Chapter 4

Revivalism; Rhetoric and Practice amongst the Manipuris of Assam:

The revival of *Apokpaism/Sanamahism* that started as a socio-religious movement had a greater implication on the socio-cultural identity of the Meitei community in Assam in particular and the whole of the community in general. This movement, no doubt, has led to the general awakening of their pre-Vaishnava Meitei religious and socio-cultural identity at present focusing also in the identity formation of the group in the line of their age old social, cultural and religious beliefs.

Deeply influenced by its religion and philosophy, the Meiteis have been practicing Vaishnavism over the last three centuries. However, the newly adopted culture could not root out the place of worship of the pre-Vaishnavite native deities viz. *Sanamahi, Ima Leimarel* and *Apokpa* from the Meitei hearts. Since time immemorial the Meiteis have been worshipping these household deities in simultaneity with the Vaishnava faith. These deities occupy different places inside the main living room of their dwelling houses. As such, every Meitei home is considered as the most sacred place of worship of these deities who are worshipped everyday by lighting of lamps at least for two times. So they maintain purity and cleanliness of themselves and their homes. Each and every adult member takes bath in the morning, generally after finishing their household chores. Their first duty of the day begins with the prayer of these household deities and ends with the prayer once again in the evening at the end of the day by lighting oil soaked cotton lamps fixed on a small bamboo strip called *pratit*. Having anything before taking bath in the morning is considered unholy and unclean. The Meiteis consider lavatory as dirty and unclean place. So anybody who has entered there must take a bath before entering into the house in order to maintain purity, which is found as a peculiar Meitei custom.
Therefore, there has always been a space for the worship of the pre-
Vaishnava deities within the Meitei society which runs side by side with
the practice of Vaishnava faith and culture. Hence, it can be safely said
that the community still adheres to their ancient faith strictly, though they
are officially the followers of Vaishnavism. Today owing to the revivalist
movement the colour of the Meitei Vaishnavism is observed to be fading
down and Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism, the pre-Vaishnavite faith, which had
been abandoned in the beginning of the eighteenth century, has grown up
as a strong force to resist and replace the Vaishnava religion and culture
that had been rooted in the Meitei society.

The adoption of Ramandi cult first and then Vaishnavism marked the
transformation of the Meitei social and cultural life. The new religion
could not uproot the ancient faith and belief from the minds of the
Meiteis which again played significant role in the revival of their ancient
faith. Adoption of the Bengal school of Vaishnavism and the replacement
of Meitei script with Bengali script facilitated the overall influence of
Vaishnavism over the life of the Meiteis. However, consciously or
unconsciously the Meiteis never discarded their age old faith and belief
system. Some way or the other the Meiteis in their individual and family
life involved themselves in propitiating their own deities and respective
belief system. The influence of Vaishnavism can be seen at social level in
the domain of culture in the form of the observance of rites, rituals and
festivals. In such rites, rituals and festivals, the role of the Brahmin
priests has always been significant and they are performed under strict
code and conduct of Vaishnavism. On the other hand, the role of the
Meitei maiba and maibi is equally significant in the performance of the
rites, rituals and festivals connected with their own deities in which the
advice of the maiba and the maibi is always supreme. Hence, the Meitei
society, when observed deeply, is a synthesis of the two viz. the
inseparable age old belief and tradition and the new found religion in the
form of Vaishnavism.
Apart from the Hinduisation, the Burmese invasion and the British colonialism, today, various other forces like modernization and globalization have deeply influenced every walk of life and such influences are inseparable in the present scenario. With more opening up to the outside world the more the Meiteis are more and more returning to their roots. The understanding of their culture and belief system also informs that such a return to the past could help them preserve their identity which is constantly threatened by the influence of the more dominant cultures (Bijay, 2005). This particular effort of reviving their past glories is also a part of their attempt to evade from the strain induced by various forces of modernization and globalization that constantly threatens their own culture and belief.

The distinct and unique cultural tradition of the Meiteis is retained in the *lai haraoba* festival which inspires them to the effect that the past could provide the way of solution to the problems that they are facing today. Hence, emotional attachment can be witnessed among the Meiteis regarding the pride in their traditional culture manifested in the *lai haraoba* festival. It encourages them to find a socio-cultural space in which they feel secure to preserve their tradition. The revivalist movement provided a boost not only in following their tradition but also trying to popularize their own rites, rituals and festivals and mobilize more and more participation to promote their pre-Vaishnava culture and tradition. Therefore, the main focus of this chapter is to relook at this trend of socio-religious changes in the Meitei society of Assam in particular and the whole Meitei community in general.

4.1 Revival of the Traditional Faith:

The genesis of the Meitei religious and cultural revivalism and the rejection of Vaishnavism by many Meiteis of Assam have an interesting trajectory over a wide period of time. It did not happen all of a sudden since their old belief and tradition had a strong presence in the life of the
people. It was inevitable but never singled out until 1930 when Naorem Phulo Singha, celebrated as a fountainhead of the revivalist movement and an apostle of the traditional faith today, formed a society called Apokpa Marup at Laishramkhun, from where he hailed, in the present Hailakandi district of Assam. This society created a virtual space for the study of the old Meitei religious philosophy. The society was, on the other hand, caused an alarm among the members of the Vaishnavite following Meiteis and was deemed to be an affront to the Brahma sabha. Following this Phulo along with seven of his followers was excommunicated by both the Brahma sabha and the Kshatriya sabha (Information provided by L. Wakching of Laishramkhun, Hailakandi, an activist of the revivalist movement, in the interview with the researcher on 23/4/2011). Till the early 1990s, even inter-marriages between the revivalists and the Vaishnavites were forbidden in the Meitei society of Assam. However, by the close of the 20th century, the conflicting situation got gradually ameliorated and with Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism gaining a strong foothold, negotiations and mutual accommodations with the Vaishnavite path became inevitable.

4.2 Life and Philosophy of Naoria Phulo:

The birth of Naorem Phundrei, destined to be known in every Meitei household as Naoria Phulo, as believed by the Meiteis, is predicted well in advance. In many puyas including Kaibarol, it is stated:

"Man from the west will come to rediscover the Meitei religion and deities and Meiteis will return once again to their own religion... in Thawan Langban (August September) ... and all sagei salai will once again return to their origin..." (Khelchandra, 1969, 2004: 110-111)

(Translated by the researcher)
Phundrei was born to Naorem Chouba and Thambou at the dawn of Monday, the 28th September 1888 (the seventh day after full moon of the Meitei calendar month of Thawan and Meitei weekday Ningthoukaba) at Leishramkhun mayai leikai in the erstwhile Cachar district (present Hailakandi district) of Assam. He was the fifth son of his parents. On the sixth day of his birth (Swasti puja or yupan thaba as termed by the Meiteis) people gathered for the occasion were surprised to see and spelled with the beauty and complexion of the child as if it was carved by a turner (phundrei) and hence his grandfather Herando gave the name of the child as Phundrei. (Information provided by Naoria Phulo's son N. Amusana, aged 78, on 12/10/2010)

Since his childhood Phundrei was very intelligent and obedient as well. When he was admitted to the then newly established 34 No. Bengali Medium Rajyeswarpur L.P. School at the age of seven, the Bengali teachers found it very difficult to pronounce his name. However, his obedience, beauty and calm nature led them to call him lovingly as Phui which means as beautiful as a flower. Thereby he came to be known as Phulo which became his certificate name.

After completion of his primary education with scholarship he was admitted to the upper primary school at Lala. However, after upper primary he faced with real problems to continue his education. Moreover, there was no school nearby to continue further. Apart from that the English education was considered a taboo in the Meitei society. His family and relatives were not in favour of continuing his education. But his intelligence and curiosity to continue his study ultimately convinced his parents to take him to the Narasing Madhya Banga School at Silchar. It was during this period that Phulo started thinking about his own mother tongue as his school mates often questioned him for not having his own religion and medium of instruction. All these made him very
much curious to know about his own language as well as the religion of his community.

After completion of his education from Narshing Madhya Banga he returned to his village. At that time the Government Victoria Memorial High School was established at Hailakandi. In 1910, he was admitted to this school at the age of twenty-two. In the mean time his father died and a year after he was married to Sanarei Devi in 1912, the youngest daughter of Moirengjam Angou, in order to look after his mother, while he was studying in class IX. Amidst great amount of hardships he passed Entrance Examination in second division in 1914 at the age of twenty-six. Just after he passed out Entrance Examination he was appointed as a teacher in the same school with a monthly salary of Rs. 10/-.

During his teaching days in Government Victoria Memorial High School also his Bengali friends asked him about his mother tongue, books written in his language, its script and its history were raised during the friendly talks with his non-Meitei counterparts. These points of discussions made him puzzled in his lone times and threw into deep thoughts to find out the reasons. (ibid)

It is worthy to note here that by the time the Meiteis settled in Assam in the mid 18th and 19th centuries, they were already Hindus and considered themselves as Vaishnavas. After the burning of innumerable Meitei puyas by Pamheiba (Garibniwaj), under the guidance of Santidas Goswami, a Vaishnava missionary from Bengal, mass conversion of the Meiteis took place through nonkhreng irruppa (ritual bathing ensuring to follow the new religion for the next seven births) under the royal orders. People with heavy hearts could not oppose the royal decree and had to carry out the unprecedented procedure of conversion. Many promised in their hearts to get reconverted to their indigenous religion on the very next day of their stipulated cycle of rebirth. In the later period during the reign of Chingthangkhomba (Bhagyachandra) the Bengal School of
Vaishnavism was made popular and the philosophy of Vaishnavism overshadowed the life and culture of the Meiteis. It was during his reign that the famous *Rasa Lila* (fusion of traditional Meitei dance form and the newly adopted religious form) was introduced. His reign is also remarkable for changing the name of the land as Manipur and the Meiteis came to be known as Manipuris. Chaste Meitei script was replaced by Bengali script and the Meitei language (*Meiteilon*) came to be known as Manipuri language. From his reign many Sanskrit and Bengali books were translated to Manipuri to popularize the new religious thought and philosophy.

Phulo inherited all these historical developments that preceded his birth and was deeply disturbed by the questions asked by his colleagues and friends but could not find out any answers. However, these questions acted like showers of blessings upon him to open up a new chapter in his life for the search of the lost treasure. Initially he made some unsuccessful attempts to translate some of the Bengali and Sanskrit books to Manipuri Language. For about two years he taught in the Government Victoria Memorial High School and then was transferred to the newly established Lala M.E. School as Assistant Head Master. He remained there for about one year until he got a clerical job in the establishment of the Deputy Commissioner's office in Silchar. He worked there for eight months and got selected as Assistant Sub-Inspector in the police department in February 1918 and joined at Dibrugarh. As a police officer he served in the capacity of Second Officer and Officer in-charge in many places of Assam including Sibsagar, Tezpur, Golaghat, Bokakhat, Gauhati (present Guwahati), Nagoan, Shillong, Nalbari, Rangia and finally at Amingaon, where he took voluntary retirement from his service.
Soon after his transfer to Rangia, Phulo's life changed its own course. One evening in 1926, in the Meitei calendar month of Lamda (March/April), he was coming back from duties riding his bicycle. He had to cross a hill tract and tried to cross it before sunset. But as the sun sank slowly behind the hilltops, a long curtain fell upon the stage of day and the intervening hills cut short the time the light and shade mingle at sunset. He felt little scared and thought of increasing the pedal movement to cross the tract as soon as possible. Suddenly caught sight of a Meitei looking old man of giant physique and colourfully dressed who was sitting on a low growing branch of a tree just by the roadside of the way he was passing. He accumulated all his strength to pass by the way in a single breath thinking it to be a deceptive figure. When he was nearing it, the man with a calm voice asked, "Why are you in hurry, son? Come, sit near me. Let's talk for a while. I have many things to discuss with you."

On hearing this, Phulo sighed with relief and being assured of his safety, stopped and sat near him. The man looked at him with his eyes and addressed him, "The duty of an able son is to know the origin of his forefathers. Quit your job and save your religion. The Meitei religion is in great trouble, all its essence is buried and we have forgotten all the holy doctrines and legacy of our own religion." On hearing this Phulo replied, "I am an innocent family man. How can I carry out such a tough task on my own? There are so many able and intelligent people around in the Meitei society, why me?" The man with a smile said, "It is you my son. You are the ablest son, save your religion for which you were born. Your religion is locked for a long period of time indiscriminately. Start your work immediately and if delayed your religion will be vanished once for all times to come." Phulo told him that the Meiteis were the followers of Vaishnavism which is an inseparable way of their life. The man then said, "Don't forget that you still worship yumlais, Sanamahi, Ima Leimaren and Epudhou Pakhangba. Remember that yours is yours and his is his. Never compare your religion with others and no religion is below or above one another." Phulo later asked the old man why he was
there. The man said that it was about 200 years that he had left the Meitei leipak (Manipur) and disappeared in the next moment. With a great surprise Phulo felt a thrill at heart — an excitement due for fear and curiosity. The site was also completely enveloped in darkness. With a heavy sweat and thousands of questions in mind Phulo reached his quarter (ibid). This idyllic incident transformed him completely and threw him into an ocean of thoughts to find out the meanings of the words spelt out by the old man.

Amingaon was the last police station where he served in the police service. In another incident on a Thursday, 26th April 1928, Phulo was studying a case in his chamber when he felt someone standing at the door. As he looked out, he saw a Meitei old man standing with his two hands holding the two borders of the door, looking at him as if he knew Phulo from years before. His whole body was bonded in shackles and holding an iron rod in his hands, with broad eyes, and was trying to say something. His appearance in this condition was symbolic and indicated that Meiteis were in chains and needed to be delivered. Phulo, in his deep inside, felt a similarity of the figure with the apparition of the man with whom he met the other day in Rangia. Before he could say anything, the man entered and sat on the chair on the other side of his table. The man stood instantly and took the cigar from him and with a somber voice said, “It has been a long time since I have not eaten Meitei food.” Phulo then offered to prepare something to eat for him. The old man with a smile thanked but refused his offer and calmly said, “My time is over and I have to go now. Come to the railway station after you finish your work. I will be waiting for you there. I have many things to convey to you.” And instantly the man got out of his chamber and disappeared out of vision. Phulo remained on his chair totally confused of whether it was an illusion or a reality. (ibid)
After his duty, Phulo went to the railway station as told by the man. He searched the entire railway station for the stranger but could not find him. He also asked the people around but no one in the platform could provide a clue of the man. With much disappointment Phulo decided to return to his quarter. When he looked around as he was returning, he saw a shackled hand hanging on the window of a train standing on the dock. He set his steps towards the train and got up in to the compartment. As he entered the compartment the stranger broke out into a big smile on his face as if he was welcoming him and blessed with the words, “My son, don’t be suspicious, come near me. I know you can carry out the task. Save your mother tongue, save your religion. The Meiteis are in prison for long and become a living dead. Do it now or never.” Phulo asked the man how he would start without knowing anything. “Whatever you do, whatever you say and whatever you set would be for others to follow. Remember I am always there wherever you go and whatever you do.” The old man added. When Phulo showed his eagerness to know his identity the old man put his fingers crossed with a slight movement of the face on the sides blinked his eyes slowly suggesting him to leave silently. Phulo had to leave the place with full of curiosity without a word, with thousands of puzzles to be solved. (ibid, information furnished was cross examined by interviewing L. Wakching, of Laishramkhun, an activist of the movement, during his interview with the researcher on 12/6/2011)

On the same day in the evening Phulo along with some of his policemen went for duty in a far flung remote area. On their way back late at night Phulo was in hurry by riding his horse through the hills, towards the station. As time rolled on, the bright and dazzling Venus appeared and was gazing intently from miles and miles away from the morning sky indicating the day break. After sometime he caught sight of a short statured old man in the dim light by the hill side, who seemed to be a grass cutter. As they were approaching, the man raised his head with eager expectation to meet someone, stopped him and inquired
whereabouts of Daroga Phundrei. Phulo was astonished at the question and replied that it was he himself whom the old man was looking for. He requested the old man to tell him what he wanted. The man with a broad smile returned, “Well, its long time since I have been looking for you. Wait for a moment.” The man, then, rushed to a small cave like shelter and came out with an iron box and handed over to Phulo saying, “Take this treasure and preserve with honour. Quit your job and start work.” The man then with a deep breath continued, “Today I have sown the seeds of seven Ebudhou (grandfathers of seven salais) and the rest is yours.” Saying thus, the man showered his blessings upon by rubbing his head. He then departed and disappeared out of vision amidst the hills. Phulo stood speechless like a statue looking towards the direction the man disappeared. It was the last blessing that Phulo received from the wise men which ultimately moulded his life towards the revival of the old Meitei religion and culture. Meiteis believed that the three old man with whom Phulo encountered with in the three different occasions were Lourembam Khongnangthaba, Langol Lukhoi and Konok Thengra respectively, the three great Meitei maichous (saints), who were believed to be disappeared from Manipur because of the misdeeds of the Meitei Kings leading to the annihilation of the Meitei tradition and origin. (ibid)

The above narrative taken from the family sources and believers, in his ideology, which looks imaginary and unreal, is referred to this context to substantiate the argument of the gradual strength that Apokpaism/Sanamahism is acquiring, supernatural cover being given to Phulo’s ordination and firm commitment of the revivalist forces in restoring and revalidating the pristine Meitei religion and faith. The narrative is

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24 The Apokpa Meiteis believe that the iron box which the old man handed over to Phulo contained the puya Sakok Thiren Machak, which is also believed to be the source of the Meitei Yelhou Mayek (script) consisting of 36 alphabets and claimed by them as the original script of the Meiteis. However, the said script is not accepted by the scholars in Manipur who otherwise suggest Sana Konung Mayek consisting 18 alphabets, which is recognized and introduced in the primary level of education in Manipur.
forming a part of popular perception as observed during fieldwork, among the fervent followers of *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism*.

The successive incidents made deep impact on Phulo’s mind and set the process of transforming his mind and infusing sense of dedication towards the goal of what the wise men set before him. Phulo started studying old Meitei *puyas* and other religious treatises like the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Bible* and the *Quran*. For the next two years, he meditated and searched for the truth and finally he was blessed with a vision and developed his school of thought. Having blessed by the wise men and read all relevant scriptures and getting convinced of reviving as well as popularizing the ancient religion among his Meitei brethren, Phulo chanted his new faith with missionary zeal and conviction.

In 1929 Phulo started his work of revivalism aiming at rooting for the roots and negotiating with his own people. His new role in calling upon the people to have a relook at their past, their pristine faith and the heritage the Meitei language was understandably received with opposition by the Meitei Brahmins and the Vaishnavite Meiteis. Mounting an attack on his revivalist initiative, Phulo was excommunicated by Jaribond *leipak* by calling him *nastik* on August 10, 1929. Phulo’s intelligence and tireless efforts fascinated number of followers. His closest followers namely Laorembam Tonjao and Naorem Kokngang were entrusted to carry out the task of propagating the traditional Meitei faith to the people of Jaribond. They convened a meetings at the residence Nepram Tonsana of Laishramkhun where they discussed on the ancient religion of the Meiteis and the new found ideal propounded by Naoria Phulo. People like Nepram Basna, Sanasam Chura, Loutonbam Dhana and Akoism Kirti took part in the discussion. They went to Thingomkhul near Kalacherra where they assembled in different places and started propagating Phulo’s ideas of reviving the
ancient religion and philosophy. Two days later, Vaishnava Meiteis gathered in an assembly at Thingomkhun convened by Ningthem Lalasana (NINGTHEM is the royal descendent from the KARTA line, descendants of king Bhagyachandra, who is the keeper and head of the Meitei society, also called LEIPAK MAPU) called Laurembam Tonjao, Bheiga, Meipak, Gopal, Laishram Makhe, Nabin and Atonyeima in the meeting and excommunicated all seven of them from the society for preaching an ideal against the established doctrine of Vaishnavism. In the next month Phulo’s family and relatives were also excommunicated by the society. They were considered to be social outcastes. (Sources from the family of Naoria Phulo.)

Phulo took voluntary retirement from the police service in March 1930 and came back to his native place Jaribond and started preaching the Apokpa religion. He reconverted his followers on the last Saturday (the Meitei week day of Thangja) of the Meitei calendar month of Lamda (11th April, 1930) at 7° clock in the morning at his residence by observing all formalities of the ancient religion. Seven disciples, namely, Laurembam Tonjao, Naorem Kokngang, Maipak, Gopal, Laishram Atonyeima, Soram Khelo and Moirengjam Munan were first reconverted to the old Meitei faith. On the next day of the reconversion ceremony, on Sunday, the April 12, 1930, Phulo founded the Apokpa Marup to give a platform for the study of the old Meitei religious philosophy. Amidst hardships and obstacles Phulo propagated Apokpa-ism for twelve years became the beloved of God for the heavenly abode at a young age of 53 on Monday, the 30th June 1941 at 8° clock in the morning at his residence at Leishrarnkhun. (Information provided by Ashem Ahan Megho, an Ahan, who is one of the seven core members or ahan taret of the Apokpa laining )

Phulo did not reconvert other than the first seven disciples named earlier during his lifetime and had left the remaining task to be carried out on his
successors. Saints in every religion are adorned by the people for their highly valued wisdom and philosophical works. Phulo was no exception. During these twelve years he propagated *Apokpa-ism* and wrote many books on different aspects including the origin of the Meiteis, their religious beliefs, rites and rituals, customs and traditions and on culture. He also put his hands in literary pursuits and composing songs which are partly published. The books he wrote included *Meetez Houpham Wari*, *Tengbanba Amashung Laininghou Laipao*, *Eigee wareng*, *Pamheiba*, *Thaeen Nong-eem*, *Ahal Yathang*, *Singtha Chetharol*, *Laining Khuda Nipal*, *Haunabung Amasung Lannabung*, among others. These books throw light on the origin of the Meiteis and development of the Meitei society, its cultural heritage, and religious philosophy. They also encapsulate the cosmogony and the relation between god, soul and body and the religious practices of the old Meitei religion, their deities. Any evaluation of his writings speaks volume to his literary beauty and style.

The news of the resurging of the old Meitei faith in Assam swept into Manipur and reached the Imphal valley. Soon a movement sprang up that found a positive echo in the minds of the young people, in their search for ethnic identity (Nilakanta, 1993). In 1935, Takhellambam Bokul (popularly known as *Sanamahi* Bokul), Surchand and Ibomacha from Manipur came to Cachar and stayed here for twenty-one months to study the religious philosophy of the old Meitei religion. They studied *Apokpa-ism* and were so impressed by the arguments given by Phulo that they denounced Vaishnavism and embraced *Apokpa-ism*. On their return, they tried to bring forth a new hope for the revival of the old Meitei religion. They initiated steps to form a religious organization and it was formed in the name of *Meitei Marup* on 14th May, 1945, consisting of seven members namely, Takhellambam Bokul, Pukhrambam Surchand, Pukhrambam Ibomacha, Angom Nungsirei, *Angom* Lila, Lukram Iboton and *Toism* Yaisna. These group of seven people played a major role in the beginning of a new era in the revival of the old Meitei religion which
they called Sanamahism (as narrated earlier, Sanamahi is the supreme household God of the Meiteis who is worshipped in every Meitei family irrespective of Vaishnava Meiteis or Apokpa/Sanamahi followers) in Manipur in the subsequent years. The formation of Apokpa Marup in the then Cachar and Meitei Marup in Manipur became a morale booster for those who were victims of the strict code and conduct of the Brahma sabha. Naoria Phulo came out strongly against the evil practices in the Meitei society. Thus the revival of Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism by the establishment of Apokpa Marup by Naoria Phulo in Cachar and Meitei Marup under his influence in Manipur became a major force in bringing a new social order. This movement led to a conflict between the followers of Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism and those of Vaishnavism. As a result, the followers and members of Meitei Marup were excommunicated by the Brahma sabha. Despite this, the movement gained momentum. Slowly but steadily the movement gained ground and greatly influenced the young minds. In the preceding years a marked change has been seen in the religious and socio-cultural life of the people at large.

In Manipur thirty-eight members of the Meitei Marup were excommunicated by the Brahma sabha, vide Brahma sabha Resolution no. 61, dated 31/10/1947. Not only those who were reconverted but also who were in touch with them in any social or religious function were also socially boycotted. They were not allowed to work together even in the paddy fields and inter-dinning as well as intermarriage between the two groups was prohibited. Neighbours belonging to opposing faiths raised high fencing to dissociate themselves from one another. Even death in the families could not bring them together in one platform. It is easily understandable that the deterioration of social relations in such a situation led to many cases of social boycott, excommunication and social conflicts between the Vaishnavite Meiteis and the followers of Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism and also between the authorities sympathetic to both these opposing groups. There was also a sense of conflict, anxiety and
distrust in the social set up. Thus the religious history of the Meiteis in the 20th century is a history of continued conflict amongst the Meitei brethren divided by the two religions, Vaishnavism and Apokpamism/Sanamahism.

In Assam till early 1990s intermarriage was between them was prohibited. However, the close of the 20th century saw Apokpamism/Sanamahism gaining strong foothold in the context of modern education, increasing sense of identity and many other social factors. Resultantly, the gap between the two groups has also seen a sharply declining movement. The impact of the teachings of Naoria Phulo became more and more embedded in the hearts and minds of the people at large. The arguments given by Phulo became acceptable to the masses. As a result, it instilled a new hope in the process of revivalist movement of the old Meitei religion. Old beliefs and religious practices paved to the broadening of the base of the emerging movement to take its righteous place.

Naoria Phulo started his movement for the revival of the old religion of the Meiteis and called for rooting for the roots. In one of his poems titled Eigi Weireng (written in Manipuri language, published by Apokpa Marup, Jafibond, Cachar, 1949) he writes:

Can’t one pray in one’s own language?
Isn’t one’s own religion the most natural way leading to God?

(16: 48-49)

He looked for the answers, after a process of search up held a vision for the rejuvenation and renaissance of his people. Phulo’s philosophy was that of ‘one fatherhood of god and universal brotherhood of human beings’ like many other religious faiths. He stressed the way that an individual reaches God in consonance with his/her own way of life. In
1937 he was given the title *Laininghan* (meaning the greatest believer of God) by the then Rajkumar of Manipur R.K. Tikendradhwaj.

Subsequently, Mass conversion of the Meiteis by an oath taking process called *nongkhrang irppua* (a ritual bathing ensuring to follow the new religion for the next seven births as stated earlier), under royal decree in the beginning of the 18th century, were reverted to *Sanamahism* on Wednesday, the 6th February 1974 by a declaration of the then Maharaja of Manipur, Okendrajit. It got its official recognition after eighteen years as the king declared on April 23, 1992 (21st of the Meitei calendar month of *Sajibu*) declared the religion as the state religion of Manipur.

### 4.3 Ideology of Naoria Phulo:

The establishment of *Apokpa Marup* in Jaribon was an effort to provide proper direction of the movement with a definite ideology. His main ideology is the de-Hinduisiation of the Meitei socio-religious identity which is manifested in his action when he started strongly opposing the observance of Hindu festivals, use of Sanskrit and Bengali languages and the monopoly of Brahmins in the Socio-religious ceremonies of the Meiteis. His preaching was also the exposition of Meitei belief and their way of life so that their identity would not be threatened by a more dominant culture. He believed that the following of the traditional Meitei way of life is no sin. According to him the best way to liberate the society from the Brahmanical domination is to worship the Meitei deities with their own hymns of the Meitei language and not through Bengali or Sanskrit verses.

By doing this Naoria Phulo has also criticized the leaders of the Vaishnavite Meitei organizations. On one occasion, during the celebration of a *sankirtana*, the king of Manipur Maharaja Churachand along with his great Sanskrit scholar, Pandit Atombapu Sharma met Phulo at Lalang, a village near Lakhipur, Cachar, in 1935. The Maharaja...
came to know about Phulo’s arguments and denouncement of Vaishnavism. It is said that a public debate was arranged there between the members of *Apokpa Marup* and the Vaishnavite Meiteis. *Laininghan* is said to have defeated Pandit Atombapu Sharma in the said debate and the Maharaja himself was impressed by the arguments forwarded by Phulo. (Information provided by N. Amusana, the son of Naoria Phulo, of Laishramkhun.)

His greatest achievement was the development of a scientific theory of Meitei cosmic evolution in his unpublished book *Sakok Salai Thirel*. His books reflected the de-Hinduisations of Meiteis and the ancient philosophy about the creation of the universe, earth, God and the origin of the Meiteis. The ideology of the *Apokpa Marup* led by Naoria Phulo was to break off from Vaishnavism totally. This ideology is also clearly reflected in the books written by him which is his major effort to stop the Vaishnava influence on the Meitei culture and religion. His works on Vaishnava Meitei Kings and Hindu Missionaries awakened the Meitei minds to a sharp departure from the Vaishnavite elements.

For Naoria Phulo, Meitei’s culture and religion which he called *Meitei-ism/Apokpa-ism* is not the off shoot of the tribal culture as propounded by European anthropologists like McCulloch, Pemberton, T.C. Hodson, Grierson and others. Neither it was a speculation based on Hindu myths of the Aryan origin as alleged by W. Yumjao Singh and Pandit Atombapu Sharma. Naoria Phulo in his theory held the view that the Meiteis are the descendents of *Laininghou Sararel* (God of Heaven) and their religion is the worshiping of *Poklen Pokpa Satlen Satpa* (Supreme Creator) along with a host of pre-Vaishnavite Meitei deities. For his tireless effort and contribution in the revival of the Meitei religious life, his followers gave him the title of *Taibangfaoba Naoria Ahan* (Universal Leader Naoria, the Great). His ideology is to establish a district Meitei identity which is neither of tribal origin nor of Aryan origin. It is to be
noted that there is a sharp difference in the ideologies of the movement in Assam and the valley of Manipur. In Manipur, the movement has always been influenced by achieving various political goals. However in Assam the movement remained as a socio-cultural and religious movement aiming at establishing a distinct identity of its own free from the influence of dominant cultures. This is because of conditions prevailing in Assam differing from that of Manipur.

Therefore, many revivalist leaders in Manipur valley differ from the ideology of Naoria Phulo because Meiteis in Manipur felt the importance of maintaining a social harmony not only between the Meiteis and hill tribes but also between various ethnic communities in the valley. These leaders claim that the Sanamahi was the common God of both the Meiteis and hill tribes. Therefore, the leaders in Manipur valley named the movement as Sanamahi Movement instead of Apokpa-ism. The change of the name of the movement by the Meiteis in Manipur indicates the ideological shift of the leaders from an exclusivist Meitei identity to a broader identity of Manipur. Its aspect is to broaden the participation of social groups rather than confining to the Meiteis alone. At present there are many state level organizations in Manipur which work together to sustain the Sanamahi movement in a holistic way. Therefore the present Sanamahi movement in Manipur has developed a multiple leadership with varying interests on different issues of language, culture, religion and politics. (Bijoykumar, 2005)

4.4 Influence of Vaishnavism on the Meitei Social and Cultural Life:

It is a fact that Vaishnavism found a fertile ground in Manipur and established a deep rooted foundation in Meitei society. The Meiteis have assimilated the faith to their own tastes guided by their own brand of conservatism and orthodoxy. This can be seen from a variety of their religious functions and other ceremonies. The Meitei Vaishnavism remains unique for its society with a dual caste organization viz.
Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. It may also be added that Vaishnavism has let, first to the complete absorption of the immigrant Brahmins into the fold of Meitei society and second to the adoption of Bengali (in its one of the dialects Brajabali) and partly Sanskrit literature which undeniably provided fodder for the cultivation of Vaishnava faith in the Meitei society. (Kennedy, 1925)

As discussed earlier, Vaishnavism has had a great impact on the life of the Meiteis. It is not too much to say that Vaishnavism has become the culture of the Meiteis, or at least made them feel that way. Their worldview, way of life, dress, and food has been greatly influenced by Vaishnavism. As discussed before, there were not much difference between them and the hill people. But when they became Hindus they adopted the concept of ‘touch me not’ attitude. They treated the hill people as untouchables and called them hao, meaning ‘uncivilized’. This led to the creation of a colossal barrier between the Meiteis and the hill people. Within the Meitei community, there are Lois and Yaithibis who were driven out of the Meitei community as untouchables for not accepting Vaishnavism. They live in the outskirts of the mainline Meitei people.

From 18th century onwards, the common Meitei thought has been identified with Hinduism in the form of Vaishnavism (Gaudia) which is associated with the school of Sri Chaitanya. Many scholars started to locate the Meiteis in the discursive episteme of a pan Indian social and cultural legacy and traced the roots of the Meiteis with that of kiratas of the ancient Indian literatures. Books and scriptures had been translated from Bengali and Sanskrit to Manipuri. Brahma sabha was formed. As a result, untouchability (mangba shengba or amang asheng) all of a sudden strictly became a part of Meitei social life. A law book called Wayel was written as Hindu Law Book of Manipur. It became a matter of pride for them to use Bengali and Sanskrit in their day to day lifestyle. All
religious functions were performed in Sanskrit in accordance with Hindu rituals. Brindavan, Nabdwip and Puri came to be considered more holy than the sacred places of Manipur.

All the rites and rituals and ceremonies of the Vaishnavite Meiteis related to birth, marriage and death were accompanied with lairik thiba (recitation and narration of Hindu religious scriptures and of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata), and Sankirtana (singing of the Vaishnava devotional song). Sankirtana, which is a form of worship of Krishna and Radha, through hymns and in praise of their lives in the garden of Brindavana. This was quite easily adopted by the Meiteis whose religion expresses itself in a synthesis of music, singing, dancing and drama (Bowers, 1953). The sankirtana, infused by the artistic movements of the Meiteis, creates an atmosphere where dance and music become dominant elements of their religion and life providing an emotional outlet for the people.

In lairik thiba, there are two men, one reciting the Hindu scripture and the other interpreted in the Meitei language, who are called lairik thiba and lairik haiba respectively. Sometimes the scripture is sung as a ballad or shown in performative art forms. These used to enthuse the audience and involve them emotionally. It entertains the audiences with different emotions. In this way the audiences were co-opted into Hindu religious philosophy and ethics.

In addition to these there are other forms of performing arts for the sociocultural and religious orientation of the Meiteis into the Vaishnava religious core. They are khubak eshei, a kind of ritual singing only by female performers who sing in praise of Lord Krishna, Natapala and Rasa Lila.
Natapala is a devotional ensemble performance held on ritual occasions in the Meitei society of Manipur. The oldest form of nata sankirtana is bangadesh pala introduced in 1709 A.D, followed by manoharshai pala, in 1850; the other two variations of this genre being dhrumel and dhap pala. In a typical performance held in the courtyard of a house or a temple, it is held with audience sitting on three sides of the sacred performing space. The head of the function, who is called kirtan mapu, ritually begins and ends the function, with the sound of the conch-shell (moibung) marking every phase of the performance. Structured as an ensemble, the primary dynamics of the performance consists of a duet between the singer-cymbal player-dancers who may be male or female and the drum-dancers called pung yeiba, who are always male. The singers sing while standing, play cymbals to keep the rhythm of the song along with and enact the meaning of the song in expressive gestures. The drum-playing is accompanied with dancing with vigorous jumps and acrobatic turns called pung cholom. The lead singer often narrates parts of the theme in the form of theatrical dialogues. They are usually sung in Brajabali language about Vaishnavite themes along with Manipuri translations.

The Rasa Lila is the prime contribution of the Meiteis to Hinduism, which is the synthesis of the traditional Meitei dance form with that of the Vaishnava religious theme. There are two kinds of Rasa Lila;

the first is about the childhood stories that enact episodes relating Lord Krishna’s childhood stories which is locally called sansenba (rakhal/raukhal/auka lila) which is largely performed by children.

the other is the Rasa Lila which is held at night and is mainly performed by adult women and those who perform in a Rasa Lila is believed to be an act of devotion in which stories from Lord Krishna’s life are performed.
They are the most powerful socio-cultural media which were engaged for mass appropriation of the Meitei population at the grass root level towards Vaishnavite cultural values and religious philosophy. These efforts to popularize the new religion caused the indigenous religion to fade out from the life of the people. However, there has always been a basic Meitei philosophy in existence under the surface parallel to Hinduism. It leads to the fact that Vaishnavism practiced in Manipur consequently became a peculiar Manipuri Vaishnavism in form, a syncretism of traditional culture and the new faith (Zehol, 1998). The religious life of the people, even if they have come much under the influence of Hinduism, retained their traditional markers inherited from their ancestors. The essentials of the old religion remain recognizable till this day.

With the revival of the traditional religious beliefs and its values, a wide range of changes are witnessed in the content and context of the rituals and ceremonies related to births and deaths and the observance of social and cultural rituals and ceremonies as discussed above. Among the Meiteis who have got reconverted to Apokpa/Sanamahi faith, the employment and engagement of pibas (Meitei man) and maibas and maibis in place of Brahmins has altered the entire structure and content of these ceremonies and rituals which are being infused with new meanings. On the other hand, there has also been witnessed a sea change in the rituals and ceremonies of the Vaishnavite Meiteis. As mentioned above the external structures of the Hindu rituals remain the same, but the social purpose and content have undergone radical changes.

The tradition which they had inherited was their own thought and philosophy, gods and goddesses, priests, rituals and festivals which were rich in mythology and colourful in nature. The yumlais mentioned earlier are worshipped in every Manipuri household and their importance in social and cultural life of the people has never been reduced. However,
conflict between Meitei *lais* and Hindu gods was never felt as the religion of the Manipuris today managed to draw effectively from both the indigenous and Hindu traditions and fuse them into a workable synthesis. The Vaishnava faith could not erase the traditional *lais* from practice and belief of the people nor did it identify the *lais* with Hindu gods. The traditional *lais* continued to be an integral part of the Meitei life and are placed side by side with the lately adopted Radha-Krishna and host of other Hindu deities.

It is a relevant point here that the worship of *ymlais* and *umanglais* are performed not by the Hindu Brahmins but by the *maiba* or *maibi* only and the ritualistic prayers of Hindu deities are performed by the Brahmins under the *tulsi* tree which is planted in every house in the north east corner of the courtyard. *Prasada* of Hindu gods and goddesses are generally not taken inside the house. In fact, after having *prasada* they are to wash their hands and mouth before entering into the house. For more than three centuries Vaishnavism had its impact in orienting the religious and cultural life of the Meiteis. The Bhakti cult permeates the emotional being of the Meitei common people. Yet even today, despite the iron grip of Vaishnavism, *Sanamahi*, the highest pre-Vedic Meitei deity rules supreme (Zehol, 1998). On a closer look into the process discussed above, one finds a sense of uniqueness. While adopting the Vaishnavite frame of living, as an effect of Sanskritisation, the Meiteis never dissociated themselves from their innate indigenous sensibilities. So we find Vaishnavism taking a ‘Meitei-turn’ in Manipur as well as in Assam. The temptation is to say that the Meiteis are Hindus whose worship of *Sanamahi* is irresistible.
4.5 Socio-religious and Cultural Changes in the Meitei society in Assam:

Socio-religious movements are defined as collective actions either to initiate or to resist changes. In this chapter an attempt is made first to identify the nature of the Sanamahi movement and secondly, to study the overall changes in the Meitei society. Therefore, attempts have been made to examine the impact of the Sanamahi movement on various spheres such as social, cultural and religious life of the Meiteis with special reference to Assam. The present Sanamahi movement has passed through various stages in shaping its goals in different periods. The most vital area of exploration in this regard is the reasons for the continuity and sustainability of the movement that had started in 1930s till today. The movement for the revival of pre-Hindu Meitei identity seems to be more relevant in the present context than before. Therefore, the intensity of the movement as well as its impact today is greater than before.

One of the most significant impacts of the movement is the changes in the socio-economic relationship between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins. Earlier the Brahmins enjoyed a certain economic status legitimised by the notion of mangba-sengba (purity and pollution) corresponding to their ritualistic and social position in the society. (Bijoykumar, 2005) Because of this notion of purity associated with their ritual status, the Brahmins enjoyed certain amount of monopoly in both religious and social space. The income that came from the public charity for rituals and their role as cook in the community feast has considerably reduced in the changed situation. It is also witnessed that along with the deteriorating positions of the Brahmins in the society, the Vaishnavite festivals, which were once celebrated in a grand way, today, they are hardly observed except for formalities. The Ratha Yatra locally called kang chingba (pulling of chariot of Lord Jagannatha), which was once the longest festival celebrated for 9 days by the Meiteis, is no more
popular in the same degree. In the entire Jaribond (Meitei settlement in Hailakandi district of Assam) only Chengbil, a village near Lala town, *kang chingba* is witnessed with a few participants. Other ceremonial activities following the *kang chingba* like *joydev chongba* (*sankirtana*) and community feast are also observed in a very smaller scale. There are many Vaishnava Meiteis and temples that do not participate in and observe this festival publicly at present.

Today even in the state of Manipur this festival is witnessed only in the Govindaji temple in the Kangla palace compound, Bijoy Govindaji temple at Sagolband and Abdeitya temple at Bishnupur with very few participants. (Bijoykumar, 2005)

On the contrary there is a growing trend among the Meiteis towards their age old religious festivals like *lai haraoba*, *Mera wa yungba* (lighting of the holy light on the bamboo pole in the Meitei calendar month *Mera*), *thabal chongba* (Post-harvest dance by unmarried boys and girls), *Emoinu eratpa* (worship of the sacred fire), to mention a few. When Hinduism spread to Manipur most of the traditional festivals of the Meiteis have been influenced by Hinduism to a great extent. Many of the festivals were even replaced by the Hindu festivals. For instance, the *kwak tanba* (ritual to drive out evil spirits) ritual had become a part of the Durga *puja*. Such assimilation led to the neglect of important traditional rituals associated with *kwak tanba/*kwak *yatrap* and led to the marginalization of the role and importance of *maiba* and *maibi*. With the revival of *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism*, their roles are being grounded fore again. It is observed that there is also a gradual increase in the popularity of traditional folk songs called *khunung eshei*, *Moirang parvah* and *Khongjom parva*. These are musical genres singing the epic love story of the legendary hero and heroine Khamba and Thoibi of Moirang. They promote the deep religious feeling of the people and provide the theme of the *Khamba-Thoibi* epic in archaic Meitei language. Another significant
change is the performing art forms in the socio-religious ceremonies of the Vaishnavite Meiteis which is also greatly influenced by the revivalist movement which can be clearly seen in their rituals and ceremonies particularly in the Meitei society of Assam.

It is pertinent to understand the dynamics of survival and existence of these indigenous traditions by defying the powerful force of Hinduisation. The subversion of the process of Hinduisation happened as these traditional forms subsumed themselves in the larger socio-religious Hindu fabric by taking in characteristics of the Vaishnavite faith. This is purely the ‘logic of culture’ and that is how the indigenous traditions have survived till today in spite of powerful socio-political forces of Hinduisation, Burmese occupation, colonization, modernization and globalization. Today the Apokpa-ism/Sanamahi movement has been making efforts not only to revive the indigenous socio-religious traditions but also to sanctify these traditions which have been intermingled with the alien cultural elements. This is the greatest challenge that the Apokpa/Sanamahi movement has to face to make the Meiteis rediscover their age old culture as a unique and distinct from pan Indian Vaishnavite traditions.

4.6 Decline of Brahmanical institutions in the Meitei Society of Assam:

Majority of the Manipuri population in Assam live in villages. More importantly, these villages’ center round a Vaishnavite temple along with a mandap, a gathering space, which serves as the village community

25. Here the term 'logic of culture' refers to the conscious part of culture that always finds its ways of survival. It has a capacity for adoption, absorption and assimilation. In order to survive the indigenous culture at the same time to accept the Hindu culture among the masses, each of the culture – traditional religion and Vaishnavism, support each other. The Meiteis also understand their subjective and objective responses to the new Vaishnavite culture. First they lend their will to the king in the legitimization of the Vaishnavite culture with free consent and obedience at the same time they also assert themselves as different from the Hindu culture. Ray, William, The Logic of Culture, Blackwell Publishers, 2001 (Cited in Bijoykumar, 2005)
centers. More than twenty major Hindu festivals were observed by them with great importance till few decades ago. Mention may be made of *ratha yatra*, *Janmastami* (*Krishna janma*), *Radhastami* (*Thourani janma*), *Sri Panchami*, *Shivaratri*, *Akshaya Tritiya*, *Baruni*, *Dol Yatra*, among others. It is witnessed that at present these festivals are no longer observed publicly with pomp and gusto but these are observed only as a routine matter. On the other hand, many pre-Hindu traditional festivals are gaining its momentum. Till 1970s almost every child in the Meitei society used to participate in the children theatre called *raukhal rakhal* (locally called *sansenba* or *gauda lila*), which was performed every year in almost every locality. Today it is no more played and such a festival is not even known to the younger generations. They can be only heard as stories from the nostalgic older generation.

The Vaishnavite temples in the Meitei villages are traditionally run by the Brahmins with the support from the villagers. Most of these temples are either established by a well to do person of the village or by the donation of the village population. The villagers provide their subscription for performing any Vaishnavite religious rites, rituals and festivals. However, today there is a marked change in the people's mindset and the earlier enthusiasm. Hence, the power and position enjoyed by the Brahmins in the Meitei society in earlier days seem to be reduced to a great extent. Moreover, there are very few Brahmins by profession now a days. Earlier it was the routine work for every Brahmin boy to help their parents in daily *puja* in the temples. However, today it is very hard to find a Brahmin boy going for the training for priesthood craft (Bijoykumar, 2005). Many lapses, omissions and commissions in the Hindu ritual formalities are witnessed in the conduct of rites and rituals of death, marriage and similar other ceremonies. This cultural and social degeneration in respect of the Meitei Brahmins has a great significance in the Meitei society in Assam in view of the present *Sanamahi* movement.
4.7 Revival of the indigenous rituals and festivals:

At present there is a new wave of popularizing traditional rituals and festivals in Assam. The term 'ritual' involves beliefs in religious power and therefore it is sacred. It also symbolizes the integrating force which is sometimes shared by the whole of the community. Rituals determine the social content and behaviour of a group which may also reflect the changing aspects of a society. Such changing aspects may signify the creation of a new aspect in the form of new tradition or redefinition of an old one. (Amal, 2010)

As discussed earlier, in the ongoing process of social change due to the modernization and globalization along with the revivalist movement of the Meiteis, which had started in the 1930s, today a change has been witnessed in the Vaishnavite Meitei social and cultural life also. When the Apokpa/Sanamahi Meiteis revived and retained their traditional culture and belief, rites and rituals, the Vaishnavite Meiteis at present are also found to have intended to change their course and conduct from the so called mainstream. Since the Meiteis had once dipped their whole body and mind into Vaishnavism with dedication, it remained to be a hard task to bring a change in their mindset in a U-turn. However, most of the rites and rituals of the Vaishnavite Meiteis are found to be performed at present with many cuts and modifications or additions, which indicates an interblending of the two to produce a new tradition or rather a revival of their age old tradition.

Most of the people including academicians to the common people assume it as a Renaissance in the Meitei society. The essence of the revivalist movement started by Phulo was its accent on old Meitei gods and goddesses like Sanamahi, Pakhangba and Ima Leimaren and host of other deities. It was a reaction to Vaishnavism initially and had an ethnic dimension as Sanskrit and Bengali were totally replaced by the chaste Meitei expression. Moreover, the modern education also has helped the
awakening multi-pronged and multi-dimensional affair which has a great impact the community in various aspects. The change that resulted from this impact is clearly witnessed from the early 1980’s. Today, the rites and rituals which had not been performed for years are started celebrating. The traditional rites and rituals became popular in almost every Meitei populated areas. In the Hailakandi district of Assam *lai haroaba* was performed only in the temple of *Lawat Lairembi* (Meitei goddess, also called *Kachaha Khouri* by the non-Meitei population of the area). However, today almost every *umanglai* deity in the Meitei village is also worshipped through *lai haraoba* festival with great enthusiasm. *Lai haraoba* festival is a lengthy process and is held in an esteemed way. There is an upward trend of this festival along with other traditional festivals in Assam.

There is no denying fact that old ritual values have considerably declined in almost in every society. It is also witnessed that there is a minimizing trend in the performance of such rituals may be due to busy and materialistic life style as a result of the globalization. As such the lengthy process of *lai haraoba* is shortened to save energy, time and space and obviously expenditure. However, the central theme remains the same and unchanging as lyrics in the hymns of the ritual are properly preserved. The *lai haraoba* festival was generally observed for at least for ten days (in Manipur it was ten days to thirty days). But today they are shortened to 9 days or 7 days or 5 days. In some cases *lai haraoba* is shortened to 3 days only in Assam. The details of the *lai haraoba* festival will be discussed at length in the proceeding pages.

### 4.8 The Worship of Panthoibi on Durga Puja:

The Durga *puja* festival as in the dominant cultures of Assam is celebrated by the Meiteis since their settlement here with great pomp and gusto. Almost in every Meitei concentrated areas this festival is celebrated. In almost all the villages the Vaishnavite Meiteis formed
committees for celebrating Durga puja. These committees closely co-operated with the Brahmins in observing the festival in their localities. However it is witnessed that there has been a peculiar change with the idol of the Goddess in its way of dressing. She wears the Meitei attire phanek maronnaibi and inaphi instead of sari. This may be due to the influence of Sanamahi movement in Manipur where revivalist Meiteis popularize this festival through the identification of Goddess Durga with the Meitei Goddess Panthoibi. The Sanamahi Meiteis in Manipur worship Panthoibi during the Durga puja festival which is an attempt to counter the Hindu religious festival and the number is ever increasing. This, however, does not make much change in the structure and formalities of the festival.

4.9 Yaosang (The Holi Festival):

This holi festival was known as loipan festival by the traditional Meiteis in early times. It was the festival of the merriment of gods and goddesses of creation from the time immemorial. In course of time the festival became synthesized with the Hindu festival of holi during the reign of king Gharibniwaz in 1709 and it became commonly known as yaosang. Among the Meiteis the holi festival is closely related to Shri Krishna and Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu as the observance of the festival starts with the birthday of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu that falls on the full-moon of Lamda purnima (March) and continues for five consecutive days. The first day of this festival starts with the construction of a small thatched temporary temple called yaosang at a suitable place in every village with prayers to Chaitanya Mahaprabhu as His idol is installed in that temporary temple or sang and offered fruits, flowers, sweets and long flags, particularly woven for the occasion called yaosang phiran, which are tied on full length bamboo poles (five such poles are mandatory). This bamboo poles serve as the poles of the sang. After performing puja, sankartana is sung by all men and women, old and young by revolving
round the *sang* at least for three times. When prayer is over the temporary *mandir* is set on fire. All people, young and old and children join together and enjoy the burning of the *sang*. After it the children in groups move around the locality from house to house for asking *vikhya* (alms) called *vikhya niba* from door to door in the name of Sri Chaitanya by shouting *Hari bolla, jai Hari* (shouting victory of Sri Hari). Such activities go on the next five days. From the next morning the little ones go for *vikhya* from house to house of the locality. The grown up boys and girls come out and move on the road sides for *vikhya* from the passers-by, mostly young people.

Till early 1990's people of all ages formed groups and used to go from door to door in the Meitei villages, which is called *holi-chatpa*. They sing devotional songs of Radha-Krishna and play *abir* (coloured powders) which is entertaining at the same times. Female folks also used to organize in such groups. Today there is a marked change witnessed in the observance of *yaosang* festival in the Meitei society of Assam. The importance of the festival is sharply declined. The trend of asking for alms has become very rare now a days. Most of the educated people are reluctant to such activities. They find it to be meaningless and do not even send their children. Hence, if these activities are carried out by some sections of people, it does not continue beyond a day since they find themselves embarrassed. Instead, *thabal-chongba* is organized in almost every locality. It is a post-harvest dance form of the unmarried boys and girls which is a derivation from the traditional Meitei folk dance form called *ougri hangel chongba*. However, playing of *abir* or colour is still witnessed in the Meitei society of Assam only for amusement.
4.10 Cheiraoba:

*Cheiraoba* or *Sajibu Cheiraoba* is an important Meitei ritual which is observed by each and every Meitei family irrespective of Vaishnavite of *Apokpa/Sanamahi* Meiteis uninterrupted from time immemorial. It is observed on the last day of the last Meitei calendar month of *Lamda*, which could never be overshadowed by the influence of Vaishnavism. In early days a man holding a bamboo stick with a bell on top of it and tied with a flag, used to go announcing the end of a year and beginning of a new year. *Cheiraoba* is a combination of a two words i.e. *chei* means stick and *lauba* means announcement. Thus *Cheiraoba* literally means announcement of the end of the old and beginning of a new year. On this occasion every Meitei house is cleaned their respective houses. The ritual is carried out mainly to pray the *yumlais Sanamahi, Ima leimarel* and *Apokpa*. They offer fruits, vegetables and raw rice and some *sageis* offer a fish mainly a *ngamu* or a *porom* or a *sareng* fish to *Apokpa*.

They cook of these offerings and eat themselves after it has been offered to the *lam-lais* including the evil spirits seeking protection and safety of the family members. This is called *lai-chak thaba*. The male head of the family makes the offerings and in case his absence the eldest male member in the family takes his place. It is witnessed that the date of observation of this ritual is different between the people who follow the *Apokpa-ism* and Vaishnavite Meiteis. The Vaishnavite Meitei observes this festival in the month of April corresponding to the Bengali New Year and the Apokpa Meiteis observe according to the Meitei calendar which falls in the middle of March. This trend of following the Meitei calendar in case of *Cheiraoba* has started from 1980s in Assam and they termed it Meitei *Cheiraoba* (Information provided by L. Wakching). This trend is gaining ground even among the Vaishnavite Meiteis. Inspite of the difference in the dates, the mode of observation of the ritual by both the groups remain the same.
Preliminary works for the celebration are done well ahead of the day of the festival - such as, the cleaning of the house, utensils of the kitchen etc. The ceremonial part starts early in the morning. Women of every household prepare athenpot containing fine raw rice, raw vegetables of different kinds, fruits and flowers of the new season. Athenpot is meant for offering to Lainingthou Sanamahi and Ima Leimarel Sidabi and Apokpa placed on the southwestern corner of the house. Prayers are offered by all the members of the family. After it the offering of foodstuffs such as rice and vegetables etc. are cooked and different varieties of dishes are made by female members of the family, which are placed on nicely round-cut plantain leaves and offered to Emoinu at the fire place of the house. This cooked food is then offered to the lamlai of the village. Food is also offered at the gate of the house to the spirits known as Lamaba Tumaba, and Saroi Ngaroi for the happiness and to protect the family from sorrows and difficulties in the coming year. After this ritual is getting over all the members of the family dine together. In the evening small boys and girls play kang, a kind of traditional game of the Meiteis in the village mandap. In the evening they prepare tan bora (typical Meitei chapati and pakora) and send it to their relatives and friends. Sajibu Cheiraoba carries great religious significance. It is believed that on the first day of Sajibu month Lainingthou Sanamahi waits for the offerings from his devotees and bless them for the wellbeing of the family. The Cheitharol Kumbaba mentions in details about Sajibu Cheiraoba, and it had been started from the time of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (33 AD). In this month of Sajibu people start preparing their agricultural fields for cultivation. However, tilting of land and digging is prohibited during the first five days of the month.

26 Each village has a different lamlai who are believed to be the first dead of the village. The Madaripar village in the Hailakandi district is Debjani, who is believed to be the first death of the village.
4.11 Apokpa Khuramba:

*Apokpa khuramba* or worship of Apokpa is another ritual that takes place among almost all the clans of the Meiteis. Sociologically ancestor worship creates mutual understanding among the clan members and brings a sense of togetherness among the members of the clan residing in different places. Secondly, it strengthens the institution of family, marriages and kingship system (Amal, 2010). The message of this ritual is sent through a messenger or various other means which is known as *sagei paojel* (invitation of sub-clan gathering). This ritual has a great impact in bringing the community together with a sense of identity.

4.12 Discursive Formation and Lai Haraoba:

This is an attempt to examine *lai haraoba*\(^{27}\) within the context of the articulation of Meitei ethnic identity. It addresses two concerns. Firstly, *lai haraoba* as it figures in popular as well as academic discourses is contextualized within the Meitei 'lifeworld'\(^{28}\) taking into account native categories of thought according to which the *lai haraoba* tradition embodies the very essence of what is truly Meitei. As such, it comes to occupy a position that can only be described as paradigmatic in the restating of a distinct ethnic identity. Secondly, at the physical level of space of the festival, it attempts at direct attention towards a secular culture within the sanctified 'non-ritual' space of the *lai haraoba*.\(^{29}\)

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\(^{28}\) Habermas’s concept of ‘lifeworld’ refers to taken-for-granted the pre-theoretical stock of knowledge that is shared, yet constitutes a knowledge that forms and remains in the background, surviving so long as it exists in the background and is not brought to the foreground. Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and Rationalization of Society*, Vol. 1, London, Heiniman Publication, 1984.

\(^{29}\) The ethnographic field of observation constitutes Barak valley of Assam; the variant of the *lai haraoba* observed here is both the traditional and of the Hindu gods.
The *lai haraoba* has been posited as the prime ritual, the ultimate source from which originates not only dance and music but also the birth of man and *lais*, the cosmos and the whole creation. The festival exemplifies the very essence of the community. An aspect that is constantly brought to the fore is its resilience to change under the impact of the eighteenth century religious conversion to Vaishnavism orchestrated by King Garibniwaz (1709–1748). The process of mass Sanskritization is something which remains associated with forced conversion in popular memory.30 The emphasis on the resilience of the *lai haraoba* in the face of this impact could be seen as a statement in itself, a reflection of a growing consciousness and a struggle of a people to assert their identity by re-establishing/re-affirming their ethnic rooted-ness. As such it is also a struggle against cultural (and political) homogenization that is perceived as threatening to local interests.31

The *lai haraoba* celebrates the myth of the Meitei origin and the creation of the universe. The Meiteis believed that the sequence and the series of events, dance, songs and music, performed in the festival represent the concept of the origin of the universe. The belief system of the Meiteis starts with the Supreme Being, *Tengbanba Mapu*, who is the source of all manifestations and to whom all manifestations ultimately return. The emanation of different deities from him is the beginning of creation. His

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31. In the Meitei experience, the change in values and lifestyles in accordance with a 'Sanskritic' pattern is also associated with conversion to Hinduism (Vaishnavism). As such it need not necessarily be an attempt to upward mobility. However it remains that the imported religion was not open to everyone. The idea of 'mainstream' may be problematic but it cannot be refuted that such an idea exists in popular as well as national imagery. Instead of recognizing the multiplicity, a composite culture which implies homogenization is theorized (K.M. Chenoy, 'Nationalist Ideology, Militarism and Human Rights in Northeast', *Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 3, Issue I, April–June, 2005). Moreover, Hinduism as it emerged in the present century began to equate itself unequivocally to Indian tradition at large. V. Dalmia & H. von Steinencron (eds.), *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and Religious Identities*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995.
earliest manifestations are that of Atingkok, the infinite expanse and Amamba, the infinite darkness. The next three, Atya Kuru Sidaba, Apanba and Asheeba, are the incarnations as the Creator, the Preserver and the Annihilator of the universe respectively. Sanamahi, Pakhangba and Nongpok Ningthou are the later incarnations, who play the role of male deities whereas Leimarel Shidabi and Panthoibi are the female deities in the Meitei belief system. Legends say that according to the will of the Tengbanba Mapu, these gods and goddesses were entrusted with various tasks to create the world of flora and fauna and to create a place fit for human habitation. On its completion the occasion was celebrated as lai haraoba.

Sociologically festivals constitute a break from the normal, the mundane everyday existence. It thus has a temporal dimension to it. As a festival of an agrarian society, it marks a break from the agricultural cycle—the closing in on the previous cycle before the commencement and the onset of the next monsoon. Therefore, it is celebrated during the agricultural slack season (Jan-June).

As a religious event, the lai haraoba marks the coming together of the world of lais and of humans. The rituals venerate not one particular deity but deities under the generic category of umanglai. These include certain ancestors, tutelary deities besides some deities of non-Meitei origin. Characteristically they are guardian deities of delimited areas which venerate them annually along with their spouse as a couple.

In the state of Manipur there are six major locations of lai haraoba, based on which distinctive features emerge: (1) Kanglei haraoba, (2) Chakpa haraoba, (3) Andro haraoba, (4) Sekmai haraoba, (5) Moirang

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32 Kuru is the word later on corrupted with the Sanskrit word guru and after Hinduisation it has replaced the word kuru in writings as well as in spoken language.
33 These three deities were later on tried to identify and incorporate with the Hindu Trinity Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar.
34 After Hinduisation Lord Shiva also came to be worshipped as umanglai
haraoba and (6) Kakching haraoba. The differences in the six festivals are very wide and broad. This prompts the question—‘why is it that a common name has been allotted to something that exhibits distinct differences?’ As a mode of worship, the rituals follow a particular structure, which commences with descent of the deities (lai eekouba) and concludes with their (lais) departure in lairoi. Daily rituals observed in between similarly follow a particular structure. This similarity in the structure of the festival also follows by the Meiteis of Assam.

The complete festival begins in the daytime of the second day. Laiboula thaba (a plantain leaf is placed on the specific place representing the unseen god manifesting the world sit) is the most important part of the beginning of the laibou saba (dance symbolizing the creation of the universe and the synthesis of the human body). The maibi with all the participants move round the plantain leaf three times symbolizing the manifestations of Mangang Kuru Sidaba, Luwang Kuru Sidaba and Khuman Kuru Sidaba. Thereafter the maibas and maibis stand erect before the deity and pray for the beginning of the laibou which is called hoirov haya laoba. During this prayer no one should move, speak or change his/her position. No one could come in or out of the laibung (temporary compound of the ritual). The maibi begins to move in the form of khayom jagoi (dance with hands at the level of the navel) along with the hoirov haya hymn. All the participants slowly begin to move their footsteps in a serene manner without dancing their hands and body. In the entire movement of the laibou dance the maibi narrates with hymns and dances, the creation of the universe; the sun, the stars, the planets, the moon, the earth, air and water. When the earth becomes inhabitable, the dance shows the creation of all beings including human beings. In the case of human beings, the different parts, the hands,

35. Eekouba is the calling of the lai by the maibi from a nearby pond, lake or river
36. Lairoi is the concluding part of the festival
37. The first three safas representing the dawn, day and darkness respectively.
fingers, palms, arms, head, neck, eyes, the body, thigh, toes, feet and all other parts are shown to be developed through hymns and dance in different *khut-theks* (hand movements). Altogether, there are sixty-four important *khut-theks* for making the human body right from the development of the human body in the mother's womb; all are shown with very fine, attractive and meaningful dance movements. Then the building of houses, starting of agriculture and other stages of human development are played through dance. The last part of the dance is confined with the songs called *paosha eshei*, for the welfare of all the individuals. The control of lust, keeping strict discipline of celibacy and control of mind are very clearly and forcefully sung to remind the importance and the value of life in this human birth. This is followed by *lai ren mathek koiba* (moving in the form of *Paphai*38) which symbolizes the continuity of human life.

Thematicallly, the festival celebrates the essence of living—of life itself, fulfillment of the purpose of living and continued existence through procreation. Its rituals revolve firstly around the origin myths of enfolding within it the various manifestations that shape the Meitei cosmic universe. Secondly, any celebration of the ongoing process of living cannot do away without the idea of procreation. Thirdly, as a festival of an agrarian community, fertility, both human and agricultural, is a prominent aspect inherent within it.

4.12.1 Contesting discourses; the *Sanamahi* Roots and Post-Hindu ethos:

The distinctiveness of the Meitei cultural identity can be seen to get shaped through two contesting forces — the forces of Sanskritization on the one hand and indigenization on the other. In a way, it balances identification with the Indian mainstream culture and its indigenous

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38 Manifestations of *Pakhangba* is in the shapes of coiled and twisted forms of a dragon/snake like creature.
roots. The demarcation between the two elements can be located at the level of discourse, each speaking different language. (Parratt & Parratt, 1997). The Hindu discourse speaks in a language orienting itself to the tradition of the mainstream Indian culture positing historical origin within this context. But the non-Hindu discourse emphasizes the traditional Meitei roots in the pre-Hinduised state. It draws strength from oral history, native categories of thought and popular consciousness. However, at present, the only biggest festival performed without any contestation between the two religious groups is the *lai haraoba* festival.

In *lai haraoba* the myth of *Nongpok Ningthou* and *Panthoibi* makes recurrent appearances through the rituals. In fact, it is to *Nongpok Ningthou* that traces the origin of the festival. Another version, that is distinctly Hindu, is its orientation tracing itself to Lord Shiva and his consort Uma. According to this version they descended from Kailash to settle down in the land of Manipur for a brief sojourn. They first came to Nilakantha Hills (identified with the Nongmaiching hill) and selected certain hills for their residence. Here Shiva was given a new name *Poireiton* meaning 'he who has come to a new place'. They then stopped at Kumara hills (identified with Koubru hills). Another reason for their sojourn was the intention of organizing the *Rasa* dance for they had once acted as doorkeepers to the *Rasa* dance of Lord Krishna with the *gopis*. Delighted by the accompanying music, Uma wished to see the performance but was denied permission. Krishna suggested that they find a suitable site to organize one for themselves. This is how they came to Manipur; but the land was wet and moist. Shiva with his *trishul* made hole in the surrounding hills to draw water out of it. When the country was dried and purified, the *Rasa* dance of Shiva and Uma was arranged. Many gods and goddesses were invited to the dance of which Anantanag, the king of nags (identified with *Pakhangba*, who is also worshipped by the Meiteis in different forms of *Paphal*, typical manifestations of dragon/snake in different coiled forms). He lit up the site for the entire
duration of the dance with the magical jewel mani on his forehead. Henceforth, the place named ‘Shiva-nagara’ is after Shiva and ‘Manipura’ after the Maha-Rasa dance. (Chatterji, 1974)

The Meitei oral history starts with Pakhangba, the mythical and legendary hero from whom the Meiteis trace descent and to whom the establishment of Meitei state is accredited. He appears in three forms – as the son of Salailal (an incarnation of Tengbanba Mapu), as the Dragon/Serpent manifestation (Paphal) and as the first Meitei king. In the Hindu narrative he is traced to Babruvahana, the son of the epic hero Arjuna and Chitrangada. It accounts that a phase of ‘non-Hindu’ never existed so far as the Meiteis are concerned. It upholds the existence of Shaivism-Tantricism as evidenced in the veneration of serpents and the worship of mother goddess. The worship of umanglai hence comes to be relegated to Shiva and Devi.

In non-Hindu narratives the lai haraoba is perceived as the single greatest key to that remote tribal past. This is drawn in traditional techniques of rice cultivation, weaving, iron work, flower culture, boat culture and so on and so forth, not to mention the racial stock of the Meitei people. Further, in the search for history within its text and tradition, myths incorporated in the lai haraoba are interpreted as embodying certain facts of historical importance. Herein the theme of conflict occupies center stage – be it the conflicts in the origin myths or the antagonism interspersed within love lyrics in the rituals. It is a matter of research that how far myths can be read as history. However, studying myths in terms of public domain could perhaps prove to be a fruitful sociological exercise.

39. According to Levi-Strauss, myth does not attempt to tell us anything. It follows its own structure which is located at the level of sub-conscious and is ultimately linked to the innate mental capacity of the people. Hence he studies them as structures of transformation. In his lines there is no one true form of a particular myth but variations of the same may appear among different people. Levi-Strauss, C. Structural Anthropology, the Penguin Press, London, 1963.
4.12.2 Space:

As a religious event, the *lai haraoba* can only be grasped within the Meitei experience of *lai* as the ultimate reality, the rituals as intended to bring about an interaction between the other world and this world within the wholeness of a sacramental universe. It opens up a social space. For analytical purposes, the site can be demarcated into ritual and non-ritual on the basis of its usage. The ritual space represents the courtyard of the *laibung* and is manned by the ritual functionaries, viz. *maiba, maibi* and *pena player* (the player of an indigenous string instrument). The non-ritual space literally opens up as the ritual closes in. This is an aspect of the festival that has not merited much attention. While the ritual space is imbued with its richness of the ancient tradition, the non-ritual space is ensconced in the contemporary individual, social and political context. It is perhaps the increasing visibility of this space, used for entertainment that has lent the notion of the *lai haraoba* as being increasingly 'secularized' (Sirkar, 1984). However this is a much later addition to the festival.

The *lai haraoba* festival, the prime Meitei ritual and center of the Meitei cultural life, are celebrated entirely outside the non-Hindu framework and celebrated by both the Sanamahi Meiteis and Vaishnava Meiteis with the help of their pre-Hindu functionaries of *maiba, maibi* and *pena khongba*. The resurgence of the *lai haraoba* on a much larger scale cannot be treated as coincidental or be simplified as cultural and religious revival. It needs to be located within the wider social and political landscape. This presentation attempts to locate the religious festival within a broader articulation of the Meitei identity in particular and also towards contributing to a people's culture. On the other hand, it reflects unease within the politically demarcated landscape of the national stream within which the Meiteis as a part of the North East are constituted in the margins. Taking into account the socio-cultural and religious life of the
Meiteis, the specific ways in which the dynamics between the various discourses are acted out and perceived.

4.13 Mera Wa Yungba:

The cultural function of the Mera wa yungba which is celebrated in the month of October is an important function to remind the relationship between the people of hill and the valley. There is a belief that the people of the hill and the valley have originated from a small place in the hill while the younger brother went down to the valley in search of livelihood and the elder brother stay back at the hill. In order to commemorate the linkage, both the valley and the hill people celebrate in a particular way. In the valley a long bamboo post is erected with a light at the top of it in every household so that the people of the hill can see it. The belief is that, when the younger brother left the hill, he promised his brother that he would put up a light in the month of Mera (October) to show that all are fine and doing well in the valley. To reciprocate, the hill people burn a part of the hill which is called langmei thaba to show prosperity and well being. In Manipur, apart from Mera wa yungba, another ceremony called the Mera hou chongba is celebrated in the same month. The tribal chiefs and village headmen were invited to the palace at Kangla on this particular day. The tribal headmen as well as the village heads exchange gifts and wishes during this particular function. These promote greater amity between the hill people and the Meiteis. The Meiteis of Assam observe it through the whole month of Meitei calendar month of Mera.

4.14 Ningol Chakouba:

Ningol chakkouba is one among the most important traditional/indigenous festivals of The Meitei community. Ningol is the daughter of a family who is married to another family. It is a significant social event of the Meiteis, when the married women of the family, who were married off to distant places, come to their parental house along
with their children and are served with a lavish and extensive meal to enjoy. It is celebrated only once in a year in the month of Hiyangei neeni panba (November). The old historical record of Manipur shows that such a system of inviting for feast was introduced since the days of Nongada Lairen Pakhangba, the first king of Manipur in the year 33 A.D.

Before the present system of inviting ningol, the pibas (brothers) were invited by the ningol during this particular day. It is said that there used to be lots of difficulties to the pibas who have many sisters because he could not visit all of them at one time. Thus the festival was changed from piba chakkouba to ningol chakkouba (inviting sisters for feast by brothers) during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakriti. In fact, the basic logic of observing ningol-chakkouba is to enrich the close relationship, loving ties between the brothers and sisters who were at one time living together and dining together under the same roof. This festival is a form of a family get-together in order to revive the family affection.

4.15 Folk forms as Cultural Repository; The role of folk songs in the revival of traditional practices of the Meiteis:

The term ‘Folk song’, originated in the 19th century, is the extension of the term folk lore, which was coined in 1846 by the English antiquarian William John Thoms to describe “the traditions, customs, and superstitions of the uncultured classes” (Scholes, 1977). A folk song is defined as a song of the people of a culture or region that reflects their outlook and life. Usually, this refers to a song with no known composer or lyricist as music transmitted by word of mouth, as songs of the lower classes and one that exists in multiple versions developed as it spread, rather than a single, standard, copyrighted edition. However, there is still no certain definition of what folk song (or folklore, or the folk) is. Folk song may tend to have certain characteristics. One meaning often given is that of ‘old songs, with no known composers’. (Ronald 2006). Another is that of music that has been handed down through an evolutionary
‘process of oral transmission.... the fashioning and re-fashioning of the music by the community that gives it its folk character.’

Folk song connotes the spontaneous outpouring of feelings, love and imaginations, sentiments of ancestors, moral and disciplines, beginning with the cradle and ending with funeral songs. The Meitei or Manipuri community has its distinct variety of folk songs and music commonly called *khunung eshei*41 also popularly known as *khullang eshei*42. *khullang eshei* was originally sung at the time of help in work in the fields or at the time of go for fishing. It has been in practice of the Meiteis to hire service of other people at the times of planting, seeding and reaping of crops to attain efficiency while at work. Initially the theme of the song was love. In course of time this work songs have been transmitted into a kind of expressive culture of the Meiteis. The literal meaning of the term *khullang eshei* is a type of song in the form of throw and bounce of words in rhythm between males and females or between two persons. There is no set system of words and sentences. The singer adjusts his/her words and stanzas of verses of his/her own to the tune.

Music of the Meiteis constitutes a major component of their folklife. In their music, one will find their hopes, aspirations and frustrations as well. The ups and downs of their voices and their tonal variations draw, in the listeners’ mind, the beautiful landscape, colourful and vivid, in nature. They also reflect the hardship of their agricultural activities. Music does not stand on its own. It accompanies dance movements or physical movements they perform while engaged in cultivation activities or ritualistic performances (Birendrakumar, 2008). Manipuri folk song and music is varied in form, genre and character. It is philosophical in content

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41. *Khunung* literally means remote village and *eshei* means song.
42. *Khullang eshei* means Songs while lending hands. *Khullang* also means throw and bounce of words between two persons.
and meaningful in nature. Different occasions has different songs. There are naoshum eshei or lullaby, shikaplon or funeral song, nonglao eshei or rain song, kumdam eshei, song for the commencement of new season, tharon eshei or songs on nature, leiron eshei, or songs of native flowers, leipak ningba eshei or patriotic songs, songs of children while at play and paosha Ishei, for the welfare of all the individuals. Some of the specimens are given below;

4.15.1 Songs of Marriage and Child Birth:

The ritual songs invariably accompany the ritual dance called laibou jagoi, a daily part of lai haraoba, are developed around the theme of child birth and the Meitei theory of origin. The theme of the song revolves round the love tale of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi. Many sacred treatises such as Panthoibi khongkul and Koubru Khongkul have described the details of marriage, which govern the thought and conduct of the people. The details is already discussed in this chapter.

4.15.2 Naoshum Eshei or Lullaby:

One of the naoshum eshei is sung and addressed to the moon with the melodious tune of the mother. The song runs like ‘hum hum hum, tha\(^{43}\) tha thabungton...’ The child is lulled to sleep with the melodious tune of ‘hum’.

4.15.3 Shikaplon:

Shikaplon is a type of song associated with the funeral practice. It was the pena\(^{44}\) shakpas (pena singers) who popularized this variety with the help of pena. A specimen of the early Christian period is

\(^{43}\) Tha literally means moon
\(^{44}\) Pena is a typical indigenous stringed instrument. Pena was usually played by its player to invoke the gods and goddesses and other ritualistic performances. But today, this musical instrument is played in musical concerts and other performances also.
"thongak makoi nungol ching..." means "the plateau of death, where the pigeon looks with heavy eyes, the waiting place for hundred youth when hundred girls die and for hundred girls when hundred youth die, oh dear, wait a little for me if my voice reaches you, micha pokti pamuba (oh my love, son of another man)" (Kirti, 1993).

It is the theme of lamentation for a dead lover by his beloved. It sings about the immortality of soul after death and love conquers death which makes them interesting and worth studying.

4.15.4 Nonglao Eshei or Rain song:

As agriculture is the mainstay of the community, rain plays an important role in the socio-economic life of the people. Being in the monsoon region, Manipur is blessed with sufficient rainfall. At the same time drought also visited it at times inflicting great hardship upon the people. The rural folk adopted many methods to invite rainfall. The priest called maiba performs a rite which was followed by songs sung by the people for rain. The song runs thus;

\[
\text{Nong o chutharo;} \\
\text{Hanuba hanubi taotharo;} \\
\text{Langjing maton thumhatlo...}
\]

The translation of the song is thus:

O rain! Shower down;  
Float down old man and old woman;  
Submerge the peak of Langjing hill...

This is a rain compelling song and only performed only in the midnight. Aged persons including both male and female participate in the performance. It is important to note that all the participants should not
wear anything while participating in the *nonglao eshei*. It is believed that everyone should enter their respective homes before rain comes. This is also referred to in the sacred text of the Meiteis called *Chiglol Laihui*. Another rain compelling song is sung by *asheiba* with the help of *Pena* thereby compelling rain to come through the prayer and singing called *hikkap*.

4.15.5 *Kumdam Eshei*:

*Kumdam eshei* or song for the commencement of new season is a type of song which describes the creation of the earth, sky, and human body, the end of the season and the arrival of spring. *Tharon eshei* is sung on the changing phases of nature, description of *Basanta* or spring on the occasion of *thabal chongba*. *Leiron* is a kind of songs describing the wide variety of beautiful flowers of the land.

4.15.6 *Leipak Ningba Eshei* or Patriotic Song:

The Burmese were the traditional enemy of the Meiteis throughout the history of Manipur. These are the songs narrating the deeds of the Manipuri heroes especially the warriors against the Burmese and the British. One of the songs runs as;

> Oh Meitei! Go ahead;
> Enemy is in front of you;
> If you retreat the Burmese will enslave you;
> Don't you love your motherland;
> Don't you love Manipur, the land of jewels;
> Man born once will not die twice, (Kirti, 1993).

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45. *A Pena* player is also called *asheiba* for his knowledge and skill to adjust his words and stanzas of verses of his own to the tune.
46. *Hikkap* is a way of prayer which means singing with heavy heart and tearful eyes to save the humankind from the clutches of draught.
47. *Thabal chongba* is the post-harvest dance festival.
Nahade (encouraging youths),
Yatrade (encouraging skillful fighting spirit),
Nipade (encouraging manhood).

The culture of Manipuri martial art went hand in hand with the consolidation of their political suzerainty. (Kirti, 1993). They apply certain sound as ‘ho hayo hei ha’ followed by a chorus sound of ‘hau ha’, for the concentration of their physical and mental energy at times of lifting weight, pulling of logs, while playing thouri chingba (tug of war) or even in fighting. It gives the impression that body and mind must be combined in an attempt to execute an action. (Ibid)

4.15.7 Songs of children at play:

One of the songs of children at play is mapi sabi means playing mother. The song runs as;

Crow, crow, what kind of crow is that?
That is the mayang\textsuperscript{48} crow.
What’s the news?
That is the news of mayang crow... (Kirti, 1993).

This is a play for children reflect the contradiction between their indigenous culture with that of the alien culture and to transmit the treasure of wisdom which has been subverted when the alien western culture in the form of Hinduism became increasingly popular through royal patronage.

A girl playing the role of mapi (mother) in this game has all her children behind her in a raw each holding each other’s waist. Another girl plays the role of a mayang crow. There is an exchange of figurative words

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{Anyone from the western side of the Manipur boundary is termed ‘mayang’ in a broad sense although there is a difference among scholars in regard to the origin of the term.}
\end{footnotesize}
through song. The *mayang* crow who begs for food, water and shelter is denied by the *mapi*. The crow then pounces on the last child whom the *mapi*/mother tries her best to protect. The crow herein referred to is the Hindu missionary while the *mapi* represents the defender of indigenous culture.

Apart from these, there is a wide variety of folk songs in the ballad forms comprises *pena sapka* (song accompanied with the music produced through *pena*, a traditional musical instrument of the Meiteis), *thabal chongba eshei* or songs of post-harvest moonlight dance by unmarried boys and girls and *khongjom parva*49.

4.15.8 *Pena Eshei:*

This song is accompanied with the music produced through *pena*. A *pena* is a musical instrument. It consists of two parts viz. the *pena masa* and *Pena cheijing*. A dry coconut shell is cut into half to make a circular opening and a slender bamboo rod is fixed at the middle of it. It is then covered with a thin skin to make a drum. A string made of horse tail is fastened from the top end of the bamboo rod to the drum. This is called *pena masa*. Another string is fastened to a curved iron rod called *Pena cheijing*. The *pena masa* is held in the left hand and the drum shell is pressed against the chest and the *pena cheijing* is held in the right hand. To produce music, the string on *pena cheijing* is rubbed with that on the *pena masa*. Earlier, *pena* was usually played by its player to invoke the gods and goddesses. It is the only and unavoidable instrument which plays the most vital role in *lai haraoba*. The theme of the song is the ancient love story of *Nongpok Ningthou* and *Panthoibi* and the epic love story of *Khamba-Thoibi* of *Moirang parba* and other ritualistic songs form an important part of this song.

49. This style of singing started from 1890s after the Anglo-Manipur war at Khongjom.
4.15.9 Thabal Chongba Eshei:

It is a tuneful music sung during the thabal chongba dance, which is a post-harvest moonlight dance. The literal meaning of thabal is moonlight and chongba means dance, thus dancing in the moonlight. The youngsters particularly girls of each and every locality supported by their local brothers organise thabal chongba (dance in a circle) with the songs of creation of the universe led by well known persons for the purpose at early times. It is performed in every locality on all the six days of the festival.

4.15.10 Lai Haraoba Eshei:

As discussed earlier the puya Panthoibi-Khongkul gives a brief account of the religious and social festival of the lai haraoba. These songs are full of erotic mysticism but the real meaning is veiled by the use of innocent sounding words. The rhythm of the tune is its quality. It is sung on the ceremonial occasion at lai haraoba narrating the creation of the whole universe and Meitei theory of origin.

4.15.11 Khongjom Parva:

It is a musical narration of the Battle of Khongjom fought between the Manipuris and the British in April 1891. A man named Dhobi Leinou started singing Khongjom parva by beating his hands on the knee and sometimes beating an empty tin and roamed place to place. The Khongjom parva narrators glorify the Manipuri soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the sake of their motherland. Today the theme of singing Khongjom Parva includes the stories of Khamba and Thoibi and of the kings of Manipur. Today the singer uses only a dholok while singing. The Khongjom parva, which is sung as ballad is regularly performed till today.
From the light of the above discussion, it can be said that Manipuri folk songs and dances, in their beautiful tunes and movements, reflect the entire history, tradition and culture of the people. Having a historical and cultural heritage of several centuries, these myriad of human emotions are expressed through similar sounding tunes, blended together with rhythm and perfection. Manipuri folk songs express the natural beauty, incredible flora and fauna, the social and cultural life and religious belief of the Meiteis. Most of the literary production of Meitei today is more or less derived from the songs and tales handed down through oral tradition. However, many of the Meitei oral traditions have been reduced to writings today. For example, the *Moirang parva* with the theme of the love lore of Khamba and Thoibi is extant today in the oral form and is sung by the *pena* singers in the ballad form. This oral tradition has been contained in the written verse form of thirty four thousand lines by the great Manipuri poet Hijam Anganghal, who studied it for twelve years from the renowned twentieth century *pena* singer Ojha Manik Singh of Khurai, Imphal. This work has been hailed as the epic of the Manipuris by Suniti Kumar Chatterjee. It can be concluded that Folk songs are one of the most important and significant vehicles of communication through which the Meiteis perceive information about their age old cultural heritage.

To summarize the entire discussion, *Laininghal* Naoria Phulo’s basic philosophy is his faith in reality, which he identifies as the path leading to God. After a long three century of orientation of Meitei society by the teachings of the Bengal school of Vaishnavism, Naoria phulo pioneered a systematic traditional Meitei theistic thought. His line of interpretation not only opposed to that of bigotry of Hinduism but also aimed at the revival of traditional Meitei religious faith and thought. His philosophy manifests the example of humanity which is readily accepted by the younger generation who are the product of science and reason. The establishment of *Apokpa Marup* is his greatest achievement which
influences the Meitei society at large and catalyses a Meitei renaissance at a time when the society was on the threshold of crisis.

Hinduism (in the form of first Ramandi and then Vaishnavism) spread to Manipur by burning down Meitei scriptures and the deities of the Meiteis being grinded to dust. These unbecoming and undreamt of acts were branded as *puya meithaba* and *kollu yeikheiba* respectively in the history of Manipur. However, it is said that the duplicates of the lost Puyas and chronicles and other religious texts were kept secret in the remote places of Manipur like Kakching, Khoibu, Kwatha and many other places and they have been recovered even today. There have been continuous efforts taken to interpret these old Meitei scriptures with fresh ideas and meanings are being infused. This made the old religion of the Meiteis along with its cultural heritage and customs more luminous because the literature and practices of Vaishnavism could not infiltrate into the ancient scriptures and practices of the Meiteis. It only makes their culture more precious and beautiful.