnupriyas, who belong to Indo-Aryan group. Besides the above, there are other communities who migrated later and settled in Manipur for various reasons (Ghosh and Ghosh, 2000).

The land of Manipur has two distinct topographical zones, the Imphal valley and surrounding hills. It is largely inhabited by four groups viz; Meitei, Meitei Pagal (Muslim) Kukis and Nagas. Meiteis and Pangals (*Muslims*) mainly inhabit the lower regions of the valley.

Meiteis are the old inhabitants of the valley and have the highest population. Meiteis are further subdivided into various clans and are believed to be a combination of seven tribes viz; *Moirang, Ningthouja, Angom, Khuman, Luwang, Chenglei* and *Khaba-Nganba* (Lucy, 1998). The Meitei Pangals also usually reside in the valley. They are mainly concentrated in and around Imphal, the capital of Manipur (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pangal>). Meitei-Pangals live not only in Manipur, but also in Assam, Tripura, Nagaland and across the national border in Bangladesh. According to the most accepted view, there have been adherents to Islam in Manipur since at least the first decade of the 17th Century ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslims\\_of\\_Manipur](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslims_of_Manipur)).

The hilly regions of Manipur are mainly populated by the Naga tribes and Kuki tribes who are believed to have settled in Manipur nearly three to four hundred years ago. (Lucy, 1998). The state is inhabited by about 33 recognised tribes who have mostly settled in the hills. According to the census report of 2011, the total population of Manipur stands 28,557,94 and the hills people constitute nearly half of the entire population of the state that is 10,55,808. (Anonymous, 2016). The detailed distribution of different tribes in Manipur has been given in (Table 1).

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**Table 1** Distribution of Scheduled Tribe Population of Manipur by 2011 Census.

District	Population
Senapati	4,13,555
Tamenglong	1,16,023
Churachandpur	2,40,718
Chandel	1,18,805
Ukhrul	1,49,501
Imphal East	10,601
Imphal West	4,240
Bishnupur	1,512
Thoubal	853
Total	10,55,808

(Source: Anonymous 2016)

**METHODOLOGY**

This paper analyses various sources such as journals, government documents and scholarly works etc. to understand the migration and evolution of Naga tribes in Manipur. As mentioned above, Naga tribe is one of the major tribe of Manipur. They are mostly settled in the hilly districts. They have migrated to Manipur over a period of time. Hence, different theories and opinions with reference to their migration in Manipur given by historians, scholars, oral history and legends has been discussed briefly in the present paper.

**Tribes of Manipur**

Tribes area social group, usually with a definite area, dialect, cultural homogeneity and unifying social organisation which includes several subgroups. A tribe ordinarily has a leader and may have a common ancestor as well as a patron deity. The families or small communities making up the tribe are linked through economic, social, religious, family or blood ties (Danda, 1988).

Tribalism implies the possession of a strong cultural or ethnic identity that separates members of a group from the members of another group. Based on strong relations of proximity and kinship, members of a tribe tend to possess a strong feeling of identity (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tribalism>).

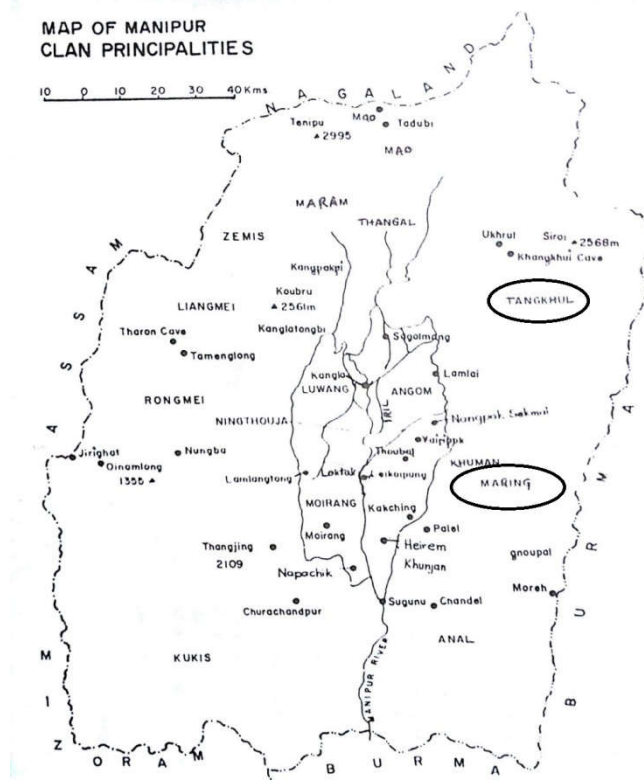
The tribes of Manipur belong to Tibeto-Burman group of Indo-Mongoloid people. They are generally medium to above medium stature, mesocephalic head, every prospic broad flat round face, broad high cheek-bone, flat platyrrhine to leptorrhine nose, brownish, yellow-skin and narrow mongoloid obliques eyes. They are strong and sturdy.

As mentioned earlier, the tribal population in Manipur is further sub divided into two major groups viz; the Kukis and the Nagas. The Kuki-chin or Kuki group include tribes such as Chiru, Chote, Gangte, Hmar, Kachanaga, Koireng, Kom, Lamgang, Mizo, Paite, Purun, Ralte, Sema, Simte, Sabte, Thadou, Vaiphei and Zou (<http://www.indianetzone.com/8/tribes>).

The Kuki tribes have predominantly settled in five districts in Manipur viz; Churachandpur, southern parts of Chandel district, Sadar hills sub divisions of Senapati district, western part of Tamenglong and south eastern part of Ukhrul district (Haokip, 2013).

The other group i.e the Nagas are further divided into various sub categories viz; Tangkhul, Maring, Maram, Mao, Monsang, Moyon, Chothe, Kabui, Angami, Koirao, Aimol and Anal. Today numbering over one million, the Nagas are spread throughout the Indian states of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh

and Manipur and parts of Burma (Shimmray, 2001). They are living in the Indo-Burma border area. They are settled in Ukhrul district, Senapati district, Chandel district and Tamenglong district in Manipur. ([www.e-pao.net](http://www.e-pao.net)) The map of Manipur showing tribal distribution in respective districts has been shown in (Fig.1).



**Fig 1** Tribal distribution of Manipur in various districts

(Source: Kabui, 1991)

Physically, the Nagas are predominantly Mongoloid. They are quintessentially a hill people who now inhabit areas as diverse as China and Amazonia. The general expansion of the Mongoloid people throughout South East Asia including the North East India may have begun as much as 12000 years ago, possibly from a region of North China. This movement has continued into recent historic times (Shimmray, 2001).

**Origin and evolution of tribes in Manipur**

The migration of tribes in North East India took place mainly along the rivers. Therefore, it is quite possible that they migrated from mainland of China, followed the route along the rivers to Myanmar, and retreated to Naga Hills and other parts of India (<http://www.epao.net>).

The tribes of Manipur believe that their forefathers came somewhere from China. Anthropologists like E.A Grierson, E.I. Gait, S.K. Chatterji and others scholars agree on the point that the original home of Tibeto-Mongoloid people was in the North-Western China between the Huang Ho and Yang Teze Kiang rivers (Chakraborti, 1989).

It was believed that Manipur was one of the routes between South Asia and South East Asia and Central Asia. Various ethnic groups belonging to southern Mongoloid group, the Tibeto-Burmans, the Indo-Aryans and a sizeable section of Tai (Shans) came to Manipur from pre-historic times down to the present day. The present ethnic groups of Manipur, viz, the Meiteis, the Nagas tribes, the Kuki chin or Kuki tribes and

other Indian communities are the descendants of those migrating people (Kabui,1991)

It was also reported that the trade between Manipur and Yunan province of China was recorded in the Chronicles of Manipur in 1630 A.D. The Chinese merchants visited the kingdom, and from them, the people of Manipur learnt the art of manufacturing gun powder.(Kabui,1991). From early times, at least from 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., there was a regular trade route by land between Eastern India through Upper Burma andYannan of China (Chakraborti,1999).

**Origin and evolution of Kuki or Kuki - Chin tribe**

Kuki people are Jewish ethnic community, inhabiting an area separated by the three international boundaries of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The generic name **Kuki** was given to them by the British in 17<sup>th</sup> century. Kuki Tribe of Manipur can be historically traced back from the Stone Age. While a number of excavations in the region reveal their existence during the Neolithic age, this tribe continued to flourish in ancient India, which is evident in the writings of Mahabharata ([http://www.indianetzone.com/52/kuki\\_tribe\\_manipur.htm](http://www.indianetzone.com/52/kuki_tribe_manipur.htm)). There are various theories with respect to the origin and evolution of Kuki tribe in Manipur.

According to popular belief, the Kukis emerged out from a cave called Khulsomewhere in central China (<http://kukiforum.com/2010/12/historical-chronology-of-kuki-people-from-bc-700-1919-ad/>). However, many scholars refer to Khulas a cave but also believe it to be a tunnel made by Kuki ancestors to cross the Great Wall of China in order to escape the despotic rule of king Shih-Hwangti around 1200 to 1300 A.D. (Haokip, 2013).

The history of Kuki tribes has been mainly discussed in the folklores and the legendary stories of the land that traces its origin. Since its creation this tribe remained significant in the ancient history as well as modern history under the British Empire in India till it was defeated in the Anglo- Kuki war of 1917-1919. As such this tribe can be considered to be one of the original inhabitants of the land who largely reside in the hilly region of the State ([http://www.indianetzone.com/52/kuki\\_tribe\\_manipur.htm](http://www.indianetzone.com/52/kuki_tribe_manipur.htm)).

According to another theory, it is believed that the Nagas, Kukis and Meiteis have common ancestors. It is believed that they have descended from three brothers who were natives of MakhelTunngan (Myanmar). From the eldest descended the Kukis, from the middle descended the Nagas and from the youngest one descended the Meiteis. They all migrated from Burma to India. The youngest son one day reached theImphal valley following a sow and settled there.Meiteis are believed to be his descendants. The other two brothers travelled up the hills and settled there. TheKuki and Naga are believed to have descended from these two brothers. According to this belief, presents used to be exchanged between the hill tribes and Meiteis (*Mera Hou Chongba* festival) (Chander, 1987).

Another variation of the legend is that a jumping competition was once held between these three brothers; Kuki, the eldest son, jumped from the top of one range of hills to the top of the next range of hills. It is believed that Kuki settled in upper reaches of the mountain ranges; Nagas, the middle brother, jumped into the intervening valley but his foot slipped and touched the river. Hence, it is believed that Naga mostly settled in middle reaches of the mountain ranges; the Meiteis,

the youngest brother tumbled heading into the river. Therefore, Meiteis settled in the valley (Chander, 1987).

Some others historians give a different version that a deity called Asu had three sons viz; Mamo, Alapa and Tuto. The Kuki and Nagas are descended from Mamo and Alapa respectively and Meiteis from Tuto (Chander, 1987).

**Origin and evolution of Naga tribes**

According to historians, the term Nagahas been derived from the Chinese term the Nagas Natcharemi meaning Naga People. Another view which has been widely accepted about the origin of the term Naga that has been derived from the Burmese word Nokameaning perforated ears. However, many think that the term Naga means naked. Sometimes it is also suggested that the word means a snake probably connected with Naga snake charmers of Aryan history (Kenilo, 2005).

The Naga groups inhabit some parts of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and also Burma. It was believed that the Naga tribes of Manipur had come to their present places in Manipur from Manchuria, Indonesia and Philippines in different waves following different paths through Burma (Sen, 1992).

According to historians, there were two routes for migration of tribes from China; one through the Irrawaddy valley in Myanmar and another along Mekong River leading to Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The tradition of the Nagas resembles the tradition of the tribes of Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia rather than the tribes of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. This supports the theory that the Nagas migrated through the Irrawaddy valley and Myanmar not along Mekong River ([http://www.epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=manipur.Ethnic\\_Races\\_Manipur.The\\_Route\\_of\\_Nagas\\_Migration](http://www.epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=manipur.Ethnic_Races_Manipur.The_Route_of_Nagas_Migration)).

The theory migration of Nagainto India can be explained broadly in two ways.

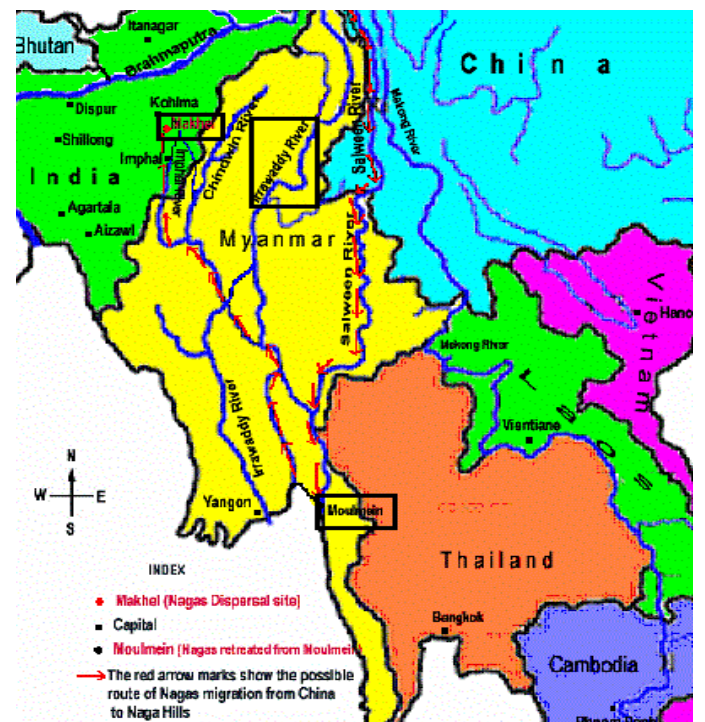
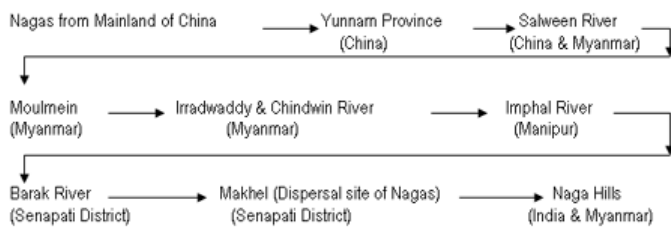


Fig 2 Map showing the route of Nagas migration from China to Naga Hills (Source: (<http://www.epao.net>))

## Migration and Evolution of Naga Tribes in Manipur

The first one is that after they came from China along the route of Salween River travelled further down in Moulmein Sea in Myanmar before they reached Makhel in India. Another theory says is Nagas from main land China migrated to Makhel in India via Myanmar. According the first theory they migrated to the Southern Seas of Myanmar from China along the rivers and lived near the Sea coast of Moulmein (Myanmar) for generations before they retreated to Irrawaddy and Chindwin valleys (Tothe,2006). The map showing route of the migration of the Nagas from China to Naga Hills in India has been shown in (Fig. 2). It is believed that the Nagas migrated from Mainland China and followed the southward movement along the route of Salween River which originated from mainland China and eventually reached the Southern Seas in Moulmein (Myanmar). The diagram below shows the migration route of Nagas from Mainland China to India in (Fig. 3)



**Fig 3** Migration of Naga from China to Naga Hills in India.

(Source: (<http://www.epao.net>))

The above theory is supported that Nagas once lived near the Sea coast or must have come from the Seas coast by historical facts (folktale, folklore, legends etc) and the evidences showed that Nagas uses the cowries-shells and conch-shells in decorating their dresses (kilts) (Fig. 4,5,6,7), which are not found in the hills (Tothe,2006). Also, it is believed that they must have used marine shells during their temporary stay and acquired the knowledge from the Southern seas of Myanmar.



**Fig. 4** Tangkhul Naga wearing ornaments Wearing made from Conch-shells, and Cowrie

(Source: <https://www.google.co.in>)



**Fig 5** Maring Naga Women wearing Necklace made of beads andx Sea-shells earring

(Source: <https://www.google.co.in>)



**Fig 6** Head wear of Tangkhul Naga Chief made from bird Feathers and Sea-shell

(Source: Saul, 2005)



**Fig. 7** Sea-shell necklace

(Source: <https://www.google.co.in>)

Another legend explained that the Naga stayed in Irrawady valley in Neolithic age. They moved up along the Chindwin River and finally they reached Thangdut which lies on the west bank of Chindwin River. It is said that having stayed in Thangdut for some period they started their migration again to the hills (Lucy,1998).

Another set of the tradition believes that the dispersion of the tribe from old villages to establish new villages was due to excess population in the old villages (Hudson,1984). It was also believed that the tribes those who settled in Thangdut valley intermingled with Burmese through intermarriages, while those who settled themselves in the hills in course of time were known as the Nagas (Lucy, 1998). According to another theory, one of the reasons for leaving the Irrawady valley was mosquito menace (Hudson, 1984)

Many theories further mention that the last place of separation of Naga tribes in Burma was Thangdut (previously called Hsawngsup and pronounced as Samsok in Tangkhul dialect). From there, they immigrated to Makhel in Mao, Longpi and Hunphun in Ukhrul district of Manipur. It was very clear and it was supported by historical facts and monuments (Shimmray, 2001). Most of the Nagas believed that their first settlement in India was Makhel, after they crossed over to Indian Territory across the Patkai mountains around the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Haksar, 2011).

### **Origin and Evolution Tangkhul Naga tribe**

The theory based on the myths and legends preserved by different Naga tribes specially Tangkhul Naga tribe claimed

that they originated from Makhel near Moa and have been living there from time immemorial (<http://www.thesangaexpress.com/tracing-origin-tangkhul-nagas-oral-tradition-folksongs/>). The historical monoliths at Makhel have been preserved in the collective memory of the Nagas, passed down from generation to generation. The great stone monuments at Makhel are believed to be the place of origin of some Naga tribes which is shown in (Fig.8).



Fig 8 The great stone monuments of Makhel near Mao  
(Source: Ganguli, 1993)

It was reported that according to Chinese history, their tribesmen migrated towards south west in between 200 B.C and 500 A.D. In support of the above theory it was said that the Hao city, now known as Xian in China was the last settled city from where the Naga people, particularly the Tangkhuls, migrated to their present habitation. According to a Greek astronomer and geographer, the Tangkhuls were living in Samshok (Thuangdut) in Myanmar around 2nd century A.D. It is believed that the Nagas were among the major tribes during the construction of the Great Wall. The Tangkhuls began disperse from Samshok after the invasion of Ko-lo-feng and his successor I-mau-shun, the King of Nan-chao in the closing part of the 8th century A.D. and beginning of the 9th century A.D. They were further driven towards the north west of Myanmar by the Shan people ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tangkhul\\_Naga](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tangkhul_Naga)).

The origin of the tribe is described by a legend of Tangkhul Naga which is connected to Hungdung village in south of Ukhrul district. According to the legend, the Tangkhul chief in Ukhrul district had a daughter. One day while she was bathing, a butterfly hovered and rested on her. Soon she conceived a child and as time rolled on, she gave birth to three sons who grew and proved to be more capable than the other children. The other children were jealous of their abilities. They used to call them fatherless sons which was always irritating to the three brothers. They asked their mother everyday who their father was. On one occasion the mother annoyed with the same question of her children, called her husband to appear. She spread out a mat and the eldest son was instructed to see his father. So he went and was about to step into the house but was terrified by the sight of a very big serpent on the mat. He jumped back and escaped as quickly as he could. Then went the second son who also having observed from the door, the monstrous serpent carefully, dared not approach it but got frightened and retreated, but the youngest son having seen the serpent went and embraced him. According to the legend the tribes viz Thangal, Tangkhul and Meitei descended from the three sons respectively (Shimmi, 1988).

According to another popular belief, the Tangkhuls claim that within every two generations a human being comes out from

the Miurlung Earthhole, which is located at Hungdung in Ukhrul district. It was believed that in the past, unknown children of very tender ages were occasionally picked up in different generations who had emerged out from the Earthhole. The Earth hole was usually covered with a slab of stone. Here, the Miurlung Earthhole and slab of stone seem to represent a couple. The theory about the Tangkhuls emerging out of the earth has been described beautifully in a folk song which is as follows;

O Katatakashang-shang.  
Na kachieinashokli?  
O Marilungvalishok  
O Chilimashok-akha  
O Kazingsiralikanganalo,  
Lgaunghangserlu.  
(In English version)  
O thou traveller  
Whence thou cometh?  
O I came through the deep holes and rocks  
If not cometh from that,  
O listen to the stars and sky  
And come thou all to report (Shimmray, 2001).

#### Origin and Evolution of Maring Naga tribe

The origin and evolution of southern Naga tribe of Manipur such as the Maring Naga tribes is supposedly different and distinct from Northern Naga tribe like Tangkhul.

The Maring trace their origin to a place called Kulvi Shongshong and Wasafai Kabaw valley in Burma. They continue to have trade relations with Shan communities living in Myanmar. (Haskar, 2011) From Kulvi-Shongshong, the Maring people gradually scattered in different directions and established many settlements which developed into villages ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maring\\_Naga](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maring_Naga)).

It is also stated that *Mangsa* in the Kabaw valley (Indo-Myanmar border) was the first Maring village. From there they gradually settled in the hills between Kabaw and the Manipur valley. It was further reported that their ritual show some similarities with the Chin tribes of Burma. One thing certain is that in the past they have moved back and forth between Burma and Manipur, in response to oppression from one side to the other. Ultimately, the Maring decided they were better off in Manipur where they now live and only a few houses remain in Burma (Saul, 2005).

According to mythological legends, the Maring tribe believed to have emerged from a type of vast dome like cave (thlei-khur). It was believed that Maring people used to live and hunt animals for their living since the time of life in the cave or beneath the earth ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maring\\_Naga](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maring_Naga)). The life inside the cave of Maring was terribly difficult and hard. However they could not come out of the cave as there was a big stone gate called *Lungthung* sealing the gate of the cave. They tried to open the stone gate using several means like pig, cow and buffalo but failed. According to the legend of cave origin, the flattened nose of pig and the crack marks on buffalo's horns were received while trying to push open the stone gate. After much consultation among themselves, *Shirimpa Bungrang* (a black male Mithun with white spots) was sent and the Mithun opened the gate at last. Thus, the Marings who had been struggling to set free themselves from the terrible and hard life in *Nungmuisho*

(Cave or underneath the Earth) at last could come out of the cave and thus the first settlement on earth begun there at Kulvi-Shongshong in Myanmar (Haskar, 2011)

## CONCLUSION

The origin of the Nagas is shrouded in history. A systematic study on the Nagas is a matter of recent past. It was mostly done by western anthropologists, ethnologists, administrators and some Christian missionaries, which was later, followed by Indian scholars. However, none of them gives the complete picture of the Nagas and their origin.

Hence, it is not certain as to how many generations have passed since the first Naga settlers arrived in their present settlement. Antiquarian remains such the stone and monuments seem very old. It may be believed that they have been there for about ten centuries (Thong, 2012). Again their myths and legends are not supported by history though they cannot be rejected. Further, the interpretation of myths and legends are different from tribe to tribe especially in relation with the geographical location which they refer to in their legends (Shimmray, 2001)

Some historians and scholars claim that it is quite possible that the Naga people must have come from mainland of China, followed the route along the rivers to Myanmar, and retreated to Naga Hills. Hence, they settled Makhel in India and further scattered other parts of India. However, no tradition of the Nagas carries any particular name of a place of China from where they dispersed.

It was also noted that from the mythical and legendary point of view, the Nagas emerged from the bowel of the earth. Almost all the Nagas tribes have the theory of cave-origin. Some Naga tribes of Manipur specially the Maring, Anals, Mayong, Monshangs, Lamkangs etc. believed that they were came from caves.

The absence of written literature has made the task doubly difficult and one may marvel at the effort and ingenuity required by the earlier tribal generations in preserving and disseminating the spoken words; songs and ballads, stories and legends, codes of law and religious injunctions handed down from father to son.

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