Chapter 5

Conclusion

An overall analysis of the Manipuri society shows that a transformation at both structural and functional levels had taken place in different periods of the history of Manipur after Hinduisation, colonization and independence. It is also observed that in all the stages of these transformations major changes occurred in the areas of culture and identity. Therefore, it is commonly felt that their tradition, religion, polity, territory and culture have been constantly threatened by various exogenous factors like Hinduism, Burmese invasion, British colonialism and later on by the unification of the state with the Indian Union. Thus, the origin of the Sanamahi movement among the Meiteis of Manipur was their feeling of safeguarding a distinct culture and belief that have been constantly threatened. Initially, the movement appeared to be a socio-religious movement but now it has assumed various political proportions. It is, therefore, an assertion of a political space defined by history and identity.

In the traditional society, the king used religion as a tool for asserting his legitimate control over his people and an instrument to exercise his power. On an analytical plane it is consensually inferred that the Manipur polity is strategically identified with Sanamahi and the associated Pakhangba as the repository of all cosmological and supernatural powers so as to substantiate the legitimacy of all Manipuri kings. As per tradition, the supernatural powers of Sanamahi were dispensed by Manipur kings to benefit their subjects. Thus from Sanamahi himself, as from the monarch, came the domain of prosperity (ahong-achao). Contact with the supernatural did enhance Meitei rulers’ superior status and also legitimize the submission of adjacent population to the Meitei monarch.
When Garibniwaz adopted the new religion followed by his successors, the motive behind the strengthening of the Vaishnavite values through the institution of Brahma sabha, was to use socio-religious means by the native ruler to retain his power at least in the socio-religious sphere along with political authority. This trend was followed during the last phase of the British rule and post-independence period with the emergence of the movement for revival of the indigenous religion which is getting sustenance till today for a complete rejection of the alien culture and its values.

The reason for the rejection is derived from Manipur's new experience in the new socio-political system of the Indian Union especially after its merger with India in 1949 only to get a Part-C State of India in 1972. This kind of political status led many youths of the region to establish a political space defined by their history, tradition and cultural identity. As a result, a socio-cultural and religious revival took a sharp U turn to the level of a separatist movement in Manipur.

But the Apokpa/Sanamahi movement among the Meiteis of Assam originated and continued without an imagined political space. It still remains as a purely socio-religious movement which aims at reviving their age-old tradition, belief and culture of the Meiteis.

Thus the movement started as a socio-religious one has greater ramifications on the socio-cultural identity of the people. The most significant impact of the movement is the general awakening of their pre-Hindu identity. This has been observed through various socio-religious festivals observed by both Apokpa/Sanamahi and Vaishnavite Meiteis. In the festivals observed by Vaishnavite Meiteis till few decades ago, more emotional attachment was there to the sankirtans sung in Sanskrit or Bengali language. Today with the influence of the Apokpa/Sanamahi
movement these religious and devotional songs and prayers have been translated and sung in archaic Meitei Language. Though the Hindu religious festivals played an important role in the socio-religious life of the Meiteis, today in the absence of a monarchical system that had patronized Vaishnavism, there is a resurgence of the Pre-Hindu Meitei religion and observance of festivals associated with the creed. It is also observed that there has been a paradigm shift of people’s interest from the Hindu religious life to their pre-Hindu socio-religious life and it has led to the gradual decline of the Hindu religious festivals in the Meitei society.

As has been observed earlier, the Meiteis had felt threatened by the near extinction of their original culture, language and religion. Therefore, the Meitei revivalist leaders (before the formal inclusion of Manipur-Meitei in the Eighth schedule to the Constitution of India in 1992), had demanded that their language be named Meiteilon instead of Manipuri.

Sanamahi as the first and foremost cult existed all through the ancient history of Manipur. Records cite that the reign of Khagemba (1597-1652) was marked by the formal deification in 1601 AD of the traditional Meitei deity, Sanamahi as royal cult or state religion—a landmark in the religious history of Manipur. Accordingly Sanamahi was to be seen worshipped in a monumental fashion at various tiers as:

1. State or Royal God (*Laimingthou Sanamahi* temple 1st Manipur Rifles and Wangoi),
2. Presiding deities at Thangiing, Marjing, Wangbren, Koubru etc.,
3. Companion god in various umanglai establishments,
4. Common household deity in every Meitei household,
5. Sun-god, and
6. God of destruction (*Sanamahi Apoiba*).
As per sacred Meitei scripture, *Sanamahi Laikan* (Account of *Sanamahi* as the Guardian and Protector), the divine Sanamahi is also the Destroyer, for which it has eulogized *Sanamahi Apoiba* (*Sanamahi*, the vagabond wanderer). During its decline particularly since 1714, (as discussed earlier, after the adoption of Ramandi sect of Hinduism by the then Meitei king Garibniwaz and its declaration as the state religion of Manipur) it did suffered losses in terms of whatever official status and the consequent following gained by it. In fact, *Sanamahi* had its slide-back even thereafter, though by way of reaction, the cult underwent a process of revival much later during the latter half of the twentieth century.

Even though *Sanamahi* religion lost its status as the State religion, it is extremely doubtful if any Meitei household inmate-including the king himself-ever stopped worshiping *Sanamahi* as divinity in the domestic or household chapels lodged in the southwest corner of every traditional Meitei house for daily propitiation by all inmates twice a day at sunrise and sunset; and very prominently in festivals and ceremonial occasions in the *Sanamahi* temple founded for the purpose by the king himself and as the companion god of the sylvan deities in *lai haraoba*.

As discussed above, *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism* is an indigenous religion of the Meiteis, which is rich in mythology and colour as evident in the rituals. This kind of ancestor worship and animism, with the central focus on worship of *umanglai*, designated as ethnic governing deities takes place in sacred groves. Other gods include *Atiya Sidaba, Pakhangba, Sanamahi, Leimaren, Oknarel Panganba, Thangjing, Marjing, Wangbaren and Koubru* with a host of indigenous deities. The religious life of the people, even after adoption of Vaishnavism, retained many characteristics inherited from their pre-Vaishnavite traditions. The essentials of this religion remain recognizable to the present day. Over the last couple of decades there has been a revival of *Apokpa-
ism/Sanamahi religion and this was evident in the significant growth of the ‘non-mainstream’ religion as categorized in the 2001 census and recorded 17% of the population as the followers of Sanamahism and Hinduism is identified with 47% of the population in Manipur.

It can be safely surmised that the Apokpal/Sanamahi movement is an effort to seek a legitimate space for the traditional path which is free from the influence of the Vaishnavite religion. However, the onlooker does not perceive any susceptible difference as the external manifestations of these forms are almost common to both Apokpal/Sanamahi and Vaishnavite Meiteis. Therefore, the effort of the Apokpal/Sanamahi Meiteis at present is to stop the process of Hinduisation through a subtle subversion of the overarching Vaishnavite social and religious values and a reassertion of Meitei cultural identity which cannot always resist and counter the Vaishnava cultural elements, but can bring in subtle changes by reviving their indigenous tradition and inflecting similar structures with similar meanings.