A Brief History of the Vaishnava Movement:

The Beginning of the Vaishnava Movement: Although Vaishnavism became the dominant religion of the Meiteis since the beginning of the eighteenth century, the advent of this religion, however vague it might be, was felt much earlier. The records, traditions and other evidences undoubtedly confirm that the worship of Vishnu was started as early as the fifteenth century during the reign of King Kiyāmbā (1467-1508 A.D.). In 1470 A.D. King Kiyāmbā, with his Pong counterpart Choupha Khek-Khombā invaded and conquered the Kabo-Kyāng (the Khumbat principality) now in Burma.  

1. Captain Pemberton, based on a Shan chronicle, describes the events that led to the destruction of Khumbat and its subsequent annexation by King Kiyāmbā on account of the abduction of the Meitei bride meant for the Pong king by the chief of Khumbat.  

2. Following this event, Kiyāmbā and the Pong king made a treaty of friendship and alliance

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wherein gifts were exchanged. Among the gifts presented to Kiyāmbā by the Pong king were a betal carrier vessel made of gold and a stone figurine of Vishnu. King Kiyāmbā took much fancy to that figurine though he was totally ignorant of its identity.

There is a story in the Manipuri Vishnu Purānā which tells us how King Kiyāmbā began to worship Vishnu. One day, King Kiyāmbā felt an irritating sensation on his person and without any scrupple in his mind he scratched his body with the stone figurine. To his great astonishment, the irritation grew up and turned into itches. On a subsequent night the king had a strange dream wherein the figurine appeared and revealed to the king that he was a lālī (god) and that should the king desire to get himself cured of his recent illness, he should worship him by requisitioning the services of a Mayāng (indicating the Brahman) who was working as a grazier in the king's elephant shed. The Brahman was immediately summoned. He appeared before the king trembling and pleading for his life. Showing the figurine and assuring that nothing untoward would happen to him, King Kiyāmbā asked him what the figurine was. The Brahman who at once recognised the figurine told the king that it was the image of Vishnu and that it should be worshipped with offerings of rice cooked in milk with tulshi leaves. The king

then entrusted the Brahman with the worship of the image.

The well-conversed Brahman began to worship the image with usual rituals and offerings. Being impressed, Kiyāmbā built a brick temple at Lammāngdong the old capital of Manipur lying about 38 kilometres to the south of Imphal. The said image of Vishnu was then installed in it. The old capital of Lammāngdong is still known as Vishnupur probably since the time of Kiyāmbā when the worship of Vishnu was first started there. The masonry temple built by Kiyāmbā still stands at the said place. It has now become a protected monument. The image of Vishnu is now housed in the temple of Govindaji at the palace of the Maharaja.

Thus, the worship of Vishnu was first started in the time of Kiyāmbā with his support and encouragement. But the king was not formally initiated into Vaishnavism. There was also no evidence of conversion of any section of people into Vaishnavism. The worship was thus probably confined mostly to the Brahman as well as the non-Brahman immigrants from the rest of India. It may be mentioned that in Kiyāmbā's time many Brahmins came to Manipur. The

arrival of these Brahmans was recorded in Bamon Khunthoklon, the book on the migration of Brahmans into Manipur. The forefathers of the present Brahman families bearing the surnames, viz., Adhikārimayum, Sija Gurumayum, Leihāothābam, Takhenchangbam and Phurāilātpam came and settled in Manipur during the time of Kiyāmbā. Bamon Khunthoklon records the flow of these immigrants till the nineteenth century. It was mainly these immigrants from the rest of India that accelerated the rapid growth of Hinduism in Manipur.

The worship of Vishnu, started during the reign of Kiyāmbā, was continued by his successors and since then it never lacked royal support and patronage. In fact the image presented by the Pong king has come down to the generations of kings as a much esteemed heirloom. The cult of Vishnu was so strong among the generations of kings of Manipur that it became customary to keep the image of Vishnu by the reigning monarch. Whenever a king went out, the image of Vishnu carried by a Brahman on the back of a white horse always went ahead of him. There was also a tradition in which the image of Vishnu indirectly participated in the royal boat-races. About the exact point of time when these traditions began, we have no clear and definite evidences. But both these traditions were in existence till the last days of monarchy in Manipur.
Though Vaishnavism entered Manipur fairly early it could not, however, gain a foothold among the masses till the beginning of the eighteenth century. Since then Vaishnavism had become the dominant religion of the Meiteis. The first Meitei king who was directly under its spell and got himself formally initiated into Vaishnavism was Charāi-Rongbā (1697-1707). As in the time of his predecessors many Brahmans also came and settled in Manipur during the reign of Charāi-Rongbā. They were the forefathers of the present Brahman families of Guru-Aribam, Lāimayum, Lāipubam, Hangoibam, Manoharmayum, Mathurābāshimayum, Choudhurimayum, and Hāzārimayum. Among the Brahman immigrants there was a Brahman named Rai Vanamāli.8 The said Brahman arrived in Mērā (September/October) 1703 A.D. from Shveta Ganga, Puri, along with his wife and several other companions.9 Charāi-Rongbā was much impressed by the talk of that Brahman on the cult of Radha-Krishna. Thus in the following year on Wednesday, the fifth day of the month of Sajibu (March/April) 1704 A.D., Charāi-Rongbā took the sacred thread after a day's fasting.10 Since Rai Vanamāli was the guru of the king, his descendants came to be known as the Guru-Aribams (aribā=old).

8. Bamon Meihoubaron Yumjiangba (MS).
10. Ibungohal and Khelchandra, op. cit., p. 56.
After his formal initiation into Vaishnavism, Charāi-Rongbā began to worship the images of Radha and Krishna. These images, carved out of wood under the name of Rasheswari and Madanmohon, still exist in tact and are worshipped in the temple dedicated by late W. Yumjao Singh at Sagolband. Charāi-Rongbā also built a brick temple of Radha-Krishna at Brahmapur Guru-Aribam Leikai for his guru. The said temple is still existing in good condition and the images made of metal once worshipped by Vanamāli is still worshipped by his descendants, the Guru-Aribam Brahmans.

While Charāi-Rongbā's formal initiation into Vaishnavism was an undisputed fact, there are, however, different versions rendered by different scholars as to the particular denomination of Vaishnavism into which he was initiated. The state chronicle, however, is silent on these points.

According to some scholars Charāi-Rongbā was a follower of the Madhavacharya sect of Vaishnavism. H. Bijoy Singh is of the opinion that the king and some other people were initiated into the Madhavacharya sect of Vaishnavism. 11 L. Ibungohal Singh, however, holds that Charāi-Rongbā was first a follower of Vishnuswami sect of Vaishnavism. Then he changed his faith to the Madhavacharya sect. 12

Some others, however, hold that Charai-Rongba was a follower of the Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism. Jhalajit Singh is of the opinion that King Charai-Rongba was initiated into the Chaitanya sect of Vaishnavism which he followed throughout his life. Dr Parrat also opines that the school of Vaishnavism to which Charai-Rongba was initiated was likely to be the Vaishnavism of the Chaitanya sect.

There is still another view which holds that Charai-Rongba adopted the Nimbarka sect of Vaishnavism. R.K. Sanahal Singh believes that a Brahman having the same name as the sect’s founder spread the Nimandi cult in Manipur during the reign of Charai-Rongba.

Now it is pertinent to see which of the three versions is the more accurate one. In the absence of any definite evidence, it is now difficult to ascertain the particular sect to which the king was initiated. The state chronicle, Cheitharol Kumbaba which confirms the date of the king’s initiation does not make any reference as to which sect he belonged. It is, however, clear as mentioned above that Charai-Rongba was a worshipper of both Radha and Krishna. But the Madhavacharya school of Vaishnavism

worships Sri Krishna as the supreme deity to the exclusion of Radha.  

It is, therefore, unlikely that Charai-Rongbā followed the Madhavacharya sect of Vaishnavism.

The Madhavacharya sect being out of the reckoning, it remains to be seen whether Charai-Rongbā adopted the Chaitanya or Nimbarka sect. But both of these two sects are propounders of the Radha-Krishna cult. This fundamental similarity between the two sects makes it all the more difficult to determine which of the two sects the king followed. It has already been mentioned that the images of Radha and Krishna once worshipped by Charai-Rongbā and the temple he built for his guru are still standing at Brahmapur. But from these archaeological evidences, it is not possible to come to any definite conclusion about/particular sect the king followed.

Other evidences, however, indicate that Charai-Rongbā was a follower of the Chaitanya sect. Some writers like U. Yumjao Singh believed that the Chaitanya (Gaudiya) system was introduced in Manipur only in the time of King Jai Singh. But this view is not convincing.

18. Yumjao, op. cit. p. 49.
References to the existence of Gaudiya Vaishnavism before
the time of King Jai Singh as found in the royal chronicle,
Cheitharol Kumbaba \(^{17}\) and also the initiation of Garibneuaz
to the Gaudiya Vaishnavism before he became a Ramandi as
found in manuscripts like Miyēt, Garibneuaz Laiming Loubā,
etc., definitely prove that the Gaudiya Vaishnavism began
to develop much earlier than Jai Singh's days though the
system was fully developed and attained the status of the
state religion only since the time of Jai Singh. Further
the saṃkirtana of Bengal Vaishnavism became very signi­
ficant and remains prominent in Manipur till the present
day. According to most Manipuri authorities in this field,
the saṃkirtana tradition began to develop since the time of
King Charāi−Rongbā. According to Atoombapu Sharma, the
saṃkirtana of the Chaitanya school of Bengal was first
introduced in Manipur by Charāi−Rongbā. It was further
developed by his son Garibneuaz. But in Jai Singh's hands
the development reached its zenith and since then it has
been firmly established in Manipur. \(^{20}\) M. Chandra Singh, the
Pandit Achouba also subscribes to the same view when he says
that the saṃkirtana tradition was first introduced in the
time of Charāi−Rongbā. \(^{21}\) It is, therefore, very likely that

\(^{17}\) Ibungohal and Khelchandra, op. cit., p. 116.

\(^{20}\) Sharma, Atoombapu, Meitei ḍi Samkirtana Mahayajna,
Imphal, 1157, p. 11.

\(^{21}\) Singh, Chandra, M.: "Manipuri Jagoi Isheida Meitei ḍi Top
Charāi-Rongbā's initiation in 1704 A.D. was the Vaishnavism of the Chaitanya sect.

Though the king was initiated into Vaishnavism no attempt was made to impose it among the masses. There was also no evidence of religious persecution in his time. Besides Vaishnavism, other forms of Hinduism such as Saivism and Saktism also existed in Manipur. From the entries made in the state chronicle, it seems certain that Charāi-Rongbā patronised the worship of Dūrgā, locally known as Kālikā. After his taking of the sacred thread Charāi-Rongbā built two temples of Kālikā, one in 1706 and another in 1707 and at the same time he also constructed the temple of Vishnu.22

While Charāi-Rongbā had his leanings towards the Hindu mode of worship, he did not at the same time neglect the traditional religion. This was evident from his commitments towards the worship of traditional gods and goddesses. Within a few months after his initiation, he dedicated a temple and a market respectively in honour of God Lāiūā Hāibā (Sanāmahī) and Goddess Pānthaobi. Again in 1708 A.D. Goddess Pānthaobi was honoured with festivities and in the following year barely two months before his death Charāi-Rongbā dedicated another temple to Lāiūā Hāibā.23

23. Ibid., p. 60.
Further allusions in the state chronicle indicate that the king did not abandon the old Meitei customs and practices (burial, dietary habits, etc.), nor was there any attempt to follow the corresponding Hindu practices. Thus till the reign of Charāi-Rongbā, in spite of the apparent royal support and patronage, Hinduism was still in its infancy and the old faith dominated the religious life of the king and the people.

Elevation of Vaishnavism to the Status of State Religion: Charāi-Rongbā died in 1709 A.D. In the same year his son Pamheiba popularly known as Garibnewāz ascended the throne of Manipur. By all accounts Garibnewāz was the greatest and most powerful ruler Manipur had ever known. Great as he was as a conqueror and an administrator, he was no less energetic in effecting a religious reformation within the country. Throughout his long reign of about 40 years, he pursued a career of conquest and under him the political fortune of the country reached its zenith. His victorious military exploits extended not only to the petty neighbouring kingdoms but as far as the imperial city of Ava. In the field of religion he elevated Hinduism to the status of the state religion of Manipur thereby rudely suppressing the age-old indigenous religion and culture. T.C. Hodoson says, "To the royal will of Pamheiba the monarch in whose reign the fortunes of the state reached their zenith,
Hinduism owes its present position as the official religion of the state."  

Whatever the merits and demerits of his fanaticism for the Hindu faith, Garibnewāz's religious activities paved the way to the rapid cultural integration of Manipur with the rest of India.

Following the footsteps of his father, Garibnewāz, while extending support and patronage to the Hindu mode of worship, was himself committed more to the cause of the indigenous faith till he was initiated into Vaishnavism. During the span of about eight years from his assumption of the throne till his initiation into Vaishnavism there was not more than a single instance (construction of a temple for Kālikā in 1715 A.D.) of the king's commitment to the cause of Hinduism. But during the said period, the indigenous gods especially God Lāiwa Hāibā were worshipped frequently. In 1710 A.D. a stone was erected at Leishāngkhong in honour of Lāiwa Hāibā and in the following year a temple was also constructed for the lāi. In 1715 A.D. a tank was dedicated to Lāiwa Haiba at Leishāngkhong. Again in 1717 A.D., just a few months before his initiation to Vaishnavism, a girl named Khonu, a younger sister of Sija was married to Lāiwa Hāibā.  

Garibneuāz's conversion into Vaishnavism, eight years after he ascended the throne, marked the beginning of the consolidation of Hinduism in Manipur. According to Cheitharol Kumbaba, Garibneuāz took the sacred thread from Guru Gopāl-Dās in the month of Mera (September/October) 1717 A.D. Some other important personages of the kingdom were also initiated into the new faith along with him. According to Sanāmahi Lāikan, Garibneuāz was initiated into the Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism. Jhalajit Singh also subscribes to the same view. In Miyāt, we find an interesting account as to how King Garibneuāz was initiated into the Gaudiya (Chaitanya) Vaishnavism. Sagol Makok was an influential courtier in the court of Garibneuāz. He kept a Sudra at his residence using him as a grazier for his horses. The able courtier was, however, charmed by the Sudra's discourses on the Hari-nama-mahamantra. Subsequently he got himself initiated under the Sudra. Hearing the news, Garibneuāz also expressed his desire to initiate himself under the Sudra. But the latter by virtue of his low birth pleaded his inability to initiate the king. At the suggestion of the Sudra, a Brahman who had already been in Manipur was selected to conduct the initiation ceremony of the king.

Garibnewāz was thus initiated into the Gaudiya sect of Vaishnavism. The grazier Brahman who became the guru of the king was given the title of Dhamandi Guru. Though the name of the Brahman was not mentioned in Miyāt, he was probably no other person than Guru Gopal-Dās himself. Guru Gopal-Dās left Manipur in 1720 A.D., about three years after giving the sacred thread to the king.

Till the departure of Guru Gopal-Dās, Garibnewāz seems to have followed the religious policy adopted by his father. Hinduism and the traditional Meitei religion co-existed and flourished side by side. There was no instance of religious persecution nor was there any forcible imposition of a particular faith in favour of another.

But the departure of the said guru was synchronised with the rise of another sect of Vaishnavism, viz., the Ramandi school which displaced the Chaitanya schooling to which the king was initiated earlier. The rise of the new faith also marked the beginning of forcible Hinduisation and other suppressive measures carried out to eradicate the indigenous faith. The Ramandi sect was preached by a very powerful missionary called Shānti-Dās Goshāi who wielded not only the spiritual but also political power in the court of Garibnewāz.

29. Miyāt (MS).
Shānti-Dās was generally known as Mahāpurus, a title no other missionary in the entire Vaishnava history of Manipur ever enjoyed. He arrived in Manipur in 1716 A.D. from Narsing Tilla, Akhra, Sylhet along with his two disciples, Bhagawān-Dās and Narāyan-Dās. The preacher was lodged at the Ningthou Shenbā Yāreksang, a place meant for the royal attendents. Shānti-Dās persuaded the king to accept the Ramandi Vaishnavism which propounded the worship of Sri Rama as the highest form of religion. Garitnewāz at first showed little inclination towards the form of Vaishnavism preached by Shānti-Dās, but the latter succeeded in winning the heart of the king by his clever persuasive manner. While taking much care not to offend the feelings of the king, Shānti-Dās is said to have argued that the Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism to which the king had already been initiated was a very fine form of religion but the masses would not be able to follow the teachings of Chaitanya which were too good for the world. Thus the clever missionary convinced the king to accept Sri Rama as the highest God to whom alone worship is to be made.

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Manipur in about 1728 A.D. and converted the king into the Ramandi sect of Vaishnavism in 1737 A.D. We cannot, however, accept their versions since we have definite evidences which undoubtedly confirmed the presence of Shānti-Dās much earlier than the date mentioned by them. We have already referred to the arrival of Shānti-Dās in 1716 A.D. Since his arrival he began to influence the king for the forcible Hinduisation of the kingdom. In 1722 A.D., Garibnewāz, at the instance of Guru Shānti-Dās, proclaimed decrees forbidding the eating of meat and the keeping of poultry and unclean animals like pigs. Those who failed to comply with the decree were severely punished. At the same time strong measures were also taken up to abandon and destroy the images and temples of indigenous gods and goddesses. The state chronicle recorded that in 1723 A.D., Garibnewāz demolished the temples of nine umanglāis and two lammābis and abandoned them. The chronicle further recorded that in 1724 A.D. Garibnewāz introduced the Hindu system of cremation and also exhumed the bones of his forefathers and cremated them on the bank of the river Chindwin, which at that time flows through Manipur.

35. Ibid., p. 72.
36. Ibid., pp. 73-74.
According to Miyāt, Shānti-Dās demanded strict observance of the said Hindu custom of cremation as one of the pre-conditions of the kings taking of the sacred thread from him. The king also pronounced decrees to the effect that those who disobeyed to observe the Hindu mode of cremation would be punished with mutilation and disfigurement.

Being a devout Ramaita, Garibnewāz started the worshipping of Sri Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, etc. In 1725 A.D. he dug out a big tank at Jāngkhāl Luikāi. The images of Krishna and Kālikā were then shifted on the bank of the tank. These images, worshipped earlier by him, were probably shifted from the palace when Garibnewāz changed his faith to the Ramandi Vaishnavism. The images of Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, etc., once worshipped by Garibnewāz are now worshipped by the side of the tank. These images might also have been shifted from the palace by King Jāi Singh when he again reverted to the Gaudiya Vaishnavism.

Besides the worship of Sri Rama, Garibnewāz also worshipped Hanuman by erecting a temple for him at Mongbā Hanbā. The image of Hanuman was carved out of a big slab of stone which stood at the Sānā Keithel. The image once worshipped by Garibnewāz is still worshipped at the same site and thousands of devotees of Radha-Krishna cult

37. Ibid., p. 75.
38. Ibid., p. 77.
visit the temple.

Though Garibnewāz was a devout Ramaite and did much to spread the new faith under the guidance of Shānti-Dās, his formal initiation to the Ramandi Vaishnavism took place only by the end of 1729 A.D. In the month of Wakching (December/January) 1729 A.D., on Wednesday, the king and the guru immersed at the river at Lilong and on the same day the Mahāpursus invested the king with the sacred thread.39 Thus Garibnewāz was initiated into the Ramandi Vaishnavism under Guru Shānti-Dās. This, however, was not the only occasion on which Garibnewāz took the sacred thread from Guru Shānti-Dās. In 1737 A.D. also Garibnewāz along with the seven salāis took the sacred thread and after receiving it, each of the seven salāis was given Brahmanical Gotras by Guru Shānti-Dās.40 Thus the repetition of such acts does not imply that the king was initiated into a different sect. Probably, this taking of sacred thread was a part of the ceremony for assigning the Gotras.

These accounts and records definitely suggest that even before his initiation into the Ramandi Vaishnavism in 1729 A.D. Garibnewāz, under the influence of Shānti-Dās, had already started his programme of Hinduisation of the kingdom. But the people led by Khongnāngthābā, the

39. Ibid., p. 78.
40. Sangai-Phammang,(MS).
protagonist of the old faith opposed the movement tooth and nail. However, the royal will of Garibnewāz was too strong to resist. The gravity of the king's suppressive attitude towards the indigenous religion is clearly revealed in the following words of Hodson: "Religious dissent was treated with the same ruthless severity as was meted out to political opponents and wholesale banishment and execution drove the people into acceptance of the tenets of Hinduism." Thus under his rule Hinduism (Ramandi Vaishnavism) was elevated to the status of the state religion of Manipur.

With the death of Garibnewāz, the political fortune of the country as well as the religion he adopted (the Ramandi Vaishnavism) declined. His immediate successors till the time of Jai Singh could not make any religious reforms. Jai Singh became the king of Manipur in 1763 A.D. after the death of his brother Gourashyam. By that time Manipur was already weakened by the death of Garibnewāz as well as by the disunity and rivalry among his successors.

41. Hodson, op. cit., p. 85.

42. Certain references as found in Cheitharol Kumbaba regarding the punishments given to the followers of Ramandi by Garibnewāz induces some writers such as Dr Parrat and others to believe that the king himself was not a Ramaite, for, if he were so, he would not have persecuted the followers of the religion which he himself followed. But it is seen that the people accepted the new faith under forcible circumstances and were not ready to accept all the tenets of Vaishnavism. It is, therefore, no wonder that the king persecuted them for their failure to observe the Vaishnava norms.
Meanwhile in Burma a new dynasty had already emerged under Alaung-Paya, one of the greatest leaders Burma had ever seen. To avenge the devastations caused by Garibnewāz, Alaung-Paya and his successors invaded Manipur and inflicted on her the most humiliating and crushing defeat in her history. Jai Singh was thus compelled to leave the kingdom off and on. In one of his sojourn in Cachar, Jai Singh visited Dacca Dakshin, the ancestral home of Sri Chaitanya in Sylhet. There he came in contact with Ramanarayan Shiromani, a great devotee of Lord Chaitanya. Jai Singh was much impressed by his exposition of the ideal of Lord Chaitanya and persuaded him to visit Manipur. After Jai Singh regained the throne, Ramanarayan preached the ideal of Gaudiya Vaishnavism which gained much popularity among the people. Subsequently Jai Singh was initiated into this sect by Rupa Parmananda Thakur. Jai Singh started the worship of the image of Sri Govindaji in 1776 A.D. by carving it out of a big jack tree from the Kāinā hill. The image was then installed at Kānchipur palace in 1777 A.D. Besides the image of Sri Govindaji, images of other deities such as Vijay Govinda, Nityainanda, Gopinath, Advaita Prabhu, Madan Mohon, and Anu Prabhu were also carved out of the same tree. All these deities are still worshipped in Manipur.

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44. Sharma, Atombapu., Meitei Kirtana, Imphal, 1953, p. 3.
except Anu Prabhu. The image of Anu Prabhu was carried by
Jai Singh's daughter Bimbabati to Nabadwip where she worshiped it throughout her life.\textsuperscript{45} King Jai Singh, after
his abdication of the throne, also went to Nabadwip where he worshipped the deity.

Garibnewaz's suppressive religious policy
created widespread discontent among his subjects. But,
unlike his grandfather, Jai Singh did not resort to any suppressive policy towards the indigenous faith. While elevating the Chaitanyaite Vaishnavism as the state religion, indigenous gods especially Sanāmahi continued to be worshipped and they played an important part in the cultic life of the king and the people. In 1778 an image of Sanāmahi was erected and in the following year another image was also dedicated at the time of the construction of the palace at Kānchipur.\textsuperscript{46} Jai Singh managed to establish a harmonious balance in the worship of the Hindu gods and Meitei gods by preserving the old religious traditions and at the same time adopting the Vaishnava traditions. Jai Singh's catholic religious outlook was evident from the fact that in 1783 A.D. the images of Govinda, Sanāmahi and other deities were given a ceremonial bath in a tank at Lamlongei.\textsuperscript{47} In this way Jai

\textsuperscript{46} Ibunqohal and Khelchandra, op. cit., pp. 118-119.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p. 127.
Singh consolidated the Vaishnavite religion by making a compromise with the indigenous faith.

The Gaudiya Vaishnavism which was elevated to the status of the state religion of Manipur by Jai Singh was further consolidated by his successors especially by Maharaja Chandrakirti Singh who reigned in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Till the present day the majority of the Meiteis are followers of the Gaudiya Vaishnavism.

Influence of Vaishnavism on the Social and Religious Institutions:

The history of Vaishnava movement clearly reveals that Hinduism came to Manipur fairly early. Before Vaishnavism gained a foot-hold among the masses, the worship of Vishnu and also of other Hindu deities such as Siva and Devi were already familiar among the people. Even after Vaishnavism had been established as the state religion of Manipur since the beginning of the eighteenth century under the patronage of Garibnewāz, the Meiteis continued to worship Siva, Devi, Ganesh, etc., along with Rama, Hanuman, Radha, Krishna, etc. But Hinduism had developed in Manipur in a very distinctive way having certain peculiarities that go against the tenets of classical Hinduism. This is because of the fact that Manipuri Hinduism is a blend of Hinduism and the old Meitei religion wherein the Meiteis rejected many
of the tenets of Hinduism while at the same time retaining many of their traditional social customs and usages, rites and ceremonies. Thus the spread of Hindu religion does not destroy or sweep away the old Meitei religion and culture. Dr S.K. Chatterji noted that such peculiar features of Manipuri Hinduism is similar with that of the Japanese Buddhism. Dr Chatterji says, "The Japanese people still keep up their old pre-Buddhistic religion, the Shinto or 'Way of the Gods' and the present day Japanese Buddhism is called by the name of 'The Ryobu Shinto' or 'Mixed Shinto'. In this way the Japanese from their own native culture and mentality have given something new to the Buddhism which came to them ultimately from India and Buddhism acquired in its Japanese environment a new horizon in the worlds of its thought and artistic self-expression. The same has been the case with the Hinduism of Manipur." 48

Though Hinduism did not replace or cause any damage to the old Meitei religion and culture, it exercised a remarkable effect on the social and religious life of the Meiteis. Immediately after the acceptance of Vaishnavism there was a strong tendency among the Meiteis to merge themselves into the Hindu fold. It was at that time that most of their gods and goddesses, rituals and festivals, their history and genealogy, etc., were more or less

Hinduised. The major changes brought forth by Hinduism on the social and religious life of the Meiteis areenumerated below:

**Hinduisiation of the Kingdom:** After the Meiteis were converted into Hinduism, the Brahmans invented certain myths and legends to show how the kingdom got the name 'Manipur', the land of jewels. These myths and legends or the so-called Manipuri Purāṇās were based on the Brahmanical Purāṇās so as to establish that the Brahmanical traditions has been in existence in Manipur since time immemorial. These purāṇās made Lord Siva and Parvati to play Ras-dance in Manipur in imitation of the great Ras-dance performed by Lord Krishna with the gopis at Vrindavana. The serpent King Ananta had filled up the whole kingdom with light by the Mani or jewel for seven days and nights until the conclusion of the Ras-dance by Siva and Parvati. Because of that illumination by the Mani or jewel, the country came to be known as Manipur. 49 Though the name 'Manipur' was coined by Shānti-Dās Gosālī, 50 the guru of Garibnewāz in the eighteenth century, the above story was specially invented to show that Manipur has been a Hindu kingdom since time immemorial.

50. Singh, Bhogeswor, O., Sanamahi Laikan, Imphal, 1972, p. 50.
Besides, the said Purāṇas made a pedigree for the ruling houses of Manipur tracing them back to Babhruvahana, the son of the epic hero Arjuna and the local princess Chitrangada. Just as the ancestry of the royal family of Manipur is traced back to Babhruvahana, the royal family of the Kachari kingdom, after their Hinduisation, was also traced back to Bhima of the Pandava dynasty and his wife Hidimba. These accounts once had a great hold on the masses but today these myths and legends are entirely discredited.

Hinduisation of the Indigenous Deities: It has already been mentioned that the introduction of Hinduism was opposed by the people led by the protagonists of the old faith. The Vaishnava kings of Manipur tried their best to enforce Hinduism by eradicating the indigenous religion and culture. But Hinduism gained success only after a compromise had been made with the old faith. Thus, after their acceptance of Hinduism, the Meiteis continued to worship all the indigenous gods and goddesses. On the other hand the Brahmans, the protagonists of the Hindu religion started worshipping some of the indigenous deities like Sanāmahi and Leimaren. But still there prevailed tension and antagonism between the Hindu deities and indigenous ones.

With a view to remove this and to absorb the indigenous faith into Hinduism, most of the Meitei gods and goddesses were identified with the divinities of the Hindu Pantheon. Thus Mei has been identified with Brahma, Ishing with Vishnu, Nungshit with Siva, Sorārel with Indra, Mārjing with Kubera, Khoriphābā with Varuna, Wānqbrei with Yama, Irum with Agni and Tāoroināi with Ananta, the divine ruler of the Nāgas.\(^{52}\) Again God Nongpok Ningthou and his consort Pānthsōibi has also been identified with Siva and his consort Uma. Even the legendary romantic figures like Khambā and Thoibi have been regarded as the incarnations of Siva and Uma.\(^{53}\)

**Introduction of the Brahmanical Gotras:** A very remarkable invention of the Vaishnava missionaries was the introduction of Gotras in the Meitei social organisation. As mentioned earlier, the Meiteis were divided into seven exogamous clans, viz., the Ningthoujā, Anqom, Khuman, Luwāng, Moirāng, Khābā-Nqānbā and Chenglei. After their conversion into Vaishnavism, each of these clans was given a particular Brahmanical Gotra. The Gotra-giving ceremony was performed on Thursday, Hiyāngei (October/November) 1737 A.D. by Shānti-Dās Goshāi, the guru of Garibnewāz.\(^{54}\)

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\(^{52}\) Chatterji, op. cit., p. 42.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., p. 48.

\(^{54}\) Shanqai-Phammanq (MS).
The following table shows the Meitei clans and their respective Gotras:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clans</th>
<th>Gotras</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ningthoujā</td>
<td>Sāndilya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angom</td>
<td>Gautama(also Bharadvaja)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moirāng Aribā</td>
<td>Ātreya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moirāng Anoubē</td>
<td>Āngirasa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khuman</td>
<td>Maudgalya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luwāng</td>
<td>Kāśyapa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khābā</td>
<td>Bhāradvāja</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngānbā</td>
<td>Naimisya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chengleii</td>
<td>Vēśistha</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since its introduction the Gotra system has been operative in certain social and religious rites of the Meiteis.

Clan Genealogy: After their Hinduisation the mythical accounts of the origin of the seven clans on the model of the Hindu Purānic myths and legends were invented. We have already cited in Chapter II the different versions of the mythical origin of the seven clans derived from the body of the Lord of Universe, Tāibang Mapu Sidābā, with their parallel Hindu counterparts. It has also been cited how those mythical accounts were contradicted by accounts based on historical and other evidences. So Hodson is right

to say that, "The Hindu friends of the people have discovered for them a respectable genealogy by which they are descended from the Guru, the sage who is Lord of Universe (Tāibang-pānbagi mapu), but the accounts differ." Today these myths are no longer given credence to have become discredited.

The Caste System: In the old Meitei society, there was no caste-system as in the Hindu society but social classes, viz., the royal aristocracy, the nobles and commoners. But with the advent of Vaishnavism, a distinctive form of caste-system appeared in the Meitei society. While the Brahmans who were the Indian immigrants remained as Brahmans and the Meiteis were identified with the Kshetriya caste. Since then the Brahmans and the Meiteis have been designated by caste names of Sharma and Singh respectively. But the female names of both Brahmans and Meiteis have the same suffix Devi. The other castes of the Hindus, viz., the Vaishya and Sudra have no room in the Meitei society. Along with the caste-system the Hindu notion of purity and impurity also came into existence. Since then there has been very little social intercourse between the Meiteis and other communities save the Manipuri Brahmans.

Today the Brahmans, although maintaining a separate ethnic identity, have lost almost all the privileges.

and the social status they once enjoyed. The Meiteis also no longer consider themselves to be a Kshatriya caste. The present-day younger generations are increasingly adopting their respective clan names such as Ningthouja, Luwāng, Khuman, etc., instead of the caste name 'Singh'. However, the distance created by Hinduism between the Meiteis and other communities is still unbridgeable, especially in religious functions.

**Position and Status of Women:** The position and status of women in the traditional Meitei society have already been referred to in Chapter III. The introduction of Vaishnavism brought no noticeable changes in the role and position of women in the family and in the society. The Meiteis, while accepting some Hindu customs and practices, rejected outright the Hindu theory and practice of widowhood, child marriage, dowry, purdah, etc. But the practice of sati gained a foot-hold in the society for a brief period. But it vanished as soon as it arrived. Just after Garibnewāz accepted Vaishnavism, his two daughters-in-law committed sati at the death of his son, prince Murāri. The state chronicle records that in 1724 A.D. prince Murāri died and his two wives also died along with their husband by jumping on the funeral pyre.57 There were other instances of committing sati in the time of Garibnewāz.58 Subsequently,

57. Ibungohal and Khelchandra, op. cit., p. 74.
58. Ibid., pp. 83 and 89.
in order to do away with the evil practice, Garibnewāz is said to have ordered the abolition of sati. However, cases of sati occurred even after Garibnewāz's reign.

**Birth**

The traditional system of rituals conducted at the birth of a child has already been referred to in Chapter III. The Meiteis still retain most of the pre-Hindu rituals which are conducted by the Māibā and Maibi. But since the advent of Hinduism, the Hindu ceremony of sasthi puja has been performed alongside the pre-Hindu ritual of impānthābā.

Today the ipānthābā ceremony is performed on the sixth day of birth and as usual it is conducted by the Māibi in the morning of the day. In the evening of the same day the sasthi puja is performed by the Brahmans. In the sasthi puja, the Brahman offers various articles of food to the deity which is represented by a pitcher which is full of water. The child is then brought and placed near it. A book and a pen are kept on a small wooden structure near the head of the child. The Brahman then performs the puja by reciting passages from the sacred scriptures. The sasthi puja observed by the Meiteis is similar to that of the setherapuja performed by the Bengali Hindus on the sixth day of the birth of the child. On this day the Bidhatapurusa

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59. Ibunghal, op. cit., p. 175.
would come to inscribe on the forehead of the child his destiny. For this purpose an inkpot and a reed pen used to be placed near the head of the child.\(60\) The ceremony in which the deity is worshipped for inprinting the fortune of the child on its forehead is called laipak khellāi yekpā.

Chaumbā: Just as the birth ceremony chaumbā (annaprašana), the first taking of solid food by the child is still celebrated mainly according to the traditional practices. The food to be given is first offered to God Sanāmahi and then it is given to the child by the mother by uttering certain words.\(61\) When Hinduism came, food already offered to the Hindu god in the temple of the Brahmans is also given to the child. But the utterance that accompanies the giving of food remain the same. Today the Meiteis observe the traditional as well as the Hindu system.

Na-hutpā: Na-hutpā, the ear-piercing ceremony was a very simple ceremony among the pre-Hindu Meiteis. The ears of the child were simply pierced and pieces of black thread were inserted into the holds. Later on, the threads were replaced by ear ornaments. Today na-hutpā is generally performed according to the Hindu rites and practices. When a child is three or five years old the na-hutpā or karnavedha

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61. See Chapter III (Birth).
ceremony is performed. First the head of the child is shaven and then after giving a bath by some virgin girls, the child is dressed up. He or she is then led to the site of yajna where the Brahman performs some pujās for the well being of the child. Then a goldsmith pierces the lower lobes of the child’s ears with a pointed golden wire and turns it into a ring round the lobes. The performance of saṁkirtana is an important feature in the ceremony. After the saṁkirtana is completed the guests are entertained with food.

Initiation: A very important event in the life of a Meitei Vaishnava is the initiation ceremony (diksha). This is called laiming loubā (taking the name of god). It is only after initiation that one is entitled to participate in the worship of gods. It is a ceremony signifying the end of childhood and the advent of adulthood. The ceremony is performed when a girl attains the age of thirteen and a boy fifteen. This, however, may be delayed according to convenience. Initiation is generally given by the hereditary Brahman preceptor of the family. After performing some pujās the preceptor gives the boy a six-stringed sacred thread and whispers the Hari-nama-mahamantra three times in the ear of the boy. The initiation of the girl is performed in the temple of the preceptor where the latter gives her similar Hari-nama-mahamantra.
The taking of the sacred thread once considered to be one of the most important ceremonies to be performed in the life of an individual is now no longer observed with its former spirit and enthusiasm.

Marriage: The traditional system of marriage has already been described in Chapter III. The advent of the Vaishnava faith brought about certain changes in it. While all the preliminary stages preceding the day of the marriage described earlier such as yek thoknābā, yāṭhāṅg thāṅnābā, wāroipot pubā, heijing kharāī pubā, deoti (meira) okpā, etc., are performed as usual, the wedding ceremony itself is now performed according to basic Hindu pattern.

After the Meiteis became Hindus, the wedding ceremony is performed in the courtyard of the house under a pandal. A samkirtana is held in which appropriate religious songs are sung. The priest (Brahman) of the family performs some pujās by reciting mantras. The father of the bride also performs some pujās in accordance with the instructions of the Brahman. When the appropriate moment comes, the bridegroom is conducted into the centre of the pandal. He is seated on a decorated dais facing east. Then the bride (in the Ras costume) is brought into the pandal where she is seated on a cushion facing the bridegroom. The hands of the bride and the groom are joined together by placing one hand upon another over which the purna pātra (kujabā yābā)
consisting of coconuts, fruits and various items of food is placed.

The priest then announces the names of the forefathers of both the families of the bride and the groom and their respective Gotras. Then the father of the bride hands over his daughter to the groom. In the meantime the traditional rite of mitangā thābā (letting loose two fishes into water) is performed by the elderly women of the bride and the groom. This custom has already been explained in Chapter III.

Now, led by an elderly person, the bride stands up and ceremoniously walks round the groom seven times and on completion of each of the rounds, she casts flowers on the head of the groom. But on the seventh or last circuit she also garlands two wreaths round the neck of the groom. Then she sits on the left side of the groom on the same seat (dais). The attendant of the groom (Bora Sannabā) takes out one of the wreaths from the neck of the groom who then garlands the bride. When the ceremony is about to close, the ends of aprons of the bride and the groom are tied together. Unlike the Hindus of the rest of India, no vermilion mark is put on the forehead of the bride.

The rest of the ceremony, viz., the escorting of the bride to the house of the groom, the reception of the
bride and the rites on the fifth day of marriage, etc., are still performed according to the traditional system.

Though the custom of the bride walking around the groom seven times by the bride is undoubtedly Hindu in origin, the system of agnipradakshina (going round the sacred fire) for witness of the marriage and also the rite of saptapadi (pacing the seven steps) are not observed. But in the case of the royal marriage all the Hindu rituals in their entirety are followed.

According to Hindu customs once the marriage is completed by the above two rites viz., agnipradakshina and saptapadi, the marriage is irrevocable and the girl cannot thereafter be given to any one else. But the Meiteis take it for granted that the girl becomes the wife of the man once the two pre-wedding rites, viz., waroipot puba and heijing-kharai-pubā are completed. This has already been referred to in Chapter III. Thus according to the traditional custom, the wedding itself is nothing but the final act of the formal giving of the bride to the groom.

**Death Rituals**: Unlike the marriage ceremony, death rituals of the Meiteis have been extensively Hinduised since the time of Garibnewāz in the beginning of the eighteenth century. While the services of the traditional rituals

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Maibā (physician and ritual performer) are still essential to some extent, almost all the main rituals are performed by the Brahman.

Normally a dying man is always attended by a Maibā. But, when the symptoms of death manifest, a Brahman is called and he performs certain rites by reciting some passages from the sacred scriptures. He places tulsi leaves into the mouth of the man to enable him to attain moksa even if he might have committed hundreds of sins in his life. When he is being removed to the courtyard of the house the Maiba utters the words, "Vrindavan jatra Hari bol Hari bol." When death actually occurs, he again utters, "Vrindavan prapti Hari bol Hari bol."

Though the Meiteis now follow the basic Hindu pattern, they haven't given up the old practice of placing the body on a long plantain leaf inside the thatched shed especially constructed for the purpose and its subsequent transfer into the coffin, etc. These aspects have already been described in Chapter III. The body is then carried to the cremation ground where the body is to be burnt accordingly to Hindu customs. In the cremation ground, six bamboo posts are firmly planted, three on each side. Within that a funeral pyre is prepared—one pile placed lengthwise and another pile breadthwise and so on, till the completion of seven layers (counting from the ground). Then the three •
pairs of bamboo posts are tied securely at the top. An 
Uchiwā (a species of bamboo plant) is planted on each of the four corners of the pyre. A canopy is suspended from the four bamboo plants. Then the coffin is placed on the funeral pyre with the head to the north. Then the performer (usually the eldest son of the deceased) with a burning torch, a dagger (no dagger for the death of a sannyasi) and a pitcher walks round the pyre seven times clockwise. In this he is followed by other mourners. On completion of each round, the performer slits each of the bamboo posts with the dagger. Then water from the pitcher is poured down on each of the four corners of the pyre. After completing the circuit, the pyre is lighted by the performer.

This mode of cremation of the body has been in existence since 1724 A.D. when Garibnewāz for the first time introduced the Hindu system of cremation at the advice of Guru Shānti-Dās. The said guru burnt the old Meitei books and scriptures in the same procedure described above and advised Garibnewāz to follow the same pattern for the funeral of the body. Since then the cremation of the body has been performed in the above fashion.63

Womenfolk who participate in the funeral rite leave the place just after the pyre is lit up while the menfolk usually remain till the rite is completed. When the

63. Miyat,(MS).
fire has almost burnt out the body, a piece of bone from
the frontal lobe is removed. This is inserted in a bamboo
tube and buried near the cremation ground. When the pyre
has been consumed, a pit in the form of a grave is dug up
where all the remnants are buried. This may probably be a
relic of the past when the body was buried. Finally the
pre-Hindu rite of mangthong thingbā (the sealing of the
grade) is performed by the Māibā or by someone who is well
versed in it.

On the sixth day, the bone which was buried in
a bamboo tube is exhumed. For this purpose a saṃkirtana
party accompanied by the mourners and others go to the
cremation ground. After the performance of the appropriate
pujās by the Brahman, the bone wrapped in a piece of cloth
is placed around the neck of a son or a near kin of the
deceased. The bone is then brought home and kept inside the
house till it is taken to the Ganges for immersion.
Formerly the bones were also immersed in the rivers Chindwin
and Irrawaddy.

On the twelfth day the purification ceremony is
performed. The next day the sraddha ceremony is held. But
for a sannyasi it is performed on the fourteenth day of
death. For boys and girls who died before taking the sacred
thread, the ceremony is performed on the seventh day of
death. The sraddha ceremony is now entirely in the hands of
the Brahmans. Samkirtana is an essential feature of the ceremony. In the sraddha ceremony the guests are entertained with light refreshments. But in the samasor (annual sraddha) which is held after a year, a sumptuous vegetarian feast is arranged. After the food is offered to the Hindu gods, it is eaten by the guests. As in sraddha, samkirtana is also an essential feature in samasor.

Though the Meiteis have basically adopted the Hindu rites and ceremonies of death described above they still retain the old rites and ceremonies connected with the death of infants, the death of women before and during childbirth, etc. The pre-Hindu rite of chukshābā, performed following the death of certain abnormal deaths so as to prevent the recurrence of such misfortune to the family, is still very much in vogue.

Conclusion: We have enumerated in the preceding pages the major impact of Hinduism on the social, cultural and religious system of the Meiteis. These Hindu customs and practices were once intensively observed. But, now-a-days, though the Meiteis continue to observe them, they have lost to some extent their former charm and sanctity. On socio-politico institutions such as lāllup, singloop, slavery, etc., Hinduism has had no impact. Similarly, on pre-Hindu socio-religious rituals like Lāi-harāobā, saroi-khāngbā, cheirāobā, kurāk lamāibā, rice rituals, rain
rituals, etc., there is nothing worthwhile that can be described as impact of Hinduism.

The Birth and Death of Institutions:

We have seen that the advent of Vaishnavism brought certain changes in the religious beliefs, social customs and usages. But none of the traditional institutions ceased to exist following the introduction of Vaishnavism. However, the new faith gave birth to certain institutions which have played a very important role in the social and religious life of the Hindu Meiteis.

Brahma-sabha: After the Meiteis accepted as Vaishnava faith, the question of the formulation and implementation of the Hindu customs and manners for the neo-Hindus came up. This was particularly essential as the Meiteis, while accepting the new faith, were not ready to accept all the tenets of Vaishnavism in toto. Hence there were the need of modifying them to suit the local interests. That is why the Manipuri Hinduism differs in many respects from that of the classical Hinduism. It was this necessity of formulating and executing new customs and practices on the model of Hinduism that gave birth to a very important socio-religious institution called the Brahma-sabha.
The Brahma-sabha in some form or other has been in existence since the time of Garibnawaz. It has already been mentioned that Garibnawaz, before accepting Ramandi Vaishnavism, was initiated into the Gaudiya sect by a Brahman. The king honoured the Brahman by appointing him Dhamandi Guru, one of the topmost gurus of the Brahma-Sabhā. However, there is very little evidence to show that the sabhā was an effective machinery for the formulation and implementation of the Hindu customs and traditions till the time of King Jai Singh. Jai Singh systematically organised the sabhā after the installation of the image of Sri Govindaji. N. Tombi Singh, however, is of the opinion that the Brahma-sabhā was initiated by Jai Singh after the installation of Sri Govindaji. Whatever its origin might be, it is definitely certain that since the time of Jai Singh the sabhā became a very effective and powerful body in all matters relating to the different aspects of the social, cultural and religious life of the Hindu Meiteis.

Maharaja Chandrakirti Singh's reign (1850-1886) was generally regarded as the golden period of Hinduism in Manipur. As might be expected the said period was the most glorious era of the Brahmins and the Brahma-sabhā. The powers and privileges enjoyed by the Brahmins during the reign of Chandrakirti Singh were recorded in Hudson's

64. Singh, Tombi, N., Manipur the Mainstream, Delhi, 1975, p. 86.
remark: "Gambhir Singh once ordered a Brahman who had
failed to take due care and proper charge of a pet goose
which had been entrusted to his care, to eat the bird which
had died from neglect, but in his sons time such an order
was impossible." In the time of Maharaja Churachand Singh,
the Brahma-sabhā was extremely powerful and later it became
an instrument for exploitation of the masses in the name of
religion. 66 Anyone who incurred to displeasure of the
leading Brahmans was victimised by ostracising him from
society. For a slight violation of certain Hindu customs
and usages, a man or even a whole village was similarly
penalised by an order of the Brahma-sabhā. If the sabhā
considered it necessary, the victims were readmitted in Hindu
society but only after the payment of a fine of rupees
eighty three, three annas and three pies.

We have already referred to the basis on which
the Brahma-sabhā was established. The sabhā consisted of
the king as its head and several leading Brahmans well
versed in scriptures and other Hindu customs and traditions.
The number of the Brahmans varied from time to time. Each
of the leading Brahmans of the Brahma-sabhā is known as
ratna. The titles of some of the leading 'ratnas' of the
Brahma-sabhā are Byabasthakari, Acharyaguru, Rajpurohit,

66. Tombi, loc. cit.
Tantradhar, Bramha, Dhamandi Guru, Vidyaratna, Hanjaba, Hidang, Govinda Adhikari, Radha Adhikari, Sambasya Adhikari, Majumdar, Bidyapati, Bidyabhusan, Bidyabinod, Bhaktisidanta, Smriti Sekhar, Smriti Bhusan, etc., etc.

The decision of the Brahma-sabhā is final on many social and religious issues. But it has no jurisdiction in matters relating to the traditional customs and practices. Thus all matters concerning the old faith has been under the charge of a group of traditional Māibās and Māibus. This body of Māibās and Māibus is known as Amāibā loishang. This loishang is an ancient institution. But since the introduction of Hinduism during the reign of Garibnawāz, its name has been changed into Pandit loishang. However, the old name is still being used along with the Hinduised name. Like the Brahma-sabhā, the Pandit loishang is the highest authority in conducting the traditional rituals and practices. As in Brahma-sabhā, the king is the head of this institution. The seniormost Pandit who supervises the workings of the Pandit loishang is called Pandit Achoubā (achoubā=big). Since the advent of Hinduism much of the power and many of the functions of the Pandit loishang had been taken over by Brahma-sabhā as the Meiteis began to perform much of their social and religious ceremonies according to the Hindu customs and traditions. But this

67. Sanglon (MS).
body is still the final authority for conducting those traditional rituals and practices un-influenced by Hinduism such as Lai-harāobā, saroi-khāngbā, kongbā leithong phātpā and leikhun phunbā, Sanāmahi khurumbā, Pākhangbā khurumbā, lāi chāklon katpā, etc. The state chronicle Cheitharol Kumbaba, which has been being maintained since ancient days, is still being maintained by the Pandit loishang for recording all the major events of the state. The entries in the chronicle are still made in the original Meitei script. The office of the Pandit loishang is situated in the palace of Manipur where a number of Pandits under the leadership of Pandit Achoubā work regularly.

As mentioned above, the Brahma-sabhā remains the most powerful socio-religious body in Manipur. Initially the sabha contributed tremendously to the stabilisation of the Hindu faith among the people. But subsequently the Brahmans used the sabhā as an instrument of exploitation in their hands. This paved the way for its unpopularity and downfall. When the privy purses and privileges of the erstwhile kings who patronised the sabhā were abolished by the Government of India, the sabhā lost much of the power and prestige. Today, the Brahma-sabhā is managed by the Temple Board of Sri Govindaji.
Samkirtana: One of the most important contributions of Vaishnavism to the cultural and religious life of the Meiteis is the Manipuri Samkirtana. Though evolved under the influence of Vaishnavism, the Manipuri samkirtana has been flourishing in its own distinctive style. It is generally believed that the samkirtana tradition came to Manipur in the time of King Kiyambā in the fifteenth century. But it is not known definitely which type of samkirtana was in existence at that time. It has already been mentioned that the worship of Vishnu in the time of Kiyambā was confined to some Brahman and non-Brahman immigrants from the rest of India. Though the worship of Vishnu received royal encouragement, there is no evidence to support that the king and the people were devotees of Vishnu. Thus even though the singing of kirtana was in evidence during that period, it must have been confined to those few devotees mentioned above. According to Devakishore Sharma, the singing of Kirtana in the worship of Vishnu during the time of Kiyambā was introduced by a group of immigrants called Kïtna.68

But during the time of King Charāi-Rongbā (1637-1709 A.D.), who adopted Gaudiya Vaishnavism, the samkirtana of the Chaitanya school of Bengal came to...

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The samkirtana tradition was carried on by his son Garibnewāz who was also initiated into the Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Later on when Garibnewāz changed his faith into the Ramandi sect of Vaishnavism, samkirtana was also performed at the adoration and worship of Ramji Prabhu. It was probably from this time that the word—Rama Krishna Govinda, in seven syllables forming a resonant rhythm, has been being sung in the samkirtana not only at the Govindaji's temple but also at some other village temples.

There are two main types of samkirtanas, viz., the Bangdesh-pāla and the Nata-samkirtana. The Bangdesh-pāla now known as arībā-pāla was introduced in the time of Garibnewāz in the beginning of eighteenth century by a Bengali kirtan singer who became a Manipuri. He was absorbed into the Konthoujam family and hence known as Konthoujam ojhā. In spite of certain differences, the basic features of Bangdesh-pāla are almost similar to those of Nata-samkirtana introduced in the time of King Jai Singh. Though Bangdesh-pāla evidently came from Bengal some scholars such as Surchand Sharma and others are of the opinion that there are certain similarities between the Bangdesh-pāla of Manipur and the

69. See footnotes 20 and 21.
71. Devakishore, loc. cit.
ojā-pāli dance of Assam.\textsuperscript{72} Nilakanta Singh even goes to the extent of saying that the style of the Bangdesh-pālā indicates more affinity with the Assamese ojā-pāli and less with the old style of Bengali kirtana and hence the Bangdesh-pālā might be a gift from Assam.\textsuperscript{73}

"The ojā-pāli chorus consists of a band of singers of four or five. The leader of the chorus is called ojā or ojhā, 'the expert' the few other singers are known as pālis, 'assistant supporters.' There is a chief among these supporters who goes by the name dainā-pāli. He is in fact, the right hand of ojā and is like a second leader of the chorus. It is the business chiefly of the ojā to lead the chorus; he sets the refrain (dīna) for the pālis to repeat, with marking of time with their feet and with hands striking cymbals and sings the main body of the verses (pada) of the poetical work to be presented to the audience."\textsuperscript{74} But the Bangdesh-pālā of Manipur consists of a larger number of singers. Formerly it consisted of sixty four singers but since the time of Maharaja Churachand Singh the number of singers has been reduced to forty five.\textsuperscript{75} The


\textsuperscript{73} Singh, Nilakanta, E., Aspects of Indian Culture, Imphal, 1982, p. 60.

\textsuperscript{74} Neog, M., Sankaradeva and His Times, Gauhati, 1965, p. 252.

two Manipuri mridanga players with their vigorous movements and jumps are the main attraction in Bangdesh-pālā. They have no counterparts in the ojā-pālī chorus. In Bangdesh-pālā the president of the assembly makes an announcement for the opening of the kirtana but this is absent in ojā-pālī chorus. But the isheihanbā (the main singer) and the dohār (the refrain singer) resemble the ojā and the dāinā-pālī respectively. However, unlike the ojā; the isheihanbā has several pālās or supporters on his side. The isheihanbā is not only the leader of the entire band of singers but also the leader of his party. The dohār who leads the other group acts in the same way as dāinā-pālī by repeating the same song sung by the isheihanbā. The role of the pālās of Manipur resembles the pālīs of Assam. Dancing is another marked feature of ojā-pālī choral performance. "While the pālīs simply strike the ground with their feet to keep the rythm of the songs, the ojā and, sometimes, the dāinā-pālī dance with proper gestures". In Bangdesh-pālā also the kartal cholom (dance with cymbals) and other hand gestures by the isheihanbā and dohār form a very important aspect of its performance.

The above sketchy comparision reveals that in spite of certain differences, there are, no doubt, several aspects of affinity between the ojā-pālī chorus and the

76. Neog., loc. cit.
Bangladesh-pālā of Manipur. Manipur has had very little cultural or religious contacts with Assam as compared to Bengal but the discovery of such similar aspects is very interesting. However, having affinity in certain aspects does not necessarily mean that one influences the other. Hence it is too presumptuous to say that Bangladesh-pālā is a gift from the ojā-pāli dance. Since the introduction of a new saṁkirtana called anoubā-pālā by King Jai Singh, the Bangladesh-pālā came to be known as aribā-pālā. The word aribā means old as distinguished from the word anoubā which means new. The aribā-pālā is a dying institution and is being replaced by the anoubā-pālā. Aribā-pālā performs only at the temple of Sri Govindaji and at some other places of Manipur.

The anoubā-pālā introduced by King Jai Singh is known as Nata-saṁkirtana. Both the aribā-pālā and anoubā-pālā are Natas. But since dance is predominant in the anoubā-pālā, the latter has come to be known as Nata-pālā or Nata-saṁkirtana was first performed on the eve of the installation ceremony of the image of Sri Govindaji in which the Rās-lilā was also for the first time dedicated to Lord Govindaji. King Jai Singh himself took the role of the main mridanga player in the said Nata-saṁkirtana. His uncles prince Ngoubram Sai and prince Dhara Sai took the respective roles of isheihanbā
and dohar. Since then as a tradition, the performance of samkirtana as a prologue to the Rās-lilā is still observed.

Like the ariyī-pālā, the anoubā-pālā originally consisted of sixty four singers which subsequently went down to forty five. But in ordinary samkirtana performed in the villages there is no fixed number of singers. It may consist of as few as nine singers or so. As in the ariyī-pālā, the singers are divided into two groups each under a leader — the ishehanba and dohar. The two maridanga players are also the chief attraction of the Nata-samkirtana. The presence of a conch blower (moibung khongba) is also essential in the samkirtana. But while the ariyī-pālā is essentially Nāmkrītaṇa, the anoubā-pālā is predominantly Līlākrītaṇa. In the anoubā-pālā or Nata-pālā, the sixty four rases of Radha-Krishna are sung. Among the various songs sung in the Līlākrītaṇa, mention may be made of the following — Janma līlā, Gostha līlā, Radha-Krishna milan, Surya milan, Jālkriya, Pashakriya, Dan līlā, Subonmilan, Uttar gosta, Nitya-rās, Mahā-rās, Basanta-līlā, Holi Nitya līlā, Jhulon, Kunjabhangā, Purva raga, Kupanuraga, Abhisar, etc.78

The Nata-samkirtana is performed in the mandap (samkirtana hall). In the centre of the mandap a piece of cloth is spread over a circular plantain leave. This is called

77. Dhana, op. cit., p. 5.
78. Devakishore, op. cit., p. 55.
Asana and on it various kinds of puja materials are placed. It must be supposed that the five Vaishnava saints, viz., Sri Krishna Chaitanya, Nitainanda, Advaita, Gadadhar and Srivasa are respectively seated on the middle, south west, south east, north east and north west of Asana. The worship of these gods is called Mandali puja. According to Atombapu Sharma, the manner of this puja is derived from the laibou-lā thābā of Lāi-hāraobā. In laibou-lā, a cloth is spread over plantain leaves where the Māibi offers sacred lāngthrei flowers (vernonia divergens benth composite) to Taibang Mapu (the Almighty Lord), God Thāngjing, God Wāngbren, God Mārjing and God Koubru respectively in the centre, south-west, south-east, north-east and north-west.  

Then the singers and mridanga players stand in their respective positions and postures. The organizer of the saṃkirtana distributes clothes to the singers and drummers. This is called the Adhivasa stage of saṃkirtana. Then the mandap mapu (president) announces the following words:

Balaha premse kaho Sri Radha-Krishna balaha Prabhu Nitai Chaitanya kahato sadho madhur-rasa vani hare hare.

As soon as the recitation reaches the name Chaitanya the mridanga start playing the tala — ten ten tat tak tang, indicating Nitai Chaitanya. At the same time the

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77. Sharma, Atombapu., Meiteiogi Saṃkirtana Mahayajna, Imphal, 1953, p. 239.
conch player blows his conch. Then the isheihanbā starts with the raga — ta ri ta na na. The isheihanbā performs the sabhā vandana and guru vandana and then sings Gourachandrika and other songs. The singing of the lilas of Radha-Krishna are the essential aspects of Nata-saṃkirtana. The cholom aspects — the kartal cholom and pung cholom are the integral features of saṃkirtana. The kartal cholom is the artistic movements of the body, hands and feet to the accompaniment of the ringing sound of the cymbal and the pung cholom consists of rhythmic, vigorous and extraordinary movements, jumps and turns to the accompaniment of various intricate talas of the mridanga. Then rajmel, talchap and others are started. At the termination of each tala the conch-player blows his conch. Finally the mandap mapu announces the following words to mark the end of the saṃkirtana:

balaho prem seva kaho Sri Radha-Krishna,
balaho Prabhu Nitai Chaitanya Advaita Radharani ki jai, balaho Sri Radha-Krishna.

As on the opening of the saṃkirtana the conch player blows a long penetrating sound from his conch.

Since the time of King Jai Singh, Nata-saṃkirtana has become a part and parcel in the life of Meitei Hindus. Its place in the social and religious life of the Meitei

80. In ojā-pāli, the ojā commences with ha ri ta na which is possibly the better and more correct way.
Hindus is unique. Sāmkirtana is still considered the highest form of worship and prayer which enables the devotees to commune with Sri Krishna Chaitanya. In the same way it is still an integral part of certain social and religious ceremonies of Hindu Meiteis such as Karnavedha, marriage, srāddha, etc. Before the time of King Jai Singh, the srāddha ceremony of King Garibnewāz was performed in 1752 A.D. with Nam-sāmkirtana by Prince Ananta Sai, son of Garibnewāz. 81

Rās-lilā: The Rās-lilā is an invaluable gift of Vaishnavism to the realm of Manipuri culture. It is a dance-drama woven through the Vaishnavite religious theme of Lord Krishna's love plays with Radha and other gopis and gopas at Vrindavan, though the style and mode of presentation are distinctively indigenous in origin.

The Rās-lilā of Manipur had its origin to the creative and artistic genius of King Jai Singh. The origin of this lilā was connected with the installation ceremony of Sri Govindaji. The nirupan of Lord Govinda (carving out of the image) was done at Bishenpur palace in 1776 A.D. After Jai Singh shifted his capital from Bishenpur to Langthabal, the image of Lord Govindaji was installed at the Ras mandal of Kanchipur in 1779 A.D. Jai Singh was determined to dedicate the lilā of Lord Krishna with the

gopis at the time of the installation ceremony. Jai Singh himself was a renowned artist. Mention has already been made of his role as the main mridanga player at the Nata-saṅkirtana performed at the consecration ceremony of Sri Govindaji. With the help of Pandits, well versed in ancient dance and music, Jai Singh composed the famous Rās-līlā and dedicated the same in honour of Lord Krishna. Thus in the Rās-līlā the image of Sri Govindaji was placed in the middle of the Rās mandal. As the image of Radha was then not yet made, the young daughter of the king played the role of Radha. Thus the princess Bimbābati consecrated herself at the lotus feet of Lord Krishna. In the Rās-līlā she became the Rāshāswari — the leader of the Rās. The sublime composition of "Bhangi Achoubā" was first presented by her along with other women as gopis on the Abhisek day of Sri Govindaji at the Rās mandal of Kanchipur. The said Rās was performed for five consecutive days.82

King Jai Singh dedicated three types of Rās-līlās, viz., Kunja-Rās, Mahā-Rās and Vasanta-Rās to Sri Govindaji. All these Rās-līlās are performed only on the full moon days of Aswīn Purnima (Mērā Wākhīnba numit), Kartik Purnima (Mērā Wāphukpā numit) and Chaitra Purnima (Sajibu purnima) respectively.83

82. Ibungohal and Khelchandra, op. cit., p. 120.
Kunja-Rās portrays the union of Lord Krishna and Radha in the Kunj (bower) with the help of the gopis. Radha's yearning for union with her Lord is submerged in eternal existence of Lord Krishna with an everlasting desire.

prati janme janme jivane marane
sange na chadibo sri-charane

Oh my Lord, I would never leave the shelter of thy lotus feet neither in life nor in death.\(^{84}\)

The Maha-Rās which is performed on the Kartik Purnima is based on the Ras—pancha-adhyaya of Srimad Bhagavata. This Ras depicts the story of Lord Krishna's play with Radha and other gopis on the said day at Vrindavan. When the play reaches its zenith, the gopis become too self-conscious and consider themselves to be more fortunate than other women. Thereupon Krishna disappears with Radha to restrain the pride of the gopis. Radha now considers herself to be more fortunate than the gopis. For the same reason, Krishna deserts her too. Finally, on seeing the grief of Radha and the gopis, Krishna re-appears not as a single person but as many to meet all of them. The līlā conveys the message that selfish love can never attain Divine love. This Rās was the first līlā dedicated to Lord Govindaji.

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Vasanta-Rās depicts a three-fold theme. Krishna is infatuated with Chandrabali; Radha is deeply hurt and, visualising the union intuitively, she beats her breasts in agony. Finally Krishna begs Radha's pardon and she reconciles with her Lord.

The above three kinds of Rās-lilās are divided into two types, viz., Sri Govindaji's Rās and Sri Vijay Govindaji's Rās. Rās is performed simultaneously at both temples. But in the Rās-lilā performed at Sri Govindaji's temple, there are no characters as Radha and Krishna. Instead, the images of Radha and Krishna are installed in the centre of the Rasmandal and the gopis dance around them. But in Sri Vijay Govindaji's temple, Radha and Krishna are portrayed by a girl and a boy in their childhood as childhood is considered as the symbol of innocence. There is, however, no age restriction for the gopis. The Rās performed in the villages is of the second type only.

Besides the three lilās dedicated by King Jai Singh, there are also other types of Rās-lilās, viz., Nitya-Rās, Gostha-Rās, Udukhal-Rās. But all these are later additions. Unlike the three major Rās-lilās, Nitya-Rās has no specific time for its performance. Here Krishna plays with Radha and other gopis merrily without any separation, fear, anger, etc. The Gostha and Udukhal are usually performed in the month of Kartik (Hiyāngeī). Both these
lilás depict the adventures and pranks of Lord Krishna.

Though the Rās-dance depicts the love story of Lord Krishna and Srimati Radha, its peculiar characteristic is the complete absence of any sensuous movement. The dancer neither moves the hip nor the eye. There is only graceful turning and swaying. The dancer's body continually seems to dissolve and re-arise in flowing, sinuous curves as the gentle hand and arm gestures melt one into the other. According to Faubion Bowers, "Excessively limpid softness was a tremendously new and fresh inspiration for India, whose dance styles had been upto then primarily energetic, electric and explosive. Manipur has given Indian dance as a whole today a sweetness entirely absent from the angular precision of Bharat Natyam, or the vigorousness of Kathakali or the mathematics of Kathak." 85

Just as its gracious movements, the music and song of the Rās-lilā is intensely subtle and sensitive. The sound of the various musical instruments and the sweet and melodious songs are perfectly incorporated into the various sequences of the lilā. Bowers describes the brilliance of the lilā thus: "I know of nothing more musically competent spiritually moving or even vaguely resembling anywhere in

The world ....... Their singing completely different from that found in India, is full of vibratos, trills, catches in the throat, and an ecstatic warmth that the rigid methodical performances of India lack as far as the unaccustomed Western ear is concerned. The perfect proportion between dancing and aria, choruses and orchestral interludes, produces a finely constructed a composition as any aesthetic law teaches.  

The Rās-dance, now renowned all over the world, is based on the various forms of the Lāi-harāobā dance. When Jai Singh invented the Rās-lilā, he presented its dance-forms out of the traditional Lāi-harāobā dance making some modifications. The main aspect of the Rās-dance dedicated by King Jai Singh is the Bhangi Pareng. The Bhangi Pareng and also the Chali of the Rās-dance are the modified versions of the laibou jagoi and Pānthoibi jagoi respectively of Lāi-harāobā.

In short the pose, gesture, technique and movement of Rās-dance originated from the Lāi-harāobā dance. To cite an instance again, at the termination of each item of both Lāi-harāobā and Rās-dance, when the dancer or dancers

66. Ibid., p. 52.
bow down to either Lāiningthou-Lāiremmā (in case of Lāi-harāobā) and Radha-Krishna (in case of Rāś-dance) the same Khujeng leibi (twisting of hands) technique is used.

But, since Lāi-harāobā is an ancient dance-form, whereas the Rāś-dance is of comparatively recent origin, it logically follows that the technique of khujeng leibi used in the latter dance must have been borrowed from the former.

We have already referred to the views of some scholars who hold that the Bangdesh-pālā of Manipur might be a gift from Assam. Now, again, some scholars such as Kirti Singh and Nilakanta Singh think that the Rāś-līlā of Manipur was immensely influenced by the sattriya dance of Assam.

Kirti Singh has referred to the common costumes between the sattriya dance and the Rāś-līlā, the prevalence of boys wearing female costume in the role of gopis and also the resemblance of Chalis between the two types of dances. But it is erroneous to assume that the two schools of dances have common costumes. There is only a slight similarity in their costumes. Again, boys wearing female costume in the role of gopis may be prevalent in the sattriya where there are no women dancers. "It may be noted that no woman dancer or actress is allowed in this school,

90. As cited by Dr M. Neog orally to me.
there being no nuns in the sattras. Even in village performances women-roles are taken by boys." But in the Rās-lilā such tradition does not exist. Rather the role of Krishna may be taken by a girl but boys do not take the roles of Radha and the gopis. There, is, however, no restriction that boys should not take the role of women. As for Chali it has already been mentioned that it is the modified version of Pāntheobi jagoi of Lāi-harāobā dance. Moreover, in the Rās-lilā, Radha the beloved of Krishna is the centre of attraction but in the sattriya there is no character called Radha whom Krishna favours. Nilakanta Singh opines that the Rās-lilā is another gift from Assam. He seems to base his views on some similar aspects regarding the sequences of the two dance forms. No doubt, there are some similar features in the dance sequences of the two schools of dance, such as, sutradharis who conduct the show, the entrance into the acting arena by Krishna (Krishnabhangi in sattriya) and Krishna coming out in search of his beloved Radha and other gopis (Krishna Abhisar in Rās), entrance dance by gopis (Gopibhangi in sattriya) and by Radha and other Gopis (Gopi Abhisar in Rās), etc. Such similarities are there probably because both the sattriya dance and the Rās-lilā

are mainly based on the Bhagavata and other Purāṇa traditions.

But, the presence of some similar features does not necessarily imply gift or borrowing. Nilakanta Singh further assumes that King Jai Singh might have invited some Assamese scholars to Manipur to sort out the shape of Rās-lilā. But there is no historical record available with us to support such a view. The only possibility of the sattriya dance exercising its influence on the Rās-lilā, if there be any, must be through no other person than King Jai Singh himself. King Jai Singh's sojourn at the Ahom capital for a considerable time is a well known fact. But how far he was influenced by the Assamese style is not known. Even an authority like Dr Maheswar Neog himself is not so sure about the impact of sattriya on the Manipuri Rās-lilā. This is clearly manifested when he says, "This school has some features in common with the Manipuri style, and one could surmise the impact of this form on the Manipuri rather than the reverse as this is the style to have been evolved and established earlier."  

Holi: The most important of all the various festivals introduced in Manipur under the influence of Vaishnavism is the Holi festival. Holi is locally known as Yaosang. The festival is celebrated on the full-moon day

93. Loc. cit.
94. Neog, loc. cit.
of Lamā (February/March) and continues for five days. Holi is the biggest Hindu festival of the Meiteis. Everyone, be he rich or poor, prepares his best for the great festival. In short, Holi is to the Meitei Hindus, what Durga Puja is to the Bengalis, Bihu to the Assamese, and Diwali to the North Indians. Holi is of special significance for the Vaishnava Meiteis because the festival coincides with the birthday of Lord Chaitanya, who is regarded as an incarnation of Lord Krishna. Hindu Meiteis are the followers of Chaitanya Vaishnavism.

The festival was first introduced in Manipur in the time of King Jai Singh. But, Holi, being a major Hindu festival observed elsewhere in India, only those peculiarities noticeable in the observance of the festival in Manipur are explained hereunder. Though the festival falls on the full moon of Lamā, preparations for the festival begin well in advance just after the Vesanta Panchami. A few days ahead of the festival young boys start collecting bamboos, straw and other materials for constructing a thatched hut in the open space near the road. These structures are called Yānsang by which name the festival is also known. These thatched huts are dedicated to Lord Chaitanya and are beautifully decorated with flags and

others. In the evening of the first day of Holi, a Brahman comes, on invitation, with an image of Sri Chaitanya from a nearby temple and installs the same inside the thatched hut. There the Brahman performs puja by reciting hymns. Then after removing the image the hut is set on fire. Immediately after the burning, children go from house to house to collect monetary gifts which are given as a matter of tradition. The same is done again in the morning of the next day. Small and grown-up girls do pester the male passers-by for money. They hardly allow them to let go unless their demand is fulfilled. As in other parts of Hindu India, the spraying of coloured water and smearing of coloured powder, especially red powder, is in vogue.

Though Holi is observed primarily as a religious festival, it has also contributed a lot to the cultural life of the Meiteis. The chief attraction of the Holi festival is thābal chongbā which literally means jumping in the moonlight. Thabāl chongbā is one of the most ancient pre-Hindu folk dances of Manipur. This is a dance in which boys and girls join hands and dance in a circle moving in anti-clockwise direction. Sometimes elderly people also participate in this dance. In olden days, in the centre of the circle, a singer used to sing a chorus in a rhythmic style which was repeated by the participants. The theme of the chorus as well as the musical instruments used in it were traditional. Today western
musical instruments have replaced the solo singers as well as the traditional instruments. Thus through this Hindu festival, the pre-Hindu folk dance of thābal chongbā has been preserved.

Again the festival is one of the best training grounds for the Meitei style of wrestling called muknā. A few days before the festival, groups of boys who organise their own respective Holi group take out every evening a procession to another neighbouring village shouting all the way slogans of challenge in wrestling and fighting. If their challenge is accepted by the other party, they test their skill in muknā (Meitei style of wrestling) which continues till late night under the supervision of elderly persons. With the passage of time this aspect of the Holi festival is becoming rare and rarer, especially in the urban areas.

Another significant contribution of the Holi festival to the world of Manipuri dance and music in the performance of various saṃkirtana parties in the temples of Sri Govindaji and Vijay Govindaji. The saṃkirtana parties start attending the temple of Sri Govindaji at the palace four days ahead of the festival to perform Holi songs and dance of Lord Krishna, Radha and other gopis. On the last day of the festival the saṃkirtana parties along with thousands of other participants come in a procession from Sri Govindaji's temple to Sri Vijay Govindaji. This
procession called halanka is led by Lord Vishnu on the back of a white horse. This is the most colourful event of the Holi festival in Manipur.

**Rath Jatra**: Rath Jatra is locally known as kāng. It is another important festival introduced in Manipur under the influence of Vaishnavism. It was introduced in Manipur by Maharaja Gambhir Singh in 1832 A.D. In that year the image of Lord Jagannath was carved out of the timber of a big mango tree. The said image was installed in a Rath having twelve wheels which was taken out in a procession on Saturday, the second day of Ingā (around June) 1832 A.D. Since then it has been observed as a major festival in Manipur. The festival is observed for nine continuous days.

Rath Jatra, as observed in Manipur, is more or less based on the pattern of the same festival celebrated at Puri, at the temple of Lord Jagannath. But the artistically minded Meiteis celebrated it in a slightly different style from that of the Puri festival by adding some local elements. In Manipur every village has several temples having the image of Jagannath. Each of these temples takes out a Rath on the road on the first and last day of the festival. Thus on these two days one could see innumerable numbers of Raths

along the roads of Manipur valley. The biggest kāng in Manipur is that of the royal Rath which is still at least forty feet in height. All the kāngs are richly decorated with flags, flowers, etc. Pictures of Hindu mythological gods are painted impressively on the side walls of the kāng. The images of Krishna, Balaram and their sister Subhadra are usually placed on the kāng. The images are accompanied by one or two Brahmans and two Meitei girls with a chamar (a fan made of a tuft of animal hair with handle) each in their hand. The kāngs are pulled along the roads to the accompaniment of songs, drums, jals, conch, etc.

An essential feature of Rath Jatra is the singing of the sanskrit composition on the Dasavatār by the noted Vaishnava poet, Jayadeva. This is performed on every evening of the nine-day festival. Khubāk ishei is another important aspect of the festival in which a group of female artists dance and sing about the various episodes of the lives of Radha and Krishna.

Rath Jatra is still celebrated widely in Manipur in spite of its declining trend.

**Krishna Janma**: Krishna Janma is another major festival observed in Manipur introduced under the influence of Vaishnavism. The festival is observed on the eighth day of the new moon of Thauān (July/August). Meitei Hindus being the followers of the Radha-Krishna cult observe this
festival with great enthusiasm and solemnity. Fasting and prayers are the main aspects of the observance of this festival for orthodox Meiteis. Besides being an important religious observance, Krishna Janma is also a festival of fun and merriment for the children. On this day children turn out in large number to buy toys and other play-things. It is still a spectacular sight to see children and elderly people visiting the temple of Sri Govindaji at the palace and Hanuman Mandir at Mahabali.

The festival has also contributed greatly to the growth of certain types of physical culture of the Meiteis such as muknā (Meitei style of wrestling) and yubi lākpi (snatching the coconut). Days ahead of the festival wrestlers in different parts of the valley undergo vigorous training and practice to participate in the competitions held on the day of the festival. Besides muknā, the game of yubi lākpi is widely organised on this day. Today the performance of these games and sports on the day of the festival is declining. The play of likol sānnabā (played with cowrie shells) between boys and girls which had been played on the night of the festival has now totally disappeared.

Like the Rath Jatra, Krishna Janma is still an important festival widely observed in Manipur.
**Jhulan Jatra:** Jhulan Jatra is another Krishnaite festival though not observed as widely as those festivals described above. The festival is celebrated in imitation of Sri Krishna's Jhulan lila at Vrindavan, and is performed in the month of Thawān (July/August). Jhulan Jatra may be performed for three to five days. For a three-day performance, the festival is to be started from the thirteenth day of Thawān and for a five-day performance from the eleventh day of the month. In this Jhulan Jatra, the images of Lord Krishna and Radha are placed on a specially decorated jhula. Music parites especially nīpā pālās and nupi pālās sing the theme of Lord Krishna's Jhulan līlā at Vrindavan.

The observance of this festival in the village temples is now becoming rare but in the temple of Sri Govindaji at the palace, it is still observed in a very grand way.

**Other festivals:** Saraswati Puja is another festival observed in Manipur, especially by the student community. The celebration of this festival is performed in schools and colleges in Manipur in a very grand manner. Subscriptions from students for the festival are collected at the time of admission. On the eve of the festival preparations are made and huts are constructed within the premises of the educational institutions. In the morning of
the puja students of each educational institutions carried the image of the goddess ceremoniously in procession on palanquins. Songs in honour of the goddess are sung and slogans like 'Binapani ki jai', etc., are shouted. Then the image is installed in the hut and puja is performed by the Brahman. After the puja, food prepared by the Brahman is distributed to all present. The performance of Jatrawalis and other music and songs are the items of entertainment for the students. But the observance of Saraswati puja in the educational institutions of Manipur has now almost been given up.

Though the Meiteis are Vaishnavas, they are also the worshippers of Goddess Durga. Mention has already been made regarding the worship of this goddess by the kings of Manipur. Durga puja is performed in Manipur in the month of Mera (September/October). The festival has been one of the greatest festivals of Manipur, next only to the Holi festival. Formerly it used to be performed jointly in every village. In the open space near the road-sides sizeable sheds are constructed where the images of the goddess are installed and pujas are performed by the Brahman. A peculiar aspect of the festival as observed in Manipur is the reciting of stories of Sri Krishna, Radha and Chaitanya during the puja. At night also groups of singers sing about the various episodes in the lives of Sri Krishna and Radha. On the day of
the immersion of the image sāmkirtanas are performed in
every pujā pandal. Due to Vaishnava influence animal sacri-
ifice of any kind is not allowed during the Durga pujā per-
formed by the Meiteis.

Today such public celebrations of Durga puja
have also become a thing of the past. However, it is still
widely celebrated especially by children in their houses.

Mention has already been made regarding the
religious outlook of the present-day Meiteis towards the
Hindu religion which has been their state religion since the
eighteenth century. With a strong sense of revivalism, the
Meiteis, especially the younger generation are now keen on
reverting to their original rituals and festivals. Conse-
quently Hindu festivals once observed splendidly have now
lost to some extent their former glamour and charm. Some of
them are dying out.

Synthesis of the Traditional and Vaishnava Cults:

The foregoing account of the Vaishnava movement
in Manipur clearly reveals that in its initial stage there
was a strong antagonism between the two distinct cults,
viz., the traditional and the Hindu. Hindu religion
ultimately succeeded in establishing a firm ground among
the masses only after due room for traditional gods, their
rituals and practices has been provided in the new faith.
This resulted in the development of a distinctive form of
Hinduism in Manipur. This Manipuri Hinduism is a product of native culture and tradition mixed with Hinduism. Dr S.K. Chatterji has compared it with the Japanese Buddhism or mixed Shinto. In Manipuri Hinduism, elements of the old Meitei religion and cults have continued to exist but these have been coloured with and influenced by the Vaishnava spirit. The traditional Māibās and Māibis (the priests and priestesses respectively) still carry on the old rites along with the Brahmans who conduct corresponding Hindu rituals and practices. Thus Hinduism in Manipur is a blend of two distinct traditions both of which ultimately fuse together into a harmonious synthesis.

In this synthesis some of the old Meitei gods and goddesses and their myths and legends have been identified with the Hindu puranic gods and goddesses, myths and legends. We have already referred to such identifications of deities of the two religions. In this identification, the identity of indigenous gods and goddesses has not been destroyed but they have been worshipped along with their Hindu counterparts as one and the same god. Thus Mei which has been identified with Brahma is worshipped thus: he Mei kouba lāi Brahma (O God Mei, thy name is Brahma). The pujā for worshipping the god is performed according to the Hindu mode of worship.

97. See footnote 48.
Thus Mei is practically absorbed in Brahma though its identity is not destroyed. Similarly some other gods which were once worshipped in their traditional forms have been worshipped according to the Vaishnava prescriptions. The traditional mode of worship and sacrifices has been not only modified but even the animal sacrifices which are considered essential in the worship of Hindu deities such as Durga, etc., have been substituted for by bloodless sacrifices and other Vaishnava prescriptions. Thus in Manipur even the Sakta belief has been assimilated into Vaishnavism. This aspect of the synthesis is also found even in the worship of the principal Meitei gods such as Sanāmahi and Pākhangaða which have not been identified with Hindu gods. While the worship of these gods are usually conducted by the traditional Māibās and Māibis in pre-Hindu rites, the traditional offerings of sacrificial animals like buffaloes, goats, pigs, fowls, etc., have been substituted for by bloodless offerings. Similarly animal sacrifices once formed a part of the Lāi-harāobā ritual but these also have been replaced by bloodless offerings. In this way this aspect of the traditional cult has been absorbed into the Vaishnava cult.

Pānthaobi is a very prominent goddess in the Meitei pantheon. She is described as the goddess of war.\footnote{Singh, Chandra, M., Panthaobi Khongul, Imphal, 1963, p.3.}
The worship of this goddess as the goddess of war has been known to the Meiteis since very early times. In the fourth century A.D. King Khui Ningonbā worshipped the goddess by sacrificing animals. After the introduction of Hinduism in Manipur this goddess was taken to be an incarnation of Durga, the Hindu goddess of war. This was a move for the identification and absorption of the goddess with Durga. This, however, has not been fully established and Pānthaibi still remains a prominent goddess. But like Durga, she has been worshipped under the Vaishnava spirit. There was also similar move for the identification and absorption of Nongpok Ningthou, the consort of Pānthaibi with Shiva, the consort of Durga.

Another aspect of the synthesis is the acceptance of Meitei God Sanāmahī by the Brahmans. The Brahmans, the priests of the Vaishnava faith also worship God Sanāmahī as their household deity. Besides, the worship of the royal deity Sanāmahī which was formerly conducted by the traditional priests had been entrusted to the custody of Brahmans until it was recently taken over by a Temple Board constituted by the State Government.

Thus a synthesis has been brought between the traditional cult and the Vaishnava cult within the framework of Vaishnavism.

99. Pakhanqba Nongarol (MS).