Chapter -V
Political Organization

Every society whether simple or complex, has some form of political organization, which deals with the processes involved in the distribution and use of power among the individuals or the group in question within a political system. Political system as a subsystem of the general social system is characterized by the monopoly of coercive power over citizens and organizations. The possession of coercive power by an individual or group is always relational. For example, A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do. In this context, power exists in an interactive, not in a static state. Yet the interaction process operates within the framework of political institutions, which have certain kinds of social relations. Political institutions also deal with the maintenance and establishment of social order within a territorial framework by the organized exercise of coercive authority through the use or possibility of use of physical force.¹ These involve the development of conflicts for power or for acquiring support for proposed goals.

According to Swartz, Turner and Tuden: "the study of politics is the study of the processes involved in determining and implementing public goals and in the differential achievement and use of power by the members of the group concerned with these goals".² Furthermore, the notion that politics has to do with decisions that apply to society as a whole sometimes necessarily leads to the opposition between the interests of the individual and those of the group. Thus, political systems develop whenever the relationships among individuals and groups are organized according to the exercise of power and its

various manifestations. These might range from sporadic meetings of village elders in simple societies to highly organized states.

Before discussing about the form and nature of political organization among the Loi community, it is important as well as desirable to reiterate that the problem cannot be dealt with in isolation from the political organization in the state of Manipur as a whole. The discussion is focused on the political scenario of the pre-independent and post-independent periods in Manipur.

Manipur in the pre-independent period had its own system of governance. Local government of earlier times was different from the present one, in terms of its characteristics, power and functions. Monarchical form of government had been the prevalent system of administration in Manipur since 33 A.D. till its integration with the Indian Union in 1949. Indeed, the state had its own independent political culture, till the British occupied Manipur in 1891. In the past, almost every sphere of Manipuri society was under the control and strict supervision of the king who was the secular and spiritual head of the country. The subjects considered their king as the regent of God. He was elevated to the position of a super-natural being, having divine qualities. He was considered as the Lainingthou (god-king), the creator of all human beings. Thus, kingship had high ritual and symbolic significance.

Early Manipur was a theocratic state in which law and religion were hardly distinguishable from each other. In chapter four, it has been mentioned that the valley of Manipur was divided into seven main principalities and each principality had its own king but after a continuous struggle for supremacy among themselves, all the principalities were annexed and absorbed in the Ningthouja principality in successive centuries. The first recorded king of Manipur was Pakhangba, who ruled the state from A.D. 33 to A.D.153. Pakhangba, the founder of the Ningthouja clan, instituted a long dynasty having ruled Manipur for around 2,000 years.
The king was assisted by a Durbar\(^3\) which was more or less an advisory council. The Durbar looked after the day-to-day administration of the state. During the pre-colonial days, the king, his close relatives such as brothers and sons, and also the nobles held important offices in the functioning of the state machinery. They hold power over administration, economy and also religion. The king remained the most important figure in the entire administrative set up. Therefore, constant struggle for the throne prevailed among the potential claimants in the royal family. The appointments to the high offices seemed to depend virtually on the wishes of the king. Strictly speaking, it was difficult to separate executive and judiciary during the time of monarchy.

Before eighteenth century, law of primogeniture was not in force and hence there was no well-established form of succession to the throne. To become a king, one had to prove one's capacity in varying degrees. The power and function of the king used to depend a lot on his personality, his might as a warrior, and also, to a certain extent, his physical appearance. According to Brara, it was Garibniwaz (1709-1748) who introduced the rule of primogeniture.\(^4\) But existing literature reveals that the rules of primogeniture were not strictly followed. It has been found that the rule of succession was brother to brother when Chandrakirti has been appointed as king succeeding his brother Bhagyachandra (1749-1798). This view is also supported by Kabui who argues that: “the system of succession of a brother in the accession to the throne which was followed since the middle of the eighteenth century and continued after the death of Bhagyachandra encouraged the intrigues and conspiracies among the ambitious royal princes whose love for power knew no bounds”.\(^5\)

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\(^3\) The Durbar was the policy making institution.
Political Scenario of Manipur in the Pre-independence Period

Manipuri society experienced a dramatic upheaval when King Charairongba (1697-1709) and his son, Garibaniwaz adopted and enforced Hinduism as the state religion. According to Kabui: “In this revolutionary change in Manipur’s life, three kings, father, son and a great grandson: Charairongba, Garibaniwaz and Bhagyachandra played very significant roles in bringing about the dramatic changes of religion from indigenous to Vaishnavism, the stamp of which was imprinted on the history of Manipur”.6 Though the reign of Charairongba lasted only sixteen years, it was found to be a very significant period because transition from the traditional Meitei to a Hinduised Meitei society took place during his regime. After the death of Charairongba, his son, Garibaniwaz, a great religious reformer, forcibly ordered the people of Manipur to embrace Hinduism.

Since Garibaniwaz’s death, Manipur plunged into an era of successive Burmese invasions and internal political turmoil. The intrigues of succession contributed to the emergence of civil wars. Shyam Shai, Garibaniwaz’s eldest son, was the natural successor; however the king at the pressure of the third queen, Gomati Devi, appointed her son Chit Shai as the king of Manipur. His error of judgment in the choice of his successor under duress cost his life and bequeathed a legacy of conspiracy and intrigue in the struggle for power among his sons and successors.7 Chit Shai (1748-1752) ruled Manipur for four years. However, the masses came to know that he was implicated in the murder of his father and brother. The people, therefore, became averse to the rule of Chit Shai. Taking advantage of the political situation, Bharat Shai, the younger brother of Chit Shai forced him to abdicate the throne. Bharat Shai ascended the throne and exiled the patricide king from Manipur to Cachar. After Bharat Shai, Gourashyam ascended the throne and his younger brother Bhagyachandra Singh succeeded him. During the period of

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7. Ibid., p.265.
Bhagyachandra’s rule, (1759-1798) conflicts between Manipur and Burma became quite intense. Bhagyachandra requested the British for help to repulse the Burmese attacks. The British refused to help the king and the Burmese defeated Manipur. The death of Bhagyachandra brought about political chaos, interspersed with incidents of treachery and conspiracy in Manipur.

Subsequently, a number of weak rulers ascended the throne and each new succession was marked by uprisings. The factors which led to rebellions by a factional group was unpopularity of the reigning king, the ambition of a faction of chiefs to seize the reigns of power by placing their own nominee on the throne, and the ambition of a prince to gain the throne for himself. The history of Manipur witnessed a lot of political instability during the period of various successive kings. In 1799, after Bhagyachandra’s death his eldest son Labanyachandra administered the country but after a short while he was assassinated. Madhuchandra immediately ascended the throne when he heard of the assassination of king Labanyachandra. Soon, in 1802, conflict started when prince Chauarjit revolted against the king. However, Chaurajit was defeated in the attack and fled to Cachar. Later, Chaurajit ascended the throne after defeating Madhuchandra in February, 1804. Chaurajit’s brother Marjit, fled to Burma to get help from Emperor Bawdawpaya to dislodge his brother, Chaurajit, from the throne of Manipur. He captured the throne with the help of Burmese forces, while his brother, the king, Chaurajit and prince Gambhir Singh fled to Cachar to take refuge there. Simultaneously, Burma attacked Manipur during the reign of Marjit because he refused to pay homage at the coronation ceremony of king Bagyidaw (1819-37) which was a customary honour for any vassal ruler of Burma. Thus Manipur was brought under the Burmese rule for seven years from 1819 to 1826. The period is referred to as ‘Chahi Taret Khuntakpa’, meaning ‘seven years devastation’. Marjit, having

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defeated by the Burmese forces, fled to Cachar in 1819. Later, he realized his mistakes and reconciled with his brothers Chaurajit and Gambhir Singh at Cachar. Gambhir Singh, one of the exiled princes, sought the support of the British. He succeeded in obtaining their help to repel the Burmese from Manipur. In 1825, the first political agent of the British, B.R. Pemberton, entered Manipur with Gambhir Singh. In 1826, the treaty of Yandaboo was signed between the British and the Burmese in which Gambhir Singh was reinstated and recognized as the ruler of Manipur. The Kabaw Valley, which was the most fertile land of Manipur, was handed over to Burma under the terms of the treaty.

After the premature death of Gambhir Singh in 1834, the throne went to his two year old son Chandra Kirti. However, because of his tender age the heir was kept under the care of Nara Singh, the senapati, who acted as the regent. Maharani Kumudini, the widow of late king Gambhir Singh, did not trust Nara Singh and planned to assassinate him but failed. Fearing for her son’s life, she fled to Cachar along with the royal heir, Chandrakirti. Nara Singh was declared king in 1844. After the death of Nara Singh, Chandrakirti who had attained maturity by then, returned to Manipur amidst popular support and regained the throne. During Chandrakirti’s rule, the relationship between Manipur and British government improved a lot and the king even sent his troops to suppress Indian revolutionaries during the so-called Sepoy mutiny (1857) of India.

Chandrakirti wanted all his sons to rule one by one in turn. This led to intense bitter conflict among the heirs, during which different factions led by different royal descendants tried to overthrow the king at different points of time, leading to the weakening of the throne. After the death of Maharaja Chandra Kirti Singh in 1886, his eldest son Surchandra Singh succeeded the throne. However, the new king Surchandra had to face lots of trouble since the half-brothers of the ruling family were split into two rival groups with four princes in each group. One group consisted of Surchandra and his uterine
brothers, Paka Sana, Pheijao Sana and Gopal Sana, and the other group comprised of Jubraj Kulachandra, Tikendrajit, Angou Sana and Zillagamba who also had the support of General Thangal, an old and revered warrior. The conflict between the brothers started because Pakasana, the second son of Chandrakirti became jealous of the rising fame of Tikendrajit, who was also receiving support from Jubraj Kulachandra. The friction amongst the princes of Manipur was due to the mutual jealousy, dissension, distrust and discord. On the midnight of September 21, 1890, Angou Sana and Zillagamba attacked the palace. After the incident, king Surachandra sought refuge in the British Residency. The clash between the two contending factions of princes in Manipur provided a fertile ground for the British to interfere in the affairs of the State.

Surachandra, who had showed his intention to abdicate the throne, proceeded to Vrindavan on pilgrimage. However, he changed his mind and petitioned to the Governor General of Calcutta stating that his rebel brothers forcibly dethroned him and requested the British to reinstate him on the throne. Meanwhile in Manipur, Tikendrajit encouraged his elder brother Jubraj Kulchandra Singh to occupy the throne and requested the Government of India to ratify the accession. The Government of India, after considering the situation, recognized Jubraj Kulchandra as the king rather than restoring Surachandra Singh. It, however, decided to remove Senapati Tikendrajit from Manipur and punish him for his conduct towards his elder brother. In this context, Brara writes that: “the British by that time had realized the courage and aggressive nature of Tikendrajit and his unsympathetic attitude towards them. They considered him to be the real trouble maker for them and wanted to exile him”.

As per the order of the Government of India, the Chief Commissioner of Assam Mr. Quinton had planned to read out the edict in the Durbar on 22nd March 1891 but the Durbar could not be held on that day since Tikendrajit Singh had refused to attend the

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Durbar. Maharaja sent a message saying that his brother was too ill to attend the Durbar, and therefore there was little point in coming himself to the Residency. The British then sent troops to forcibly take Tikendrajit to the Residency, but Manipuri warriors repulsed them after a violent clash, resulting in the death of many people living inside Kangla. Mr. Quinton, along with four of his officers including Mr. Grimwood, went to the palace, where they tried, in vain, to persuade Tikendrajit to attend the durbar at the Residency. While Mr. Quinton and his companion were leaving the palace, an enraged crowd, who held them responsible for the death of innocent people, attacked them. British officers including Mr. Quinton, Chief Commissioner of Assam, Mr. Grimwood, a political officer, were executed in the process. In retaliation against the killings of their officers, the British Government of India declared war on Manipur, and subsequently sent troops from different directions, which escalated into what is known as 'the battle of Khongjom'. Manipuri heroes fought the battle under the leadership of Paona Brajabasi and Rajkumar Chinglensana along with many Manipuri soldiers but they were eliminated one by one, and finally, the British defeated the Manipuri forces.

The fall of Khongjom was the turning point in the history of Manipur. The defeat of the Manipuris was the loss of their independence and sovereignty to the British and it marked the integration of Manipur with British India. On 27th April 1891, the British occupied Kangla, the sacred royal palace at Imphal and sealed the destiny of the dynasty. The British authority dealt with the rebellious ruling group of Manipur with a heavy hand and subsequently, all persons suspected of murder or of having acted as instigators of the revolt were put on trial. The most eminent leader, Prince Tikendrajit, the Commander-in-Chief (senapati) and Thangal Major, the next important military official, were captured and publicly executed by hanging on 13th August, 1891 amid the heart-rending cries of thousands of Manipuris at Pologround (mapal kangjeibung).
On 14th of August 1891, Kulachandra, Angou Sana and some other supporters were banished for life to the Andaman Island after the confiscation of their property. As the British began to exert extensive control over the administration of the state, structural changes in the socio-economic and political system came into existence. Subsequently, a new bureaucratic structure trained in the new British traditions was introduced. Nonetheless, the purpose behind the setting up of such a political system was to safeguard the colonial interests.

After the British occupation, Churachand (1892-1941), who was only six years old and a close relative of the deposed king, was chosen as the king of Manipur. The British chose the young boy since they did not want anyone opposing them. The King was compelled to give an annual tribute to the British Government and their control over Manipur continued till 1947. The Political Agents were given more power in matters of administration and this continued until Churachand attained maturity. The British officers, on behalf of the minor king, administered the state from 1891 to 1907. According to Brara: "after the British established their supremacy, the concept of the king as a ritual head lost its meaning and accession to the throne phambal kaba, which used to be the principal state ritual, became a battleground for acquiring political supremacy devoid of any ritual elements".10

In subsequent years, Churchand ruled the State with the assistance of a Durbar, consisting of one Indian Civil Service (ICS) officer and six Manipuri members. Churchand abdicated in favour of his eldest son, Bodhchandra (1941-1949), under whose regime the state was amalgamated with the Union of India under duress. Manipur adopted its own political constitution after the British left India under which the constitutional monarchy was adopted and it continued till Manipur's merger with the Indian Union. Today, some sections of Manipuris argued that the Government of Manipur and

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Indian Government had signed the instrument of accession and not that of merger. Considering the pre-conditions that brought about the merger, it can be said that the merger was not unconditional and the pre-conditions for the merger was based more on acts of faith between the Government of India and Government of Manipur and it warranted maximum autonomy for the state of Manipur. Yet the little political power that was left with the king also got away from his hand with the merger of Manipur as an integral part of India. The control over administration came under the supervision of the representative of the Central Government and bureaucrats recruited from outside Manipur. This gave rise to resentment among the local people, gradually sowing the seeds for the emergence of new power groups in the state.

**Political Scenario of Manipur - Post-independence Period**

After the independence of the country in 1947, in the wake of public pressure, king Bodhachandra formed a representative government with elected and nominated members, under the Chief Ministership of Maharajkumar Priyabrata Singh, the younger brother of the Maharaja. However, the government did not last long as Bodhachandra signed the merger agreement with the then Indian Dominion on 5th October 1949. According to Brara: “from a divinely ordained ritual head the kings were reduced to mere political heads who were not sure of their own future. This political transformation gradually eroded the edifice of the society that used to be based on ritual elements”. 11

When the Constitution of India came into force in 1950, Manipur became a Part ‘C’12 State administered by the Chief Commissioner appointed by the President of India (Rawal Amar Singh was the first chief commissioner) as the head of the administration and continued to be so till it converted into a Union Territory on

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12. According to Brara, the special features of the Part C states were that they were administered by the President, through a Chief Commissioner or a Lieutenant - Governor, acting as his agent. Parliament had legislative power relating to any subject of the Part C states, but the Constitution empowered the Parliament to create a Legislature as well as a Council of Advisors or Ministers being merely advisors to him. See Brara, op.cit., 1998, p.241.
November 1, 1956. After the general election of 1957, in order to aid and advise the Chief Commissioner, a territorial Council was constituted comprising thirty elected members and two nominated members. This territorial Council controlled a number of subjects transferred to it by the Central Government, including public works, education, medicine, health, agriculture, veterinary, and local self-government.

The 23 years central rule (1949-1972) produced an adverse effect on the people. The political aspirations of the people of Manipur were fulfilled when Manipur became a full-fledged State of the Indian Union on January 21, 1972. After statehood, the Governor, aided and advised by the Council of Ministers, become the head of the State. Manipur has two representatives in the Lok Sabha; and one in the Rajya Sabha. It is also of great significance to the monarchy that as per the Constitution (Twenty Sixth Amendment) Act, 1971 or Article 363A of the Constitution of India, the successor of Maharaj Bodhachandra Singh lost the right to the Privy Purse. In 1972, with the Government of India formally abolished the royal Privy Purse, the King of Manipur, ceased to function as the titular head of the state. However, the imposition of new political structures has not supplanted the old ones. Though different kinds of political set ups came into existence as a result of these changes, the images of the past in the form of rituals and belief systems continue to exist along with this system.

Lallup System

The 'lallup' system in Manipur had its origin in its distant past. T.C. Hodson is of the view that the earliest mention of lallup occurs in the reign of Koirengba, A.D. 1510. At the outset, lallup was a military association but subsequently played an important role in the economic life of the people. These lallups or military organizations,

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besides working in the king's palace, expended their labour on different civil work programmes of the state such as the construction of roads, bridges, dredging of rivers and so on.

Under the lallup system, every male member between the age of 17 and 60 years was supposed to render free labour to the state for ten days out of every forty days. Thus, a man liable to 'lallup' had to work for the State for 10 days according to his skill and grade while he could attend to his own needs for the remaining thirty days. In recognition of the service rendered by the men, each household was allotted 2.5 acres (pan) of land for self-cultivation. Hodson noted that in case a lallup member failed to attend to his duties due to sickness or some other reasons, he was required to pay a fine of Re.1 per day to hire a substitute. The fine system was advantageous to the nobles and other well-to-do people, because they could escape the lallup duty by paying fines. There were, however, no strict rules and everything depended on the wishes of the king. The Brahmins, Meiteis and Muslims were liable to perform only duties pertaining to lallup whereas the Lois and Nagas had to do much heavier and menial duties.

Some scholars, however, are of the view that the Lois did not perform lallup duties but they were subjected to pay tributes to the king. Brown who supports this view opines that "amongst the Loos are a section chiefly engaged on the Logtak Lake, who do not perform lallup, but pay tribute to the raja." He further writes that those "Lois" who were engaged in fishing had to pay a monthly tax of Rs.2 to 4. McCulloch cites that the Lois are obliged to manufacture a certain quantity of salt monthly for the raja. Like the tribes in the more distant hills of Manpur such as the Maos and Marams who paid

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17. E.W.Dun, Gazetteer of Manipur (Delhi: Manas Publications), 1886, p.27.
19. Ibid.
tributes in kind, the Loi population paid silk, iron, salt, earthen vessels, and liquor as tribute to the Meitei king (lallup).

From these observations, it is evident that the king had a clear policy, which was differently applied to his favourites and non-favourites. The latter usually had to bear the burden of degraded as well as heavy duties in the traditional kingship system in the form of tribute (loipot) service. Among the favourites, those who had royal connection did the supervisory work as the head of offices in the palace whereas the commoners got the middle level jobs. However, the job opportunities for the degraded were limited and closed and for the commoner unlimited and open. Each villages of Lois had different assigned occupations. For example, the Loi villages like Ithing and Thanga carried out fishing in the Loktak, Chandrakhong used to make salt, Shugnu prepared lime, Kakching melted iron, Chairel manufactured pot, Sekmai distilled wine, Khurkhul fabricated silk and so on. None of these degraded groups had any other choice than do the work specified to them. It is understood that a village, a small area and even a part of ethnic group of the degraded was stigmatized with an occupation. These occupations assigned to a particular community were considered as inferior by others. The king extracted the entire surplus of the population and more heavily from the Lois.

**Traditional Political System of the Lois**

In the traditional political system, there was not much distinction between Loi villages and other villages of Manipur as far as administration was concerned. The village court (Loisang) was the smallest unit of administration consisting of the headman and the village officials. Common cases like divorce and adultery were brought to this court. In fact, this unit was a kind of an extended family network where mutual compromise was the main method for conflict resolution.

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21. Loipot service means the paying of tribute to the king, some portion of the produced by the Lois
23. Ibid., p.227.
performing vital functions both for the individuals involved in disputes and for the community as a whole. Like the Benas, described by Swartz, among the Lois the village officials used to settle the disputes and looked after the socio-religious affairs of the village. The decisions for solving a dispute were generally based on consensual opinions rather than authoritative rule. It also relied on the method of persuasions and conciliations to resolve conflicts. Routine cases, such as those dealing with adultery or debts, were settled in a meeting in the presence of the representatives of both the groups and the individuals involved. The Khullakpa (head of the village) acted as the intermediary between the villagers and the king and was responsible for collecting the articles like silk, pots etc. from the villagers which were paid as tributes to the king. The traditional village organization still prevails in the Loi villages though the importance of village officials has reduced. The system has, however, ceased to function among the Meiteis.

In villages of Manipur, there are many officers, bearing different titles, heading the village organizations but the head of most of the Loi village organizations bear the title Khullakpa, and his deputy is Luplakpa. Among the Meiteis, the village organization was headed by Gopal Hanjaba and his deputy is Gopal Hidang. There are also some degraded Meitei (Loi) village organizations headed by Hanjaba and his deputy Hidang. The difference in the designation of the head of the village organizations helps to distinguish the Meitei villages from the Loi villages. There is no hereditary succession to the village chiefs or other village officials since people appointed them on the basis of their ability and capability and those who could work for the welfare of the people. Though the number varies from village to village, each village organization has a council of village officials under the headman and these officials possess powers to supervise socio-religious festivals. The officials commonly found in the villages under study are as follows:

Khullakpa

"Khul" means village and "lakpa" means controller, meaning the person who controls the village and was appointed by the king. Though the roles and powers of the Khullakpa have come down considerably with the disappearance of kingship, the individuals who hold this office still maintain the custom of getting the approval of king’s descendants to give legitimacy to their position. During the monarchical rule in Manipur, the Khullakpa was a dominant figure in the sphere of the administration of the village.

Before the emergence of the present form of democratic government, Khullakpa, as the chief justice of the village, wielded supreme executive authority. He had executive and religious powers and was the arbitrator of disputes in the village. He was conferred privilege by the king of Manipur. Like other officials of the State, they were allowed to wear ‘Khamenchatpa’ (lower part of man’s dress worn by king and other heads of the state), Reshan phurit (kind of velvet shirt) and other ornaments. The post of Khullakpa is still in existence, but due to the introduction of modern administrative system, especially the Panchayati Raj system in the village, his importance has declined and people show little respect to him seeing that he has lost his judicial and administrative powers. Therefore, the power and functions of Khullakpa, at present, are mainly confined to Lai Haraoba and other socio-religious rituals of the village. During Lai Haraoba (worshipping of community deity), he is the chief person who managed the execution of rituals. A special seat is reserved for the Khullakpa of the village at the time of Lai Haraoba and other social and ritual ceremonies of the village.

Luplakpa

‘Lup’ means organization and ‘Lakpa’ means controller. Luplakpa is the deputy of Khullakpa and the second most important officer after Khullakpa. The then king of Manipur appointed Luplakpa. Nonetheless, the function of the Luplakpa is not clearly defined and serves primarily as an assistant to the Khullakpa.
Khunjahanba

The oldest villager is known as Khunjahanba. The function of the Khunjahanba is also not clearly defined. Generally he was the chief organizer of any meetings and festivals within the village and the proposals of the villagers to the other officials were mainly communicated through him. At present, he is consulted mainly on socio-religious matters.

Yupalba

Immediately below the Khunjahanba is the Yupalba. Yupalba was the manager of the ‘yu’ or beer, brewed from rice, and he used to taste the brew to decide its quality. He also decided in what quantity it should be produced and was responsible for the entertainment of strangers.\(^{25}\) He also looked after the supply of rice beer for Lai Haraoba and other socio-religious celebrations in the village. At present, he is performing the role of a cashier who manages the accounts at the time of Lai Haraoba.

Telloihanjaba

*Telloihanjaba* was the leader of the army of the village and an expert in archery. His main duties were to lead the villagers during the war in Manipur and also at the time of hunting. Presently, his duties are curbed down to the role of a cashier and also to provide assistance to Yupalba.

Telloihidang

He was the assistant to Telloihanjaba. His main functions were to collect the baskets and the essential commodities from the villagers, for the socio-religious festivals of the village. He was the chief organizer of sport festivals like race, wrestling (*mukna kangjei*), to name a few.

Pakhanglakpa

*Pakhanglakpa* was an officer in charge of the unmarried men of the village and thus, he looked after the young men’s club. T.C.Hodson writes: “...the custom of keeping the young men in one

\(^{25}\) Hodson, op. cit., 1908, p.60.
dormitory is known to have been at no distant date common among
the Loi communities".26 However, contrary to Hodson's view, the Lois
of Sekmai and Khurkhul villages with whom the researcher has
interacted could not remember whether the dormitory system had ever
existed in the Loi villages. At Khurkhul village, Pakhanglakpa has a
special duty, of cleaning up of a small pond called, Pakhangba kom,
during the Lai Haraoba ceremony. It is an interesting thing to note
here that in the course of the celebration, snakes usually come out of
the pond and it is the responsibility of Pakhanglakpa to tame the
snakes, which are believed to be the incarnation of the deities. In the
absence of Pakhanglakpa, the Khullakpa could carry out his functions
by using the clothes of Pakhanglakpa. According to one official of the
village organization, the reason for performing the rituals in this
manner is due to the fear of the villagers that the deities which
usually appear in the form of snake(s) may harm the villager if the
required ritual is not performed.

Narahakpa

According to Hodson: "the Naharakpa is the ruler of the
adolescent lads who are still younger than the pakhangs (the fully
fledged but unmarried men), and his sphere of authority extended
over the lads in the same manner as did that of Pakhanglakpa over
their immediate elders".27 His functions include advising the youth
every now and then about how they should perform or arrange the
requirements of the Lai Haraoba ceremony and other socio-religious
functions. There is no significant difference between Pakhanglakpa
and Naharakpa and the only difference lies in the age group of the
people under their control.

Loumilakpa

Loumilakpa is the officer who looks after all the paddy fields
belonging to the village deity and collects the revenues in the form of
paddy from the leased cultivated fields. The paddy is used during the

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27. Ibid.
Lai Haraoba festival. In Sekmai, Loumilakpa is the head of those men in the age group of 19-25 years and the name of the group headed by him is called Laroi. His function is to help the other officials at the time of Lai Haraoba and by being the head of the youth he has the power to order them to perform some specific tasks whenever necessary.

Loumihidang

Loumihidang is the assistant to Loumilakpa of the village. In Sekmai, Loumihidang is the head of those men in the age group of 26-32 and the group controlled by him is known as Singloi. His main function is to assist in all the works undertaken by the Loumilakpa for the welfare of the village. At Khurkhul, the functions of Loumilakpa and Loumihidang also include looking after a big drum called pungjao and some small drums (pungs), which are commonly owned by the villagers. Permission should be sought from the officials while taking the drums, since the drums are required to announce the death of a person in the village.

Besides the above-mentioned officials commonly found in both the villages, there are two more officials found only in Sekmai whose names are given below:

Ningolakpa

Ningolakpa was responsible for looking after the welfare of the girls of the village. In the olden days, if the females wanted to have a feast or play sports such as kangjei (polo), likon (cowries) and thabal chongba (moonlight dance), they had to seek his permission. The post of Ningolakpa still exists in Sekmai. However, his functions have diminished as, now-a-days, no one takes part in the afore-mentioned sports except thabal chongba, and there is no compulsion that he should be informed.

Purenpham

There is another official who holds the post called purenpham, whose function is also not well defined. Nonetheless, he is an important official at the time of Lai Haraoba.
As mentioned above, altogether there are ten officials in Sekmai and eight officials in Khurkhul. Besides them, there are some more officials functioning in different Loi villages. In Andro, there has been an officer called 'Khabam Lakpa' who looks after the organization called Naharup and Ahallup. In Phayeng, there are village officials called Hijanglakpa, Sagol Hanjaba and Chabon Hanjaba.

Power and Functions of Chiefs

The Khullakpa of different Loi villages, with the help of other officials, disposed of cases such as divorce, theft, elopement and so on that occurred within the village. He also had the power to investigate the quarrels and internal strifes occurring within the village. In any disputes that took place in the village, his decision albeit taken in consultation with other officials of the village used to be considered as final.

All the afore-said village officials enjoyed the elite status and respect in the village. The officials were and still are selected from the respective village itself and none of them came from outside. Even today, the above officers enjoy high prestige during the socio-religious festivals though their influence in other areas has considerably diminished. On the one hand, the Lai committees took over most of their functions, especially after the introduction of modern administrative system, and on the other hand, Pradhan and police had reduced their roles. As a result, the Khullakpa cannot impose strict actions and discipline upon the villagers. Thus, it can be argued that the present headman is only a titular leader in view of the fact that he can no longer exert control in political and economic affairs of the villagers. Nevertheless, when any important decision is taken in connection with the socio-religious functions, the officials of the

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30. The Lai (deity) committee is formed to look after the management of the Lai Haraoba ceremony. The members of the Lai committee are called by modern designations as secretary and cashier to name a few.
village and members of the Lai committee discuss the problem together. Any problem relating to disputes, murder, conflict, and quarrel that had been reported to the village court are being reported now either to the village gram Panchayat or to the police or to the high court depending on the seriousness of the case. Thus, at present, the power and functions of the village chiefs and his subordinates are mainly confined to the Lai Haraoba and other socio-religious rituals of the village.

**Village Organizations**

Like the other villages in the valley of Manipur, the Loi villages also have organizations like ‘Singlup’, ‘Leilup’ and ‘Keirup’.

**Singlup**

Singlup takes the responsibility for the development of the village and the organization takes up such matters as making roads and bridges, digging of canals, cleanliness of lakes and protection of forest. Whenever somebody dies in the village, it is compulsory for each family who hails from the same singlup to send a male and a female member as representatives to the house of the bereaved family. When a death takes place in the village, it is customary for the singlup members to bring some firewood and a few rupees for the cremation of the deceased person. The singlup will impose a fine of certain amount of money from the absentees who failed to attend the funeral or bring the firewood. One respondent of Khurkhul said that these days in his locality, the villagers have stopped bringing the firewood but decided to offer their contribution in cash, fixed by the villagers itself, to the bereaved family since many members tend to bring very small bundle of fire wood. However, bringing firewood is still prevalent in most of the localities. Thus, helping the deceased family constitutes the main and foremost function of the organization. Various authors have also given a brief mention in their works about the working of these village organizations.
In this regard Brown notes:

In the villages situated in the Manipur valley are clubs, named "Singlup" or wood clubs, resembling the Panchayats of Bengal. These clubs under the Sirdar or Head of the village have the general control of it, and adjudicate in trifling cases arising in the villages. In the event of a villager sinking into a state of extreme poverty, these clubs supply him with necessary food. In sickness they looked after him and when dead, provide the wood for his last rites. In this way although many of the inhabitants are very poor, actual starvation or fatal neglect is rendered impossible.31

**Leirup**

*Leirup* is an organization mainly formed by the male members of the locality, particularly by the youths of the village, to perform different manual works. This organization is involved in developmental functions such as construction and repairing of lanes, roads and small bridges. They also dig and repair village ponds, embankment of rivers, tunnels and irrigation canals in the fields. In addition to these programmes, they usually clear the bushes especially on the day of Gandhi Jayanti. Sometimes, people who belong to the *Leirup* contribute money for paving the lanes in their locality without waiting for the government.

**Keirup**

*Keirup* ("Kei" means tiger, "rup" means organization) was a military organization meant for defending the village as well as the state. Persons who belonged to *keirup* acted as messengers of war. Whenever war broke out, they went to the battlefield. Besides the military functions, they were also responsible for protecting the villagers from the attack of tigers. Hence, they can be considered as a sort of village guards who held the responsibility of protecting the village from unforeseen incidents.

With the advent of new system of administration, especially after Manipur became a part of the Indian Union, *keirup* gradually ceased to function smoothly; however other organizations such as

singlup and, to some extent, leirup are still in existence. These organizations used to look after the welfare of the villages and performed their functions under the headmen of the villages. Though they could not match the standard of modern local self-government, they still continue to provide welfare services to the Loi villages of Manipur. It will not be an exaggeration to say that these were local self-governments in the embryo.32

Judicial System

The concept of justice in ancient and medieval Manipur was based on the principles of customs and usages that were in vogue since time immemorial. The important aspects of the law and order, as emphasized by the pundits, were social, religious and the sanctity of kingship in the life of the people.33 For instance, without the permission of the king, the villagers had no right to use either the particular colour on specific occasions or the particular dress that the king used. Those who violated these restrictions were punished by the Cheirap Court, which was the highest Court of justice administered by the king in the state.

The severest form of punishment inflicted upon the members of the royalty was banishment from the kingdom; however they were spared from capital punishment. The King's relatives and Brahmins were exempted from many of the customary punishments. If a Brahmin or a woman was involved in cases like murder, he or she was not awarded capital punishment. The utmost punishment given to a Brahmin was expulsion from the country and in case of a woman, she was tonsured and paraded in the market.34 Sometimes, they were severed from religious rites and sent to distant villages. Thus, Brahmins were neither imprisoned nor put to death. The punishment given to the ordinary people were imprisonment, whipping, cutting of legs and limbs, and sometimes even capital punishments. But often

34. Ibid, p.146.
the king sent the offenders to Loi villages as a lenient form of punishment. One reason for sending off the offenders to the Loi villages could be due to the absence of organized jail system, which can accommodate many culprits. Anyone who violated the customs and traditions of the country were subjected to various forms of punishment.

As mentioned earlier, those who attempted to overthrow the king, steal arms, wage war against the king, provide assistance in waging war or conspire against the king were put to death, kept in prison or exiled to a Loi village. At times, the offender was not only killed, but his body was cut into pieces and hung at different places. Sometimes, the dead body was exposed in the sun and placed, where people could easily see it. The practice of banishing the subjects who disobeyed the king was widely prevalent even before the emergence of Vaishnavism. After Vaishnavism became a state religion, those who refused to accept it were sent to Loi villages and in the course of time became Lois. As a result, many high status Meiteis were degraded to low status. Consequently, such ex-communicated people became confined to some villages. Those who were involved in incestuous relationship, like marrying a woman belonging to the same clan (yek) or of closely related blood, were also sent to distant Loi villages. Adultery was regarded as a serious offence and the adulterer had to face severe punishments such as imprisonment and mutilation of limbs, in the case of male culprit. Even lack of royal etiquette was a specific offence at the time of kingship and those who broke the rule were punished.

Village Loisang (Court)

During native rule, the judicial functions of the village were performed in a court called loisang, which had civil and criminal

37. Ibid.
jurisdictions. *Loisang* was composed of village headman and other officials who acted as a judicial court of the village. The village headman was an agent of the king who had to maintain regular contact and report anything significant to the official concerned in the palace.\(^{38}\) The village officials dealt with cases such as theft, physical assault, trespass, adultery, divorce and other cases of family dispute. These officials solved all the cases through joint meeting and consultation.

Here, it has to be noted that the criminal law of the Loi villages was very simple. The procedure followed during the trial was based on the information brought before it, which meant that the decision was given immediately. In contrast to the present legal system, justice was available and administered quickly in the past. However, it can be argued that since there was no police investigation before the trial by the court and it was based on the oral information of the accused and the victim, justice might not be totally based on truth.\(^{39}\) The procedure for the administration of justice was not properly defined and regular. Whenever a case was referred to the village court, the officials made inquiries on the spot. The nature and form of punishment varied according to the nature of crimes committed. Generally, the guilty person was punished and he had to offer rice beer and pork to the members of the village court and to the elders of the village. Such type of punishment known as *wakongba* was common to most of the Loi villages. Strict social and moral discipline was observed by giving punishment to the wrongdoers.

If a male culprit had committed a serious crime, he was punished by binding his legs and hands together and then flogged for a fixed period of time at a public place. Women were neither incarcerated nor beaten.\(^{40}\) But they were subjected to a very degraded and perverted form of punishment called *Khongoinaba*. This punishment humiliated and disgraced the women culprit so that they

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38. Ibid., p.145.
would not repeat the unlawful act again. In this context: T.C. Hodson writes:

Such a penalty was given to women specifically when they committed adultery, assault, theft and other cases relating to women and family disputes. The guilty woman was stripped naked, except for a small piece of cloth, which was tied, round her waist. Her hair was shaved off, her face and bare head were coloured, and then the guilty was exhibited in public places. A broomstick was also tied on her naked buttock with a drum. A man would pull her on the front by a piece of rope tied on her neck and a large crowd would gather behind her, beating the drum and proclaimed her offence. She would walk thus though the several streets of the village.

The village court had no power to try when the crime committed was a serious one, such as, heinous-treason and murder. In such cases, the matter was reported to Cheirap, the highest court of Manipur. The village court is still in existence in the Loi villages but due to the introduction of the Panchayati Raj system in the village, it has lost its judicial power, which is exercised today by the village pradhan, police and the formal judicial court. The ex-pradhan of Khurkhul, Phuritsabam Tomchou, reported that the panchayat now mainly deals with the cases related to divorce, assault, trespass and adultery.

If any person of the village under the jurisdiction of Khurkhul gram panchayat, reported a dispute, the panchayat consisting of the pradhan, up-pradhan and other members along with the disputed parties try to solve the problem through discussions and consultations. As punishment, the panchayat members collect a fine of Rs.100 from the wrongdoer. Imposition of fine is an ordinary punishment in the Loi villages. In Sekmai, disputes are reported mostly to the police station in the area and from there they go to the district court for final settlement. Thus, under the new political set up, a new group of administrative personnel with formal legal powers have emerged. Nevertheless, the traditional titleholders have not yet

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41. T.C. Hodson, op. cit., 1908, pp. 88-89.
completely disappeared. Though the powers have considerably eroded they exist side by side with the new power elite.

**Present Scenario of Village Level Politics**

After achieving statehood on January 1972, Manipur State Assembly has 60 seats in legislative assembly of which 40 seats are situated in the valley, 19 in the hills and 1 in the Barak basin of Manipur. Out of 40 constituencies in the valley one seat is reserved for the Scheduled Caste since 1972. The reserved constituency is called Sekmai constituency, where both Khurkhul and Sekmai villages are situated.

Out of the 25 villages in the Sekmai constituency, five are Loi villages, and the Meiteis and the other communities dominate the rest. Being a Scheduled Caste reserved constituency, only the Lois enjoy the privilege to contest the elections from this constituency as other inhabitants of the constituency such as Meities, Nepalis and people belonging to other communities lie outside the Scheduled Caste category. Though a Loi belonging to any of the villages in the constituency can contest the election, the voting pattern shows that the villagers prefer to support candidates from their own village for the state legislative assembly elections. Thus, a strong village solidarity can be seen among the villagers at the time of assembly election. The available data on the results of 2000 and 2002 Manipur state assembly elections also support this view (See Tables: 1 and 2). Out of the five Loi villages, only three Loi villages have fielded their candidates in the elections while the remaining two, Koutruk and Tairenpokpi villages, lack the initiative to field representatives because of their small population. In the elections to the Legislative Assembly for 2000 and 2002 (2002 was a midterm poll because of the early dissolution of the Assembly), there were four contestants, two from Sekmai, one each from Khurkhul and Phayeng.

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Tables 1 and 2 detailed below illustrate the voting pattern in the villages from where the candidate’s hailed in the two Assembly elections held in 2000 and 2002.

**Table: 1**

7<sup>th</sup> Manipur State Assembly Election (2000)

Results of Sekmai constituency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the candidate</th>
<th>Name of the candidate’s village</th>
<th>Name of the political party*</th>
<th>Total no. of electorates in candidate’s village</th>
<th>No of votes polled in candidate’s village</th>
<th>No of votes secured by the candidate from his village</th>
<th>Total no. of votes secured</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kh. Chandra Singh</td>
<td>Sekmai</td>
<td>BJP</td>
<td>3553</td>
<td>3129</td>
<td>1895</td>
<td>5729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Ibomcha Singh</td>
<td>Sekmai</td>
<td>SP</td>
<td>3553</td>
<td>3129</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Borajaoba Singh</td>
<td>Khurkhul</td>
<td>INC</td>
<td>2435</td>
<td>2341</td>
<td>2111</td>
<td>4503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Biren Singh</td>
<td>Phayeng</td>
<td>MSCP</td>
<td>2471</td>
<td>2316</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>5602</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Information gathered from Dr. H. Borajaoba, the candidate who contested the 2000 and 2002 state assemble elections

* The abbreviations for the political parties are as follows:
  - BJP – Bharatiya Janata Party
  - SP – Samata Party
  - INC – Indian National Congress
  - MSCP – Manipur State Congress Party

The above table shows that each candidate secured significant amount of votes from their respective village of origin. The total number of electorates in the Sekmai constituency was 18916 in 2000 and among the four candidates contested, two hailed from the Sekmai village. Out of 3129 votes polled in Sekmai village, Kh. Chandra Singh and M. Ibomcha Singh, both of Sekmai garnered 1895 and 488 votes respectively. The other two candidates, Dr. H. Borajaoba, a native of Khurkhul, secured 2111 votes out of 2341 votes polled in the Khurkhul village and N. Biren Singh who hails from Phayeng, got 1981 votes out of 2316 votes polled in his village. The above fact reveals that the villagers prefer to vote for a candidate who hails from their own village.
Table 2

7th Manipur State Assembly Election (2002)

Results of Sekmai constituency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the candidate</th>
<th>Name of the Candidate's village</th>
<th>Name of the political party*</th>
<th>Total No of electorates in candidate's village</th>
<th>No of votes polled in candidate's village</th>
<th>No of votes secured by the candidate from his village</th>
<th>Total no. of votes secured</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kh.Chandra Singh</td>
<td>Sekmai</td>
<td>BJP</td>
<td>3753</td>
<td>3461</td>
<td>1603</td>
<td>4739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kh.Amujao Singh</td>
<td>Sekmai</td>
<td>INC</td>
<td>3753</td>
<td>3461</td>
<td>1347</td>
<td>3345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.Borajaoba Singh</td>
<td>Khurkhul</td>
<td>SP</td>
<td>2617</td>
<td>2460</td>
<td>2033</td>
<td>3602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.Biren Singh</td>
<td>Phayeng</td>
<td>FPM</td>
<td>2679</td>
<td>2489</td>
<td>2291</td>
<td>6023</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Information gathered from Dr. H. Borajaoba, the candidate who contested the 2000 and 2002 state assembly elections

* The abbreviations for the political parties are as follows:
BJP – Bharatiya Janata Party
SP – Samata Party
INC – Indian National Congress
FPM – Federal Party of Manipur

The trend of getting more votes from the candidate’s own village continued in the election of 2002 too (Table 2). This time the number of voters in the Sekmai constituency has increased to 20,034 from 18916 in 2000. Kh.Chandra and Kh.Amujao of Sekmai secured 1603 and 1347 votes respectively out of 3461 votes polled in their village. Dr.H.Borajaoba of Khurkhul got 2033 votes out of 2460 votes polled in his village; while N.Biren Singh garnered 2291 votes out of 2489 votes polled in his village, Phayeng. The above figures show that each of the candidates had secured maximum number of votes in their own villages. This finding reiterates our earlier argument of the existence of strong village solidarity among the villagers. However, even though the villagers normally support the candidates of their own village, the votes from other villages did play an important role in winning the election. In 2000 election, one of the candidates from Sekmai won the election because the other candidate of the same village failed to draw enough support from his village (See Table 1). In 2002 election, the
candidates from Sekmai, despite having the largest number of voters supporting the candidates, could not win the election because there were two candidates who scored almost equal number of votes from their home villages as the candidates had equal influence among the villagers (See Table 2).

The primary survey conducted in the two villages under study reveals that there are many reasons, which are found to be relevant in choosing the candidate. The reasons include voters' relationship with the candidates, the latter's personality, power and popularity, educational qualification, and political affiliation (See Table 3). These trends show that personal relationship with a candidate is the dominant factor over other reasons such as caste, religion, ideology and gender in determining the fate of a particular candidate.

**Table 3**

**Criteria of selecting the candidate**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No</th>
<th>Reason behind choosing the candidate</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>38.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Educational Qualification</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Social Activism</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Power and Popularity</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Political affiliation</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>No reason</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Estimated from the primary survey conducted in the Loi villages.

**Village Level Politics: The Case of Gram Panchayats and Nagar Panchayats**

For obvious reasons, unlike the State Assembly elections, village solidarity gets loosened in the Panchayat elections, where intra-village competition becomes stronger. In these elections, the candidates may belong to the same village but the loyalty and alliance for choosing a particular candidate is on the basis of one's own lineage and relation since the competition is on intra-village level. In this sphere, the village tends to get segmented with intense rivalry between the
segments. This shows that the operations of countervailing pulls in
the village, where at one level, the villagers compete with each other as
in the case of intra-village politics and at another level, unite together
against the other party as in the case of inter-village politics. When
conflict and competition occur with other groups, the Loi villages
subdue their inter and intra village conflicts and stand united against
the particular group. Thus, the tendency of fission, which is feasibly
inherent among the Lois particularly at the intra-village level politics
transforms to fusion at the inter-village level politics.

**Panchayati Raj in Manipur with Special Reference to Sekmai and
Khurkhul Villages**

The village panchayats or village councils constitute one of the
most important structures of the Indian political system. Though
systems of local self government have existed since time immemorial,
the government formally introduced Panchayati Raj in most of the
States only after independence. Consequently, Panchayati Raj in
Manipur was introduced in 1960 when the United Provinces (Uttar
Pradesh) Panchayati Raj Act, 1947 was extended to the State.43 The
Act provided for a two tier system of Panchayats i.e. gram panchayat
and nyaya panchayat. It, however, excluded from its purview the hill
areas, cantonment areas, municipal areas and notified areas.44 Three
years after attaining statehood the Government of Manipur enacted
the Manipur Panchayati Raj Act 1975. The Act provided for a three
tier system of panchayats, i.e. gram panchayats at the gram sabha
level, panchayat samitis at the block level and zilla parishads at the
district level, besides nyaya panchayats for judicial purposes. To make
the Panchayati Raj institution as effective vehicles of social and
economic change, and in conformity with the 73rd Constitution
Amendment Act of 1992, the Manipur Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 was
passed on 23 April 1994 by repealing the Act of 1975.45 The new Act

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43 Lal Dena, *Status of Panchayati Raj in the State and Union Territories of India*, Manipur,
44 Ibid.
has provided for the constitution of a two-tier panchayati raj in the three (now four) districts of the valley- the Gram Panchayat, at the village level and Zilla Parishad, at the district level. Nagar Panchayats are also in existence in the town areas where Gram Panchayats are not present.

The first election of panchayat was held in 1964. In September 1964, a total of 227 gram panchayats and 43 nyaya panchayats came into existence and started functioning.\(^{46}\) The Manipur Panchayati Raj Act of 1975, the population of Gram Sabha was fixed at between 4,000 and 8,000. But the maximum population may sometimes reach 10,000 due to local condition.\(^ {47}\) The Panchayats are authorized to initiate and prepare plans for economic development and social justice.

**Gram Panchayat**

A Gram Panchayat is formed by a village or by the union of many adjoining villages and is divided into small constituency called ward. Each ward has an elected representative and, a pradhan and an up-pradhan are elected from these representatives who have to guide and direct the members in development activities of the villages, under the overall supervision of the rural development department. Gram Panchayats also receive funds directly from the Central Government for the implementation of the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana and from the state government for executing various rural and community development schemes.\(^ {48}\) The Pradhan and the members are elected directly but one up-pradhan of the Gram Panchayat is elected indirectly by the members of the Gram Panchayat. Seats are reserved for the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women in the Gram Panchayat.

The Panchayats perform some developmental functions delegated by the state government, mainly in the execution of plan

\(^{46}\) Ibid., p.199.


\(^{48}\) Dena, op. cit., 2000, p.201.
schemes, while the Nyaya Panchayats are concerned with judicial matters. The functions of a Gram Panchayat include promotion of agriculture and animal husbandry, conservation of trees, preservation and control of water pollution, maintenance of village roads, drains and culverts. Besides these, the other important functions are promotion of education, rural and cottage industries, sanitation, public health, street lighting, propagation of family planning, welfare of the weaker sections etc. 49

Since the introduction of Panchayati Raj System in Manipur, one of the study villages, Khurkhul, has been included in the Khurkhul Gram panchayat which is a constituent of Imphal West-1 Block of Imphal District. The Khurkhul Gram Panchayat is composed of 9 elected members and one pradhan. Out of 9 members of Khurkhul, there were 2 women members in the year 2000. However, till date not even a single woman pradhan has been elected from this area.

**Nagar Panchayat**

It represents the town or a little more developed area from the village. A Nagar Panchayat consists of different wards and each ward is represented by a councilor. Subsequently, a Chairperson is elected from these councilors. Nagar Panchayat is operated under a separate department called Town Planning Department. The Chairperson and Councilors together form Town Committee that runs the institutions.

One of the study areas Sekmai is included in the category of nagar panchayat. Sekmai Nagar Panchayat came into existence in 1994. Prior to 1994, it was known as Sekmai Small Town Committee, which had been established on 26th August, 1978. There is no difference between the Small Town Committee and the present Nagar Panchayat in regard to power and functions. The only difference is in the nomenclature. The Sekmai Nagar Panchayat takes exclusive responsibilities for the developmental programmes. One of its main

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functions is to look after the trade and commerce of Sekmai Bazaar. The developmental fund for implementation of various schemes and administration of Sekmai Nagar Panchayat is received from the central and state governments through the Directorate of Municipal Administration and Urban Development. The first Chairman of the committee was Kh. Muhindro Singh. In the 1994 and 1999 elections for nagar panchayat, four women councilors were elected but till date no woman representative has been elected for the post of Chairperson. Once elected, the representatives have a tenure of 5 years in office.

Zilla Parishad

After the enactment of the Manipur Panchayati Raj Act of 1994, the State Election Commission constituted under the new Act framed the Manipur Panchayati Raj (Election) Rules, 1995. After the elections held on 31st January 1997, 166 Gram Panchayats and 3 Zilla Parishads (Imphal Zilla parishad, Bishnupur Zilla parishad and Thoubal Zilla parishad) have been constituted. According to section 50 of the Manipur Panchayati Raj Act, 1994, the Zilla Parishad shall consist of members directly elected from the territorial constituencies in the district; the members of the House of the people and the members of the State Legislative Assembly representing a part or whole of the district whose constituencies lie within the district; and ten percent of the Pradhans in the district. The elected members of the Zilla Parishad in turn elect two members amongst themselves, Adhyaksha and Up-Adhyasha, who will be the sanctioning authority for all village development activities. The functions of Zilla Parishad consist of planning for economic development and social justice, and ensuring the coordinated implementation of such plans. In Manipur, the election to the Zilla Parishad was held for the first time in the year 1998. Since the constituency called Khurkhul Zilla Parishad was

50. When Sekmai was Small Town, the elected representatives were known as Chairman and members but after Sekmai Small Town was transformed into Nagar Panchayat, the elected representatives are known as Chairperson and councilors.


reserved for women, a woman candidate has been elected as a member of Zilla Parishad.

Panchayati Raj institutions in Manipur have not been able to function properly due to the lack of power, authority and resources. However, they have emerged as instruments of decentralized development administration at the grass root level. The Gram Panchayats had been involved fully in the implementation of the anti-poverty and rural development programmes. The selection of beneficiaries for these schemes was done in village meetings, where gram panchayat and panchayat samiti members played an important role.53

**Participation of Loi Women in Political Affairs**

Unlike in many parts of the world, women of Manipur had generally enjoyed economic and political rights before the emergence of modern political and economic forms of organization. The Loi women enjoyed the right of participation in the political process for the first time when a responsible form of government was introduced in Manipur. However, they mostly participate only as voters. Since then Loi women have been participating in the political process of the State in every election held under the Constitution of India.

The judicial system of the past pointed to the important role women played in the informal political realm and, to some extent, in the formal structure of the women's court.54 In fact, the large market centers of Manipur run by women have a history of providing moral consensus on the political problems of the state.

Despite their isolation from formal politics the political activism of Manipuri women is clearly demonstrated by the *nupi-lan*, a series of organized protest against the power of the colonial government, which has acquired major distinctions not only in Manipur but also the country as a whole. The first *nupi-lan*, occurred in 1904, when some anti-government people had burnt down the residence of the British

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53. Ibid., p.201.
54. Sircar, op. cit., 1984, p.34.
political agent. In retaliation, Major Maxwell, the political agent, ordered to secure free labour from the people to rebuild the house. This was strongly resisted by women who gathered in thousands and agitated against the government decision. The unrest reached to an extent that the crowd had to be dispersed by force and the government withdrew its order.

In 1939, tradeswomen again organized a massive demonstration against the official policy of exporting rice. Thousands of women from all over the valley gathered in the capital to protest against the Government approval of unlimited export of rice to other states by Marwari merchants. Though the movement was a big success, the participation of Loi women in such type of movements was not so significant because of the far-away location of their villages from the town. The available literature on the leadership provided by women in such movements also makes no mention of the role of Loi women since their contribution had been marginal. The information collected from some of the Loi women for the present study also fails to come up with firm evidence to support their role in the movement.

Not long ago males mostly dominated the pre election meetings in the villages. However, the trend has changed in the recent years as women have started participating in the election campaigns, holding meetings and discussing their problems with the political leaders in the village. The leishabis (unmarried girls) along with the married women go for door-to-door campaign for the candidate they support. Each and every organizations of women even collect money from almost all the candidates who contested elections to become the Members of the Legislative Assembly. The women either use the money for feast or keep it as funds for the management of their organizations. Similarly, the organization of the unmarried girls use the money collected from the candidates either for a feast or for use at the time of thabal chongba (moonlight dance).

The 73rd and 74th Amendment of the Indian Constitution reserved 33 percent of seats for women in the Panchayats and other
local bodies. In this context, the political parties have no option but to fill 1/3 of the electoral block by women candidates. This has been evident by the fact that 33% of women politicians are returned to the Panchayats and Municipal Councils. However, during the election of Zilla Parishad in 1998, when the seat under Sekmai constituency was reserved for women, for the first time in the history of the constituency, a woman candidate N. Meipakpi Devi was elected as a member of Zilla Parishad. Subsequently, she was reelected in 2002 election of Zilla Parishad defeating her male rival when the seat was converted into a general one. Today, there are two women members out of 9 members in Khurkhul Gram Panchayat and four women councilors out of 9 councilors in Sekmai Nagar Panchayat. Despite the increase of women's participation in political affairs, till now there is no woman pradhan in Khurkhul village or woman chairperson in Sekmai municipality area.

In the course of time, Loi women have slowly started participating in mainstream politics. The reservation of seats for women has made this possible. However, the old tradition of male attitude cannot be changed drastically and some of the women interviewed reported that they cannot even register their franchise according to their choice since they are guided by their husbands before voting. Whereas 83.3 % of the respondents are in favour of woman's participation in the political process, 10% highlighted their weakness, physically and mentally, and their lack of expertise in delivering public speech. They further added that politics is always a man's activity and a world which women cannot handle properly. Another 7.7% of the respondents did not register their preference. Interestingly, some of the female respondents also expressed their opinion against women joining politics because in their view it exposes their weaknesses and they can be easily exploited. Of course, it is a fact that many women are not politically educated in the strict sense.

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A handful of respondents have a negative view of the political system as a whole arguing that it can bring no good to the society. Perhaps these negative views could be due to the fact that Manipur has been grappled with unstable politics, rivalry, conflicts, and enmity among members who have overtaken the political arena.

**Night Patrollers**

The organizations of night patrolling formed by women members are worth mentioning. Women organize themselves into groups of night patrollers and guard their neighbourhood against any man consuming liquor and risking addiction to excessive drinking. Women in Manipur mobilized themselves into what are popularly known as the night patrollers in 1975. Groups of thirty to fifty women patrolled the streets after dusk and were on the alert for an inebriated man returning home after an evening at the wine shop. The movement had spread to almost all parts of the state. The motives of the night patrolling by women is to prohibit manufacturing, selling and drinking of alcohol. According to Jain: “the overall objective of the night patrollers was to introduce temperance in the drinking habit so as to ensure that alcoholism did not erode family life, children’s health and the potential for productive participation by the consumer of alcohol”. These women groups also maintain vigilance against the arresting of youth out of mistaken identity by the police and armed forces. Even though most of the Loi villages are involved in the distillation of country liquor, every Loi village has the organization of night patrol formed by women. The secretary of Sekmai patrolling organization said that their objective is not to terminate or stop completely the production and consumption of the alcohol but to control its excessive consumption. In Sekmai, night patrolling (*nisha ban*) is organized only in the market area and not in every locality. This is because many households of Sekmai earn their livelihood on the income generated from selling alcohol. Those hotels, which sell

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57. Ibid., 240.
58. The interview was held with Moirangthem Lalita at Sekmai on 22nd October 2001.
country liquor in Sekmai bazaar are to be closed by 6.30p.m. in winter and 7p.m. in summer. There is an important difference in the objectives of the organizations formed by the Meitei and the Loi villages, whose main occupation is manufacturing wine. The purpose behind the formation of organization by Loi villages as mentioned above is just to control the excessive consumption without banning the production and consumption of alcohol while the organizations shaped by the Meitei villages aims at completely banning the use of alcohol in the State.

Enrolment to the locality (leikai) committees of night patrolling is not only voluntary but also compulsory. Each household in a locality has to spare at least one woman for the night patrolling. The committee is divided into many groups formed by one or two localities consisting of 30 to 40 women. These groups shift their duties, for example, one group of women will patrol one night while another group would patrol the next night, thus circulating the turn from one group to another. The organizations enjoy such wide ranging support amongst women in Manipuri society. Subtle strictures are passed against a family, which does not contribute a female member to the organization. The fear of disapproval persuades some households to exhibit their support to the movement by providing one family member in the local night patrol.59 These night patrollers organize the patrols, monitor the regularity of the patrollers, collect fines from the apprehended drunkard, and act as an intermediary between the drunkard and the police. The women usually carry either lantern or a flaming torch (meira) while going for night patrolling.

The drunkard is surrounded in the street and fined Rs.100 for being found drunk. If the culprit does not have money, he is escorted to his house to collect the amount. In Khurkhul, manufacturers and vendors of alcohol are under constant pressure from the night patrollers to curtail production; while in Sekmai the manufactures and vendors of alcohol pay regular taxes to the excise department. If

alcohol is found either in the house of manufacturers or vendors at the time of raiding by the women, the wine pots are broken and their contents are emptied into street gutters. Most often the women undertake a raid without any legal authority or sanction. According to one observer, this is a reflection of the moral authority the night patrollers enjoy in their society. Usually, at the peak time of agricultural activities, such movement is suspended for sometime and begins again after the agricultural season. However, there is no conclusive evidence of a decline in liquor consumption in Manipur because of the agitations by women. At the time of the fieldwork, there were women who patrolled the streets at night in the study areas suggesting that alcohol consumption continues to be widespread in the society.

**Village Youth Clubs**

In every Loi village, there are many youth clubs formed for the promotion of literary activities, sports and music. The clubs are supposed to be democratically constituted but they are dominated by the male members especially by the boys. The members of the localities form the clubs. Almost every locality of a village has a club. There are as many as 8 clubs in Sekmai while there are 6 clubs in Khurkhul. Some of the clubs have a small hut in which the members keep few books, sports equipments and sometimes a television. The members contribute a small sum of money while forming a club. Sometimes they request the people to donate for the purpose. The elderly people usually encourage the youth in this endeavour. In fact, on the day of *Cheiraoba* - Manipuri new year day - the elderly members of the village play football against the youth in the Loi and Meitei villages and the money collected are used for the club. Funds for the club are also raised by holding dramas (*sumang lila*), and music (*ishei*) shows, and by organizing games like *housi* and lucky dip. The clubs also regularly hold tournaments in the name of some deceased person. In such tournaments the household of the deceased person, in whose name the sport is dedicated, gives the club a sum
ranging between Rs.2000 to 3000 in order to hold the tournament. It is a common sight to see regular meetings of the boys and sometimes girls engaging in activities of playing football and volleyball in a nearby playground. The tournaments not only serve to bring the people together but also to promote sports among the youth, such as, football, volleyball, kho-kho, and kabadi.

In addition to the women's organizations and youth clubs, there are also associations formed specifically for the development and welfare of the Loi. The most prominent among them are given below.

Scheduled Caste Association

The Scheduled Caste Association for the development of Scheduled Caste community of Manipur was formed around 1950's under the leaderships of Shri Kh. Chaoba of Sekmai, Kh. Leirijao of Khurkhul, and A. Pabung and A. Tolchou of Phayeng. One of the key objectives of the Development Committee was to include the Loi villages of Manipur in the union list of India as Scheduled Caste. Due to the efforts of the above-mentioned leaders, the list of the eight villages mentioned in Chapter one has been recognized as Scheduled Caste villages. The other objective of the association is to accelerate the developmental process among the Loi community.

All Manipur Scheduled Caste Students Union

The association was formed in 1968 at D.M. College Boys' Hostel, Chingmeirong and like the Scheduled Caste Association, it also aims mainly at the development of the scheduled caste community. In addition, the union purports to spread awareness among the students about the benefits and advantages provided by the government for weaker sections. Besides, the association organizes cultural meetings every year by incorporating all the Loi villages of Manipur thereby bringing co-ordination among these villages and preserving the cultural heritage of the community. At the time of cultural meet, various programmes such as folk songs, folk dance etc. are performed by different groups who hail from different Loi villages.
An analysis of the political life of the Lois shows that they are being marginalized in every sphere in the state, and as a result they failed to achieve any significant position even today. This is clear from the lack of any conclusive evidence, either in the forms of documents or in the memory of elderly informants in the field, on the presence of any officials belonging to the Lois in the king's durbar. It is unlikely that there were any officials from the Loi villages since they had been excluded from joining the *pana* (administrative divisions of the state) system. However, the king used to collect tributes from each Loi village through the village chiefs. From the Chronicles such as *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, it has come to our notice that the Loi villages were used by the king as a place of deportation of wrong doers before Hinduization and more commonly after the State has embraced Hinduism.

**Conclusion**

This chapter gives a historical account of the evolution as well as the form and nature of Lois political organization from ancient times till date. The study reveals that in the traditional political system, there was not much difference between Loi villages and other villages of Manipur as far as administration was concerned. At the head of the administration was the king who was treated as the representative of God (Lainingthou - god-king). The King was assisted by a Durbar, which looked after the day-to-day administration of the state. Till the British occupation of Manipur in 1891 and its subsequent integration with the Indian Union in 1949 almost every sphere of Manipuri society was under the control and strict supervision of the king.

At the local level, the village court (*Loisang*) served as the most important unit of administration consisting of the headman and the village officials. Common cases like divorce, adultery, debts and minor disputes were brought to this court and settled in the presence of the representatives of both the groups and the individuals involved.
Though the power and functions of the village chiefs have considerably eroded with the emergence of the new system of governance, the traditional village organization has not completely disappeared in the Loi villages. While monarchy has long been abolished, the village functionaries still take formal endorsement from the descendants of the king on assumption of office.

The study also takes a brief look at the present scenario of electoral politics. Data from the two study villages show that it is not the factors such as caste, religion, ideology and gender but village solidarity that plays an important role in choosing a particular candidate. Interestingly, the tendency of fission that is inevitable at the level of intra-village politics transforms into fusion at the wider political level. The Loi women also have slowly started participating in the mainstream politics, though the age-old tradition of male domination has not changed. All in all, at the level of the village the political organization of Manipur in general, and Loi in particular has not witnessed any drastic changes. The roots of traditional political organizations still exist in the political economy of Lois. This fact finds clear reflection in the economic structure of the society.