

Syncretisation of Local Elements in Manipuri Vaishnavism: A Study in Manipur

Dr.H. Rajmani Singha¹

Dr. M. Ninghaiba Singha²

¹Assistant Professor, Dept. of Manipuri, Assam University, Silchar

²Assistant Prof., Teaching of Manipuri, Patharkandi College of
Education, Patharkandi, Assam.

INTRODUCTION:

It is not paradoxical but a logical truth that the present day Manipur had an evolutionarily historical course of amalgamations of different groups of peoples to make an integrated Meitei Nation during the period covering 33 A.D. to the last part of the 18th c. A.D.

It is also a well known fact that there are archeological evidences which prove that this land had experiences of Paleolithic, Neolithic, ancient and medieval cultures which have affinity with the Hoabinhian and are of non-Hindu origin. On the other hand it also can be logically assumed that this land and its peoples had doses of both Hindu and Buddhist cultural waves during the ancient and medieval periods of time. Such assumption may be vouched by the historical assertions of historians like *B.K. Barua (A Cultural History of Assam, Guwahati, Reprint 1969)* P.C. Choudhury (*The history of Civilization of the people of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D. 1958*) as that the earliest reference to the Indo-Burma route is found in the report of Chang Kien the famous Chinese ambassador to the Yue-Chi Country, submitted in 126 A.D., on the basis of which Paul E Pelliot, French Sinologist and Orientalist has shown that from 200 B.C., there was a regular route by land to China through Assam, Manipur, Upper Burma and Yunan and also described two routes from India to Burma through Manipur. As such, it can be easily asserted that King Abhiraja of the Sakya Clan from Kapilavastu who founded the Hindu kingdom of Tagaung in 800 B.C. and flourished in Upper Burma till the Chinese Buddhist devastated in 600 B.C.; surely had his venture passing through Manipur which surely might had left imprints of Hindu colours among the peoples of this land.

On the other hand, there are records of the Shans, a group of people who called themselves the Tais and Buddhist overrunning the valley of Manipur and its peoples from time to time since early period of the history of Manipur: 1st c. A.D. that also surely left imprints of Buddhist cultures on this land and its peoples. For such insertions, it can be easily cited *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the royal chronicle of Manipur; like: During Meitei King Naothingkhong (663-763 A.D.) Pong prince *Samlung*, brother of *Sukanpha*, king of Shan kingdom stayed ten year at a place called *Apong Ingkhol* near Imphal in Manipur on his journey back home from venturing eastward with powerful force of army. Furthermore, as the rising in importance, power and prestige of the Shans in Upper Burma, influence of the Shans on the culture of Manipur became more pronounced from the time of Meitei King Loyumba (1074-1122 A.D.). However, in the courses of the Meitei integration and

amalgamation of the Meitei Nation : Manipur, Gaudiya Vaishnavism of the Hindu emerged as the main integrating religion and shaped cultural traditions of the peoples so integrated as the Meitei, the major community of Manipur.

Now, an attempt is made in this write up to define some of the syncretized local elements of pre Hindu period to the present days Manipuri Gaudiya Vaishnava cultural traditions of the Meiteis.

However, for that matter of fact, elements of Hindu or other that might have influenced in one or other ways among the groups of peoples either before or after the integration and amalgamation of the Meitei in Manipur may be observed for clearances.

Objective of the Study:

The main objectives of this study are:

- To study the origin and development of Vaishnavism in Manipur .
- To investigate the process of development the composite Meiteis in Manipur.
- To study the impact of Vaishnavism in Manipur and develop of Manipuri Cultural Integration.
- To study the syncretism of local elements in Manipuri Vaishnavism in Manipur.

Methodology

A large number of Data are available in the form of written records like books, magazines, journals, reports, official records, articles and newspapers etc. For the collection of these data, it is needed to explore from the various record rooms like Imphal East and West district, Cachar district records room and Manipur State Archives, Gauhati Archives, Assam University, Silchar , Manipur University, Canchipur's Library and Silchar District Library etc.

The method of the study will be based on historical and empirical method. The tools and data require for the collection of the work will be based with the help of primary and secondary data. The oral sources will also be adopted in the work, in order to write in a systematic way. The analytical method will also be applied in this study.

FOOTHOLD OF THE HINDU AND OTHER ELEMENTS IN MANIPUR:

As of present, it is accepted that the first appearances of Hindu element surfaced in Manipur during the reign of Meidingu Kiyamba (1437-1467 A.D.) in the form of Brahmins from the mainland India. The presence of the Brahmins from the mainland India in the valley of Manipur is recorded since the time of Meidingu Kiyamba. The king with the help from a Brahmin who was found settled in a village nearby the Kangla in the north east (present **Lairikyengbam Leikai**), initiated worshipping of Lord Vishnu by establishing a sanctum at

the present day Bishnupur. After that, there are records of Brahmins arriving in Manipur from different parts of India.

On the other hand there are rounds of strong affirmations by few scholars of Manipur: W. Yumjao Singh, Pundit N. Khelchandra Singh, Dr. M. Kirti Singh, etc. of a copper plate with inscriptions of Hindu God and Goddess name like Sri Hari, Siva, Durga, etc. to be of the time of Meidingu Khongtekcha (763-773 A.D.). But such claims have been refuted by other younger generation scholars with only placing of philological content of the plate and till date no one has brought up any interest of scientific study of the plate for its authenticity. The Copper Plate which was excavated from Pheiyeng, a Chakpa village of Manipur 15 km. west of Imphal by the foremost Manipuri archaeologist W. Yumjao Singh during the 60s of the last century is presently on displayed in the Manipur State Museum. If the former affirmation on the plate belonging to the time of Meidingu Khongtekcha is true, it can easily be taken that Hindu elements had distinctly started evolving within the integrated Meitei. Besides these affirmations and refutations regarding the Copper Plate of Pheiyeng, there is another round of opinions among a few other scholars of Manipur about an idol of Lord Siva which is worth mentioning for consideration as a serious matter of scientific research to bring in light untold aspects of the cultural history of Manipur.

There is an idol worshipped as Lord Siva at a sanctum known as *Ingourok Mahadeva* located at the foothill of *Kounu Hill* in Koubru range near *Kanto Shabal*, a Manipuri village 21 km west of Imphal. Though the initiation and installation records of the sanctum and the idol is still obscure; it is clear that Meitei Hindus started performing pilgrimage to the place on every consecutive seven Sundays just following after Cheiraoba, the New Year festival of the Meitei Hindu usually falling on the 14th or rarely on 13th April every year for worshipping Lord Siva since Manipur embraced Hinduism as state religion during the reign of Meidingu Garibaniwaz ((1709-1748 A.D.). However, the said idol in reality is said to be a Parinirvana (lying position) statue of the lord Buddha as claimed by some scholars of Manipur.

Furthermore, there are writes up of some other scholar published in Manipur where it is claimed that the nearby area of the said sanctum of the controversial Lord Siva had been a site of world largest *Mandalas* (a sacred space of geometric configuration of symbols as an aid to meditation and trance induction in both Hinduism and Buddhism) in ancient time. Such claims are also a serious matter for scientific research to unfold historical obscurity of the cultural traditions of Manipur.

Here we can assert about Buddhist wave that could have brought some or other impressions to the pre amalgamation groups of people in Manipur since early time by placing archaeological findings from *Langol* hill near Imphal and *Sekta Mound* at *Sekta* village 18 km north of Imphal as historical evidences to prove that Manipur had Buddhist wave and settlement in early days. Other than these archaeological findings, the history of Chakpa migration and settlement in Manipur since around the last century BC is giving us enough substances to insert that Manipur had colours Mahanaya Buddhist culture amongst its pre amalgamation groups of peoples. Such colours of Mahanaya Buddhist culture can still be seen among the Chakpa Andro group of people who has not embraced Hinduism and are still preserving their tradition of worshipping nonstop fire which is a Mahanaya Buddhist culture

besides adopting almost every cultural traditions of the integrated Meitei except Hindu practices.

Another aspect of element that could have infused distinct cultural impressions to the life of both the pre and post amalgamated Meitei worth considering is the Tantric ways and practices. Many considered Tantric which is considered a pre Vedic as a part of Hindu culture. In fact it is rightly considered to be apart from the Hindu culture and Vedic civilization as Tantric language and practices are different from that of Vedantic Hindus. However during the time of the Vedas, Tantric elements got absorbed into the Vedas. But there are history of flourished Tantra in the part of eastern Bengal, Assam and Manipur since time immemorial to the recent time, like Laiwaa-Tinwaa, Thamaiba, Shemjinba, Ngaohanba, Hikaap-tenkaap, etc. in Manipur. Such Tantric practices also must had its share of contributions in building native cultural traditions among the both pre and post amalgamated groups of people in Manipur.

NATIVE CULTURAL TRADITIONS OF MANIPUR AND ITS SYNCRETIZATION IN MANIPURI HINDU CULTURAL TRADITIONS:

Historically it is known that the present days Meiteis are the descendants of the migrating people from the parts of South East Asia which in the course of time intermingled with number of distinctive ethnic groups from south Asia like India, China, etc. These ethnic groups on successive migration waves made their settlements at the different parts of the valley and hills of Manipur and established their independent principalities with distinctive dialects, folk religion, culture and traditions and definite territorial boundaries. Number of such groups and their independent principalities are mentioned in the recorded history of Manipur, viz. Angom, Khaaba, Ngaanba, Luwang, Khuman, Moiraang, Mangaang, Chenglei, Haorok Konthou, Heirem Khunjaan, Thaanga Kambong, Haokhaa Lokkhaa, Selloi Langmai, Maanting Maraang, Lera Khongnaang, Chakpa(s), Sektaa, etc. These groups of peoples had been integrated in a process of amalgamation starting from 33 A.D. to become one as the present days Meitei in such a manner that:

In 33 A.D., a group of men who were drawn and comprised from different groups, led by one *Nongda Lairen Paakhangba*, a man from the Angom invaded and devastated the group of *Khaaba* who occupied *Kangla* and its nearby adjoining areas as their principality. After the *Khaaba*, *Nongda Lairen Paakhangba* established seat of power at the *Kangla* for his group : the Meitei, whose descendants became to be known as the Ningthoujaa group in the seven clan lineage system developed in later period and started process of amalgamation to build a Meitei nation by subduing and integrating different groups as mentioned above completely to the Meitei fold with annexational expansion of Meitei power and territory which became to be known as Poirei Meitei Leibaak (the land of Meitei). The amalgamation process so started since the time of *Nongda Lairen Paakhangba* continued by his subsequent lineal successors and completed during the reign of Meitei King *Chingthangkhomba* (1763-1798) by totally bringing the principality of Moirang, a group of people with distinctively rich cultural heritages completely into the Meitei kingdom and Meitei fold.

The group of people led by **Nongdaa Lairen Paakhangba** who devastated the Khaabas from Kangla and established seat of power for his group had no any compact cultural tradition for a common bonding amongst themselves as they were comprised with men from different groups. As such, the group started embracing and adopting established cultural traditions of the group they subdued as the common integrated cultural traditions of the amalgamated Meitei. They also blended newly different cultural traditions to suite for the amalgamated Meitei power and society to come. Almost all of the cultural traditions so embraced and adopted by the pre Hindu amalgamated Meitei have since been remained as part and parcel of the Meitei Hindu cultural traditions, i.e. Manipuri Gaudiya Vaishnavism of the Meitei intactly in many cases and in an intermingled form in others.

We can easily imagine and construct the pictures of established social institutions like marriage then prevalent among the groups of people before its amalgamation to the integrated Meitei fold. Old manuscripts like Panthoibi Khongul, Pombi Luwaoba, describes customary procedural traditions of marriage in the form of both arranged and love marriages and also about the rituals performed in a marriage like- Waroipot Puba, Heijing Kharai Puba, Meira Okpa, Meetamnga Thaba (Ngakha Potongyan Thaaba), etc. which are still in vogue in the Meitei Hindu marriages without any changes.

Here, it may be mentioned that the human society in this world started establishing from marriage between man and woman. So among the established social institutions in any human society, the most important is the institution of marriage. If there is procedural institution of marriage in a human society, it may be taken for granted that the society has firmly established customary norms of institutions in respect of birth and death within the society and also in various aspects of day to day life and living within the society. Therefore, we can still be seen various forms of non Hindu rituals incorporated in the birth and death ceremonies of the Hindu Meiteis. There are non Hindu forms of rituals and practices like Naopham Phumba, Ipaan Thaaba, Ten Kaappa in birth ceremony (Swasthi Pujah) of Hindu Meitei and also there are existences of non Hindu rituals in connection of death ceremony of Hindu Meitei like Mangthong Thingba and Chup Shaaba.

Other than the non Hindu customary rituals seen still in vogue among the Hindu Meiteis in connection with birth, marriage and death, there are various forms of non Hindu practices still adopted in the forms of worshipping and offerings like: worshipping of Lainingthou Sanamahi, Paakhangba, Leimarel Shidabi, Imoinu, Phouwoibi, Apokpa Khurumba, Umanglais and Lai Haraoba etc. which are still actively common as an important part of life among the Hindu Meities.

Another distinct aspect of native cultural tradition which still occupies a very important place in the cultural life of the both integrated Meitei Hindu and non Hindu (Like the Chakpas) is the tradition of Amaibi. The Manipuri term Amaibi is Shaman in English as attributed to the "Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend" edited by Maria Leach (Funk and Wagnails, New York, 1950, reprint) by scholars of Manipur as the said dictionary termed Shaman as, "The term Shaman is usually used by Americanist ethnographers in reference to men or women who, through the acquisition of supernatural powers, are believed to be able to either cure or cause disease." Further, Melville J. Herkovits, in his "Cultural Anthropology" (Oxford & IBH, 1974) New Delhi, 1974, reprint)

insert the Shaman as, “The Shaman is an individual endowed with supernatural power to hear, or one who can call his spirit to find out what is beyond time and space.”

However it is known that the Shaman in the other part of the world remained as a different sect not belonging to the mainstream societies; whereas the Shamans has been a part of the both pre and post Hindu societies of the both pre and post amalgamated groups of peoples in Manipur since time immemorial. As such there are mentions about the Amaibis in old manuscripts like, *Thirel Meiram Liba*, *Leishemlon Ariba Puya*, etc. even incorporating them with the cosmological beliefs of the Meitei. So king of integrated Meitei and kings of other pre amalgamated groups had its own establishment of *Amaibi* institutions for performing various worshipping rituals for both the king and his subjects. It is also mentioned on record that Meidingu Khagemba (1597-1652 A.D.) initiated and established *Amaibi Loishang* (Institutions of Shamans) other than the exclusive of the royal court but also at different localities for worshipping local deities (*Umanglai*) and other traditional rituals of individual people. *Amaibi Loishang* continues to be in existence till date at the Sri Sri Govindajee Temple which has been considered as the supreme head of the Manipuri Hindu Gaudiya Vaishnavas and the *Amaibis* continues to be an essential part in performing inseparably syncretized non Hindu rituals in Meitei Hindu traditions like, *Kurak Lamtaiba*, *Kongba Leithong Phaatpa*, *Shajibu Leikhun Phunba*, *Cheithaaba*, *Maikai Ngaakpa Lai Khurumba*, *Sanaamahi Chenghongba*, *Pakhangba Chenghongba*, etc.

CONCLUSION:

We know that Hinduism has no central doctrinal authority. In fact almost all who are said to be Hindus do not claim to belong to any particular denomination or tradition. For example take the four major traditions of the Hindu which are accepted and used in scholarly studies, viz. Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism and Smartism; which are sometimes referred to as the denominations of Hinduism with differences in the primary deity at the centre of the tradition. But we can find any Hindu belonging to a particular denomination of Hinduism worshipping all the kind of God and Goddesses belonging to other denomination. Also we find groups of Hindu belonging to a particular denomination celebrating each and every festival of other denomination. Therefore, it is a notable feature of Hindu denominations that they do not deny other concepts of the divine or deity, and often celebrate the other as henotheistic equivalent. As such, noted scholar on Hinduism and comparative Study of Religion, Julius Lipner defined denominations of Hinduism as unlike those found in major religions of the world, because Hindu denominations are fuzzy with individuals practicing more than one, and he suggests the term Hindu polycentrism.

Hence, it is of no surprise in finding many facets of syncretized local elements in its pure or remoulded forms in the cultural traditions of the Manipuri Hindu Gaudiya Vaishnava as a result of the fact that both the pre and post amalgamated peoples of Manipur had experienced and imprinted various waves of cultural courses in different stages of times before it embraced Hinduism as its state religion in the 18th century A.D.

References:

1. Khelchandra Singh, N., (1969). *Ariba Manipuri Sahityagi Etihhas*. Imphal.
2. Khelchandra Singh, N.,(Ed.), (1967), *Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba*. Imphal.
3. Ibungohal Singh, L.amsung Khelchandra Singh, N. (Ed.), (2005)*Cheitharol Kumbaba*. Imphal.
4. Hodson, T.C. (1975), *The Meitheis*. New Delhi.
5. Chatterji, S.K., (1967), *Religious and Cultural Integration of India*. Imphal.
6. Parratt, S.N. (1980), *The Religion of Manipur*. Culcutta.
7. Roy, Jyotirmoy., (1973), *History of Manipur*. Culcutta.
8. Nilkanta Singh, N., (1982). *Aspect of Indian Culture*. Imphal.
9. Kirti Singh, M., (1980). *Religious Development in Manipur in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. Imphal.
10. Jhalajit Singh, R.K., (1976). *A History of Manipuri Literature*. Imphal.
11. Manihar Singh, Ch., (1965). *A History of Manipuri Literature*. Imphal.
12. Jhalajit Singh, R.K., (1975). *States of Our Union Manipur*. New Delhi.
13. Yumjau Singh, W., (1965)., *An Early History of Manipur*. Imphal.
