Hinduism is of comparatively recent introduction in Manipur. It became the dominant religion of the land during the reign of Pamheiba\(^1\) (1709–1748). As Hodson observes, "To the royal will of Pamheiba, the monarch in whose reign the fortunes of the State reached their zenith, Hinduism owes its present position as the official religion of the State. At first the decrees of the king received but little obedience, and the opposition to the change centred mainly round the numerous members of the royal family who were supported, not unnaturally, by the maibas, the priests of the older religion. Religious dissent was treated with the same ruthless severity as was meted out to political opponents, and wholesale banishments and execution drove the people into acceptance of the tenets of Hinduism."\(^2\) There is, however, evidence of early Hindu influence on the people of the land. Some Brahmins came from the west and settled here during the reign of Kyamba in the 15th century but they had no significant impact on the life of the Meeteis in absence of any support from the king. Brahmin migration continued presumably with the permission of the kings. These settlers were allotted clan (sagei) names and through

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1. Pamheiba was also known as Garib Niwaz, a persian name indicating the influence of Islam at that time.
2. Hodson, T.C., The Meitheis, p. 95
interrmarriage with Meetei women were absorbed into the Meetei community.¹

During the reign of Charai Rongba (1697-1709) some Vaishnava saints came to this land. The king and his family were initiated into the new faith.² According to the chronicle, the king and some of his nobles took the sacred thread after a day's fasting.³ Conversion of the king to a foreign religion was possible only because there had already been at least some influence of Vaishnavism in court circles. Kennedy thinks that Vaishnavism of the Chaitanya sect was introduced in Manipur as early as the 17th century.⁴ Charai Rongba never attempted to impose the new religion upon the people as a whole. At his initiative a Vishnu temple was constructed. A temple of the goddess Kālī was also built. At the same time the king paid respects to the old faith and temples were erected in honour of the lais of the traditional religion.⁵

The process of forcible Hinduization was carried out by Pamheiba (Garib Niwaz), son of Charai Rongba. He was

¹. Bamon Khunthoklon, pp. 1-4
³. Cheitharol Kumbaba, p. 56
⁴. Kennedy, M.T., The Caitanya Movement : A Study of the Vaishnavism of Bengal, p. 73
⁵. Cheitharol Kumbaba, pp. 59-60
initiated into Vaishnavism by Guru Gopal Das. He punished those who violated Hindu dietary laws. Consumers of cow meat and of any other meat were beaten and it was forbidden to keep pigs and hens in the housing areas. Cremation was made the customary method of disposal of the dead. A temple of Lord Krishna was built. A large tank was excavated and images of Krishna and Kālī were placed on the bank as part of the consecration ceremonials. The proselytizing of Pamheiba displaced the traditional gods. He destroyed several temples of Umanglais.¹

In the later part of Pamheiba’s reign, a Brahmin, one Santidas, came to Manipur from Sylhet and began to preach Vaishnavism of the school of Rāmānanda.² According to some Manipuri writers, the king was initiated by Santidas into the Rāmānandi sect. After the initiation he severely persecuted not only the followers of the traditional religion but also those who belonged to the other sect of Vaishnavism. Through the instigation of Santidas the king collected all the puyas and ancestral records and burnt them at Kangla. By a royal decree the books and records in Meetei scripts were banned. Maichous who were in possession of the ancient texts went to remote areas of the hills and the valley to keep their treasure

1. Ibid., pp. 71-5
2. In contrast to the Vaishnava sects of Nimbārka and Chaitanya, the Rāmānandi sect prescribed the worship of Rām and Sitā instead of Krishna and Rādhā. See Bhandarkar, R.G., Vaishnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems, p. 62ff
Dr. Parratt observes that there is little support for the view that Pamheiba transferred allegiance from one Vaishnava sect to another. The chronicle speaks of "the renewal of the sacred thread by the king" and does not suggest "the adoption of a new sect." Moreover "it is difficult to suppose that the king could persecute a sect into which he himself had been initiated." Under his rule Vaishnavism was established as the state religion. Each yek was identified with a particular Hindu gotra. The Hindu calendar was introduced. Old Meetei rituals were adapted to Hindu usage. Pamheiba himself worshipped Rāma and Lakshmi after his victory in Tippera. He was a great devotee of Hanumān, the monkey god and ally of Rāma and constructed a temple in his honour. The chronicle however refers to the persecution of the Rāmānandis. "In the month of Inga (May-June), on the 2nd day, Monday, all the followers of Rāmānandi were punished: all the Brahmins were sent back to the land of the Mayangs; all the princes, brothers of the king, were deposed from the positions, most (of their followers) were sent to prison." The incident occurred in 1736. It is

4. Cheitharol Kumbaba, p. 84
evident that the persecution was not simply on religious grounds but had political overtones. Perhaps the Rāmānandis conspired to overthrow the king and invited royal wrath. As a result this sect ceased to be a significant factor in Manipur. The king was not absolutely hostile to the traditional religion, for even after taking the sacred thread he appointed Brahmins to worship some lais,\(^1\) Perhaps his aim was to curb the power of the Maibas and maibis. He "abdicated in favour of his son Chit Sai in 1748 A.D., and retired to Rammagar, very possibly as a Sannyasin."\(^2\) In the opinion of some writers\(^3\) Pamheiba was treacherously murdered by his son Chit Sai, but Dr. Parratt doubts the veracity of the reported parricide.\(^4\)

Chit Sai tried to reverse the religious policy of his father but he was soon banished from the land by his brother. The dreary tale of treason, rebellion and intrigue continued. It was during the reign of Chingthang Khomba (known as Bhagychandra) (1763–98) that Hinduism was consolidated. Despite the ravages of successive Burmese invasions he confirmed Vaishnavism of the school of Chaitanya as the state religion

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1. Ibid., p. 72
2. Parratt, S.N., op. cit., p. 152
4. Parratt, S.N., op. cit., p. 150f
without neglecting indigenous gods. Through his efforts Hindu festivals and rites were generally accepted. The most significant contribution of Bhagychandra was the introduction of Rās Līlā. It was based on the dances in the Lai Haraoba. Thus a traditional ritual was transformed into a classical Indian dance.

While Vaishnavism was of comparatively recent introduction, the worship of Siva, Durga (Kālī) and Ganesha was very ancient. This is evident from the Phayeng Copper Plates\(^1\) discovered by W. Yumjao Singh in 1935. These plates contain the injunctions of king Khongtekcha (763-784) encouraging the worship of Siva, Durga and Ganesh. The presence of Sanskrit words in the king's proclamation suggest the influence of Hinduism on the people of the land at an early date. Dr. Parratt is sceptical about the datation of these plates and their value and holds, "that they originate from a period when Saivism was at a low ebb and in need of a boost - perhaps having been eclipsed by Vaishnavism - and was lacking in royal support."\(^2\) But the presence of Saivism long before the advent of Vaishnavism in Manipur cannot be denied. As E. Nilakanta Singh says, "The pre-historic period of Manipur

\(\text{1. These copper plates were collected from the Loi village of Phayeng. They were written in archaic Manipuri and were translated with illuminating comments by Yumjao Singh in his 'Report on Archaeological Studies in Manipur' Bulletin No. 1, Unfortunately the plates are now missing.}
\(\text{2. Parratt, S.N., op.cit., p. 109}\)
proves the wide prevalence of Shaivism and Tantric cults. On many a hill top there remains still Shiva lingas, whom people on special occasions, worship and pray to.¹ As to whether Saivism was brought to this land by any particular person at a particular time there is little information. Perhaps Siva cult has been prevailing in this land from a very early period and has never stood against the traditional religion of the Meeteis. Like Siva and Parvatī in the Hindu pantheon Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi have set ideals for mankind. The legend says that the king Nongpok Ningthou met Panthoibi as she was helping her father at jhuming.² No words were exchanged but the two fell in love. But Panthoibi was married off to another person against her will. She left the house in search of Nongpok Ningthou. He also left his palace in search of Panthoibi. The two met at Kangla. Since then Kangla has been associated with the coronation of the Meetei kings. The Nongmaijing mountain where the capital of Nongpok Ningthou was established is a place of pilgrimage. This episode of the divine couple is always danced out in the Lai Haraoba festival.³ This couple is identified with Siva and Durgā. There is a phallic stone in a flat place just below the summit of the Nongmaijing mountain. Pilgrims perform the sacred bath in the Chinggoi stream and

¹ Singh, E. Nilakanta, 'Lai Haraoba', Marg 14(4), p. 3C
² A kind of terrace cultivation.
³ See Panthoibi Khongul
then climbed the mountain. This stream is as sacred to the Meeteis as the Ganges is to the Hindus.

The co-existence of Hinduism and the traditional religion was uneasy for some time, but gradually there began the process of assimilation and the result was the Hinduization of the Meetei religion. Hinduism is a medley of beliefs and rites. With ease it has absorbed the customs and ideas of people with whom it has come into contact. It has accepted almost as a part of its creed that men differ considerably in temperament, training and level of aspiration. Synthesis and compromise rather than criticism and elimination have been the guiding principle of Hindu teachers and commentators. As a result of this attitude Hinduism has become a mosaic of almost all the types and stages of religious aspiration and endeavour.

On many fundamental points there are striking similarities between Hinduism and the indigenous religion of the Meeteis. Both claim to have grown out of a divine tradition. The Vedas form the foundation of the Hindu religion. It is believed that they are not human compositions. The Rsis of the Vedas are not the authors, but only the seers of the Mantras. The religion of the Meeteis also has no human author. There were, however, persons of divine disposition who enlightened people about the Lais and their function. The Meetei theory of creation as represented in the Puyas bears resemblance to the doctrine as depicted in the Nasadiya
hymn. Both the theories hold that the determinate world presupposes the Indeterminate Reality as the ground and goal. For the Meeteis, the Supreme Lord, Tengbanba Mapu, in his manifestation as Blank Boundless Expanse (Atingkok) pervaded by Darkness (Amamba) is the source of all the deities and the heaven and the earth. The Meetei seers were not mere primitive men wondering at the forces of nature. They were intellectual personages who could discover unity as the foundation of multiplicity. The Meetei religion is not anthropomorphic polytheism. Lais are regarded as mere manifestations of the Supreme Deity. When a particular lai is worshipped, he is not worshipped in his individual capacity but merely as the manifestation of the Supreme God who is called by various names. The lais are worshipped; yet not the lais but the Supreme God, Tengbanba Mapu, is praised through them.

As in Hinduism, so also in the Meetei religion, man is the cream of creation. He is higher than all other things and beings of the world. The cosmic order is the settled will of God, the law of morality and justice as well. As in the Vedic conception of Rta, so in the Meetei conception of Lainingshing Heiyi we notice a development from the material to the spiritual. The Supreme Lord determines the course to be followed by all in the universe. The divine law maintains

1. See above p.
2. See above p.
the scheme of creation. As Radhakrishnan observes, "Where law is, disorder and injustice are only provisional and partial. The triumph of the wicked is not absolute. The shipwreck of the good need not cause despair."¹

Like Hinduism, the traditional religion of the Meeteis believes in the plurality of deities. But the tendency at systematisation has its logical culmination in monotheism. The primitive conception of Umanglais is reconciled with the idea of Unity represented in Tengbanba Mapu, the Ultimate ground of all things and beings.² The difference between Hinduism and the Meetei religion in this context cannot be overlooked. In the former case, "there has been a gradual development of the philosophical thought from the Mantras and the Brāhmaṇas through the Āranyakas to the Upaniṣads. It is said that we can notice a transition from the naturalistic and anthropomorphic polytheism through transcendent monotheism to immanent monism in the pre-Upaniṣadic philosophy. The personified forces of nature first changed into real gods and these later on, became mere forms of one personal and transcendental God, the 'Custodian of the Cosmic and Moral Order', who Himself, later on, passed into the immanent Purusa. The Upaniṣads developed this Purusa into Brahman or Ātman which

1. Radhakrishnan, S., Indian Philosophy, vol. 1, p. 109
2. See above p.
is both immanent and transcendent."¹ There is no such
development of the idea of God in the traditional religion of
the Meeteis. Their religious philosophy is often lost in the
amorphous mass of animistic ideas. Their religion has all the
features of primitive faith. It is animistic in so far as it
believes that external things are possessed of a life akin to
man's and that spirits are present everywhere in nature.
Traces of worship addressed to concrete things are found among
the peoples of classical antiquity.² The Meetei term 'umang
lai' (forest or wood deity) points to tree-reverence as an
important feature of primitive faith. This does not mean that
all the Meetei deities are associated with trees. The term
now applies to any traditional deity even in absence of any
kind of association with trees.

The significance of animism is that man endows the
religious object with a soul like his own. The Meetei concept
of Umanglai bears striking resemblance to the Burmese concept
of Nat.³ Nats are associated with trees and regarded as
guardians of particular areas, just as Umanglais are regarded as
guardians of directions. While people are afraid of Nats and
try to appease them by offering food, Umanglais produce the
feeling of awe in which fear, wonder and reverence are

¹ Sharma, Chandradhar, Indian Philosophy, pp. 3-4
³ See Spiro, M.E., Burmese Supernaturalism.
A characteristic feature of the Meetei religion is that primitive beliefs and high philosophical concepts exist side by side. All lais are regarded as the shifting forms of the one and real divinity, Tengbanba Mapu. Leithak Leikhalon Puya emphatically asserts that Tengbanba Mapu is the all-embracing whole within which there is Atingkok (Blank Boundless Expanse). Within Atingkok there is Amamba (Infinite Darkness); within Amamba there is the primal Air; within the Air, there is the cloud; within the cloud there is Water; within Water there is Earth. As the background of all things and beings Tengbanba Mapu is transcendent of the universe; nevertheless he is immanent in all things and beings which are his manifestations. This monistic music of the Meetei religion makes it closer to Hindu thought which believes that Brahman is the Ultimate Reality from which all flows out and to which all returns.

The most important of the household deities is Sanamahi. Literally 'Sanamahi' means 'liquid gold'. As such it represents fire. Like the Vedic people the early Meeteis worshipped fire. In the Rg-Veda "Mātariśvan, like Prometheus, is supposed to have brought fire back from the sky and entrusted it to the keeping of the Bhṛgus." According to the Meetei tradition, Poireiton carried with his men a tray of earth

1. Leithak Leikhalon, pp. 11-12
2. Radhakrishnan, S., Indian Philosophy, vol. 1, p. 82
filled with rice husks, in which a fire was kept burning. He wandered through the hills and mountains before entering the valley of Manipur in search of a place free from sickness and death. Since then in every Meetei house, in the centre of the main room the hearth is placed. Though there are no elaborate rites as found in connection with the Vedic hearths, the Meeteis consider the domestic fire to be of great religious significance. Outwardly Sanamahi is different from Phungga (fire place), but its inner meaning has led some writers to regard him as a sun god. The worship of the sun is natural to the human mind. It is an essential part of the Hindu religion. Sanamahi, like the sun, is the author of all light and life in the world. While Sanamahi is the indwelling spirit in every being, the unmanifested potential essence, Pakhangba is the manifest aspect of the Supreme Lord, the ruling deity of living beings, the Prajāpati in Hindu conception.

Both the Meeteis and the Hindus believe that man is potentially divine. The ideal of life is to realise God within man. God-realisation is self-realisation. The Meeteis do not support the materialistic view that man is just the body which is annihilated at death. They have a strong conviction of the continuity of life and maintain that there is something which


2. Singh, K.B., Traces of Pre-Hinduism in Meitei Society, Folklore 5, p. 203. See also Singh, W.Y., Religious Belief in Ancient Manipur, p. 66

3. See above p. 76
survives bodily death. From the Chronicle we learn of the primitive Meetei belief that man is both soul and body. All the Puyas agree in holding that the Supreme God is seated within man in his different aspects. According to them, man has five souls (thawais) and a shadow. Death means dissociation of the shadow from body. These immaterial essences which constitute the core of man's being abide for ever. The heart of religion is that man belongs to an order beyond the visible and the temporal. The belief of the Meeteis that man's soul is of divine origin and is akin to the spirit of God points to man's capacity to transcend limitations set by the body. The transfiguration to which man aspires is the very law of his own being.

Sri Atombapu Sharma has attempted to establish close connection between the Vedic religion and the traditional faith of the Meeteis. Though his writings about the Indo-Aryan origin of the Meetei beliefs and practices appear to writers like Parratt to be "too much like special pleading to be convincing", it is worthwhile to have a careful look into them to get an idea about the affinity between the two faiths. The figure (No. 14) is called Pallandabi by the Meeteis. It is not known from whom they learnt this figure. It has been a

1. Ningthourol Lambuba, p. 191
2. See above p. 109
3. Parratt, S.N., op.cit., p. 2
tradition of the Meeteis to draw it on some special occasions. It is found drawn at the door as a measure to protect domestic animals against death and diseases. It was an old practice followed in ancient Europe. It was believed that the figure belonged to the Pythagorean school. But later it has been discovered to be of Indian origin. The same figure was found drawn on the royal gate of the king of Mysore. Another similar figure (No. 2) is also believed to have come from the East. This figure has been in use among the Meeteis since ancient time in their important rituals. It is regarded as the sacred curve of God Pakhangba in his snake manifestation. They call it Tillikoktong Yaibirel Sidaba.

The game of polo (Kangjei) is of Meetei origin. Two teams consisting of seven players each play on horseback each with a stick (kangchei). The ball used is made of bamboo root and is large and light. According to Atombapu Sharma, this game is considered sacred by the Meeteis because the ball (kangdrum) represents the sun who symbolises God. The game is played on horseback. The horse represents the fast moving character of things. In order to signify the fast-moving sun,

1. Sharma, Atombapu, Meitei Kirtan, p. 161
2. Akoijam, I., Eeyek Salai, p. 1
3. "In the more important games as played in Manipur, seven men on either side is considered the correct number, but in ordinary games any number may play", Brown, R., Statistical Account of Manipur, p. 79.
horses are used in the game. The sun is considered to be carried by the horse. This refers, says Sharma, to a Vedic tradition in which the sun is considered to be riding on a chariot driven by horses. The seven players represent the seven days which the Meeteis call 'numit' meaning the sun. Thus through this play the people remember the ancient Vedic tradition.

Atombapu Sharma thinks that the word 'sanamahi' is derived from 'Syen' and means Garuḍa who serves the Lord Viṣṇu in preserving the universe. He goes to the extent of saying that the religion of the ancient Meeteis was Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda. So the Hindu religion as introduced by the Brahmin immigrants in the later age is not anything new to the Meetei people. The Vedic tradition has been prevailing in Manipur since ancient times. Although Sharma's attempt to establish an Aryan pedigree for the Meeteis may not be justified by facts of history, he has drawn interesting parallels between the Meetei and the Vedic culture.

S.K. Chatterji has pointed out the partial Hindu parallel to the legend of Pakhangba. On being told by his father that he would be king if he could return first after circuiting the whole world, he circumambulated his father's

1. Sharma, Atombapu, op.cit., pp. 162-4
2. Ibid., pp. 111, 115-7
3. Ibid., pp. 161, 177
throne seven times and bowed to him. But his brother Sanamahi started off from that place and returned to see Pakhangba on the throne. In the Hindu legend Ganesa circumambulated his mother Parvati while his brother Karttikeya undertook to go round the world on a peacock to settle the argument as to who was greater.¹

The affinity between Hinduism and the traditional religion of the Meeteis has facilitated the establishment of Vaishnavism as the religion of Manipur through absorption of the Meetei Lais in the Hindu pantheon. It is a fact that India has assimilated in course of its long history people of every race, colour and culture. In Manipur that process of assimilation has inevitably led to a tolerance of the local customs and beliefs by recognising them as part of Hinduism. Radhakrishnan observes, "Hinduism is not based on any racial factor. It is an inheritance of thought and aspiration to which every race in India has made its distinctive contribution ... ." While the Vedas represent the religion of the classes, the masses continued to worship their traditional deities, Yaksas and Nāgas. Behind the facade of Vedic orthodoxy and its tendency to abstract symbolism, an extensive and deep-rooted system of popular beliefs and cults and a decided tendency to anthropomorphic presentation prevailed. The Vedic religion, however, absorbed, embodied.

¹ Chatterji, S.K., 'Kirata-jana-Kriti', Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 16(2), p. 225f
and preserved the types and rituals of older cults. Instead of destroying them, it adapted them to its own requirements."¹

It is a fact that there was some opposition to the process of Hinduization as carried out by the king Pamheiba. But this opposition had political overtones. Shakespeare attributes this opposition in part to the king's forcible imposition of Vaishnavism and in part to the strict dietary laws advocated by the Brahmins.² Parratt says, "It seems likely that the king did not attempt to destroy the traditional religion entirely, for this would have been an impossible task. There is evidence that he tried to bring some at least of the old gods under the cultic control of the Brahmins, perhaps with the object of reducing the importance of the maibas and maibis while at the same time avoiding the direct destruction of the greater lai."³

There is no real conflict between the Meetei Lai and Hindu gods. There are, however, certain points on which these two religions disagree and these are dogmas and rituals which are more or less derived from local traditions and mythologies, bearing as they do the inevitable stamp of local forms and names. But they are the non-essentials of religion. Essentially

¹. Radhakrishnan, S., Eastern Religions and Western Thought, pp. 306-308
². Shakespeare, J., 'The Religion of Manipur', Folk Lore, 24. p. 413
³. Parratt, S.N., The Religion of Manipur, p. 157
there is unity between the two faiths. Their fundamental principle is the absolute oneness of Divinity. As the Rg-Veda declares, "That which exists is one, the learned call it by various names."\(^1\) That Universal Being, call it Brahman or Tengbanba Mapu, is manifesting itself in infinite varieties of names and forms. It is the essence of our being, the foundation of our existence and the basis of our intelligence and consciousness. The whole phenomenal universe is nothing but the manifestation of all the powers that are latent in the absolute Being.

The affinity between the traditional religion of the Meeteis and Hinduism has brought about a synthesis of the two faiths in Manipur. The Meeteis have not given up their old culture and tradition. They have found their place within the Sanatana dharma of the Vedas. The integration of the two religious traditions has been summed up by the erudite scholar, S.K. Chatterji thus: "Manipur Hinduism gradually became a synthesis of the old Meithei religion with its gods and goddesses and myths, its own legends and traditions, its social customs and usages, and its priest and ceremonials, and of Brahmanical Hinduism with its special worship of Radhā and Krishna."\(^2\)

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1. Rg Veda 1.164.46