Chapter IX

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing pages we have tried to trace the history of the introduction and development of Hinduism mainly Vaisnavism in Manipur and discuss their cultural implications. We have also dealt with the political and socio-economic conditions of the state in the 18th and 19th centuries at some length. We have found that wars with Burma led to notable changes in the religious history of the Meithei people. Manipur's alliance with Assam, Tripura and Bengal arising out of political considerations brought in its train religious ideas too. As a sequel to it, the people were brought into the mainstream of Indian civilisation.¹

According to one tradition, Hinduism has been existing in this part of the country since time immemorial. The Hindu god, Śiva, has been recognised as the creator of Manipur in the legend. But this is all in the region of mythology. Phayeng copper-plate inscription points to the eighth century as the beginning of Hinduism in Manipur in the forms of Saivism and Vaisnavism.²

¹. Vide, Ch. V. The introduction of Neo-Vaishnavism is associated with the Burmese occupation of Manipur in 1764. King Jayasimha went to the Ahom court as a fugitive. His determination to become a Vaishnava and his acquisition of knowledge of Assamese Vaishnava dances are said to have been the result of his stay at the court there.

². Vide, Chs. I (Sections I, III, IV), and VIII (Section on Saivism).
Vaisnavism entered Manipur in the following ways:

(a) It is alluded to the event of King Kyamba getting the image of Visnu from the King of the Pong Empire in the fifteenth century, (b) In the eighteenth century Manipur came under the influence of bands of missionaries coming from the rest of India, (c) In the constructive period of Manipur's history from Jayasimha to Chandrakirti extending over a hundred years, Manipur was in constant touch with the well-known Vaisnava centres of India.

According to the census report of Manipur published in 1961, the Manipuri Hindus constituted 61.68% of the whole population (7,80,037). The king is still considered to be the spiritual head of the state. The king unites all Manipuri Hindus in Manipur and outside. An analysis of the schools of Vaisnavism has led us to arrive at the conclusion that the Vaisnavism introduced during the period from Charairongba to Garibniwaz conforms to the Nimbarka school and the early Bengal Vaisnavism. Garibniwaz later changed his religious faith for the Ramanandi school. The influence of Assamese school of Vaisnavism is also in evidence during the period.

Some scholars suggest that King Garibniwaz was a Gaudiya Vaisnava before he became a Ramanandi. But Vaisnavism had not then developed the principle of nine modes of bhakti.

3. Vide, Ch. V. The king is still controlling the religious rites and rituals of the Manipuri Vaisnavas. The Government of India have also agreed that the religious practices should be left to the supervision of the king even after the integration of Manipur with the Indian Union in 1949.
There was no madhura (erotic) rasa and no worship of Caitanya.
So it is pre-Caitanyaite though some accounts describe Garibniwaz as a follower of Caitanyaism. An analysis of the facts of the mode of worship and iconography reveals that the accounts are later accretions.

And that the Vaisnavism introduced under King Jayasimha and followed by his successors is clearly Caitanyaite on all counts - its music and dance and its literature. The close connection between Manipur and Assam was further developed during the time of Jayasimha. It has been remarked that King Jayasimha stayed at Tekhāo Leipāk (Assam) in order to get the help of the Ahoms against the Burmese. The use of Śrīmad-Bhāgavata and the imitating in some measure of the Sattra modes of dance, costume, etc., lend considerable support to this view.

A close study of the religious history of these times indicates that the elements of Śaivism, Saktism, Tāntricism and animistic beliefs were incorporated into Vaiṣṇavism. The Burmese invasion and occupation could not hinder the progress of Vaiṣṇavism. It is of interest to note that as Śaivism grew increasingly stronger in Manipur, it grew markedly weaker in Navadvīp. It was for Manipuri kings like Jayasimha, Chourajit, and Chandrakirti to strengthen this cult in the place of its birth. When Manipur became permeated with Vaiṣṇavism, the

Meithei people developed their culture in their own way and played a significant role in the spiritual life of India with a succession of kings and artists who travelled widely in India and carried the distinct pattern of their culture.\footnote{Supra, Chs. V and VI.}

Vaisnavism provided a vital link towards the progressive aryanaising of the Manipuri people and produced a band of local scholars who enriched their language through the translations and commentaries of Hindu sāstras.

Vaisnavism was the source of inspiration for dance, song, architecture, sculpture and painting. Taken as a whole, art and culture attained a high state of progress on account of Vaisnavism. It is also to be admitted that Manipuri culture owes to Vaisnavism the beginning of her first brick masonry work.\footnote{Supra, Ch. I, Section IV.} As a result of the diffusion of Vaisnava ideas Manipuri language, and literature flourished. We do not have much evidence of the development of literature and fine arts in Manipur in the pre-Vaisnava era.

The rites and ceremonies, as they are observed by the people, are fairly numerous and have many local peculiarities. Some of them are of primitive origin, viz., the worship of Sanamahi, Pakhamba and the festival of Geiraobā. The Vaisnava rites were evolved under the twin doctrines of bhakti and ahimsā but are sometimes tinged with local beliefs and practices. The
new faith taught the dignity and value of human life as well as self-effacement, and this gave the whole Manipuri people a sound philosophical background to life."

As we trace the development of Hinduism especially Vaiṣṇavism in the state, we find that Vaiṣṇavism was a religion first followed by the kings, the pībās (the chiefs of the clans) and the nobles. Step by step, it came to gain ground among the common people. Vaiṣṇavism enlisted the full support of the priests and the common people as is evidenced from the history of temples, land-grants, and endowments towards the establishment of religious centres. The humanitarian and philanthropic work of the kings and the nobles was responsible for the rapid growth and development of Vaiṣṇavism in Manipur. It is no exaggeration to say also that they contributed their mite to the revival of Vaiṣṇavism in Nadiyā, Purī and Vrṇḍavaṇa, too.

Under the influence of Vaiṣṇavism certain weaknesses of Pūrānic Hinduism have crept into the mind of the Meitheis. Idolatory, caste division, the satī system and untouchability crept into Manipuri society. The inter-dining of a Vaiṣṇava with a non-Vaiṣṇava was interdicted. The law of Karma and the transmigration of soul are accepted in their entirety and infused a fatalistic attitude in the minds of the people. The people came to believe in Nityati (fate). They think that

8. Vide, Ch. VII.
"though a man exerts himself over and over again, he shall get what comes on the appointed day." Protection of cows is enjoined and cow killing and meat eating are treated as crimes against the Vaisnava society. Some people hold that Vaisnavism went to minimise the intense patriotism of the Manipuris' militant type. Some went to the length of saying that Vaisnavism was, to a extent, responsible for the political downfall of Manipur. They feel that the policy of developing dance and music, etc., consequent on the acceptance of Vaisnavism, was not conducive to a militant cult. A Vaisnava cannot but shudder at the sight of blood and so cannot do well in the battle-field. It is alleged, moreover, that the Vaisnava kings were suited to the seat of a monk rather than the position of a warrior. The accusations seem to be ill-founded. They are unfair both to the kings and the faith they professed. But the political downfall was mostly due to the continuous feuds among the princes for the throne. This is bore out by the stories of King Ajit Sai and King Marjit who were Vaisnavas but were, all the same, warlike and could afford to be cruel. History tells us how Vaisnava kings like Gambhir Singh and Narsingh and generals like Thangal and Paona Vrajabasi fought the enemy with courage. Religion did not prevent them from responding to the sense of duty in the war-field, when the situation demanded.

That many Vaisnavas of Manipur were good warriors suggests

9. A well known saying found in Manipur.

10. These are fallacious charges made by the anti-Vaisnavas against Vaisnavism. They are to be refuted.

11. Supra, Ch. II.
that this faith appealed to the warlike people as Christianity
did in Europe.\textsuperscript{12} It must, however, be admitted that the atti-
tude of the Manipuri Vaisnavas are more or less exclusive in
so far as the Loi people (a scheduled caste) and the Naga
tribes, who are condemned to live by a callous social system
in poverty and ignorance on the one hand and cruel isolation
on the other, are concerned.\textsuperscript{13} This had led to the large scale
conversion of the hill people into Christianity by the
missionaries in the beginning of the twentieth century. The
Christian missionaries have adopted a strategy which took full
advantage of the situation, and Vaisnavism has now to face the
task of combating their activities.\textsuperscript{14}

Under such circumstances, we are tempted to ask the
question: What will be the future of Manipuri Vaisnavism? The
answer may perhaps be a disheartening one because we to-day
see the worship of the Vaisnava deities is confined almost to
the hereditary sebaits. Among the educated section of people
living in the town the practice of rites and ceremonies is just
conventional routine work. Vaisnavism no longer enjoys the
great position which it once occupied in the life of the people.
The Meitheis seem to be gradually losing their faith in the
rituals. It is, of course, a general phenomenon that the num-
ber of temple-goers is going down everywhere, and people no

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{12} For this, the views of W. Yumja Singh and L. Ibungohal
Singh may be taken into account.
\item\textsuperscript{13} T. C. Hodson, \textit{The Meitheis}, p. 70.
\item\textsuperscript{14} F. Bowers, \textit{The Dance in India}, pp. 163-164. Most of the
Hill tribes were baptised by American Baptist Mission in the
beginning of the 19th century.
\end{itemize}
longer owe much allegiance to temples and priests. The withdrawal of members from the Vaisnava order is very easy to-day because the control of society in general upon its individual members is loosening. So religion is in a precarious state; its position is undermined from within by disbelief and evil propensities and from without by critics outside who do not care to go deep into matters.

Ethnologically and linguistically the Meitheis belong to the Kuki-Chin group of the Mongoloid race of people. But in course of the last few centuries, as we have seen in the foregoing pages, they have adopted Indian, that is, Hindu, religion and culture, and perhaps imbibed a little Aryan blood, and tried to adjust them to their own way of living and to their own language. What is more, they have cultivated items of Hindu culture and fine arts like music and dance in their own peculiar way, and in this, particularly in the art of dancing, they have made a great mark inasmuch as Manipuri dances are to-day well-known all over the world and its rāṣa-līlā variety has been recognised as one of the four classical dances of India, even while the other traditions like Assam's ojā-pali and Sattriya dances and the South's Kuchipudi, Bhāgavata-melā, Yakṣagāna, etc., have been relegated to a poorer position. It will be difficult for us to say what may be the future of Vaisnavism or Saivism in Manipur, but perhaps the Vaiṣṇava dances of Manipur, which are a definite contribution of the Meiteis to Indian culture and civilization, may not be neglected or forgotten by posterity.