Chapter III

Pre-Vaishnava Social Institution

Introduction:

The formation and development of Meitei society has already been described in the preceding chapter. It has been noticed that the Meiteis have had a well-settled and organised society since very ancient times. The organisation and the working of this society has been effected through its various social institutions. The importance of the social institutions in building-up of social unity and in the maintenance of society has been emphasized by various social scientists. According to Barnes, "Society could not carry on without some organised effort and direction for its varied activities. This is supplied by social institutions, which represent the social structure and machinery through which human society organises, directs and executes the multifarious activities required to satisfy the human needs."¹ According to Hamilton, "Social institution is a verbal symbol which for want of a better word, describes a cluster of social usages. It connotes a way of thought or action of some prevalence and permanence, which is

¹ Barnes, H.E., Social Institutions, New York, 1947, p. 29
embedded in the habits of a group or the customs of a people."\(^2\)

Hertzler also observes, "A social institution is a complex of concepts and attitudes regarding the ordering of a particular class of unavoidable or indispensable human relationships that are involved in satisfying certain elementary individual wants, certain compelling social needs or other eminently desirable social ends."\(^3\)

Since very ancient days the Meiteis have a number of social institutions. These institutions are the mediums through which the Meitei society has been carrying on its mainfold activities. All the institutions described herein owe their origin in the pre-Hindu period. Most of these institutions still persist and remain operative in the social and religious life of the Meiteis.

The Role of Father:

As elsewhere in the world, in Manipur too, the family has been the most important primary social unit. The Meitei family is patriarchal. Polygyny is practised especially in the higher strata of the society. The practice of polyandry is unknown through all the stages of the Meitei society.


\(^3\) Hertzler, J.O., Social Institutions, New York, 1929, pp. 67-68.
The father who is the patriarch of the family takes the responsibility of all family affairs. He is respected by all the other members of the family. They seldom do a thing which may displease him. Everything is usually done with his knowledge and approval. His words are laws in the family. All the properties of the family normally belong to him. It is his prerogative to distribute them among his children, though he is always guided by the customary laws.

There is a long-standing tradition among the Meitei to regard the father as god who not only looks after the interest of the family while living but also continues to do so even after his death. This is evident from the domestic ritual of apokpā khurumbā, in which the three deceased male generations of the family, viz., the father, the grandfather and the great grandfather are worshipped. But the worship is to be done by the head of the family only after the death of his father. A son, who establishes an independent household and becomes the head of the family, must not worship the apokpā while his father is still alive.

In every Meitei household there are certain honoured places reserved exclusively for the father. Traditionally, all the Meitei houses face the east and in every house there is a large open verandah called māngol. The southern side of it is called phamen where a clean mat is always laid exclusively for him. While other members of the family may work or relax in the māngol, but no intrusion in the phamen is permitted, which is
The father also plays a supreme role in the matter of all social and religious functions of the family. He is the priest of the family and most of the family rites and ceremonies are performed by him. Besides performing family duties, he represents the family in all community functions. The authority and responsibility of a father is absolute until his death. Unlike some of the Naga tribes, the father does not become a person of secondary importance in the house after the marriage of his sons. A father's relation with a son may be intimate as long as the latter is quite young. By the time the sons become mature, the father assumes a more dignified and authoritative attitude towards his sons and expects submissiveness from them. It is only when he is too old to conduct the affairs of the family that he remains simply as the head of the family and the sons are expected to conduct the management of the family. After his death, the eldest son assumes the position of the father.

The Position of Women:

The Meiteis hold their womenfolk in high honour. This is evident from the comparatively fair amount of freedom she enjoys in the society and the treatment of customary

offences on womenfolk. The Meitei women have never been confined or secluded in their houses as was their counterparts in the rest of India. Mrs. Ethel Grimwood says, "The Manipuris do not shut up their women as is the custom in most parts of India and they are more enlightened and intelligent in consequence." But, girls, before their marriage, are subjected to various restrictions. Unlike their counterparts in the neighbouring hills, they cannot mix freely with the boys. No dormitory system wherein girls used to sleep together until their marriage is also in existence.

The purdah system of the Hindus is non-existent among the Meiteis. Women move with their bare heads. The practice of sati or the burning of widows along with their dead husbands is non-existent save one or two instances which occurred immediately after their conversion into Hinduism. Divorce is permissible and a woman could take the initiative for divorce if she so desire. Widows and divorcees are permitted to re-marry though the usual marriage rites are not performed in their cases. Child marriage has been totally unknown among the Meiteis as also among the surrounding hill tribes. Dr Horam's observation that, "Child or infant marriage among the Nagas is rare." is misleading. Col. McCulloch says,

5. Grimwood, Mrs.Ethel Clair., My Three years Experience in Manipur, London, 1871, p. 58.
"the very early marriages of Hindostan are not approved of and it may say never take place. Polygamy is common. Suttee is unknown. Widows are not treated as in Hindostan: they may marry again, eat such food, and dress in such style, as they please." The customary law of Manipur did not permit a woman to get any harsh punishment. The severest punishment she might have for a criminal offence was Khungoinaba or exposure along the market by announcing her crimes. Assault on woman was a serious offence and the offender was punished with Phoubā or exposure on a high platform in the market.

The Meitei women have always been very industrious. Their contribution to the economic life of Manipur is still very considerable. They are expert weavers. Generally every household has at least a loom. Sir James Johnstone says, "the women are famous as weavers and in many cases have completely killed out the manufactures of cloths formerly peculiar to certain hill tribes, over whom the Manipuris have obtained mastery by superior intellect." Women do all the household works, besides handling most of the buying and selling of commodities in the market. This tradition has its own history. In former days, the relation between Manipur and her neighbouring kingdoms especially Burma was marked by raids


and counterraids. Warfare was the biggest and most important department of the government in which all the menfolk were engaged. Moreover, the system of lallup (unpaid labour) which prevailed under its sovereign rulers, envisages every male adult from 16 to 60 years of age to work for the state for ten days in every forty. Thus while man were engaged in active works, all the household chores and the marketing of goods were naturally shouldered by women. Dr Brown asserts, "It would be difficult to find a more industrious woman in India than the Manipuri." 10

The position of mother in the household is more or less similar to that of father. Though father is the patriarch, mother shoulders heavy responsibilities in the affairs of the family. She is rather a co-partner of the family than a subordinate to him. While taking any important decision the mother is always consulted and she has a say in all matters of family life. Like father, mother may inherit any landed property and transmit it to her posterity. When her husband is dead and her son assumes the headship of the family, she continues to be regarded as the informal head of the family. It is customary for a son to take the guidance and approval of his widowed mother while conducting the affairs of the family.

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In former days though women in general were usually engaged in household affairs, they were not debarred from joining administrative and other activities. Lāisnā, queen of Pakhangbā is said to have held the presidency of Pāchā, a court which tried all cases relating to women. 11 Queen Linthoingambi was a woman of great wit and wisdom who assisted the king in the affairs of the state. Her courage and wisdom secured the capture of a group of Tāngkhul marauders when the king was away on an expedition somewhere in the southern Manipur. The long and successful reign of King Chandrakirti Singh was mainly attributed to his queen-mother Kumudini who exercised much influence during his minority. Kuranganayani had her own place in the history of Assam for her exceptional intellect and courage that led to the restoration of Swargadeo Lakshmi Singh to the throne after his dethronement. 12

As in the case of father, the position and responsibility of mother in the Meitei society still persists as it were in the past. The introduction of Hinduism in Manipur has had very little effect on the traditional role and position of women in the society.

Marriage:

In every society, whether primitive or civilised, marriage has been in many respects one of the most important

social institutions. The stability of society, to a great extent, depends upon this universal and primary institution. It is through marriage that the very basis of family is organised and fulfilled. On account of its vital importance the sanctity and permanence of marriage has been universally emphasized in all societies.

The earliest and the only socially and religiously approved form of marriage among the Meiteis is the marriage by engagement. This is called 'luhongba' in the true sense of the term. This term is not, however, elevated to other forms of acquiring wife. In ancient days luhongba was known as 'marān yumgā tambā.' References as found in ancient texts like, Panthoibi Khongul, Pombi Luwāobā, etc., reveal that marriage by engagement has been in existence among the Meiteis since pre-historic days. The usual preliminaries and the accompanying rites performed in the marriage of Panthoibi to Khābā Taramkho inuchā are still existing today.

The system of elopement has also been prevalent among the Meiteis. Widows and divorcees may re-marry but not with their deceased husband's brothers.13 They are usually acquired as wives only through elopement. In the case of the girls who are acquired as wives through elopement, a short and simple ceremony called "loukhatpā" (to accord recognition) may be performed as and when the guardian of the bride is in a mood to do so. Unless loukhatpā is performed, the wife is not

 permitted to join any function or ceremony held by her parent and their relations. If loukhatpā is performed in the case of girls who eloped, an important aspect of marriage rite called lāi-tin-thābā is performed. This, however, is denied in the case of widows and divorcees. In former days even though the loukhatpā ceremony was accorded to a girl who eloped with a man, the couple and their offsprings were debarred from active participation in certain social and religious functions.

Marriage by engagement or luhongbā proper, being the only traditional and the universal form of marriage among the Meiteis having social and religious sanctions, it shall be described in detail. The system may be said to have some similarity with the Hindu form of Brahma marriage only in that the bride is given to the groom with due ceremony. But the procedures and the accompanying rites and ceremonies are different. Dr. Parrat's view "while the orthodox Brahma form of marriage is not uncommon, Manipuri custom leans more to the Non-Brahmanical gandharva form usually with the accompanying rites."\(^{14}\) seems to be very defective. The gandharva form, though prevalent had no religious sanctions, and in former days only the loukhatpā ceremony as mentioned above was accorded to it. Moreover, a woman who was not married under the proper form of luhongbā or married without the rite of heijing-kharāi-pubā which constitutes an essential part of luhongbā is forbidden to head a marriage procession and her husband and

their offsprings are forbidden from assuming the pibāship (hereditary chief) of the sāgei, conducting of or participation in religious rituals and also from becoming the personal attendants (ningthou shenbā) of the king.15 These facts amply prove that luhongbā proper or marriage by engagement has been the customary and universal form of marriage having social and religious sanctions.

The Meiteis strictly adhere to the principle:–
"They should not marry people of their own kins."16 They observe certain degrees of restrictions on marriage. One such major restriction is called 'yek thoknabā.' Yek is another name for salāi. The Meiteis have seven yeks. Marriage within the same yek is forbidden as each of the seven yeks is descended from a common ancestor. Those who married within the same yek was, in former days, punished with banishment and ex-communication. In some cases even inter-marriage between two different yeks is still forbidden. Thus the Khuman and the Luwāng clans do not intermarry as they are descended from a common ancestor. Mungnabā is another kind of marriage restriction. When two sisters marry two persons, each belonging to two different sāgeis(sub-clans) and yeks (clans), their offsprings, though belonging to different sub-clans and clans are forbidden to intermarry till the next sāgei.

15. As cited by Shri N. Khelchandra Singh orally to me.
16. Hodson, op. cit., p. 75.
Pendinnaba is another important marriage restriction. People of different sägeis, who are the progenies of the same mother or grandmother but of different fathers or grandfathers, are prohibited to intermarry as they are uterine brothers or sisters. Shāiruk tinnabā is another kind of marriage restriction. Because of this restriction, two sägeis of the Moirāng Aribā salāi, viz., Mungyāngcham and Loirencham are forbidden to intermarry with the Ningthoujā salāi as the two sägeis are descendants of King Pākhangbā. Similar restriction also exists between the Khabā salāi and the three sägeis of the Angom salāi viz., Hidam, Achong Yumlenbam, Langmāithem Tellongpā Shangbam.

Having ascertained that the families of the boy and the girl are free from any of the above restrictions, the usual negotiation for the marriage takes place. The initiative comes from the side of the boy usually through a negotiator. Then the women of the family of the groom go to the house of the girl and ask her parents for the hand of their daughter. If the response is favourable, the menfolk of the family of the groom go to finalise the negotiation. Before the settlement of the marriage, consent of the girl is generally taken. Such customs and practices have been in vogue since very ancient days. This is evident from references found in ancient texts like Pombi Luwāobā and Pānthoibi Khongul.

Among the Lois, women having an odd number first go to the house of the girl accompanied by a gift packet containing areca nuts and betel leaves of odd numbers like five, seven,
nine, etc., wrapped with three layers of plantain leaves and tied with three pieces of thin bamboo stripes (payā). The gift is placed before the Leimaren (household goddess). The packet is then opened and omens are read from the position of the nuts and leaves. If the guardian of the girl offers the visitors to eat the pan with them, it is considered to be a favourable response. Then the menfolk consisting of the same odd numbers go to the house of the girl to settle the engagement. 17

After the negotiation is thus completed, a formal agreement is reached between the two parties. This is called yāthang-thānabā in which elderly men and women of the boy go to the house of the girl with various items of food to be distributed to all those present there. Among the Lois, salted-dried mud fish and wine are essential items of food.

The next stage is called wāroipot-puba. This is regarded as the official betrothal ceremony. On this occasion also, the family of the boy brings various items of food to the house of the girl. Among the Lois, as among the Meiteis, offerings of food are made to Leimaren (family goddess), Sāgei apokpā (the originator of the sāgei) and the lamlāi (the presiding deity of the area). Girls of the sāgei are, however, forbidden to eat the food offered to the sāgei apokpā. This ceremony is an age-old practice of the Meiteis. This is

17. As cited by Pundit Angom Tomchou of Phayeng, a Loi village, orally to me.
mentioned in the *Panthoibi Khonqul*. When Khāba Shokchronbā, the king of Kanglā engaged Pānthoibi for his son, he brought all the customary articles for the waroipot puba ceremony.\(^{18}\)

Heijing-kharāi-pubā is the last and most important of all the preliminary stages of marriage. Should this be omitted, the marriage cannot be regarded as having social and religious sanctions. Those who marry without this rite are referred to as heināi-shungnāidabā. As on the previous occasions, the family of the boy brings food for the ceremony. But, in addition, they must bring several baskets of food for offering to the god of the family, the ancestor of the sagei and the presiding deity of the area. These baskets must contain at least heikru (*emblica officinalis*) and heining (*spondias mangifera*). In case these fruits are not available, they must be substituted for by the leaves of the plants. It is from this customary gift of fruits that the very name of the rite originated. Heijing-kharāi-pubā is also called heikru-pottam pubā. While the food brought by the family of the boy is distributed and consumed by those present in the ceremony, those items of food called apok-ashāt must not be distributed to the guests. When the guests are gone, the food is offered to the ancestral deity. It is then distributed to the sageis of the family. It is a taboo to both the married and unmarried ningola (girls) of the sagei to eat the apok-ashāt. At the close of the ceremony, the guardians of the

bride and the groom exchange betal nuts and bow down to each other facing east and north. This is known as 'ngāi-sen-konnabā.'

After wāroipot-pubā and heijing-kharāi-pubā, it is presumed that the girl no longer belongs to her parents but to the family of the boy and if the girl dies accidentally just after the performance of those rites, even her body must be brought to the family of the boy for its disposal and other accompanying rites. All this implies that once the two pre-marital rites are completed the girl virtually becomes the wife of the boy.

Like the preliminary ceremonies, the marriage ceremony is performed in the house of the bride. On the evening of the day of marriage, the bridegroom along with friends and relatives go to the house of the bride. The family of the groom is required to bring different food articles to be distributed to all those present on the occasion and also other kinds of food for offering to the ancestral deities of the bride and groom.

The marriage party is led by a woman, specially selected for the purpose. She carries a covered basket mainly containing rice and discs of salt. This basket is called phiruk-nungshāng and is kept undisturbed inside the house of the bride until the morning of the fifth day of marriage. The woman who conducts the marriage must have certain qualifications, viz., she must be married according to the correct procedure,
must be a henai-shungnāibā, must bear several children and the eldest must be a son and all of them must also be living intact, and finally she must not be a widow or divorcee. It is believed that if the marriage is conducted by a woman suffering from social stigmas the sacredness of the ritual would be polluted and the prospect of the couple would be bleak.

When the bridegroom reaches the gate of the bride's house, a rite is performed in front of him by kindling three torches each of them handled by three men. Kaboks (puffed rice) and others are thrown over the bridegroom several times. Then the bridegroom is conducted into the house. This rite is called deoti okpā and believed to purify the bridegroom. In pre-Hindu days, the wedding ceremony was not accompanied by sāmkirtana as is done now. The bridal costume consisted of phanek (main garment), innaphi (sheet), phurit (shirt). There was no potloī (as used in Rāṣ dance) as at present. Similar practice is still current among the Lois. The marriage ceremony was performed by the Māibā and the father of the bride. Offerings were made to the Lord of the Universe, Goddess Imoinu Ahongbi and other deities and hymns were chanted requesting them to shower their blessings on the bride and the groom. Proper offerings and prayers were also made to the ancestral deities.

While the ceremony was in progress a rite called mitamngā-thābā (letting loose fishes into the water) was performed.

In archaic Meiteirol, this rite was known as ngāpā poutongyān. This rite is still performed by two elderly women of the groom's family and one woman of the bride's family or near relative by letting loose two ngamus into the water each representing the bride and the groom, praying to Ireimā, the goddess of water to shower her blessings for the prosperity and happiness of the couple by uttering:

he ibemmā Irāileimā Ikheiren Nāmungbi korou nono交通枢纽 taretmaŋtəgi kumlaklo, mālem leikhāron taretmaŋtəgishu kāraklo, he ibemmā ireimā i nāmung khusā thille khus nāmung, mitnā yengle mit nāmung, puknā ningye puk nāmung nāmingbu kajengngānbi koubi, he ibemmā nashunā ngashi korounumitshidā nangi lāija ironnungdā ngamu toktaobichābu mitamjaria. He ngamu toktaobichā nātāogi/natāgi aphabā nungālbā pīnabirāmā.20

Oh, Goddess Irāileimā Ikheiren Nāmungbi, Supreme Goddess of water, come down from the seven layers of heaven and come up from the seven layers of the earth. Oh goddess Ireimā (goddess of water), thy name is called kajengngānbi if someone points to you with his hand, the hand becomes deformed; if looked by the eye, it becomes diseased; if thought otherwise, the mind becomes disorderly. Oh, goddess, I, your granddaughter offer you today this Ngamu toktaobichā in thy water. Oh Ngamu give blessings and prosperity to your male friend and female friend.

The movements of the fish are observed. If both of them swim together, that is considered a sure indication of a happy married life.

The ceremony came to a close with ngāisen-konnabā

20. As dictated by Pandit Th. Madhab Singh and Shri N. Khelchandra Singh.
in which both the guardians of the two families exchanged betel nuts and leaves and bowed down to each other facing north and east. As soon as the ceremony completed, the bride is taken in a procession to the house of the bridegroom. Bridal gifts according to the means of the family are presented to the bride. These consist of mainly wooden furniture, clothes, utensils, ornaments, etc. When the bride reaches the gate of the groom's house, the rite of deoti okpa is repeated. The bride is then received by the mother-in-law and another lady of the family who conduct her into the house in embrace covering the back side of her with their innaphis (sheets). That this is an age-old practice is evident from Panthoibi Khongul. When Panthoibi was married to Khābā Taramkhoinhucā, her mother-in-law, Manu Teknga, received her in the same fashion as described above. 21 Then, the family of the groom entertains the guests with various kinds of food. In earlier times, meat and wine were the major items of food served in this ceremony. 22 Among the Lois, a sumptuous feast is still held in which rice, meat, wine etc., are served.

On the morning of the fifth day of marriage, some women (usually three) of the groom's family go to the house of the bride to open the covered basket which has been kept in the Phungā Lairu since the day of the marriage. The uncooked rice is then poured out and omens are read. Observing those creatures

22. Ibid., p. 41.
which may be found in the rice, the good or the evil of the newly married couple are predicted. The presence of ants and spiderwebs are considered a good omen. This process is known as chengluk nungshāng kāibā. In the afternoon of the same day, some women of the bride's family go to the house of the groom to open another covered or sealed basket or box. This basket was brought by the family of the bride to the house of the groom on the very day of marriage. Omens are similarly read and the fortune of the couple is predicted as above. This is known as phiruk hāngbā. In these modern days, on the fifth day after marriage a grand feast is held in the house of the bride in which the two families, their friends and relatives eat together. This is known as chākkoubā.

This is the traditional form of marriage as practised by the Meiteis since time immemorial. However, with the introduction of Hinduism certain changes have been introduced. This will be dealt with in Chapter VI.

Divorce:

Divorce has been in existence since very early stages of Meitei society. In Chenqleiron, we find how Thāngyi Tāoobung Khongdoubā, the Chenglei king divorced his wife Toibireimā on the ground that the latter was suffering from leprosy. Toibireimā, therefore, returned to her parental home in the Luwāng principality. Later when she was cured of the
disease they were re-united. In Khuman Kangleiron also we find how Ngānu Thumbi, mother of Shenba Mimābā, the Khuman king was divorced by his father Luwāng Ningthou Punshibā, the king of the Luwāng principality. Unlike marriage, divorce is a simple affair without any kind of ceremony. Khāinabā is the Meitei word generally applied to divorce. But in the strict sense of the term khāinabā is not absolute as divorce. In respect of the conjugal life of the spouses, khāinabā is nothing but divorce; but the wife does not automatically cease to belong to the husband or his family. A woman, after khāinabā, remains as belonging to the sāgei of her husband, however, long the period might be, until she becomes the wife of another man. If she dies after khāinabā but before becoming the wife of another man, the customary rites are performed by the family of her husband. Even after she becomes the wife of another man, and if she has a male issue by her former husband, her death rite is conducted by the said male issue, while her other issues by the second husband remain as strangers.23

There are several grounds of divorce, viz., incompatibility of temperament between the couple, childlessness or want of male children, adultery, etc. Divorce may come about from the husband's initiative or from the wife's. But, if one of the spouses initiates divorce without proper reasons, he or she is frowned upon by the community. If a divorced wife

re-marries neither the couple nor their offsprings are permitted to have active participation in many social and religious functions. Her husband and her son are forbidden to serve as cooks in the traditional offerings of food to the sagei ancestors. In the same way her former husband will also suffer the same stigma if he marries a divorcee or a widow. These social and religious stigmas to a very great extent serve as a means of controlling divorce in the Meitei society. Col. McCulloch's observation, "a man can put away his wife without any fault on her part, and if a person of influence he may do so without its being noticed. The rule, however, is, that if a men put's away his wife without any fault on her part, she takes possession of all his property except a drinking vessel and the cloth round his waist. A man and wife may separate by mutual consent, and a wife may quit her husband on giving the value of the slave." is misleading. It is not based on facts. No such rules or traditions had ever existed among the Meiteis. His statement about giving the value of a slave by the wife when she leaves the husband may be the return of mangkat or the bride-price. His observation is also contradicted by Hodson when he says "I must say that I never came across any case in which the rule mentioned above was even cited, and enquiries made among Manipuris of good position only elicited a denial of its existence. The statutory penalty for adulterary carrying with it divorce was fifty rupees, the

price of an adult slave." 25

After divorce, a re-union is not barred. If a wife is in a state of pregnancy at the time of khainabā, she is entitled to at least 12 pots of paddy as angāng-chāk-thāk. This customary maintenance allowance (angāng-chāk-thāk) allowed to a wife, though becoming rare these days, is still in vogue. When separation takes place by way of khānabā, a divorced wife can claim and take away her awoonpot (dowry). The customary laws concerning divorce, which has been existing since very ancient days, still hold good.

Inheritance:

The father is the absolute owner of all the property in his possession, whether ancestral or self-acquired. He can deal with it in any manner he likes, though he is guided by age-old customary laws. With regard to the inheritance of immovable property, all the sons equally share the parental property, but in the partition of the ingkhol (home-stead), though all the sons share it equally, the eldest son gets the southernmost side, the next the northern side and the youngest the northernmost side and so on. Normally, daughters do not inherit the paternal immovable property. This does not mean that they are debarred from inheriting such property. In the absence of sons, daughters inherit and share equally the

25. Hodson, op. cit., p. 91.
property of their father and transmit it to their posterity. Even in the presence of the sons, when a daughter undergoes khāinabā and is compelled to leave her husband's house, or if she becomes a widow and desires to stay at her parental home, she has a right to get an abode at her father's place so long as she remains such and does not remarry.26

As regards the movable property, a daughter at the time of marriage may be given as many articles as the family can provide including furniture, cloths, utensils, ornaments, etc. It is also not uncommon to give landed property to the daughters. As with the immovable property, all the movable property is shared equally by the sons. It is, however, a common practice for the father to portion out a greater share to the more needy ones. The paternal house is usually inherited by the youngest son.

If a father dies without leaving any son or daughter, his widow inherits the property over which she alone has the right. But she cannot alienate such property without any legal necessity and permission of the court.27 Again, should a father die without leaving his widow, sons and daughters and their descendants, his property will devolve on his father if alive and in his absence on his mother. In the absence of both father and mother the property will be inherited by the brother of the deceased and in his absence, by the sister. A son has an

27. Loc. cit.
unfettered right to sell the home-stead he inherited from his father, but he is bound to accommodate his divorced sister at his new residence.  

These customary practices are still very much in vogue among the Meiteis of today.

Birth:

A woman in the early stages of her pregnancy is not prohibited from doing all normal household works. But in the advanced stage of pregnancy she is expected to do only light domestic works. There is little restriction on diet for the expectant mother until the birth of her child. But, bitter food articles are avoided for fear of miscarriage. During the whole period of pregnancy, the woman and her husband are prohibited from killing or beating any animal as it is believed that the cruelty to animals might cause some harm to the unborn child. Twin-bananas are not eaten to forestall the birth of twins. The expectant mother is not to censure anything or anybody as it is believed that the child would get the very qualities she censures.

Around the fifth month of pregnancy, an important rite called kokthok chamthokpa is performed. It is a sort of atonement rite performed to prevent any obstruction at the time of delivery. Dr Parrat has described it thus: "In this, the mother

28. Ibid., p. 12.
is seated and her husband stands behind her, moving a burning piece of pinewood behind her head. He manipulates this torch until the shadow of his wife's head falls on her lap; the light is then extinguished. A Māība then brings a pot of water which is placed in the centre of the house and offerings of betal nut and fruit are made. After the pot and the offerings have been prayed over by the Māība the woman washes her hands and face outside the house with the water from the pot."

The birth of the baby is usually arranged in a secluded place of the house where the mother has to stay till the yumsengbā (purification) ceremony is performed. With the birth of the child the family as well as the sagei is considered to suffer temporary pollution. This is called 'yummāngbā' (pollution of the house). The mother spends the days in total isolation during this period.

The delivery of the child is generally performed by a Māībi who is considered to possess a fair skill in such cases. This Māībi is different from her name-sake the Māībi who conducts religious rituals. She is usually assisted by some women of the house and also by a woman from the neighbouring house known as māiyoknabi. Immediately after the birth of the child, the attending Māībi cuts the umbilical cord with a sharp stripe of bamboo. Then the placenta is

29. Parrat, op. cit., p. 77.
placed into an earthen pot and buried at the southern yenakhā (side verandah), if the child is a boy, and at the northern side if it is a girl. Thereafter, the Maibi bathes the baby in lukewarm water. The father then chants the name and glory of Sidabā Mapu, the Lord of the Universe through both the ears of the child. Then the baby is given breast-feeding by a woman having a nursing child. After three or four days, it is fed by its own mother.

On the morning of the fifth day of the birth, the ipānthābā ceremony is performed by the Maibi. The Maibi puts some cooked rice, curry and others on plantain leaves and these are placed on a domestic winnowing fan. The child is also placed on the winnowing fan after being bathed and wrapped with a piece of clean cloth. After offering the food along with the child to the goddess, Immoinu Ahongbi, the Maibi feeds the child symbolically by touching its lips. This process is repeated five times uttering the words:

Let the five souls be kept together by it.
Let the five souls and the shadow be kept together by it.
Let the hardships and sufferings of life be endured by it.
Let maturity and long life be attained by it.
Let the wise counsels of the revered teachers and parents be understood by it.

On each occasion the Maibi utters: mum mum, kuk kuk. At the time of the first rice eating ceremony called chaumba, performed

32. Mikouron, (MS).
three months after the birth of the child, the above process is repeated. Then the Māipi asks the mother whether she wants to keep the child or the fan and whether she would accept valuables in exchange for the child. The mother expresses her preference for the child. After repeating the process several times, the child is handed over to the mother.

Among the Los, the ipānthābā ceremony is performed on the fifth day of birth in the case of a boy and on the sixth day for a girl. The purification of the household is done by the Māibi on the third day of birth or on the day of ipānthābā by sprinkling water by a small leafy branch of tāiran tree (cedrala toona). This completes the ceremony.

As in marriage, today, the birth ritual is a mixed ceremony consisting of traditional as well as Hindu elements. But the customary practices described above are still followed by the Meiteis of today along with the Hindu practices.

Death Rites:

The Meiteis believe in the immortality and transmigration of the soul. Death is regarded as the separation of the soul from the body with a view to transmigrate into a new body. Hence, proper rites for the disposition of both the body and the soul are performed.

In ancient days, when a Meitei was on his last moments he was removed to the laplanka (a site in the middle
of the house) where he was allowed to die. This practice was in existence till the time of Garibnawaz in the eighteenth century. A dying person is always attended by a Maiba and as soon as the end comes he withdraws his hand off the body. This is called khutthaba which is signal of death. This is followed by the wails and cries of near and dear ones. As soon as the news of the death is heard, people assemble at the house of the deceased and preparation for the funeral ceremony begins. A small thatched shed called khängpokshang is made at khänglenpham (the south-eastern corner of the courtyard of the house). Khänglenpham is so called as it is believed that the dead take a temporary refuge at it before its journey towards the land of death. In the meantime, all the paraphernalia needed for the funeral are also arranged.

The body is always carried through the náktha, and then kept inside the hut at the khänglenpham upon a long plaintain leaf. The body is then bathed and dressed. Three sheets of cloth are placed at the bottom of the coffin. After the body is put inside the coffin another three other sheets of cloth covers the body. The coffin is also covered by another sheet.

The treatment of the body once practised by the different sections of ancient Meiteis were varied. According

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34. The northern side of the open verandah of the house.
to the ancient religious text, Shakok Lamlen, four different forms of disposal of the dead, viz., ishingi potloi (disposal in water), nungshitki potloi (disposal in air), meigi potloi (disposal in fire) and leipākki potloi (disposal in earth) were practised by the ancient Meiteis. Ishingi potloi is the disposal of the body by throwing it into the water. This system existed in Manipur in ancient days. The phrase 'Loktāk ngāmi themnabā' which is still current among the people in their common parlance means the disposal of the body in the Loktāk lake. Nungshitki potloi is the exposure of the corpse in the air. This system was practised till very recently for certain kinds of abnormal deaths such as suicide, etc. Meigi potloi is the burning of the corpse and leipākki potloi is the burial of the dead. Meigi potloi is carried on by the Loi community even to this day, but leipākki potloi is no longer practised by the Meiteis.

As in Indo-China, burial was the traditional form of the disposal of dead among the different sections of people in pre-Hindu Manipur. In this the corpse was either burnt or buried. But in both cases, coffins were invariably used. Since the eighteenth century the Meiteis adopted the Hindu mode of cremation but still the use

of coffin is continued. Then the bones of the buried or burnt corpse were collected. These were then placed into the wallong (an earthen pitcher) for final burial. In archaic language, this was known as luphu -chanba.

The funeral procession starts as soon as the coffin is lifted from the khānglenpham. The khāngpokshang is also demolished and is carried along with the dead body. A Maibā or a person well acquainted with the funeral conducts the procession. In former days the presence of pena khongbā (pena singer) was essential.

For those who burnt the corpse, as soon as the coffin reached the graveyard it was placed on the sacrificial wood. Certain rites were performed by the Maibā. A torch was kindled by rubbing two ignitable hard substances (meibā chingbā). Then, the Maibā bearing the torch, followed by the near relatives and others, walked round the pyre five times in case the dead person was a man and six times in the case of woman before the pyre was set on fire.37

Among the Lois, till the present day, while the body is lying at khānglenpham, two persons each with spear and shield would perform a ritualistic dance moving round the corpse five times with cries of uh, ha, ha, etc., in order to drive away evil spirits. If the deceased is a woman, no such rite is performed. Then the coffin is lifted by three pestles.

37. Shakok Lamlen (MS).
each handled by two persons and is taken away to the graveyard. The procession is headed by a torch-bearer followed by the two persons with spear and shield. The Māibā follows them holding a yempāk (a kind of umbrella) over his head. A retired official of the singloop (the name of a village institution) brings food for the dead. They are followed by the pena singer. The coffin is carried behind him. Other mourners follow the coffin. An earthen pitcher (meikoi chaphu) and yu (wine) are brought by the womenfolk. The coffin is then placed on the pyre and is kindled by the Māibā.

As soon as the fire burns out, it is extinguished with water usually by a son-in-law of the deceased. The five or six women of the nearest kin collect the bones with bamboo tongs already prepared by the Māibā, five in the case of men and six in the case of women. The bones so collected, are then washed and cleaned with water and wine after which they are arranged into a human figure and tied with unstarched threads. The figure is then wrapped by a white sheet of cloth and is put into a wālong (an earthen jar). The wālong is then brought home by one of the women who collected the bones or by a female member of the family. The jar is kept inside the house and dressed according to the sex of the deceased. It is then carried to another graveyard, accompanied by pena singers and drummers. There the Māibā lowers it into the grave, with due accompanying rites. Then offerings of food are made and a yempāk is also kept standing over the grave. A final rite called mangthong thingbā.
(the sealing of the grave) is performed by the *maibā*. It is believed that the spirit of the dead man always attempts to take away the lives of his near and dear ones. Hence, the rite of mangthong thingba is performed in order to forestall the possibility.

Cremation as the mode of disposal of the dead corpse has been in existence among the Loi community at least since the beginning of the Christian era. This is evident from the following text from *Poireiton Khunthokpā*:

> Chakpā Keithonghāo pākhāng-o meikhu nonglon kābā asidi kūri meino hāithabādā ayum Chakpā hemcheng phuyik meichakai kākup mei charu tangshoi mei phudit nongphai meibu nātte. Chakpā khāmpok leima Mahoungambi mapārī Shangphurāhu khēra khutyon thana nongmalle adugibu ayum Chakpā meiyikmei hemcheng meirou meine.38

> Oh youth Chakpā Keithonghāo, the fire which is rising in the air—is this fire? It is not the fire for burning the pitcher of our Chakpās (the maker of pitcher) nor is it the fire for burning the straw. Shangphurāba, son of Chakpā Khāngpok Leima Mahoungambi died accidentally and the fire that is seen is the one meant for burning the dead body of the Chakpā.

> For those who buried the corpse, the dead body was kept for three days and pre-burial rites were performed to the accompaniment of drums and songs.39 Then the body was brought to the graveyard and was buried with due rites. The

rite of mangthong thingba was similarly performed by the Māibā or a man well acquainted with the rite. After about a year or so, the grave was excavated. A rite called 'mangthong hāngbā' (opening of the grave) was also performed at the grave. Then the bones especially the skull were exhumed. These were then washed in a long (a kind of basket) and exposed in the sun. Thereafter, the bones were placed into a wallong and buried in another graveyard.

For the royal burials, the services of some particular families or yumnāks were requisitioned. A big richly decorated coffin called 'Kāiren Kajō' was used. The coffin was made only by a particular family called Thlongbam. The decorated coffin was brought to the graveyard along with the regalia and other articles such as royal dresses, utensils, ornaments, etc. The royal grave was dig up only by the Tokpam family and the earth was removed only by the Mungkhom family. The latter also performed the rite of mangthong thingba. Until its excavation, the grave was under the care of the Mangshātābam family who also performed the work of offering food and trimming of the lamp. After about one year, the Ayam family performed the rite of mangthong hāngbā. Again, the services of the Tokpam and Mungkhom families were requisitioned for the excavation of the grave. Then the bones, especially the skull, were taken out by the Shatokpam family. The hair, if any, was shaven by the Akhām family.
The bones, thus collected, were washed clean in the same fashion described above by five families, viz., Ahanthem, Longjam, Thoidingjam, Akoijam and Amākcham. The 'long' in which the bones were washed must be made only by the Khumukcham family. After being washed the bones were exposed in the sun for five days and to protect it from birds and others, four families viz., Putonjam, Shāntonjam, Amākcham and Kāndepmayum guarded the bones. After five days the bones were wrapped in a clean cloth woven by the Yumlembam family. This was then put into a wāllong and then carried to another graveyard. Once again, the services of the Tokpam and Mungkhom families were requisitioned to dig up the grave where the wāllong was to be buried by the Pāllujam family. The Tongbram family would pile up the earth over the grave. A final rite of mangu thong thingba was performed and offerings of food were made over the grave. As late as 1697 A.D. when King Pāikhombā died, his body was buried and later exhumed, and the bones were buried according to the customary rites. These customary practices came to an end in 1724 A.D. when Caribnewāz exhumed the bones of his forefathers and cremated them on the bank of the Ningthi (Chindwin river) and ordered his subjects to burn their dead according to the Hindu mode of cremation.

40. Purol Mashin, (mS).
42. Ibid., p. 73.
The disposal of the dead body either by burial or by burning followed by jar burial once prevalent among the Meiteis was also commonly practised by the Burmese and other Indo-Chinese people. Shway Yoe describes the disposal of the dead as practised by the Burmese thus: "When the fire has burnt out, two or three of the nearest of kin come and search about among the ashes for the bones. They were washed clean with coconut milk, and in the case of the great people of the Lower Burma of late years, often with lavender water, eau de Cologne, or any of Atkinsons or Piesse and Lutins Scents. They are then wrapped up in clean white cloths, and placed in a newly made earthenware pot which is not uncommonly gilt, or covered with pictures of sacred events taken from the birth stories. This is then taken back to the house temporarily .... Then the pot containing the bones, if the dead person was burnt, is taken to the graveyard and buried."43 Among the Chinese, a kind of pot burial was prevalent. But, unlike the system as found among the Burmese, the Chinese did not cremate the dead. The dead body was put into the coffin and buried. After about seven years, the bones were exhumed and placed in a pot. The pot was left exposed for an indefinite period and then entombed.44

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The Meiteis observe death pollution not only by the family of the deceased but the sāgei as a whole, until a purification ceremony is performed. In Lois community, this is done on the third day of death by the Māibā by sprinkling water with a leafy branch of tāiren tree (cedrela toona). In Shakok Lamlen, we find the purification ceremony of the ancient Meiteis was performed on the tenth day of death. This was followed by mathou yāngenbā (srāddha ceremony). A sumptuous feast was held in which all the friends, relatives and neighbours were invited. Before partaking the feast, texts from the sacred books like Pakhangbā Lāihui, Sanāmahi Lāihui and Nongshābā Lāihui were recited. Offerings of food and cloths were made to Sidabā, the Supreme Lord, so that the departed soul might live peacefully in the abode of the Lord. When the feast was ready, the Māibā performed a rite called 'yāithong shā-hunbā,' the offering of food to the departed soul, by throwing the food ceremoniously five times for men and six times for females. Then, the Māibā asked all those present to partake of the food. The same sumptuous feast was repeated at the end of the year. Today, the Meiteis follow the basic Hindu pattern of srāddha and samasōr.

For infants dying under three years of age, there prevail separate modes of disposal for both the body and the soul. The spirits of such dead children are considered to be

45. Madhab and Khelchandra, op. cit., p. 70.
very malignant and hence proper rites are performed so that it may never again trouble the family. The spirit of the male infant is called soren and that of female, apumbi. Apumbi and soren are one of the most dreaded spirits. People of all kinds never dare to tread over their graves for fear of some disease caused by these spirits especially the disease of the eye. It is still believed that these spirits are always on a look-out to re-enter the womb of the mother rather than any other woman. As it is believed that the re-incarnated child would also die young, the parents of the dead child perform certain prescribed ceremonies to prevent a further misfortune.

The corpse of infants is wrapped with cloth and is placed into an earthen pot. No wooden coffin is used. As in the case of others, the body is kept at khanglenpham but no thatched shed is constructed. There is no ceremonial procession and the body is silently carried and buried in deep groves or river bank where people seldom tread. As in others, the rite of mangthong thingba is performed and as a part of it a branch of thorny saltingkhang plant is placed above the lid of the pot but below the surface of the grave. J. Shakespear describes the burial thus; "The Maiba, or priest of the ancient gods of the country, buries with the corpse some well-roasted peas, saying, 'When these peas spring up you may return, and not before.' In Andro, a village inhabited by people who have not yet been converted to Hinduism, the Maiba takes a stone and a little cotton wool and having put the stone into the right and the
wool into the left hand of the dead child, he throws them into some water, saying, 'You are bad; do not return till this stone floats and this cotton sinks.' A more or less similar custom is said to prevail among the Burmese. Shway Yoe describes it thus: "a piece of iron is placed in the cloth in which the body is wrapped, or in the coffin if there is one, and at the burial some member of the family says some such formula as 'Never more return into thy mother's womb till this metal becomes soft as down.'

After the burial, a branch of the thorny saiting-khang plant is kept hanging at the main door of the house. This is also done to prevent the possible re-entry of the spirit into the house. House-pollution is observed for one day only. On the third day of the death, the Māibā performs a rite called lāi-yupānthābā in which the Māibā invokes the spirit of the dead child and offered a hand of banana ending with si (even number) with various other food and clothing. The cloth offered varies according to the sex of the deceased infant. Then addressing the spirit of the dead child the Māibā utters, "We have given your food and clothing. Go and do not return."

A more important and final ritual to ward off the spirits from entering into the family and into the womb of the mother is performed three months after the death of the infant. This

47. Yoe Shway, op. cit., p. 2.
is known as 'sorenthingatpā.' For this various articles are collected. Among them, a hand of bannana ending with chang (odd) and two hands of banana ending with si (even), rice flour, parched rice, egg, fruits and cloths. Then the Maiba facing Mount Koubru in the northern side of the valley recites a prayer to the Lord Sidaba by offering the articles. Then the Maiba offers a portion of the articles to Lamjāsaran-lāthokpā (roaming spirits troubling mankind), requesting to accept the offering and not to disturb the worship. Finally, both the parents and the Maiba would stand in the north-east corner of the homestead. The Maiba then hands over a winnowing fan containing all the articles to the father. The parents hold the winnowing fan together over their heads. In the meantime, the Maiba recites Hymns to Lord Sidaba requesting Him to make the spirit of the dead infant to be satisfied with the offering and not to return to the family again. The winnowing fan is then returned to the Maiba who collects for himself the contents. This completes the soren-thingatpā, the appeasement of the spirit. This practice still prevails unchanged among the Meiteis.

Women, who die before or during childbirth are considered to be unlucky and they are accorded a separate treatment. In such cases, first of all the foetus is removed from the mother and is buried separately. While the corpse of the mother is disposed of in the ordinary manner, a special ritual is performed to ward off the evil influence of the
spirits especially upon the husband. For this ritual, various articles are collected and kept in the courtyard while the Maibā is sitting just in front of the verandah of the house. To the far left front of the Maibā, three cloths are laid and on these a hand of banana covered by three mora pieces cloth is placed to represent the corpse of the deceased woman. To the right front a bunch of flowers meant for God Sanamahi is placed, and in front of the Maibā is placed a pot-ful of water. To the right of the corpse, pans and betal nuts, twelve cups (kagāms) and twelve pitchers (chaphu) full of rice with lime on top of each are laid. In front of these articles, a winnowing fan is placed over a mat and then further ahead two baskets, each containing paddy and rice are laid and a branch of nongleishang (a kind of tree) is planted. A cloth containing coins is kept hanging over the seng-gam (a bamboo pole suspended on two posts). Finally five discs of salt are kept, suspended along the front of the verandah.

The ritual starts when the Maibā, reciting incantations, sprinkles water on the hearth by using a bunch of tāiren leaves. He removes some earth from the hearth and puts them on a leaf and then, accompanied by three persons, walks around the hearth three times. After this the Maibā sprinkles water on the body of the husband. All the articles are then taken to the house of the Maibā, except the five discs of salt kept suspended along the verandah. These are thrown outside the village to neutral the bad luck and also to prevent the
recurrence of the catastrophe. Finally, the Māiba returns to his own house without looking back. This done all the evil influence of the spirits is considered perfectly neutralised.

Among the Shans when a woman dies before childbirth, the foetus is removed and buried separately, lest the spirit should trouble that of the mother in a future birth. The corpse of the woman is buried in the usual way, and a ritual is performed to remove the evil influence on the husband. Immediately after the burial, the husband should change into ragged clothes beside the grave and feign madness. The villagers then pelt him with stones and he plunges into a river. On emerging the changes into new clothes and returns clean. Among the Burmese also the death of woman before childbirth is considered unnatural and unlucky. Thus, if a married woman dies before bearing a child, a caesarian operation is performed and the embryo is buried in some secret place. If it is not done in this way, it is believed, the husband in another both would marry the very woman again and she would again meet with the same fate.

In the case of unnatural deaths such as suicide, drowning, falling from the tree, death at childbirth and also the death of bachelors, spinsters, etc., a rite called 'chūp-shābā' is performed. In this various kinds of food, cloths

49. Yoe, Shway, op. cit., p. 2.
coins, fishes, fouls, etc., are offered to the Almighty God so that similar tragedy might not visit the family in future. The rite is also performed when a person suffers severe humiliations so that the same may not occur to him or to his near relations once again. In chūp-shābā, the Māibā or the priest recites the sacred verses from the most ancient ballad Numit Kāppa (shooting the sun). As in marriage and others, the death-rite among the present-day Meiteis is a composite one. While some of the traditional elements, such as the burial system, has been given up in favour of the Hindu system of cremation, some other traditional practices such as the disposal and other accompanying rites relating to the death of infants, pregnant women, etc., still survive in the Meitei society. The special rite of chūp-shābā connected with abnormal deaths is still in practice. Whatever modifications introduced by the advent of Hinduism will be discussed in Chapter VI.

Lāllup:

The system of lāllup once practised in Manipur under its monarchical rule was a universal and unique institution among the Meiteis. It reveals the entire, social, political and economic structure of pre-British Meitei society. In those days the populace paid no taxes to the state exchequer.

and, instead, they were bound to render personal services to the state. This compulsory state service is called lāllup.

Lāllup was a very old institution. Dr Brown surmised that the system was first introduced during the time of King Pākhāngbā in the first century A.D. But the system in its well-organised form had been in existence since the time of King Loiyambā in the twelfth century A.D. In 1110 A.D. King Loiyambā introduced a kind of division of labour and a code of conduct to be followed by all his subjects according to which every individual or family was assigned a particular job or occupation. Thus, the people had to follow their own respective trades. All these were incorporated in his famous edict, called 'Loiyambā-Shinyen.'

Since the time of King Loiyambā, people began to perform lāllup in their own respective lines or trades.

Under the system, every male member of the state save the uppermost strata of the society aged between seventeen and sixty was required to place his services at the disposal of the state for ten days out of every forty days. This service was so arranged that a man worked his ten days and had his interval of thirty days with regularity all through the year. Lāllup was originally a war organisation (lal=war,

52. Ibungoinal and Khelchandra, op. cit., p. 4.
53. Khelchandra, op. cit., p. 84.
Subsequently, it also began to play a role in the economic life of the country, such as construction of roads, bridges, houses, digging canals, weaving, carpentry, blacksmith, so on and so forth. Thus, from an exclusive war organisation, Lallup had become a socio-politico-economic organisation.

But, the people were not given any remuneration directly in cash or kind. Some British authors and administrators have described Lallup as unpaid labour having taken note only of the non-payment of direct remuneration. Sir James Johnstone however refused to consider it that way when he said, "The Manipuris paid very little revenue in money and none in direct taxes. The land all belonged to the Rajah, and every holding paid a small quantity of rice each year. The chief payment was in personal service. This system known by the name of 'Lallup', and by us often miscalled 'forced labour' was much the same as formerly existed in Assam under its Ahom Rajas." 54

As in Manipur so in Assam, a more or less similar system existed during the time of Ahom Kings under the title of "Khel system." According to the system, the adult population of Assam was divided into 'Khels' having to render specific service to the state such as arrow-making, boat building, fighting, writing, revenue collecting, road building,

catching and training of elephants, superintendence of horses, training of hawks, supervision of forests, etc. An adult male whose name was registered for state service was called a 'paik' and four 'paiks' constituted a unit called a 'got'. One man in a 'got' had to serve the state for three months in a year at the end of which his place was taken by a second man from the same 'got' and so forth. The remaining three paiks looked after the cultivation and other domestic concerns of their absent comrade. In cases of emergency two and even three men, were recruited for state service from each 'got'. The levy of one man from each 'got' was called the 'mul', of two the 'dowal' and of three the 'tewal'. 55

For the convenient administration of lāllup, the Meitei population was divided into several divisions called 'pānas' or units of society. Formerly there were four pānas but subsequently it was increased to six pānas, viz., anallup, nāharup, khabam, lāipham, hidākphanbā and potsangbā. Every Meitei was necessarily a member of one these pānas. Each of these pānas sent a team of workers who were to work for the state. These men attending lāllup were divided into as many sections as there were departments (loishangs). According to Hodson, the number of these divisions was as high as 107, exclusive of the military divisions or regiments and the Loi and Naga villages. Each of these 107 subdivisions 55. Bhuyan, S.K., Anglo-Assamese Relations, Gauhati, 1974, pp. 10-11.
had a number of officials some of whom held ex-officio positions on the 'Cheirap', the chief judicial authority in the country.56

The head of the pānā and all officers were appointed by the Raja and, generally, without reference to their origin. They were responsible for the performance of the prescribed duties of the lāllu. The head of each pānā was an officer called Lākpa. The heads of the pānas were known as Ahallup Lākpa, Nāhārup Lākpa, Lāiphām Lākpa, Phunonāi Sang Lākpa.57 An important functionary of the lāllu, though subordinate in rank, was an officer called lāllu chingbā. He was the head of the Khundin. "Khundin is a branch of the lāllu and consists of the duty of seeing that the men liable to lāllu are regular in attendance, and covers cases of illness where a substitute is provided."58

The meeting in the Khundin was held on the ninth day of the lāllu.59 Persons who would not be able to attend the lāllu in the next turn on account of illness or other circumstances should inform the lāllu chingbā. Such cases were considered in the Khundin and if any of them was considered genuine, they were exempted from the lāllu service. Lāllu absentees,

56. Hodson, op. cit., p. 60.
57. Potsangbā are called pānā khutmei or phunonāi and were under the charge of Phunonāi Sang Lākpa.
who failed to give prior information to their concerned officers, were fined or given lashes of phibul, which was always kept hanging in the loishangs.

Thus, in the event of an individual wishing to escape his turn of duty, he must either provide a substitute or pay a certain sum, which would be paid to his substitute, if required, or the rest of the lāllup could do the extra duty by accepting the money. In no case would the money so paid for exemption go to the Government. But it may happen that in spite of a man providing a substitute for himself, the state might again requisition his service as the particular work could not be performed well by none other than himself. In such circumstances he had to lose the money already paid, while still not free from his assigned duty. Such a case was known as 'lāllup shu kābā wāshā shu shēbā' (lāllup shu kābā=attending the lāllup, wāshā shu shēbā=paying the fine).

It was the duty of the head of each family or tribe to provide proper persons for various services required of that tribe in his own pēnā. If a man had several sons, the eldest had to serve as ningthou senbā (personal attendant of the king). The second and the fourth had to work in the leikāi shangshāroi. Their chief duty was to make houses, bridges, etc., for which they should collect the materials. The third son

60. According to Khelchandra Singh, phibul is a customary whipping instrument for giving lashes to the lāllup offenders.
had to serve as lālmi (army).

Certain sections of the Meitei population were exempted from the state service. They were the members of the royal family, the sons and grandsons of officials like the Lākpā, sana matei, leimā matei and their sons, the members of the family of the Rani etc.61 In Assam, the nobles, priests and persons of high casta and those engaged in replaceable occupations were exempted from the state service.62

The Brahman and the Muslim communities also served lālup. The main duty of the Brahmans was to cook for the king and for the temple of Govindaji. The Muslims worked as sepoys, tuners, gardeners and porters. They had a separate loishang known as pangal loishang established since the time of King Khāgembā (1596-1652 A.D.). The Naga and the Loi communities of the state did not serve the lālup. They, however, paid regular tributes to the king and also worked for the state whenever they were assigned particular duties.

It was often thought that lālup caused much hardship to the common people. But Sir James Johnstone thought that the system was a good one and when not carried to excess, pressed heavily on nobody. He further stated that

A sana matei is the husband of a girl belonging to the royal family. A leima matei is the husband of a girl born of a woman belonging to the royal family.
he had never heard of it being complained of as a hardship. Mrs. Grimwood also thought likewise when she remarked, "It was a system that answered very well and the people seemed well to do and contented."64

The system of lāllup indeed benefitted the country tremendously. The proper administration of the country both civil and military, the economic and other developmental works would have almost been impossible without the operation of lāllup. Manipur, though small, was once a prosperous country. Its prosperity naturally attracted the attention of invaders from its hostile and warlike neighbours. Since plundering a neighbouring state was at that time the most profitable exploit, raids and counter-raids were the order of those days. The country, therefore, needed a large body of fighting men and also large amounts of materials both for defensive and offensive purposes. Being small in size and population, the kingdom raised its forces by inducting the services of one man from every family while the rest worked for the economic and other developmental purposes. By working in their respective loishangs (departments) every able-bodied citizen contributed his share according to his station in life for the benefit of the community and the state. Thus, all the public and other developmental works were once executed

64. Grimwood, op. cit., p. 54.
under this arrangement.

The system of lālīlup had been in existence till it was abolished in April, 1892, by the British Government which took over the administration of the state after the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891.

Singloop:

Just as every Meitei was a member of the lālīlup, he was at the same time a member of singloop (wood-club), under which he contributed voluntary social works. Every village in Manipur had such an organisation by virtue of which the individual members lived in an atmosphere of mutual help and co-operation. Dr Brown thought that this resembled the Panchayats of Bengal. The function of this organisation was primarily social in nature but sometimes it also exercised political and judicial functions such as deciding petty cases or disputes among the villagers. Singloop was a primary social group where there was direct interaction or close personal contact among the members. A group of village elders acted as the chief functionary of the singloop.

The main function of the singloop was to provide any kind of possible help to the needy fellow villagers. Thus, in cases of death, sickness, extreme poverty, etc., the

singloop helped the affected individual or bereaved family with all kinds of assistance, physical and material. When a member of the singloop was ill and dying, other members used to be present at his house day and night and rendered all possible help. When he died, the members of the singloop would arrange the disposal of the dead body and also the accompanying rites and ceremonies. If the dead person was to be burnt, the members contributed firewood for the burning of the corpse. Each individual was expected to bring a log when he came to the house of the deceased. This was called 'sing-yen'. From the very day of death, two or three persons periodically would attend the house of the deceased at night till the 'mathou-mangam' (srāddha ceremony) was performed.

In the event of a villager falling into a state of extreme poverty these clubs supplied him with necessary food. In this way, even though an individual was extremely poor, actual starvation or fatal neglect of him was un-imaginable in those days. Col. McCulloch's observation regarding the activities of the singloop is worth-quot ing, "A person in London might die all above of sickness without its being known to, or even much cared for by his next door neighbour. This could not well happen in Munnipore."66

With the advent of modernity the institution of singloop itself had gradually faded away, but much of its

beneficial functions are still prevalent in the social fabric of the Meiteis.

Slavery:

The institution of slavery is ancient and world-wide; but it varied greatly in character and oppressiveness. In Manipur slavery of a mild type was in existence from an early period. The system that once existed in Manipur was, however, very different from the much-dreaded form of slavery as found in American and West Asian countries. According to Sir James Johnstone, "It was a great abuse but slavery in Manipur must not be put in the same rank as slavery in Brazil, the West Indies, or Turkey and Arabia."\[67\] Col. McCulloch also subscribes the same view when he says, "If the word slave has conveyed to the mind the idea of people in the condition of slaves of America, it is a wrong one."\[68\]

In view of its mild nature, some classes of slaves of Manipur may practically be described as inferior servants. They live in the same house as their masters, eat in the same kitchen and are for all purposes treated like members of the family of the master. People who chose to work as slaves at their own request could go free whenever they liked.

\[67\] Johnstone, op. cit., p. 117.
According to Col. McCulloch the cause of such class of slaves was 'sheer laziness'.

Ill-treatment of slaves was a rare phenomenon. Dr Brown notes, "Ill-usage of slaves does not seem common, they are generally treated as parts of the family with whom they reside and do not hesitate to run away when they are ill-treated, which creates a scandal and is carefully avoided. Cases of cruelty do however occur but such cases are exceptional."

When a slave ran away, it was customary for the new master to pay the price of the slave to the former master. In such cases, the prestige of the former master was considerably affected while that of the new master was enhanced. Such social checks also made it possible for the slaves to receive a lenient treatment from their masters.

Unlike ordinary citizens, slaves were not requisitioned to render the state service of lāllup. Their position was thus in a sense better than that of the poor free citizens whose lives were burdened by poverty as well as by the compulsory state service of lāllup. This was probably one of the reasons why many poor people in those days voluntarily became slaves.

Even though slavery in Manipur was one of a mild nature slaves were after all slaves. Their lot was far from

69. Loc. cit.
enviable. The difference between the slaves of Manipur and that of other countries was but a matter of degree. The slaves were more or less regarded as the exclusive property of the master. In some classes of slavery, not only the slaves themselves but also their offspring also automatically became the absolute property of the master. This class of slaves could be sold or mortgaged by the master and they could hardly redeem their freedom. Their offspring became hereditary slaves. The master could separate the children from their parents and sell them whenever he wished to do so. Such a cruel practice was abolished by King Devendra Singh in 1850 A.D. In ancient Rome, the practice of selling of slaves in the open market was in existence but laws were subsequently enforced to keep parents and children together.\(^{71}\)

Even after regaining their freedom, slaves could never attain the status of a free-born citizen. As in other countries, social and marital relation between a slave and a free-born individual was considered a taboo. A free slave could not ordinarily marry a free-born girl. Nor could he actively participate in the social and religious ceremonies. For instance, a freed slave was not allowed to become a cook in the ancestral rituals of his clan. Though slaves were socially inferior to the free citizens, they were never considered as racially inferior, for slaves belong to the

same racial stock as their masters. Slavery was considered an accident or misfortune that might befall any man, not as the natural and indeliable mark of an inferior race.

Varrier Eluin defines "A slave as someone who is the property of another person and entirely subject to him." 72 According to Chrysippus, "a slave is labourer hired for life." 73 Such definitions of a slave cannot altogether be applied to the slaves of Manipur. Majority of the slaves of Manipur fall outside the scope of the above definitions. This will be evident from the following classification of slaves as found in Manipur.

There existed two classes of slaves in Manipur, viz., the Mināi Chānnabā and Mināi Ashānbā. The former was the exclusive property of the master. Most of them were made slaves against their will. In theory these slaves could gain freedom but in reality they could hardly have the means to redeem their freedom. Dun says, "Nothing can be said in favour of the system under which many people became slaves, not of their own free will." 74 Prisoners of war, persons who committed serious crimes and people sold by their relatives and were made slaves belonged to this category.

In the later case, persons became slaves voluntarily.

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72. Eluin, V., A Philosophy for NEFA, Sillong, 1764, p. 129.
73. Hunter, op. cit., p. 23.
74. Dun, E.W., Gazetteer of Manipur, Calcutta, 1886, p. 25.
Poverty, debt, laziness, etc., were the causes of this form of slavery. Many people sold or mortgaged themselves out of monetary considerations. According to McCulloch, this class of slaves was "like giving work in lieu of the interest of the money paid, and should the person who becomes 'ashánbā' get sick, he was obliged to give a substitute or make good in coin the labour lost in the interval of sickness." There were also people who did not sell or mortgage themselves but voluntarily went to the houses of the rich to serve as servants. These people were neither in debt nor were in need of a repayment. Since these slaves were not debtors, they could achieve their liberty whenever they wished. Consequently the masters also treated these slaves in the most liberal way.

The selling of wives and children though a rare phenomenon, was prevalent among the Meiteis. It was not uncommon for a man in a serious financial situation to sell his wife and children. Dr Brown writes, "a not common form of this kind of slavery is that of parents disposing of their children either temporarily or permanently - a fruitful source of immorality. It is said that this is only resorted to the extreme cases such as want of food, etc., and is looked upon as a disgrace." In the neighbouring countries of Burma and Assam the selling of wives and daughters was also quite common. Michael Symas notes that, "The Burmese

75. McCulloch, op. cit., p. 25.
considered women as little superior to the brute stock of their farms; and that they also sold their daughters and wives. In Assam also the selling and buying of slaves were practised openly. Sir Edward Gait writes that slaves were bought and sold in open market, the price ranging from about twenty rupees for an adult male of good caste to three rupees for a low caste girl. The selling of wives by their husbands was also similarly done. For instance, during the reign of king Gadadhar Simha in 1685 A.D., a man sold his wife to a priest of Kamakhya at the cost of eight rupees and an embroidered sari.

Many people also became slaves because they had committed certain criminal and civil offences. Criminals became the slaves of the rich and influential people as the latter either saved them from heavy punishment or paid the fine for their crime. When a person was unable to pay a fine imposed by the court, he was sold as a slave. Robbers, when they were caught but the stolen goods were not recovered, were also sold as slaves. In cases of adultery, if the offending man was unable to pay the fine or the damages to the injured husband, he or his family was forced to become slaves.

78. Gait, op. cit., p. 216.
In ancient Manipur, the king, the nobles and most of the wealthy individuals possessed slaves. The slaves of the king were numerous and divided into several groups according to their functions. The Raja's slaves were divided into Ayokpā, Tengkhul and Kei. When there occurred a change of rulers in the kingdom, it was customary to seize the former slaves of the last ruler and to divide them amongst the adherents of the new ruler. This practice was found to entail upon individuals more hardship than the worth of the slave. Slaves, therefore, when seized, were not distributed amongst adherents, but made to work for the Raja under the name of Ayokpa. The chief duty of the king's slaves was to cultivate the royal lands, to look after the royal barns, to keep the palace neat and clean and also to do all the menial work of the palace.

The gift of slaves was also a common practice among the kings and nobles. It was customary for the king to give a number of slaves as part of the dowry at the time of the marriage of their daughters, sisters, etc. Besides, favourite ministers and others were also occasionally rewarded by a gift of a slave. Slaves owned by the king and nobles were of various kinds both voluntary and involuntary; while ordinary individuals could generally acquire them through purchase.

The institution of slavery was one of the major social evils in the old Meitei society. No attempt was, however, made during the long monarchical history of Manipur to end this evil. The reasons were obvious. The king who had a large number of slaves and was greatly benefitted by it naturally did not bother to enforce a law to put the system to an end, even though there were checks against the abuse and misuse of the system. To cite an instance, in 1850 A.D. King Devendra Singh put an end to the inhuman practice of selling the children of slaves by their masters. Moreover, the masters and nobles, who used to be benefitted by the system indirectly encouraged the continuance of the system by way of exacting fines from the criminals and civil offenders and forcing them to become their slaves in the event of their failure to pay such fees.

The institution of slavery had been officially in existence in Manipur till it was abolished on 29th April 1892 by the British Government which took over the administration of the state since the British conquest of Manipur in 1871.