CHAPTER IV

Political Practice

The occupation of state power through a transformation of the existing balance of social forces in order to establish or perpetuate the dominance of a particular class or alliance of classes represented politically in the state apparatus is the specific objective of political practice in any social formation. It has already been noted that the Ningthoujas who later on came to be known as the Meiteis had been able to subjugate and absorb other principalities and minor ethnoses and emerged as the sole power in Manipur valley in the middle of the fifteenth century. This domination was expressed and given complete form in the establishment of the political structure of Meitei kingdom and reached its final shape during the reign of king Khagomba (1597–1652 A.D.), one of the principal makers of Manipur. The first half of eighteenth century witnessed the zenith of power and glory of the kingdom and further consolidation of the polity while the later half of the century was marked by the beginning of the structural decline as a result of the internal dynamics of the system itself and the process continued in the nineteenth century till the British conquest of Manipur
in 1891 A.D. External factors like the growing imperialist and expansionist interests of the Burmese rulers on one hand and strategic and commercial interests of the British India government on the other also played crucial roles in her eventual decline.

Integration of Clan Principalities and Evolution of the Meitei Polity:

The evolution of the polity rather specifically political evolution of the kingdom was a long journey. While attempting to establish an organised polity the Ningthoujas who single-handedly played the leading role in the foundation of Meitei kingdom had to face a number of challenges from other principalities settled in Manipur valley. Not only this they also faced challenges from minor ethnoses like the Heirem Khunjans and the ferocious hill tribes surrounding Manipur valley. In fact history of the evolution of Meitei kingdom from a tribal to semi-tribal and feudal state is the story of innumerable trials and tribulations in a long historical period in which the Ningthoujas emerged victorious.

As already noted the ethnoses known as the Meiteis were evolved out of the integration of seven main clans or Salais. Nongda Laiiren Pakhangba, the founder of Ningthouja principality started the process of subjugation and integration of other clans/principalities into the Ningthouja fold. The seven Salais had its own independent principalities in different regions of the valley as well as in some parts of the hills whose boundaries though difficult to ascertain fluctuated at various times depending upon the fortunes of their rulers.
Of the seven *Salais* other than the Ningthoujas to be absorbed into the Meitei fold was Khabas, who till the beginning of the first century A.D. was ruling at Kangla, the historic capital and focal centre of the emerging Meitei kingdom, the control of which lay at the root of all political and religious power. When Nongda Lairen Pakhangba arrived at the outskirts of the capital with the intention to capture the throne, the Khabas resisted him fiercely. In the ensuing encounter, the Khaba chief known as Khaba Nongchenba defeated Pakhangba and the latter took refuge in the Moirang principality. While taking shelter at Moirang, Pakhangba organised men and material and made extensive preparation to defeat the Khabas with the help of Moirang chief. Pakhangba then attacked the Khabas. This time he was able to defeat the Khabas and was successful in getting the coveted throne at Kangla. Many of the Khaba clansmen fled to different places in the hills and valley.-Thus in the beginning of the first century A.D. Pakhangba defeated and annexed the Khaba principality and since then the latter ceased to exist as an independent principality/tribe and were absorbed into the emerging Meitei fold. The Angom chief Puleiromba who is described by some historians as the foster father of Pakhangba supported his cause. With the help of Puleiromba and supported by the Chakpa and some other tribes, Pakhangba could ascend the throne at Kangla. Another principality which is considered as the oldest among the seven principalities that later on constituted the larger Meitei nationality was Sarang–Leisangthem also known as the Chengleis. They were once a powerful principality/tribe before the
emergence of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba. It was the Chengleis who were once a strong claimant to the throne at Kangla. However, by the time Pakhangba emerged on the political horizon of the valley, the power and strength of the Chengleis was greatly weakened and without much opposition they were absorbed into the Meitei and became a clan only.

Unlike the Khabas, the Luwangs appeared to be a peaceful tribe. The chronicles of Manipur do not record any conflict between the Meiteis and Luwangs. It has been mentioned that the cause of Pakhangba was well supported by the Luwang principality. Thus they were ruling in their own principality autonomous of the Meiteis for several centuries after the first century A. D. Their ability to keep cordial relationship with the Ningthouja (Meitei) rulers enabled them to remain autonomous of the Meiteis for a number of years. There are references of the Meitei king Naootingkhong (663–763 A. D. ?) being given education and training in statecraft by Luwang Ningthou Punshiba, the scholar/statesman and famous chief of the Luwang principality before his formal accession as the Meitei king.⁴ However the autonomous character of the principality was destroyed by a joint expeditionary force of the Khuman and Moirnag principalities at Lammangdong.⁷ Afterwards the Luwangs lost their separate identity and were absorbed in the larger Meitei fold. They made significant contribution in the field of culture and peaceful activities. Poireiton, a coloniser who was regarded as a contemporary of Pakhangba was given shelter by the Luwangs and became one of the greatest culture heroes of Manipur who contributed
a lot to the making of the civilisation in Imphal valley in the historical
times.\textsuperscript{5}

The Mangangs, a small tribe was inhabiting at a place called
Loiching Phouoiiching. They remained as an independent principality
till the Meitei king Naethingkhong invaded them. It is recorded that
Naethingkhong defeated Mangang Konkhucha, the chief of Mangangs
and brought them under Meitei suzerainty. Many items were collected
from them as war booties which includes among others Koritharaocchi
a trumpet–like instrument made of copper which was later used for
giving messages to Lai Kasha (Lord of Heaven) on the coronation of
Meitei kings. Since the conquest over Mangangs Naethingkhong was
given a new title called Mangang–Ngamba (conqueror of the
Mangangs).\textsuperscript{6} Thus, the Mangangs too were absorbed into and became
a part of the Meitei community.

The Angom was the common name given to a number of small
tribes who were amalgamated under one social fold whose political
chieftain and social head was Puleiromba. Puleiromba is regarded as
the progenitor of the Angom clan and a foster father of Pakhangba.
The Angoms were believed to have migrated from the north-east from
the Khangkhiui caves near Ukhrul. It is possible that they might have
lived for some time in the caves of Khangkhui which provided tempo-
rary settlement to the migrating people.\textsuperscript{7} Puleiromba, the Angom chief
played a significant role in shaping the destiny of Pakhangba. Pakhangba
recognising the contribution of Puleiromba in his struggle for power
coronated him as the Angom chief. Puleiromba on the other hand ac-
cepted the tributary status under the Ningthoujas and henceforth the
title Angoupanba was given to the Angom chiefs by the Ningthouja kings. As the Angoms had already accepted tributary status under the Ningthoujas, they did not have an independent history of their own as such “... Angoupanba or the Angom chief was an honoured member of the Ningthouja court, and the office of the Angom Ningthou (Angom chief) continued to the twentieth century even. The Ningthouja/Meitei state was built on the alliance of Ningthouja-Luwang and the Angom.\textsuperscript{8}

The Angom chiefs after Puleiromba continued to play a supporting role to the successive Meitei kings as powerful nobles. However, the social and political alliance between the two came into open direct conflict over the Angoms who asserted their independence at times. There was a series of conflicts between the Angoms and the Ningthoujas during the time of Meitei king Sameirang. Sameirang defeated and killed the prince of the Angoms and realised tribute from the Angoms. And this event was the beginning of the protracted conflicts between them which ultimately led to the absorption of the Angom principality in the Meitei kingdom.\textsuperscript{9} The great Meitei king Loiyumba of the twelfth century A.D. enlisted the Angom chiefs in the civil and military service of the state. The king sent Haokhei Lanthaba, the Angom chief to invade Sekta. The Angom chief Hitha Langlangamba accompanied the Meitei king Ningthoukhomba and participated in the expedition of Moirang in 1432 A. D.

The Khumans constituted another important principality in the south-western part of Manipur valley with their principal seat of power
established at Mayang Imphal. Though they had established matrimonial alliance with the Ningthoujas since the early times, intermittent conflicts between the two are recorded in the chronicles. The royal chronicle mentions Hongnem Yoi Khunjaoba who later on came to be known as Meitei king Naethingkhong (663–763 A. D. ?) taking asylum in Khuman principality and marrying Khayoirol Keireng Thangbi, daughter of Khuman chief Punshi Yoimoiba. Naophangba (428–518 A. D. ?) also married Kaireima a Khuman princess. Thus, for about four centuries i. e., from the fourth to seventh century A. D. it appears that cordial and peaceful relations existed between the Khumans and the Ningthoujas.

However, the policy of friendship and matrimonial alliance could not be maintained forever. Conflicts broke out between the two principalities even over trivial matters. As the Ningthoujas were asserting to be the sole master of Manipur valley, occurrence of such conflicts appears quite natural. Quarrel broke out between these two principalities over matters like ownership of animals and control over brime wells. Thus the matrimonial relations could not satisfy the Ningthouja kingdom’s growing aspiration for territorial aggrandisement and expansionism. The Khuman principality who enjoyed control over the resources of water and large fertile areas naturally drew coveted attention of the Ningthouja rulers and hence conflict between them became a regular feature of twelfth century A. D. Manipur history. Till the thirteenth century, inspite of the intermittent challenges from the
Meiteis the Khumans were able to preserve their sovereign identity. The crushing defeat they faced in the hands of Meitei king Thawanthaba (1193–1231 A.D.) marked the beginning of the decline of Khuman’s power and glory. The principality was declining so rapidly that subsequent Khuman chiefs could no longer carry out the administration of their principality effectively. Being unable to cope with the chaotic state of affairs facing the principality, the Khuman chief, Lamyai Kaikhinba voluntarily left the Khuman capital and came to the court of the Meiteis and handed over the administration of his principality to the Meitei king Kongyamba (1324–1335 A.D.). Lamyai Kaikhinba stayed in the capital of the Meiteis for the rest of his life. With this significant event the Khuman ceased to be a political entity and the principality was absorbed into the Meitei kingdom.

For about a century after the decline of the Khumans, the Moirang principality still flourished as an independent principality. "Moirang is the name of a regional and ancient principality situated on the bank of great fresh water lake known as the Loktak inhabited by a community with the same name". About the history of this principality G. Kabui thus observes, "The history of Moirang is a history of rise, growth and decline of an ethnic group whose autonomy was submerged with the Meitei polity, society and culture. The . . . traditions of her people points to the existence of a remarkable cradle of culture, civilisation and human creativity in south Manipur which was a rival to the Ningthouja kingdom in north Imphal valley for many centuries".
Like that of the Meiteis (Ningthoujas), the original and early history of Moirang are mystified in their own chronicles and traditions though the archaeologists have well established that in the second millennium B.C. a neolithic culture existed at Napachik, near Wangoo in southern part of Moirang territory. Initially, there was cordial relationship between the Ningthoujas and Moirang as evidenced by the assistance rendered to Pakhangba by the Moirang principality in his struggle for power. However, in course of time the cordial relationship turned into hostility as both of them were trying to overshadow each other. The hostile relationship reached its culmination in the first half of the fifteenth century while Moirang had reached the climax of her power which also coincided with the growth of Meitei state under Ningthouja dynasty. The royal chronicle mentions that Ningthouja king Punshiba (1404-1432 A.D.) invaded Moirang principality several times. Moirang under Sanahongba was a powerful principality. However complete subjugation of the Moirang principality was accomplished by Meitei king Ningthoukhomba (1432-1467 A.D.), son and successor of Punshiba. The year 1432 marked the end of the independence of Moirang.

With the conquest of Moirang the process of integration of the regional principalities into the kingdom of Manipur was completed. As the Meitei kingdom was a rising power in the fifteenth century Moirang principality was not strong enough to withstand onslaught of the Meiteis. After their subjugation, Moirang chief was given the status of a tributary chief. The conquest over Moirang, which was a cradle of
human civilisation and cultural creativity, was also a great landmark in the culture and history of Manipur as it led to the enrichment of the culture and civilisation of Manipur as a whole.

In the preceding paras an attempt has been made to trace the evolution of Meitei state from tribal, semi-tribal to a feudal state. Beginning with the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in the first century A. D. the process of state formation was completed in the middle of fifteenth century A. D. By the middle of fifteenth century the process of absorption and integration of other principalities/tribes of Manipur valley into the Meitei fold was also completed. By this time the other principalities had accepted the Ningthouja (Meitei) suzerainty. As already noted the chief of principalities other than the Ningthouja chief who had now became Meitei king were accommodated in the Meitei state apparatus by giving prominent positions. By according official position to the chiefs of these subjugated principalities which helped in strengthening the foundation of Meitei state is evidenced from the fact that Angom chief Hitha Langlangamba accompanied the Meitei king Ningthoukhomba and took part in the invasion and conquest of Moirang in 1432 A.D. At the behest of Meitei kings some other chiefs who carried out regular expeditions in tribal villages were also recorded.

Thus state formation in general and Meitei state formation in particular is the process of evolution, growth or constitution of a people or a social group occupying a geographical region into a political society through different stages and phases of social and economic for-
mation. The Ningthouja principality with its base at Kangla was able to organise men and material for a long period of time and was able to subjugate, absorb, and integrate the various ethnoses inhabiting Manipur valley into a single political entity known as the Meitei state. But there is not a definite explanation of the formation of states. The absence of a generally accepted single theory or hypothesis on state formation is due to the variation in the factors that led to the emergence of states. Therefore it will be a worthwhile attempt to have a glance of the type of state one encounters. Henery Classen and Peter Skalnik have classified states into two categories viz, i) early states and ii) modern states. The early states are simple, non-industrialised and pre-capitalistic whereas the modern states are complex, industrialised and developing.\textsuperscript{13} According to Morton H. Fried the political state is not only a structure not merely emerged from a long process of demographic, ecological and economic development but as a revolutionary transformation of culture in general and fundamental to this conception is the notion that the state is something more than a formally organised society or even an aggregation of institutions and apparatus of social control at some specified level of complexity.\textsuperscript{14} Fried classifies the states into two types viz, the pristine state and secondary state. The pristine states are simple, early, original, primary and lacking in development. On the other hand secondary states are formed due the pressure from the existing states and which often use parts or all of the organisation of some prior states as models of emulation or improvement. Pristine states are found in African autochthonous
political formations and tribal North East India. Thus unlike the neighbouring Ahom state which experienced a secondary state formation, the formation of Meitei state in the fifteenth century is a case of primary state formation which experienced a long period of inter-clan and inter-social conflicts among the clan principalities of Manipur valley.

The Apparatus:

The basic apparatus of the Meitei state that developed through a historical process receiving its final shape during the seventeenth century, remained about the same till its collapse. The system worked smoothly till the successive wave of Burmese invasion of Manipur in the second half of eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From then onwards there was acute strain in the system. In the absence of any resilience in the face of the crisis, the Meitei state began to decline.

Although the king, initially only a tribal chief, later assumed despotic position by virtue of his role in the production and distribution process, he was proclaimed as Meidingu (Meitei king) by following the law of primogeniture. During the reign of Pakhangba, the king was assisted by Ningthou Pongba Tara (council of ten ministers) and sixty-four Phamdous (nobles/officials) in administration and official matters of the state. The Ningthou Pongba Tara held offices of Pukhranba, Nongthonba, Khwairakpa, Yaiskullakpa, Hiyailoi Hanjaba, Chongkhanba Hanjaba, Humangloi Hanjaba, Phamthakcha Hanjaba and
Naikhurakpa Hanjaba. Pakhangba established the following state departments for administrative convenience which were, i) Laipham Shanglen, ii) Kuchu Shanglen (highest court of justice), iii) Khanba Shanglen, iv) Naharup Shanglen, and v) Pacha Loishang. However, most of the day-to-day administration was carried out by the Ningthou Pongba Tara in consultation with other ministers. Though the king was fountain head of administration, he could be imprisoned by the council of nobles and ministers on account of misbehaviour. In case of the nobles who are found misbehaving, accepted bribes or indulging in nepotism, they are liable to be imprisoned for a period of three months and could be removed from office or both. Thus certain mechanism of check and balance in matters of exercising power was evolved in the kingdom. But this system of power sharing and mechanism of check and balance in administration of the kingdom obliterated considerably in the eighteenth century after large scale conversion of Meitei population to Hinduism taking place in the land.

The abovementioned functioning of state machinery worked to a great extent. The council of ministers transacted important business of the state under guidance and supervision of the king. The Pukhramba and Nongthonba placed before the king matters of importance like collection of revenue, food and civil supplies and defence etc. The king then discussed these important matters with his council of ministers. For maintenance of law and order in the kingdom was the responsibility of Dolaipaba whose title later on came to be known as Kotwan (perhaps a corrupted form of Kotwal, a police officer). The defence of
the kingdom from external aggression and internal disturbances was the responsibility of Lanjing Purel (equivalent to Senapati) and Lallup-chingba to organise the militia. The Lallup-chingba was entrusted with the responsibility for successful organisation of the Lallup system. Lanmi Yarekshang (quarter guard of the army) was raised during the reign of Khagemba (1597–1652), which indicates the beginning of organisation of a standing army in the kingdom. It appears that the office of Ningthou Pongba Tara was replaced by that of Khunphangthou Mapan (nine council of ministers) in subsequent years. The nine Khunphangthou were Wangkheirakpa, Khurailakpa, Khwairakpa, Yaiskullakpa, Nongthonba, Pukhranba, Hiyangloi Hanjaba, Shanglen Lakpa, and Chongkhanba Hanjaba. Hence, the organisation of civil and military machinery of the Meitei state was not so complex.

A few words may be said about the evolution of Pana system which is considered as the steel frame for administration of the kingdom for several centuries. Some scholars are of the opinion that Pakhangba introduced the Pana system. However a closer examination of the available historical literature does not lead us to any substantive evidence to support the argument. Though Pakhangba had established five departments of the state the assertion of Nongda Laiersen Pakhangba having associated with the evolution of Pana system was perhaps a later interpolation by some scholars. It was king Loiyumba (1074–1122 A.D.) who introduced a systematic administrative division of the country by creating six Lups (division) viz, Kongchalup, Langmailup, Angoubalup, Chingchalup, Khurailup and Khaichalup.
The heads of these Lups played important role in the organisation of Lallup system and administration of the kingdom. These Lups also served as the basis for the evolution of Pana system during the reign of Kyamba (1467–1508) in the fifteenth century. In 1497 the king established two revenue or administrative circles known as Ahallup and Naharup pana by appointing two supervisors. The person who headed each Pana were known as Lakpa. The establishment of two panas clearly contradicts the claim made by some scholars that Pakhangba introduced the pana system in Manipur. We do not know the real meaning of the term “Pana”. However, Gangmumei Kabui conjectures that the introduction of the word “Pana” in the revenue administration was an influence of the Shans who came into contact with Manipur in the fifteenth century. Further expansion in the organisation of pana system was made during the reign of Khagemba (1597–1652). Besides increasing the number of panas in addition to the existing ones in revenue administration, the system was also extended to military and games and sports. More administrative responsibility was extended to each pana with the construction of its own office buildings in 1668 A.D. by Paikhomba (1666–1697 A.D.). The Ahallup and Naharup panas were entrusted to carry out military expeditions. Persons from the four panas along with some Loi and Kei population were also engaged in developmental and other productive works of the state like brick making. It may be interesting here to note that Paikhomba in December 1687 A.D., enlisted the service of five hundred and four men from
the four panas along with some Loi and Kei population in brick making in fourteen brick kilns for three months. Further systematisation in administration could be seen during the reign of Garibniwaz (1709–1748 A.D.) who introduced the Hindu system of ministers known as the *Mantris*. The Ningel stone inscription refers to the king as ‘Shri Garibniwaz Maharaj’ being accompanied by one of his minister named ‘Haobamcha Ibungo Mantri’. Ananta Shai, uncle of king Bhagyachandra (Jai Singh, 1763–1798) a highly respected person hold the office of Mantri. Certain offices of Ahom civil and military system like Rajkhowa and Hajari were introduced by the king. As the king experienced the functioning of Ahom stae during his politica asylum to the Ahom court on account of the simultaneous revolt of Moirang and the Burmese invasion of the kingdom in 1764 A.D. It is no wonder for the Meitei king to borrow and implant the Ahom system of administration in the kingdom. The offices of the Yubaraj, Senapati, and Mantrti which had been created during the time of Garibniwaz were followed and continued ever since. Khullakpa, Luplakpa and Khunbu looked after the village administration. Garibniwaz during his time extended Lallup service to some tribal villages. The administration of capital city was divided into four zones and each zone headed by a Lakpa. In the eighteenth century the post of Khurailakpa, Khwirakpa, Yaiskullakpa and Wangkheirakpa were held by royal princes.
The Hierarchy:

The Meitei king who headed the socio-political structure belonged to the Ningthoujas (the ruling dynasty since the time of Pakhangba). The Ningthou Pongba Tara who assisted the Meitei kings in administration was chosen from amongst the subjects who possessed high quality wisdom and moral character. The chiefs of other principalities who are now reduced to the status of mere clan head were appointed in the council of sixty-four Phamdous with the honorific title of Ningthou (e.g. the chief of Angom principality was addressed as Angom Ningthou). The Ningthou Pongba Tara later on called Khunphangthou Mapan along with the sixty-four Phamdous carried out the administration of the country under guidance and supervision of the king. During the time of Loiyumba, heads of six Lups known as Lakpa assisted in revenue administration of the kingdom.

The Pana system introduced during the time of Kyamba greatly strengthened administrative machinery of the state. Successive Meitei kings systematised and made improvements in the system which is regarded as the steel-frame of administration of the country. Except for minor modifications this system prevailed upto the British conquest of Manipur in 1891. Even during the British colonial rule Pana system existed in Manipur side by side with colonial system of administration. With the Hinduisation of the kingdom in the eighteenth century some elements of Hindu system of administraton could be seen in the kingdom. King Bhagyachandra during his stay at the Ahom court had seen the functioning of Ahom system and introduced some
elements of it in the kingdom. Every officials engaged in state service was granted lands in lieu of salary. The quantity of land depended upon the rank of officers. The monarch also granted land to individuals who rendered valuable services for the state. Some of the officials received an allotment of wet–rice land, and homestead land in the neighbourhood of the capital. Most of the important functionaries of the state were allowed to reside in the four divisions of capital city. Some features of village and hill administration emerged in the kingdom during the time of Garibniwaz.

**Meitei Despotism:**

The evolution of Meitei state as a feudal polity reached its full–fledged form in the seventeenth century during Kyamba’s time. A corollary to the emergence of Meitei state was the increase in royal power. Certain elements of the evolution of the kingdom towards a feudal polity could be witnessed in the edicts of the king. The successive Meitei kings by virtue of his role in meeting the land reclamation and irrigation needs of an emerging rice economy had developed despotic powers. In extending and maintaining the rice culture, which involved considerable labour, the state represented by the king had to take the initiative. The king participated in this work by enlisting the entire male population and organising a militia out of it. The militia was employed in clearing the dense jungles, levelling of the rice fields, clearing of swamps and marshes, settling of new population in these areas, construction of river embankments and bunds to check inundation of water. Thus the whole infrastructure for the rice economy
was provided by the state represented by the king through its militia and thereby fulfilled a crucial function by organising and regulating the labour services of the community. During the reign of successive Meitei rulers public works of one type or the other were regularly executed. The Lallupchingba and Lakpas were the officers who looked after these activities under supervision of the king. All resources of the country ultimately belonged to the king who exercised its rights and claims over all lands, cultivated or waste, or forests and even brime wells. The state also made religious grants of lands and distributed lands to its subjects for services rendered to the state.

The supply by the Meitei state of basic infrastructural facilities for public works, production and ownership of the means of production resulted in centralisation of power at the hand of the Meitei king. Theoretically the Council of Ministers could check the despotic powers of the king, but it seldom happened. In fact the king could choose his council of ministers thereby making him the ultimate arbiter of destiny of the subject people.

The Impact of Hinduisation:

Traces of Hinduism in Manipur could be found since an early period. As Manipur had been one of the trade and migration route between India and South-east Asia, hordes of traders and religious missionaries passed through the land. Large scale immigration of Brahmins into Manipur took place during the reign of Kyamba in the fifteenth century. Since then there was a regular flow of Brahmins into
Manipur. Many Brahmin scholars were employed by the monarchs for multifarious works in administrative and religious affairs specially in the performance of rites and rituals. The first king to be initiated into Hinduism was Charairongba (16797-1709) in 1704 and adopted the Sanskrit name of Pitamber Singh. However the starting point of real Brahmanical impact on Meitei polity began with Garibniwaz (1709-1748) who accepted a Brahmin called Shanta Das as his preceptor and confidential advisor and a new phase of intensified Brahmanical influence began. With the exposure to Hindu tradition the Meitei king assumed the title of 'Maharaja' and people came to regard him as a representative of Lord Vishnu. The reign of Garibniwaz also witnessed attempts at large scale conversion of the entire Meitei population in the Hindu fold. Hindu eras and calendars were adopted. Jai Singh also popularly known as Rajarshi Bhagyachandra for his devotion to Hinduism introduced a new era known as Chandrabda in the kingdom. The nobility were now allying themselves with the Brahmin literati with a view to forming an expanded ruling class. The lineage base clans of the Meiteis were brought into the fold of Gotra system. The Brahmins formed a social group and the entire Hindu population were classified as belonging to Kshatriyas caste.

Another dimension of the Hindu impact was the grafting of Hindu myths on Meitei legends. This being done to identify the principal Meitei deities with gods of the Hindu pantheon, e. g. Sorarel of the Meitei deity was identified with Indra. A theory of Aryan origin of the Meiteis
particularly the royalty having connected with Arjuna, the Pandava prince. The ruling family was often described as belonging to Arya Vamsh and Manipur as Aryabratta.

The most important aspect of the Hinduisation of Manipur was the rise of the influence of the Brahmins. Without the blessings of these spiritual nobility the regime of any Meitei king could not get legitimacy. The Meitei kings also granted tax free lands to the Brahmins to acquire that legitimacy. Within no time the Brahmins as a social group shot up in political influence. They helped Hinduise the divine origin theory of the Meiteis and to uphold the sacredness of the royal person. In this way the Brahmins helped legitimise and validate the dynastic rule of the Meiteis in the eyes of their Hindu subjects.

By the seventeenth century the kingdom of Manipur had become a regional power. She had established sway over the hill tribes. The establishment of a standing army by Khagemba had considerably strengthened the state. Manipur's control over Kabaw valley and improved agricultural techniques introduced by the Muslim immigrants provided an stable economy and resulted in further sophistication of Meitei state structure. In fact, the Meitei state structure received its final shape during this period under the hands of Khagemba. The concept of vassalage appears to have developed and found acceptance. The hill tribes' acknowledgement of Meitei suzerainty is evidenced from the fact that many tribes stood by the king during the Muslim invasions of 1604 and 1606.²⁶ Though the institutions of kingship and
Ningthou Pongba Tara and sixty-four Phamdous retained their original clan tie-ups and authority many non-Meiteis were admitted into offices at other levels. Craftsman, scribes, musicians and oil crushers etc. were brought into the kingdom from other parts of India by offering them due incentives. To look after the Muslim immigrants a department of Muslim affairs known as Pangan Loishang was established. A department to look after the tribal affairs known as Haomacha Loishang was established during the reign of Charairongba (1697–1709 A.D.). The post of Khullakpa (controller or administrator of village) for the hill chiefs was created by Garibniwaz.

The militia system underwent a final reorganisation to keep pace with the changes in the social, military and political level. Besides strengthening the standing army Lallup serice, though not found much favour had been extended to the hill areas by Garibniwaz. Many tribal chiefs accompanied the king in his military campaigns against Burma. Thus feudalisation of the state polity was consolidated gradually.

Crisis and Decline of the Polity:

The Meitei state which had reached its zenith of power and glory in the first half of eighteenth century had also witnessed the beginning of her decline in the later half of the century. The wrath of rising Burmese imperialist interests and resultant male depopulation of the kingdom in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was due to the serious crisis faced by the Meitei state which caused her eventual decline. Aided and abetted by the French which had been driven out of
India by the British East India Company, the Burmese rulers of Tongoo dynasty pursued a vigorous policy of expansionism in north-east India including Manipur with an intention to capture the lucrative Chinese trade. As Manipur had been her immediate neighbour she had to face the onslaught of repeated Burmese depredations. From 1758 to 1826 within a period of fifty-eight years, Manipur was overrun and dominated by the Burmese forces several times without number. The worst being the Seven Years’ Devastation (1819–1826) locally referred to as Chahi Taret Khuntakpa. These repeated Burmese depredations had also caused a large-scale exodus of male population from Manipur valley who took refuge in Cachar, Sylhet and Dacca etc. A large number of cattle and horses were lost. The Burmese forces carried away and destroyed 300,000 persons. It was Gambhir Sngl (1825–1834), the exiled Manipuri prince at Cachar with the help of the British army finally succeeded in recovering the kingdom from the Burmese with his five hundred militia known as Manipur Levy. Finally when the Burmese left the country, theumber of male population in Manipur valley did not exceed 3,000. The number of valley population according to an estimate of 1873 is about 65,000 including women and children.

The Hinduisation of the kingdom was followed by an intensive process of sanskritisation which had a negative bearing on the polity as a whole. After conversion to Hinduism and particularly Gaudiya Vaishnavism with greater emphasis on purity and impure (Mangba–Sengba), its associated rites and rituals and festivities round the year
of the new religion had also greatly affected the martial tradition of the Meiteis. People were more drawn towards the outward element of Hinduism rather than taking up arms and had a negative bearing on the economic activity and a resultant decrease in productivity.

Technological factors also played another important role in the decline of Meitei ploity. For the last many centuries Manpur had not been in cordial relation with her neighbours especially Burma. By the second half of eighteenth century the Burmese rulers had acquired sophisticated arms through the Frech. On the other hand Manipur still depended on her age old swords and spears. Besides her standing army which was very much necessary for defence of the state was not so well organised and ill equipped. So she could not successfully met the challenges posed by the neighbours. Her search for alliance of a great power remained elusive until the outbreak of the First Anglo-Burmese war (1824–1826). Being a land-locked country lacking in regular contact with the outside world she miserably failed to realise the importance of changing geo-politics in the sub-continent.

Another important factor which has not drawn the attention of the historians in the decline of Meitei polity was the British intervention in the kingdom. Gambhir Singh, no doubt, had taken British help in the recovery of the kingdom from Burma. Though the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826) had recognised the independence of Manipur and Gambhir Singh as the Raja it appears that the recently acquired sovereign status of the kingdom obliterated considerably in her dealings
with the British. The British authorities deemed it not necessary to consult Manipur when Kabaw valley was transferred to Burma on January, 1834 as a result Gambhir Singh died on the same day due to grievous nature of the transfer. The establishment of a British Political Agency in 1835 hastened the process of the eventual decline of Manipur as a sovereign kingdom. Though the purpose of opening the Political Agency was to maintain the friendly relationship that existed between Manipur and British it soon emerged as another power centre and started interfering in the internal affairs of Manipur. Attempts made by some members of the ruling family and nobles like Yubaraj Tikendorjit and general Thangal to check the British interference proved futile and led to the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891. With the defeat of Manipuris in the unmatched episode, Manipur lost her sovereignty which was not restored until the Indian sub-continent got its independence in 1947.
Notes and References:

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8. G. Kabui, op.cit., p. 156.
11. Ibid.
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