INTRODUCTION
Cultural performances are exposed to the process of both conscious and unconscious forces of temporal exigencies, brought about through the dynamism of both endogenous and exogenous cultural traits. This means there is the vulnerability of cultural performances being immersed into the cultural, religious, political, economic terrains of the society of which they are part. However this does not discount their propensity to rise above/against them; fix them in the synchronic time frame; take them to the world of mythology and history; and also to the yet unseen future with their own prognosis. Further, cultural performances cannot be labelled just as a product devoid of values, because 'taste is a deeply ideological category'\(^1\) for both the producer and the receiver. Raymond Williams\(^2\) is of the view that the changes and conflicts of a whole way of life are deeply implicated in its systems of learning and communication, with the result that cultural history is far from being a mere province of idle aesthetic interest. Cultural production involves a tacit understanding, between the producer and the consumer, of a shared meaning. If there is an endeavour, through this, to possess a certain cultural, political, and religious element within the societal location, then this very process is a pointer to the dispossession or to the 'othering' of the elements which are perceived as detriment. Pierre Bourdieu sees the cultural production and consumption of culture as 'predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences'.\(^3\)

Theatre tradition as one of the trajectories of cultural performances, also traverses in a geo-historical vehicle which takes along the social and cultural ontology from its temporal (both reversible and irreversible) and spatial sojourns. Community participation serves as a catalyst to this journey, for it cannot stand by itself without the response, be it approving or denouncing, from an audience. This is because theatre is an art form which is regulated by the limits of time and space in terms of its performance. Here, a thin line can be marked between theatre and the community's unending dynamics which involve both integrative and conflictual situations among groups or individuals. While the situations in the latter can be read as a relatively incessant narrative, theatre weaves through a narrative

which is bound, performed in a specified space and time in front of an already present audience. So, theatre is an address by an individual or a group of individuals to a number of people. It is a communication between the performers and the spectators. All the theatrical performances share at least one underlying quality, that is, performance behaviour. Performance behaviour⁴ is not free and easy. It is known and/or practiced behaviour— or 'twice-behaved behaviour', 'restored behaviour'— either rehearsed, previously known, learned by osmosis since early childhood, revealed during the performance by masters, guides, gurus, or elders or generated by rules that govern the outcome. This means performance behaviour never wholly belongs to the performer. It is something, which is learned and imposed upon the performer during performance.

The performance behaviour is present in both ritualistic and theatrical performances. However both ritual and theatre cannot be subsumed into the same genre though they share many similarities. According to Schechner they can be categorised in terms of the degree of the presence of either entertainment or efficacy.⁵ The presence of a higher degree of entertainment makes the performance theatrical and on the other hand ritual has the higher degree of efficacy. But theatre and ritual, most of the time, co-exist in a performance. They form a braided structure. In history of western theatre, when the braided structure is tight i.e., when both efficacy and entertainment are present in nearly equal degrees, theatre flourished. Especially in western theatre, when efficacy dominates, performances are universalistic, allegorical, ritualized, tied to a stable established order. When entertainment dominates, the performances are class oriented, individualized, show business, constantly adjusted to suit the tastes of the audience. At one moment ritual seems to be the source of theatre and at another point theatre seems to be the source of ritual. In fact, they are twin system vitally interconnected. There is osmosis between the two. Presently theatre is entering into the avenues, which were once solely occupied, by religion and politics.

It is not surprising that there is the globalising trend of deliberate experimentation of converging elements belonging to ritualistic (sacred) and theatrical spheres (profane) mostly by people in experimental theatre tradition. However there are, still, societies which

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⁵Ibid. p. 137.
are still caught up in the webs of ritualistic performances. They are unable or not willing to switch over to the secular space of theatre. They are apprehensive of their culture being polluted by the entrance of new and foreign traits or changes. On the other hand, there are societies which can easily differentiate between ritualistic and theatrical performances. They try to capitalise on their ritualistic heritage, through theatrical performances in today's market oriented global equations.

Manipur society has been able to take along both the forms of performances in its social and cultural existence. Theatre, in Manipur, as a cultural representation, is a site of cultural dialogue, contestations, protests, and critiquing of the internal societal imbalances and irregularities, and hegemony of both the internal and external forces. It also serves as a domain of regulation of social differences, when there is a categorisation between what is called 'elite' theatre and 'popular' theatre. People hegemonised by 'elite' theatre have been constantly trying to map out a society congenial to their ideological topography. Nevertheless, there is always a consciousness to connect the global with the local, despite many taxing forces of commercialisation and consumerism. Land and territoriality, both geographically and culturally, are the central topics taken up by these theatre forms. Shumang Lila, the present topic of study, has taken more responsibility than any other theatre genre in Manipur to keep the above mentioned connection alive, through its myriad forms of presentations and representations of different facets of community, history, mythology, politics, economy and religion, for decades.

Shumang Lila which can be loosely translated into courtyard theatre is a touring theatre form. Shumang literally means courtyard. This theatre form is of two forms, categorised through gender line. The troupes are either exclusively of male or female. The male Shumang Lila is called Nupa Shumang Lila and the female one is Nupi Shumang Lila. The performance is done in any open space or in an empty auditorium. It is different from the proscenium theatre in that the performance is done surrounded by audience from all directions. The performance does not use elaborate stage props but a table and two chairs which serve as props. These props may be symbolically employed depending on the demands of the scenes. Since its emergence as a secular performance genre in the late 19th century, there have been various developments in terms of forms and contents. The texts of the plays have tried to incorporate the social, cultural, religious, political, and economic

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6 The difference between elite and popular theatre will be dealt with in detail in Chapter I.
facets of Manipuri society and its relationship with its neighbours; the issues pertaining to the Northeast India; India; and also international issues. What is important in Shumang Lila is its endeavour to adapt national and international issues to the local contexts. The present thesis will try to study various facets of Shumang Lila. Chapter I, in particular, will introduce this theatre form in detail. As Shumang Lila takes into consideration various issues pertaining to Manipur and Northeast, it would be pertinent to have a social, cultural, political, historical, religious and geographical mapping of Manipuri and Northeast societies. Northeast societies which look homogenous to the laypersons from outside are culturally very heterogeneous. First let me delve into the Northeast and later come to the state of Manipur, which will be located within the larger frame of Northeast India as a region.

1. ‘Ethnoscaping’ the Northeast India

1.1 Topography and Demography

Today, the Northeast India comprises of eight states namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The region lies between 88°E (approx.) and 97.5°E (approx.) longitude and 22°N (approx.) and 29.5°N (approx.) latitude. It has an area of 2,62,500 sq. km. out of India’s total area of 32,87,263 sq. km. which means only 8% of the latter. 98% of its border is international, shared with Bhutan, China (Tibet), Myanmar and Bangladesh. This means only 2% of it, or mere by that 20 km wide corridor aptly called ‘Chicken’s Neck’ near Siliguri in West Bengal, is the only passage to the rest of India. This name ‘Chicken’s neck’ can be seen as metaphor with various geographical, political, social, economic, cultural and racial interpretations. Here, symbolically speaking, Northeast is the head of the chicken and the rest of India, the body.

When one sees the physiology, the head of a body is the most important part which controls most of the bodily functions. This has been duplicated in the social system when the person with power, sanctioned through seniority or otherwise, is called the head. This means the head has been the most influential part of the physiology as well as the social system. Following this reasoning, Northeast should be having an ample amount of sway over the rest of the country. But when it comes to the utility i.e. the meat of the chicken, the head of chicken is the most neglected, least preferred and inedible, while the body is

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the most edible and resourceful portion which includes the egg laying parts. Here, there seems to be no difference if Northeast India is either head or tail. Both are in the periphery, marginalised in the race for utility. But there are times when this head turned tail creates huge ripples in the nervous system of the body and the body somehow responds, most of the time, with intense force and sometimes with much calculated ‘goodwill’. Metaphorically speaking, this binds the politics of geography, economy, culture, religion and race between the people of Northeast and the people in the corridors of power in New Delhi in particular and the rest of the country in general.

Northeast, which is negligible in terms of its territorial contribution to India, is also very minimal in its constitution of the total population of India. According to Census 2001 the population of the region is 39.04 million which is 3.80% of India’s total population of 1,028 million. However, the region recorded a high percent decadal growth of 22.16 as compared to that of All India figure of 21.34, in the inter-censal period 1991-2001. Nagaland topped the list with 64.41%. This owes to large scale immigration to the state and also to the region from other parts of the country and also from Bangladesh, which is also part of the programme of what Sanjib Baruah calls ‘nationalising space’. This means the large chunk of the population of the region is of ‘non-native’ origin, though the debate on who should be called as ‘native’ or ‘non-native’ is still on.

In terms of literacy the region is relatively better when seen vis-a-vis other parts of the country. It has 68.77% (Male: 75.08% & Female: 61.91%) little above the national average of 65.38% (Male: 75.85% & Female: 54.16%). Mizoram stands second with 88.49% next only to Kerala (90.92%) among the Indian states. However Aizawl, its Capital, is the most literate district in India with 96.64%, according to the Census Report 2001. This may not be a confirmation that the quality of education, especially higher education, in the region is also high. In terms of Human Development Index the region records a varied picture. Among the 32 states and Union Territories of India, Mizoram stands at 7th and Manipur at 9th ranks while Arunachal Pradesh is at 29th and Assam at 26th ranks.\textsuperscript{10}


\textsuperscript{10} See Annual Report 2004-05, Ministry of DONER, Government of India.
1.2 Northeast as a ‘Region’, the Transformation from Frontier to Border

Categorizing a certain area under the umbrella name of ‘region’ triggers primordial sentiment among the people marked out by that physical boundary. This ‘primordiality’ is sometimes invented to meet the exigencies against the compelling forces from the out-groups. This is a moment of consolidation of shared values despite the existential heterogeneity among the groups within the region. The politics of regionalism has not had a happy outcome in most parts of the world. This has been marked with discontents and rivalry, both physical and ideational, resulting in, sometimes, bloody fall-outs. The examples are galore, starting from the one between ‘Tonkin, Annam, and Cochin in Pre-partitioned Vietnam, the two baskets on the long pole, were opposed almost purely in regional terms, sharing language, culture, race, and so on’ to the then ‘East and West Pakistan’; ‘Java versus the West Coast in mountain-bisected Malaya’ etc.11 This regionalisms have been pronounced with their own stakes on the power structure. There is a conscious move from inside which involves the agency, targeted against its rivals outside. In case of Northeast India, the construction of region as a primordial force, is thrust from outside. There was no concrete concept of Northeast as a region prior to 1960s, though the people shared commonality in terms of race vis-à-vis other racially different people within India. So, the creation of Northeast as a region is a state-sponsored move to club the racially similar and geographically isolated people under one umbrella. Before 1960s the term Northeast existed only in case of North East Frontier Agency or NEFA, which was the present day Arunachal Pradesh. NEFA, though was a part of the then Assam, was administered by the Ministry of External Affairs until 1965 and then by the Ministry of Home Affairs till 1972 when it was turned into an Union Territory with a new name Arunachal Pradesh.

India’s war and defeat against China in 1962, made all the difference both for the region and the power in New Delhi. It triggered the state building process by dividing Assam into smaller units. The first to come out was Nagaland with the granting of statehood in 1963. This was to appease the independentists in the Naga Hills, who had been waging a rebellion for an independent nation since 1950s and who were perceived by the Indian Government as having alliance with China. It was also perceived as a ploy to

divert the minds of these independentists and to encourage them to be part of the power structure created by the Centre. This was the beginning of the consolidation of what Sanjib Baruah calls ‘cosmetic federalism’ where the state governments in the region seem to be having a stake in internal relations and function but in the real sense, the power is in the hands of New Delhi. Following Nagaland, Meghalaya (statehood in 1972), Arunachal Pradesh (statehood in 1987), and Mizoram (Union Territory in 1972 and statehood in 1987) came out of the then Assam. Other two states Manipur and Tripura were Princely states during the British time and after they merged into India in 1949, they were put into Part C State Category. Both got statehood in 1972.

The post Indo-China war of 1962 saw an active manoeuvring of the region by the Central Government. This was a time when it was felt that the region should be formally clubbed into one category. So, the North Eastern Council (NEC) was established in 1972 through an Act of Parliament i.e. the North Eastern Council Act 1971. Driven by the ‘strategically’ important location of the region, in 2001, the Ministry of Development of North-Eastern Region (DONER) was added as a separate Ministry in India’s central government. With this formation, Sikkim was inducted into the region so that it has eight states today. This formal creation of a Ministry, which is not to be found for other regions of India, is seen as an effort in ‘nationalizing space’ through state-building institutions to create a sense of ‘pan-Indian national community’ amongst the people of the region, whose loyalty the Central Government always doubts.

The Indo-China war of 1962 was a benchmark to turn the frontiers into borders. The category ‘frontier’ rings a fluid and unbounded sense of existence. It sides more with the social and cultural relationship between people than the formally created categories of the state. Its negative connotations may also mean that it serves as a buffer zone between two states, which may bear the brunt of the confrontations between the states. On both counts, Northeast could be suitably considered as frontier region before 1962, given the porous nature of the international borders and ill-governance. The insult India got in the hands of China consolidated her resolve to guard her territory with militaristic approach even at the cost of trans-national social and cultural alliance among the people in the

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13 *Yojana* December, 2005. op. cit. p. 4.
region and other neighbouring countries. So state institutions made its presence felt when the idea of territory with marked border was made real.

The transformation was also an attempt to homogenise the national space. Borders, in fact, are conceived as markers of identity and have played a role in making national identity the pre-eminent political identity of the state.\(^{14}\) Anita Sengupta is of the view that, ‘while it is now generally accepted that the population of the world is territorially divided into local groups, it is also accepted that the boundaries between them are social constructions which may be violated, moved or dismantled and their significance and uses changed.’\(^{15}\) She cites the example of the Central Asian countries where there is difficulty in putting all the people with similar primordial characteristics within the fabricated national boundary.\(^{16}\)

In the case of Northeast India also, there are communities whose members are in both sides of the international borders. For instance, the arbitrarily demarcated border separates many Naga villages in Nagaland and Manipur between Myanmar and India. The same is the case with the Mizos. Irrespective of these formal borders these areas serve as cultural zones. Despite this commonality, the state sponsored demarcation creates a psychology of allegiance, in the experiential lives of the people, to the country to which their community belongs. Significantly, most of the Manipuris direct their economic, political and cultural allegiance towards the mainland India rather than towards the Burmese in Myanmar despite their closeness, in geographical, historical, cultural and racial terms, to the latter. This is in a way a success of the orchestration of the Indian state to ‘nationalise the space’.

The effort to create a region and nationalise the Northeast is pushed forward with very visible signs which try to establish a connectivity of the region with the Sanskritic civilization of India. One primordial element which is put in active service is language. Naming of NEFA as Arunachal Pradesh and the new state, created out of the Khasi, Garo and Jaintia Hills, as Meghalaya (the land of the clouds) is not just coincidental, but a drive moved by the fear of the Northeast’s alleged allegiance towards the powerful China. Both the names do not have their social and cultural connection with the people who inhabit

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\(^{16}\) Ibid. p. 16.
these areas. This has been an effort to create or invent primordiality out of the new language of experience. Such negation of the connectivity with people’s cultural ethos is also seen in naming the region as ‘Northeast’. Sanjib Baruah writes,

> Since governments, political parties, and the media have come to view the area as a region it is useful to take it as a unit of analysis at least for certain purposes. At the same time it is important to keep in mind that an official region does not necessarily imply a regional consciousness corresponding to it. The term Northeast India points to no more than an area’s location on India’s political map. Such generic locational place-names are attractive to political engineers because they evoke no historical memory or collective consciousness.\(^7\)

The term, though initially devoid of historical and cultural connectivity with the people of the region, is not completely against the politics of the insiders of the region. With repetition of experiences, shared through the platform of this common term, there is the creation of a new primordiality called Northeast among the people of this region. This is even more consolidated when they come together to meet any out-group, both in the formal, administrative and experiential levels of the lived world. This is despite many sore relationships, sometimes bloody, among the communities of the region on the lines of ethnicity. Whatever the initial motive of the Indian Government, the creation of Northeast as a region has also created an ‘informed self’ out of India.

### 1.3. Race and Ethnicity

Northeast India is, without doubt, one of the most complex regions in the world both in terms of biodiversity; and ‘ethno-diversity’, which include culture, language and religion etc. In terms of biodiversity of this region, Arunachal Pradesh alone has ‘500 species of orchids, 52 species of rhododendron and 105 species of bamboo’ apart from ‘many endangered species including ten distinct species of pheasants, the great cats – tigers, leopards as well as clouded and snow leopards – and all three of the goat antelopes.’\(^8\) On the other hand, ‘ethno-diversity’ can be easily exemplified by the fact that there are places where people of two neighbouring villages are not able to understand one another’s language despite their geographical proximity. This opens up the floodgate to discern the

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\(^7\) Baruah, op. cit. pp. 4-5.

whole plethora of inter and intra community dynamics of politics, religion and culture. Both the diversities converge when communities have been attached to flora and fauna through the channel of belief system which may be termed as animism. That is not all. Northeast is in the heavy current of transition where the ‘old’ meets the ‘new’; ‘tradition’ meets ‘modernity’ and there are both conflictual and dialogic intercourses between the two. This whole networks become more complex when the questions of ethnicity and race are evoked through conscious efforts to draw a different model of social relations, both at the extra-community, inter-community and intra-community level; and the one between individuals of the same community and with members of other communities.

The above questions are at the core of race and ethnicity as identities. This requires in-depth clarity of whether race and ethnicity can stand as autonomous concepts or are interchangeable. To start with, identity can be located in various levels, two of which may be the one at the macro or group level, and the other at the micro or individual level. However, the latter is situated within the former, for the identity of the individual is determined by his being a member of a certain group. According to Anthony Appiah,

Identity is a coalescence of mutually responsive (if sometimes conflicting) modes of conduct, habits of thought, and patterns of evaluation; in short, a coherent kind of human social psychology. Every human identity is constructed, historical; everyone has its share of false presuppositions, of the errors and inaccuracies that courtesy calls ‘myth,’ religion ‘heresy,’ and science ‘magic.’ Invented histories, invented biologies, invented cultural affinities come with every identity; each is a kind of role that has to be scripted, structured by conventions of narrative to which the world never quite manages to conform.  

The experiential world of identity, which is also highly influenced by the ideological projects, may not be all the time positive in its objective and intention. There have been many negative effects of the identity politics, which put one group against another in their fight for a limited resource, both material and primordial. Such instances are available whether it is racial or ethnic. But it is not really easy to differentiate between race and ethnicity, given the kind of usage by the people and also by the state machinery to define the categories of people within a definite state. Many use the two interchangeably. For instance in Malaysia ‘Malay’, ‘Chinese’ and ‘Indian’ are regarded as races in the

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popular conception of race. Even in the official conception, i.e. in the Malay constitution, also there is lack of clarity as to what is race and ethnicity. On the other hand the American census has ‘races’ as an explicit term for whites and blacks. Again it has the term ‘ethnic’ but it also mentions that ‘Hispanics’ as an ethnic group may be of any race. The British Census does not have ‘race’ as a term but has ‘ethnic’ categories such as “black” and another, “Pakistani”, the first a “race”/colour term and the second a national origin/ethnic term’.20

Race according to Clifford Geertz is a primordial property. According to him, ‘race is similar to assumed kinship, in that it involves an ethnobiological theory’.21 Major problems with defining race wholly on the basis of biology i.e. differences in phenotypical and also genotypical characters, are that firstly, race as such does not exist and secondly, there are no pure races as a result of so much of interbreeding in many societies.

According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant, there are two opposing claims on the understanding of race. First there ‘is a continuous temptation to think of race as an essence, as something fired, concrete, and objective.’ On the other hand there is the perspective ‘to imagine race as a mere illusion, a purely ideological construct which some ideal non-racist social order would eliminate.’ But both are inaccurate and there needs to be one alternative. Race should be understood ‘as an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle.’22 The task of sociological theory is to explain this situation.

Race as a biological basis for classification of human groups is a recent development in human history. It was accentuated with the rapid, long distance migrations of different groups which, again, was accelerated by trade and the large-scale European exploration and colonial expansion of the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. This was accompanied by the rise of modern science when, especially, Darwin’s theory of evolution which emphasised the theory of the survival of the fittest was accepted and theorised by social theorists like Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner. This social

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21 Clifford Geertz. op. cit. p. 262.
Darwinism was used as a 'justification for the imperialism by the British and others, and for America’s treatment of its minorities in the early twentieth century.'

Some physical anthropologists have categorised human groups into three main races—the Negroid (black), Caucasoid (white) and Mongoloid (yellow). But there has been confusion or interchangeable use between race and ethnicity. 'As recently as World War II it was not common to hear people speak of the “British race,” the “Jewish race,” and so on.' All this was despite the fact that both the Germans and Jews were of the same colour though they did not share the same cultures. This fluctuation in the understanding of race underlines the fact that race is not a fixed concept but a socially constructed phenomenon, depending on who defines whom.

What is important when we talk of race is the social significance it has. 'Racial distinctions are meaningful because we attach meaning to them, and the consequences vary from prejudice and discrimination to slavery and genocide.' It is the belief in the racial differences, not really biological significance, which drives people to mete out different treatments to 'racially' different people. This social significance is still very real in American society, which is considered to be a natural laboratory for the study on race. W. E. B. Du Bois captured the socio-psychological condition of the blacks in a white dominated American society. A Black person had 'no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.' Racial formation, according to Omi and Winant, is 'the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed'. The racial formation process, then, occurs 'through a linkage between structure and representation. Racial projects do the ideological “work” of making these links.'

Race can remain just as an objective and harmless category when social, historical, political, and ideological meanings are not superimposed on it. When such superimposition

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid. p. 1617.
27 Michael Omi and Howard Winant. op. cit. p. 372.
28 Ibid.
happens it takes the form of racism. Racism also involves multiple discourses ranging from explicit justifications of segregation as in the USA and apartheid South Africa; the racist anti-migrant rhetoric in post-colonial immigrant receiving Europe such as Britain, Holland and France; and racism seen as any political cultural construction which falls short of ‘Universalism’. ‘The core of racism is a system of social classification designating peoples as being of inherently unequal worth; this doctrine is allied to the systematic suppression and oppression of a people category both within the framework of a nation-state and in systems of imperial domination.’ Sustenance of racism has much to do with the ideological colour of many natural and social scientists. This is evident from the fact that natural and social sciences have been dominated by ‘white, and middle class to upper class.’ This course can be at least minimised when the academics is opened to ‘new scholars with a wide diversity of background.’

Race and racism may not be widely used as analytical tools among the social scientists in India who are involved in the study of identities. They now prefer the concept of ethnicity as the flavour of the time. Nevertheless the question of race cannot be shunned away as an obscurantist idea altogether. As discussed above, the imagining of India on an idealistic plain, that race ought not to be regarded as the main reference point in categorisation or social interaction between groups of people in India, is one thing. But understanding the lived world of social interactions which is, whether one likes it or not, much shaped by the phenotypical features and then by the socio-cultural construction of race, is another thing. The former lies in the ideational plain and the latter in the experiential plain. But both are also ideologically motivated realms.

Though India does not engage with the question of race in the state sponsorship at the macro-level, the micro-level inter-group communication is much motivated by race and the accompanied prejudices. So it is important to discern the now sidelined concept of race. One of the first scholars who took interest in the study of race in India was Sir Herbert Risley. He classified the Indian population into seven racial types, three fundamental and four secondary. The fundamental races are 1. Dravidian; 2. Mongoloid; and 3. Indo-Aryan. The secondary ones are 1. Cytho-Dravidian; 2. Aryo-Dravidian; 3. Mongolo-Dravidian and

29 Susan R Pitchford. op. cit. p. 1619.
4. Pre-Dravidian. The classification does not use Negroid as one of the types in India. But J.H. Hutton is of the view that Negrito were the original occupants of India. In 1950s B. S. Guha came out with a list of six main racial elements in India, with nine sub-types made in connection with the census of 1931. They are:

1. Negrito;
2. Proto-Australoid;
   ii) Tibeto-Mongoloids
   ii) Mediterranean &
   iii) Oriental Type
5. Western Brachycephals: i) Alpinoid
   ii) Dinaric &
   iii) Armenoid

The notion of race is also ingrained in varna system. The word varna itself means colour. It originally referred to the Arya and Dasa. In this connection Ghurye writes,... in the Rg Veda the word ‘varna’ is never applied to any one of these classes (Brahmana, Kshatriya, etc.). It is only Arya varna or the Aryan people that is contrasted with the Dasa varna. The Satapatha Brahmana, on the other hand, describes the four classes as the four varnas. ‘Varna’ means ‘colour’, and it was in this sense that the word seems to have been employed in contrasting the Arya and the Dasa, referring to their fair and dark colours respectively.

Taking the debate on race further in the modern context, Beteille is of the view that race as an analytical tool in India and other parts of the world is no longer a preferred one. But he recounts an era when race was an important concept in the academic circle. Beteille is against UN’s attempt ‘to revive and expand the idea of race, ostensibly to combat the many forms of social and political discrimination prevalent in the world.

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34 Andre Beteille. op. cit.
Interested parties within and outside the U.N. would like to bring caste discrimination in general and the practice of untouchability in particular within the purview of racial discrimination.  

It is true that state sponsorship of policies and programmes based on racial categories further accentuates the already ugly face of racial politics. But it is unwise to deny the existence of social signification of race. In India, though race has been given adieu at least in academic circle, there are still strong traces of race related problems. This is despite the claim that there is no pure race as such. Social groups in India are still caught up with the phenotypical construction of race, which effects and affects the inter-group interactions. The most evident instance would be how the social relation between people with Mongoloid features from the Northeast and people with Indo-Aryan and Dravidian features from the ‘mainland’ India, is hyphenated by the physical features of the respective groups.

Race as a social category is not a recent invention in India too. It has been documented in various Sanskrit literatures even. There has been a strained relationship between what is Northeast India today and other parts of India, in racial terms. Sajal Nag writes,

Despite the massive diversity and heterogeneity the common feature that these tribal and ethnic groups share is their Indo-Mongoloid origin as against the Indo-Aryans of the rest of India. This made them distinguishable physical types to begin with, which is evident from the description of these people in Sanskrit literature in blanket terms as kirats, asuras, danavas, kuvachas and mlecchas. The Aryan conception of these groups can be seen from what is recorded in the Padmapurana. ‘The mlecchas as barbarians are accustomed to eat everything. They are idiotic and kill cows and Brahmans.’

Not so early in history of India this racial dimension was expressed when Sardar Patel wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru, ‘The people inhabiting these portions have no established loyalty or devotion to India. Even the Darjeeling and Kalimpong areas (in the present day West Bengal) are not free from pro-Mongoloid prejudice.’ (Italics mine)  

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35 Ibid.
These scriptural and historical prejudices between the two visibly different groups of people is still carried forward even in today’s India. Indian mind is hierarchical and it is reflected in most of the realms, be it macro or micro. People of Indo-Aryan and Dravidian physical features have been treated differently in the Mongoloid Northeast. Different communities of the region have given names to the ‘outsiders’. ‘The Mizos called them vais, the Khasis dkhar, the Garos aching, the Meiteis mayang, the Minyangs ayeng, the Gallongs nipak, and the Ao Nagas thumar.’

In Manipur, with Hindu majority, there are two seemingly contradictory forces working when it comes to interaction with the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian people. One is that they look up to them as carriers of a high Hindu tradition. On the other hand, there is distrust driven by the ‘wiliness’ which is also an impact of the economic and political influence by these ‘outsiders’ in their existential conditions. So, they are as a whole categorised as Mayangs, irrespective of whether the person is Indo-Aryan or Dravidian. It is because the people of Indo-Aryan or Dravidian origin do not look like local people. The term Mayang is not for other Mongoloid groups. So, this term also carries a racial overtone.

Same is the case when a Mongoloid looking person is treated differently in the land dominated by Indo-Aryan and Dravidian people. The prejudice akin to what is mentioned in the Padmapurana is still prevalent in this case. Such racial formation is consolidated with the increase in the out-migration of people, especially student migrants, from the Northeast to other parts of India. The negative image is accentuated when the receiving population establishes a bracketed identity between these new migrants and the already familiar community like Nepalese. The status of Nepalese in India is not respected in the mainland India as they are engaged in the professions which are at the lower rungs of the traditional occupation hierarchy. The community is stigmatised more so because many of their women are also into the stigmatised profession of prostitution. This means the new Mongoloid migrants from the Northeast have also to bear this stigmatised identity because

38 Sajal Nag. op. cit. p. 27.

39 ‘Every year between 5,000 and 7,000 Nepalese girls are trafficked into the red light districts in Indian cities. Many of the girls are barely 9 or 10 years old. 200,000 to over 250,000 Nepalese women and girls are already in Indian brothels.’ *Facebook on Global Sexual exploitation–Nepal.* Available at http://www.uri.edu/arts/artsci/wms/hughes/nepal.htm. Also see Rape for Profit: Trafficking of Nepali Girls and Women to India’s Brothels. In *Human Rights Watch.* Vol. 12, No. 5(A), October 1999. Available at http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Inida.htm
of their being from the same racial background. It is not strange for many of them to lose their temper when addressed as Nepalese in the micro-level interactions in cities in the 'mainland' India. This is an outstanding example of how race is also motivated by cultural, economic and social conditions of the people.

The consequences of race are not only social and cultural but also psychological. There is always self-consciousness of being a 'minority' in the midst of a public dominated by a 'majority'. The negative repercussions are higher than the positive assertions. There can be ways to neutralise these effects. One way would be to try and look like the majority through assimilation, both culturally and physically. The other one is to assert one's identity. One very prominent example of the former is Michael Jackson who transformed his skin colour from black to white and his facial structure to that of a white person. So, race and racism, though condemnable in all their forms, still have their existence, irrespective of whether or not they are taken up by scholars as framework for analysis.

Let us turn from the category of race and see how the other category of ethnicity can be understood in relation to race or independently of race. The word Ethnicity comes from the ancient Greek *ethnos* which seems to have referred to a range of situations in which a collectivity of humans lived and acted together, and which is typically translated today as 'people' or 'nation'. The 'centre of gravity' of ethnicity is constituted by ancestry, culture and language. Subsumed within these attributes are the shared history, distinctive foods, dress, family names, music, customs, religion, and national origin. According to Steve Fenton the concept of ethnic group 'refers to the social elaboration of collective identities whereby individuals see themselves as one among others like themselves. Collectively, people – whose boundaries may be loosely or tightly defined – distinguish themselves from other people. Thus ethnicity is about social classifications emerging within relationships.\(^{40}\)

'The idea of an ethnic group, however, is relatively new. The first surfaced in standard English dictionaries in the 1960s as increased world migration and globalization heightened contact among different peoples.'\(^{41}\) Moreover this category becomes a relatively clearer concept as it does not suffer from the historical association of error in the way that the concept of race does. It was also practical 'with notions of “race” in public

\(^{40}\) Steve Fenton. op. cit. p. 6.

and scientific disrepute since 1945, ethnicity has obligingly stepped into the gap, becoming a rallying cry in the often bloody reorganization of the post-Cold war world. The obscenity of “ethnic cleansing” stands shoulder to shoulder with earlier euphemism such as “racial hygiene” and “the final solution.”

One of the earliest scholars to have discerned the concept of ethnicity is Max Weber. According to him, ‘an ethnic group is based on the belief shared by its members that, however distinctly, they are of common descent’. He emphasized that ‘race creates a ‘group’ only when it is subjectively perceived as a common trait. This happens only when a neighbourhood or the mere proximity of racially different persons is the basis of joint (mostly political) action, or conversely, when some common experiences of members of the same race are linked to some antagonism against members of an obviously different group’ For Weber, ‘ethnic membership does not constitute a group; it only facilitates group formation of any kind, particularly in the political sphere. On the other hand, it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized, that inspires the belief in common ethnicity.’

Jenkins then comes up with his basic social anthropological model of ethnicity. It has four points. They are:

1. Ethnicity is about cultural differentiation – although, to reiterate the main theme of Social Identity, identity is always a dialectic between similarity and difference;
2. Ethnicity is centrally concerned with culture – shared meaning – but it is also rooted in and to a considerable extent the outcome of social interaction;
3. Ethnicity is no more fixed or unchanging than the culture of which it is a component or the situations in which it is produced and reproduced;
4. Ethnicity as social identity is collective and individual externalized in social interaction and internalized in personal self-identification.

Ethnicity stands as a supported body of the dynamics of culture, economy, and politics. Ethnicity does not stand just as a fixed and neutral concept but is defined and redefined with involvement of an active agency. This means there should be definition of not only self but also the others. So, for the ethnic sharing to spring to life ‘it is necessary

that real or perceived differences of ancestry, culture and language are mobilised in social interactions.\textsuperscript{45} What is important here is that ethnicity should be understood as ‘social process, as the moving boundaries and identities which people, collectively and individually, draw around themselves in their social lives. Central to this process is the production and reproduction of culture, of acknowledged ancestry and ideologies of ancestry, and the use of language as a marker of social difference and the emblem of a people.'\textsuperscript{46}

The horrible reactions to this constructed action of ethnicity have been witnessed around the world from time to time, especially in the post-colonial era (post-1940s). This analytical tool which graduated from that of race is now turning into the ugly face of its predecessor itself. So, the word ‘ethnic cleansing’ which emerged in 1992, has replaced the much feared and condemned terms like Holocaust and genocide. This was carried out in 1992 by Serbians who attempted to eliminate Croats and Muslims from their population. It was also seen in 1994, when Hutu militia in the African nation of Rwanda massacred approximately half a million of the nation’s ethnic minority, the Tutsis. Ethnic based violence was also witnessed in Indian subcontinent between Hindus and Muslims during partition between India and Pakistan in 1947. It still continues to erupt in India from time to time. One of the longest ethnic confrontations is the one between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.\textsuperscript{47} In Manipur also the ethnic clashes between Nagas and Kukis; and between Kukis and Paites in early 1990s still remain fresh in the minds of the people.

South Asia is complex in terms of ethnic groups and ethnic politics. One of the bloodiest ethnic crises is that of Sri Lanka between Minority Tamils and Majority Sinhalas. According to Aparna Agashe, politics of Tamil ethnicity emerged as a reaction to the concretisation of Sinhala identity, the Sinhalas’ chauvinistic control over the state machinery, and rivalries between Tamil and Sinhala Buddhist elites. On the other hand Sunanda Deshapriya’s contention is that the Sinhala nationalism emerged as a response to the economic dominance by Muslims and Indian and Pakistani traders. Later it became

\textsuperscript{45} Fenton. op. cit. p.6.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid. p. 10.
\textsuperscript{47} Joseph M. Palmisano (ed.). op. cit.
political targeting minorities like Tamils, Muslims and Christians while claiming Sri Lanka as the land of Sinhala Buddhists and Sinhala as the national language.\textsuperscript{48}

Such ethnic problems are also found in almost all the states in South Asia. Ananta Raj Poudyal stresses the multinational, multi-lingual, multi-religious, and multicultural aspects of Nepal. But the constitution declares Nepal as a Hindu kingdom and Nepali language the only national language, which shows the homogenising attitude that has led to the emergence of ethnic problems in Nepal after the restoration of democracy. Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakraborti) talks about the influx of Rohingyas, who are Muslims from the Arakan region of Myanmar, to the Chitagong region of Bangladesh which became a bone of contention between the two countries during 1991-93 and 1997-99.\textsuperscript{49}

In Northeast the problem becomes more complex given the complexity and numerosness of the ethnic groups which are claiming their share within and outside of the constitution of India. There has been ample amount of engagements in the constructivism in establishing the ‘uniqueness’ of the existence of these groups. The problem also lies in defining ethnic group itself. If we take sharing of ancestry, culture and language as the characteristics of being an ethnic group then, in Northeast, it coincides with the category of tribe. But again it is also a fact that there are elements within the region which are trying hard to establish a common history, ancestry and culture through such tools as origin myths. This mystification of identity is motivated by political motives and is connected to nationalism. Here the boundary crosses the individual tribes and encompasses a wider collection of people. This widening of boundary tries to define the new entity as ethnicity, on the basis of shared ancestry and culture, if not language. This is outstandingly evident in case of Nagas.

1.4 Ethnicity and Tribe

Let us now try to see the convergence and divergence between the categories of ethnicity and tribe. There is no unanimity in defining what a tribe is. But there are certain characteristics which are common to the communities which have been categorised as tribes. Jaganath Pathy sums up as follows: ‘Some superficial and empirical characteristics are attributed to the term, namely: (1) homogeneity; (2) isolation and non-assimilation; (3)
territorial integrity; (4) consciousness of unique identity; (5) animism (now defunct), but religion all-pervasive; (6) absence of exploiting classes and organised state structure; (7) multi-functionality of kinship relations; (8) segmentary nature of the socio-economic unit; (9) frequent co-operation for common goals; and many other ambiguous empirical external attributes which have been presumed to have remained unchanged over a century since the time of Morgan, although these social formations have changed radically.50

Originally the term tribe is derived from the Latin word ‘tribus’. The Romans used it to designate divisions in the society. But later it was designated for poor people. The popular usage of the term is the result of the expansion of western colonialism in Asia and Africa. Today in India a group of people is called a tribe if it is listed in the scheduled tribes’ list in the constitution of India. A community is included in this list by Presidential order. Apart from this administrative concept of a tribe, the constitution does not give any definition of tribe. These tribal areas are included in Fifth (article 244 (1)) and Sixth (articles 244 (2) and 275 (1)) Schedules of Indian constitution.51

The nomenclature started in India during the British period. A regulation in 1833 brought certain parts of Chotanagpur as non-regulated areas which meant that normal rules were not applicable to these areas. This also prevented the outsiders to acquire land in these areas. Later this rule was extended to other parts of India. So, in 1874, the Scheduled Area Regulation Act was passed. This paved the way for defining these people as tribe to differentiate them from Hindus and Muslims. It was because they followed what the colonialists termed as animism. The act of 1935 had provisions and policies which sought for reservation of these people. However, the term tribe did not have any equivalent in India. They were addressed by their local names such as Bodo, Ahom, Ao, Angami, Khasi, Kurumba, Irula, Paniya, Asur, Saora, Oraon, Gond, Santhal, Bhil etc. Vanyajati, Vanvasi, Pahari, Adivasi, Anusuchit jati etc. are the modern names to translate the term tribe. The term tribe negates all the local elements of a certain tribe and creates a homogenous picture of them.

There have been attempts to define tribe in India by Anthropologists and Sociologists. This is made difficult because of varied characters found in the so called

tribes across the country. And also there are characters which are shared by tribe and caste. But Bailey suggested that there should be a continuum of which one end is occupied by tribe and the other by caste. According to him tribes have segmentary, egalitarian system and not mutually inter-dependant as castes in a system of organic solidarity. They have direct access to land and no intermediary is involved between them and land.\textsuperscript{52}

There had been efforts to distinguish tribe from caste in scholarly discourses. Virginius Xaxa writes,

In the colonial ethnography, the concern shown by the British administrators-scholars was to mark off tribe from caste. Hence tribes were shown to be living in complete isolation from the rest of the population and therefore without any interaction or interrelation with them. In contrast the main concern in the native ethnography has been to show close interaction of the tribes with the larger society or the civilisation.\textsuperscript{53}

G.S. Ghurye\textsuperscript{54} and N.K. Bose\textsuperscript{55} are two scholars who endorsed this line of thinking. Ghurye even talked of tribes as ‘backward Hindus’. Surajit Sinha also endorsed this idea but he adds the idea of civilisation in that. For him tribes are isolated from the networks of social relations and cultural communications of the centres of civilisation. In this way tribal societies are sustained by relatively primitive subsistence technology such as shifting cultivation and hunting and gathering, and maintain an egalitarian segmentary social system guided by entirely non-literate ethnic tradition.\textsuperscript{56} But today, it is a known fact that these characteristics of tribe are losing their meanings in India due to modernization and industrialisation. In terms of religion many of them have also converted into Christianity, Islam in addition to Hinduism. In the field of occupational structures also, they no longer stick to their traditional ones but have taken up wage labour and other government jobs as the educational level grows up and also assisted by the reservation policy of the government. Despite these changes a tribe still maintains its uniqueness which also enables

it to be different from others. There are politics on the line of this uniqueness to extract higher dividends from the government or other competing groups.

Northeast region is home to numerous tribes which are included in the Scheduled tribes list of the constitution. Nagaland itself has more than 30 tribes having their own languages and dialects. Some of the major tribes are Angami, Ao, Chakesang, Chang, Khiamniungan, Kuki, Konyak, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sangtam, Sema, Sumi, Yimchungru and Zeliang. Mizoram, known till 1954 as Lushai Hills District, within Assam, has Mizos which include various sub-tribes such as Lushai, Punte, Poi, Khawlhring, Renthlei, Lakher, Khiangte, Chawngthu, Paihte, Roite, Ralte, Hmar, Darlong, Ngente, Thadou, Pautu, Tlau, Zawngte, Vanghelia. Manipur has around 29 major tribes and some are under the Naga fold – Zeliangrong (composed of three related tribes, namely. Rongmei or Kabui, and Liangmei and Zemei or Kacha Nagas), Tangkhul, Mao, Maram, Maring and Tarao. And under the Kuki-Chin group of Manipur are Gangte, Hmar, Paite, Thadou, Vaiphei, Zou, Aimol, Chiru, Koireng, Kom, Anal, Chotoe, Lamgang, Koiraou. Thangal, Moyon and Monsang. In recent times, several Kuki-Chin communities have identified themselves as the Nagas e.g. Anal, Kom, Thangal, etc. depending on socio-economic and geo-political advantages to the tribes. Meghalaya’s main tribes are the Khasi, the Garo and the Jaintia. Khasis are matrilineal where the mother’s brother exercises a very important role in the family. There are about 20 major tribes in Arunachal Pradesh which are divided into sub-tribes. The principal tribes are Adi, Nissi (Nishi or Dafla), Apatani, Tagin, Misaim, Monpa, Aka, Nocte, Wancha, Singpho, Tangsha, Khampti. Padma, Miris and Sherdukpen. These tribal groups speak about 50 distinct languages and dialects, belonging mostly to the Tibeto-Burmese branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Tripura has also a substantial tribal population. Some of the major tribes are Tripuri, Reang, Noatia, Uchai Jamatia, Chakma, Mag, Lushai, Kunki, Halam, and Chaimal. Sikkim has two main tribes, the Bhutias and the Lepchas. Assam also has substantial population of tribal people. Principal ones are Bodo, Dimasa, Karbi, and Hmar.

These tribes and sub-tribes of the region have their own different languages and dialects and there have been rivalry among them for the control of territory, resources and social status. But the need to pool together under an umbrella group to defend their similar

58 Pukhrambam Lalitkumar Singh – People of Manipur. Available at www.kanglaonline.com
interest has driven them to be united. So, these tribes now take the form of ethnos. Naga is the outstanding example of tribes becoming an ethnic group. Nagas across the boundaries, within India and outside, like in Myanmar came together to fight for a separate sovereign nation for the past 50 years or so. The category Naga in this case is not a fixed identity but ever expanding one depending on which group wants to come under this umbrella group. So, ethnicity in case of Northeast region is a political move. Here ethnicity establishes an umbilical connection with nationalism and empirically the latter is the culmination of the former.

Manipur also is a state where tribe is closely linked with ethnicity. However there is also a category which homogenizes the differences within the tribes in Manipur. In Manipur, all the people who are under the category of tribe are addressed by their different names as mentioned above by the majority Meitei community who are predominantly Hindu. But all of them, irrespective of difference amongst them, are also colloquially addressed as Hao, a homogenous term. But due to Vaishnavism’s rules of purity and pollution these communities have been treated differently. Today the term ‘Hao’ has become a stigmatized articulation representing the ‘spoiled identity’ of the hill communities.

The distinction between ‘we’ and ‘they’ seems to be universally present in all the societies. The process of building up a particular group’s narrative often is motivated by the narrative of its neighbours. In that sense the counter narrative also becomes a narrative and then a source of another counter narrative. This domino effect is clearly visible in today’s ‘post-modern’ world where there is fragmentation of identities into smaller entities. This affects its interrelation at the micro level also. Satish Saberwal tries to examine such digressions from the societal values in the day-to-day interactions between individuals, and groups of individuals. He gives very relevant examples like the scuffle between students and bus operators in the roads of Delhi. He regards such happenings as a ‘weakness in implicit commitment to impersonal rules’.

1.5 Religions

In terms of religion, the Northeast reflects India as a whole, where almost all the major religions of the world are present. Manipur is dominantly Hindu, while Christianity is dominant among the tribes. It also has a sizeable population of Muslims. These are in addition to the indigenous religions which these tribes still practice. Nagaland has around 85% Christian population. Mizoram, Meghalaya are also dominated by Christianity. Assam is dominantly Hindu with Muslims and Christians constituting a considerable population. Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are the only ones which are not dominantly Christian, unlike other tribes of the hills in the region. Hindu beliefs and practices have penetrated the region, especially among populations near the Assam lowlands. Tibetan Buddhism is found among groups near the Tibetan border, and some tribes along the Myanmar border practice the Southeast Asian form of this religion, Hinayana Buddhism. Sikkim is dominantly Buddhist.

Christianity, among the tribes of the region, brought 'modernization', in terms of both western ideational values and material development. The greatest influence has been the spread of modern western education system. With this also there came many set backs in the indigenous values and social system. In Nagaland, it 'civilised' the people and dragged them out of the traditional custom of head hunting. With the ban on head hunting, many of their indigenous cultural and social values also have been lost. There is no possibility of recovering these today, despite the importance given to their distant past as the basis of the uniqueness of the Nagas by the present groups involved in their freedom struggle.

If we consider the changes brought in by Christianity in the material conditions and the value system in general in Naga society, we might term it as development from a traditional society to a modern society. However, it can also be interpreted as the erosion of local wisdoms, spirituality and practical means of meeting exigencies which were very much part of the existence of the community. This is where the Nagas are situated today, with the heavy westernization of their way of life. Christianity has influenced them so that the indigenous belief systems are labelled as pagan and obscurantist.

Monotheist Christianity was instrumental in sweeping away the animistic belief systems 'at one stroke, and replaced it with something that was entirely foreign to the Naga people. Christ's message of love and compassion was understandable, but concepts like
God, creation, sin, salvation, immortality etc. were not. What was of immediate value was the setting up of schools and provision of medical care that the missionaries brought in.\(^{61}\) With Christianization, the traditional institution of Morung or Ariju (bachelors’ dormitory), a ‘social’ centre of learning and also a ‘ritual’ centre was replaced by the church.\(^{62}\) But the role taken by the Morung is very hard for the church to inherit. Churches have tried to open up hostels in place of Ariju but failed.\(^{63}\) The forces of Christianity are felt more today than before. However, despite the sweeping changes there have been efforts to blend the old with the new to preserve both the faiths. One such attempt is the state sponsored Hornbill festival celebrated in December, the Christian festive month, with songs and dances of different tribes.\(^{64}\) This is an endeavour to play down the inter-tribal differences and capitalize on the common tribal identity.

The case in Mizoram is also similar. Christianity brought education and material developments in Mizoram but it also brought many changes in social and cultural systems. However the Mizos retained ‘some customary laws....The efforts of the Missionaries, so it seems, were not directed at changing the basic customs of the Mizo society presumably because they saw nothing much wrong with them. The customs and traditions which they found meaningless and harmful were abolished by persistent preaching. Thus tea replaced Zu (rice bear) as a popular drink among the Mizos. Zawlbuk (bachelors’ dormitory) had been replaced by modern education. Animal sacrifices on ceremonial occasions, which were once an integral part of Mizo religious system, are now considered anathema. But such tradition as the payment of bride price is still continued.\(^{65}\) Along with the Christian values the Mizos still are adherent to their indigenous code of ethics which moves around “Tlawmngaihna”, an untranslatable term meaning on the part of everyone to be hospitable, kind, unselfish and helpful to others.\(^{66}\)

Despite all the good moves, Christianity has taken a different form in Mizoram where members of Christian bodies like Young Mizos Association (YMA) has gone overboard involving themselves in many untoward activities which a devout Christian is...

\(^{62}\) N.Venuh. op. cit. pp. 42 & 53.
\(^{63}\) Ibid. p. 85.
\(^{64}\) Ibid. pp. 55 & 58.
\(^{65}\) www.mizoram.gov.in
\(^{66}\) See www.north-east-india.com/mizoram/art-culture-mizoram.html
not expected to do. In its zealous support of making Mizoram an alcohol free state, YMA has banned and destroyed, recently, ‘the Grape & Apple Processing Industry’ factory which ‘has greatly helped the state in economic growth and employments for the youths’ because of a little content of alcohol in its product.\(^{67}\) Other than this there have been allegations of its involvement in killing of innocent people and raping. The churches are also involved in matters which are not considered to be in tune with the Christian values. ‘Sometimes they are more concerned about rupees especially the US dollars that would flow into their pocket than saving the wandering souls. Therefore, Christianity in Mizoram is becoming like a Trade Centre. Thus, if Jesus comes back on earth, his first target of using violent means would be against the Church leaders!’\(^{68}\) So, the role of Christianity in Mizoram’s wholesome development is diverse, including both good and bad.

Christianity in Meghalaya did not have an easy access to the people. It, like in other states, brought education and material development. But it had been met with resistance since very beginning. One strong movement is that of Seng Khasi which started in 1899. It was formed ‘by some educated and enlightened Khasis with the object of preservation of the ancient Khasi culture and religion.’\(^{69}\) It is still a force to reckon, though its following has dwindled over the years. Christians are antagonistic towards this movement. Some of the Christian converts even go to the extreme to sell their dancing clothes when they become Christians. Tiplut Nongbri asserts that ‘Conversion to Christianity has weakened the matrilineal system. Many of the traditional rites centred in the matrilineal household have now lost their importance. In Christian households the authority of the mother’s brother is giving way to the father’s authority.’\(^{70}\) Even the non-Christians have also been influenced by this change due to the increase of ‘salaried employment and the spirit of individualism and rationality’.

The process of conversion to Christianity in the colonial time saw a relationship between the missionaries and the administration. This relationship was sometimes political and sometimes of indifference. However, the missionaries had a political motive of

\(^{67}\) Lalengzoul Hmar – *Mizoram: In the Talibanization Process II*. Available at www.e-pao.net

\(^{68}\) Ibid.


'westernising' the 'savages' in the guise of religion, culture and modernisation. Such was witnessed in Chhattisgarh in colonial time.\textsuperscript{71}

1.6 Nation and Nation-state

Nation and nationalism are some of the words which have become quite synonymous in the Northeast, in both discourse and praxis at academic as well as day-to-day lived experience of the people of the region, especially in ‘post-colonial’ India. There are still questions raised against the term ‘post-colonial’ itself. Some feel that there is a ‘coloniality’ of the post-colonial, meted out to these peripheral areas of the Indian state. The cocktail of ethnicity and nationalism in the region makes the problem grimmer. So questions may be raised why are these dissenting voices coming up from these marginal people in a ‘democratic’ state of India. All this is a pointer to the mismanagement, most of the time deliberately, in the nation building process of the Indian state. The policies and programmes of independent India have not synchronised nation building process and state building process. State building process which involves machination of land and territory in an impassioned manner, especially through military, has created a vacuum in the construction of national sentiments, which can bind the people together within the bounds of the Indian Territory. So history refuses to lie silent in this region and gives moments of anxiety in the minds of those who are trying to create a homogenous Indian self, carved out of the model of majority people populating the ‘mainland’ India. At this juncture it is important to discern the rough terrains of nation, nationalism and Nation-state.

Sociology is a later player in this terrain, which has been dominated by either political theorist or historians.\textsuperscript{72} The recent multiplication of theoretical orientations in sociologically relevant writings in these fields is mainly due to the ‘tumultuous changes in post-war geo-politics such as the national liberation movements, the crisis faced by ossified Marxism, and by the well nurtured liberal-democratic paradigm, the challenges to national sovereignty both from below and above and more specifically, the ascendancy of all forms of primordial loyalties’ like ‘ethnic resurgence’.\textsuperscript{73} So, this newly rising sociological approach is an attempt ‘to be analytical and thematic and yet to operate within

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid. p. 9.
the historical data at different levels.' Such writings started in the middle of the 1960s with Ernest Gellner, Benjamin Akzin, Benedict Anderson, John Armstrong, Walker Conner and Anthony Smith.⁷⁴

One widely discussed approach to the concept of nation in the recent times is that of Benedict Anderson. For him nation emerges as an imagined community. He defines it as follows:

(I)t is an imagined political community – imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion....The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind....It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm.⁷⁵

Partha Chatterjee, while accepting Anderson’s idea of nation as an imagined community, has an objection to the latter’s contention that nationalisms in Western Europe, Americas and Russia provided a set of modular forms which were chosen by the nationalist elites in Asia and Africa. He gives his own argument as,

If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain “modular” forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would seem has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity....Even our imagination must remain forever colonized....I object because I cannot reconcile it with the evidence on anticolonial nationalism. The most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but

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⁷⁵ Benedict Anderson. op. cit. pp. 6-7. Also see the excerpted version in Steven Seidman and Jeffrey C. Alexander (eds.). op. cit. pp. 224-30.
rather on a difference with the "modular" forms of the national society propagated by the modern West. 76

According to Chatterjee, the problem lies in the fact that 'claims of nationalism' have most of the time been conceived 'to be a political movement much too literally and much too seriously.' In case of India's anticolonial movement and the imagination of nation, there was distinction between two domains - 'the material' and 'the spiritual'. 'The material is the domain of "outside," of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed.... The spiritual, on the other hand, is an "inner" domain bearing the "essential" marks of cultural identity.' So, India already had its own sovereign community in the colonial society before it actually entered a 'political battle with the imperial power'. 77 The Imperial power was denied its entry into the 'spiritual' world of Indian nation.

According to Emerson a nation is 'a terminal community - the largest community that, when the chips are down, effectively commands men's loyalty, overriding the claims both of the lesser communities within it and those that cut across it or potentially enfold it within a still greater society....' which simply shifts the ambiguity from the term "nation" to the term "loyalty," as well as seeming to leave such questions as whether India, Indonesia, or Nigeria are nations to the determination of some future, unspecified historical crisis. 78 One problem which is faced by the new states is the growing 'disaffection based on primordial attachments. By primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the "givens"-of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices.' In the modern societies such primordial elements are given lesser importance and 'national unity is maintained not by calls to blood and land but by a vague, intermittent, and routine allegiance of a civil state, supplemented to a greater or lesser extent by governmental use of police powers and ideological exhortation.' 79 But such primordial elements are emphasised by groups within the state to claim their share, which

77 Ibid. p. 6.
sometimes take the form of insurgency demanding a separate state or nation from the present existing state. Here identity based politics becomes counter to the state itself. Moreover identity should not be regarded as fixed or 'given' i.e. primordial but a constantly growing entity i.e. constructed. So, nationalism becomes a construction through mystification of the contexts. But it is possible that primordiality can be motivated to effect the motives of the nation and nationalism.

The liberal rationalist paradigm seeks the connection between nationalism and the rise of industrialism and democracy. Nationalism in this way is an attempt to ‘actualize in political terms the universal urge for liberty and progress.’ But there also arises a dilemma within it when nationalism starts involving in ugly terrains like mindless chauvinism and xenophobia. ‘It has been the cause of the most destructive wars ever seen; it has justified the brutality of Nazism and fascism; it has become the ideology of racial hatred in the colonies and has given birth to some of the most irrational revivalist movements as well as to the most oppressive political regimes in the contemporary world.’\(^8^0\) But then the liberal rationalists still have faith in the core ideals of nationalism. They regard those nationalisms which do not fit into the original model are deviants which, nevertheless, still try to come towards the classical ideals.

These deviations can be explained through the rise of industrialisation and modernization. These processes have got their share of negative impacts. They dislocate the structure of traditional society and also create uneven development. This latter perception of uneven development is a catalyst for the creation of nationalism. So nationalism rises when ‘more or less advanced population can be easily distinguished in cultural terms.’ Taking this as a cue it can be maintained that ‘Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist – but it does need some pre-existing differentiating marks to work on.’\(^8^1\)

Then it can be asked: Is nationalism confined to a particular state? Can there be nations within the boundaries of state? Answers to these questions will lead us to the concept of state formation and nation-state. State formation, especially in the post-colonial era, faces many problems. The problem lies in combining this process with the nation-building project. When the focus directed to a foreign ruler is dismantled, the reality of

\(^{8^0}\) Ibid. p. 2.
\(^{8^1}\) Ibid. p. 4.
addressing its own structure dawns on the newly independent state. ‘It becomes less and less easy to avoid confronting the fact that to make Italy is not to make Italians.’ 82 In such new found status, the state defines and tries to define ‘a collective subject to whom the actions of the state can be internally connected, in creating, or trying to create, an experiential “we” from whose will the activities of government seem to spontaneously flow.’ This process takes into account two trajectories. One is ‘essentialism’ i.e. taking along ‘the indigenous way of life’ and ‘epochalism’ i.e. ‘the spirit of the age’ which means adjusting into the larger developmental paradigms present in other states so that it may be counted as member of the international bodies. ‘There is no new state in which both these themes...are not present; few in which they are not thoroughly entangled with one another; and only a small, incompletely decolonized minority in which the tension between them is not invading every aspect of national life from language choice to foreign policy.’ 83

The project to establish a nation-state in these newly independent states is enormous and taxing, given the limits and applicability of nation-state in these states. Nation-state is a structure which replaced the ancien regimes, with the rise of capitalism. Territory became the central point of reference in the nation-state. It presupposes that a nation should be created, based on common cultural core, as a state. This project rises above the old ‘localised solidarities and affiliations’. The educated class took the lead during this era when freedom was bestowed through the rise of capitalism. Though capitalism was without any boundary, the values ingrained in it enabled this educated class to represent ‘elevated grand national sentiments over all the pre-existing local ties without which the nation-state would have been impossible to conceive.’ 84

There are two views on nation-state. The first school sees, ‘a nation-state is born out of the tremendous surge of passion that is located in the irreducible ethnos of a people.’ 85 This view banks on the primordial core which may be language or religious sectarianism or most of the time combination of the two. According to Dipankar Gupta this view lacks ‘historical specifics of nation-state formation’ as nation-state is a modern phenomenon which is about two hundred years old, while the solidarity based on the

82 Clifford Geertz – After the Revolution: The Fate of Nationalism in the New States (Chapter 9). In Clifford Geertz op.cit. p. 240
83 Ibid. pp. 240-41.
85 Ibid. p. 63.
ethnos has a history much older than this era of nation-state. The second view is that the ‘capitalist engine,’ ‘has both structuralist and voluntaristic components....The structuralist version would go on to argue that this nation-state denouement is an ineluctable aspect of the growing power of capitalism. To this the voluntaristic would add that national sentiment and territorial boundaries are essential outcomes of compromises and machinations between leading capitalists in different parts of the world.’

In the case of India, there has never been a smooth sailing in the conceptualisation of nation, nationality and nation-state. ‘In the pre-independence period, the use of the term “nation” for India was applicable to colonial India, which consisted of present-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.’ Seeing the great diversity within the Indian sub-continent, the British never considered India as one nation. It is evident from Strachey’s words: ‘...there is not and never was an India...no Indian nation, no people of India.’ Despite this conceptual deficiency, there have been attempts to define nation in the Indian sub-continent. Oommen sums up seven ways:

(1) ancient civilisational entity, (2) composite culture, (3) political entity, (4) religious entity, (5) geographical/territorial entity, with a specific cultural ethos, (6) a collection of linguistic entities, and (7) unity of great and little nations.

These concepts have their own flaws vis-à-vis the experiential lives of the people. The Civilisational approach of Radhakumud Mookerji and Beni Prasad has geography and Hindu culture as the basis. There is confusion between civilisation and nation. The argument of composite culture takes into account only Hindu and Muslims coming together. It does not give space to ‘the pre- and non-Aryan peoples—the Dravidians, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes—who together constitute nearly 50 per cent of the population of India.’ In the political entity argument the state and nation become interchangeable which is conceptually misleading. This lack of clarity was seen in the conceptualisation by Indian Marxists. ‘For A.R. Desai a nation is an entity consisting of economic, political and cultural elements.’ Though they recognised the existence of nationalities within India there was categorisation between ‘dormant’ and ‘wakened’

89 Also see A.R. Desai, 1982 (originally 1948) – Social Background of Indian Nationalism. Bombay: Popular Prakashan Pvt. Ltd.

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nationalities which created a hierarchy of Indian nationalities. The religious entity argument of nation was spearheaded by the likes of Gowalkar and Jinnah. Both failed in that India is not a uni-religious entity and also the fact that sharing of religion does not mean sharing of a nation. The latter was seen in the division between Pakistan and Bangladesh. The politics of language in building an Indian nation was done with declaring Hindi as national language. But the Indian practice... clearly indicates that all the major linguistic collectivities with a territorial base are deemed to be culturally distinct entities, that is, nations/nationalities.’ There is also tendency to refer to ‘tribal and linguistic collectivities as sub-nations or ‘little’ nations. In this strand of thinking, the little nations and their nationalism are juxtaposed to the great Indian nation and its nationalism.’ For T. K. Oommen, nation is constituted by linguistic community. For him organisation of state in India by the States Reorganisation Commission, 1955, was ‘a vindication of the definition of nation as a linguistic collectivity with a territorial base’. According to him, in case of India the co-terminality of nation and state has been done away with. ‘In fact, most Indian states have renounced the idea of having their own sovereign states.’ He, following his understanding, asserts that ‘several nations are vivisected across South Asian states: the Tamils between India and Sri Lanka, the Bengalis between India and Bangladesh, the Nagas between India and Myanmar, the Punjabis and the Kashmiris between India and Pakistan.’ Even within the state of India there are distributions of nationalities across the boundaries of the states, which some regard as having layers of loyalty. For Oommen ‘in reality there is no hierarchy of loyalty but only contexts of identity.’ One word of caution is essential here in his definition of nation/nationality. It is erroneous to club together Tamils, Bengalis, and Punjabis with the Nagas. While the concept of nation in the former three is made on the basis of a common language, the Nagas’ nation is not based on common language. In fact they do not have one language but many languages and dialects. The basis of their nationalism is the shared culture constructed through a common origin myth. This will be dealt little later.

The present day turmoil in the Northeast has much to do with the process of state formation at the dawn of Independence of India. There has been pre-eminent involvement of militaristic approach to bring these areas within India. “Isn’t there a brigadier in

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90 Ibid. pp. 2-11.
Shillong?  

This was how Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, India’s Deputy Prime Minister responded in 1949 to reports that the ‘native’ state of Manipur might be reluctant to merge fully with the Indian union. As a result ‘within days the Maharaja of Manipur on a visit to Shillong, found himself virtually imprisoned in his residence. The house was surrounded by soldiers and under the pressure of considerable misinformation, the Maharaja—isolated from his advisors, council of ministers and Manipuri public opinion—signed an agreement fully merging his state with India. When the ceremony to mark the transfer of power and the end of this ancient kingdom took place in Imphal on 15 October 1949, a battalion of the Indian army was in place to guard possible trouble. This brigadier mindset kept on increasing and is at the highest today in the region, especially in Manipur.

The problem in the region started primarily with the civilisational difference between this region and that of ‘mainland’. While most part of this region lies within the Sinic civilisation the ‘mainland’ India is within the Indic one. There has been constant endeavour to discard the civilisation and culture of the region by the mainstream politicians and intellectuals alike and assume them within the Indic civilisation. This amounts to assimilation of this region to the larger ‘Indian self’. This region has been perceived as a blank slate on which anything new can be written as per the whims and fancy of the people in power in Delhi. It has also been projected as what James C. Scott termed as ‘illegible space.’ But these had not to be accepted by the people in the region and as a result there has been an upsurge of national and ethnic movements in the ‘post-colonial’ India. Some are for sovereignty and some to extract good dividends from India, remaining within the territory of India. Such movements also put ethnic groups of the regions against each other when the interests collide. The question of ‘illegible space’ is also prevalent when it comes to the relation between the hill and plain people in the region. This creates a divide within the region reflecting the highly heterogeneous composition of the region.

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92 Sanjib Baruah, op. cit. p. 59.

93 Ibid. pp. 59-60.

The Naga nationalist movement has occupied a dominant force in the 'post-colonial' India. The first effect of Christian education among the Nagas was felt during the start of 20th century with the formation of the Naga Club in 1918 by the western-educated Nagas. They submitted a letter to the Simon Commission (1929) to recognize the Nagas as an independent entity. The limited concept of ‘Naga’ and the community inhabiting the then Naga Hills, can be seen from the contents of the letter itself. It says,

We pray that the British Government will continue to safeguard our rights against all encroachments from other people who are more advanced than us by withdrawing our country from the Reformed scheme and placing it directly under its own protection. If the British Government however, wants to throw us away, we pray that we should not be thrust to the mercy of the people who could never subjugate us in ancient times. We claim (not only the members of the Naga Club) to represent all these tribes to which we belong: Angamis, Kacha Nagas, Kukis, Semas, Lothas, and Rengmas.

Naga National Council (NNC), the first full-fledged political organization, was formed in 1946 and pursued the self-determination agenda once the British left them. The organization celebrated independence of the Naga Hills on the 14th August, 1947. However India intervened and made it part of its territory. Since then NNC under the leadership of A.Z. Phizo started their struggle and took up arms later. With this the concept of Naga also started spreading in the region to include many tribes ‘of the hilly border region between India and Burma—in the northeast Indian state of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal and in Burma’s Sagaing Division and Kachin state.’ Nevertheless the category Naga is hardly used in both the official documents and experiential lives of the people. The census of India uses the name Tangkhul, one of the largest tribes which consider itself as Naga, in Manipur. Gangmumei Kabui writes, ‘It is not clear how the name “Naga” was derived …. The issue is made more complicated due to the continuing process of identity assertion, formation and expansion movement of the Naga themselves.’ They are highly diverse in terms of language. ‘Despite these diversities,
there is a strong fundamental unity, a feeling of ethnic and emotional solidarity and belonging.’ What is important is the sharing of the origin myth amongst these tribes. The origin myth establishes them to be autochthonous. ‘Almost all the tribes trace their origin from the caves or holes in the earth which is a myth reminiscent of the distant echo of the cave men’s style of life of the Nagas. All the southern Naga tribes claim their origin from Makhel in Mao subdivision of Manipur’s Senapati district.’\(^9\) The migration theory and the origin myth are given more mileage when they are politically motivated by the nationalists within the Nagas. There is a marriage of constructivism and essentialism in this endeavour.

The Naga movement driven by mythology, culture and religion (Christianity) had to bear the brunt of the coercive Indian state from the very beginning itself. As the movement grew substantially in the 1950s, the Indian government sent its army to the Naga Hills in 1956. This started the long ordeal of militarism, subverting the ‘democratic institutions and principles in the Northeast. A. Bimol Akoijam and Th. Tarunkumar remind us of another 9/11 event took place in the region long time before the 9/11, 2001 event of World Trade Centre. ‘On the 11th September 1958, the President of India gave his assent to a legislation enacted by Parliament to make it a law—the Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers act, 1958! It was not an attack on democracy carried out by ‘terrorists’ on a ‘suicide mission’. It was an act of subverting democracy and unleashing state terror on its own population by the largest democracy in the world.’\(^9\)

\(^9\) Ibid. p. 27.
The intensity of the movement did not cease with the intensification of this Act, rather the number kept increasing in the region. There has been increasing dissatisfactions among various groups of people against the Indian state. Also there are strong movements of assertion of the identities of these groups which directed both to the Indian state and

100 This Act is a descendant of Armed Forces (Special Powers) Ordinance, 1942, which the colonial government made extensive use of during the Quit India movement. When the Indian Army and other Paramilitary forces were deployed in early 1950s in these areas to counter armed Naga separatist movement, it was experienced that the security forces were always at the receiving end. The Army and Security Forces (SF) could not open fire until they were fired upon. This was passive reaction, whereas the requirement was a pro-active reaction. This evoked the need of a stringent Act to allow the Security Forces to strike first. So on 22 May 1958, a mere 12 days after the Budget Session of Parliament was over, the Armed Forces (Assam-Manipur) Special Powers Ordinance was passed. A bill was introduced in the Monsoon session of Parliament that year. In a brief discussion that lasted for three hours in the Lok Sabha and for four hours in the Rajya Sabha, Parliament approved the Armed Forces (Assam-Manipur) Special Powers Act with retrospective effect from 22 May 1958.

In Manipur AFSPA was imposed in 1961 in some areas and the whole state came under its purview in September 1980. In 1972 the Act was amended and extended to all the seven states in the northeastern region of India citing that the region was trouble zone. This literally converted the whole region into an Army cantonment with military ruling the civilians in a ‘democratic’ country, India. Under the sweeping powers of this Act the central leadership starts seeing any democratic protests in the region as ‘anti national’ disregarthing the fact that there are populations which did not support any kind of violence. But this mistreatment further alienates the people of this region from what is called the ‘mainstream’, which is a true negation of the contents of the constitution of India. It should be clear that civilians, who have nothing to do with any insurgent movement in the region, are the victims under this Act.

AFSPA is a one-page legislation with six sections as compared to 64 of POTA, but with many unclear terms, which give scopes for various interpretations. Before this Act can come into operation in an area that area should be first declared as ‘Disturbed Area’. Section 2a defines the ‘Armed Forces’ as “the military and Air Force of the Union so operating”. Section 3 defines the ‘Disturbed Area’ in a very vague manner. It grants the power to declare an area disturbed to the Central Government and the Governor of the State, but does not describe the circumstances under which the authority would be justified in making such a declaration. It empowers the two authorities to declare an area ‘Disturbed’ if they are “of the opinion that whole or parts of the area are in a dangerous or disturbed condition such that the use of the Armed Forces in aid of civil powers is necessary.” So it does not give any criterion for a ‘disturbed area’ but depends on the satisfaction of the Central government avoiding the space for any judiciary review. People simply cannot challenge this opinion and have to be only repository of dictates.

Section 4 outlines the powers sanctioned to the military posted in the ‘disturbed area’. Even a Non-Commissioned Officer (read as Naik or Havaldar) has these powers along with any commissioned officer and warrant officer. Under 4a the officer ‘after giving such due warning as he may consider necessary, fire upon or otherwise use force, even to the causing of death, against any person who is acting in contravention of any law or order.’ Section 4b empowers the Armed Forces to ‘destroy any armed dump, prepared or fortified position or shelter from which armed attacks are made or are likely to be made, or any structure used as a training camp for armed volunteers or utilized as a hideout by armed gangs or absconders wanted for any offence.’ The 4c is highly draconian in the sense that it gives priority to ‘instinct’ than the ‘reason’. It allows the army to arrest anyone ‘without a warrant’ if he/she has committed, is ‘suspected’ of having committed or is ‘about to commit’, a cognisable offence and use any amount of force “necessary to effect the arrest”. Under section 4d the army can enter and search any premises ‘without a warrant’ to make an arrest or to recover any property, arms, ammunition or explosives, which are believed to be unlawfully kept in the premises. All this is with the use of force necessary.

Section 5 gives liberty to the army to detain and use anyone arrested for an unlimited time. It allows the arrested to be handed over to ‘the officer in charge of the nearest police station with the least possible delay’, together with a report of the circumstances occasioning the arrest. It does not define how least is ‘least’. Worst of all the Section 6 gives the impunity to the army man. Any army man cannot be persecuted or suited or subject to legal proceedings for his ‘action’ except with the previous sanction of the Central Government.
their neighbouring groups. This also created a clash of interests and objectives of the movements. One evident example is the rise of dissent within the Naga National Council (NNC) and split of it in 1980 National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) was founded by Isak Chishi Swu and Th. Muivah. The inter-tribal and intra-organisational fissures were seen again when NSCN was divided into two factions, NSCN (K) under the leadership of S.S. Khaplang and NSCN (IM) led by Isak Chishi Swu and Th. Muivah in 1988.

Religion played a vital role in building a Naga ‘nation’. Despite the inter-tribal tussle, people see Christianity as a binding force. Understanding this possibility the National Socialist Council of Nagaland took a giant leap to declare the slogan ‘Nagaland for Christ’ in their manifesto. It says, ‘We stand for the faith in God and the salvation of mankind in Jesus, the Christ alone, that is "NAGALAND FOR CHRIST"’. The slogan was raised in a time when Naga people became disenchanted with the rampant violence in their societies due to the conflict between Indian Security forces and the insurgent groups on the one hand and the fratricidal encounters among the insurgent groups. That might be construed as a politics of sentiments by the well strategizing think-tanks of NSCN. Later when the term Nagaland became inappropriate with the changing facets of their movement the word Nagalim was introduced. The word ‘lim’ means land in Ao language. The recentness and disconnectivity with the public psychology of the term are reminded when the NSCN manifesto often uses ‘Nagaland’ instead of ‘Nagalim’.

There have been efforts to bring solutions to the problem. As a result the first Ceasefire was declared on September 6, 1964 between the Government of India and the armed groups of the Nagaland state. It broke down and again another ceasefire was announced in 1997 between NSCN (IM) and Government of India with talks between the two parties still going on till date. Later in 2001 the Ceasefire was also brought in between NSCN (K) and Government of India. But the problem ceases to die down with NSCN’s demand on the territorial integrity of all the Nagas. Nagalim includes territories within Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and these states are not ready to give in to NSCN’s demand.

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101 NSCN Manifesto available at www.nscnonline.org
This is a wedge in the inter-community relation between Nagas and Meiteis in Manipur today.\(^{103}\) The strong resistance from Manipur which was seen in June 2001 makes NSCN's objective problematic for the peaceful co-existence of ethnic groups within the region. The fundamental barrier in bringing a solution to this crisis is that both the parties are stuck at two diametrically opposite poles. The Nagas in Manipur are for separatism and other communities led by Meiteis are for integration and maintaining the present territorial status of Manipur. Both the parties are not willing to find a middle path where they can feel and have a win-win situation. On the other hand the Indian government is not unhappy with this inter-ethnic crisis as this also serves its interest of lengthening the problem without a final solution. This is felt by the local elites in particular and masses in general since the Central government is without political will to bring a lasting solution.

As a matter of fact there are several states working in the region, especially in Manipur. First is the state run by the elected MLAs. Second is the one run by central government agency i.e. governor and military, which use the former just as a dummy administrators. This is a ‘state within state’. Third one is that of insurgents who are running a parallel government with their own system of tax collection, judiciary etc.\(^{104}\) In the midst of all these chaos is the common people who have to learn to divide their loyalties according to the contexts.

Insurgency in Mizoram started as a result of the step-motherly treatment of Indian state during the famine of 1959. The request by the then Mizo District Council for assistance from the government was responded late and with dispassion. A new group called Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF) was formed to assist the famine affected people. In 1961, MNFF was converted into a political party under Laldenga as president. The party was given a new name of Mizo National Front (MNF). ‘Right from the beginning it made its military and secessionist intention clear to the Mizo people, specially the youths.’ The movement escalated to the peak when the group went for a coup d'etat in 1966. After its success the group declared unilateral independence and set up a parallel government in exile with Laldenga as the president of this Mizoram. But Indian Army

\(^{103}\) Going into these political details is necessary as Shumang Lila also takes up many themes related to this inter-community relationship.

\(^{104}\) Sanjib Baruah. op. cit.
repulsed MNF’s hold. This insurgent movement came to an end in 1986 with the signing of Mizo Accord during the Congress regime of Rajiv Gandhi.\textsuperscript{105}

In Assam the independentist militancy started in the late 1980s with the formation of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). Before this, Assam had its own sub-nationalism within the state of India, which emphasized the autonomy and distinctiveness of Assamese language and culture. ‘ULFA was organized as a liberation army with modern weapons and trained cadres that would liberate Assam... The ideology of ULFA emphasizes the unity of the indigenous peoples of the area—both the Assamese of Assam and those who live in the areas that have been separated out.’\textsuperscript{106} It described, in late 1980s, ‘India’s relationship with Assam as colonial and demanded that multinational and Indian-owned tea companies do more for the development of the state.’ In this venture it ‘intervened in a long debate within Assamese subnationalist intellectual life.’\textsuperscript{107}

Tripura is also affected by the insurgent movement and inter-ethnic clashes between the indigenous tribal people and Bengalis. There are many small groups, which are involved, in the ethnic turmoil. Two groups which have been categorized as Proscribed Terrorist/Insurgent Groups are All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) and National Liberation Front of Tripura.\textsuperscript{108} Apart from these there are various homeland movements in the region which are demanding either greater autonomy or statehood within Indian state. Some of the prominent ones are those of Khasis, Bodos and recently Dimasas. What is significant is that there is a graduation from the status of ‘excluded areas’ to ‘exclusive homeland’.

From the above discussion it can be substantiated that the geographical terrains of the Northeast is peopled with the rough political, social and cultural terrains. They create a mosaic of beautifully solidary people by dint of being parts of the region and also sometimes they are placed against each other on primordial elements. This way ethnicity, nation, nationality, and homeland become part and parcel of both social and political lives in the region. Most of these aspects, in one form or other, are reflected in the themes of Shumang Lila plays. Now let me give a more detail account of Manipur, the universe within which my work is located.

\textsuperscript{106} Sanjib Baruah. op. cit. p. 132.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid. p. 125.
\textsuperscript{108} See www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/tripura/terrorist_outfits/index.html - 20k -
2. Manipur

The present state of Manipur has Myanmar in the east, Nagaland in the north, Cachar district of Assam in the west and Mizoram in the south. It has a territorial area of 22,327 sq. km. out of which only one tenth can be described as plain areas. It has a bowl shaped valley, called Manipur valley, surrounded by mountain ranges from all sides. There are nine districts – Imphal West, Imphal East, Bishnupur, Thoubal, Senapati, Chandel, Churachanpur, Tamenglong and Ukhrul. The first four are in the plains and the last five in the hills. There is a concomitant relationship between the hills and plains not only in terms of social, cultural and economic dynamics but also in terms of the geographical, irrespective of contradictory claims by people who want to prove the opposite for the political benefits which sometimes do not concern the existential milieu of the masses. There cannot be plains without hills, geographically speaking. The hills are inhabited by different groups, which come under the major umbrellas of the Kuki, and the Naga. They have been put under the ‘Scheduled Tribes’ (ST) category in Indian constitution. The valley is inhabited by the Meiteis who are the majority people, the Meitei Pangans (Muslims), Mayangs (non-Mongoloid Indians), some percentage of hill people etc.

The valley is densely populated, highly fertile and has advanced technology and better social and economic organizations which all led to the growth of kingdoms and principalities while in the hills the political systems could not develop beyond the village society or village republics\(^{109}\) because of the geographical location. According to the Census report of 2001,\(^{110}\) the total population of Manipur stands at 2,166,788. It also indicates that the four plain districts have sizeable population of hill communities, though there is a presumption that they are inhabited only by the Meiteis. Imphal West has a Scheduled Tribe population of 21,118 which is 4.8% of its total population. Imphal East has 24,712 (6.3%); Bishnupur, 6,143 (2.9%); and Thoubal, 4,273 (1.2%). In this introductory chapter I will be confining myself only to the valley society of Manipur and mainly that of the Meiteis and other ethnic groups who come under the Meitei fold. However mention will be made of other communities wherever called for.


\(^{110}\) Census of India 2001.
2.1 Origin of the Meiteis

Community, according to Benedict Anderson, is an ‘imagined’ entity which is conceived to be ‘moving steadily down (or up) history’ through the ‘homogenous, empty time in which simultaneity is ... transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clocks and calendar.’ This is a modern concept of construction of a community and nation. However, there are pre-modern societies which do not have the ‘conception of history as an endless chain of cause and effect or of radical separations between past and present’ but which have ‘a conception of temporality in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable, the origins of the world and of men essentially identical.’ Manipur presents a case in hand where there is blurring of history and mythology in its attempt to establish the linear diachronic connection of events and epochs which makes its synchronic world credible. There is constant traffic between the pole of ‘time immemorial’ to the other pole of ‘33 AD’ from which date the written accounts have been found. The rich oral tradition found in Manipuri society supplements the existing written documents. But it is still to see if the hardcore historians, who adhere only to the verifiable written documents which distinguish history from mythology, will be able to partake in this ‘strange marriage’. Above this there is the politics of myth-making and ‘invention of tradition’, which are relatively recent in its birth, to corroborate the claims of authenticity. But there are cases of demise of such claims in the dynamics of societal temporalities. Here we can remember what Levi-Strauss says, ‘...the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real) .... Thus, myth grows spiral-wise until the intellectual impulse which has produced it is exhausted. Its growth is a continuous process, whereas its structure remains discontinuous.’

Like many peoples in the world, the origin of the Meiteis is still a contested subject matter. There are three popular theories. The first one is the Indo-Aryan narrative, which came up after the Hinduisation of the Meiteis, trying to trace the ancestry of the Meiteis to

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111 Benedict Anderson. op. cit. See Introduction.
112 Ibid. pp. 23 & 36.
the Aryan race. The second narrative is grounded in the autochthonous origin of the Meiteis from the Koubru peak in the North-West part of the present Manipur. These two narratives stand as binary opposites, tinged by religious and cultural existential anxieties. The third is the one, which came out of the study of the ethnonym ‘Meitei’ itself.

The Indo-Aryan card is enthusiastically played by such writers as Atombapu Sharma, W. Yumjao Singh, L. Ibungohal Singh, E. Nilakanta Singh, R. K. Jhalajit Singh etc. Jhalajit\(^{115}\) goes to the extent of saying that Manipur has always been a part of India. According to him the Meiteis are the descendants of Babhruvahana, the son of Arjuna and Chitrangada of the Mahabharata. He confidently asserts that Manipura mentioned in Adi Parva (when Arjuna went from Hiranyakshirsha to Mahendra mountains and then to Manipura where he married Chitrangada, the Princess of that kingdom), Ashwamedha Parva (when the sacrificial horse followed by Arjuna was stopped by Babhruvahana and there is a fight between the father and the son) and Mahaprasasthana Parva (when the five brothers and Draupadi leave their capital city with a dog towards heaven in flesh and blood and Chitrangada returns to Manipur city) is the Manipur of today. The explanation given to justify this claim is that Manipura of the Mahabharata is in the Eastern frontier of the whole earth bounded by the ocean. Again there is the propagation of a royal genealogy, which connects Pakhangba, the first king (recorded in history) as the son of Sooprabahoo who is again a son of Babhruvahana. This theory is rejected by many scholars only as a myth. Many British and Indian scholars do not support this and locate Manipura of the Mahabharata in or around Kalinga in Orissa which is in the Eastern frontier at sea coast. This whole cultural project is seen as an aspect of ‘Sanskritisation’ and as an attempt to gain recognition and respectability in the Hindu world.\(^{116}\) Sir Edward Gait maintains that the Aryan connection of the Meiteis is a legend invented by the degraded Brahmins who serve the Manipuris.\(^{117}\) A determined group of non-Brahminical Meitei scholars forcefully and convincingly argue that the name ‘Manipur’ is a hinduised name which came around early eighteenth century when Hinduism was adopted by the Royal family. The purport of this claim is that the original name of the kingdom is Kangleipak.\(^{118}\) Though there had been persistent contact with both Western and Eastern people with the Meiteis through


\(^{116}\) G. Kabui, 1988. op. cit. p. 4

\(^{117}\) Referred to in Ranajit Kumar Saha, 1994 – *Valley Society of Manipur*. Calcutta: Punthi – Pustak, p. 58

\(^{118}\) G. Kabui, 1988. op. cit. p. 5
trade and migration it would be really a courageous step to claim that the Meiteis are the
descendants of the Aryans.

The second theory is based on the mythology of the Meiteis. It is believed that the
first human settlement in Manipur took shape on the Koubru Peak when the entire valley
was a vast lake. The legend says that a powerful god drained the water by drilling a big
tunnel by the name of Chingnunghoot (a hole inside the mountain) in the Eastern fringe.
When water drifted away, the present valley showed up and was readied for human
settlement and human civilization. Taking this as a premise, Dr. R. Brown made an
interesting speculation to claim that the Meiteis are the descendants of the tribal people
inhabiting in hills of Manipur. According to him, some members of the hill people came
down on the valley and started cultivation and after harvest went up the hills again. Then
due to the growth of more cultivable land, people started to settle down permanently and
started a settled life. This theory was the nodal point when some orthodox Hindu Meiteis
started propounding the Aryan theory in the late 19th century to claim the Kshatriya status
of the Meiteis, in order to disconnect from the hill people who were then considered lower
in status due to the Hinduisation process.

The third group of scholars tries to substantiate the origin of the Meiteis from the
ethnonym ‘Meitei’ itself. B. H. Hodgson opines that ‘Moitay’ is the combined appellation
of the Siamese ‘Tai’ and the Kochin Chinese ‘Moi’. He maintains that Meitei belongs to
the ‘Moi’ section of the great tribe called Tai. This theory is criticized by T. C. Hodson
from the point of language, culture and tradition of the Meiteis. According to him there
was great political and cultural influence from the Shan but to group the Meiteis with the
Tai race is difficult on linguistic ground. Meitei language is more inclined towards Tibeto-
Burman group of languages. Another scholar Ch. Budhi takes a great leap to claim that
the Meitei is the ethnic blending of people of ‘Mei’ and ‘Ti’ tribes of ancient China. He
claims that ‘Timei’ is the original name, which was later on annagramatised into ‘Meitei’.
But this is critically assessed on the ground that there is no historical findings and even no
oral tradition, which show some connections of the Meiteis with the ancient China and
which can render validity to this theory. The historical and archaeological evidences apart.

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119 N. Tombi Singh, 1975 – Manipur and the Mainstream. Imphal; Cheitrebirentombichand Khorjeirul, p. 48
120 T. C. Hodson, 1968 (originally 1908) - The Meitheis, Delhi: Low Price Publication, p-7
121 Ibid, p-10
122 Chongtham Budhi – The Ethnonym “Meitei”. In Naorem Sanajaoba (ed.). 1988. op. cit. p. 74
another origin myth of the Meiteis tells that man was modelled (teiba) after the image (mi) of the creator. Hence the name 'Meitei'.

2.2 History of Manipur

The emergence of modern Manipur can be traced back to the evolution of an independent kingdom since 33 A.D with the ascension of Pakhangba, the first Ningthouja king. The Kingdom grew up as a powerful force in the region and spread its sway far and wide to include most of the present day Nagaland, Tripura and parts of Myanmar. There were also constant confrontations and wars with the Burmese (also known as Ava) and even the Chinese. Slowly it came under the influence of the British Power in order to ward off the nagging incursion by the Burmese. Maharaja Bhagyachandra signed an agreement with the British East India Company on the 14th September 1762. That marked the beginning of the involvement of Manipur in the theatre of tussle between Europeans and South Asia and South East Asia. Manipur came under the Burmese occupation in 1819 and remained till 1826. This period is known in the history as Chahi Taret Khuntakpa (Seven Years devastation). This period was a dark period in the history of Manipur when the occupiers ransacked the land and wreaked havoc among the people. The then king Marjit fled to Cachar in the present day Assam with much of the population of the valley. This sojourn was the starting point of the Manipuris’ direct experience of the outside society in person. Slowly the British who were waiting for the right time to strike their ‘friend’ started interfering in the internal matters of the kingdom and this led to the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891. Manipur was defeated but she was not ‘annexed’ to the British Empire. She became a 'Tributary State', indirectly ruled by a political agent through a Manipur Raja.

After strong movements by various groups and political parties against the British and the Maharaja and his Durbar, the Maharaja conceded to form a responsible democratic government. In March 1947, the Constitution Drafting Committee was formed with members from both the hills and the valley. On the 15th of August 1947 Manipur became independent. On 26 August 1947, the Manipur Constituent Assembly adopted the Manipur constitution, which introduced a democratic set-up with a constitutional monarchy in

123 The clan system and the tussle among the clans or kingdoms or principalities for power will be dealt with elaborately later in this chapter.
125 The sordid tale of this ordeal is still kept alive through oral tradition which may be regarded as one means to awaken history.
Manipur. Elections based on the ‘universal adult franchise’ were held in June (in the valley) and July (in the hills), 1948 and elected 53 members to the Assembly. Thus under the universal adult franchise, the people of Manipur became the first to enjoy the fruits of democracy, the first of its kind in the ‘entire Indian sub-Continent’.

The story of an independent state came to an end when the Indian government and Maharaja Bodhchandra signed the controversial ‘Manipur Merger Agreement’ on 21 September 1949. As a result, the Assembly was dissolved unceremoniously on 15 October 1949 and since then the Agreement came into force. The kingdom was reduced to a mere “Part C State” under India, administered by a chief Commissioner appointed by the President of India. This reduction of an erstwhile independent kingdom to a mere footnote in the wide text called Indian nation is perceived as a humiliation by wider sections of Manipuri society. She was given the union territory status in 1965 and subsequently the statehood very late in 1972. This further hurt the sentiments of the people and people in general and the elites in particular started losing trust on the Union Government of India.

There have been many discontents, among the sections of people, against the government of India and the controversial Merger Agreement. All this is despite the religious and cultural affinities Manipur has with other parts of India. This gave rise to many armed movements. In 1964, United National Liberation Front (UNLF), the oldest insurgent group, was founded by Arambam Samarendra Singh (though it was not armed initially but later it became one). This was followed by another group, People’s Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) under the leadership of R.K. Tulachandra. And then N. Bisheswar Singh founded People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in 1978. This way the emergence of many insurgent groups continued and now Manipur has about 17 such active groups, both of the hills and the valley. They regard the rule of the Indian Government as colonization. It is the case of the coloniality of the ‘post-colonial’. In order to bring the unrest under control, in 1980, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 was imposed in the whole of Manipur. Then, there started the militarisation of the civil space in the ‘democratic India’. Due to constant demand and struggles, Manipuri language was included in the 8th Schedule of Indian Constitution in 1992. The sweet and sour relationships still continue between Manipur and the Indian State on the one hand and the Manipuris and the other Indians on the other.
2.3 Social Structure of the Valley people

The valley of Manipur is inhabited by six major ethnic groups, namely the Meitei and groups who are within the Meitei fold, such as the Loi/Chakpa, the Yaithibi, the Bamon (Brahman), the Brishnupriya and the Meitei Pangan (Muslim). The first three claim to be and are regarded by others as indigenous while the last three are immigrants from the East such as plains of Assam, undivided Bengal and other parts of the present day 'mainland India'. Though they were aliens initially they were later assimilated to the Meitei society to such an extent that they lost their mother tongues and were substituted by Meiteilon (Manipuri) as their mother tongue. Those who were not able to go this far remained as outsiders, like the Mayangs. Here we may remember what R. Constantine records in his experience, 'Nothing that came to Manipur valley, be it man or religion, retained his or its foreign identity for long. All of them, without exception, acquired local colour, habits and content and turned as much Meitei as the landscape of the valley.'

The Manipur valley presents a pattern of inter-group stratification. It has been documented by many scholars that Manipuri society does not follow caste system and is driven by the egalitarian principles. But in the contrary, it is hard to dismiss the presence of caste system though in vestigial form. Among the groups within Meitei society the Brahmins are placed at the highest place in terms of ritual hierarchy, then the common Meiteis, then the Lois and Yaithibis. This hierarchy was consolidated with the adoption of great Hindu tradition, through widespread circulation of scriptures like Ramayana and Mahabharata through the story telling sessions called Wari Liba and Lairik Thiba-Haiba. in both spiritual and social system. With this the concept of Mangba Sengba i.e. purity and pollution also came.

This development has its own history. During the early twentieth century the Raja of Manipur tried to reclaim his position in the field of religion and culture while he had been sidelined by the British. So, his despotic face was witnessed when he subjugated his people in alliance with the infamous Brahma Sabha, the committee of Brahmans, and his army of devoted lieutenants. The traditional state cult, comprising the king, aristocrats and

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126 Ranajit Kumar Saha. op. cit. p-3.
128 Discussion on these groups will be done here subsequently.
129 During this period there is no clear picture of the people, being either 'citizen' or 'subject' since there was parallel existence of the 'modern' and 'monarchical' structures, Manipur being indirectly ruled by the British.
religious leaders, let itself alive, during the British time also, with the king as the religious head. There were irrational impositions of taxes and services on common Meiteis (Manipuris) (the hill people were not fortunately part of this ordeal) who were not related to the king and his nobles. This was partly to meet the amount of tribute to be paid to the British annually and partly to assert his authoritarian legitimacy in the minds of the people, which seemed to have waned, vis-à-vis the British power. These taxes included Chandan senkhai (tax on using chandan, the sandalwood paste) which consolidated the practice of mangba sengba (purity and pollution). Those who were declared by the Brahma Shaba as mangba (polluted) had to pay certain fines to the Sabha so that they could be again sengba (purified). If not they were outcast and sent to a specified village meant for them. This is also how the group Lois emerged within Meitei society. Today the stratification between the common Meiteis and Lois is at the level of inter-village. Unlike in many parts of the caste India, in Manipur the two groups do not live in one village. On the other hand common Meiteis and Brahmans share social and geographical space of a village. But the villagers are also aware of the other groups living in different ecological zones of the valley and refer them in terms of a notion of hierarchical relationship.

On the other hand, when it comes to inter ethnic group relationship, all the Meiteis, irrespective of the differences within them, are placed in a higher status vis-à-vis other ethnic groups or tribes of the hills and plains. In this way all the tribes are put under one category. The consciousness of 'self' and 'others' in the community relation between the two people is older than what some scholars suggest. However, religion, i.e. Vaishnavism, served as the wedge to further strengthen the already existent consciousness. Concepts within Meitei society like purity and pollution system and vegetarianism, also brought about modification in their social interactions when they started regarding 'other' non-Vaishnavites in the kingdom, including the hill people as inferior.

The possible argument as to why the division between the 'self' and the 'other' between the two peoples predates the coming of Vaishnavism. This could be seen in the fact that the hill people were not converted to Vaishnavism. The valley people under the rule of the Ningthouja king had, by that time, already been homogenized under the social.

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cultural and political systems of the Meiteis. The last tribe or kingdom which was merged was Moirang after they were defeated by the Ningthoujas in 1432 AD. The event which is of sociological interest and is recorded is the outcasting of those Meiteis who did not convert themselves to the new religion. Having named them as Lois, they were banished to the fringes of the country. This shows the centrifugal atmosphere present within the Meiteis themselves. On the other hand, there is the event showing the centripetal relationship between hill and valley people, when some hill communities, to escape from the proselytising Christian Missionaries, requested the king to convert them to Vaishnavism. But the king instigated by the Brahma Sabha, rejected their plea saying a ‘Hindu is born, never made.’ This serves as an index to understand the division between the two people. This is also an indication that there has never been an attempt to homogenize the hill people to the Meitei fold, leaving the former to practise their own respective cultures and religions, though they, in the historical past, were under the suzerainty of the Meitei kings.

Manipur caste system is one particular case among numerous caste systems in the Hindu India, and also in Muslim, Christian and Sikh communities as influenced by Hindu systems. It is also discerned that all the varnas are present in Manipur. Three varnas, Brahman, Kshatriya and Shudra (Lois) (though it has its own qualification) are present in Manipur. The common Meiteis claim to be Kshatriyas, though Meitei society has a particular lineage called Kshetrimayum (the house of Kshatriyas) whose members call themselves as the true Kshatriya. In Manipur though Brahmins have ritual control over the rest of the Meitei society, they do not constitute a dominant caste or group. There is a network of power sharing among the people in Meitei fold, including Brahmins and common Meiteis. But Lois still suffer social stigma due to the historical baggage.

132 Today Meitei society has seven clans which were different tribes before the Ningthoujas or Meiteis subjugated them to form the present day Meitei society. These clans are Mangang (Ningthouja), Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, Khaba-Nganba and Chenglei. This will be dealt later in the chapter.


134 R. Constantine. op. cit. p. 31.

2.3.1 The Loi/Chakpa

The Loi/Chakpa constitutes the present day Scheduled castes among Meiteis. They constitute the group of people who were banished by the king for their deeds which were considered anti-social and polluted and were made to settle down in far flung fringes of the kingdom. Their low status is also due to the occupations they indulge in, such as manufacturing of liquor, poultry farming, sericulture, swine rearing, pottery and so on which are considered to be impure. The term Loi is traced to the term loibi (hills) because most of them are settled in the foothills. They are also known as Meitei Ariba (old Meiteis). There are six Loi/Chakpa villages – Andro, Khurkhul, Sekmai and Phayeng in Imphal districts (West and East), Leimaram (Bishnupur), and Kwatha (Chandel).136

Despite the visible differences between them and other groups, the Lois/Chakpa are trying hard to uplift their social status vis-à-vis that of the other Meiteis. There is visibility of traces of Sanskritization amongst them when they try to modify their accented Manipuri to match the one spoken by other Meiteis. They continue to endeavour in performing various Hindu rituals at par with those of other Hindu Meiteis. In totality, in present day Manipur, Loi/Chakpa are considered as a dispensable part of the Meitei fold even by the common Meiteis because of their social, cultural and religious proximity to the Meiteis. There are increasing instances of intermarriage between them and the other Meiteis. In fact, it would be outrageous to address them as non-Meiteis in today’s Manipur.

2.3.2 The Yaithibis

Literally Yaithibi means bad luck (Yai=luck, thibi=bad) because they had been reduced to low status. Yaithibis are also under Meitei fold but are historical outcastes. The Meitei version of the ex-communication of the Yaithibi is that they were exiled because of their indulgence in socially tabooed traditions like marrying near relatives like sisters, step-mothers and other near kins. But their version is that once upon a time, a few favoured people of a king had illicit relationship with the queen and infuriated, the king sent those people and their kith and kin in exile and reduced them as outcastes. These people were also pardoned criminals who were exiled in border areas so as not to have any social communication with the Meiteis. The story says that all the criminals who were to be executed were sent to the Shugnu Village. But such executions could be prevented if the

wife of Shugnu Hanjaba, the headman of Shugnu village, wanted. So, those who were pardoned by her were sent to those Yaithibi villages so as not to have any social connection with their parent society. In this process they became untouchables and grouped in one village, Waithou, situated near their present village, Thoubal Khunou in Thoubal district. It is believed that they served as scavengers in the king’s palace. Otherwise, they were not allowed to move freely in the Meitei Villages and even their shadows were considered impure. Whenever they ventured out of their village they wore blue coloured clothes and turbans so that other Meiteis could avoid them. Today there has been substantial improvement in the social condition of the Yaithibi and the past is being left buried. Culturally and socially they are almost like the Meitei. It is also difficult to identify them as they hide their identity to pass as other ordinary Meiteis. The concept of ‘passing’ is appropriate here. It is an act to identify oneself with other status or group in social situations. Originally the concept is mainly associated with the dynamics involved in sexualities. Here it is an act where those who are passing seek to hide their sexuality and be defined as normatively male and masculine or female and feminine (or heterosexual, e.g.; not gay or lesbian), objectifying the very categories (male and female) that stand to their hidden being and desires.\textsuperscript{137} But it may happen in many similar situations of identity crises, be it caste, class, ethnicity or gender.

2.3.3 The Meitei Bamons (Brahmins)

Bamon is the local term for the sanskritised word Brahmin. They are an integral part of the religious life of Vaishnavite Meiteis. No life cycle ritual is performed without the Puja, the chanting of ‘Shlokas’ by them. Thus they are ritually higher in status than other Meiteis.\textsuperscript{138} Originally, they were immigrants from different parts of the present India, who came as priests and scholars of Hinduism. From the reign of Kyamba (1467-1508)\textsuperscript{139} onwards small batches of Bamons started immigrating to Manipur.

Some of these Bamons brought their wives along with them when they immigrated but others married Meitei women and settled down in the valley. In order to survive in this foreign land they accepted Manipuri customs, manners, food habits and even the pattern of


\textsuperscript{138} Some hardcore followers of Sanamahism or the indigenous religion of the Meiteis do not regard the Bamons as higher in status, ritual or otherwise, mostly after the ‘revivalist’ movement have started. But still general people have respect for them.

\textsuperscript{139} R. K. Jhalajit Singh. op. cit. p-93
naming. They have been assimilated to the Meitei way of life, for centuries in such a way that they cannot be pointed out as outsiders from the external characteristics, though they still carry the Indo-Aryan facial features. They are now Meiteis in all possible ways, so that they are called Meitei Bamons. It would be derogatory to call them outsiders today when they have been completely assimilated to the Meitei fold.

Priesthood and cooking for community feasts are the main traditional occupations of the Meitei Bamons. All the community feasts of the Gauriya (Vaishnavite) Meiteis must be cooked by them. Otherwise they are regarded as impure and any devout Vaishnavite will not attend such feasts. The Meiteis who follow the indigenous Meitei Dharma (Sanamahism) have their own cooks and do not regard Bamons as necessary. But in this process there is a parallelism between the professions of Bamon cooks and the Meitei Sanamahi cooks. The latter came up as a substitute to fill up the void created when they reject Bamons as the sole ritual specialists. Nevertheless the structure is almost the same while the contents are different. In terms of other occupations Bamons are also involved in agriculture. But they never plough, as they think that as a degrading act for them. If, at all, they plough due to economic circumstances, their status is reduced and is mocked at by other Meiteis.

2.3.4 The Bishnupriyas

There are two contradictory versions of the origin of the Bishnupriyas. The first one is by the Bishnupriyas themselves. According to this, they are the indigenous people of the valley, the autochthon Kshatriyas who are the descendants of Babhrubahan of Mahabharata. They claim to be the original worshippers of the Vishnu god. But the Meiteis regard them as outsiders and late settlers of the valley who are of different gotras. Even their god Vishnu is not an original Meitei god. Bishnupriyas have distinctive facial appearance, which is quite similar to that of North Indians. For this, the Meiteis even group them within the category of ‘Mayang’. In the historical past they were insignificant till the king Rajarsi Bhagyachandra (1759-1762) married a maiden from this community, leading to the birth of a son named Kalaraj. The Rajkumar families in Ningthoukhong in present day Bishnupur district trace their origin to him. Most of the Bishnupriyas fled to Cachar district of Assam, Tripura and Sylhet (in present day Bangladesh) during Manipur-Burmese wars. The present day Bishnupriyas in Manipur have almost forgotten their original language and they speak only Manipuri. They are in villages of Ngaikhong.
Nachou, Thamnapokpi and Ningthoukhong of Bishnupur district. Unlike them, the ones in Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh have different dialect, which is more like a variant form of Bengali than Manipuri though it has quite a large number of Manipuri words. These Bishnupriyas from outside are the ones who are spearheading a movement to claim Manipuri language as their original language and not the one spoken in Manipur. This is out rightly rejected by the Manipuris and the latter regard it as the voice of a people who are groping for a losing identity which also is triggered by the politics of the places where they are presently settled down in considerably large numbers. Otherwise the Bishnupriyas of Manipur are not even aware of their Bishnupriya identity and are as Meitei as any other Meiteis. There is also increasing number of inter-marriage between them and other Meiteis.

2.3.5 The Meitei Pangans

The Meitei Pangans are the Muslims who migrated from the districts of Sylhet (present day Bangladesh) and Cachar (Assam). Originally they were known as ‘Bangal’ as they are mostly Bengalis and it became Pangan. Historically they were war captives who were made to settle down in Manipur and marry Meitei women by the king Khagemba (1597-1652). Till today they are considered as Meiteis’ maternal cousins.

They have been given the status of being within the social space of the Meitei and are addressed as the Meitei Pangan. They have Manipuri as their mother tongue though they carry out their religious rituals in Arabic. In terms of food habits, they are equally comfortable with whatever other Meiteis eat, though they enjoy beef which the Meitei mostly refrain from and avoid pork. Socially, they are a distinct ethnic group though they have embraced Meitei lineage (Sagei) system up to a certain extent. Initially they were assimilated to Meitei society. But due to their exposure to the outside Islamic world their ‘lifeworld’ also started changing with religion becoming more central. Today, they have reached a stage where they want to do away the name Meitei which is prefixed in Pangan and call themselves Manipuri Muslims. Intermarriages between them and the Meitei is negligible. They are also economically backward. The Meiteis have certain reservations and prejudices about the Pangans because of their observable social behaviours.

From the above study it is substantiated that the other groups readily got themselves assimilated to the main Meitei society while Pangans have centrifugal relationship with the Meiteis today. It can be said that the Meitei society is 'encompassing' and other ethnic groups are 'encompassed'.

2.4 Status Groups
It would not be right to analyse Meitei society as completely egalitarian in structure. However the class division is not clearly demarcated and most of the egalitarian principles are operative among the members in the present day Meitei society though it had a past of clear-cut class division.

Conceptually class and status are two most important dimensions of social stratification. Social stratification refers to the ranking of groups or individuals into various high and low positions. There can be numerous criteria of social stratification – social, ritualistic, political and economic. Status is a socially defined position in society. It is the rank or position of a person in a group, or of a group in relation to other groups, or a defined position in the social structure of a group or society that is distinguished from and at the same time related to other positions through its designated rights and obligations. Some statuses are ascribed and some achieved. Class on the other hand is a social group whose social standing is determined by having similar economic conditions.

In Manipuri society there is blending of economic and social characteristics to define the status of a person or a group. Despite having an ascribed dominated status system in Manipur, it is not uncommon for a person to lose his status. In this case status of a person is not a fixed identity but a fluctuating one. It is not unusual for a person to come down or rise in the status ladder, depending on his ability to maintain it. Discerning historically, Manipuri society is not completely divorced from class structure. The rise of educated elites and middle class started in the early twentieth century with the introduction of western education and exposure to western cultural elements and political principles. The first batch of students appeared in the matriculation examination at Srihat (Assam) in 1909 recognized by Calcutta University.141 This new class of educated youth was

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141 The English education system started in Manipur in 1885 with the establishment of a school, Johnstone Middle English School, by Sir James Johnstone. But for higher studies people had to go out to other places like Sylhet, Decca (all in the present day Bangladesh) etc. See Jamini Devi, 1989 – Education in Manipur. Imphal: Rai Pravina Brothers. p. 36 & 37.
accommodated to the state services both by the Raja and the British so that they also were ideologically merged to the ruling class.

This period of the first half of twentieth century was also a period when ‘sanskritization’ of the literary language and the spoken language, especially amongst this new middle class, started. The more Sanskrit or Bangla words a sentence has the more the writer or the speaker was considered ‘cultured’ and educated. Let us see, for instance, a sentence – ‘Kulachandrana nataktugi nayikagi abhinay toukhi’ (Kulachandra took the role of the actress in the play). In this sentence the main words like natak, nayika and abhinay are all Sanskrit words, Kulachandra being the name of the person. Only the postpositions like na, gi, and the verb toukhi are Manipuri words. Again let us examine one more sentence which will also show the health of the ‘high’ Manipuri language. ‘Putrasnehadi pratyek matrihridayada samay-asamay khaktana adhar oiduna leirabani’ (love of a mother for her son is always there in her heart independent of time). Here all the main words like putrasneh, pratyek, matrihridaya, samay-asamay, adhar are all either Sanskrit or Bengali.

There have been efforts by the educated people and scholars to do away with this ‘Sanskritophilic’ and ‘Bengalophilic’ elements in Manipuri language and in the socio-cultural fields. Nevertheless the class structure still persists, though not very highlighted. Ranajit Kumar Saha, discusses three main status groups in Manipuri society. They are—(1) Achou-Asang macha (aristocrats), (2) Meecham (commoner) and (3) hanthaba mee (degraded people). They are the ones, which were created historically based on two criteria: (i) their position in the overall segmentary structure, and (ii) their participation in the political organization of the state system.

Achou-Asang macha is constituted by the people of the aristocratic lineages of the Meiteis only. They include the lineage of the king, the lineages of the husbands of the Rajkumaris called Sijamouwa (Sija = Rajkumaris; mouwa = husband) and the king’s favourite people. Meecham literally means commoner. They are of the common Meitei lineages. They are the people who do not have any connubial relationship with the Royal lineages. Hanthaba mee literally means degraded people. Traditionally they included the

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143 Ranajit Kumar Saha. op. cit. p-85
impure Brahmins, the Loi/chakpa, the Yaithibi and other people who were disfavoured by
the king.

Apart from the above three status groups, there are also the formation of two
groups which is based on territorial distribution of the people of the valley. They are-(1)
Imphal and (2) Lawai. Imphal has been the cultural, religious and economic centre of
Manipur. People who live in Imphal city consider themselves as more civilized and
developed than people in other parts of the state, mainly villages. Due to early exposure to
modern education, they have access to different knowledge systems, lifestyles and
etiquettes. Lawais have their own local social and cultural existence though they have
centripetal relationship with Imphal. They look up to Imphal people as reference group.
But they are the torch bearers of native customs and folklowers. They are educationally
backward and are less enterprising than Imphal dwellers as they are a bit afraid and
hesitant to move out of the traditional occupations of farming and fishing. The title Lawai
is a label which creates an inferiority complex amongst people outside Imphal city.

The above dichotomy is more than the age old dichotomy of Urban and Rural.
Even the urban people of other towns of Manipur are grouped under the heading of Lawai.
It is rather a dichotomy between Imphal dwellers and the rest. But due to the increasing
educational, cultural and occupational conditions of the people outside Imphal, the attitude
of the Imphal dwellers is gradually changing day-by-day. There is increase in immigration
to Imphal city by the Lawai people, subconsciously, to claim the Imphal status. But for a
certain period they still suffer from this label called Lawai and their neighbours treat them
accordingly. Today, the term Lawai is gaining the status of an adjective which is widely
used for the ‘indecent’ and ‘uncultured’ people both in Imphal and the rest of the state and
is used by both village and Imphal people. It is becoming a derogatory term. The symbols
of modernity which have a homogenizing impulse have contributed to narrowing down the
gap between the two.

2.5 Kinship System
The Meitei Society is Patrilineal in descent and inheritance, Patrilocal in residence (though
there is also a custom called Yaong-inba when the Son-in-law lives with his in-laws
especially when the latter do not have any male progeny), and Patriarchal in authority. It is
a segmentary system having units of differing genealogical distance. The largest unit or
segment is called Salai (clan), the second one is yumnak {Maximal lineage}, the third one -
Sagei (Major lineage), the fourth Chagok (persons in 3 living generations), the fifth is Immung (family) which is the core social unit, then the last one is man. Ideally, it is believed that all the clans had the same origin from Shidaba mapu, the divine ancestor (Shidaba= immortal, mapu=father). The Meitei segmentary system has a time perspective. There is structural relationship among the segments. The whole structural relationship can be represented as the one between the last living person in the line of descent and the first person in the ascending line. This is what Evans Pritchard called ‘structural distance’.\textsuperscript{144} It can be shown as follows.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Fig. 1 Genealogical distance}
\end{center}

In the above diagram the base line is represented by the living agnates and the pyramidal lines the dead agnates. The line depth is highest in case of Yek-Salai followed by Yumnak and Sagei respectively, measuring from the apex of the whole structure.

There are seven salais in the Meitei social structure. They are - (a) Ningthouja, (b) Angom, (c) Luwang, (d) Khuman, (e) Moirang, (f) Khaba-nganba and (g) Chenglei. The Salai can be aptly called clan rather than caste. So, the Meitei Salai can be equated with Gotra of Hindu caste system. Equating the Salai with Jati is not appropriate since the former is an exogamous group while the latter is an endogamous one. Caste or Jati is an in-marrying group with a defined ascribed status. Gotra, on the other hand, is an out-marrying subdivision of Jati. Gotra denotes descent from a common ancestor in the distant past. Kula (or Vansha) represents a lineage, with a five or six generation depth. Beyond this the line is blurred.\textsuperscript{145}

Like Gotra, the Salais also have their originators. These original ancestors whether they were God or Ningthou (chief) are called Salai-Apokpa. So, the founder of the

\textsuperscript{144} R. K. Saha. op. cit. p-113
\textsuperscript{145} S. C. Dube. 1990 – Indian Society, Delhi: National Book Trust. p. 48
Ningthouja Salai was ‘Nongda Lairen Pakhangba’; the Angom ‘Pureiromba’; the Moirang ‘Nganghunthok’ and ‘Ngangningshing’; The Khaba-Nganba ‘Thongaren’; the Chenglei ‘Nungou yumthangba’; and that of the Khuman and the Luwang was Poireiton. Since the time Vaishnavism came to this Meitei land, the Vaishnavite missionaries, mainly Brahmins, also juxtaposed Hindu names to these indigenous clan names. Ningthouja became Sandilya; Angom, Goutam; Moirang, Atriya Angiras; Luwang, Kashyap; Khuman, Madhukalya; Khaba-nganba, Madhukalya and Bharadwaja; Chenglei, Basistha. However this arrangement is more of the result of mythmaking to completely assimilate the Meitei world to the Hindu world. Despite this attempt this does not have much functional utility except that the officiating Brahman priests use these Gotra names during the life cycle rituals connected with birth, initiation, marriage and death of a Vaishnava Meitei. Outside this ritual sphere, no common Meitei knows these Hindu pseudonyms of the Salais. In common Parlance the clan is addressed as Yek-Salai. Every Yek-Salai has one laigi-Yelhin, which is a totem, associated with the originator or Apokpa. They are mostly plants. Though they do not have any practical use these days, they used to be significant in olden days. But technically there is slight difference between Yek and Salai. Yek is addressed when it comes to conjugal relationship between Salais. Salai as such is more of political arrangement of the society.

Yumnak is the lineage in the Meitei segmentary system. A Yek-Salai has many Yumnaks. Atombapu Sharma, a Vaishnava pundit, gives the list - the Ningthouja Salai has 116 Yumnaks; Angom, 52; Khuman, 100; Luwang, 46; Moirang, 55; Khaba-Nganba 20; and Chenglei, 44. But this list is not an exhaustive one. Many Yumnak members migrated to other places in Bangladesh, Tripura, Assam and Burma and it is difficult to have a thorough account of all these people of different Yumnaks. Moreover, there are many Yumnaks, which are not included in the Salais. All the Yumnaks of the Bamons (around 40), Kshetrimayum, Lairikyengbam are not included in the above list. Again the Meitei Pangans (muslims) also adopt this typical Meitei lineage system and have many Yumnaks.

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146 R. K. Saha, op. cit. p. 107
148 R. K. Saha. op. cit. p. 98
149 R. K. Jhalajit Singh. op. cit.
Sagei is the segment of a Yumnak. It is a corporate group, which observes Yummangha (birth and death pollution) which is also called Fukainaba (fu = Pitcher, Kainaba = to break) when the cooking earthen pitchers are broken in the case of any death or birth of any member of the Sagei and replaced by new ones. A Sagei of a Yumnak can be formed by the members who go far away from their Yumnak members and also by members who are in conflict with other members of the same Yumnak. Generally Yumnak and Sagei are regarded as synonymous by the common people. But Sagei is not named like Yumnak. Most of the works done by the Yumnak have been replaced by the Sagei.

2.6 Religion

Sociology of religion has taken various perspectives in its endeavour to understand and study the myriad elements cloistered in numerous religions, both in 'primitive' and 'modern' societies. How does sociology see religion as different from how Metaphysics or Theology sees it? Sociology of Religion instead of asking the question whether God or gods exist, is oriented towards questions like 'Why do people believe in God?'; 'How do they come to believe?'; 'How do they describe their God?'; 'Is there any relationship between their description of god and their social conditions?' etc.\(^{150}\)

What, then, is religion from the sociological point of understanding? This question becomes 'more pertinent than ever since how religion is perceived, described and analyzed in contemporary society depends to a large extent on how it is defined'.\(^{151}\) Edward Tylor, following the evolutionist paradigm, gave a 'substantive' definition saying, 'Religion constitutes a belief in supernatural beings.'\(^{152}\) Durkheim, in his functional approach, started seeing the service of religion, manifested in rituals, beliefs and practices, in maintaining solidarity within the group of people who followed them through collective consciousness.\(^{153}\) However, the paradigm also changed again during the mid 20th century from the study of function to the study of meanings and symbols of religion. A major shift in the conservative understanding of religion can be seen in the phenomenologist approach. When phenomenologists define sociology 'as the study of the nature of subjective reality or of the way in which the world appears to human beings, religion is what individuals and

\(^{151}\) Ibid. p. 7.
\(^{153}\) Emile Durkheim. op.cit.
societies say it is'. This further expands the possibility of encompassing even the elements which are considered as secular in the conventional way, within the realm of religion. This is seen in the Western world with the rise of so called 'New Religions' like Scientology.

Religion, from the conventional point of view, plays a very vital role in the Meitei 'lifeworld' even today. Meiteis follow two dominant religions – Vaishnavism and Meitei dharma or lately Sanamahism (after a god of household). But recently there have been changes in this front too. Christianity has been adopted by some. Then there is upsurge in the number of followers of such cults as Sai Baba. Despite all these variants the lifeworld is still commanded by the cultural system of the amalgamation of Vaishnavism (Radha Krishna sect) and Meitei Dharma.

2.6.1 Meitei Dharma
The indigenous religion of Meiteis has been categorized as one of the animist belief systems. Before we jump into this bandwagon of animism we need to examine it a little closely. According to Durkheim, the elementary forms of religion have been conceptualized into two principal ways. First one is naturism which 'addresses itself to the phenomena of nature, either the great cosmic forces, such as winds, rivers, stars or the sky, etc. or else the objects of various sorts which cover the surface of the earth, such as plants, animals, rocks, etc.' Max Muller comes first amongst its proponents. The second form of conceptualisation is called animism, which 'has spiritual beings as its object, spirits, souls, geniuses, demons, divinities properly so-called, animated and conscious agents like man, but distinguished from him, nevertheless, by the nature of their powers and especially by the peculiar characteristic that they do not affect the senses in the same way: ordinarily they are not visible to human eyes.' Durkheim rejects the two concepts and feels totemism as 'more fundamental and more primitive, of which the first are only derived forms or particular aspects.' By totemism he means the belief in the totem of a clan. Totem is 'the species of things which serves to designate the clan collectively....The totem of the clan is also that of each of its members.'

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154 Hunt, op. cit. p.8.  
155 Emile Durkheim, op. cit. p. 48.  
156 Ibid. p. 102.
The three concepts given above do not suffice to understand Meitei religion fully. Nevertheless it has elements of all the three. When Durkheim conceptualizes the fundamental religion of human societies in terms of totemism, the concept suffers the fallacy of universalization. Meitei society has got so-called totems for each clan; clans are only parts of the whole. While ‘totemic’ belief represents personalized ideas of clan, other forms of belief are shared by the whole society. So, instead of giving the Meitei belief system the names of the above discussed, it is pertinent to stick to its own name.

The Meitei Dharma has Sidaba Mapu (Sidaba = immortal, Mapu = master or ancestor), the Supreme Being as the sole god from whom the cosmos and the world emerged. It is more like henotheism where other gods are the manifestations of Sidaba Mapu. The Meitei pantheon can be broadly categorized into Imunglai (deities of the household), Umanglai (literally sylvan deities) and Lamlai (deities of the wilderness).157

The Imunglais are sanamahi158 (sun god), worshipped in the south west corner of the house, Laimarel (earth goddess) worshipped near the wall just to the north of the fungu (fire place). Apart from these the ruling dynasty of the kingdom worships Pakhangba (moon god) as its family deity. The Umanglais (Umang = forest, lai = deity) are named this way because of their dwelling places which are mostly groves within the village or localities (in case of towns). Some scholars prefer to interpret them as the forest deities in control of the grove they dwell. But they are tutelary deities who have their spiritual and ritual tutelage over the people of the certain village or the locality within which they reside. This way they are not just the deities of the forest. This is also endorsed by such scholars as Bhagyachandra159 and Saroj Nalini Parratt.160 These deities are revered and at the same time feared by the Meiteis. They are worshipped with the festival called Lai Haraoba. There are also Umanglais who guard the land from all directions. They are also known as Maikei Ngakpa lais (direction deities). They are Koubru (reigning in the North West), Thangjing (in the South West); Wangbren (in the South East); Marjing (in the North East).

The third category of gods called Lamlai is not less important. They are deities of the

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157 T.C. Hodson also followed the same categorisation. See Hodson, op. cit. p. 96.
158 The word Sanamahi has been explained by Yumnam Tamphajao, in a personal interaction, as the semen (sana) which is one of the essence of giving life. The common understanding of the term is that sana (gold) which is in liquid form (mahi). But this is rejected as the term is a corrupted form of the Hindi word sona.
nature. The nature itself is regarded as a goddess and called Mahousa Lairembi (Mahousa = nature, Lairembi = goddess). There is worship of Sorarel god (sky god) who has his abode in the heaven. The worship of rain (nong) god is one of the most important rituals in Meitei society, which has an efficacious connection. Worshipping of all these above gods and goddesses is carried under the guidance of Maibas (priests) and Maibis (priestesses).

The Meiteis are ancestor worshipping people. Among the originators of the clans Pakhangba (one who understands his father or pa) is the most popular one. It may be because he is the originator of the ruling clan, Ningthouja. The legends say that he used to take the shape of a snake during the day time and shape of moon during the night which means that he was as clever and shrewd a politician as snake during the day time and cool and calm like the moon during the night. To this day also Pakhangba is regarded as a snake god who is represented in different divine symbols called paphals. This snake form is mostly symbolized with his tail inside his mouth since the world begins and ends with him. His body is coiled on all the four corners representing the four directional deities – Thangjing (south-west), Koubru (north-west), Marjing (north-east) and Wangbren (south-east).161

2.6.2 Advent of Vaishnavism

Hinduism emerged out of Vedism. The latter is the belief in the ‘manuals of ritual performances (Brahmanas, Aranyakas), and later discursive speculative treatises (Upanishads), also called Vedanta (the culmination of Veda). The emergence of Hinduism was marked by the emergence of ‘more texts on more varied subjects...notably the Grihya Sutras, which are guides to the performance of domestic rituals, and the Dharma Sutras, which have social ethics and law as their subject matter. Besides, there are the Shrauta Sutras, which are technical treatises on the correct procedures for the performance of vedic rituals of public significance.’ What is important in Hinduism is ‘varna-ashrama-dharma, or a context-sensitive morality.’ The ‘pluralities of scripture, metaphysics, and social organization...are characteristic of Brahmanical orthodoxy.’ But there have been challenges from within against this orthodoxy. One important sect which is non-vedic is

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Tantrism which follow the *Tantras*. Traced to folk cults of Assam and Bengal, the eastern frontier of Vedic (Aryan) northern India, Tantrism is characterised by enormous internal diversity including within its fold magical fertility rites as well as arcane metaphysics. There are variations in the Hindu traditions in parts of India. Apart from giving different local meanings to the great tradition, there are different combinations of the deities of the great tradition.\(^{163}\)

Manipuri society stands as one society where Hinduism relatively arrived late. To start with, Shaktism and Tantrism from Bengal and Assam had influenced the Meiteis by the seventh and eight centuries A.D. Vaishnavism came to Manipur, then Kangleipak, in the late 17th century from Bengal in the reign of king Charairongba (1698-1709 AD).\(^{164}\) The king was initiated to the Radha Krishna sect. This was the starting point of the diffusion of the traits of Hindu great tradition to Manipur. But the watershed was ushered in during the king Pamheiba or Garibaniwaz (1709-1748)\(^{11}\) who made this religion the state religion after which there started mass conversion of the people. During his time two other sects of Vaishnavism also entered Manipur. One was *Nimandi* of Nimbarka, a South Indian Brahmin. The other was *Ramandi* which followed Rama and Sita as main deities. This sect was brought in by Shantidas, a missionary from Sylhet (in the present day Bangladesh).\(^{165}\) He influenced the king saying that the Radha Krishna sect was too feminine for a martial community like Meiteis. There were also forced conversions of the valley people to Hinduism and destruction of indigenous scriptures (*Puyas*) and banishing of people, to the fringes of the kingdom, who defied the edicts of the king. This shows that centrifugal forces existed within the Meitei community itself. But there was no conversion of the hill communities as they constituted the ‘other’. As time went by the new religion slowly merged with the indigenous religion and everything local was not lost.

With the coming of this new religion, other attributes of the religion such as vegetarianism, practice of purity and pollution were also internalized by the new converts. This endogenous systemic change also brought about modification in their exogenous ‘lifeworld’ when they started regarding ‘other’ non-Vaishnavites in the kingdom including the hill people as inferior. After the death of Pamheiba the Ramandi sect also declined. The

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164 R. K. Jhalajit Singh. op. cit. p. 133.

165 Ibid. 163.
present sect of Vaishnavism in Manipur is called Gauriya Vaishnavism of Chatanya Mahaprabhu which came to Manipur through a Bengali, Narottam Thakur Mahaya. This was officially recognized as the state religion by Raja Bhagyachandra (1759-1762, 1763-1798). The supreme god of the Gauriya Vaishnavites of Manipur is Sri-Sri Govindaji, the Manipuri name of Sri Krishna. Besides him is Rajeshwari (Radha) who is equally revered by the Manipuris. They are the head occupants of the Sri-Sri-Govindaji temple, the holiest Shrine of Vaishnavite Manipuris.

Some scholars like Gangmumei Kabui\textsuperscript{166} use the concept of ‘Sanskritisation’ to describe how Meiteis took into Hinduism. But the term is misplaced in the context of Manipur where there is no up-gradation of caste status as the Meiteis were never part of the Hindu caste system before. It was the direct transplantation of the new religion to a different social system. Though M.N. Srinivas\textsuperscript{167} also talks of Sanskritisation when tribes become Hindus, it is still inappropriate to equate it with that of Meiteis since the latter did not regard Vaishnavism as a superior belief system. Moreover there were many dissent against the conversion. Instead of this concept, ‘Hinduisation’ would be more appropriate term. Lokendra Arambam\textsuperscript{168} prefers to call it ‘Meiteisation’ of Hinduism since Meiteis took whichever useful parts of the latter and amalgamated them with the indigenous belief system. This is precisely what we see in today’s Meitei society.

\textbf{2.6.3 ‘Revivalist’ Movement}

The ‘revivalist’ movement among a section of Meiteis is the combination of religion with social change. The movement endeavours to revive the Meitei dharma and getting rid of Hinduism. In Manipur there are both formal and informal organizational endeavour to revive the indigenous system. In 1930, a Meitei, Naoriya Phulo started an anti-Brahmin and anti-Hindu movement in Cachar District of Assam.\textsuperscript{169} He established a group called \textit{Apokpa Marup} (association in the name of Meitei ancestor deity). He was driven to start this movement due to the culturally and socially hostile milieu in which Meiteis in Assam were, under the self style ‘superior’ culture of Bengalis. In Manipur valley following his movement a movement called \textit{Sanamahi} (named after a Meitei house deity) was started in

\textsuperscript{167} M.N. Srinivas, 2005 op. cit.
\textsuperscript{168} From a personal interaction with the scholar.
\textsuperscript{169} Manjusri Chaki Sircar, 1984 - \textit{Feminism in a Traditional Society – Women of the Manipur Valley}. Ghaziabad: Shakti Books, p. 121.

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1945. The Central organisation is called *Meitei Phurup* having many branches (*Marups*). The reason why the protagonists of this movement in Manipur called it Sanamahi movement was because of their desire to consolidate hills and plain relationship since hill people also worship the same deity. This was also because the social milieu in Assam was different from that in Manipur where there was/is no binary opposition between two communities. There was strong opposition from the dominantly Vaishnavite Meitei society to this movement during the monarchy which was also strong proponent of Vaishnavism. Even in the initial period of the independent and non-monarchic era the followers were strongly discouraged. They were not given space in the ritualistic and religious ceremonies of the communities. But with the growing political dissent against the Indian nation-state, the elites and common people also started having centripetal relationship with this movement. These neo-conscious people started equating Hinduism with 'Indian nation state'. Moreover this religious movement changed its face incorporating many political and cultural agendas. There started a kind of parallel tradition along the already existing Vaishnavite ones in order to counter the latter. For instance, worshiping of Panthoibi goddess during the same period of Durga Puja festival; singing of Sankirtan in all the ritualistic and religious ceremonies, though the contents are that of the Meitei religion; Wearing of sacred threads like Vaishnavite Meiteis, though the number of thread is seven while that of the Vaishnavite Meiteis are nine in number; applying of *chandan* mark on the forehead, though they wear only a grey and round spot while that of the Vaishnavite Meiteis is brown and covers both forehead and bridge of the nose and other body parts; idolatry, though the indigenous religion does not originally engage in this; singing of *holi*, a kind of public singing during the festival of *Yaoshang* (Holi), though they sing of *Sidaba Mapu* etc. The list is long. This is an indication that Meitei society is not able to earmark what are Vaishnavite and the indigenous strands of culture. Both exist as a whole. This is also an example of accommodation though the followers of the movement claim that they are opposing the Hindu religion.

There is certain danger in the agendas of this neo-conscious people. First of all equating Vaishnavism with the Indian state is misleading since the Vaishnavism of Manipur is a localised one like in many parts of India and outside where there are so much of differences in the real lived traditions. Though the great traditions may be similar among these Hindu communities, the real social existence is commanded by local little traditions. So, the movement, instead of finding a peaceful existence, is ushering a new form of conflict within
the same people. Sometimes it looks like finding a sore site where there is none. Meitei society, today, is in a perturbing cross-road. It is not the question of choosing one instead of other but braiding the two religions, as they have always been, minus the antiquated social and cultural traits.

I shall now describe the contents of each chapter of the thesis, theatre on text, performance and rituals of the Meitei, since the social, cultural background from which the plays proceed have been given.

Chapter I is entitled as “Shumang Lila: Interface between Art and Society.” It is the introduction of Shumang Lila as a cultural product. It also discerns the debate between classical and popular conceptions of the performing arts. Then it traces the history of the origin and development of Shumang Lila till the first half of the twentieth century. The special study of this era is deemed important as the genre existed mostly in an illiterate tradition till then.

Chapter II “Imagery and Representation in the Age of Written Texts,” deals with the emergence of literate tradition in Shumang Lila after 1950s. It talks about the textual analysis of the select text of the plays from this era till date. In this chapter the content-analysis is done employing five dimensions of the plays – (a) themes; (b) play types; (c) goals and motives of characters in plays; (d) setting in which a play takes place; (e) ending. While analysing the texts, importance has been given to the social, cultural, economic, religious, and political transactions between the genre and the society as a whole.

Chapter III goes by the name of “Aesthetics and Sociology of Performance and Construction of Meanings.” It is an analysis of how Shumang Lila endeavours to make its production aesthetically more acceptable and popular through various semiotic tools. Though the two systems of theatre and society have their own networks of functioning they are not mutually exclusive systems. Both have their ways of dealing with aesthetics but they are always in diffusing relationship. This chapter also talks of the structure of Shumang Lila, like space where it is performed and the rituals involved in the performance. This is important because the products of aesthetics, in this case, depend on them.

Chapter IV “Artistes and Audience: Braiding of those Looked on and those Looking” gives emphasis on Shumang Lila’s place in the community service; the study of audience’s responses while performance is going on; how people, who constitute the audience, see the actors in the mundane world; how the actors see themselves vis-à-vis the judgment of the community; the kinship relationship among the actors; and the organisational structure of Shumang Lila.
Chapter V is entitled as “Nupi Shumang Lila: Re-crafting of History and Mythology.” It exclusively deals with the gender issues in Shumang Lila tradition. It traces the history of performing women in Manipur in general and in Shumang Lila in particular, in patriarchal performing art forms, which also reflect the general rule in Manipuri society. It also gives space to the formidable role taken by the women Shumang Lila artistes in evoking history and mythology.

Chapter VI “Nupi Shabis: A Theatrical and Social Ontology of Alternate Sexuality,” is a treatise on the ‘male actresses’ or transvestite performers of Shumang Lila. While tracing the history of cross-dressing in Shumang Lila this chapter also talks about the changing sexuality of these artistes. There is an overt presence of artistes with the alternative sexuality which also reflects the changing dynamics of society vis-à-vis these people. The chapter also introduces the concept of performance sexuality as a possible form of sexuality in a theatre having cross-dressers.

The Conclusion sums up the arguments presented in the whole thesis. It also gives a thought on the rising forms of commercialization and westernization due to increased forces of globalization. The questions of whether or not Shumang Lila should allow itself to be swept in this trends, has been heeded. How far it can cling on to the local elements, and how it can devise its own strategy so that it can remain as a formidable force in cultural production, are some of the questions discerned here.