CHAPTER I
ORIGIN OF THE LOIS

Manipur is located in the north-eastern region of India and it is situated in a mountainous region endowed with natural beauty of blue mountains and green valleys. The state is bounded by Nagaland in the north, Mizoram in the south, Upper Myanmar in the east and Assam in the west. It has a population of 2,388,634 persons according to 2001 census.\(^1\) Out of this, 56 percent consists of the Meiteis inhabiting the valley, 34.41 percent belongs to the Scheduled Tribes who mostly inhabit the hill areas, while 2 percent consists of the Lois or the Scheduled Caste mostly inhabiting the foothills of Manipur and around 8 percent consists of other communities.\(^2\) The total area of the state is 22,327 sq. km, divided into nine districts. Out of these, the Lois who are categorized as Scheduled Castes in the Indian Constitution are spread over four districts: Imphal West, Imphal East, Bishnupur and Chandel.

The State has had a long march in her historical development emerging from a small clan principality at Kangla in the heart of Imphal into a powerful kingdom, which extended beyond the present day Manipur.\(^3\) Till the beginning of the 18th century, the Meiteis of Manipur valley followed the ancient Meitei religion and the tribes who inhabit the surrounding hills were the practitioners of the animistic tribal religion. Besides the traditional religion, the Meiteis who dwell in the plain areas of Manipur adopted Hinduism from early eighteenth century while the Nagas and the Kukis,\(^4\) who are located in the hills, converted into Christianity in the nineteenth century A.D. In contrast to the Meiteis and the people in the hills, the Lois of the present study area, neither formally embraced Hinduism nor converted to

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\(^1\) Census of India, Series 14, Manipur, Directorate of Census Operations, 2001, p.9.
\(^2\) Census of India, Series – 1,Union Primary Abstract for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. 1991, p.11.
\(^4\) The Nagas and Kukis are two major tribes in Manipur.
Christianity, but continued to preserve the traditional culture and religion of their own, though recently a small segment of Lois have converted to Christianity and the rest treated as Hindus.

Before we focus on the Lois, it would be prudent to take a broad look at other ethnic groups in the state particularly the Meiteis since both the communities share many similar cultural traits that cannot be distinguished from each other. According to the 1981 census, Manipur has a list of 29 scheduled tribes: Aimol, Anal, Angami, Chiru, Chothe, Gangte, Hmar, Kabui, Kacha Naga, Koirao, Koireng, Kom, Lamgang, Mizo, Maram, Maring, Mao, Monsang, Moyon, Paite, Purum, Ralte, Sema, Simte, Sahte, Tangkhul, Thadou, Vaiphei and Zou. These 29 scheduled tribes of Manipur are broadly classified into the Nagas and Kukis. The major tribes such as Kabui, Mao and Tangkhul fall under the Naga group and Paite, Kom, Hmar, Vaiphei, Thadou, Gangte and Zou belong to the Kuki group.

**Ethnic Groups of Manipur valley**

There are six ethnic groups in the valley of Manipur: the Meitei, the Loi, the Yaithibi, the Brahmin, the Bishnupriya, and the Pangan (Manipuri Muslim). Of these, three ethnic groups, namely, the Meitei, the Loi, and the Yaithibi claim to be and are regarded by others as indigenous. According to R.K.Saha: “The Meitei literati propagates the theme of indigenousness of these ethnic groups and according to them records on all these aspects have been maintained from the beginning of kingship in the valley”. Those who claim to be indigenous people considered the other three ethnic groups, viz., the Brahmin, the Bishnupriya, and the Pangan as "outsiders". Each of the six-ethnic groups has a distinct consciousness of its identity and each has a particular notion about its historical past. Out of these six ethnic groups in the valley, the Lois do not have much interaction with the Bishnupriyas and the Pangans, this explains why these two do not

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figure much in the discussion as the remaining four ethnic groups. Of the rest, the Lois have a closer relationships with the Meiteis since the Loi villages are adjacent to the Meitei villages. Besides, many Meitei families have settled in the Loi areas. On the other hand, the Lois have lesser interactions with the Brahmins since very few Brahmins have settled in and around the Loi villages. The Yaithibis are also recognized as Scheduled Castes but due to wide spatial distance they have little interaction with the Lois. Hence, the role model of the Lois is not the Yaithibis but the Meiteis since the Lois are closer to the Meiteis socially and spatially. People belonging to other ethnic groups are not residing in the Loi villages. Thus, the interactions of the Lois with these ethnic groups are limited and mainly restricted to the market places, public institutions, transports etc.

The Meiteis

The Meiteis are primarily located in the valley and speak the Manipuri language. The word 'Meitei' has been interpreted differently by different scholars. According to Hodson, the word "Meithei" or Meitei has been derived from \textit{mi} = man and \textit{thei} = separate.\footnote{T.C. Hodson, \textit{The Meiteis} (Delhi : Low Price Publications ), 1908 ,p.10.} Brian Houghton Hodgson, on the other hand, says: “In the Moitay (= Meitei) of Manipur we have the combined appellations of the Siamese Tai and the Kochin-Chinese ‘Moy’.\footnote{M.Kirti Singh, \textit{Religious Development in Manipur in the Eighteen and Nineteen Centuries} (Imphal: Manipur Sahitya Academy), 1980, p.1.} For Constatine, the term Meitei is applicable to anyone belonging to the seven clans.\footnote{R.Constantine, \textit{Manipur: Maid of the Mountains} (New Delhi: Lancer Publishers), 1981,p38.} To Kirti, the term 'Meitei' primarily meant the people of the Ningthouja clan who entered Manipur in 33 A.D.\footnote{M.Kirti Singh, op. cit., 1980, p.19.}

There are two distinct opinions about the origin of the Meitei in Manipur, one ascribing them to Hindu descent, the other to tribal origin. British administrators and scholars like Dun\footnote{E.W. Dun, \textit{Gazetteer of Manipur} ( Delhi : Manas Publications), 1886, p.13.}, and Hodson\footnote{T.C. Hodson , op. cit., 1908 ,p.6.}
are inclined to trace the origin of the Meitei from an agglomeration of Naga-Kuki Tibeto-Burman speaking tribes who surrounded the Manipur valley. Bhattacharya, on the other hand, supports the claim that the Manipuris descended from "Babhruvahan", the son of Arjuna of Mahabharata. In support of this view, Chatterji points to an Aryan admixture in the Meitei community. Brown, however, notes that: "the upper and learned classes of Manipur do not accept their origin from the hill tribes surrounding the valley arguing that they always belonged to the valley and have always been a separate race, and Hindus."  

In this context, Saha notes, an examination of the structure of the society and the oral testimonies of the groups of people who are called 'tribes' by the British administrators and scholars and 'jati' by the Pundits, and in terms of principalities by the historians, points to the conclusion that the original constituent units of the Meiteis were 'exogamous clans' and not tribes.  

Notwithstanding the above view, tradition holds that the Meiteis are the indigenous inhabitants of the Manipur valley, and the Meitei language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family under Kuki-Chin group of languages. The Manipuris are a conglomeration of several distinct tribes who came from different directions. This point is supported by Brown, who writes that the Manipuris are supposed to be the descendants of four old tribes: Khuman, Luwang, Moirang and Meitei, which are known to have inhabited the valley of Manipur at no very distant period. Hodson argues that these different tribes came from different directions such as the Moirangs from South, the direction of "Kookies" (= Kukies); the "Koomul" (=Khuman) from the east, the direction of the "Murring" (=Maring); and the "Meithei" (=Meitei) and the "Looang" (=Luwang) from the north-east, the direction of

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13. Ibid.  
"Koupooes" (=Kabuis).\textsuperscript{18} The offshoots of these tribes who are very similar to those of the Kabui, Kuki and Maring living on the hills, became dominant in the valley at different times one after another. At one time, the Khuman became most powerful, while on another occasion, the Moirang. But ultimately the Meitei subdued all the others and gradually the name Meitei became applicable to all the tribes that settled in the valley. In this context, Dun writes: “they still call themselves Maithai (=Meitei), which tribe appears to have absorbed the rest, and are divided into seven families, the members of which do not inter-marry, and whose name perpetuate the memory of the original tribal divisions”.\textsuperscript{19}

At present, the Meiteis can be classified into two categories: 1) The Gouriya Meitei and 2) the Sanamahi Meitei. Both categories of Meiteis have been the followers of Hinduism till the past four decades or so. However, in the present times different opinions have emerged among them about the present state of their religion. The first category of Meiteis, the Gouriya Meiteis employ Brahmins for worshipping Vaishnava deities, conducting various ceremonies, and cooking communal feast. Highly sanskritized in orientation the Gouriya Meitei interpreted their tradition as related to the great Hindu tradition.

The second category of Meiteis felt that their old Meitei cultural and religious identity has been eroded by following the Hindu custom and religion imposed on them by the Meitei king and thus became disenchanted with Hinduism. This section of people headed by Naoriya Phullo (1838-1941) started a movement known as the revivalist movement or Sanamahi movement. It is a movement that aims at de-Hinduisation of Meitei cultural identity by reviving pre-Hindu Meitei script, custom, culture and religious beliefs and practices. In an attempt to go back to their roots, the Sanamahi Meitei tried to identify their indigenous tradition as distinct from Vaishnavism.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18} T.C. Hodson, op. cit., 1908, p.6.
\textsuperscript{19} E.W. Dun, op. cit., 1886, p.13.
\textsuperscript{20} Ranajit Kumar Saha, op.cit., 1994, p.62.
The Brahmins

The Brahmins, locally called the 'Bamon', belong to the priestly class and they came to Manipur as early as the fifteenth century, serving as agents of Hinduization. During the vigorous movement of Hinduism in Manipur valley, when King Garibaniwaz (1709-1748) adopted and declared Hindu Vaishnavite faith as the state religion in early 18th century, the prominence of the Brahmins took a firm root in the mainstream Meitei community. The king sought advice from the Brahmins in determining the verities of Vaishnavite life. The king chose a consortium of few learned Brahmins as mentors and formed a Sabha known as Brahma Sabha, which could change the social and ritual status of others from lower to higher.21

After the adoption of Vaishnavism, the Meitei kings of different periods brought Brahmins into Manipur valley from various parts of India. Although the majority of the Brahmins came from Bengal and Assam, there are many others who came from distant places like Kashmir, Gujarat, Punjab, Mathura and Orissa.22 The Brahmins as trustees take charge of the property dedicated to the Hindu gods and goddesses by the local people and fulfill the ritual needs of the locality. In every Brahmin house, there is a temple enshrining deities like Ram, Radha, Krishna, Gouranga Mahaprabhu, Jagannath and others. When the Brahmins came to the valley, some of them brought their women along with them but most of them married Meitei girls and settled there. Though the Brahmins originally came from outside Manipur, in the course of time they have adopted local customs in such a manner that they cannot be easily identified as outsiders. They use the local language, eat local food, and dress in the Meitei fashion and have now become an integral part of the Meitei society. They were given lineage (yumnaks) by the Meitei kings and became a part of the larger Meitei society, but remain outside the seven clan (salai) structure, the core of

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the Meitei social structure. While they retain the gotra system characteristic of Brahminic Hinduism, under their influence each clan of Meitei has been identified with a particular Brahmin gotra. In this regard Saha observes: “Even in conducting a Meitei marriage, they use the gotra which is juxtaposed with the Meitei clan”.

According to Brara: “In the entire social matrix, they (the Brahmins) stand apart because of their ritual status, as well as for their physical appearance. Many of them have non-Mongoloid features.” Yet they have adopted the Meitei lifestyle completely. They even have a place for Sanamahi, the traditional household deity of the Meitei faith, in their houses. The significant difference between the Meitei and the Brahmin is that the male members of the former use ‘Singh’ as their titles while the latter use ‘Sharma’. Unlike those in other parts of the country, the Brahmins in Manipur do not possess a very high social status. Yet, they are accorded a high ritual status and revered as persons of high intellectual and religious knowledge.

**The Yaithibis**

Like the Lois, the Yaithibis are exiled Meiteis. According to M. Kirti Singh, Yaithibis are a section of the outcaste comprising those persons penalized by the king of Manipur for violating the marital regulation or for looting the jewels of the royal family in times of war. The difference between the Lois and the Yaithibis is that while the former can be designated as the Kshatriyas after a purification ceremony, the latter was an inexpiable one, a case of eternal degradation. They were exiled to a village named Waithou (situated near their present village, Thoubal Khunou). Brown writes: “the Eithibee or Yaithibi are the exiled people and they used to perform the scavenger’s job in the palace only for the Raja and his family. He

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27. Ibid.
labeled them as Mehter caste.\textsuperscript{28} Saha states that: "During the native rule the Yaithibi were untouchables."\textsuperscript{29} They were not allowed to move freely on the roads and streets. Even their shadows were not to be touched by the upper caste people. When they came out of their houses, they had to wear blue coloured cloth and turban so that people could identify them from a distance. The Yaithibis and the Meiteis are similar in all respects of cultural patterns but the Meiteis refused to acknowledge them as Meiteis. Rather the Meiteis condemned them as descendants of an exiled and socially outcaste people on account of their grave offence such as marrying close relatives like sisters, step-mothers, and other near kins. While the Yaithibis had no option but to reconcile themselves to the status of outcastes, they do not agree with the Meitei's version of the nature of their ex-communication. They attributed their outcaste status to the injustice shown to them by the king and some of his favourites, and were condemned to accept their present low position.

**Meaning of the Term 'Loi'**

The word Loi is used as a prefix and occasionally as a suffix in Manipuri vocabulary to express different meanings. It is used in such expressions as \textit{Loi-thaba} (to exile in the Loi villages or expulsions from Manipur to a place outside), \textit{Loi-kaba} (to return from exile), \textit{Loi-okpa} (to receive somebody while returning from exile), \textit{Loi haba} (to pay tribute to a conquering country), \textit{Loipot-kaba} (to pay tribute to a conquering power), \textit{Loi-chanba} (to conquer a country), \textit{Loi-thokpa} (to kill) \textit{Loi-bi} (hill) and \textit{Sajik-Loi} (the glazier section). According to N. Khelchandra, the term Loi means those who were subdued or who pay tributes to a sovereign.\textsuperscript{30} M. Kirti Singh opines that, "Loi means subdued, dependent, outcaste, backward and to complete or to be completed. It is obviously connected with the degraded or subdued

\textsuperscript{28} R.Brown, op. cit., 1874, p.13.
\textsuperscript{29} Ranajit Kumar Saha, op. cit., 1994, p.75.
groups of outcaste and low caste people". N. Nabakumar, however, writes: "...the term 'Loi' is found to be different from its historical specific connotation". Thus the term, in its current sense, does not cover many of the Lois who were regarded as Lois in the historical past. In its present contextual meaning, it embraces only the Lois who are included in the list of Scheduled Caste. These observations converge to the point that the Lois of Manipur are assigned the status of low caste people similar to the Dalits of mainstream India. Like the Dalits, the Lois of Manipur have been pushed to the peripheral areas of Manipur and social intercourse with the Hinduised Meiteis restricted to the minimum and specifically debarring intermarriage between members of this category and those considered to be of the higher order.

According to one version, the Lois are a people of distinct ethnic identities living in small independent or autonomous socio-territorial local units. As they gradually rose to power, the Meitei kings vanquished and made them their dependent tributary subjects one after another and labeled with the appellation 'Lois'. Thus the term was first used to refer to that category of people who are in a dependent tributary status under the lordship of the Meitei kings. Today, the Lois who inhabit the foothills of the state are conferred the status of a Scheduled Caste community. Despite this distinct identity conferred on them by the Constitution, the Lois neither have a fixed boundary nor are they precisely marked off, from neighboring communities especially the Meiteis by cultural and linguistic usage. In fact in the terminology of Firth, the Lois can be seen as the sectional

33. Nandalal Sharma, Meitrabak (Imphal: O.K. Store), 1960, p.27.
small community since they share many cultural traits with the Meiteis. According to Firth:

"The small community, which is the unit of personal observation, is of two types: the integral community and the sectional community. The integral small community, such as that of the Tikopia, is structurally self-contained. The system of clans and other kinship units, the pagan religious system, the institution of chiefs, and their supporters are primarily independent of external social arrangements. The sectional small community, on the other hand, is structurally a part of a wider entity. Clan membership or a religious system, or a superior political authority is shared with other communities of the same kind."36

**Origin of the Lois**

Different scholars have different opinions about the origin of the Loi but none could give a precise explanation of it. Some scholars identified Loi as an independent tribe that once ruled the valley (Brown37; Kirti38; Singh39); others considered them as part and parcel of the wider Meitei community (Sircar,40 Brara 41).

Based on oral testimonies, it is understood that the Loi belonged to one of the seven clans of Manipur. During their conflict with the Meitei chiefs (Ningthouja chiefs), they were defeated and driven towards the foothills. By this political conquest, they were designated as Loi and later emerged as a separate group, Loi. Thus, the Loi population consisted of those who were vanquished by the Meitei kings, and who paid tributes to the Meitei rulers, soldiers or people taken captive in the war and the people who were expelled from the Meitei society for violating the social customs and traditions. Those committing crimes against the king or disobeying his orders were ordered to live in the Loi villages for the rest of their lives. Persons who

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36. Ibid., p.49.
committed serious offences viz, murder and raising arms against the rulers were also banished to the Loi villages.

The Loi themselves have varied opinions regarding their origin. Some of them believe that they are the original inhabitants of Manipur whereas a few assert that they have migrated into their present abode from different places and are of different ethnic backgrounds. In this context, Hodson opines: “the Loi is a title applied to the inhabitants of a number of villages which are at some distances from Imphal, and which are and have for long been in subjection to the Meiteis, are of various origins”.42 The people of the two Loi villages Sekmai and Khurkhul, where fieldwork for the present study was conducted, believe that their present village had been established some 300 years back and they think that they had originated from different ethnic groups. While the people of Khurkhul village trace their origin to the Shan people of Kabo in Burma, the people of Sekmai, on the other hand, trace their origin to the Sak ethnic group, which, according to them is presently located in Thailand. The Loi villages that claim membership to the Sak ethnic group are Andro, Sekmai, Phayeng, Leimaram, Thongjao and Koutruk. These villages constitute a group named Chakpa which means Chak or Sak people. The villagers that belong to this group prefer to call themselves Chakpa.43 It may not be wrong to say that by identifying themselves as Chakpa Lois, the group seeks to differentiate itself from the other Lois of Manipur.44 It may be noted that some individuals from Sekmai headed by Khwairakpam

42. T.C. Hodson, op. cit., 1908, pp.8-9.
43. It is believed that those who got Loi status after Hinduism, were the Chakpas who were the earliest settlers of Manipur...According to their myth, the ancestors of the Chakpas and Andros were two brothers who occupied Kangla but they were driven out from the place by Pakhangba. Before leaving they decided to have a meal. The Phayeng Chakpa's ancestor cooked ngakra (a kind of fish) and his younger brother cooked khajing (prawn). The khajing took a long time to cook, so the Andro ancestor told the Phayeng ancestor to go ahead, and said that he would follow him later. But when the Andro ancestor finally followed, he was unable to locate his elder brother, and returned. Thus, he got his name Andro, a derivation from Handro (who returned). The Andro settlements are in the east while the Phayengs live in the west. In the traditional text Chakparol (an ancient text maintaining the records of Chakpa), there is a detailed account of the origin and later migrations of the Loi/Chakpa settlements.
44. John Mao, Manipur: A Cultural Region (an Unpublished Doctorate Thesis Submitted to the Department of Anthropology), Manipur University, 1990, p.29.
Nipamacha are currently investigating the connection between the Chakpa ethnic group with that of Sak ethnic group of Thailand from the standpoint of language, culture and tradition of the people. However, dearth of written records to substantiate the above claims made the task a difficult one.

The Lois by their tradition think that they once occupied the fort of Kangla from where they were driven out by Pakhangba, the first recorded king of Manipur around the 1st century A.D. The archeological relics at Kangla and the presence of a place named Chakpa Yengaoupung support this view. When Pakhangba subjugated all other clans, most people accepted him as the ruler of the seven clans and subsequently, Meitei, a composite term for all the clans came to be used. But some people belonging to these clans refused to be absorbed into the Meitei fold, and hence were exiled, and had to pay tribute to the king. Probably, these people who had been subjugated and exiled at the time of Pakhangba (33A.D.) came to be known as the Lois. The Lois' segregation became more stringent at the time of Pamheiba (18th century) when they refused to embrace Hinduism, and wanted to retain their original identity. Backed by the above tradition, the Lois claim that they have settled in Manipur since time immemorial and they are the actual descendants of Sorarel or Asiba (the sky God). Another version, propagated by the Meitei, is that the Lois are the original Meiteis in custom and behaviour. However, with the passage of time, the Meitei have become more and more Hinduised while the Loi have preserved their indigenous traditions.45

Brown, the then political agent of Manipur, puts forth:

"The Loee (Loi) is not recognized as a pure Manipuri; they appear to be descendants of the former inhabitants of Moirang, one of the original tribes which formerly occupied the valley of the South. They were formerly independent, but were reduced ages ago by the Meitheis; hence the name Loees or "subdued", which was given to them after their subjugation...The Loee caste seems a sort of "limbo" or nondescripts of all the descriptions. Manipuris are frequently degraded

to Loees, as a punishment: in this case, should it not be remitted, which it usually is after a time, a punishment's descents to the wife and family of the culprits who become Loees. All descendants of people of Low caste, other than Muslims seem to be consigned to Loees".46

The Loi community is believed to have grown by the absorption of new immigrants from different places and this view finds support in the works of many scholars. According to them, the population of the Lois gradually increased owing to the immigration by various ethnic groups into their territory and the addition of war captives. Parratt observes that the Loi community has been enlarged by migrants of various ethnic origins and hill peoples.47 L.I.Singh argues that there are many outsiders from Takhel (Assam), Tekhao (Tripura) and Kabo (Myanmar) and the very high class Meitei Hindus included in the Loi community.48 L.B. Singh opines, “The ancient Chakpa immigrants who did not mix up with the original population and who settled at the remote areas of the valley near the foothills...constitute the Loi population. To these Chakpas are later added those Meiteis who refused to accept Hinduism imposed on the people by King Pamheiba.”49 However, the above-mentioned scholars did not elaborate on the specific periods of immigration and incorporation of the various ethnic groups to the Loi community.

From the Manipuri chronicles written by royal pundits from time to time regarding the establishment of the Loi villages in the state, it is found that during the reign of King Pakhangba (33-154A.D.) 15 Loi villages namely: Chakpa, Kha Sekmai, Awang Sekmai, Koutruk, Thongjao, Thoubaldong, Andro, Phayeng, Leimaram, Kakching, Sikhong, Ningel, Tinsang, Chairel and Leikok Leisangkhong were established. Four more Loi villages namely: Heiyel, Hangul, Phoubakchao and Waikhong were added during the period of King Kongyanba (1324-1335A.D). Then at the time of King Ningthoukhomba
(1404-1432A.D.), 3 Loi villages namely Thanga, Moirang and Kameng were created. Four Loi villages were further added to the list during the time of King Kiyamba (1467-1508A.D.). They were Waikok, Khoirikhul, Khamaran Kekam and Kumbi Tolong. Thereafter, during the time of King Khagemba (1597-1652A.D.), another 5 Loi villages namely Wangu, Nungu, Sugnu, Langathel and Pallel were established. One more village, namely Arong, has been added to the list during the time of King Khunjaoba (1652-1666). In addition to these villages at the foothills, one Loi village (Kwatha) was established in the upland, a few miles away from Moreh town. Thus, altogether 33 Loi villages have been historically recognized. Besides the above-mentioned villages, there was a late entrant to this assembly, known as Leimaram Khunou or Tairenpekpi. Overall, there were 34 Loi villages.

Impelled by political, economic and religious considerations and the absence of a formal jail system, the successive kings of Manipur declared the different villages situated near the foothills as Loi villages during their respective periods. King Khagemba, during his reign (1597-1652A.D.), initiated the practice of using those Loi villages as the place of transportation of prisoners and social offenders as punishment. Cheitharol Kumbaba, a royal chronicle of Manipur, shows that after King Khagemba, several rulers of the state used to deport several prisoners and social offenders to these Loi villages as punishment. For instance, Katwal Koireng, one of the sons of King Chandrakirti, the then ruler of Manipur was deported to Thanga Loi village as punishment for severely hurting two persons. To banish him to a Loi village as punishment was a great risk to the throne of Manipur. Yet, the ruler of Manipur, exposing all kinds of risks, had to take the extreme step of deporting him to a Loi village thereby showing the society that the rule of law was not only supreme in this tiny State but also applicable to all, irrespective of class and status, even in those days of uncertainty. Even during the reign of the last monarch of Manipur, King Kulachandra, several persons were exiled to Thanga, Kakching, Khurkhul, etc. Thus the practice of deportation of offenders
and prisoners continued from the time of King Khagemba to King Kulachandra. However, there is hardly any mention on the banishment of any prisoners or social offenders to these Loi villages after King Kulachandra either in the chronicle *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, or in any other books.

**Conflicting Identity**

According to Saha, the Lois are a tributary class originated from a tribal group, having fixed assigned occupations and share the segmentary system similar to the Meiteis. Contrary to this view, in the present times the Lois of Sekmai and Khurkhul prefer to identify themselves as Meiteis or Scheduled Caste or Chakpa or give the name of their village when asked about their identity. Closer investigation revealed that the villagers used different identity in different contexts and situations. For example, outside Manipur, they identify themselves as Meiteis but inside the State, they identify themselves by using their village name. They reveal their newly acquired status as Scheduled Caste only for official purposes or if a stranger wants to know more about them. Interestingly, it has been observed that many villagers see Lois as synonymous with Scheduled Caste. In this context, N. Nabakumar writes: “The meaning of the term (Loi) has reoriented to such an extent that it means Scheduled Caste to the ordinary layman”.

Interestingly, though the terms Lois and Scheduled Caste are frequently used interchangeably few see themselves as Hindus. The data of 300 individuals collected from the areas of study shows that 32 percent identified themselves as Meiteis, 24 percent as the Scheduled castes, 22 percent as Lois, 19 percent as those using their village name, 3 percent as Chakpas. Significantly, some of those who identified themselves as Scheduled Caste assert that they are not Lois but included in the category of Lois in order to get the facilities available to Scheduled Castes. They further said that

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their leaders only took the initiative to include their villages in the Scheduled Caste category purely for the benefits provided by the Indian Constitution.

**Types of Lois**

In an apparent attempt to untangle the identity issue several authors have tried to classify Lois into different types. For instance, Ibungohal argued that the Lois could be divided into three groups namely, Lois by birth, Lois by punishment and Lois by purchase. However, he reminds us that the last one was not, in true sense of the term, Lois.\(^{52}\) Shyam, like Ibungohal, maintains that the Lois comprises three segments: Lois by birth, Lois by punishment or migration and Lois by capture during war.\(^{53}\) Sanahal, on the other hand, claims that Lois form a consortium of three classes: the vanquished, the war captives and the Meiteised Nagas.\(^{54}\) These statements point to the fact that the Lois of Manipur are an amorphous category with divergent origin and spread to many distinct villages.

To this large number of classification, based on their belief, the Lois can further be divided into two distinct groups: converted and non-converted. The former represents those who have formally converted to Hinduism with the permission of the kings whereas the latter includes those Lois who have not formally converted. But today the non-converted Lois are also seen as Hindus by virtue of their designation as Scheduled Caste. The present study focuses on the latter type of Lois. The converted Lois follow the life style, custom, manner and rituals practised by the Vaishnavite Meiteis and no longer called Lois but are called Meiteis. The social status of the converted Lois significantly changes to the extent that they are identified as Kshatriyas of the Hindu social hierarchy. The non-converted Lois (though treated as Hindus), on the other hand, still observe their age-old usages, traditions, customs and cultures. Though similarities

\(^{52}\) S. Sanatomba, op.cit., 1994, p.45.

\(^{53}\) Ibid.

\(^{54}\) The Nagas who have migrated to the valley of Manipur in olden days and have been absorbed to the category of Lois.
remain in some of their customs pertaining to religious beliefs and practices, family structure, origin of the clans etc., lifecycle rituals carried out at the time of birth and death of a person are found to be significantly different between the converted and the non-converted Lois.

**Language and Speech**

On the language of the Lois, Damant attempts to categorize it under the Kuki-Chin group. The Lois speak Manipuri language, which comprises of different tones and accents. According to McCulloch, many of the Loi villages have preserved languages of their own. There is a difference in the language spoken by the Lois of the northern villages such as Sekmai, Khurkhul, Phayeng and Andro, and those of the south such as Chairel and host of other Loi villages on the banks of Imphal river. Even in those Loi villages, which are primarily constituted of persons expelled as punishment from the Meitei society, the separate tones and accents seem to have developed due to their long segregation from the rest of the Meitei people and distance from the capital, Imphal. While this dialectical difference is one of the factors which accounts for the social backwardness of the different Loi groups of Manipur, there is no conclusive evidence to suggest the language/dialect they speak belongs to a separate family from Manipuri.

It is probable that these villages might have spoken different languages in the olden days. But to trace the source of this difference is a difficult task. Contrary to the view expressed above, it has been observed in the course of fieldwork that there are villagers speaking different tones and accents of Manipuri language but not different languages as such. In other words, each village possesses its own tone and accent. Both in structure and vocabulary there is a strong overlap between the language spoken by the Loi and Manipuri. From this, it

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55. M. Kirti Singh, op. cit., 1998, p.120.
can be assumed that the Lois originally speak Manipuri but each Loi village has its own tone and accent, and the village of domicile of each Loi can be easily identified from his/her tone and accent. Saha notes that: “According to the Meitei, their (Lois) dialect is marked by defective pronunciation and bad total quality”. The pronunciation of the Lois is very different from the Meiteis as they speak Manipuri in their own accents and tones. Their speech is translated in written form too but is often mispronounced and differently spelt since their speech form is different from that of the Manipuri spoken by the Meiteis. But this is not unique to the Loi. Like the Lois, there are some Meitei villages whose inhabitants speak Manipuri in a different tone. This may be due to the fact that the way in which a particular person pronounces the words of a language is very much influenced by the tone and accent of the locality within which he/she resides.

**The Price of Being Loi**

As a punishment, meted out by the Meitei kings a Meitei was often degraded to the status of a Loi. After the punishment, the degraded Meitei was usually readmitted within the fold of Meitei societal set-up. In the absence of readmission, no punishment could be more severe than to be permanently condemned to the status of Loi. Apart from the social ostracism meted out upon them, individuals and families who were degraded to Loi faced the severe penalty of being excluded from the system of pana\(^59\), an administrative division to which all citizens of the state belong. Originally, exclusion from the pana was a form of penal punishment for the following categories of persons/groups:

1. Those who commit crimes against the king and state
2. Those who violate social customs and traditions and
3. Those who refuse to adopt Hinduism.

But gradually the exclusion got extended to the whole Loi population

\(^{58}\). Ranajit Kumar Saha, *op. cit.*, 1994, p.73.

\(^{59}\). *Pana* system – These refer to divisions within Meitei society for administrative purposes.
In order to become a Meitei, a Loi must be assigned to one of the *panas*. The role of *pana* in the society was so unique that a person who was not a member of a *pana* was debarred from participating in games like polo (*sagol kangjei*), hockey (*khong kangjei*), wrestling (*mukna*), race (*lumchei*), and boat race. While this system of exclusion may have been designed to warn offenders from disobeying the norms laid down by the monarchical state, it serve to marginalize the degraded individuals and groups (Lois) from the centers of power and influence. Some are of the view that the prohibition was probably due to the fact that they were conquered by the Meiteis and treated as a subjugated group.  

**Tributes to the Kings**

Added to the policy of exclusion the Lois had to pay handsome tributes to the Meitei kings as a sign of their political subordination. In Manipuri, paying tribute is called *Loi-pot-kaba*. According to E.W.Dun, it is only the Loi population who pay tribute. Pundit Khelchandra opines that the term ‘Loi’ means those who were subdued or those who paid tribute. Budhi remarks that the Lois were socially and politically subordinate people paying tribute to the Meitei rulers. According to McCulloch: “the Loee (=Loi) population consists of people who pay tribute, and is considered so inferior that the name Meithei (=Meitei) is not given to it.” The heads of the village were responsible for collecting the products from the villagers and giving them to the kings as tributes. The Lois practised some assigned occupations and different Loi villages were supposed to pay different kinds of tributes. They could not change their professions without the permission of the ruling king. The Lois were classified into different tributary groups depending upon the items they paid as tributes to the king. The

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61. E.W. Dun, op. cit., 1886, p.27.  
64. M. McCulloch, *Account of the Valley of Manipur and Hill Tribes* (Delhi: Gian Publishers), 1859, p.11.
groups were arranged as follows:- (a) Langlois, (b) Thumlois or Numitlois, (c)Yotlois, (d)Sellois, (e)Urois, (f)Phusaba and (g) Ngarois.65

1. Langlois: - The Loi villages included in this section paid silk items as tribute to the king. The other Loi villages were neither allowed to rear silk worms nor to weave silk clothes. Included under Langloi villages are Thongjao, Soisakameng, Khurkhul, Kaotruk, Phayeng, Chakpa Khunou, and Leimaram.

2. Thumlois: - Thumlois were the manufacturers of salt, an item that was highly valued in those days, both for domestic and economic purposes. The villages included in this group are Sikhong, Ningel, Chandrakhong, Phanjangkhong, Itham, Monthou, Karong, Sarang Ngaikhong, KeithelManbi, Sabikhong, Nungbangkhong, and Waikhong.

3. Yotlois: - The villages were assigned the work of smelting iron, a vital item used for the manufacture of agricultural implements and weapons. Villages under Yotlois are Kakching Khullel, Kakching Wairi and Kakching Khunou.

4. Sellois: - Sellois were the villages which paid sel (=coins), the bell metal coins, to the king as tribute. Villages under selloi are Leishankong, Nachou, Heiyel, Ngikhong, Hangul, Kumbi, Thanga Leimanai, Karong, Thanga Ningthounai, Arong, Phougakchao, Heirok, Ningthoukhong, and Khangabok.

5. Urois: - Urois were the Loi villages which engaged in logging and paid timbers as tributes. Wangu, Nungu and Sugnu are the villages included in the Urois group.

6. Phusaba Loi:- Villages in this category were engaged as potters and gave mud pots as tribute. Some of the villages in this group are Lamangdong, Thongjao, Kha Chairel, Kha Thongjao etc.

7. Ngaroi: - These Loi villages used to give fish as tribute to the king and the villages are Thanga, Moirang and Arong.

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It needs to be noted that the system of tribute enforced on the Loi not only contributed substantially to the economy of the state but also enabled the Hinduised Meitei to maintain their upper caste/class status.

**Constitutional Status of the Lois**

Though the Loi's have yet to be able to shed off their subjugated identity in the eyes of the Hinduised Meiteis, today they have acquired a new political identity deriving from the Constitution. According to Article 341(1) of the Indian Constitution, the President may with respect to any State or Union Territory (and when it is a State, after consultation with the Governor thereof) by public notification, specify the castes, races or tribes or parts of or groups within castes, races or tribes which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Castes in relation to that State (or Union Territory), as the case may be. Under Article 341(2), Parliament may by law include in or exclude from the list of Scheduled Castes specified in a notification issued under clause (1) any caste, race or tribe or part of or group within any caste, race or tribe, but save as aforesaid a notification issued under the said clause shall not be arrived by any subsequent notification.66

In line with the above provision, residents of eight Loi villages have been designated as Scheduled Castes as per the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes orders (Amendments) Act of 1956. In addition to the Loi's, six other groups are designated as Scheduled Caste. These are:

1. Yaithibis
2. Dhobi
3. Muchi
4. Namsudra
5. Patni
6. Sutradhar

As noted earlier, though there were as many as 34 Loi villages in Manipur, only the inhabitants of eight Loi villages have been recognized as Scheduled Castes; these villages are Sekmai, Khurkhul, Koutruk, Kwatha, Phayeng, Leimaram, Leimaram-Khunou and Andro. Hence, the Lois mentioned in the Presidential order under Article 341 of the Constitution are only the residents of the above mentioned eight villages and they alone have been enjoying the rights and benefits granted under the Constitution. In the records preserved by the Directorate of Tribal Development, Government of Manipur, two more villages, namely Thongjao and Sangaithel, have been included in the Scheduled Caste category under the Constitution of India. In response to their demand, the inhabitants of another Loi village Kakching have also been conferred the rights and privileges granted for the Scheduled Caste under the Constitution from 1991 onwards. The inhabitants of the remaining villages have been more or less assimilated into the Meitei society.

To have a clearer understanding of the problem in hand, it would be prudent to take a closer look at the historicity of scheduling. Prior to their scheduling as a Scheduled Caste, an inspection team headed by Shri I. Sashimeran Aier, from the Regional Assistant Commissioner for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe, Shillong, visited the Loi villages to ascertain their backwardness. The team visited Phayeng, Koutruk, Sekmai, Laimaram, Andro, Kwatha, and Khurkhul. The investigation revealed many similarities between the Lois and the tribes in the hills in terms of their social ethos and high reverence to nature, but the team sought to describe them as a 'backward class', distinct from both the Meiteis and the tribes. The reason for this action is not far to seek. The generations of segregation meted out to them by the Meiteis had reduced the Lois almost to the

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67. It is seen that sometime in the year, 1953, the Loi population numbering about 40,000 living in 7/8 villages had formed an Association and started to claim themselves as members of Scheduled Castes. Quoted from Manipur Gazette, Government of Manipur, Secretariat: Tribal Development Department, July 8, (Imphal: Authority), 1994, p.15.
68. Ibid., p.17.
status of untouchables, suggesting that the Lois are closer to the Scheduled Castes than to the Scheduled Tribes. The strict prohibition on intermarriage and inter-dinning between the animistic Lois and sanskritised Meitei added validity to the opinion. Further, in support of its argument that the Lois are a 'backward class', the team held that the Lois are not only engaged in fixed occupation, such as distillation of country liquor, silk rearing, and rearing of pigs which are not only considered to be degraded by the Hindu Meiteis but also the nature of cremation of the death is similar to the practice followed by the Meitei Hindus. Hence to lift them from their social and economic backwardness the team notes, it would be ideal on the part of the government to make special provisions for the social and economic uplift of the Loi by designating them as Scheduled Castes. The team also recommended that for the social and economic uplift of the Loi community, it is essential to open up lower primary schools, to install communication network, to provide irrigation facilities for their fields and to create more medical facilities.

The Commission submitted its report in 1955, on the basis of which, P.C.Mathew, the then Chief Commissioner of Manipur, recommended that the members of Loi community living in the eight villages mentioned above are to be treated as Scheduled Caste, terming them as Loi to the Union Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi vide his letter No.G.Hill 23/54 dated 17 June 1955. It also notes that the descendants of these members will have to be treated as Scheduled Caste even in future. Acting on the Commission's recommendation the president of India as per Constitution issued notification to this effect vide the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders Amendment Act, 1956.

It is interesting to note that the Lois’ similarity to the Meitei in their socio-religious practices (cremation of the dead) qualifies them to Scheduled Caste status they are generally treated as distinct from the

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69 Manipur Gazette, Government of Manipur, Secretariat, Tribal Development Department, July 8 (Imphal: Authority), 1994, p.15.
Meitei. As mentioned elsewhere in the thesis, before and after the movement of Hinduization, the Lois settled down on the foothills of Manipur as a subdued group within the kingdom of the Meitei kings. The Lois’ failure to embrace Hinduism added to their subjugation and made them inferior in the eyes of the Meiteis. Due to these factors, the Lois were treated as distinct from the Meiteis in spite of the fact that the former speak Manipuri, which, due to segregation, got reduced to a corrupt form of Manipuri, and later came to be known as Loi dialect.

Relationships Between the Lois and the Meiteis

In the pre-Vaishnavite period, the Meiteis lived in a more or less egalitarian society. But, after the adoption of Vaishnavism, the Meiteis, living in the shadow of Brahmanic influence, have acquired a great deal of caste consciousness in their habits and lifestyles. Traditionally, there was no stratified caste system in a Meitei village. The Loi and Naga lived separately in their own villages without any ritual or social tie and often with no economic obligation to the Meiteis or the Brahmins. However, with the advent of Vaishnavism and the recent process of scheduling, Constantine reports that the Scheduled Castes were treated perhaps as badly in Manipur as they are in the rest of India. Some middle-aged people recall how teachers used to keep Scheduled Caste students and other Hindu students segregated. The Scheduled Caste students were not allowed to enter the house of the teacher and sat on the courtyard while the Brahmin and Meitei students sat on the verandah. As a general practice, the teacher would touch his book with a long stick while teaching the Scheduled Caste students.

The above point is supported by many informants who reported to the researcher that their classmates used to laugh at them when they speak Manipuri in their accent. A 60 years old informant narrated an incident in which he felt the Lois were humiliated by the Brahmins.

70 M.C. Sircar, Feminism in a Traditional Society: Women of the Manipur Valley (Delhi: Shakti Books), 1984, p.23.
of his village. He recalled that when he was around 14 years old, one day he had gone to the house of a Brahmin to see the festival of Ratha Jatra (Hindu festival), in which khichri (mixed rice and dal), one of the popular and most common food items, was served to the worshippers. When the people were seated in the mandap of the Brahmin’s courtyard to eat the khichri, he noticed that the Lois were separated from the Meiteis and the Brahmins by a stick placed between the groups.

Another informant narrated a similar story about the attitudes of Brahmins and Meiteis towards the Lois whom they considered as unclean and polluted because they consume pork and liquor. According to the informant, in order to express their own higher status in the social hierarchy, the Brahmins and the Meiteis used to put a stick at the time of feasting in order to separate the Lois from them. Interestingly, he declares that now he also wants to put a stick in the same way as the Brahmins and Meiteis did to the Lois since the new generations of Meiteis no longer follow the dietary habits of the Hindus by consuming varieties of meat and liquor. The informant further asserted: “they eat even those types of meat that we do not take”. Notwithstanding the changes in the dietary habits of the Meiteis, the same old practice is still continuing today in the social interaction of the Meiteis with groups such as the Loi and the Yaithibi. Iboongohol Singh opines that the Lois are still being attached inferior status in the caste hierarchy by the Meiteis particularly in a strictly performed social and religious functions. The above view is also supported by Saha’s observation on the existing relationships of the Meiteis with the Lois. Saha writes:

“The people of all surrounding Meitei villages come together to participate in different social ceremonies connected with birth, initiation, marriage, and ceremonies associated with death occurring in

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72. The interview was held on 3rd October 2001 with H. Damar Singh at Khurkhul.
73. The interview was held on 4th April 2001 with Kh. Uma Singh at Sekmai.
these villages. But they never join the Phayeng (a Loi village) Lois in any of their religious festivals or social ceremonies. But in one case I noticed that a well to do Loi of Phayeng had invited some of these Meiteis who were entertained with food separately cooked by a Brahmin in a separate house specially cleaned for the purpose. The Meitei of the Lairenoabi (a Meitei village) also do not like to invite any of the Loi/Chakpa of Phayeng to any of their social ceremonies. 75

As indicated earlier, an important evidence that marked the social distance between the Lois and the Meiteis is marriage. Marriage was strongly endogamous among the groups. Though at present, inter-caste marriage between a Brahmin bridegroom and Kshatriya bride or vice versa is accepted if the marriage is held in the Gandharba form. Inter-marriage between the Lois and the non-Lois have also occurred, but these cases mainly take place on material considerations such as high educational attainment and sound economic position of the concerned Lois. But even these are mostly confined to the urban areas. In general, till date, orthodox Meiteis would not take food from the Loi and maintain a social and ritual distance from them, so as to preserve their status.

In the study area, it has been found that few Meitei women are married to Loi men. When they were asked whether their parents had ever eaten food in their house, one of the informants replied that her mother had never taken food in her house. She however, had no explanations when the researcher further enquired the reasons for her mother's reluctance in taking food in her house. 76 The truth is that the daughter in this case has married a Loi who, in the mother's perception, is impure due to their un-Hinduised status and practice of consuming meat and liquor. Though the informant's parental village happens to be near her husband's village, the social distance between them remains, primarily because in the opinion of the villagers those Meiteis who had settled near the Loi village are more orthodox and behave as if they are purer than the Meiteis living in the urban areas.

76. The interview was held on 17th April 2001 with Kh. Kunjala Devi at Sekmai.
In recent years, many Loi girls have got married to Meitei boys. Even marriage between a Brahmin woman and a Loi man has occurred recently in the area of study. In this case, there was no restriction from the girl’s family because the groom happens to be a well placed police officer.

In general, however, the Lois, who had inter-caste marriage, are expected to undergo a purification ceremony called *Laiming louba* (the same initiation ceremony taken at the time of conversion to Hinduism) presided over by a Brahmin. One Meitei informant, who is married to a Loi, gave an account of her marriage saying that her parents are not very orthodox and therefore allowed her to marry a Loi. On enquiry whether her husband observed the purification ceremony before marriage, she replied in the affirmative saying that her husband was wearing the sacred thread on the day of their marriage. Having overheard the conversation, her husband stated that he did not undergo any purification ceremony but wore the sacred thread to give the impression to his in-laws and other people present at the time of marriage that he has gone through the ceremony. The husband’s ability to get away without actually going through the purification ceremony points to the absence of any strict adherence to the rules of Hinduism and lenient methods of practising Hinduism in Manipur.

At present, there is a greater degree of relaxation on the interaction between the Meiteis and people of other ethnic groups. This is reflected in the matter of smoking and dining. In some respects, the Meiteis have abandoned rigid segregations, and they sit and mix together with members of the Loi community. In fact some Meitei families have migrated to the Loi villages and have settled down for at least two generations.

**Interaction Between the Lois and Tribal Groups**

Literary accounts on the interaction between the Lois and the ethnic groups in the hills are not readily available. On the basis of

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77. The incident of Brahmin woman marrying Loi has occurred in Sekmai.
78. The interview was held on 5th April, 2001 with Yumlembam Joymati Devi at Sekmai.
available evidence, it may be asserted that the interaction of the Lois with tribes has more positive elements than with the Meiteis. In such interactions, the barriers of commensality, pollution, and taboo do not arise. It is an amicable one, or rather we may say that it is a cordial relationship. Interestingly, despite such cordial relationship, in actuality, it is observed that the Lois interact more with the Meiteis, than with the hill men, partly because tribes are generally regarded as socially and economically backward. Moreover, as noted earlier, the Lois share similar cultural traits with the Meiteis than with the tribals.

Indeed, in their aspiration for upward social mobility, the Lois are more inclined towards identifying themselves with the Meitei, which can be described as "Meiteisation" and refrained from associating themselves with the other ethnic groups. This explains why inter-marriage between the Loi and other ethnic groups are very rare. Endogamy is the preferred form of marriage amongst the Lois, particularly for women. While a Loi boy may marry a tribal girl the reverse is extremely rare. At the time of fieldwork the researcher came across many tribal women married to Loi men whereas just three Loi women were married to tribal men in the present study area. The Lois frequently pay a visit to the tribal areas, and even participate in their festivals organized during Christmas and New year. Similarly, the tribals, who live in the remote hill resorts, are usually given shelter in the Loi house before they proceed on their journey to the town (Imphal). This shows that the Loi can inter-dine with the tribals, but so far as marriage is concerned endogamy is the norm. Intermarriage is a rare phenomenon mainly because of the difference in their religious affiliation and paucity of social interaction between the different ethnic groups. In this regard Saha notes: "Apart from the market place, different ethnic groups do not find any scope for direct interaction with each other at the village level. In the absence of any systematically structured inter-relationship amongst various ethnic groups at the village level attributive notion of hierarchy finds expression in the
principle of endogamy, commensality, and in various attitudes of the people as well as in the process of their social mobility". 79

Brief Account on Khurkhul and Sekmai Loi Villages

Khurkhul

On the origin of Khurkhul village, there are various myths narrated from generations to generations. One of the folklores is called Khongchomnupi Nongarol. Khongchomnupis are six female friends of Luwang clan, which is one of the Meitei clans. The story projects them as disobedient daughters who did not listen to the advice of their parents. In this story, there are six friends who were bachelors (Pakhangs) belonging to the Haoku tribe. Once the six girls of the Luwang clan went to buy fish at the place where the Haoku boys were catching fish. The Haoku boys informed the girls that there was no fish that day because the fish did not enter in their fishnet and the girls were asked to stay back the night with them.

Initially, the girls refused to stay back as that would be against the wishes of their parents and elders and stated that they were scared of the consequences. But the Haoku boys persisted and praised their beauty and attractive appearance. On the insistence of the boys, the Luwang girls spent the night with them and promised to meet again after 5 days at Tendongyan village. When the Luwang girls reached home, their parents scolded them for their disobedience and for engaging in immoral acts. The girls felt ashamed and left their house to meet the Haoku boys at the place where they had agreed to meet. However, one of the girls named Leima Yangdou Ataobi was found pregnant so she informed her friends that they should climb the sky first and she would follow them later. On the maturity of her pregnancy, a cricket was born to her instead of a human being. She cut her child’s umbilical cord with a type of grass called Lamthangjou. The place where she performed this act came to be known as Khoilenkhul (khoi=navel, lenba=to cut, Khul= the village). The present

79. Ibid.
village of Khurkhul, where the research was conducted is said to have derived its name from this incident.

There is another story regarding the origin of the village Khurkhul. In this version, the village owes its name to the popular love-lore of Khamba and Thoibi of Moirang. In this epic, Thoibi, a princess was exiled (*Loi-thaba*) to Burma (*Kabo*) for refusing to marry Nongban, the son of a noble, who is the villain of the story. When she was called back from exile (*Loi-Koukhatpa*), the chief of *Kabo* presented her fifteen slaves. She and the fifteen slaves proceeded on a journey after the ritual of throwing an egg or a ball of rice (*chaktum*). The egg or the ball of rice fell and broke in the areas belonging to leburn Lairembi, who is the deity of Khurkhul village. It is also believed by the villagers that there is a possibility of Ichum Lairembi to be the daughter of the king of Kabo named Sanarik Chaningkhombi, who accompanied Thoibi while she was returning from her exile. According to priest Jugol Singh, Thoibi did not want to take Sanarik Chaningkhombi to the palace which was situated in Moirang so she told the latter to stay at Khurkhul village.\(^{80}\)

When the researcher enquired from the villagers and village headman about the origin of Ichum-lairembi, they failed to provide a concrete answer on whether Ichum-Lairembi and Sanarik Chaningkhombi are the same person or not. They also could not ascertain whether they are the descendants of Ichum Lairembi. However, they maintain that the present village deities are their unseen gods. Though the villagers do not know the exact origin of their village in the absence of written records, they believe that the village could be as many as 300\(^{81}\) years old. Of the two folklores mentioned above, most villagers prefer to support the story of Khongjomnupi Nongalol rather than the story of Khamba-Thoibi.

It is difficult to trace the origin of the village Khurkhul since there is dearth of written documents on it. Khurkhul village comes

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\(^{80}\) As narrated by *maiba* Jugol Singh of Khurkhul on 15\(^{th}\) January 2003.

\(^{81}\) In the perception of the villagers 300 denotes a period of high antiquity.
under the administrative jurisdiction of the Imphal West 1 sub-
division. The village is located to the North of Imphal and is 18 km
away from the capital. The village has an area of 3031.47 acres or
1027.140 hectares. The village is surrounded by Sekmai village and
flanked by Leimakhong river on the north, on the east by Tendongyan
village, on the south by Loitang Khunou and Senjam Chirang villages
and on the West by Kounu hill and Kanto Saban village.

According to 1991 census, the total population of the village is
3,344, of which Scheduled Caste population constitute 60.37 percent,
followed by the Meiteis (39.96 percent) and Scheduled Tribe population
(0.12 percent). The main occupations of the villagers are cultivation
and sericulture.

Khurkhul village is divided into many leikais (localities). There
are as many as 6 leikais in this village. They are: Awang Leikai,
Makha Leikai, Mamang Leikai, Maning Leikai, Sevok Leikai and
Napang Leikai.

Sekmai

The name Sekmai was derived from the word Sengmai, which
originated from the word sengba, meaning pure. The villagers believe
that they are the actual descendants of Soraren (the sky God). There
are three villages with the suffix Sekmai located in different parts of
Manipur valley. As regards the origin of Awang Sekmai which forms
one of the villages under study, the survey monograph of the village
conducted by the Census of India records that: “During ancient time,
when there were constant raids and battles in the country, most of the
inhabitants of a place now known as Nongpok Sekmai (Nongpok
Sekmai is a village, located in the eastern part of Imphal) came and
settled at the present village which they found to be a safe place for
settled life. These settlers called their village Sekmai and the present
inhabitants are believed to be the descendants of those ancient
settlers”.82 However, the record does not provide us the definite

time/period during which the inhabitants of the present village, Awang Sekmai, immigrated to their present abode. On the contrary, the people of this village believed that they have migrated from Kha-Sekmai (Kha=South), a village located in the Southern part of Imphal.

Sekmai has an area of 2047 acres. It is located 19 kms towards the north of Imphal on National Highway Road (National Highway No.39). Sekmai is bounded by Kanglatombi village and Koubru hill on the North; Sekmai river and Nongpok Ningthou hill on the east; Khurkhul and Keingam villages on the west; and Maharabi and Tendongan villages on the South.

According to 1991 census, the total population of the village is 4,288. The Scheduled Caste comprises 72.46 percent of the population, Scheduled Tribes 0.28 percent, and the Meities and other communities 27.26 percent. The main occupations of the villagers include cultivation and distillation of liquor. The village is divided into many localities (leikais). The localities are divided by lanes which cuts across the village. There are as many as 7 localities, viz: Awang Leikai, Makha Leikai, Mayai Leikai, Khunou, Nongthonban, New Market and Sekmai Bazaar.

**Conclusion**

The present discussion raises pertinent questions about the identity of the Lois. Some scholars identified Lois as an independent tribe that once ruled the valley, while others considered them as part of the wider Meitei community. Though the scholars failed to arrive at a consensus, it needs to be noted that the Lois cannot be equated with the Dalits of mainstream India since the notion of purity and pollution that stands as the basic principle of the caste system is traditionally absent in Manipuri society.

Based on religious belief, the Lois can be divided into two: 'converted' and 'non-converted'. The former represents those who had embraced Hinduism with the permission of the kings whereas the latter consist of those who have not formally converted. The present study focuses on the 'non-converted' type of Lois. Evidence reveals
that the designation of the Lois as Scheduled Caste failed to formally convert and make them follow the rules of Hinduism. In general, the religious life of the Lois reflects the dominance of traditional practices and has not been replaced by Hindu rituals, as we will see in the next chapter.