PART FOUR

SUMMING UP
CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing chapters an attempt has been made to describe and analyse the rich Meitei folklore material, both verbal and non-verbal. It has been our endeavour to deal with the various genres of folklore material of the Meiteis of the valley of Manipur, and it should be evident from our study that we have tried to highlight the particularly important and significant aspects of Meitei folklore.

As has been pointed out, Manipur has a rich and unique cultural heritage, much of which is made up of traditional folk-cultural material. The population of the state has different elements, both tribal and non-tribal, among which the Sanskritized Meiteis form the majority, and thus Meitei language and culture predominate in the cultural milieu of the state. Despite the presence of Sanskritic elements, the Meitei society has its own distinctive indigenous tradition rooted in the soil. The Meiteis thus have a composite culture. It is not always possible to find out each stream and to trace it to its source. The local Meitei culture is made up of its basic Indo-Mongoloid character which is intimately connected with the tribal cultures of the contiguous areas and is also found to have some degree of association with the culture of Burma which lies close by, whereas the pan-Indian Sanskritized elements have been later graftings. The fact
that Meitei folk-culture comprise both Sanskritized and non-Sanskritized elements and much of it is the product of the inter-play of the elements of these two kinds makes the field all the more interesting and significant.

It is now admitted that the present folk-culture of Manipur valley has a predominantly pre-Hindu tribal foundation with a largely Vaishnava Hindu superstructure. Therefore, we always find mixed character in the culture of the Meiteis not only in the religious and semi-religious beliefs, practices, and ceremonies but also in other fields like folk arts and crafts and oral literature.

The peculiarities and distinctiveness of the Meitei religion is that it is itself a strange amalgam of pre-Hindu and Hindu elements. Side by side with the Brahmanical gods and goddesses of pan-Indian affiliation, a number of pre-Brahmanical deities continue to receive veneration and propitiation. In the course of our investigation, the above facts have been come across.

As stated earlier, the Meiteis have many indigenous festivals and ceremonies coming in incessant succession throughout the year. But with the advent of Hinduism, many indigenous pre-Hindu festivals and Hindu festivals are being observed side by side. Likewise, in all social functions like marriage, birth, death, etc. are mixture of the old tradition and the new one. Even the marriage system has become a compromise between indigenous and Hindu observances. All this has been revealed in our inquiry into the respective fields.
Again, it has been found that in such fields as performing folk arts there are fine blendings of the pan-Indian with the regional and local elements whereas in certain others like games and plays, cuisine and costumes it is the local and the indigenous that predominate. Thus syncretism plays a dominant role in much of the folk culture of Manipur, and it is hoped that the analysis of the various folklore material attempted here has been able to bring that fact out.

The Meitei culture is also rich in the field of traditional dramatic and semi-dramatic institutions of a purely folk nature and also in that of ritualistic dancing represented by the Lāi-Harāobā and other performing art forms like pung cholom, kartāl cholom, khubak īshei, ṭhābal dhongbā, etc. We have noticed how the indigenous and the pan-Indian as well as the 'folk' and the 'classical' meet in a delightful combination in this extremely fascinating field.

The Meiteis have an undoubted uniqueness in the field of folk arts and crafts. Exquisite poetry in colourful fabrics, both cotton and silk, has been woven by the Meitei women from very remote ages. The priceless heritage of the artistic weaving and embroidery has not been given up by the Meiteis. Despite the severe confrontations of the machine-made products, Meitei women weavers are still vigorously active in this field. The Meiteis also have large number of folk paintings preserved in manuscripts which depict their life and culture. Such paintings
of the Meiteis possess outstanding qualities of both craftsmanship and artistic excellence. This particular artistic heritage of the Meiteis has so far received little attention and an attempt has been made in our study to place it in the broader perspective of Meitei folk culture.

As already stated, the valley of Manipur where the Meiteis inhabit has been the meeting ground of different cultural trends. Because of the rich and multi-dimensional cultural milieu, the Meitei society has a rich verbal folklore material and particularly in narrative genres like myths, legends, tales and ballads. It has been discussed in the preceding pages that the Meitei folk narrative is designated by the term wāri so long as the form of the narrative is in prose and if the same story is recited or presented in the song form it is called ishei. A narrative with the same content may be either a wāri or a ishei. Meitei folklore abounds in such wāris and isheis. Myths and legends of the two streams i.e., the Sanskritized and the non-Sanskritized are current in the Meitei society side by side. It may also be said that some Meitei myths represent syncretism, a few being the creations of comparatively recent times. True to the general character of the syncretic nature of Meitei culture, the Meitei people set a tremendous store by all this wealth of verbal folklore.

Story-telling is still one of the most favourite pastimes for the Meiteis. It is significant that the Meiteis have a belief
that if a story is told in an incomplete manner, an elephant will chase the narrator in his or her dream. Therefore, when a story is told it should be told in its entirety. They have professional tellers known as wāri leebā. Thus, Meitei folktales, on a wide range of subjects are still being transmitted effectively from generation to generation.

Again, the Meiteis have a uniquely rich store of ballads material, one of the most important genres of verbal art. There are again different forms of presentation of ballads. In the Meitei society, the same theme of the story told by the story-teller or by the parents may be sung by the Meitei ballad singers like Penā Sakpā, Khongjom-parba Sakpā, etc.; they are professional singers who are the permanent preservers and carriers of the Meitei ballads from one generation to another. There is another form of ballad singing by females known as Moirāng-sāi. These female singers sing only the story of the incarnations of Moirang called Moirāng Sāiyon. In the course of our study, we have noted that the Meiteis have a unique and distinctive rich material of ballads also on flora and fauna, particularly on orchids like the Kwāklei, Melei Leisnā Nongumpāl, Verumlei, etc. in which Manipuri folk literature perhaps has few parallels. These ballads are known as Leiron in Manipuri.

We have also seen the rich Meitei folksong genres ranging from the ritualistic Lāi-Harāobā songs, to the lullabies sung to induce a child to sleep. Being by nature musically inclined,
the Meiteis are preserving a rich store-house of songs and rhymes. And as is evidenced by the rich body of dance forms, both classical and folk, the Manipuris are inveterately fond of dancing. Thus singing and dancing are even to-day a part and parcel of the life of the people of Manipur.

The proverbs and riddles which form an important part of Manipuri oral literature also cover a wide range of phenomena. The Meitei proverbs are usually used by the elderly persons whereas riddles by the children. Again, the excellence of the use of alliteration rhymes, end-rhymes, simile, assonances, etc. is also found in the Meitei proverbs and riddles.

In conclusion, a word could perhaps be said about the academic value and utility of this kind of study of Meitei folklore of Manipur valley. The work was undertaken with the humble aim that it will give a general and comprehensive picture of the folklore wealth of the Meiteis, which could help in a fuller and better understanding of Meitei culture as a whole. Again, such a study could also pave the way for further scientific research on specific fields of Meitei folklore.

We also hope that this study will give an assessment of the extent and value of the cultural contributions of the Meiteis of this region to the Indian culture which represents a unique example of 'unity in diversity'. Such assessments in
respect of the indigenous cultures of the various ethnic groups of this region could help not only to have a better understanding of the ethos of the people of this region but also in tackling many of the problems facing this particular region as well as India as a whole.