CHAPTER V

Social and Ideological Practice

The history of the Manipur society in general and Meitei society in particular in the medieval period is one of the transition from a tribal formation to a class based society. The eighteenth and nineteenth century, with which we are concerned was a period of zenith of power and glory and eventual decline in Manipur's history of social and polity formation. The advancement of feudalism as a result of the development of the forces of production was manifested in many forms; growing complexity of the class structure, change in ideological environment, birth of new beliefs and faiths etc. It was the disintegration of the erstwhile structure and birth of new social order. In short eighteenth and nineteenth century Manipur witnessed trials and tribulations of her history.

Information or research works on medieval social structure or conditions of Manipur are not so forthcoming. Except for the monumental works of Gangmumei Kabui there is not much commendable work worth mentioning in the area. But his work suffers from lack of sufficient information from the point of social and economic history. The primary difficulty one faces in studying the medieval Manipuri
(Meitei) social structure is scarcity of information, the technical difficulty is to isolate social from economic and political activities.

The pre-seventeenth century Manipuri society was more or less a tribal society. But by the seventeenth century a fullfledged political structure had been established. Though there was the presence of Shan, Hindu and Muslim elements in the population it did not alter the social composition of the valley. Certain similar traits in their socio-religious pursuits could be found among the Meiteis of the valley and tribes of surrounding hills in the kingdom. While the tribes still retained their animistic beliefs and practices the Meiteis on the other hand evolved its own religious beliefs and practices. Their beliefs and practices were centered around the worshipping of Atiya Sidaba² (Immortal Lord of the sky), ancestors and sylvan deities. Besides these they also worshipped Lainingthou Sanamahi in every household and is considered as the spiritual deity of the Meiteis. These have been the general beliefs and practices of the Meiteis for several centuries and is best represented in the associated rites and rituals such as Lai Haraoba which continue till now. But the Hinduisation of the polity and the intensive process of sanskritisation initiated by the combined coalition of rulers and Brahmins have altered beyond recognition the face of Manipuri society.

Social Practice – Sanskritisation and Social Stratification:

A brief picture of the Hinduisation of polity has been discussed in the previous chapter. The immigration of Brahmins into Manipur had been a continuous process. Successive Meitei rulers had allowed
the settlement of Brahmins into Manipur. However, large-scale Brahmin immigration in the kingdom took place during the seventeenth and eighteenth century as a result of the Mughal expansion in eastern India. Many Brahmin settlers of U.P., Bengal and Sylhet etc. took refuge in Manipur to avoid Muslim persecutions. They adopted Manipur as their homeland and accepted Manipuri as their mother tongue. Khagemba employed Brahmin scholars as astrologers in the royal court. The Brahmins were given Yumnaks (local surname). But till the first part of eighteenth century Brahmins in Manipur did not play any significant role in religious spheres of Manipur. The rulers till then followed the traditional Meitei religion. However, the first Meitie ruler to have been converted into Hinduism was Charairongba (1697–1709). In April, 1704, the king was formally initiated in Vaishnavism by a Brahmin known as Krishnacharya who came from Sweta Ganga, Puri. Charairongba was the first Hinduised king of Manipur and adopted the Sanskrit name of Pitambar Singh. As the reign of Charairongba was short-lived the impact of the new religion could not be felt for some time. Large-scale conversion of Meitei population into Hinduism took place during the time of Garibaniwaz (Pamheiba) who adopted the Sanskrit name of Gopal Singh. Though the king had been initiated into Hinduism for a long time his active involvement in the spread of the new religion started in 1720. Formally initiated into Vaishnavism the king turned attention towards Ramandi cult with the arrival of a Brahmin
named Shanta Das who came from Nar Singh Tilla. From now onwards Garibaniwaz declared Hinduism as state religion and propagation of the new faith was vigorously pursued under the active guidance of Shanta Das. Attempts to suppress remnants of the traditional Meitei religion had been taken up. Sanamahi Laikan an account dealing with the resurrection of Lord Sanamahi refers to the destruction of temples of sylvan deities on the order of the king and Shanta Das. Many important books of religious, philosophical, social and cultural importance were burned down by the king and his preceptor. During a short span of time, the social, cultural and even the social identity of the Meiteis was radically altered and sanskritised. Serious attempts were made to transform the whole social and political system of Manipur into a Hindu state and society. The country was renamed Manipur as proposed by Shanta Das and accepted by the king and the court and identified the land with Manipur of the epic Mahabharata\(^5\). In 1724, the title of ‘Maharaja’ was given to the king\(^6\). Though genealogical accounts had been prepared earlier by Haobam Pukhramba in 1731 A.D.\(^7\), another genealogy of the ruling dynasty known as Vamshavali was prepared at a later date establishing mythical connection with sages of India, particularly with Arjuna, the Pandava hero of Mahabharata\(^8\). The seven clans of the Meiteis had been brought into Gotra system of the Hindus. The Ningthouja (ruling dynasty) was identified as belonging to Sandilya Gotra of the Hindus\(^9\). The Hinduised Meiteis including the king were declared as Kshatriya thereby becoming a single caste society.
The Meitei ruling dynasty had been equated with the Surya Vamsa. Festivals associated with age old Meitei religious belief and practices were given Hindu names or modified with Hindu form. To cite a few examples, the annual boat race known as Heikru Hitongba festival performed in the month of September every year since the reign of Mungyamba (1562–1597) was renamed Jal Yatra. Likewise, Kongba Leithong Phatpa ceremony cum ritual and Ahong Khongching was replaced or substituted by Vishnu Samkranti and Rath Yatra respectively. The policy of Hinduisation and sanskritisation reached its fruition during the rule of Bhagyachandra (Jai Singh). The influence of Hinduism permeates down to cultural level, the best example of it was found in the Raas Leela (a ritual cum dance devoted to Lord Krishna and his consort Radha) and become world famous. Bhagyachandra’s reign also witnessed the beginning of Bengali cultural influence. Many books dealing with Hindu religion and culture were translated into Manipuri. Hindu epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata written in Bengali were translated into Manipuri. The same trend was continued in nineteenth century also. The Bengali cultural and literary influence was so great that Bengali script replaced that of the Meiteis as medium of writing. This trend continues even today. Though there are negative effects of this phenomenon one positive feature of the Bengali cultural influence on Manipur had certainly opened a new weltanschauung for the Meiteis in the realm of literature, culture and even education of the future gen-
erations. As a result of the new religion refinement in the way of life could be seen in matters of dining and other habits. However, inspite of all these influences of Hinduism prevailed in the kingdom it could not completely wipe out the traditional beliefs and practices. Outwardly people seems to be more drawn towards the new religion but inwardly people did not altogether gave up their tradition. Lord Sanamahi continued to enjoy its primacy as a household deity. Besides Hinduism people still professed their traditional religion. The intermingling of the two religious practices resulted in a synthesis thereby giving a new identity to Hinduism, the best example of it could be found in the *Raas Leela* and other rites and rituals. The Brahmin influence became exceedingly strong. It was more so with the establishment of a Brahmins council known as the *Brahma Sabha*. The Kshatriya Ideal of kingship had been literally followed by Bhagyachandra for which the people affectionately called him “Rajarshi” (saintly king). Thus, in short, Hinduisation of the kingdom followed by sanskritisation had brought about remarkable changes in the social and cultural life of the people and ultimately altered the social and religious structure of the polity.

Largely based on a natural economy, the eighteenth and nineteenth century social strata constituted some features of a pyramidalised structure. The top layer of hierarchy was occupied by the privileged aristocracy not subject to render any kind of manual service to the state. This aristocracy comprised of the king, nobles and the Brahmins.
Most of them enjoyed revenue free lands at which their slaves and tenants carried on the cultivation. Besides, the temporal aristocracy enjoyed a monopoly of all important offices of the state. The aristocracy, however, did not constitute a homogenous group. There were differentiation in rank and status based on birth and office. Occupying a position of pre-eminence were the Brahmans, the holders of revenue free land grants. The sanskritisation of Garibniwaz had created a new powerful princely group known as Rajkumars who were the children of the wives and concubines of kings. These groups of Rajkumars hold important offices of the state. At the lower level of this bureaucratic machinery of Meitei state were the Khullakpa, Hanjaba, Hidang, Pakhanglakpa, Naharakpa, Ningol-lakpa, Khunjanha, Toloihanjaba, Toli Hidang, Hiruba, Hinouba and Shellungba etc.\(^\text{13}\)

The peasantry, fishermen and artisans included mainly the common people comprised the lower level in the social hierarchy. This group which constituted the most numerous class were required as Lallois to render compulsory labour services to the state under Lallup system or pay a tax in lieu of it, in kind or cash. The entire state structure was maintained by the labour of this class, however, they did not occupy any status commensurate to their importance. In short, the Lallois are the most humble subjects of the kingdom and they constituted the source of its strength. As already stated, these Lallois at the same time the peasants constituting the bulk of the village community. Artisan and craftsmen were by and large, at the same time, also
peasants having cultivation as their primary or subsidiary occupation. At the lowest echelon of the social structure were the servile class constituted of the Loi, Kei, Bishnupriya, Yaithibi and slave etc. However, slavery as was found in Manipur was not as severe as in other parts of India. R. Brown observes, “The name of slavery, however, as it appears in European ideas, is perhaps, too harsh a name for the mild form, which in most, if not in all, instances obtains in Manipur.” Al-most every nobility and persons of respectable position had several slaves who were engaged as domestic servants or employed as cultivators in their fields. However there is hardly any data about the number of slaves employed in the kingdom. Slavery as found in Manipur are of two types; i) any one who becomes a slave either temporarily or permanently of his own free will, and ii) forced slavery. However, debt was perhaps the most general cause of voluntary slavery. The king’s slaves number around 1,200 to 1,500. But ill-treatment of slaves are not common, they are generally treated as part of the family with whom they reside. Taking a class to mean a group of people who by nature of their role in the production process constitutes a separate category, the eighteenth and nineteenth century Manipuri society can be broadly stratified into the producer and non production class represented by the privileged aristocracy and the peasant respectively. Though the process of Hinduisation and sanskritisation had been continued during the period under study stratification on lines of caste had not become a reality in Manipur. Only, the Hinduised Meiteis had been identi
fied to have belonged to Kshatriya caste of the Hindus, the Brahmins, who were the propagators of the new religion constituted a compact social group. Thus it may be an overstatement to assume that caste system prevailed in Manipur after the conversion of the Meiteis into Hinduism as done by some scholars.\(^{15}\)

**Ideological Practice – Ideology of Kingship:**

The function of ideological practice in every social formation is to ensure that subjects represent to themselves in ideology their conditions of existence thereby ensuring the reproduction of the social formation. Consequently ideology exists in the form of material actions. Ideology is thus a practice with a specific objective of transforming the subjects existing relations to the lived world into a new relations through the process of ideological conflict.\(^{16}\) According to Gramsci, ideologies are not individual fancies but are embodied in collective and communal modes of living and it provides people with rules of practical conduct and moral behaviour.\(^{17}\) But if ideology exists as a practice, then it must have a material basis. Hence, ideology exists in the form of material actions governed by practices and rituals that are inserted into apparatuses, which are always subject to the ideological requirements for the reproduction of the dominant mode of production, to the requirements of the dominant relations of production and ultimately to the ideological forms within which the class or classes that controls the production and distribution of the surplus product
lives its relations to the lived world.\textsuperscript{18}

The Divine Origin of State and Divine Right of Kings is perhaps the oldest theories of the origin of state and of king’s divine right to rule. In medieval social formations the reign of a monarch was legitimised through his birth or genealogy and a particular family’s rule was accepted and approved on the basis of certain concepts and beliefs prevalent about that family. These beliefs are propagated from above and are hegemonic in nature. In such ideologies the monarch was given a divine status. His functions were seen in an inverted form. He himself was viewed as celestial, of divine origin and his functions as instructed by the Divinity. The king was believed to be a representative or incarnate of God who possessed super human power. He was not only seen as guarantor of welfare and protector of his subjects, but also as the guarantor of the fertility and higher returns of land. In other words there was a complete fetishism of the king.

The Meitei kings were believed to have possessed divine status and whose functions were postulated to be ordained by the divinity itself. Thus Pakhangba, the first historical ruler is regarded to have possessed divine powers. He was projected as the incarnate of divine Pakhangba, the serpent God. Likewise Pakhangba has been characterised in three different ways: i) as a man, the unifier of the Meiteis; ii) as a deity, brother of Sanamahi and son of Atiya Sidaba; and iii) as a snake.\textsuperscript{19} Khagemba who is described as one of the greatest kings Manipur had ever produced assumed the title of \textit{Lainingthou
God King) thereby establishing primacy to the concept of divine origin of kingship. Meitei kings are also addressed as Meidingu (Lord of the Meiteis). After the Hinduisation process this title was Hinduised as well. After Hinduism the Meitei kings are regarded as the incarnate of Vishnu and assumed the title of Manipureshwar (Lord of Manipur). This title emphasised the divine origin of the kings. In other words, the Meitei kings could not be equated with ordinary mortals.

This theory of the divine origin of the Meitei kings was the ideology on which not only kings but their family and offsprings were also accepted as fit to be kings. In this way the royal lineage was perpetuated. This idea was coined and propagated to grow into a belief that it was ordained by providence that a particular family or lineage or clan was fit to rule over a particular people. It was carried out through the creation of tradition, ideas and rituals e.g. it was propagated that a man must be of royal blood if he aspired to be a king. In other words, it meant that only a prince or a member of the family could become king. As long as the ideology worked threats to the throne from outside was eliminated. This theory which in course of time become a tradition further laid down that an ordinary person would not be a worthy ruler. It required godly elements in the body to become a king, which were found only in those who had divine ancestry. Such theories had the sanction of the priestly class thereby confirming the solidity of the idea.

There are also other ideas that were part of this theory that were
fostered and which eventually emerged to be a belief were many. Though eventually difficult to trace its development, but by the time of Gour Shyam (1753–1759) in the latter part of eighteenth century that being divine origin the king’s person was to be sacred and perfect, free from any blemish or mark of injury, whether from disease or injury. As Gour Shyam became crippled during an expedition he abdicated the throne in 1759 A. D. in favour of his younger brother prince Bhagyachandra. On the one hand this belief made subjects look upon the kings as truly higher beings as physical proof of the belief and on the other hand the ruling class used it as means of debarring rival claimants to throne by forcefully making them scarred and blemished. Since the king was above his people as a superior beings, he also had great responsibilities towards his subjects. He was to perform certain duties and succeeded in difficult tasks. These tasks were protection of the subjects from external aggressions and internal strifes, natural calamities, organisation of public works, distribution and redistribution of land resources, irrigation facilities and thus ensure the economic prosperity of the community. The Meitei kings carried out these functions through the extension of wet rice cultivation, utilisation of the available manpower for the construction of bunds, dredging works, tanks, roads and supply of scarce goods to the people. In return the subjects, paid him tributes in the form of labour services, tax in kind or cash.

The professed duty of the Meitei kings was to always work for the welfare of the people. At least theoretically, the Meitei kings were
great warriors and had to go to the battlefield to exhibit gallantry to prove it.\textsuperscript{25} The king had to be capable of protecting their subjects from external aggression. Hence, the Meitei kings performed great feats in the construction of the public works, embankments, roads, bridges and granaries were some principal works provided for the benefit of the people. For carrying out such works a huge manpower was necessary. The Meitei kings organised a militia out of the state’s male population. The militia was also employed to reclaim cultivable lands from swamps, marshes and forests. The Meitei kings also arranged distribution of essential commodities for the subjects during natural calamities. It helped to enhance their image as visualised in the prevailing faith by fulfilling important economic functions in addition to the political and legal functions.

The above outlined theory of kingship was actually a reflection of the structural relationship of the monarch vis-a-vis his subjects. The divine attributes of kings postulated, were based on actual functions. In other words, what appeared as heavenly attributes of monarchs were actually merely the effects of his functions in the appropriation, distribution and utilisation of surplus labour.\textsuperscript{26}

Such concepts of kingship act as cementing agent in binding together a bloc of diverse social elements in social unification and was an inextricable part of social formation without which the monarchy could be threatened and the system collapse.\textsuperscript{27} It also helped to continue because the above ideology rendered legitimacy to the regime.
Since ideology played such an important role it had to have the sanction of the community and the vanguards of the religion, i.e. of the priestly class. Hence the monarch was constantly guided by the deities and priests and his tasks to be always expressed through religious symbols and rituals. The pre and post Hinduisation theory of divine origin of Meitei kings, the installation and construction of temples as well as the maintenance of a body of religious functionaries guaranteed the success of this endeavour.

As a result of these theories the kingship was totally fetished. The king's attributes, ancestry and status as a higher being became proverbial in time. Thus the actual relationship between the monarch and village communities appeared in an inverted form and the king was perceived as the guarantor of the welfare of the people. Thus perpetuated by the monarchy and supported by priestly class this ideology came to have an hegemonic effect on the people. The kings attributes and his ordained functions were accepted by the people as long as the king performed his functions.
Notes and References:

3. Bamon Khunthokiol (Ms), Cheitharol Kumbaba records the arrival of Brahmins into Manipur.
7. Ibid., pp. 92–93
10. Ibid., p. 50.
11. Ibid. pp. 63–64.
15. Ibid., pp. 91–92.
21. Cheitharol Kumbaba, p. 34.
22. The term ‘Meidungu’ stands as prefix to the name of all the kings of Manipur. Cheitharol Kumba and Ningthourol Lambuba, op. cit.
25. The pages of Cheitharol Kumbaba and Ningthourol Lambuba contains full of exploits of the Meitei kings.
27. Roger Simon, op. cit., p. 60.