Chapter VIII

Summary and Conclusion

In the foregoing pages we have surveyed the social system of the Meiteis and the various institutions which have been existing since time immemorial and also those that have evolved or died out in course of time due to social, political and religious changes within the country. From this survey we may arrive at the following conclusion.

The Meiteis or Manipuris form a section of the Indo-Mangoloids. Till very recently they had been outside the orbit of India's political life. They, however, came within the fold of Hinduism extensively since the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Meiteis have been a dominant section of people mainly inhabiting the valley of Manipur, the hills being the abode of the Nagas and Kukis in particular. Although they have been in the valley which barely covers 2000 square kilometres with a numerically insignificant population, the culture and civilisation they built up within this small land-locked valley is remarkably brilliant. Their religion, language, martial tradition,
dance, music, and other fine arts, etc., each is a class by itself. Since the dawn of history the Maiteis developed a strong monarchial form of government, and, subsequently, they extended their sway not only over the surrounding hills but also over other kingdoms that lay beyond the hills. It was their strong sense of superiority complex and inherent martial qualities and skill that led them to engage in frequent encounters even with their bigger neighbour and traditional enemy, the Burmese. It was no mean achievement for such a small community to plunder and lay in devastation frequently areas right up to the imperial city of Ava, the then capital of Burma.

The Maiteis also have their own system of religion which has its own myths and legends, gods and goddesses, festivals and ceremonies, priests and priestesses, etc. The religion centres around their belief in the existence of a Supreme Being, Taibang Mapu Sidabā, who is a formless Divinity having myriad manifestations.† Their language and literature, which developed since very early times, is now one of the advanced literatures of India. It is recognised by the Sahitya Akademi and in Eastern India it comes next only to Assamese and Bengali languages in status and importance. They have a high sense of historicity and have been keeping historical records and chronicles since an

† Vide Chapter I: Religion, p. 28.
early period. Their state chronicle, Cheitharol Kumbaba, which dates back from the first quarter of the first century of Christian era, is one of the longest of its kind in India. It is still maintained in the original Meitei script by the Māibās (traditional pandits) at the palace. Their dance and music are renowned and universally recognised for their artistic qualities and grace.

The Meiteis, although they resemble physically their immediate neighbours, the Nagas and Kukis, their traditional customs and behaviour pattern are different from the tribes and are akin to those of the Shans, Burmese, Mons, Chinese, etc. They are believed to have migrated to Manipur from somewhere in South-East Asia years before the beginning of the Christian era. In Manipur they have settled in kinship groups in different parts of the valley as well as in some parts of the hills, each occupying definite territorial areas and was independent of one another. In their bid for supremacy, there were constant warfare amongst themselves in which the weaker groups were absorbed into the stronger ones and in the beginning of the Christian era the country was found to be occupied by seven major communities, viz., Meitei, Angom, Moirāng, Khābā-Ngānbā, Chenglei, Khuman and Luwāng. These communities were what are

still known as the seven clans of the Meiteis. These seven clans also entered into an age-long struggle for supremacy, in which the Meiteis, who were also identified as Ningthoujā clan, succeeded in absorbing all the communities one after another. The first community absorbed within the fold of the Meiteis was the Khābā-Ngānba, which absorption took place around the beginning of the Christian era and the last community thus absorbed was the Angom — which event took place during the reign of King Charāi-Rongbā (1698-1709). Thus it took about seventeen centuries for the Meiteis to absorb all the remaining communities within their fold.

After the Meiteis had thus established their hegemony over other communities the name Meitei became the common nomenclature for all of them. The original Meiteis or Ningthoujā clan was founded by King Pākhangbā, who ascended the throne of the Meiteis in 33 A.D. Since then his descendants ruled Manipur all through her monarchical history.

Thus the Meitei society, that we find today, was formed by the amalgamation of those closely allied communities with the original Meiteis or Ningthoujā clan. Though the country was once divided into several distinct political entities, those entities had a more or less

similar social structure, religion, custom, tradition, usage, food habit, dress, etc. Hence culturally, the valley had always been a single unit. The traditional Meitei culture that we still find is the integrated culture of all those communities.

In the matter of their social structure the Meitei society has been divided into seven exogamous divisions called salāis or clans. However, this division of society into seven salāis or clans must have been effected after the process of amalgamation was complete. The Meitei family is patriarchal and patrilocal. Polygyny is practised especially in the upper strata of the society. But the practice of polyandry is unknown through all the stages of Meitei society. As compared with their counterparts in other parts of India, the Meitei women has a comparatively high status in the society. The Hindu theory and practice of widowhood, child-marriage, dowry, purdah, etc., have been non-existent. The pre-Hindu society was casteless but social classes, such as, royal aristocracy, nobles and commoners were prevalent. It was after their Hinduisation that a mild form of caste system came into existence. While all the Meiteis identified themselves as the Kshatriya caste, the Manipuri Brahmans remained Brahmans. The other Hindu castes such as Vaishya and Sudra, however,
found no room in the Meitei society. Along with caste system a mild type of untouchability also crept into the Meitei society. Today the caste system and untouchability are no longer in existence just as their pre-Hindu society was free from these prejudices. Although the pre-Hindu society was casteless, certain yumnāks or families were assigned certain trades or occupations and their were no encroachment in it. The system of this division of labour was introduced by King Loiyambā in the eleventh century.

The most prominent organisation which existed till the advent of British rule in Manipur in 1891 A.D. was the socio-politico-economic institution, called lāllup, according to which all the people of the country from seventeen to sixty years of age were obliged to work for the state ten days out of every forty days. In Assam also a similar organisation by the name of khel system existed under its Ahom Rajas. Thus every able-bodied citizen had to contribute his share according to his station in life for the benefit of the country and the community. This system is sometimes described as forced labour by having taken note only of the non-payment of direct remuneration. But since the people paid very little revenue and none in direct taxes, the chief form of payment was in the shape

personal service. Though the system of lālup looks outdated from the present-day point of view, it was the most effective and beneficial system under the then existing social and economic conditions of the society.

Slavery of a mild form was existent in pre-British Manipuri society. There were two kinds of slaves in Manipur, viz., mināi channabā and mināi ashānbā. The former were the exclusive property of the masters, and they became slaves much against their will; but the latter became slaves voluntarily on account of debts, laziness, etc. Slavery was a major social evil in pre-British Manipuri society. The reason why slavery flourished in Manipur till its abolition in 1892 after Manipur was under the British paramountcy was that the king, the nobles and other privileged sections of people, who were most benefitted by the system, never made any attempt to end the evil.

Since very ancient days the Meiteis have their own traditional system of rituals and ceremonies and till their conversion into Hinduism in the eighteenth century these had been conducted in their own way by their priests priestesses called Māibās and Māibis. In the matter of customs at death in pre-Hindu Manipur some tribes buried and some others burnt their dead.5 But in both cases coffins

were used and the bones of the burnt or buried corpse was given a final burial by inserting them into a big earthen jar, called wällong. This custom is more or less similar to those of the traditional customs of the Burmese, Chinese and some other Indo-Chinese people. Since their conversion into Hinduism, the Meiteis adopted the Hindu system of cremation. But the use of coffin still continues and when the pyre is consumed, a pit in the form of a grave is dug up where all the remnants of the body are buried. This must be a relic of the past when the Meiteis buried their dead. The rituals performed in the case of death of infants and mothers, who die before and during childbirth, which are still current among the people are very similar with those of the Shan and Burmese customs. Rituals at birth, marriage, etc., were also performed in their own distinctive way. But since their conversion into Hinduism, these rituals are now conducted according to the Hindu pattern. Hinduism, however, did not destroy or sweep away the old rites and ceremonies, and the pre-Hindu elements still play a very important role in the ritual structure of the Hinduised Meiteis.

The Meiteis not only strictly observe the rituals concerning their life cycle but also have a number of

festivals and ceremonies, which constitute essential aspects of their religious life. Since the introduction of Hinduism, the Meiteis have been observing the traditional as well as Hindu festivals. But due importance is still accorded to the traditional ones as these are believed to be connected with the prosperity and welfare of their kingdom, community, family, etc. Hence in the observance of these festivals, the rites, hymns, incantations, etc., are rigidly observed with meticulous care so as to avoid any mistake, as they believed the same would lead to the disaster of the country.

Of the various traditional festivals, the most important is Lāi-harāobā. Inferring from its literal meaning, the Lāi-harāobā is often interpreted as merry-making or rejoicing of the gods and goddesses. The Lāi-harāobā is performed with a view to executing the very Divine Works of the Lord, such as, bringing forth of the gods and goddesses, the creation of the universe and men, the romantic episodes of the gods and goddesses, etc., through various dances and songs accompanied by various rites, hymns, incantations, etc. By doing so the Lord would be propitiated and He would shower prosperity and happiness on the country and people. It is, therefore, not fair to conceive the benevolent and theological works of the Lord as being motivated by merry-making actions. The people
observe the festival as a mark of their obligation and honour to the Almighty God, the creator of all things and beings. The rites and ceremonies, songs and dances of Lai-harāobā depicts almost the entire culture of the traditional Meiteis.\(^7\) Even after the Meiteis became Hindus, the Lai-harāobā and other traditional festivals are still observed exclusively according to the traditional rites. These festivals and ceremonies are performed not for fun and merriment but for the welfare of society and the people. Hindu festivals and ceremonies like Holi, Rath Jatra, Janmasthmi, etc., are also performed by the Hindu Meiteis along with the traditional ones.

Since very ancient days the kings of Manipur used to encourage various forms of education and learning among the people. Mention has already been made that literary education began to develop since very early days. Dr S.K. Chatterji opines that the beginning of Manipuri literature may go back to 1,500 or even 2,000 years from now.\(^8\) Besides literary education, dance and music was another form of education imparted to the people. But in former days, there were no established institution and instruction was carried on in the residence of the teachers.

\(^7\) Vide Chapter IV : Lai-harāobā, p. 183.
\(^8\) Vide Chapter I : Language and Literature, p. 32.
These forms of education, though carried on widely were, however, treated as of secondary importance. To provide instruction and training in the field of traditional martial arts, games and sports were the chief mode of imparting education to the people. This was necessitated by the then prevailing social and political conditions. Till the end of the nineteenth century Manipur had engaged herself in an endless warfare with her neighbouring kingdoms especially with her permanent foe, the Burmese. Hence everyone was trained not only in the armed modes of fighting such as sword, spear, arāmbāi or dart, etc., but also in wrestling and other unarmed combats. Horse riding and polo playing were a must for all sections of the male population. Moreover, for those who could show prominence and merit in these games were more honoured and respected than those who achieved prominence in other fields. Again persons, who distinguished themselves in these martial games, were sure of getting royal recognition and good position in the court of the king.

Almost all the major traditional games like sagol kāngjei (hockey on horseback), muknā (Meitei style of wrestling), hiyāng (boat-race), thāng-tā (sword and spear), yubi lākpi (Meitei style of rugby), etc., are war-oriented and martial games of the Meiteis. These games are thoroughly manly and sometimes very risky and dangerous.
Yet these were the most favourite games and they flourished vigorously under the patronage of the kings of Manipur. Till very recently hardly any public fair or festival be it traditional or Hindu, passed without a display of some of these games.

The traditional game of sagol Kangjei (hockey on horseback), which subsequently came to be known as the English game of polo, flourished in Manipur since very ancient days. We have already alluded to the origin of this game. Some people believed that the game came from Persia while others firmly hold that Manipur is the birth place of polo. But two things are definitely clear — that the British officers in India first learnt the game from the Manipuris and spread the game in other parts of India and finally to England and America; and that the game of sagol Kangjei as played by the Meiteis of Manipur is not an importation but evolved indigenously within this land-locked valley quite unknown to the outside world since pre-historic days.

Among the various martial games of the Meiteis, thāng-tā (literally, sword and spear) occupies a unique place. Not only did the fame and fortune of the Kingdom mainly depend upon the proper skill and handling of the

weapon, thāng-tā may also be regarded as the soul of Manipuri culture, as its techniques and movements have close connection with various Manipuri dance forms such as Lāi-harāobā, Rās-lilā, pung cholom, pālā cholom, etc., and also with other forms of unarmed martial arts like muknā, shārit-shārāt, etc.

It was mainly due to the unusual proficiency and skill in these martial arts and games that the rulers of Manipur were once able not only to wield political and military power over the neighbouring tribes but also to plant their banners in the heart of Ava, the then capital of Burma.

Hinduism entered Manipur fairly early. The worship of Vishnu was first started in the fifteenth century by King Kiyāmbā, though he himself was not initiated into Vaishnavism. The image of Vishnu, however, did not come from any other part of India but was received as a gift from the Shan king, Chouphā Khēk-Khōmbā. Since then the kings of Manipur used to patronise the worship of Vishnu started by King Kiyāmbā. Besides the worship of Vishnu the kings of Manipur also patronised the worship of other Hindu deities such as Sīva, Dēvi, etc. King Charāi-Rongbā

(1698-1709 A.D.) was the first king of Manipur to have been imitated into Gaudiya Vaishnavism. But Vaishnavism was still then an infant stage and could not gain a foothold among the masses. King Garibnewâz (1709-1748 A.D.) was not only the greatest conqueror but also the greatest religious reformer Manipur had ever known. After following for some time the religious policy adopted by his father, he introduced Vaishnavism (Ramandi sect) as the state religion of Manipur in spite of large scale opposition from the protagonists of the old faith. Garibnewâz suppressed them with a stern severity in the same way as was meted out to political opponents. To establish Ramandi Vaishnavism and other Hindu customs and usages once for all, Garibnewâz at the instance of Guru Shânti-Dâs burnt all the available Meitei traditional books and scriptures and destroyed a number of temples and images of indigenous gods and goddesses. Vaishnavism thus became the state religion of Manipur since the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Garibnewâz's suppressive religious policy created widespread discontent among his subjects and this caused the downfall of the religion be preached. After his death, King Jai Singh (1763-1798 A.D.) revived the Gaudiya Vaishnavism.

11. Ibid., p. 271.
12. Ibid., pp. 284-85.
and elevated it to the status of state religion in place of Ramandi Vaishnavism. Jai Singh consolidated the Vaishnavite religion by providing in it due place for the indigenous gods and goddesses, rituals and festivals, etc. Since then Gaudiya Vaishnavism became the dominant religion of the Meiteis.

However, Hinduism had developed in Manipur in a very distinctive way, having certain peculiarities, which go against the tenets of classical Hinduism. This is because of the fact that the Meiteis, while accepting the new faith, rejected many of the tenets of Hinduism and at the same time retained many of their old rites, ceremonies, customs and usages. In view of this Dr S.K. Chatterji compares Manipuri Hinduism with that of Japanese Buddhism or Ryobu Shinto. Thus Hinduism did not destroy the old Meitei culture and religion. Immediately after their acceptance of Vaishnavism there were intensive Hindu campaigns and it was at that time that the Meitei gods and goddesses, myths and legends, rituals and festivals, history and genealogy, etc., were more or less Hinduised. Thus in Manipur the traditional and Hindu elements are still

13. Ibid., p. 287.
existing together harmoniously within the framework of Hinduism. 15

Vaishnavism has tremendously contributed to the development of Manipuri art and culture. Manipuri culture would not have reached to such a high level as at present had not Hindu culture and religion come into this part of the land. The Rās-lilā, one of the masterpieces of Asian art, which occupies a place of pride in the world of dance and music is an invaluable gift of Vaishnavism to the realm of Manipuri culture. It is woven through the Vaishnavite religious theme of Lord Krishna's love play with Radha and other gopis at Vrindavan though its style and mode of presentation are distinctively based on the indigenous Lāi-harāobā dance. The Manipuri sāmkirtana, which has now become integral aspect in the social life of the Meiteis, is another product of native genius based on the theme of Vaishnavite religion. In literature, the rapid growth of medieval Manipuri literature with a Hindu bias may be attributed to the influence of Hindu culture and literature. 16

But Hinduism had also done some harm to the indigenous


16. Medieval Manipuri literature begins from the time of King Garibnewāz in whose reign Hinduism was fully introduced upto the time of the British conquest of Manipur in 1891.
literature. Religious fanatics like Garibnewāz and Guru Shānti-Dās destroyed many valuable Meitei books and scriptures for the cause of Vaishnavism. Bengali script was introduced to replace the old Meitei script on the very same religious ground. After its lying low for several centuries the Meitei script has now been introduced in the schools of Manipur for mass instruction.

Manipur, which had been under the rule of its sovereign monarchs, came under the British paramountcy in 1891, A.D. When some internal troubles and dissensions occurred among the princes of Manipur, the British Government, on the plea of Maharaja Surchandra Singh, who was dethroned by his younger brother, Tekendrajit Singh, decided to interfere in the affairs of Manipur. For this Mr. Quinton, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, accompanied by several British officers with a large force of British sepoys, were sent to Manipur. But the inapt handling of the situation by Mr. Quinton led to a disaster, in which the British force was routed and Mr. Quinton and other British officers, including Mr. Grimwood, the Political Agent of Manipur, lost their lives. This event led to the subsequent occupation and introduction of British rule in Manipur. The introduction of British rule in Manipur marked the departure of the old-world Manipur and the advent of a
modern Manipur. It also laid the foundation for the ultimate political integration of Manipur with the Union of India in 1949.

The British rule in Manipur did away with the age-old institutions like lālūlup and slavery. Certain beneficial measures like the modern system of education, land reforms, revenues, justice, etc., were also introduced. But the introduction of some obnoxious institutions such as potthāng, by which the people were forced to carry the goods of the touring officials, and other irrational exactions made the common people groan.

In the sphere of religion and culture, the Meiteis treated Englishmen almost as untouchables. No attempt was made by the British rulers to spread Christianity among the Meiteis. The Manipuris also did not consider the culture and religion of the white man as something superior to that of their own. Apprehending that any attempt to spread Christianity among the Meiteis would be a futile endeavour, the British authorities advised Reverend William Pettigrew to start his missionary work among the hill tribes. The hill tribes who considered the culture and religion of the white man as the best in the world started to sing and dance to the tune of the missionaries. Thus the British rule in Manipur led to the complete Christianisation of the hill tribes of Manipur.
Manipur became an integral part of the Union of India after its formal merger into the latter in October 1949. But her cultural integration with India which had started long ago is not yet complete, and still continues. Since the Meiteis became Hindus their cultural life especially those that connected with religion has been linked up with the mainstream of Indian culture. But in certain other respects such as social customs, manners, etiquettes, etc., the Meiteis are outside the mainstream of India's cultural orbit. Since their conversion into Hinduism from the eighteenth century the Hindu Meiteis form an inseparable part of the great Hindu family. The hold of Hinduism on them is very remarkable. But of late, the trend is changing and the hold is loosening. This is because people in general are now no longer charmed by religious rituals and practices, and the Meiteis are not an exception to this. Moreover, a movement is in the offing to replace Hindu culture and religion by the traditional ones. The protagonists of the movement feel that only by doing so they can preserve the Meitei culture and identity from being swallowed by the great Hindu culture of India. They started performing their rituals according to their traditional practices. But they seem to be half-hearted in

17. Vide Chapter VII : Political Merger of Manipur with the Union of India, pp. 370-71.
reverting totally to their old customs and usages and one can still notice many Hindu elements in their so-called traditional rituals and practices. The movement is still confined to a small section of the population. It, however, seems to have attracted the fancy of the younger generation. But their anti-Hindu, anti-Brahman and some other activities are a dangerous trend, which might be a breeding ground for division among the Meiteis themselves, let alone the disintegration from India's Great Tradition.