Chapter I

Introduction: Historical Overview

Love for one’s own culture and tradition, a priceless legacy left behind by the forefathers and handed down through the generations, is ingrained in the hearts of the people. This seems to be all the more evident from the life-styles and social mores of the Manipuris/Meiteis/Meeteis\(^1\) who still retain the age-old customary practices of their forefathers, irrespective of their place of settlement. The Meiteis of Assam are no exception to this, with the people keeping alive the culture and tradition of their forefathers close to their hearts. Free from the diktats of a powerful clergy and monarchy of Manipur, the traditional religious and social mores started reasserting themselves and a revivalist movement of the old faith called *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism*\(^2\) started since 1930s amongst the Meitei population settled in Assam and the movement gradually found a way back to Manipur.

The north east India is a politically vital and strategically vulnerable region of India. Surrounded by five countries, it is connected with the rest of India through a narrow, thirty-kilometer corridor. The entire region then called Assam, is now divided into Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Diversities in terms of Mongoloid ethnic origins, linguistic variation and religious pluralism characterize the region. This ethnic-linguistic-ecological historical heritage characterizes the pervasiveness of the ethnic populations and Tibeto-Burman languages in northeast. This

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\(^1\) As far as the mere appellation is concerned, a Manipuri may be any one born and brought up in Manipur, but then, primarily the Meiteis or Meeteis are referred to as Manipuris.

\(^2\) The revivalist movement started by Naoria Phulo in Assam terms the name of the Meitei religion as *Apokpa-ism*, worshippers of the Supreme Creator, and they follow the religion as *Apokpa* religion. However, the movement when reached the Manipur valley, it came to be termed as *Sanamahi* movement and the religion as *Sanamahi* religion, may be to have a wider support not only from the Meiteis but also from other non Meitei communities.
predominant tribal region, replete with protracted records of isolation, difficult terrain, and lack of intense inter-ethnic contacts, had witnessed formation of three types of society and polity such as 'tribe', 'chiefdom' and 'state' (Das, 1989).

The region has witnessed over the years the rise of ethnic consciousness and aspirations leading to tribal movements and ethnic unrest. The multi-ethnic and multi-cultural setting of India struggles to define its nationhood since the nationalist movement provided a fertile ground for the development of ethno-nationalism and other forms of identity quest. In the political parlance the region is almost characterized by ethno-political movements. Since independence every decade saw a new movement of political unrest, most of which turned into violent in extreme forms. Insurgency, an extreme form of ethno-political upsurge, has rocked almost the entire north east region. The religious revivalism amongst the Meiteis is a milder form of ethnic assertion that can be accommodated within the larger trend of revivalism and political assertion.

Assam, the gateway to the region, is a multi-ethnic mosaic, and the people belonging to different ethnic stocks from all over the north east India are found within the cartographic realm of present day Assam. Different racial elements form the population of Assam, speak different groups of languages. Each tribe has its own language, history and culture which altogether form a part of Indian culture and civilization. Most of these tribes had their independent states which were merged into a single whole by the colonial rule after Assam was annexed to British India in 1826. They are now a neglected chapter of Indian history and culture. (Gait, 1906)

Most of these groups, however, are identified with an original homeland, while some are found spread all over the north eastern region and cannot be linked with any particular space that can be designated as their
original homeland. The ethnic groups like the Garos and the Khasi-pnars, various Naga groups like the Jame Nagas, Rengmai Nagas, Zeliangrongs and the Meiteis are found in various parts of Assam, and they are linked with their own homelands. While the Garos and the Khasi-Pnars are from Meghalaya, the Naga tribes are associated with Nagaland, and the Meiteis with Manipur. The Meiteis have a considerable presence in southern Assam, central Assam and upper Assam. Other ethnic groups like the Hmars, Kukis, Paites and the Reangs are found in different parts of the north east, including Assam, but have no association with any particular state or territory. Although many religious missionary works have been carried out by the missionaries of Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, Hinduism remained the religion in of the royal families of the Kacharis, the Ahoms, the Jaintias, the Kochs, the Tripuris, and the Manipuris.

Manipur was known to the Khagis (Meitei word for the Chinese) as Kase, and to the Ava (Meitei word for the Burmese) as Ka-the; the Ahoms called them Mekhali, and the Kacharis called them Mogli, and the old Assamese name for them was Moglu, while the Bengali name of the state was Moglai. (Gait,1906.) The reconstruction of the history of Manipur in the early period was based on the chronicles of the Ningthouja dynasty supplemented by other clan genealogies and some literary sources (Kabui, 1991). There is, however, scarcity of source material to reconstruct the history of Manipur. This may be due to the burning of

3 Manipur, one of the eight states in India's North East, and lies between Latitude 23° 83' north and Longitude 93° 03' and 94° 78' east. The total landmass consists of about 22,327 sq km of which two third of the total land consists of hills and one third of the leveled country forming the broad valley which is about 790metres above the sea level with a total area of 700 sq miles approximately. Manipur is geographically bounded by Myanmar on the east, Nagaland on the north, Assam and Mizoram on the west and Mizoram and Myanmar on the south. Its unique location bordering Myanmar provides her the unique advantage of acting as the 'gateway to the east'. It has a population of 2721756 (according to the 2011 census report) of which about two thirds of the total population are Meiteis, who live in the valley and the rest of the population, mostly of Kuki and Naga stock, live in the hills.
historical records and religious scriptures (known as *puya meithaba*) in the event of religious conversion to Hinduism in the eighteenth century orchestrated by King Pamheiba (whose Hindu name was Garibniwaz, 1709–1748) under the guidance of the hosting priest Shantidas Goswami, a Hindu missionary of the Ramandi sect from Bengal. It is, however, agreed by majority of the scholars that "the Manipuris have been the politically, economically and socially dominant group in the known history of Manipur" (Dutta, 1994) and the Manipuri language or Meiteilon serves as the *lingua franca* for various tribal groups who otherwise speak different tribal languages.

Acharya (1988) noted that Manipur has always attracted historians, traders, invaders and preachers of all hues. It was perhaps due to suitable climate, fertility of the soil and superiority of culture prevailing in the region. A discernible civilizational process appears to have evolved in Manipur long before the historic period resulting in its cultural distinctiveness in almost all fields. The Kings of early Manipur had matrimonial relations with royal families of Assam, Tripura and neighbouring Shan lands. It had trade relations with the countries like Burma (now Myanmar), China, British India, Arab and Greek world. Indian trade route to China and South East Asia also lies through Manipur. These large scale contacts had left far-reaching consequences in the history and culture of Manipur.

The Meiteis knew the land by as many as 22 names in different ages in the pre-historic and historic periods as it is recorded in the indigenous literature and *puyas* (royal chronicle of Manipur). Some of them are; *Tillikoktom Ahanba, Meera Ponthoklam, Tillikok Leikoiren* and *Muwapalli* and so on. Later on, in the historical period, the land came to

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*puya* is the religious scripture and royal chronicle of Manipur.
be known as Kangleipak (land of Kanglas⁵), Meitrabak or Meiteileipak (land of the Meiteis). The royal chronicles, folklore tradition and legends of Manipur trace their historical period fairly continuous from the 30th year of the Christian era. The recorded history of Manipur begins with the coronation of the first Meitei King, Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in 33 A.D.

The historical capital and focal centre of the state was the Kangla, the control of which lay at the roots of all political and religious power. The legendary Kangla complex had been the capital of Manipur from the very ancient times down to 1891. The ancient treatises, especially Sakoklamlen, Chinglon Laihui, Nuglon, Kanglei, Layat and Kangla Houba etc. laid down the rules for the construction of the Kangla. The rulers of Manipur, who belonged to the Ningthouja clan, strictly followed the ancient texts for the construction of the Kangla (Khelchandra et al, 2006).

Although the period of the Kangla’s existence dates back to antiquity but the royal chronicle gives many references to the construction of the Kangla by successive reigning kings in Manipur. The major landmarks in the growth of the Kangla were made by king Khagemba, the conqueror of the Chinese who ruled Manipur from 1597 - 1652 A.D. The royal chronicle records that in 1632 A.D., Khagemba constructed a brick wall at the western gate of the Kangla. The historians believe that the art of brick making was acquired from the Chinese prisoners who were captured during the Chinese invasion of the eastern frontier of Manipur. His son Khunjaoba (1632 - 1666 A.D.) further improved the fortification and beautification work of the Kangla. It is said that the king excavated a moat (commonly known as Thangapat) on the western side of the Kangla. During his period, the power and prestige of Manipur was at its

⁵ Kangla is the seat of power of the Meitei kings. It is believed that in Manipur before they were merged into a single political unit under the Ningthoujas, all the seven salais had seven Kanglas, which were their respective seats of power.
peak. The Burmese kings and chiefs approached him to settle their disputes and beg the hands of Manipuri princesses. It was further improved and enlarged by king Garibaniwaz and after him by the successive kings of Manipur. Since the reign of Maharaja Bhagyachandra (1762 - 1798 A.D.), due to repeated invasion by the Burmese, the Kangla was deserted several times. The present state symbol Kanglasha (a three headed lion facing three directions) stands in front of the Kangla toward the west. The chronicle Cheitharol Khumbaba records the construction of the Kanglasha in Saka Era 1726 (1804 A.D) during the reign of Maharaja Chourjit. The Burmese destroyed the Kanglasha in 1844 which was reinstalled during the reign of Nara Singh, in the same year in 1844 (Khelchandra et al, 2006).

The Kangla had indeed been connected with a never ending cycle of human action since the dawn of Meitei consciousness. The Kangla also signifies the central architectural construction of the palace, where the king sat for transaction of his public duties. The big palatial house was constructed with utmost ritual attention and care, with materials for its construction being supplied from different regional areas of the state (Arambam, 1991). After Manipur was defeated by the British in 1891, the Kangla had been under occupation of the Assam Rifles. However, the Assam Rifles vacated the Kangla in 2001 after a long protest by the people of Manipur.

Joykumar observes that people look at the Kangla from different perspectives. The people who believe in the traditional religious practices regarded it as a sacred place. Therefore, they are trying to install images of their traditional deities inside the palace. On the other hand because of the construction of the Govindaji temple, after the en masse conversion to Vaishnavism, the people who believed in the new religion, thought it as their sacred religious place. The people who worked on culture took it as an important cultural site and historians took it as an important
historical monument. This is the significance and beauty of this palace. He further adds, "The Kangla is the history of the people of Manipur and the history of Manipur is the Kangla." (Joykumar, 2006)

As per the Manipur State Archives, Manipur was ruled by 76 kings since 33 A.D. The development of the political power of the Meiteis was related to the control and consolidation of resources around the central location of Imphal, and the entire valley and hills. The Kingdom was later governed on the basis of the written constitution called Loyumba Shinyen decreed by king Loyumba (1074-1112 AD.) in 1110 AD. and was based on the earlier codes and conventions. The Loyumba Shinyen was further expanded by the later kings like Kiyamba (1467-1508), Khagembha (1597-1652), Garibniwaj (1709-1748), Bhagyachandra (1763-1798) and Chourjit (1803-1813). The later additions make the decree a complete code on the duties to be rendered by the hill tribes and other communities in the Kingdom (Kabui, 2003). Oinam Bogeshwar, the renowned historian and scholar observed that there was a centralized constitutional Government since A.D 429 (CORE, 2007). The power of Manipur was recognized by other Asian kingdoms, especially by the Shans with the 1470 Agreement between the king Kiyamba of Manipur and Khakhomba of Pong in upper Burma. It was followed by the Anglo Manipur Friendship Treaty in 1762, Anglo Manipuri Defense Protocol of 1763, and the Treaty of Yandaboo 1826, between the British and the Burmese governments after the Burmese occupation of Manipur from 1819 to 1826. Not only have the Meiteis possessed a distinct political and territorial status for centuries, but they can also legitimately boast of a highly literate and developed culture, an advanced literary tradition which stretches back a thousand years, and a distinctive linguistic tradition (Chandhoke, 2006). The annexation of Manipur in 1891 by the British became a debate in the British Parliament and Manipur was not annexed to her territory and allowed it as an international Protectorate. Independence of Manipur in 1947 and passing of the Manipur
Constitution Act in 1947 before its merger with India was an important landmark in the history of Manipur.

1.1 Meitei Myth of Origin:

The origin of the Manipuris or the Meiteis is looked upon with many theories. Some scholars have tried to relate Manipur with the *Mahabharata* but it was rejected by scholars both from Manipur and outside. After having converted into Hinduism (Bengal School of Vaishnavism propagated by Sri Chaitanya), many scholars tried to level the pan-Indian history and culture with Manipur and tried to root the origin of the Meiteis with the *Kiratas* of ancient Indian literature. The Vaishnava scholars have also tried to give the theory of their origin and attempted to trace the Meitei civilization to the Aryan myths and beliefs by forwarding the view that Manipur at present time was the Manipur mentioned in the great epic *Mahabharata*, and the Meiteis as the descendants of Babrubahana, the son of the epic hero Arjuna. But the main difficulty is that there is no valid evidence to substantiate this proposition. (Sanajaoba, 1997)

Bhattacharya (2006) observes that the Manipur mentioned in the *Mahabharata* was situated near Kalinga and its identification with modern Manipur is not justifiable. Similarly R.C Majumdar observes that the description of Manipur in the epic is located in Orissa coast (cited in Sanajaoba 1988). Prof Gangumei stated that after the conversion of the royal family to Hinduism, they claimed to be the descendents of Arjuna, as indicated by the royal genealogy, prepared after Hinduisation. But there was no mention of Babrubahana or Arjuna in the Pre-Garibniwaz chronicles and genealogies of the royal family which was founded by Nongda Laiien Pakhangba (Kabui 1988). H.D. Sankalia writes; “What we have to remember is that even the critical editions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* do not represent the original epics but their redactions in about the 5th century AD.” (Sankalia, 1974.)
The theory of Hindu origin of the Manipuris has been rejected by historians and authorities like Pemberton, B.H. Hudson, T.C. Hudson, G.A. Grierson, S.K. Chatterjee et al. Pemberton considers them to be the descendants of a Tartar colony from North West frontier of China (Pemberton, 1835). Hudson’s theory of Tai ground that the Meiteis are Tibeto-Burman speakers while the Tai are of Siamese Chinese linguistic family (Hudson, 1908). G.A. Grierson put forward another theory that the Tibeto-Burman and other Mongolian groups inhabited the upper courses of Yangtze and the Hung-Ho rivers in China in pre-historic times. Their kinsmen migrated southward and settled in the Hukwang Valley of the present land of the Catnips in the upper Burma before they moved further down to the Manipur valley. (Grierson, 1904)

Archaeological findings have revealed that Manipur was inhabited by Pre-historic Man since the Stone Age. Cultural relics of pre and post historic periods are found from many caves at Kangkhui in Ukhrul district, Sangbu in Chandel district, Tharon in Tamenglong district, Nongpok Keithenmanbi in Senapati district, Mongjam in Imphal district and Wangoo in Bishenpur district. The Paleolithic Man lived in caves while the Neolithic Man lived in open sites. The Neolithic Man reached the valley of Manipur at least not later than 2000 BC. (Bhatt, & Bhargava, 2006) Recent archaeological findings at Tharon caves and Napachik and other places in Manipur point to the existence of a Mon-Khmer speaking Mongoloid people in Manipur who migrated to this land before the arrival of the Tibeto-Burman speakers. Well established proto historic and historic relationships between the Meiteis, the Mon-Khmer and the Tai are supposed to have produced Tai influence on the language and culture of the Meiteis. (Chatterjee, 2000)

It is evident from the fact that the Meiteis belong to the Tibeto-Burman family, speak the Kuki-Chin group of languages. Whether they, like the other Tibeto-Burman(s), are the migrants to Manipur or the indigenous
people, is not at all finally pronounced. According to Meitei legends and folklore traditions the valley of Manipur was totally under water which was drained by them and established their settlements in the valley. Some scholars, in fact, majority of the scholars believe that they entered Manipur from Burma (the present Myanmar) and the Meitei culture, at least in the past, had been the elongation of the culture of the Mon-Khmer Region of South East Asia.

The royal chronicles, legends and folklore traditions of the Meiteis trace their historical period from the thirtieth year of Christian era. Till 1709 AD they had as many as forty-nine kings, with an average period of rule of thirty-five years. According to a very ancient puya Meihourol Pukok, there were as many as eighty-four Meitei kings ruling in Manipur prior to 33 AD. Many of the events narrated are corroborated with the independent records maintained by the Burmese and the Chinese. However the historical narratives are fairly continuous from 1714 AD. This irregularity of historical records may be due to the destruction of indigenous literature by king Garibniwaz in 1714 AD by setting them on fire in the Hindu funeral pattern at the Kangla.

The Meitei pantheon and cosmology have their own myth of origin, which is known as Leishem wari. Atiya Maru Sidaba or Ipung-Loinaiba-Sidaba Mapu is the supreme God of the Meitei traditional pantheon. He once wished to create the universe and its creatures. He brought forth seven gods or deities, drawn from different directions. They were - Nongpok Ningthou, Awang Kaubru Asupa, Thanjing Koirel Lai, Khanna Chouba Wangbarel, Ilai Pulinglai, Lainingthou Panganba, and Leiningthou Salailel Sidaba. They were then assigned with different tasks. Sidaba Mapu then transformed Himself into a three days old baby. According to His wishes, Salailel Sidaba and his consort Leimarel Sidabi adopted the child.

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6. leishem = origin of the universe, wari = legend.
Since the child was glittered in the pure golden complexion, he was named Sanamahi\textsuperscript{7}. When he was grown up, his father Salailel Sidaba assigned him the task to create taibang-mi\textsuperscript{8}. He carried on his duty but failed initially. It is said that all other creatures were the ill-products of his failure. Salailel Sidaba then directed to create man by duplicating his shadow and finally human being was created. Leimarel Sidabi got pregnant at the very first sight of the man created by Sanamahi. Thus Pakhangba was born. Salailel Sidaba one day asked his two sons to wait for him at paotak hidel\textsuperscript{9}. Accordingly the two brothers went and suddenly saw a carcass of a bull. The younger brother instantly identified it to be their father. Salailel Sidaba then physically appeared and thereupon named the younger son as pa-khangba\textsuperscript{10}.

Salailel Sidaba once decided to choose his successor from his two sons and create a social world of mankind. He announced that the one who can first traverse the universe for seven times will be his successor to the throne. Sanamahi came forward for the trial and soon he set upon the enterprise. On the other hand, his envious younger brother Pakhangba was sad as he was young and week. Helplessness and gloomy thought pinched in his mind. His worried mother Leimarel Sidabi enlightened him by showing the light that the throne of his father Salailel Sidaba signifies the universe. Pakhangba at once completed seven revolutions around his father’s throne and thus he ascended the coveted throne.

Sanamahi after passing through the rigorous course of adventure returned only to find Pakhangba enthroned. He was goaded with anger when he realized the irony of the circumstance. He became furious and consequently challenged his brother Pakhangba into a combat. Leimarel Sidabi in the mean time directed the seven wives of Pakhangba to rescue their husband. The wives of Pakhangba encircled him by dancing and

\textsuperscript{7} san\textsuperscript{a} = gold, m\textsuperscript{ahi} = liquid, in short essence of gold.
\textsuperscript{8} taibang = worldly, m\textsuperscript{i} = man.
\textsuperscript{9} paotak = name of the river, but literal meaning is advice, hid\textsuperscript{e}l = river.
\textsuperscript{10} pa = father, khangba = to know, hence, one who knows ones father.
singing which is known as *ougri-hangel-chongba*. The present day Manipuri folk dance form *thabal chongba* is based on this dance performed by seven wives of *Pakhangba*.

*Sanamahi* was helpless as there was a taboo of touching younger brother’s wife, a custom of avoidance in the Meitei kinship culture. At his heat of anger he was caught by a destructive idea of turning upside down and destroying the universe. The moment he put his hand, *Salailel Sidaba* appeared and calmed down him by showing the original identity of *Sanamahi* as the direct incarnation of the Supreme Being. *Salailel Sidaba* then settled the dispute by equitable distribution of powers between *Sanamahi* and *Pakhangba* in conformity with the Divine Wish of creation. Accordingly *Pakhangba* became the secular ruler of the social world of mankind while *Sanamahi* is the mentor of all creatures he created including mankind. In this capacity *Sanamahi* also governs the supernatural world of deities and spirits benevolent and malevolent. (Sharma, & Majumder, 1979.) *Pakhangba* became the king of the *Kangla*, and *Sanamahi* became the presiding deity of the entire household of the Meiteis families. *Pakhangba* is worshipped as the ruling deity of the kings, and *Sanamahi* is worshipped as the deity of the entire Meitei household. All the offerings are first offered to the *Laininghtou Sanamahi*, and then to *Pakhangba*.

It is with reference to this power of *Sanamahi* that the Manipuris worship *Sanamahi* at every critical point of time of life particularly at the time of illness and for protection against evil spirits and demons. *Sanamahi* was at first reluctant to wield such a mighty power vested in him. His father *Salailel Sidaba* consoled him by assuring that he will always convoy with him. *Leimarel Sidabi* also consoled with her maternal protection. It is, therefore, believed that *Sanamahi* is worshipped and occupies the south west corner of every Meitei household along with *Ima Leimarel Sidabi*.

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11. It is a dance form accompanied by the song; *ke kre ke mo mo, yangen shamba shao shao, keiga yenga tokpaga kambaga, yenkhong fete chasillo, leigi yenni chaphade.*
who occupies the other corner near the side wall of the last but one room of the traditional Meitei dwelling house.

1.2 Origin of the name Manipur:

As discussed earlier, in the ancient records, chronicles and archaic literatures such as puyas, various names of the land is found viz. Meiteileipak, Meitrabak and kangleipak in various phases of history, but the name ‘Manipur’ never occurred in the literatures written prior to the eighteenth century. In fact the name ‘Manipur’ was foreign to the natives till the adoption of Hinduism in the early 18th century. According to the puya Sanamahi Laikan, a Hindu missionary named Shantidas Goswami from Bengal entered Meiteileipak to propagate Ramandi sect of Hinduism during the reign of Pamheiba (1709-1748). Having been deeply influenced by the teachings of this missionary, the king converted himself into the new faith, assumed the Hindu name Garibniwaz and declared it as the state religion with a strong royal decree. All the indigenous literatures and historical records, religious scriptures and puyas were collected and burnt down to ashes under royal decree at the Kangla, the capital of Meiteileipak or Kangleipak and the land came to be known in the Sanskrit nomenclature as ‘Manipur’. (Sanajaoba, 1997) This event is known as puya mei-thaba in the history of Manipur. This view is also supported by the legends and folklore traditions of Manipur.

In fact many Sanskrit words appeared for the first time in the Ningel Inscription issued by Garibniwaz, which was recorded in the year 1736 AD. It opens with an invocatory line Jaya Shree Garibniwaz Maharaja Simha Nongsagumba and closes with the sentence of salutation as Shree Ram Ram. Use of Sanskrit terminology in religion or any other discipline is never to be found in the pre-Garibniwaz inscriptions, not even in the inscription of Charairongba, father of Garibniwaz. In post-

12. puya = Chronicle and indigenous literature, mei = fire, thaba = set on.
13. nongsa = lion, gumba = like a
Garibniwaz inscriptions many Sanskrit words appear such as Shreejut, Kripa, Madhararada Govinda Padaravindara, Shree Hari, etc. (ibid)

Along with the epigraphic sources numismatic records also establish the fact of adoption of Hindu religion and consequent Sanskritization of Manipur towards the beginning of the 18th century. W. Jumjao Singh unearthed four numbers of coins which depicted the legends in developed Nagari script. Sanajaoba observes that nowhere in India, was such a Nagari script developed before 17th and 18th century AD. Secondly, the silver coin of Pramatta Singha, the Ahom king, minted in 1751 AD, can be taken as associate evidence in this regard. Thirdly, the coins explored by Jumjao Singh are the coins of king Garibniwaz issued in 1724 AD. (Sanajaoba, 1991)

The coins issued before Garibniwaz depicted the legends in archaic Manipuri script. For the first time in the numismatic history of Manipur, Garibniwaz introduced Nagari script in the coins which was also followed by later kings. So far numismatic evidence and epigraphic records are concerned, the name ‘Manipur’ appears to be a recent coinage. In the coins of King Garibniwaz the name of the land was written as Mekhale. (ibid)

From the available sources it is observed that the name ‘Manipur’ first occurred in the coins of king Chingthangkhomba, whose Sanskrit name was Jaya Simha and Bhagyachandra, inscribed on his commemorative coins. The version of the obverse legend is Sriman Manipureswara Shree Jaya Simha Nripabarasya, Saka 1691 and on the reverse, Shinat Radha Govinda Padaravinda Madhrarada Madhukarasya. The name Manipur also occurred in the coins of the later rulers. It is very interesting to note that Garibniwaz himself depicted the name of the state as Mekhale. If the name Manipur was popular during his time, there is no good reason as to why he should not use the name in his coins. Even in
his Ningel Inscription there is no instance of mentioning the name of the state as Manipur. (ibid)

1.3 Language and Literature:

As observed earlier the cultural distinctiveness of the Meiteis was discernible in almost all fields. Their millennia-old political organization, social set up, religion, language and literature, martial tradition, traditional games and sports, dance and music and other fine arts etc. each is a class by itself. (Bhatt & Bhargava, 2006.) The Manipuri language or Meiteilon is a Kuki-Chin language of the Tibeto-Burman family. Some scholars believe that the language has its origin from the present language spoken by Kukis and Nagas. However the Manipuris "are the most civilized of all the tribes in that part of the country" (Mason, 1880). T.C. Hudson writes "I don’t think that the religious beliefs of the Nagas have been seriously contaminated by intercourse of a pacific nature with their semi-Hinduised overlords, the Meitheis. What is possible is that the use of Meithei as lingua franca of this part of the hills may have let me think that the hill people attached the same value to such terms as deity, soul or spirit as do the Meitheis ... The fantastic caves hollows by some force of nature in the bottom of the hills are designated ‘lai-pham’ (lai = god + pham = place). The Thados have borrowed from the Meitheis the word ‘laili’ (or Meithei word lairik; lai + rik = grains of alphabets) as if they thought a written document possessed a divine potency." (Hudson, 1908.)

The beginning of Manipuri literature may go back to 1500 – 2000 years from now. According to Suniti Kr. Chatterjee "... the literature which the Manipuris have given to India and the world in their own Language, the beginning of which unquestionably go back to some 1500 – 2000 years. But people who do not understand the history, culture and atmosphere of Manipur and who have no knowledge of the great things which one can find in Manipuri literature erroneously consider Manipuri to be one of
the backward languages of the *adivasi* or primitive people of India. But any superficial knowledge of the language and its literature would convince anyone of the great value of the literature in the Meithei or Manipuri language. Their literature is in the forefront of the advanced literature spoken by millions of people in the Indian union and it has some special quality and character of its own” (Chatterjee, 1951). He further summed up that the Meiteis or Manipuris are the most advanced section of Kuki-Chin people. (Ibid) In fact, Manipuri language, the state language of Manipur is the only important language in the Tibeto-Burman family (Manoroma Year Book, 1882). The Meiteis had a strong sense of historicity and maintained chronicles and *puyas* and numerous records of their genealogy, society, religion, government, astrology, charms and mantras, lexicography, medicine, earth sciences etc. (Bhatt & Bhargava, 2006.) More than a thousand Meitei scriptures had been already existed before 18th century AD. Such a rich heritage could be developed and maintained because the Meiteis came into contact with the Chinese long back and the art of writing was spread extensively as a result of their historic association with the Chinese who were the first literate people on the earth and who invented paper and the art of writing. (Ibid)

The Manipuri script is known as *Meitei mayek* (script). It is one of the ancient scripts of the world, according to *puyas*, legends and folklore traditions; the script was invented during the reign of Ngasapa, who reigned in the 17th century B.C. on the basis of anatomy and philosophical conception as propounded by his predecessor *Mangang Ningthou*. This script is ideo-phonogram in its structure and related to human body, which may be may be considered as a ‘miniature of the universe’. (Singh, 1990) The *Meitei mayek* has twenty-seven alphabets although it bears eighteen basic alphabets which were first introduced during the reign of Ngasapa and the remaining nine metamorphosed alphabets were added during the reign of Khagemba, who ruled from
1597 – 1652 AD. The epigraphic description of the eighteen basic alphabets is also depicted in the *puyas* like *Wakoklo Thiel Salai Amailon Pukok*.

A cultural onslaught occurred when all the archaic Meitei scripts were destroyed by Garibniwaz at the time of conversion of the Meiteis into Hinduism in the 18th century AD. The proselytization of the Meiteis into Vaishnava sect of Hinduism brought about a metamorphosis of their original culture to a state of old and new but not to a replacement of the former by the later. (Bhatt & Bhargava, 2006.)

1.4 The institution of *Yek-Salai*; the Basis of Meitei social structure:

The Meiteis have developed some important traditional socio-religious institutions in different periods of time. The development of these institutions constitutes an important part of the crafts of state in the Meitei society. Whether they are following Vaishnavism or *Apokpa­ism/Sanamahism*, they have been practicing these institutions in an equal degree. Though various changes have been witnessed in its structure and function in different phases, these institutions have survived and formed the basis of the Meitei social structure. It is, however, pertinent to look how these institutions have been functioning, and how the king in the past and people in present times articulate these institutions to shape and reshape the identity, politics at different stages. The revivalism of *Apokpa/Sanamahi* belief today is seen as a part of this undergoing process through which the Meiteis articulate their socio-cultural identity for different socio-political goal.

The Meiteis have a unique social system of *salai*, which is an exogamous unit, each tracing their origin from a common mythical ancestor known as *Salaiiel Apokpa* who is the supreme deity of the Meitei divine pantheon. It is believed that *Salaiiel Apokpa* had seven wives through whom he had seven sons namely;
Mangang-pa,
Luwang-pa,
Khuman-pa,
Angom-pa,
Moirang-pa,
khaba-Nganba-pa,
Sarang-Leisangthem-pa.

These seven brothers are known as the ancestors of the seven salai. If we go back ward along the historical path we reach to a stage when the Meitei was only a village society. This was the period of chieftaincy. Each of these clans then formed a village society and was identified by their clan name. Each of these villages was synonymous to their clan name (Saha, 1987). However, when British started to study them, they started treating these village based clan groups as distinct tribe (McCullock, 1859). If we look into the structural and functional system of the salai, it can be seen as a clan. It has seven patrilineal units known as yek/salai. They are:

Mangang,
Luwang,
Khuman,
Angom,
Moirang,
khaba-Nganba,
Sarang-Leisangthem (or Chenglei).

T.C Hodson claims that there was ten salai in the Meitei Society. He refers to the Meitei mythology called Numit Kappa, according to which formerly there were ten sons representing ten salai and the other three have been extinguished in the inter-clan conflict. (Hudson, T.C. 1908) Various existing literatures and traditions also revealed that there were
seven *yeks* and nine *salai* and in this regard we may refer to the popular saying of *yek taret amasung salai mapal*, which means seven *yek* and nine *salai*. It is to be noted here that some scholars treated *yek* and *salai* are synonymous having same meaning and functions. They do not differentiate *yek* and *salai* from each other. (ibid, Sircar, 1984) However *yek* and *salai* have different connotations when it operates. When it’s a Meitei rule of marriage it is not the *salai* but *yek* through which the preference of marriage mate is chosen. But when it for rites and rituals related to the group, they use the term *salai*.

The term *salai* defines how one relates with his or her fellow members. They are united in various rites and rituals of the *salai*. It also defines its peculiar nature and type of the rites and rituals through which the members are united while it excludes other groups from the respective group. For instance, any other person except the member of a particular *salai* is not allowed to participate in the rites and rituals of that *salai*. On the other hand, the term *yek* refers to the marriage rule between the *salais*. It is functional for the inter-*salai* solidarity and the cooperation through which they established the *salai* exogamy in marriage. It reduced the inter clan conflicts that they had before the formation of the Meitei nation. Hence the term *salai* is functional for the intra-*salai* solidarity and cooperation. Thus the institution of *yek* and *salai* provides a total structure and functional system of socio-religious institution of the Meitei Society.

*Salai* was originally having a territory, speaking a dialect and enjoying socio-political autonomy. Later on, it was reduced to social autonomy when it came under the Meitei rule. On the one hand, *yek* is an exogamous social group within which marriage is not permissible. It is believed that in order to enforce the rule of exogamy among the *salai*, the system of *yek* came into being. The rule of *yek* denotes that the marriage between two persons belonging to the same *salai* is forbidden. This
system somehow enforces the rule of salai exogamy in the society. Thus, it enforces the inter dependence among the members of different salais. The institution of yek is an important craft of the state that had been developed later in the Meitei society in order to cease out the possible tension and conflict between the salais that they had before the formation of the Meitei nation.

Each salai worships its ancestors called Salailel Apokpa. The first five salais namely Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang have single ancestor each while Khaba-Nganba (nomenclature of the two salais – Khaba and Nganba) and Sarang-Leisangthem (nomenclature of the two salais – Sarangthem and Leishangthem), have a pair of ancestors each namely Thongaren and Atongba for Khaba and Nganba and Yumthangba and Ashangba for Sarang-Leisangthem salai respectively. The appearances of a pair of ancestors among the later two yeks show that they have been unified in order to perform some socio-political functions. These nine ancestors having different identities, totems and taboos, mode of worship, are considered as salai. After the last four salais were fused together to make two groups khaba-Nganba and Sarang-Leisangthem (also called Cheng/ei), both the term yek salai synonymously used. (Kabui, 1991) However, looking into their respective structures and functions, they have different connotations in the Meitei society.

The salai is a patrilineal unit and it is assumed that all the members of a given salai are related through blood. Men and women belonging to same salai are called yek-thoknaba which means taboo against marriage. Any person marrying within the salai or from the prescribed yek is followed by a practice locally called eenthokpa, a sort of social ostracism which denies the individual from membership in any socio-economic association like singlup or marup and it is the biggest form of punishment given at the collective level. It thus functions as a powerful system of social control. The system also enforces the rule of exogamy
that the society needed when nine salais came together to form a Meitei community. In the pristine past such persons were even sentenced to death. (Manjusri, Chaki-Sircar, 1984)

Further marriage of persons connected on the maternal side within three generations is prohibited, though they belong to different salais. This type of prohibition is called shairuk tinnaba. Formerly this restriction was extended to five generations but reduced to three only during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakriti (1850-1886). (Shakespeare, 1910.) However, at present this restriction is not found in the Meitei society in the same degree and is loosening its values today. However, the Meiteis in Assam still give restriction against inter-salai marriage in case of an arranged marriage.

The head of the salai is called piba, who requires performing certain rites and rituals of the salai. The role of the piba is to look after the welfare of the members of his salai and settle small disputes among them. All the salai also have strict prescribed day, month, modes and materials for worshiping their respective ancestors. For example, the Mangang salai offers red lotus, red sareng (buwal fish), thamjet (lotus fruit). Their special colour is reddish gold and special day is Sagolsen (Thursday). And month is Inga (June/July). Luwang day is Eerai (Friday), month is 12th lunar day of Wakching (January). They offer mellei (a kind of orchid), brown sareng (Buwal fish), kihom (pineapple) and their colour is bluish white. Every year all the salai perform the ceremony of Salailel Apokpa khurumba, which is a practice of offering of prescribed materials to their ancestors on the particular day as prescribed in the puyas. This particular ceremony is the means of reinforcing harmony and cooperation among the members of a salai whose members are now lived in different places. This is also a way how an individual identifies with his or her salai and differentiate him or her from the rest of the salais.
Each salai regard some objects of taboo as namungba or laigi yenhen. It may be considered as the totem of the respective salai. For example, the Mangang salai is forbidden to kill snake and so on and so forth. Likewise, each salai also observes and protects some objects whether it may be plant or animal. Thus salais have some totemic characters in regard to the taboo associated with it. The Meiteis in general believed that if any member of the clan even touches one of these objects intentionally he or his people will die mysteriously or suffer from some incurable disease (Hudson, 1908). This is the taboo associated with Salailel Apokpa. But now a days it exists in the memory of only a few members and majority of the younger generations go far away from this belief.

Each salai is again divided into fixed number of lineages called yumnaks. A yumnak may denote the occupation of one’s ancestors of the place from where the ancestors had migrated or unique character of the group (Singha, 1986). It appears that all the yumnaks have their particular occupations, which were not to be encroached upon by other members. The first Meitei Law Book known as Loyumba Singyel; Wayen Pathap, which was written during the reign of Loyumba, dealt with the distribution of different occupations of the yumnaks. All the yumnaks performed certain roles in society and the roles so played determined the names of the yumnaks. This division of the functionaries among various yumnaks was related to the essential functioning of the state. It was endogenously developed as an important part of the functional of the kingship. It can be better observed as the form of state control over the social system.

On the social level yumnak is a corporate body of the same lineage and observe yum mangba (birth and death pollution) i.e. if any member of a particular yumnak dies all of its members are informed. They change their earthen cooking pots to a new ones and clean metal pots. They
observe the death pollution for seven days in case of a child below three years and twelve days in case of the dead of adult member. On the other hand, the followers of Apokpal/Sanamahi observe seven days for birth and dead pollution. This segmented lineage group is called phukainaba sagei. However, the members of the yumnaks spread to a large area, a problem arises in regard to the implementation of the practice. Hence, yumnak is again divided into closed groups known as sageis, inhabiting in a particular locality.

The notion of ritual hierarchy which the Vaishnavite Brahmins added to it brought further complexities into this system. The proselytization campaign made attempts to transform the whole socio-religious and political system of Manipur into a Hindu state and society. (Kabui, 1991.) This campaign drew up a scheme of transplanting the Meitei social structure with Hindu structures. The Caitharol Kumbaba records the preparation of genealogies of the Meiteis in order to supplant them with Hindu gotra system by Shantidas Goswami in 1731. The king and all the converted Meiteis were proclaimed Kshatriyas and transplantation of gotras assumed significance which is shown in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yek/Salai</th>
<th>Gotra</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ningthouja or Mangang</td>
<td>Sandilya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luwang</td>
<td>Kashyap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angom</td>
<td>kaushika</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khuman</td>
<td>Madhugalya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moirang</td>
<td>Aitereya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khaba-Ngba</td>
<td>Gautam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarang-Leishangthem</td>
<td>Bhardwaja</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is a fact that the traditional state had the policy to unify all the salais by controlling the territorial and social autonomy of each salai. The
institution of yek system enabled the state to reduce the degree of social and political autonomy of the salais. This was further accelerated by the division of salais into numerous yumnakS. However, the observance of the same socio-religious functions of their salai by the members of the yumnak indicates that the distinct identity of each salai is still maintained by the means of rituals and observance of yum-mangba.

It is, however, believed that the institution of the exogamous system of yek was developed much later when the Mangang salai overruled all other six salais. The solidarity of the Meitei kingdom and society for such a long period has been through the means of cultural project of the institutionalization of yek-salai. Therefore, the institutionalization of yek-salai could be considered as the state’s articulation of socio-cultural identity of the Meiteis in order to cease the distinct salai identity and their socio-cultural and political autonomy so that a homogeneous Meitei society was finally established.

1.5 Objectives of the Study:

The present research is postulated with an aim to understand the phenomenon of cultural revivalism amongst the Meiteis along the parameters of contemporary theoretical developments. The study aims at interrogating the sustenance of the various traditional modes of the cultural and social life of the Meiteis in spite of their overt and apparent abandonment, and what forms they assumed in the intervening period. The theoretical concept of the bricolage would be interesting to study the revivalism amongst the Meiteis, and how cultural remnants are cohering into newer patterns.

The study has primarily focused on the Meiteis of Assam, and their overall role in the revivalist impetus in the Meitei society. Though the revivalist rhetoric takes its most vocal and assertive dimensions in the
Imphal valley of Manipur, nonetheless, the role of the Meiteis of Assam is of crucial importance in the contemporary resurgence.

Finally the study aims to focus on the role of Naoria Phulo and his movement and the cultural rhetoric of his proclamations. It would also try to explore the modes through which a social and religious movement enters the sphere of militant assertion and how the goals of both, though distinctly different, enter into a marriage of convenience, whereby the radical elements appropriate the parameters of an essentially different movement for newer political purposes.

1.6 Relevance of the Study:

The present study tries to understand the phenomenon of cultural revivalism amongst the Meiteis of Assam in a systematic way and relate the dynamics of such assertion with pan Manipuri perspectives. It is undeniable that while the ethnic assertions amongst the Meiteis in Manipur often assume violent contours along political lines, in Assam it is rather a cultural movement that is subtle, non-confrontationist, and aimed at the revival of the past glory. The study would try to put in perspectives such an outlook in the context of the larger Meitei nation and how, dislocated or diasporic parlance can often be the source of resurgent spirit. It is, hoped, that the Meiteis and their culture spread over the country, which in itself is a lesser known fact, is taken into cognizance in a holistic understanding of the Meitei culture and society, and how the term Manipuri collates multiple cultural and social dynamics and cannot be narrowed down to what comes across the term Manipuri today.

1.7 Method of data collection:

The work has been undertaken mainly based on the empirical studies. Intended to be qualitative in nature, this research involves the following
techniques that allow for the study of special and unique aspects like what people think, what they do and what they really want to do. And the generalization emerges out of the specific details of what the researcher observes. For this purpose the use of the materials drawn from both primary and secondary sources is the basis of this research work.

1.7.1 Review of literature:

To trace the traditional, social, religious, cultural and political structure of the Meiteis who are living scattered in almost the entire North East region is really a difficult task. Since the present revival of Apokpaism/Sanamahism and the Apokpa/Sanamahi movement is a sectarian movement by nature it also does not attract many scholars. As there are limited works concerning the present problem of the revivalism of Sanamahism obviously there is a great amount of paucity of the sources. However, attempts are being made to use of most of the available sources. For the main sources available for the understanding of the dynamic nature of the society, polity, economy and religion of the Meiteis references are being made to various literary sources viz. royal chronicles such as Chaitherol Kumbaba, indigenous archaic literature, ancient traditional legends and puyas handed down to posterity by the forefathers of these people. Besides, there are many accounts left by the British ethnographers and political agents and modern writings. Whatever may be the basis of their accounts, it is worthwhile to have a careful look into these accounts to ascertain the origin of the people, their belief system, social set up, other cultural values and the change. Broadly these studies may be grouped under three heads:

1.7.1.1 Traditional Accounts:

The Meiteis had mastered the art of writing from the very early times, which can be seen in the form of royal chronicles, clan genealogies and other works covering almost all aspects of the Meiteis. The royal
chronicle called the *Chaithrol Kumbaba* is the most important indigenous literature of Manipur, which records the historical events of nearly two thousand years, covering the reign of seventy-six kings from Pakhangba (33-154 AD.) to Budhachandra (1941-55). It provides only an account of day to day political events with less emphasis on the social aspects. But enough accounts are given on the religious aspects; especially the king's initiation into Hinduism is narrated in detail. However, all these accounts are vague in nature as myths were given much prominence. Like all other royal chronicles, it suffers a lot of biases in the selection of the events to be recorded essentially. So every fact has to be compared and analyzed along with other contemporary sources. Besides the royal chronicle, *the puyas* (archaic literature) too serves the purpose of this research work. The important *puya* related to the study is the *Bamon Khunthoklon* (the account of the Brahmin immigrants) mainly deals with the coming of the Brahmins and their role in the socio-religious life of the people.

1.7.1.2 British accounts:

The British ethnographers and political agents, who wrote a number of accounts on the land and the people, though they had written at the time when Hinduism was at its full glory in Manipur, provide us important information. R.B. Pemberton, who served as Joint Commissioner in Manipur, first published *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India* in 1835. Putting aside the mythical origin of the Meiteis as written in the *puyas*, the first authentic view about the origin of the Meiteis was given in his book. Otherwise his book mainly deals with the economic and administrative aspect of his period.

His work was followed by that of Lt. Col. McColloch, who served as Political Agent of Manipur from 1845 -67. His work, *An Account of the Valley of Manipur*, (1859), throws valuable light on the socio-religious aspects of the Meiteis. R. Brown provided similar view in his book
Statistical Account of Manipur (1873). He states that the hill and the valley people had a common origin.

T.C. Hodson’s classic work The Meitheis (1908), gives in detail, an account of the pre-Vaishnava Meitei society giving special emphasis on social, religious and political aspects like the salai (clan) system, the lalloop (services to the king) system, the religious system and the importance of maiba and maibi in the pre-Hindu Meitei faith. His book also recorded the initial resistance of the Meiteis to adopting Hinduism. He observed, “To the royal wills of Pamheiba (Garibnawaz), the monarch in whose reign the fortune of the state reached its zenith. And to it Vaishnavism owes its present position as the official religion of the state. At first, the decrees of the king received but little obedience and the opposition to change centered mainly round the numerous numbers of royal families, who were supported, not unnaturally, by the maiba, the priest of the old religion.” Thus his work is still the best full scale study of the Meitei society based on the ethnology and historical evidences.

1.7.1.3 Modern Writings:

The colonial ethnographic accounts emphasizing on the origin of the Meiteis from the surrounding hill tribes, was not accepted by the orthodox Vaishnavite Meiteis. As a result, a new school of thought emphasizing their Aryan origin came into being from the late nineteenth century, perhaps to encounter the British writings. The trend was first started by Pandit Atombapu Sharma and W. Yumjao Singha. The former represented the Sanskrit literary school of Manipur and the later represented the historical and archaeological school of Manipur. Then it was followed by N. Nilakanta Singh, Pandit Khelchandra Singh and L. Ibunghal Singh.

Atombapu Sharma from 1889 to 1963 wrote around hundred papers and books. Among his writings, Haree Mayee (undated and first book),
Manipur Itihas (1940) and Meitei Kirtan (1952) specially emphasized the Indo-Aryan origin of the Meitei society from the Vedic point of view. He is of the opinion that the Meiteis are none but the Kshatriyas who are the descendants of Arjuna, the legendary hero of the Mahabharata, and hence they are Aryans. To uphold his purely Hindu oriented view, Sharma completely ignored the ancient traditional values and culture, religion and society which are very much given in the indigenous texts. Following the view of Sharma, another Manipuri writer L. Ibunghal Singh in his book Introduction to Manipur (1963) similarly wrote as the Meiteis had an Indo-Aryan origin. So his theory suffers from blending too much on an Aryan hypothesis.

To counter Manipuri’s alleged Aryan theory of origin, another school of thought led by scholars like Naoria Phulo, Khumanthen Kaomacha, N. Tombi Singha, L. Bhagyachandra Singh et al along with the works of some organizations having a revivalist tendency, emerged. Naoria Phulo, popularly Known as Laininghan, who was the founder of the Apokpa/Sanamahi Movement did his research work on the Meitei history, culture and religion extensively. He published many articles related to the ancient traditional culture of the Meiteis. Many of his articles were later published in a book entitled Eigi Wareng in which he critically observed the role of Brahmins and Hinduism in the Meitei society. Besides these articles, he also wrote many other books on different aspects of Meitei culture, belief and practices on the eve of the advent of Hinduism in Manipur.

Of these books mention may be made of Meitei Hourakpham wari (an account of the origin of the Meiteis), Meitei Ishei (Meitei religious songs), Tengbanba amasung Lainingthou Laipao (Verses of the Almighty), Singtha Chaitharol (a book on the Meitei rites and rituals), Thayeem Nongyeen (a book on Meitei socio-religious philosophy), Ahal Yathang (advice of the elders) among others. Many of these books
contain poems and hymns which are highly philosophical and some are critical notes on Hinduism and Brahmins. His hymns are highly powerful who influence thousands of people to make themselves aware of their pre-Vaishnava culture, belief and practices which are manifested by the activists of *Apokpa/Sanamahi* Revivalist movement.

Khumanthem Kaomacha, in his Book *Manipur Ittibriti* (1938) listed the names of the *puyas* that had been burnt during the Hinduization period by the Hindu Missionaries. N Tombi Singh in his book *Manipur: A Study*, (1972) observes that the advent of Vaishnavism in the beginning of the eighteenth century was responsible for the cultural separation between the people of the hill and the valley of Manipur. This was one of the reasons of the revivalist movement. In a sharp departure from the Hindu centric views Bhagyachandra Singh in his book *A Critical Study of the Religious Philosophy of the Meiteis before the Advent of Vaishnavism in Manipur* (1991), adopted an alternative to the exploration of ancient Manipuri religion and culture. It projects the religion and philosophy of the pre-Vaishnava Meiteis from the native point of view.

Yet another new school of thought tried to explain the features of the present Meitei society as the force of reaction against Vaishnava cultural value. Manjusri Chaki Sircar, in her book *Feminism in Traditional Society: Women of Manipur Valley* (1984) views that the Meitei society as a field of conflict and compromise between the religious values of Hinduism and *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism*. She says that the growth of new political consciousness and a movement towards revivalism has been inspired by a sudden education explosion, closer contact with modern Indian society, abolition of native statehood and assimilation with India. Lucy Zehol, in her book, *Ethnicity in Manipur*, (1998) writes a glimpse about the revival of *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism* amongst the Meiteis and how it transformed as a platform of Meiteis for the quest of their ethnic identity.
Another modern historian Gangumei Kabui in his article *Socio-Religious Reform Movement* in Lal Dena’s (ed.) *History of Modern Manipur* (1991) provides a comprehensive account of the nature, objectives and impacts of the revivalist movement among the Meiteis of Manipur. Sairem Nilbir’s paper, *Revivalist Movement of Sanamahi* in the edited volume of Naorem Sanajaoba’s *Manipur Past and Present*, Vol. II (1991) provides an account on how a radical group of Apokpa/Sanamahi movement takes over the ancient religious sites of Manipur. R. Constantine in his work *Manipur; Maid of the Mountains*, (1981), provides an account of the decline of Hinduism in Manipur. While giving this statement he used festivals as the indicator of the popularity of a religion and its values among the masses. He observes, “The Saraswati *puja* which was once a big and popular festival in schools of Manipur is no more celebrated now.” Another writer M. Kirti Singh in his book *Religion and Culture of Manipur*, (1988), provides an account of the growing interest and popularity of the *lai haraoba* festival which is the prime Meitei ritual and centre of Meitei cultural life. He also views these changes as the result of the emergence of their pre-Vaishnava Meitei identity consciousness among the masses. While British ethnographers focused on the social aspects of the Manipuri religion and culture, Kirti Singh’s focus is on the ritualistic aspect of the Meitei society. M. Tombi in his book *Manipur and Mainstream* (1975) views the Brahmins not continuing their social obligations and mentions many lapses, omissions and commissions in the Hindu rituals. (Bijoykumar, 2005)

**1.7.2 Primary Data Collection:**

Primary sources comprise data collected through empirical observation and interview technique. It starts with the use of the mixture of both non-probability and probability sampling methods at various levels. In view of this the study is also intended to use the snowball sampling to generate the sample. The person so selected is interviewed. The persons
interviewed include not only those members of the movement but also those from among the Brahmins and the Vaishnava Meiteis. This intensive technique enables the present writer to capture the response of the people to this movement.

The information elicited from the interviewed is counter-checked through the use of observation method. This helps to capture the subjective meaning of the movement as 'it occurs' rather than as 'it is reported'. It also provides a valid process to access verbal report against non-verbal behavior, and hence ascertain reliability of the data collected.

1.7.3 Selection of Field Sites:

The field work was carried out in all the three districts of Barak valley and at Hojai and Jugijan in Nagoan district. The field survey was done in three phases as most of the festivals and public rites and rituals have their appropriate time to perform. For instance, if observations are to be made on lai haraoba festival it is favourable to visit during January to May. Hindu festivals like Ratha Yatra and Krishna Janma (Janmasthami) it is favourable to visit during June and July. And festivals like Durga puja and Kali puja generally falls during October/November. As a part of my fieldwork I have also visited Manipur Valley in 2009 to have a firsthand knowledge of the impact of Sanamahi movement and its present status which originated from the erstwhile Cachar district of Assam.

The main Pre-Vaishnava shrine in Imphal is the Kangla and the Sanamahi temple situated inside the compound of the 1st Manipur Rifle (MR). I have also visited the Govindaji temple which is the most important centre of the Vaishnava faith and the centre of the Hindu religious activities over the past two hundred years. Unlike Manipur valley we do not find prominent Vaishnavite Meitei religious centre like the Govindaji temple other than a small temple meant for a particular village, neither in Barak valley nor in Nagoan district. Side by side there
are a number of temples dedicated to lairembis (goddesses), village deities of umanglai which are exclusively worshipped by the Meiteis without the interference of Hinduism and the Brahmins. In the Hailakandi district there are thirty-three Meitei populated villages and in each of these Meitei villages there are 4/5 Brahmin households.

The Barak valley of Assam is inhabited by the Meiteis who migrated from Manipur mostly during the Seven Years of Devastation or Burmese occupation of Manipur from 1819-1826. An official Report of British India 1832 gives the account of the settlement of the Manipuris in the present three districts of Barak valley:

“...a large portion of new settlers of Manipuris who averse to the system of the government of their own country, they have determined not to returned to it, and have in consequence obtain grants in Cachar, one of the largest and most flourishing of the villages thus founded has been established on the bank of Madura Nulla…” (As quoted in M. Gojendra, Brief History of Manipur, in Nehru and Manipur, Govt. of Manipur, Imphal, p. 43

A large number of Manipuri villages were established by the British in the eastern fringes of Cachar (Bhattacharya, 1977).

The main reason behind selecting the present Barak valley of Assam for this work is that the present movement of the revivalism of Apokpa/Sanamahi culture had its origin here. Anyone can identify Meiteis easily from the rest of the community because they still preserve their identity especially after the movement. Women can be easily identified by their phanek at their lower part of the body and innaphi at the upper part of the body. However, due to close contact with their immediate Bengali neighbours many Hindu Bengali customs have been embraced and thus adopted themselves entirely to new environment and way of life. Still they have managed to retain their age-old socio-cultural
traits which are seen in their behavior, language, dress, habitation and beliefs, values associated with their rituals of birth, marriage and death. Thus, in spite of various changes they still retain their own festivals such as lai haraoba and thabal chongba and the worship of yum-lais, Lainingthou Sanamahi and Ima Leimaren Sidabi in the south-western corner of every household is of utmost importance and indispensable part of every Meitei family. In this way Vaishnavism as well as Meitei-ism goes side by side and much of the traditional faith and rituals are retained.

1.7.4 Field Study:

Staying in the field and involving as a participant observer, I became particularly interested in the lai haraoba festival in Assam which is purely Meitei in its origin and form. This festival is performed annually in most of the Meitei villages, which continues for five days, seven days or nine days. In Manipur the festival is performed from ten days to one month. In Assam the days of the festival is cut short to a maximum of nine days. The most important lai haraoba festival in the Hailakandi district of Assam is the Lawat Lairembi (Goddess) haraoba (Bengalis and other communities call the Goddess as Kachcha Khouri). It continues for nine days. In the Nagaon district of Assam the lai-haraoba of Lainingthou Khoriphaba is celebrated every year for seven consecutive days during Kalen-Inga (June) season and it attracted not only the Meiteis settling in Pipal Pukhuri area but also from the neighbouring Meitei settlements like Lanka Paona Leikai, Lachi Nagar, Pandrogaon, Rajbari apart from a large people belonging to other communities.

The lai haraoba of the Meiteis may be said to represent the epitome of the cultural ethos of the Meitei society. It is indeed the core of the Meitei culture through which one can visualize the Meitei religious way of life. The essence of the rituals is that it is performed to gain the favour of the lai and is performed by the maibas and maibis as priests and priestesses,
not as representatives of gods. It embodies a composite concept of the whole story, concerning the creation of earth by the creator god, stable settlement of lives here and continuance of their ancestral rites. The *maibi* evokes the spirit or call out the supreme father and mother from the water, which then copulates and gives birth to a baby, who is ceremoniously and ritually brought into the world. When the baby grew up with all rituals initiations, his house was constructed and marriage was solemnised following all ritual details. *Lai* is immortal hence his soul ceremonially sends back from where it came, that is, to water.

One of the most important values, which *lai haraoba* carries, is its reflection of equality among the villagers. As the temple of the *lai* belongs to the community, they are also equally responsible for its management. Offerings made during the festival are distributed among them, which is the difference between a Vaishnavite and the *umanglai* temples. In the Vaishnavite temples, though the land is donated by the villagers, it is fully dominated by the Brahmin family and the offerings made by the villagers go directly to the Brahmin’s house.

Also as a part of the methodology apart from the literatures mentioned elsewhere journals and news papers from time to time having references to the revivalist movements have been incorporated. And the data so collected, is analyzed on the basis of the meaning of the data rather than being essentially descriptive. An interactive technique involved in qualitative analysis is employed to make conclusion from the data collected.