Chapter-IV

Hindu Religion and its impact on Manipuri society and culture
Hindu religion, its impact on Manipuri society:

The British occupation of Manipur in 1891 mark the close of an old era and Manipur entered a new period of her history. Her sovereignty and independence was lost which the state had long maintained and she began to pass under British domination, due to her defeat in the Anglo-Manipur war. The management of the state was characterized by close control of the British government. To carry on the administration of the state during the minority of the Raja Churachand, a new post of superintendent of the state was created, vested with full powers, with due regard for the customs and traditions of the Manipuries. Thus, the Political Agency and the Superintendent of the State became the real head of administration. In fact until the power was transferred to the Raja and his Darbar in 1907 Manipur was under the direct supremacy of the British officers. The Post of the Superintendent of the state was abolished and the political Agent-cum-Agency and Superintendent became Political Agent only. As per the provision of the “Rules for the Management of Manipur” which was introduced in 1907, a Manipur State Darbar of eight members including the Raja was constituted. The Raja presided over the Darbar. The Vice-President of the Darbar was always a British officer, normally of the Indian Civil Service (I.C.S.). The Assistant Superintendent of the state became the Vice-President. It was found out that there were two types of Darbar member- the ordinary member and the additional member. The
ordinary members held charge of departments and were executive heads of departments. However, additional members did not hold any charge, like ministers without portfolio but these additional members had every right to take part in the deliberations of the Darbar including voting. As far as the local sentiments were concerned, the Vice-President of the Darbar used to pay due respects to the Raja, as if he was also one of the Raja’s subjects. The Raja was made to feel big in front of his subjects. Sometimes when the Raja wanted that the matter under discussion in the Darbar might be deferred and the Darbar might assumed sitting in the afternoon, the Vice-President would suggest that the matter in question might be discussed in the morning itself as an afternoon sitting would involved another bath for the Maharaja as the British knew that the local Hindu custom of taking bath for purification after having been in contact with the British “malechha” (foreigner) and they did not mind it or speak badly against it.

Manipur was under the direct supremacy of the British officers as all the transaction of the state was managed by the British government. Maharaja Churachand Singh and the Brahma Sabha of the Palace were utilized by the British Government to exert power to the local people of Manipur. When the administration of the state was made over to Maharaja and his Durbar, the British Government deliberately
encouraged the autocratic attitude of the ruler towards his people. Strongly backed up by the imperial force, the Maharaja had no longer had the desire for the good will of his ruling.

The ancient administrative machineries of the ruling monarchs of Manipur were changed into oppressive forces by Maharaja Churachand Singh. His authority was subject to the schemed for the administration of the state drafted by the British government. The new scheme was provided for the reconstruction of a Durbar composed of the President, Vice-President and other ordinary members elected from among the Manipuris. The Raja was assisted by the Durbar, the President of which being the Raja himself. The Vice-President was an English Indian Civil Officer lent to the state. The other six Manipuris were appointed by the Government of India on the recommendation of the Raja and the Political Agent.

With the imposition of British administration in the state, the government had to face a problem for dealing with the hill tribe. A separate system of administration for the hill areas restored with peace and for the convenience of administration the hill areas were divided into five divisions called *lams*. Each *lam* was placed under the supervision of a Manipuri official called a *lam Subedar* who was again assisted by 7 *Manipuri Lambus* or hill peons.* The chief concern of this administration
in the hill areas was the collection of revenue like house tax of Rs. 3 per house was levied and of house tax at the rate of Rs. 30 per gun for those who own gun. Against this policy, the hill tribes reacted violently as their age-old isolation was broken. The result was that the British rule created a problem which manifests itself into inter-tribal raids or feuds. A strain relation ship was also developed between the plain people and the hill people resulting in the one time brotherhood relationship between the Raja of Manipur and tribal people of the surrounding hills of Manipur was completely cut off. A serious gap of misunderstanding was developed and a growing dichotomy between hill people and plain people was created.

This new administrative system (British colonial ruled) introduced by the colonial authority had cause a widespread dissatisfaction among the people of Manipur. It has brought tremendous changes in every aspect of the life of the state of Manipur. These changes made a serious disturbance in the normal life of the common people. The outbreak of the first women agitation was of 1904 was a turning point in the emergence of new trend of political and national consciousness in the state. It was launched by the women folk

of Manipur as a protest against the injustices of the British authorities to a temporary revival of the *lallup* system (a forced and free labour given by the people of Manipur) that all the people of *Imphal* should extract teak wood from the *Kabow* valley and to rebuild the resident of the Assistant Political Agent, which had been destroyed by fire. They further added more hardship on the common people by introducing a complicated social evil like *Mangba-Sengba* (unclean and clean) and by exploiting their traditional village economy. These were followed by different social movements like *Kuki rebellion* of 1917, *Zeliangrong* movement of 1930 and *Water tax movement*. Maharaja and his family enjoyed the highest status in the social hierarchy of the country. The British officers were fully convinced that the people of Manipur always kept their loyalty to the Maharaja and his family.

Maharaja Churchand Singh had imposed many forms of taxes in the name of religious duties on the unwilling subject of Manipur. This autocratic was severely criticized but the poor people had no guts to fight against the foundation of the royalty which strongly backed up the British paramount. The form of taxes and duties imposed were:-

1) *Kangthouri* (rope tied to the Rath or *Kang* for the *Rath Yatra* festival)- a subscription of half an *Anna* per house was collected from all
Meetei, Nagas and Muhammadans were not liable to pay this subscription.

2) Kangchingba - all Meetei Hindus were liable to attend for Kangchingba (festival of Kang or Rath Yatra of Lord Jagannath) celebration.

3) Lai haraoba (merry making of God and Goddess) - when a Lai Haraoba was performed the sagei (clan) or khul (entire village) on behalf of whose Lai (God) took place should remunerate the Maibasang (hut built for the priest), the Maibisang (hut built for the priestess) and the Pena-Khongbasang (hut built for those person who played traditional musical instrument called Pena) at the rate of Rs. 6 for each, if the ceremony last for several days. If in a year a Khul or a sagei were unable to perform the full ceremony, they had to pay Sangs (hut built for festivals) Rs. 2 to Rs. 4 according to circumstances.

4) Chabok wangol (hut built for giving birth to babies) - a subscription of one pie (3picas) per house was collected from all Meetei Hindus on the occasion of the birth of a child to His Highness the Raja by any offerings in kind and they turn were rewarded by the state.

5) Mera-Haojongba (social gatherings of the hill people and plain people in the month of September/October) - those tribal village which
had been accustomed to appear for Mera Haojongba had to continue to do so. They were to bring the usual trifling offeringods in kind and they in turn were rewarded by the state.

6) Pakhangba-sang-saba (building of hut for the Lord Pakhangba, Meeteis indigenous snake God) -a subscription of one Anna per house was collected from the Ningthouja Salai, when Pakhangba’s house needed repairing or reconstruction.

7) Ram Mela and Sibaratri- the collection of any fees for Ram Mela (festival held in commemoration of Lord Rama) and Sibaratri (worshiping of Lord Shiva) was prohibited from amongst the people but the necessary expenses of the celebration were borne by the state.

8) Phambal Tongba (ceremony held for the coronation of King)- on the occasion of Phambal Tongba, the Khutnaiba (position holders in the Darbar) and all Yumnaks (surnames) had to do the necessary work peculiar to their respective trade by the state. All the 10 pannas had to their share of work but no collection was made in case.

9) Pacha and Napet (person who shave, cut hair and pierce the ear of others) - a yearly contribution of 4 utongs (piece of bamboo used as measuring unit) of dhan was collected from every house in the Manipur valley. The dhan thus collected from people were divided between the Napets and Pachas.
10) Hiyang (making of royal boat)- a subscription of one pie was collected from every Meetei house in Imphal for the construction of Hiyangs for His Highness, the Raja and the Maharani. The Phamnaibas had to build their own pavilions for the construction.

11) Chandan Senkhai- it was not to be levied without the order of the Darbar which fixed the rate from time to time. Every Meetei Hindu had to contribute the chandan senkhai.

12) Mandop Mats - the necessary provision of mats for the building of Mandops (large hall way in front of village temple for the congregation of people at festivals and ceremonies) on any occasion of urgency was abolished and the necessary expenses were borne by the state.

13) Kwakjatra (the marching of the King, the Senapati, and the courtiers riding on the horseback and elephant accompanied with the nobles, the Pena players, the maibas, the maibis and the band men towards the Kwak-sang/hut built for the crow)- the duties incumbent on the Keirosis(person entitle to do the work) on the occasion of the Kwakjatra was to be carried out in future of the state\(^{(1)}\).

Another forced imposition recognized by the Maharaja were the Yairek Sentry in which all the villagers at night by turn on duty guard the money of the clerks and other officers of the state government who came

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\(^{(1)}\) Manipur State Darbar Resolution No.7 of December 1913, as amended by Resolution No. 1of 28\(^{th}\) January 1914.
to distant for their safety in the night. *Yairek Sentry* (duty of night vigil) existed up to 1938 much to the disgust of the village population of Manipur. Peon and *Amin* were fed to their satisfaction by the poor village peasants even when a very low grade *Amin* and *Chowkidar* when on duty in a local village. If they refused to obey, they were declared alleged criminals and they were heavily put in the jail.

*Jal Sambandhi* (taxes imposed on water) violation of this right meant heavy punishment by the Manipur State Darbar. A nominal fee *Sentek* was subscribed from those who wanted to angle. Paddy field where the lake water spread and touched during the monsoon season could be claim by the lake owner and could catch all the available fishes from among the growing *dhan*. The poor peasants were not allowed to pluck *thamchet* (fruit), *thamna* (leaves) and *thambou* (root stalk) of the lotus plant from the lake.

The peasant of Manipur led a miserable life. All the *dhan* produce by the villagers were consumed by the Maharaja, the *Rajkumars*, *Phamnaiba* (courtiers), *Ningthem nubies* (queen and wives of courtiers) and the rich people of the city. More restriction was imposed on the village peasants as they were not allowed to cut weeds from the paddy fields, not allowed to collected dry twigs scattered on the mountain, no peasant could walk in the open with a freshly cut bamboo plant and big
trees growing within the area of the *patta* holder could not be made into boats for private use. A reasonable forest fee was levied by the State Government to loosen the restriction.

A system of tax *Khewa* was levied to pass on an *Urok Thong* (a tiny bamboo bridge). The villagers were suffering much from the unlawful imposition of *Dolaireng* (tax imposed on the local villagers on refusal of carrying of Dolai of the *Phamnaibas* and of Government officials). People had to wade through the muddy road knee-deep. When the villagers wanted to understand a letter or resolution of the Manipur State Darbar they had to come up to Imphal with sufficient fooding and walk a long distance on foot. The Government Peon was carried in *Dolai* from one village to another during the rainy season by the villagers and if they refused to walk through the muddy ditches, they were whipped mercilessly.

The post of the Judge and Magistrates were reserved for the Maharaja’s near relatives. The really educated people were given the post of *Mohurrirs* and low clerks. Many of the cases lodged in the *Cheirap* and *Sadar Panchyat* courts was decided by the unqualified Judges appointed by the Maharaja. The Maharaja himself encourages and demanded *Wakheisel* from the successful party which automatically encourages corruption and bribery in the Law courts. Membership in the
Cheirap and Darbar were offered to the sons and grandsons of the high Phamnaibas, Mayangs (non-Manipuri) and the British officials resigned high in the society. The Mayang coolies, barbers and napets were addressed as Babus by the Manipuris with a respectful salutation of Aap. On the other these foreigners salute the Meetei as Tum only and Manipuris offered a physical salutation by bowing down their heads before British officers (2).

On many occasion, Maharaja Churachand Singh used the Brahma sabha (a congregation of Brahmins) as a weapon to torture his political opponents and to collect unlawful levy from the common people. The Brahmins at that time had a strong hold over the Manipuri society. The whole function of the Sabha was to make a final decision on the complicated religious matter of mangba-sengba case. No ceremony was performed without the guidance of a Brahmin and no important religious or social matter could be settled without referring to the Brahma Sabha. If the Sabha was not offered with money they would not allow cremation and other religious rites. Any criticism on Sabha would lead to a declaration and the man concerned was ostracized and ex-communicated as a mangba (out cast). If death occurred in the family ostracized and ex-communicated family, the death body could not be cremated as was done by a Hindu Vaisnavite.

All the Manipuri subjects had to embrace the Vaisnav religion. They should abandon the ancient traditional Meetei religion. The newly baptized Hindu Vaishnavite was supposed to mark his forehead with tilaka to give evidence of his being real Vaishnavite. The fee of the impression of the tilak, chandan senkhai was levied from every household, fixed at five annas per house. The Sabha appointed Ratans to collect the Chandan senkhai and if any Hindu vaishnavite refused to his subscription of Chandan senkhai he was also declared a person as mangba by the Brahma Sabha. The ostracized people were given chances to purify themselves on the condition of a payment of fees. The affected person had to make a prayer to the Maharaja. The Maharaja passed it over to the Brahma sabha for the final decision. Any Brahmin was competent to carry out the act of redemption. The following was the odd fees imposed to be levied from an excommunicated person if he so wished to purify.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authority</th>
<th>Redemption fee Rs.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>His Highness the Maharaja</td>
<td>Rs. 500.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahma Sabha</td>
<td>Rs. 80.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanakhyya Ahal</td>
<td>Rs. 200.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratans</td>
<td>Rs. 50.(^{(3)})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3) Manimohan singh Karam Hijam Irabot and Political Movements in Manipur, p-38
Members of the Sabha were free to advice the Maharaja the way they liked. After the payment of the prescribed fee a purification ceremony was followed.

The religious impositions on the public by the Brahma Sabha brought a strong feeling of dissatisfaction over the Manipur Government in dealing with the people. Well-to-do Brahmins went round the villages informing people that the Brahma Sabha had declared or would declared them as mangba or outcast. They were offered for a consideration to have the villagers a sengba or purified. Similar methods were used to persuade the villagers to pay Brahmins for the recovery of cattle, which the Brahmin had stolen the cattle. Thus, the Maharaja, the head of the Brahma Sabha caused a loss of confidence in the administration. The Manipur state Darbar was somewhat out of touch with the public share in this loss of confidence (4). The Ratans of the Brahma sabha get earned a lot of money extorted from the victims of the mangba-sengba(unclean and clean) case. They declared ban on the cremation of a death body for two or three days unless the afflicted family could pay off a certain fee to the members of the Brahma Sabha. In marriage function or a Sradha ceremony, the Brahma sabha could make an urgent declaration that the concerned parties of the ceremony had been made outcasts which resulted

4) Administrative Report of Manipur, 1939-40, p-3
to the invitees to flee away from the spot immediately. On such occasion
of the ceremony members of the *Gour dharma Pracharini sabha*
(religious council of the Brahma Sabha) extended help and completed
most of the deserted ceremonies.

As a part of the religious inculcation of the position holders in the
society, the unlawful imposition of *Pothang* or compulsory labour
provided by villagers for the repair of roads, schools and the transport of
officials’ baggage become more serious in tone. This provokes the first
sign of public agitation in the month of April 1937. The other aspects of
public agitation in which a cry for a great social reform showed
manifestation were the unlawful practice of extortion charges made on
the public and the peculiar existence of *mangba-sengba* scandal.

Religious excommunications in Manipur were made by His
Highness the Maharaja on the advice of the Brahma Sabha. During the
eyear parts of 1938, the blackmailing in the *mangba-sengba* swept over
Manipur. Gangs of bullies were quartering in the country demanding
money from the public and threatening those who refused to pay it with
religious excommunication. Thousands of rupees had been squeezed by
these people from the poor and helpless people of Manipur. The Brahma
Sabha could also be asked to declare openly whether the
excommunication of a whole village for a religious irregularity
committed by one or more of its inhabitants was in accordance with the Hindu Law.

The Brahma Sabha had disposed of case curious by nature and unheard of before. The arbitrary action of the Brahma Sabha was found unbearable. The Brahma sabha had in one of their decision resolved in favour of declaring a woman whose identity was known to the public as of Brahmin origin, to have become a Kshetrani. The signatories were excommunicated and later made seedhi (purification). The penalty sequel to the above decision of the Brahma sabha was so great that no Sardha ceremony was solemnized, when death occurred to the Bebasthakari (religious counselor), but contrary to this the Brahma Sabha who had penalized some of their members unexpectedly reversed their opinion, finally upheld the first decision and again declared the woman in question to be a Kshetrani(5) Above this the members of the Brahma Sabha were either penalized with fines or pardoned by the Manipur Sate Darbar for their misuse of powers in dealing with religious question.

An interesting role of the government was the interference in the private life of the common people. It is recorded that if there was a divorce case between husband and wife then they had to pay fine of a sum of Rs. 1

5) Manimohan singh Karam,op.cit.,p-99
to the authority. Majority of the common people was not in the position to give this amount of money to the government. Thus mangba-sengba Problems became one of the most important factors for the widespread dissatisfaction among the people. Ostracized persons or locality could be readmitted in Hindu society after payment of Rs. 80 and 4 annas.\(^6\)

The establishment of the *Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha* on 30\(^{th}\) May, 1934, a socio-cultural organization, under the patronage of the Maharaja of Manipur, was a great significant development in the future political history of the state\(^7\) The organization was established with a basic objective to bring fraternity of the Hindu Manipuri’s of Manipur, British India, Burma and emancipation of the people from social and religious orthodoxy.\(^8\) This religious organization was an instrument of the Maharaja to oppress the and through this organization he tried to consolidate his position. With the help of Brahma Sabha he was able to impress on the ignorant masses that he was an incarnation of *Vishnu* or *Pakhangba*, a Meetei royal deity as the majority of the Manipur valley were Vaishnavite Hindus and the people were under Brahma Sabha in social and religious matters. The objective of the Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha, a social and religious organization was for the upliftment and promotion of the social and religious life of the people. Hijam Irabot Singh, a prominent leader of the Mahasabha specifically mentioned

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6) Ritichand Singh M.,Miyamgi Luchingba Irabot,p-12.  
7) Resolution of the Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha and Manipur Pradarsan.  
8)G.Kabui, Leftish Movement in Manipur; a case study of comrade Hijam Irabot Singh,p-2.
of the organization, to promote social unity for the strengthening of the Meetei nation.\(^{(9)}\) He strongly emphasized the social unity among the same ethnic group. In the fourth session of this organization held at Chinga in south Imphal, this socio-religious organization became a political party and changed its name to Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha. The party adopted a resolution of the establishment of a responsible government in Manipur. A.R.H. MacDonald, President of the Manipur State Darbar took a keen interest in bringing some positive changes in the administration. He was very much against the practice of *mangba-sengba* (unclean and clean ostracism) which was exercised by the Maharaja and the Brahma sabha. He expressed his desire to remove all the social evils from the administration of the state. He proposed the sale of the state’s property in British India, abolition of all grants for the Puja ceremonies and allowances to the temples, reduction in the staff of H.H. the Maharaja’s Palace Office and Revision Court\(^{(10)}\)

The *Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha* was split into two in the year 1939. Hijam Irabot and his party formed a new party *Praja Sanmeloni* with the objective of the abolition of the colonial and feudal administrative system.

\(^{(9)}\) *Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha and Manipur Pradarsini*, p-23  
\(^{(10)}\) *Letter from MacDonald, PMSD to the member of the Darbar, Memo No.2913-18G, DATED 30.3.1939*
Again in 1945 another party was formed at the initiative of Hijam Irabot Singh called as ‘Praja Sangha’ to endeavour for the attainment of independence of Manipur from the hands of the colonial rulers, abolition of the existing feudal system, establishment of responsible government and introduction of adult universal franchise. The party strongly stressed for the establishment of classless society in the state and the injustice made in the name of Hindu religion.

The women of Manipur played a vital role in the cultural and social life of Manipuri. The women of Manipur take a major part in the cultural activities and religious life of the state in which they enjoy maximum independence. Also regarding the economic life of the women of Manipur, their centre of activities was at ‘Sanakeithel’ a major market place located in the heart of the Imphal town, which always served an important venue for social and political interaction. This high status accorded to the women folk is regarded as one of the ‘greatest pride of Manipur’\(^{11}\). The women of Manipur were always ready to fight for justice. They organized a mass agitation movement known as ‘Nupi-Lan’ first in 1904 and again on December 1939, which directly related to the irregularities and malpractices in the administration of this state and the economic exploitation by the authority aided and abetted by the intrigues of the section of colonial exploiters.

\(^{11}\) S.P.Sen (ed) Social and Religious Reform Movement in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century, p-41.
Hindu Religion, its impact on Manipuri Culture:

There was a major transformation in the cultural base with the emergence of Hinduism in Manipur on the performing architecture, songs, music and drama. A new philosophy came along within the contact of a synthesis or assimilation of native literary, legendry and historical materials in which the prevailing culture under went assimilation and projected further in the past-Hindu Traditional performance of Manipur. The Hinduism in Manipur created a deep impact in every aspects of life affecting the rituals, belief system, customs and traditions of the entire Meeteis world view. Hinduism became the state religions and in 18th century amidst much religious and social crises, suppression helping the ideological transformation for a new ritual system to constitute the governing principle of the kingdom. Vaishnav commonly believed Lord Govindajee to posses the real power and the king as his viceroy. It is accepted that “Sri Govindajee” is the king of the land of Manipur. And the king of Manipur takes care of its source- that is four Pana and the Goudiya vaishnava subjects services of the land were divided amongst the Lallup. The services were further divided into two types-the daily rituals by the officials and authorities of the sankirtana by Sebayat and Hari of the Loishang.
The dress of the Manipuris is very colourful. The men folk wear trousers and shirt but the older folk wear the traditional white dhoti and kurta. A small piece with check prints is normally carried on the soldiers to serve as hand towel. Women folks wear the normal blouse and "phanek" and wrap across the shoulder as a saree. Women from well-to-do families wear necklace chain and other ornaments as worn by women in other parts of our country. The men folk and children also wear gold chains.

Manipuris are very religious people. The people express themselves mostly through music, dance and drama. Today the life style of Manipuris is distinct from that of other states of the country. The influence of western culture is on the increase and Manipuris are giving up their age old traditions for the want of free and easy living. The influence of rapid growth of economic development in the state and rising impact of western culture, most of the traditional customs and traditions cultures are on the wane among Manipuris.

Music:

Music of the valley is divided into folk music and classical music.

Folk music included songs known as Khullang ishei, lai haraoba ishei, pena ishei and khongjong parva. Folk song connotes the spontaneous outburst of feeling, love, and imagination, sentiments of the ancestors,
morals and disciplines, beginning from the cradle and ending with funeral songs.

Khullang ishei/ Khunung ishei (Khut means hand, Lang means lend and ishei means song) is folk song par excellent. There is a set of tunes but the singer and the wording may be varied almost without limit to suit mood and taste of the singer or singer and the wording is just fitted in the tunes. It has been the practice of the Meeteis to hire the service of other people at the time of accomplishing the planting of seeding and reaping of crops so that they can attain efficiency in work. Manipuri folk song is varied in form, genre and character. It is the result of the mutual influence of the cultures of the people of this land. In course of time this work song has been changed into a kind of romantic song, in the form of snip-snap between the male and females or between the two persons.

Lai haraouba ishei is a type of song sung in the ceremonies called lai haraouba (merry making of God and Goddess). These songs are full of erotic mysticism. They are accompanied with dances called Laipou chongba, a daily part of Lai haraouba. It is noted that this songs are developed around the themes of delivery and child birth in the empirical level but spiritually on cosmology and cosmogony. Pena ishei or Pena is a class of song sung to the accompaniment of a stringed musical instrument called pena. The theme of this class of music is in most cases
the story of the lovers, *Khamba* and *Thoibi*. It is legend or some charm to ensure the prosperity of the village. The *pena* singer is clad in snow-white dhoti and puts on a turban of the same colour. He puts on bangles and gold earrings. He is clean in his person, his dress and puts on flowers. He is assisted by one or two young learners.

*Khongjom parva* is a song sung to a definite part of an epic like the battle of *khongjom* in which the Manipuris were defeated in 1891 against the British, the heroic struggle of the Manipuris came into existence in the ballad of *khogjom parva*. Some other Historical themes were also set in tunes of *khongjom parva* as Jai Singh’s flight to the court of King Rajeshwar of Assam, Chandrakriti’s meeting with Lord Northbrook, the Governor General of India in 1874, episodes from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the story of *Khamba* and *Thoibi* became popular in their new grab.\(^{12}\)

*Thabal chongba* was of the folk music type. It was tuneful and sung with dholak by young men and women dancing in a ring on the moolit night. The themes were either religious or historical. Songs in Bengali and Brajabuli and not in pure Manipuri form had become attractive item of Meetei culture by 18\(^{th}\) century. Marriage, ear lobing and

scared thread ceremonies are scared purificatory rites which are observed with Bengali kirtan from the lips of professional men or women. Now a days the feelings on separation of the bride from the parental house are composed in modern Manipuri and sung through records. Folk songs and songs of medieval Vaishnava lyrics (pandavali) present a history of mutual influence. They are the precursors of well-known Sanskritan varieties of Manipur. The mode of singing Jayadeva’s Gitagovinda during the Rath Yatra festival is done in Meetei folk tunes and these folk text and tunes were made the base for those of the old Kirtan. Consequently older folk music was affected much in the courts as well as in the valley.

Krishna culture became quite prominent in the valley of Manipur through Govdiya vaishnavism. The vaishnav scholars opined that singing of kirtans was introduced while offering prayer and arati to the lord. The scholars stressed the immense popularity of kirtans by the people that gave an impetus to the birth of “Nata”*. It is used in all ceremonies as the piercing of the ears, the investiture of the sacred thread, marriage, sardha etc. and the festivals like Jhulon yatra, Durga puja and Manipuri Ras dances. The star singer is assisted by a team including two drummers called one pala.

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* Nata in Sanskrit means a dancer or an actor.
He puts vaishnava sect marks on his face and eleven other places on his body. He is clad in a dhoti, puts in a turban on his head and a sheet of clothe is tied round his waist. He uses a pair of cymbal called kartal fitted with purple or yellow strapes. There is good team work in a pala. The leader of the group is called duhar. The drummer dressed like the rest of the team. They get the chances to express the audience with their skill in percussion and their spectacular virile drum dances.

In Nata, the music is begun with one of the six ragas. A raga is a series of musical tones rigidly fixed in a particular order. Each raga is believed to produce its own effect. Correct rendering of Shri Raga, is believed to confer prosperity and is suitable for ceremonies like marriage. Selection of a suitable raga for the occasion calls for good taste and maturity of judgment. When the raga finished, it is to the time to sing of the glory of Chaitanya, to whose school of vaishnavism the Manipuri Hindus belongs. There are a large number of songs dedicated to his glory called “Gour pads*. After the Gour pads, they sing the glory of Krishna and his exploits in Vrindavan. Lastly is the prayer for except the desire to serve His feet in tens of millions of rebirths. Gulab singh, Ibomacha sharma (better known as Abhiram) and Kalidoman singh are among the leading nat singers*(13)

*The word Gour in Gour pads is an abbreviation of Gouranga, other name of Chaitanya and pads is colloquialism for pada, a line or lines in a poem or song.

13) R.K.Jhalajit Singh,ibid.p-63
Sankritana Vaishnav strota, Vishnu Saahsnavm and Das Avatara kritans are composed in Sanskrit. Kritans took up many features of the state, accompanied by its original songs, beats rhythms and languages. The Manipuri Nata Sankritana had incorporated the Pandavalis composed by the local Gurus. As such the Bengal kritan was transformed to a new form of Manipuri kritans and its lyrics were from the Mahajan Pandavali composed by the vaishnavite poets. During the days of Garabniwaz in the early 18th century, establishment of temple of Ramji Prabhu where the idol of Rama was worshiped gave birth to the ritual performance of the Ariba pala or Bangdesh pala which later refined to sankirtana of today. The Ariba pala retained its pristine ritual, tradition of music and dance through Rama worship, transformed itself with the introduction of proper Vaishnav text based on the worship of Lord Krishna under the personal vision and experience of Gourachandra or Chaitanya. The choral singing reached its highest aesthetic standard with the amalgamation of the physical expression of the native performer, the synthesized philosophy of Meetei Vaishnava and more sophisticated utilization of drums and cymbals as developed from the Ariba pala.

Nata sankritana became a compulsory prologue or purvaranga. It assumed a fundamental as with the presentation of the Raas Leela, was
separately introduced in the rites of passages of devout worshippers of Vaishnav religion in the late 19th century. It also became a genre of presentational programmers during the commercial era in the colonial Manipur. *Nata sankritana* of Goudiya Vaishnavism is the form of worship. The vaishnav architects trace its origin to the aesthetic and philosophy of *Shrimad Bhagavata*. It is considered as a *mahayagya* (complete sacrifice). The essence of *Nata sankritana* is *bhakti* (devotion) and the whole performance is *bhakti* oriented. It is the depiction of the “*Madhur prem rasa*” (transcendent love) of Radha Krishna.\(^\text{14}\) In the Goudiya vaishnav philosophy the Lord and his followers are in separable. The promotion of Raas Leela was extensively due to the zeal and enthusiasm of the court, masses and its in separable relation with the socio-religious life of the peoples.

*Dhob* is sung with a kind of large thin cymbals called *jhal*. It is accompanied with the beating of drums in the Manipuri style. *Dhab* singers wore a kind of shirt called *bagal bandhi*, very thin and spotlessly white. The singers use smaller turbans. The *Dhob* singer described how the *sanatan*, a minister of Hussain Shah, escaped from his prison and became Chaitanya’s disciple. In tune, *dhob* songs are intermediate between *nat* songs and *manahar sai*.

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14) Rangitabali Waikhom, A historical study of Traditional Manipuri theatre (from ancient times to 1947), Department of History, 2004, p-100.
Manohar sai is sung with a kind of small cymbals called ram kartal and a drum called khol. The Manohar sai singer does not use any turban. Its tunes originated in the Manohar sai Pragana in the district of Burdwan in Bengal. Its tunes sound like a cry from the innermost recesses of the devotee’s heart in his yearning for God and bring tears to the eye of the hearers by appealing to his finer sentiments.

Among the songs sung by women, it may be mentioned of nupi pala, nupi khubak ishei, ras and rasheshwari. Nupi pala literally means a women’s team of singers. In it the songs are begun with a series of tones softer and less elaborate than those of raga. There is no special costume for the nupi pala. She holds a pair of little cymbals called mandira fitted with crimson straps. A chaperon accompanies her at night. It is sung during Jhulon Yatra and Durga puja.

Khubak ishei * is a combination of khubak and ishei or music sung to the accompaniment of the clapping of hands. It is sung either by men or women but not jointly. It is sung in a vigorous tandav style and has an appeal of its own. Khubak ishei is mostly sung standing unlike nupi pala.**

* Khubak means palm and ishei means music.
** Nupi means women and Nupa means men
appeal of its own. Khubak ishei is mostly sung standing unlike nupi pala.**
Dance:

Dances may be discussed under two heads: folk and classical dances. In the folk dances, we have the *thabal chongba* and *lai haraouba* dance. *Thabal chongba* dance is a beautiful form of dance, dancing in the moonlight. It was held at night of the fullmoon of *lamda* (February-March) and last during the next five days. Young boys and girls clean in person and in clothes, danced in the spacious courtyards of nobles and rich or the village greens, in a ring in the moonlight singing sweet songs.

*Lai haraouba* dances form a group of graceful movements performed to please the gods. These dances are accompanied with *lai haraouba* songs, *pena* and the drums. Manipuri has been called the youngest amongst the classical dance styles of India. The evolution of its distinct form was of a mutual interaction between the earlier ritualistic dances and the vaishnava bhakti cult. Today Manipuri dancing is the richest manifestation of the vaishnavite tradition. With the advent of Vaishnava, a new structure called *Mandaps* (big hall way in front of temple), where vaishnava devotional singing (kirtan) replaced the earlier practices at the shrines (*Umanglai*). Meetei community singing and *Maibee* (priestess) dance gradually took the shape of the Kirtans and the *cholams* of vaishnavite tradition.
Manipuri ras is a dance-drama on the theme of Krishna’s play with gopis of Vrindavan. Manipuri ras has four of its kind: *Vasanta ras, Kunja ras, Maha ras* and *Nata ras*.

*Vasanta ras* is played in the spring on the full moon of *sajibu* (April). The dance is performed at the temple of Govindajee and after it, it could be performed anywhere else. It is mainly based on the beautiful Sanskrit lyric *Geet Govinda* of *Jaya Deva*.

*Kunja ras* is played in autumn on the full moon of *Mera* (October). It is based on the Bhagavat.

*Maha ras* is based on the five chapters of *Ras Panchdhyai* in the tenth Book of the *Bhagavat*. *Maha ras* is a really beautiful dance-drama from the stand point of art. The glittering costumes of the milk maids and Krishna in a pleasing colour combination look very beautiful in the artificial light in the *mandap* or the stage. The tuneful accompanying music narrates the story. The movements of the fingers and hands speak a language of their own. It is performed in late autumn.

*Nata ras* is based not based on any specific scripture. The plot differs materially from that given in the *Bhagavat* or *Geet Govinda*. The styles of the dance are the same. It may be played at any time of the year, there is no restriction but it is not played in the temple of Govindajee.
There is a popular dance opera called *Sanjenba* which literally means tending the cattle. It is about Krishna’s tending cattle in the groves of Vrindavan and is in the tenth book of Bhagavat. It is essentially a dance-opera of young boys.

*Gour Lila* is an opera based on the episodes from the life of *Chaitanya* and his companion *Nityananda*. The whole opera is performed in a religious atmosphere and participants join it as an act of piety.

*Shumang Lila* * is the dramatic performances with proper acting make-up and costume. The courtyard is the usual place where it is performed. In it women’s role are played almost invariably by young men. The young men more women like than real women with their skilful make-up, art and acting. The most successful *Shumang lilas* or plays were of *HarisChandra, Moirang Parva, Chandrahas, Chandrajini* and *Thog lila*. The play *Chandrajini* is based on the story of chandrajini found only in the Manipuri version of the *Lanka Canto* of the Ramayana. It is a skilful *Thog lila* was a type by itself. *Thog* means a professional swindler and the story began with the exploits of a cheat. Humor was the stock-in-trade of the actors in *Thog lila*. They were rewarded with peals of laughter from the spectators.

* Shumang means courtyard and lila means drama.
** Warilibas means professional story tellers.
   interpolation by Manipuri warilibas.**
There was no abatement in the people’s deep religiosity so much that they voluntarily subscribed to Chandan Senkhai to a Brahmin agent from Holy Nabadwip specially assigned to distribute pieces of scared earth to devout vaishnavas. The practice was symbolic that the people showed their faith ful loyalty to the religious heads and it was carried out with the sanction of the King.

The people were ecstatic in the singing of sankirtana and enactment of they Ras lila did not feel so much concerned with the written literature. A few sampling in the form of textbook for primary and lower classes, a few poems and moral essays did sprout. However in those famished days, the publication of Makar Singh’s Manipuri Primer and Munal singh’s second primer in Bengali script in 1910-11, with poetic rhythms, bountiful pleasant anecdotes and savory local proverbs turned out manna to the parched souls. Both the writers hailed from Cachar and were among the bunch of teachers invited and employed by the new administration. The educated few quenched their thirst with Vaishnava Pandavalis, Bankimchandra, Saratchandra, Kaliprasanna Ghosh, Rabindranath Tagore etc. in Bengali and Shakespeare, Romantic poets, Walter Scott, Tennyson, Macaulay etc. in English. All this re-oriented their outlook and forged a new sensibility thereby setting a seal on their break with the past.
A few Sanskrit and decent Bengali words during social gatherings or confabulations showed the water mark of one’s status.

During the first decade of the century some Bengali gentlemen of the Babupara area moved in to the Political Agent of Manipur to establish a school, a club and a cultural hall for the Bengali community of Manipur. With a meager amount of fund a cultural Hall was established under the name of *Manipur Friend’s Dramatic Union* in 1905. All the plays performed in this theatre were made in the Bengali version among which some of the prominent plays were *Rijiya, Bangebarjee, Pandab-Kaurab, Jayadeva, Ranee Durgabatee, Anudhajer Hari Sadh, Seeta, Karna-Arjun, Prithiraj Samjukta* etc. Some Manipuri artists like Irabot acted as the female character of *Rupmatee*, Thanil played the character of Gulam Hussain in *Bangebarjee*, in the *Rijiya* play Mayurdhaja took the main role. But by 1910, the dramatic performance in the Bengali and Manipuri dialects became popular and every year during the Saraswati Puja ceremony, plays were performed in the Johnstone School. The Manipur State Education Department also shared their keen interest in staging plays. Although few plays had already been staged in various parts of the capital, they still remained a stereotype version of the Bengali theatre in script, dialogue, gesture and acting and this provoked a sense of dissatisfaction to the Maharaja and he longed to see a perfect original Manipuri play.
In 1928 another theatre called the *Yaiskul Nupimacha School Drama Party*, initiated by Ngangbam Shyamkirshore Singh, a cheirap Member, came into existence in Manipur. For the first time in Manipur during the Holi festival, Sorokhaibam Lalit Singh's script of *Satee Khongnang* was staged. After a successful performance of *Satee Khongnang*, some members of the Drama party had collectively agreed to establish a theatre under the name of Manipuri Drama Union on 17th April 1930, at Shyamkishore Singh's residence. The first regular society of amateur actors was formed about the year 1931 under the name *Meitei Dramatic Union* and Lalit's second script *Areppa Marup* was staged in ticket system but it was renamed as the *Manipur Dramatic Union* (M.D.U) in 1937. A costly out house was turned into a theatre at the residence of Shri Shyamkishor Singh, a judicial officer of the state and the brother of the Maharani. M.D.U. began to stage social and historical plays. The year from 1942 to 1946 saw a boom of dramas. Theatres grew up like mushrooms. Most of the plays were original writings and some of them were translated from Bengali and Sanskrit. M.D.U's *Shankuntala* is the translation from the immortal *Kalidas*'s drama. Among the famous playwrights, it may be mention of G.C. Tongbra, Ramavharan and Birmangol. Manipur State Kala Akademy looks after the improvement of the fine arts particularly of music, drama, dance and literature.