Chapter 3

Manipuris of Assam and Their Socio-Cultural Practices

3.1 The Meiteis of Assam; Migration and Habitats:

Historical circumstances account for the rather wide geographical distribution of the Meiteis. The date of the first Meitei settlement in Assam is not known. However, they have come to Assam at different waves at regular intervals. Possible reasons leading to this, as circumstantial evidences support, are that the Meitei settlement in the two river valley regions of Assam namely the Barak valley and the Brahmaputra valley was because of their matrimonial relations with Ahoms and the Kacharis and series of treacherous raids of the Avas (Meitei word for the Burmese) in Manipur. From the mid eighteenth century, owing to the Burmese invasion of Manipur, their relocation and settlement in southern Assam, upper Assam, Tripura, Jaintia hills (now in Meghalaya), Sylhet (now in Bangladesh), Nadia (in West Bengal) and Brindavan (in Uttar Pradesh) became rapid. In Fact, the influx of the Meiteis, especially in Barak valley of southern Assam took place en masse during the devastation of Manipur by the Burmese during 1819-1826 and is known as chahi taret khuntakpa or seven years of devastation in the history of Manipur. At present the sizeable population of Meiteis in Assam is found in southern Assam in the districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi followed by Hojai, Lanka and Jugijan in the Nagaon district of central Assam and in some other parts of Upper Assam.
3.2 Meiteis in Barak Valley:

The southernmost part of Assam is broadly known as Barak valley (earlier it was called Surma valley as the present Barak river was known as Surma river) bordering the north eastern states of Mizoram in the south, Manipur in the east, North Cachar hills in the north Tripura and Bangladesh in the west and south-west. The entire valley was referred to as ‘Kachar’, during Kachari rule of the valley and ‘Cachar’ after the annexation of the valley to the British India, although it is presently divided into three districts, Karimganj and Hailakandi being other two revenue districts of Assam. Various ethnic communities reside in the valley including Kacharis (or Kachari Barmans who are also known as Dimasas), Meiteis, Nagas, Khasis, Hmars, Riangs, Tea tribes, Mizos, Bishnupriya, Koch Rajbansis, Assamese and Bengalis. At present Bengalis (Both Hindu and Muslim) form the majority of the population of the valley. The main and official language of the valley is Bengali (though it is within the state of Assam). Besides Bengali the Meiteilon or Manipuri language is also spoken in some areas of the valley where there are large concentration of the Meiteis (in places like Lakhipur in the Cachar district and Jaribond in hailakandi district).

The Meiteis form one of the most important racial elements in the overall make up of the population of the valley. At the same time their culture is inextricable and acts an important role in the cultural integration of the valley. The main concentration area of the Meiteis are Lakhipur, Sonai, Bontarapur, Silchar, Lala, Patherkandi. They are also settled scattered in places like Katlicherra, Gumrah, Badarpur, Borkholala, Udharbond, Joypur, Kabuganj and Bhaga.

The exact date of the Meitei settlement in Barak valley of Assam is not known. However, it is a fact that the Meiteis had migrated to this valley in various waves at regular intervals. Tamradhvaj, an inhabitant of Barak valley in the 19th century described that the Manipuris of the valley have
been living here from time immemorial (cited in Manikchand, 2005). An early historical evidence of Manipur recorded that the first settlement of the Meiteis took place when one Chenjel Naral Pakhangba migrated to the Barak valley in the 5th century AD. (cited in Wakat, 1985: 28)

The migration of the Meiteis in Barak valley en-masse may be dated back to the beginning of the 18th century. The rulers of both the kingdoms of Cachar and Manipur encouraged immigrants to settle down in their respective kingdoms. Moreover the socio-political and economic reasons at times compelled the Meiteis to migrate to neighbouring kingdom of Cachar. Proselytization of the Meiteis to Hinduism which took place in Manipur in the early 18th century might also another cause for Meiteis leaving their country and settling in different places like Cachar, Sylhet, Tripura and in the upper Brahmaputra valley. At the same time people who defied royal order to adopt the new religion were driven out from the kingdom and some of them took shelter in Cachar. However, large scale migration occurred due to repeated Burmese aggression on Manipur from the middle of the 18th century. For a period from 1758 to 1826 AD Manipur was overrun time and again and dominated by the Burmese (Babachandra, 2005). A large number of people had been killed in action or taken as captives by the Burmese. Another section of people including their kings and princes had fled to Barak valley and other parts for safety and settled there in the later years. Hence, settlements of the Meiteis grew up in different parts of the Barak valley, Sylhet and Tripura and many went as far as Dacca.

An official report of the British in 1832 showed that a large portion of the new settlers consisted of Manipuris, immigrants who were being advered to the political unrest in their own country, had determined not to return to it and had, in consequence, obtained grants of land in Cachar. In fact, the Meiteis fled from their own country en-masse during the seven years devastation of Manipur during 1819 to 1826 as a result of the
Burmese occupation of Manipur which is called the *chahi taret khuntakpa* in the history of Manipur. Even after the annexation of Cachar plains in the British East India Company’s territory in 1832, the migration of the Meiteis still continued. Captain Fisher, the first superintendent of Cachar, established a number of Manipuri villages in the eastern part of Cachar. They were encouraged to settle in the frontiers, as demanded by the exigency to cope with turmoil of the Kukis since the Manipuris, who on being supplied with a few fire-arms easily kept off the Kukis, and so protected not only themselves, but also the other people living in the plains (ibid). On the southernmost part of the valley the Meiteis were also arranged to settle bordering the Lushai Hills to cope with the frequent raids carried on by the *Lushais* (Mizos) on the plains of Barak valley. Thus not only one but multiple factors worked together leading to the migration of the Manipuris into the Kingdom of Cachar. The kings of Manipur and Kachari kings of Cachar also had matrimonial relations which resulted in Manipuri settlement in Barak valley. The Meitei princes Induprabha was married to the Kachari king Krishna Chandra in 1806 and her retinues were arranged to settle in Khaspur. A census taken in 1851 showed the population figure of the valley at 85522 of which 30,573 were Bengali Hindus, 29708 Bengali Muslims, 10723 Manipuris, 276 Assamese, 62 Europeans, 6320 Kukis, 5645 Nagas and 2215 Dimashas. In 1881 the Meitei population rose to 19484. The census of 1931 put the Manipuri population of Cachar district including Silchar, Hailakandi and N.C Hills at 55,550 out of the total population of 570531. The above figure shows that a good number of the Meiteis had been settling in the valley and they played an important role in the socio political, cultural and economic life of the Barak valley. However, since the middle of the 19th century they are pushed behind as a subordinate race by the majority Bengalis.
3.3 Meiteis of Brahmaputra Valley:

In the *puyas* (royal chronicles) the land of the Ahoms was known as *Tekhao Leipak*. The word *tekhao* is derived from the river Dikhau, a tributary of the Brahmaputra flowing through Sibsagar district. The relation between Assam and Manipur began in the beginning of the 15th C. AD when one Govinda Manik and six other families migrated to *Meitei Leipak* (which was renamed as Manipur in the 18th C.) during the reign of king Khomba (1432-67). This is the first recorded immigration from Assam which is detailed in the *puya Mayang Tekhaolon*. (Jhaljit, 1987). Further a group of Brahmins from Assam also entered Manipur as early as 15th C. AD during the reign of king Kyamba (1467-1508). (Nilakanta, 1982)

The Meiteis and the Ahoms had matrimonial alliances for a long time. Francis Hamilton writes in his *An Account of Assam*, Gauhati, 1963 that the Swargadevas or the Ahom kings had alliances with the kings of *Meitei Leipak* (Manipur) and frequent inter-marriages were taken place among the two royal family members (Hamilton, 1963). The royal chronicle of Manipur *Chaitharol Kumbaba* writes that in 1536 the Meitei king offered a bride to Ahom king. In that year, the route from Manipur to Assam was also improved. At present, the main concentration of the Meiteis in Brahmaputra valley is found in the districts of Nagaon, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Digboi and in Guwahati.

3.4 Cultural Linkages with Manipur; Continuity and Change:

The adaptability of the Meiteis settled in different parts has, by and large, made them assimilate into the cultural mainstream and become a part of the cultural and social scape of the places where they settled. However, they maintained certain cultural markers that bridge their past with the present. According to Alexander Mackenzie, the Meiteis are of mixed Kuki and Naga descent, but after their conversion to Hinduism, they
became more 'Hindu than the Hindus', professing themselves to be *Kshatriyas* and accepting the caste hierarchy with special veneration (Mackenzie, 1999).

By the time they settled in Assam the Meiteis were already converted into Hinduism and they considered themselves to be the followers of Vaishnavism. Manipur in the 18th century saw a great change in the social and religious life of the Meiteis. The period from the reign of Pamheiba (Garib Nawaz, 1709-1748) to Chingthangkhomba (Bhagyachandra, 1762-1798) and Maharaja Churachand Singha witnessed a marked change in the Meitei society, both in culture and religion. Even the Meitei kings adopted Hindu names and titles. It was during this period that the Manipuris have embraced Vaishnavism by renouncing their traditional religion and faith under royal patronage. Initially it was *Ramanandi* sect of Hinduism spread in Manipur by Shantidas Goswami during the reign of Pamheiba. Later on the Bengal school of *Gaudiya Vaishnavism* came to dominate the Meitei religious life since the reign of Chingthangkhomba, who was popularly known as Bhagyachandra.

However, there has been always a basic remnance of Meitei philosophy in existence parallel to the official practice of Vaishnavism. The religious life of the people, even if they have come much under the influence of Vaishnavism, retained their traditional markers inherited from their ancestors. The essentials of the old religion remain recognizable till this day. This is by and large replicated amongst the Meiteis of Assam also.

### 3.5 Socio-Cultural life of the Meiteis in Assam:

The Meiteis form one of the most important groups in the overall make up of the population especially of the Barak valley and it is the second largest community only next to Bengali. Though their settlement in the valley was contributed by various reasons, the basic ideas and institutions
of the Meiteis remain almost the same as found in their homeland. This is because of the fact that their migration in the valley and the relationship they developed with the Kacharis and their active participation in the political affairs of the land helped them to retain their age old tradition and culture. Their active participation in the politics led to the acquisition of the entire valley for almost seven years from 1819 to 1826, when the three Manipuri princes Chaurjit Singh, Marjit Singh and Gambhir Singh ousted the then Kachari king Govinda Chandra who fled to the British territory in Shylhet. The three Manipuri princes parceled out Cachar among themselves. They reigned over three different parts of the Cachar plains (Surma valley or the present Barak valley) independent of one another. For some period, Cachar appeared to be an extended Manipur (Bhattacharya, 1977). Chaurjit Singh ruled from Sonaimukh, Marjit Singh took over Hailakandi and made his capital at Jafirbond (also called Konung Leikai) and Gambhir Singh took over Tillain (present Kalain) with his capital at Gumrah.

This political superiority, though for a small span of time, also helped the Meiteis to sustain their culture and tradition without much interference from the dominant cultures and their neighbouring communities. The Meitei society is based on agrarian life. So they live mostly in villages in Assam. Because of their distinct culture and well defined dress one can easily recognize a Meitei inhabited area. As time changes the new generation today is motivated to shift to the urban areas which is the impact of the modern education and globalization. As a matter of fact some of their ideas and institutions are also dying out in the face of LPG (Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization).

The Meitei society was vertically structured (individuals were ruled by the king on top). There was no social class and caste hierarchy. However, the whole community was brought under the Kshatriya varna after their conversion to Vaishnavism. Equality in social and economic status was
shared among the Meiteis. They lived mostly in close-knit village communities with a dense social network.

3.6 Family:

Family is the primary unit of every society. The Meiteis follow strictly the patriarchal type of family and generally they live in joint families. The concept of nucleus family is prevalent now a days which is again the impact of LPG. Since their family is of patriarchal type father is the head of the family and his decision is final in almost every matter. Family property is divided according to his will. On his inability or in case of his death, the eldest son revolves as the head of the family. However, there is a special place for the mother too in the Meitei families. In olden days Meitei women carried on the entire family marketing and she also used to participate in the economic affairs of the family. There was evidence of Meitei women selling green grocers and domestic handicraft products like hand woven cloths in the market places. The trend is however declining and only a few Meitei women can be seen now a days in the market places of Assam in contrast to their counterparts in Manipur who actively participate in the market economy.

Generally, separation amongst the brothers and distribution of parental property takes place on mutual understanding. In most cases parents stay with the youngest son and as such he enjoys a larger share of the parental property than others. Begging is discouraged and considered as unfair and shameful. Interestingly no Meitei beggar was found while conducting fieldwork. There is well defined division of work between the males and females. Besides their regular domestic chores, the females extend their help to their male counterparts such as planting and cutting of crops at the time of harvesting. Other hard works such as tilting of soil and other agricultural works are done exclusively by the male members. Earning through handicraft works and selling of some indigenous products in the market is a part and parcel of most of the Meitei women.
Handicrafts such as weaving cloths and other small scale domestic industrial works are mostly handled by girls and married women. Hence, Meitei women play a vital role in the overall economy of the family. Today, the Meiteis are not merely confined to traditional means of livelihood since educated people are absorbed in jobs both in government and private sector and several other professions. Most of the younger generations have shifted to towns and cities in search of suitable jobs. As such most of the Meitei families in the villages have given up cultivating their own lands due to shortage of labour. As such, cultivation is done with the help of landless cultivators on share basis and thus agriculture has become less productive. Earlier, most of the families used to sell surplus rice grains but now their agricultural products hardly meet the needs of their families.

3.7 Village Life:

Majority population of the Meiteis lives in villages. A Meitei village is dwelt by a particular sagei (sub-clan) or by more than one sagei. In some villages a particular sagei forms the majority since they are known to be the first settlers of the village. They are then subsequently supplemented by other sageis to form a village community or khun. The names of these villages, in most of the cases, are named after the sagei, for example Haorom Leikai (where Haorom sagei were majority) or Laishramkhun (where Laishram sagei forms the majority). Some other villages are named according to the location and their significance. For example Konung Leikai (konung means palace and leikai means village, from where Marjit Singh ruled the area). In the Hailakandi district there are altogether 33 revenue villages where Meiteis live. However, most of the Manipuri villages are substituted with Bengali names. For example, Laishramkhun is the largest Meitei village in the district of Hailakandi which runs about two and half kilometers and Bengalis unable to pronounce Laishramkhun and call it Lambagaon. There are many such
instances of substituting the names of Meitei villages by Bengali names across the valley. *Komung Leikai* is also called as *Rajar Gram* by the Bengalis. (Information provided by Ng. Brajaraj Singha, aged 86, of Madaripar.)

Each village centers round a Vaishnavite temple with a gathering space called *mandap*, which serves as the common center for the entire village population. Most of the functions, rites and rituals of the village are held here. The Meitei populated areas in the valley is demarcated as par the territorial areas ruled by the Meitei princes from 1819 to 1826. For example, the Meitei populated area in Hailakandi is known as Jaribon *leipak* (*leipak* literally means kingdom). Most of the social codes and conducts and structure, carried out during the rule of Marjit Singh, are still continuing within the Meitei society. However, after the treaty of Yandaboo in 1926 the power and function of the ruler ceased to exist, but the social codes and conduct and structural pattern has been continuing till today. The eldest descendant from the Karta (descendant of king Bhagyachandra) line retains the position as the nominal head of the society who is known as *leipak mapu* or the lord of the land. He is assisted by a group of office bearers such as secretary, *kirtan mapu* or the head priest, *muktiers* or representatives of the village community drawn from a village or combination of more than one village. In the village level there is a post called *kopaidang*. He is the messenger of the village and responsible for informing the village on any event. He also makes necessary arrangements for any function or ritual in the village in consultation with the head of the family and the village Brahmin/baman (Meiteis call Brahmins as *bamon*) or the priest. The secretary of the *leipak* or *leipak* secretary maintains the records of the proceedings of the *leipak* meetings held and communicates the necessary information to the *leipak machas* (people) through the *muktiers* and carries out the orders of the *leipak mapu*. The *muktiers* represent their respective village or villages to the *laipak* meetings and they are considered as intellectuals by
the common people. They are also supposed to be fluent in rites and rituals and they occupy an important place in the society just below the leipak mapu in rank. (Information provided by Oinam Langbanjao, aged 67, a retired subject teacher in Political Science from Bamon Leikai)

In the village level people form an association called sagei changba or sagei marup in which members of a particular sagei holds the membership. Now a days, members of other sageis also join the existing sagei marup. In the event of death of a member of the village, all the families of the said group contribute a fixed amount as a help towards the family of the deceased in performing the related rites and rituals following the death. This is called singlen or latha. Other forms of supports are also extended by donating rice grains called cheng marup by all the members of the said group. Functions like marriage or rituals of death are arranged in the village mandap in case there is no available space of the family. However, most of the Meitei families are self-sufficient in terms of space and have a permanent construction which is an open shed in the courtyard of the house called sangoi and such functions are arranged here.

In case of death rituals of the Vaishnavite Meiteis, a brief ceremony is performed on every odd days from the day of the death. This is called parav viz. humni parav, mangani parav, taretni parav, mapanni parav and taramathoini parav (i.e. parav on 3rd day, 5th day 7th day, 9th day and 11th day). The fifth day is called asthi chandan on which the soul of the deceased is paid homage with floral tribute followed by a sankirtana. A feast (chak) is arranged for the invitees and guests who attend the asthi chandan. Yum shengba or cleaning and purifying the house is done on the 12th day as the pre-requisite for performing sorat on the 13th day for the eternal peace of the departed soul. Sorat (shradha) is always accompanied by a sankirtana which is sung on the theme of Radha
Krishna jugal milan which symbolizes the assimilation of the atma with the Paramatma.

On this occasion the presence of all the dignitaries of the leipak, such as leipak mapu, kirtan mapu, the hosting priest, at least one muktier, sambhasa (a person is designated to welcome the dignitaries and other guests), arangbham (stock manager, who also offers lei chandan means flower and chandan to the assembled guests) and khonghambam (gate keeper), is mandatory. The people participating in the sankirtana is not less than seven or in increasing odd numbers i.e 7, 9 or 11. They are; one eshei sakpa, one or two khombangton, one duhar, two pung yeibas and at least two pala machas. The lyrics of the sankirtana were earlier sung in Brajabali. But now-e-days they are sung in archaic Manipuri language. The sankirtana is accompanied by the musical instruments pung and kartal only. For the shradha ceremony the khonghambam ritualistically brings the spirit to the arangbham who takes it to the kirtan mapu, the hosting priest. The kirtan mapu takes the spirit inside the sankirtana and places it in the ghot, which is placed in the middle of it. The concept is to invite the soul (pret-atma) to listen the jugal milan for the eternal peace.

When the sankirtana is about to end the kirtan mapu enters the sankirtan and he sends the soul back to the Sri Charana through the different sacred places of the Hindus like Nabadwipdham, Puri and Brindaban, Baikunthadhram etc. He dictates the names of these sacred places and others shout victory on it. This is called naam thingatpa. (The researcher was a participant observer on the rituals following the death of his uncle named Ng. Harkumar Singh, at Guwahati in December 2009.)

A marked difference could be observed in the performance of death ceremony among the Apokpa/Sanamahi Meiteis, who follow their traditional ways. In contrast to the thirteenth day ritual of the Vaishnavite Meiteis, the Apokpa/Sanamahi Meiteis observe it on the eighth day, following the cleaning and purifying the house on the seventh
day. The *maibaren* (head of *maibas*) performs the duties of the priest and 3 or 5 aged persons called *ahan*, who are the core members of the sect, use to sit to look after the affairs. In case of the *Apokpa/Sanamahi* Meiteis the soul is sent back for the heavenly abode and eternal peace through the holy places of Manipur. The *maibaren* chants the names of the holy places.

### 3.8 Religion of the Meiteis:

Though the Meiteis were believed to have been animists, they also have the concept of the existence of a Supreme Being. They know Him with different names such as, *Ipung-Loinaiba-Sidaba Mapu* (Lord of the Universe), *Atiya Maru Shidaba*, meaning the Immortal God, *Shoraren* (the God of Heaven) and *Shidaba Mapu* (Immortal Owner). He is the Creator, Impersonal and Absolute. He is believed to be omnipresent and omnipotent.

He is also believed to be above of all gods and goddesses and have created the whole universe. This concept of a Supreme God came from a long and complex process of evolution in the Meitei traditional belief. The diverse traditional belief enabled them to develop a concept of polytheism.

According to Parrat, this Supreme God is also believed to be embracing the whole universe as a boundless envelope. He is the only everlasting God, who alone remains when everything disappears (Parrat, 1980). The Meiteis believe that the worship of other gods and goddesses is worth worshiping Him because they all are his manifestations.

The Meiteis had their own elaborate religious tradition before they became the followers of Vaishnavism. They worshipped many gods in the form of natural objects and mythical gods. Hodson supports the idea that the Meiteis were animists when he says, “We are justified in holding them (Meiteis) to be still animists” (Hodson, 1908).
Hindu deities are worshipped by the Meiteis. The term *lai* (god) is used generally to cover all the categories of god. The pre-Hindu deities are broadly divided into two, viz. *yum-lai* (household gods) and *umang-lai* (gods of the abode).

However, Parratt (1980) broadly classified *lai* into four groups:

(i) *Ancestors* which were believed to have had a human existence at some point in the past. Examples of these are Pakhangba and Poireiton.

(ii) Important *lai* associated with one particular *yek*.

(iii) The domestic deities known as *yumlai*, which are worshipped in every family.

(iv) Tutelary deities, i.e. *lais* connected with particular places or areas. There are various places in Manipur which are regarded as sacred. These are often hills, which are associated with a particular deity. Examples are hills in Moirang and Nongmaiching hills are associated with Ningok Ningthou and later on identified with Siva after the advent of Vaishnavism.

Everything pertaining to the religious realm Manipuri language is preceded by the word *lai* such as *laishang* (temple of God), *laipham* (place of gods), *laining lambi* (ways to reach god), *laipao* (message of god) etc. as it was also observed by Brara (1998). In contrast to Parrat's classification of *lais* she broadly classified the *lais* into three groups – i. Directional deities, ii. Household deities and iii. Ancestral deities. Apart from the household deities and Ancestral deities she described the directional deities as follows:

(a) *Wangburen or Wangpurel* resides in water. He is the guardian of the southern part of Manipur. He is depicted as a deity riding a
black tiger, whose anger and terror personified. He sends floods and creates havoc. He is worshipped with great care. Gold necklaces and sexual indulgence is strictly forbidden during his worship (haraoba). His main temple is at Sugnu on the bank of the Imphal River.

(b) *Koubru* is the god of the north-west direction and worshipped annually by the king with the sacrifice of goat’s sheep’s etc, in order to avoid famine. His temples are located in the *Loi* village of Sekmai and Phayeng.

(c) *Nongpok Ningthou* is the guardian of the eastern direction and over the years He has been the central deity of the *lai haraoba* festival.

(d) *Thanjing* is the god of the south-west direction. His temple is at Moirang.

(e) *Marjing* is the protector of the north-eastern direction and is believed to be the protector of animals. The Meitei polo (*sagol kangei*) and hockey (*kangei*) are traced to him. People worship him by offering a *kanjei* (stick) and a *kangdrum* (ball) when any animal in their house falls sick. (Brara, 1998)

The above mentioned directional gods are worshipped by the Meiteis of Assam only on the occasion of *lai haraoba*. Although different authors give different classification of *lais*, ultimately they fall under the two broad heads viz. *yumlais* and *umanglais*.

**3.9 Vaishnavism and the Meitei Society:**

The Hindu concept of ‘Divine Kingship’ was indeed what Pamheiba (Garibniwaz) needed to legitimize his rule in Manipur. Further, since Hinduism represented a more progressive ideology, it had attracted the
attention of many people though it certainly did not grow unopposed. Along with the destruction of many traditional *lais* and burnt many religious scriptures, Garibniwaz took up a number of measures to popularize the new religion in Manipur. He ordered to discontinue all the ceremonies and rituals of the old Meitei faith and they were substituted by the Hindu ceremonies and rituals. It is believed that with the advice of Santidas Goswami (popularly known as Santidas Gossain), the king destroyed the image of Sanamahi. As a result of this, it was believed that, the king's son and wife were seriously ill. The king was perplexed. All the advice and rituals performed by the Hindu priest for their recovery was in vain. At last the king requested the Meitei *maiba*, known as Moirang Lalhanba, to cure his wife and son. On the advice of the *maiba*, the king re-installed the image of Sanamahi and the prince and the queen were recovered. During his reign the *Kirtibasi Ramayan* and the *Mahabharata* were translated from Bengali to Meitei language by his court poet Angom Gopi. The ideas of the *Mahabharata's* Manipur and the history of Chitrangada's descendant were established in a most ingenious manner.

King Bhagyachandra further consolidated Vaishnavism in Manipur but he, however, continued to encourage the ancient gods and used to worship Sanamahi, the traditional family deity (Lokendra, 1991. op.cit). He dedicated his life to Vaishnava religious works. During his reign, Gaudya Vaishnava religion was highly developed in Manipur. In November (in the Meitei calendar month of *Hiyangei*) 1779, on a Sunday, the King introduced *Rasa Lila* for the first time in Manipur at *Langthaban* palace, which is considered as one of the most important contribution of the Meiteis to Hinduism. In 1780 he installed the image of Shree Shree Bijoy Govindajee. During his reign, Chinglen Nongdren Khomba introduced *sansenba* (*rakhal/gouda lila*), about the childhood play of the Lord Krishna. Further conversion was also continued during the reign of Chandra Kirti Maharaj (1850-86). During his time, the
annual festival of the god Nongpok Ningthou was converted into Baruni Mahadev festival.

A number of books were also written in the 18th and 19th centuries to establish the Meitei's connection with the kiratas of the Mahabharata and other ancient Indian literature. This trend was further continued in the first half of the 20th century. The allegorical book called Meitei puran Bijoy Panchali was written during the reign of Bhagyachandra. Pandit Phurailatpam Atombapu Sharma published his book entitled Hari Mayi (1930) describing Manipur as the original home of the Aryans. Many such books have already been mentioned in Chapter 1. Further the consolidation was made by changing the names of mountains, rivers, places of Manipur such as Nongmaijing mountain into Nilkantha Giri, Koubru mountain into Kumara Parbat, Kongba river into Gayabi Ganga, Chingoi river into Uttarbahini Ganga, Pungseng Ikon lake into Bindu Sorobar, Loktak lake into Lakshmi beel, Lammangdong into Bishnupur, Shingjamie into Nilachal Kshetra, and Mongba Hanba temple into Mahabali temple. The names of the Meitei Kings were also given Sanskrit names, such as – Nongda Laien Pakhangba (33 AD) into Jyonista, Khuiyoi Tompok (154-264 AD) into Kemchandra, Taothingmang (264-364 AD) into Jalgatya Singha, Naethingkhong (663-763 AD) into Nilamani Singha, Khagemba (1597-1652 AD) into Khogendra Singha and so on.

Shakespear observes, “Manipur figures as a Hindu state in the list of the Feudatory states of India, and Hinduism is the State religion, but when we have said this we have by no means stated the whole case, for alongside of Hinduism they are the worshippers of the umanglais (forest gods) and various other distinctly non-Hindu cults, which are practiced by good Hindus as well as by those who have not yet abandoned the faith of their forefathers. As a matter of fact even the best Hindus in Manipur, except perhaps a few of the most holy Brahmans, cannot be said to have
abandoned the ancient faith; rather, they accepted the Hindu pantheon in addition to the old gods of their own country.” (Shakespear, 1913, op.cit.)

McCulloch observed that the hold of the Hinduism among the Meiteis was at a superficial level, it was 'professed not from the conviction but because it (was) a fashion'. In fact the brand of Hinduism that the Meitei practices had some unique local variations and it represented a blending of various elements of traditional Meitei religion and Vaishnavism. While there was an increasing popularity of the worship of many Hindu mainland gods and goddesses there were also an equally strong hold of the traditional gods of the Meiteis (McCulloch, 1857). He further wrote, “Children upto 10 to 12 years of age eat every sort of food without regard to Hindu notion of purity and impurity...The early marriage of Hinduism are not approved of... and never take place”. (ibid)

The Meitei culture and religion is much similar with the Burmese and the Japanese. Most Japanese follow Buddhism and Shinto which is the pre Buddhist religion. It is believed that there are no written rules to Shinto, which makes it very flexible. While Buddhism is more organized, it is also relatively flexible. This is why Japanese can comfortably adopt both Buddhism and Shinto into their lives without conflict (Buddhists argued that some of the Shinto kami were Buddha’s incarnations, thus helping to close the divide). The resemblance is closest in the case of Burma, for there, as in Manipur, only one conversion has taken place. The state religion, in Burma is Buddhism, and in Manipur Vaishnavism, existing side by side with the more ancient faith. As a simple matter of fact, it is undeniable that the propitiating of the nuts (traditional deity of the Burmese) is a daily concern to the lower class Burmese, while the worship at the pagoda is only thought of once a week.

Similarly, the Meiteis, although most of them profess Vaishnavism and are strict in observing many of its customs. Unlike the nuts the
umanglais of the Meiteis enjoy better position for they are officially recognized and some of them receive tax-free lands for their maintenance, and are also honoured as the Hindu gods. Each set of divinities has its own ministers. Krishna and the other Hindu gods are served by Brahmins, while the local gods have their own priests and priestesses, known as maiba and maibi. As a Hindu the Meitei calls on the Brahmin on occasions of births, marriages, and deaths, and observes the Hindu festivals, but in sickness he consults the maiba and he worships the gods of hills and rivers of his country as his forefathers did before him (ibid).

In this context, it is worthy to refer Lokendra Arambam (2008) who used the term Meiteinisation of Hinduism rather than Hinduisation of Meiteis. He differs with the point of Sanskritisation of the Meitei as observed by some scholars. He further adds that he used the term Meiteinisation of Hinduism as a concept on the strength of the indigenous culture, which did not indicate total surrender of the society to the higher religion, but used the higher culture for indigenous needs of the day. There is no massive re-orientation of social and cultural forms as seen in the Hindu-Meitei society today. (Arambam, 2008)

In the similar pattern Brara observed that, even though the new religion succeeded in diluting, and sometimes even disintegrating, the rites and rituals pertaining to the traditional faith, a few Hindu rites and rituals were also adopted and incorporated. Yet in the event of bringing a child to this world, and sending the soul of the being back to heaven, the required rituals were and still are conducted by the maibas and maibis. All the other intermediate rites of passage are influenced by Vaishnavism, which nevertheless retained some of the traditional cultural characteristics. With new elements incorporated and old elements modified, the rites and rituals pertaining to this society evolved as ‘Meitei-Hindu rituals’ rather than just Hindu rituals. (Brara, 1998, op.cit)
It can be observed from the above account that the traditional religion of the Meiteis could not be eroded in spite of the king’s repressive measure to adopt Vaishnavism. So the king and his few wise men synthesized the new religion with the traditional religion. The concept of Vaishnavism has a different form when it came to Manipur as described by Lokendra Aramabam as *Meiteinisation of Hinduism and Meitei-Hindu rituals* by Brara. It is further supported by the fact that, in every Meitei household, a small area is reserved for their traditional god *Sanamahi* irrespective of their religion.

3.10 *Aani, a Social evil of the Meitei society in Assam:*

Since the inception, social conflicts happened to be a part of the human society. This conflict may arise due to quarrel between two persons, families or groups. In other words, a minor cause may be the root of a conflict which may later on lead to groupism and turn into a serious socio-political conflict. In the earlier days, the division of the society into different groups having different outlook and opinions was a common scenario in the Hinduised Meitei society of Assam which is commonly known as *aani* system. *Aani* literally means division in the society as a result of quarrel, differences of ideologies, and differences of opinion. This is mainly due to the development of Brahmanical institutions and the tussle of Brahmins to take hold of priesthood. This word has an adverse affect in the Meitei society which raises its ugly head time and again leaving the members of the society in acute crisis in the overall social life of the Meiteis. But this *aani* system is found never existed before Hinduisation nor does it exist among the Apokpa/Sanamahi Meiteis, who have revived their traditional culture.

*Aani* was known to be existed mainly in two levels – *leikai* level and in *leipak* level. *Leikai* level *aani* basically refers to the village level. A village was generally divided into two or three groups such as *mamang leikai* (upper part of the village), *mayai leikai* (middle part of the village)
and *maning leikai* (lower part of the village). The interaction between any two groups was strictly banned in any occasion, whatever important it might be. Most interestingly one group might have good terms with the other groups at a time. As such they used to take the opportunity to be the mediocre. *Aani* system in the true sense had a great social implication in the Vaishnavite Meitei society. Every Meitei village has a Vaishnavite Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu temple with a Brahmin family as *purohit* of the temple. He performs and guides all the rites and rituals of the social area in which he is the *purohit* on the payment of *dakshina* in the form of cash or on the *jajamani* system. The *aani* system divides the whole village into fractions and creates the necessity of a separate *purohit* for the separate groups concerned. As a result the importance of the presence of Brahmins increased. In cases of unavailability of a *purohit* locally, a Brahmin from even any other far flung places had been invited to stay in the village as *purohit* by providing the facility of his dwelling free of cost, with a Sri Chaitanya temple duly built by the donation of the group.

*Aani* often took the shape of a *leipak aani* when any quarrel, differences of opinions or ideas, supporting or not supporting on a particular issue happened in the village level. Interaction or development of any kind of relation with one another was prohibited. Even the relationship between the near and dear ones could not escape from its cruel hands. Even death could not bring the two groups in one platform. Any member who defied it was excommunicated from the concerned group. So he either lived on the fate or take refuge in other groups. However, this has a territorial limitation. *Aani* of a particular territory, as for instance, in Jaribon or the Meitei society in Hailakandi would not have its affect on the Meiteis living in other parts like Lakhipur, Sonai or in Silchar. However, *aani* within a particular *sagei* had its affect on the entire *sagei* irrespective of the place where he or she lived.
Meiteis have witnessed a number of *aani* in different periods due to different reasons, major or minor. In the early years of 1980s, the Meiteis of Jaribon had experienced one major *aani* which brought the entire Jaribon Meiteis into deadlock. A Brahmin named *Phurailatpam* Gojendra Sharma had eloped a Meitei girl who happened to be his *sevak* (a boy or a girl who takes *diksha* to Vaishnavism from a Brahmin is called *laiming lauba* and becomes the *sevak* of the Brahmin). This incident wrought havoc in the Meitei society of Jaribon. Such a relationship between Guru and *sevak* was not approved and accepted. Hence, he was excommunicated by his uncle *Phurailatpam* Chand Mohan Sharma. Many groups of people as supporters and opponents of the incident came up later on. On the other hand, Ramu Sharma, another uncle of Gojendra Sharma, who was also a close associate of the *Ningthem* (*leipak mapu*) Gulap Sana, stood in favour of his nephew Gojendra Sharma. As such *Phurailatpam* Brahman *sagei* was broken up into two *aani* groups and in no time, it took the form of *leipak aani* with their supporters and opponents and ultimately resulted into the division of the Jaribon *leipak* into two. The group formed by Chand Mohan Sharma came to be known as *Brahma sabha* and the other group under Ramu Sharma with the support of the *leipak mapu* Gulap Sana came to be known as *Kshetri sabha*. The villages of Mirirgul, Lawat, Nalubag, Lairengkhun, Khetrikhun and a portion of Laishramkhun stood for *Brahma sabha*. On the other hand, Thingomkhun, Gwalipar, Bhatrigram, Jalampur, Konung Leikai, Bamon Leikai, Laihouopokpi, Madaripar, Vetlapar, Chengbil, Lala and a portion of laishramkhun had strongly become the supporters of *Kshetri sabha*. This *aani* was reported to be continued for seven years. (Information provided and narrated by Sri Nilabapu Sharma, aged 85, from Leihoupokpi in Hailakandi district).

It is very interesting to note that as a strict prohibition law was developed between the two groups, professional *kirtonias* (persons who profess for *sankirtana*) were confined only to their concerned group and hence the
new and the 'not so popular' ones also got a platform for exposure. In between the two groups the *Kshetri sabha* had a strong foothold since it had acquired the support of the *laipak mapu*. On the other hand the *Brahma sabha* nominated a well known *muktier* from Lawat, Sri Thambou Singha as *leipak mapu* and was made the nominal head of the *Brahma sabha*.

In 1986-87 there witnessed a change. In a marriage ceremony at Mirirgul, an important member of the *Kshetri sabha* named W. Tolenjao Singha, who was an influential *muktier* from Leihoupokpi, attended the same since it was a marriage function of his close relative. This incident caused a disturbance in the *Kshetri sabha*, and arranged a meeting at Leihoupokpi. They summoned Tolenjao Singha in the meeting with a show cause. He simply replied that it was unavoidable on his part. This could not satisfy the leaders of the *Kshetri sabha*. After this the *Kshetri sabha* excommunicated him. Tolenjao Singha was upset with the treatment of the *Kshetri sabha* leaders towards him. He then decided to end this division in the society and formed yet another group called *mayai leipak* (which means middle *leipak*). This group also gained yet another collection of supporters who were the victims of *aani* and wanted to set themselves free. They had a different opinion from the previous two and had free access to both. The formation of *mayai leipak* weakened both the *Brahma sabha* and *Kshetri sabha* and many members started open criticism of the heinous system. Finally in 1987 the *aani* which lasted for about seven years came to an end in a meeting at Thingomkhun. (ibid)

Another *aani* was witnessed in the same degree when one Nongthombam Naba Singha of Lala eloped a widow from the same *yek*. Since marriage between *yeks* is strictly prohibited in the Meitei society, it also brought chaos among the Meiteis of Jaribon in the form of *aani*. Initially the Nongthombam *sagei* was divided into two, one in support of Naba Singh
and the other opposed him which resulted into leipak aani and it continued for nearly 5 years. Finally the aani came to an end with the suicide of Naba Singha. (Information provided by N. Nityai Singha aged 76, B.T Road, Lala).

In recent times an existing aani is witnessed in a village called Boaljur near Silchar which originated from an appointment of a contractual teacher in a school of the village. The conflict arose when a section of people wanted appointment of a local candidate while the authority, supported by another section of villagers, appointed another candidate from outside the village on overall merit basis. The aani is still continuing and the village is divided into two prominent groups.

This system acted upon the Meitei society of Assam with strong prohibition rules and regulations made by the group leaders. The dos and don’ts of the system brought about nothing good but breaking of hearts among the relatives of the two groups. If a daughter’s family after marriage is in a different group from that of the parents, she is not allowed to visit her parental house for any purpose. She is prohibited even in unavoidable occasions like birth, death or marriage. These prohibitions led to physical and mental tensions among individuals or groups. Therefore, the aani system could be considered as a social evil which was prominently prevailing in the Meitei society of Assam. At present, the aani system is decreasing its influence with strong reactions from the younger generations, who are, otherwise influenced by the revivalist movement and modern education. This system, however, is also found in the Meitei society of Manipur in a different variation. Instead of aani they know it as bamon haidokpa., unlike the Meitei society of Assam, it is prevalent only in the leikai or village level in Manipur.
3.11 The Traditional Meitei dwelling House:

Manipuri society has been developed pre-dominantly in rural set-up. It generally makes its habitat near water bodies that may be a lake or a river. In the areas where there are no such water bodies they use to dig large community ponds for the entire locality. In the Barak valley region of Assam we come across families having large private ponds which are the markers of how rich the family is.

The Meiteis follow their own method of construction of their house called yumsharo\(^{15}\). The traditional Meitei dwelling house is known as yumjao\(^{16}\), which is a rectangular ground plan enclosed by four walls and built on the center of the plot called yumpham. In earlier days, they used to make the four walls out of bamboo splinters and wooden poles placed vertically. The side walls were plastered over by a mixture of mud, cow dung and rice straws which were cut in very small size. The framework of the roof was made of wood and bamboo with two slopes on the north and south. These were tied together by ropes prepared from jute and the roof was thatched by a kind of dried wild grass called ee. It is important to note that a traditional Meitei house must be constructed facing eastward. Therefore, the length of the house runs from east to west which gives them the right direction for morning prayer because the Meitei system suggests that a person should face the east at the time of prayer and they bow down to pray the rising sun (numit tha khurumba) after getting up in the morning.

A traditional Meitei house is generally divided in four divisions or parts set in a row. However the size of the house depends upon the means of the family. A portion of the easternmost part of the house is left open from the front which is called mangon\(^{17}\). It is a spacios area and used for

\(^{15}\) yum = house, sha = construct, rol = method.

\(^{16}\) yum = house, jao = big.

\(^{17}\) mangon = varandah.
sitting and working for the members of the family and also serves as a sitting place for the visitors. The right side is called phamen which is strictly meant for the head of the family and next to him is the place for other male members of the family. The left side is called mangsok or nakiha, which is the place for the women folk of the family. In general the typical Meitei loom called iyong or iyongkham is placed in this corner, as weaving is a part and parcel of the Meitei way of life.

Next to the mangon, the rectangular house is partitioned into different compartments with a passage in a raw in the middle of the house. The main door of the house is called thongjao\(^\text{18}\). Except the mangon the other portions are called imung in general. The first portion of the imung is meant for the unmarried sons and daughters occupying the right and the left side of the compartment respectively. If one of the boys is married, the unmarried ones get shifted to an extension on the northern side of the house and the compartment is left for the privacy of the newly married couple. The second portion of the imung is a spacious area called phamjao-\(\text{ka}\)\(^\text{19}\), strictly meant for the head of the family. The right side is for the father and the left side is for mother. However if the father dies before his wife (mother), then she is shifted to the right side.

The last portion of the imung is divided into two parts. The northern portion or the left corner is called chakhum\(^\text{20}\) and the southern portion is the place where the granary is erected which is called kei or kot where phau or rice grain is kept which is worshipped as keirungba. The south west corner, next to granary, is occupied by Sanamahi and hence this corner is called Sanamahi kachin\(^\text{21}\) who is accompanied by Leimaren Sidabi on His left side. Sanamahi occupies this corner of every Meitei household who is also the supreme God of the Meitei pantheon. The middle portion of this part of the house is the family dining area. A small

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\(^{18}\) thong = door, jao = big.

\(^{19}\) pham = bed, jao = big, ka = room.

\(^{20}\) chakhum = chak + chapham, chak = rice, chapham = place to eat.

\(^{21}\) kachin = corner.
fire place called *phunga* is kept on the right side of the kitchen. It is also called *Phunga Lairu*, which carries a tremendous religious significance and considered an inauspicious to let the fire get extinguished. Hence, fire is preserved with husk and other materials. It is believed that *Imoinu*, the Goddess of wealth is present in *phunga Lairu*.

In the earlier periods the house was constructed with the helping hands of the villagers, who were guided by one skilled person hired by the host from or outside the village who is a professional. The house is constructed to ensure the happiness of the family and strictly follow the methods prescribed by the Meitei *Yumsarol*. When the construction of the house is completed a ceremony called *sang-kaba*\(^22\) is celebrated on an auspicious day which is fixed by an expert astrologer. An elaborate ritual is performed by a Brahmin in case of the Vaishnavite Meiteis and an *amaiba* in case of the *Apokpa/Sanamahi* Meiteis, which is followed by a feast. The Brahmin or the *amaiba* offers sweets, betel-nuts to the fire place of the newly constructed house by chanting of mantras. However, for the poor's there is no compulsion of the feast. For the next five consecutive days nothing can be moved and removed from their place and all the family members should stay all the five days and nights in the newly constructed house after they have entered into it. *Yumsharol*, the Meitei rule for the construction of houses is now available in written form. The basic Meitei ways such as the importance of direction, places of worship, cooking and dining places etc. are strictly followed although they make modifications, beautification and extensions in the other parts of the architectural design. (The researcher gathered the above information though participant observation)

\(^22\) *sang* = house, *kaba* = entering.
3.12 The Meitei marriage lu-hongba

Meaning and significance - lu and hongba two words are compounded luhongba (marriage). The literal meaning of lu/means root or origin and hongba means change. After marriage a girl changes her yek and takes the yek (clan name) of that of the boy to whom she is married with the agreement of the two clans and with the consent of both the girl and the boy and their parents.

There are two types of marriages

1. The arranged marriage (haina-singnaba) and

2. Eloped marriage (chenba).

3.12.1 The arranged marriage (haina-singnaba):

If the marriage is arranged by the parents of the boy and the girl there are processes to be followed:

1. Mou yengba is the informal proposal of a girl by the parents of a boy or any other representative. If the girl and her parents express willingness to the proposal it is followed by mangon kaba.

2. Mangon kaba is the formal visit by the mother of the boy with two or three of her companions to see the girl. It is the first contact of the parents of the boy and the girl formally to communicate relevant talks if it is acceptable according to their respective yeks.

3. Marriage is finalised in the family level through a formal visit by three or four male members from the boy’s side. It is called yathang-thaba.
4. *Wa-roi-pot-puba* is the function in which the marriage agreement is made public. A group of people from the boy’s side, consisting of a minimum of five to seven males and females formally visit with a large amount of fruits and sweets and is distributed to the friends, relatives and neighbours of the girl’s side who are assembled there and chats exchanging thoughts and ideas. This is the first public interaction between the two sides.

5. The final step before the marriage function is *heijing-pot-puba* or *heijing kharai puba*. It is usually performed one or two days ahead of the marriage function in earlier days, however, it is performed now a days on the same day of the marriage according to the convenience of the two families. It is said that without this particular function the process of the marriage is incomplete as it bears great significance to the whole life of the bride and the groom.

This function of *heijing-pot-puba* is held in still bigger assembly of relatives, friends and people of the locality of both the families. Women dress nicely with traditional Meitei attire called *maron naiba* and *moirang kaba* and men are also dressed up with white *dhoties* locally called *faijom* and white *kurta* called *pumyat*. They offer special items of fruits to the deities of the two clans such as *heigru* (*ama*), *heining* (*a type of fruit*), *heijrang* (*a type of fruit*), banana *changthokpa* (counted pairs in odd numbers), white sugarcane, betel nut with betel leaf (*pana tangla*) and *lashing* (*cotton*). These things are put together in a *phiruk* or *phingaruk* (decorative container made of bamboo with cover). One *phiruk* contains fruits for ancestor deities and another for *lamlai*, (local deities). One container is earmark for *Lainingthou Sanamahi* and *Ima Leimarel Shidabi*. In this occasion the bride is gifted with special items of bridal decoration which is known as *kujaba*. A lot of eatables mainly
sweet items and special items for the bride and her friends are brought as agreed upon before the function.

At least five phiruks are arranged and carried on heads in a line one following the other by beautifully dressed up ladies called laipot pubis for some distance from the gate of the residence of bride even if these things are brought by vehicles from long distance. Other fruits and sweets are also carried in a large quantity. The party of the groom use to sit on the east and the north of the mandap while the invitees of the bride side use to take their seats on the south and the west. After the assembly has taken their proper places fathers of both the bride and the groom come up in the mandap and make public announcement of the marriage to the society. Following the announcement the sweets are distributed in large quantities for celebration. A well decorated circle around the centre of the mandap is demarcated as mandali for the wedlock. Before the wedding starts the Brahmin, the hosting priest (maiba in case of the Apokpal/Sanamahi Meitei marriage) performs puja and offer the items brought by the parents of the groom and pray to the deities for enabling to perform the marriage ceremony without any obstacles as well as for the wellbeing and long prosperous life of the couple.

At the end of the heijing-pot the groom and his party who stayed back in some prearranged place outside the bride’s compound is invited formally to the bride’s residence which is known as bor-barton tauba. A younger brother of the girl with an elderly person goes with a specially arranged betel nut with leaf called pana-tangla and lei-chandan (traditional form of invitation by flower and chandan) bound nicely by a white cloth while the groom wearing pheijom (dhoti) and white pumyat (kurta) waits for the coming of the formal invitation. He is offered with the lei-chandan and then the boy (the younger brother of the bride) puts a white garland around the neck of the groom. He then takes out the well prepared pana-
tangla, place it before the groom and bows down making a formal request to come to the ceremony.

After getting the invitation a prayer is made as a ready-to-start ceremony called *bor yatra touba*. The groom sits with his legs crossed facing the east on a white seat of cloth arranged on the ground. A brass pot called *iratphu* and a mirror with a stand is placed just in front of him facing towards him so that he can see his image in the mirror. The priest or the *maiba* performs the *puja* and finds out an auspicious moment to start (*yatra touba*). When all the formalities are completed the groom starts accompanied by one of his friends called *bor-senaba* (companion of the groom), holding an umbrella upon his head. They are followed by all his friends accompanied by a band party. On the day of marriage the groom wears a white turban called *koyet* as the head wear. Above the traditional dress he also puts on a full-length white *chaddar* called *inaphi* covering around the whole body. An umbrella called *pe*, a nice *chaisel* (a broad mouthed brass utensil), a mirror (used at the time of *bor-yatra touba*) must be taken along with him.

The *laipot pubis* (women who carry *phingaruks*) go in the forefront of the procession with the *phingaruks* on their heads serially as follows:

1. *chengluk-nungshang phiruk* (mainly filled with raw rice),

2. *apok-asha phiruk* (another container filled different kinds of fruits),

3. *lam-lai/umanglai phiruk* (container with fruits and sweets made of rice),

4. *sagei-lai-phiruk* (container filled with fruits and vegetables for the family deity of the family of the bride),

5. *mitam nga phiruk* (container to carry a fish called *ngamu*)
After the procession has started three elderly men from the groom's side go ahead to inform about the arrival of the groom for the ceremony. Accordingly a sankirtana starts in the mandali. When the groom reaches the gate of the bride's house, he is welcome in a prescribed manner. Three long slender bamboo sticks are wrapped with cotton, up to a certain length from the top and are soaked in ghee. Holding the three sticks by three males in front of the groom, the tips are joined and lit with fire. The fire is supported by throwing dhoop powder upward to brighten the flame. In the meantime at least three female members including the mother of the bride throw flowers mixed with kabok aphaba (rice corn flower) for three times towards the groom's head when the groom still bows down. The significance of it is the driving off the evil spirits and purification of the groom with fire. The mother of the bride along with other near relatives offers the groom with pan which is called kwa lanba. This entire process is known as bor/daman-okpa (receiving the son-in-law).

The bor-senaba or the companion of the groom guides the groom to pay obeisance to the sankirtana and proceeds on to the north east side of the mandap which is specially meant for the groom's side. The groom accompanied by the bor senaba along with other friends sits on a well placed white seat on the ground facing towards the sankirtana. The mirror is also kept open in front of him and the companion always takes care of everything about him, waiting for the auspicious moment to enter in to the sankirtana in the mandali.

The mother of the groom sits over a white cloth specially arranged for her, on the north-west corner just outside the mandali, facing straight to the groom when the ceremony takes place. She stays still in her seat and is not allowed to move. The father of the groom occupies the second place of the first row of the northern-side of the mandap. The women folk of the bride side sit on the southern side. By this time the bride is
dressed up inside the house by a trained person. In early days the bride used to wear the beautifully embroidered *phanek* called *maron naibi*. She wears special ornaments around the neck, arms, wrist and fingers and headwear called *kajenglei* and feathers of *langmei, nongningkhoi* (kind of birds). When Vaishnavism was adopted the bride started wearing *potloi* (the dance costume worn by Radha during *Rasa Lila*) in addition to traditional ornaments like *marei heibe-mapal, khuji pok-chaobi* along with other regular ornaments.

After performing a rite by the priest with the *iratphu* (ghot) and *sakyeng mingsel* in front of the bride, she waits for the auspicious moment to come out from the house for the ceremony in the *mandali*. The bride is then led to the *mandali* by one of her friends or a lady, who knows the procedure and hired for the purpose, guides the bride during the entire ceremony.

The Meitei marriage symbolizes and connotes the meaning of creation. For example, *bor* (the groom) stands for *sun* (*Lainingthou Sanamahi*) who always sits on the south west (*santhong*) in every Meitei house and the *kanya* (bride) represents the earth (*malem*) who is always on the northeast (*chingkhei*) direction. The white *turban* wears by the groom symbolizes the white rays of the sun and the bride wears green blouse represent the greenness of the earth. The bride revolves round the groom seven times representing the revolution of the earth around the sun.

The most important part of the ceremony is the entrance of the groom in the middle of the *mandali*. The *luhongphal* (the rectangular wooden elevated seat) for the groom is placed on the south western side of the *mandali*, facing east. Below the middle of the seat is engraved with *malem-paphal* or symbol of throne by the priest. It is important to note that this custom is followed by both the *Sanamahi* Meiteis and the vaisnava Meiteis.
A red phirangji (woollen cloth) covers the seat. When the time comes the guide leads the groom and makes him bow down to Lainingthou Santhong altar in the sankirtan and touch the depicted throne. The groom then sits on the prepared seat followed by the purification and sanctification with raw-rice, flower and water.

The bride sits separately on the left-side of the groom facing her face towards the groom. She is also purified and sanctified in the same way and the yek-salai of the bride is changed to that of the groom ritualistically. She then bows down to her father by offering pana tangla(pan) and seek his blessings in heart for a long and happy married life. Then her right hand is put on the right hand of the groom and tie the two hands together by combination of seven threads called kush signifying the binding of the two souls of two different yek-salais together. A well prepared brass thali, called dan pukham, will be placed above the two bounded hands (since it is heavy a wooden or iron support is prepared these days). Related mantras are recited by the maibaren or the Brahmin with offerings of essential articles to the iratphu (ghot) by the father of the bride. This is called kanya dan touha. Prayers to seven ancestors/forefathers of the bride and the groom of both yek-salais will be carried out. The dan pukham is a typical and traditional convention of the Meitei society. It includes the following things;

(i) fine raw-rice filled the pukham (dish) with one good scented fruit (hiejrang)

(ii) chang thokpa laphoi (banana counted in odd numbers),

(iii) one whole coconut (yubi)

(iv) one pana tangla (betal-nut)

(v) three numbers of langthrei mapop (a kind of small herb which is a must in any Meitei ritual)
(vi) one *pheijom* (dhoti)

(vii) one stitched *inaphi* (*chadar*)

(viii) two pairs of *sing* (*gingers*)

(ix) two salt cakes and

(x) *sendai* (*money*).

There are changes in the number of articles now-a-days delimiting to some few unavoidable items. The articles of the *dan* will be arranged by the bride’s party. It indicates that the girl (bride) is introduced to the *yek-salai* of the groom from that day and they become husband and wife.

Another uniqueness of the Meitei marriage is the *ushil-mitam-thaba* (to send off two fishes locally called *ngamu* into the water) that has been brought from the house of the groom. This has to be performed while the two hands of the bride and the groom are tied together and holding the *dan* by them. This is done by three ladies two from the side of the groom and one from the side of the bride, who takes the two fishes to nearby pond or river to release them in water.

It symbolizes that the two fishes, representing the bride and the groom, would take the responsibility of the well-being of their married life and guards themselves from any harms and difficulties. It is believed that if the two go together on one side into the water, their life will be happy with love and that is why the movements of the two fishes are closely observed. However, now a days such rites with *ngamu* are replaced by coins as the value of fish because fishes found dead sometimes in case of marriage in distant places.

There is a convention of gifting money above the *dan*. Father of the bride or his representative will be the first man to offer it and all others follow
one by one from the side of the bride. When it is completed the dan is carried with much care by the bor sennaba and handed over to the mother of the groom who receives it with care by covering it with her sawl. When the wedding ceremony gets over it is put into a covered phiruk to be carried away to the house of the groom. This is called dan jaba.

An interesting episode is lei-koiba. The bride led by her guide revolves round the groom in a clockwise direction for seven times. At the end of every round the bride showers a handful of flowers over the head of the groom. In the last round she holds two garlands beautifully made of kind of white flowers (called kundo pareng) and puts both the garlands around the neck of the groom which is called lei hukpa and takes her seat on the left side of him on the same luhongphal. The groom then takes out one garland with the help of his guide and places gently around the neck of the bride. The couple then stands up with the ends of their cloth duly tied together into a knot by the priest.

The last part of the ceremony is known as kangsubi lannaba. Both the bride and the groom come out from the mandali together led by the bride to her house. When they are seated, the bride and the groom are given a kind of sweets called kangsubi (made of black seasame) and pana tangla (betel-nut with leaf) to both of them, to offer and exchange between them. When it is over the groom comes out of the house and bows down to the sankirtana until which the sankirtana cannot be closed. The ceremony ends with ngai -shen konnaba or embracing to each other between the parents of the bride and the groom with exchange of kwa pana tangla (betel-nut- with leaf).

After the whole ceremony is over it is followed by mau thinba (sending off the bride). There has been a convention of giving essential domestic articles for her daily use besides the weaving loom its accessories. These
things are called *aunpot*\(^\text{23}\) (gift). The importance of weaving in the Meitei socio-cultural life is indicated by the fact that when a bride starts for her husband's house she is preceded by a woman with a *tareng* (spinning wheel) carrying on her head as the first and primary item of *aunpot*. The bride enters her husband's house also with the woman carrying it in the forefront. Giving *tareng* as *aunpot* is a tradition while the other costly and luxurious items are present day additions.

When the bride reaches the groom's gate she is received with a worm welcome as it is done in case of welcoming the groom at the bridal residence. Then the mother of the groom with two other relatives receives the bride called *mou-okpa* from the center of the courtyard. She is embraced and let to pay obeisance to *Lainingthou Sanamahi and Ima Leimaren Shidabi* and finally takes her to the allotted room. The mother of the bride never accompanies her on this day which is considered a taboo. The marriage is followed by *mangani chakauba* on the fifth day. This is a feast arranged by the parents of the bride in which the family of the groom and their daughter is invited. This function is followed by yet another feast arranged by the parents of the groom, which is called *ngai khangnaba* on which the family members of the bride are invited. This function formally ends the ceremony.

### 3.12.2 Eloped Marriage or *chenba*:

In *chenba* or elopement system of marriage many omissions are witnessed in the formalities of the marriage. This system of marriage has also been in vogue in the Meitei society since time immemorial. In such a marriage a boy elopes a girl which is called *chenba*. The girl is then kept in a separate house generally in one of the relatives of the boy from a different *sagei*.

\(^{23}\) The *aunpot* is not like dowry system which is found in other Indian societies. If the parent of the bride is unable to afford *aunpot*, the relatives of the bride extend help. In some cases only the basic things which the bride will need in her husband's house is given.
On the next day the parents of the boy along with other three of four aged persons go to the girl’s house for formal information about the elopement which is called *pau hanba* in Assam and *pau haidokpa* in Manipur. The mother of the girl along with some ladies goes to the house where the girl is kept after elopement to ask the girl whether the elopement was taken place on her agreement. This is called *machin hangba*. If the girl has agreed upon it, the parents of both the girl and the boy fix a day for marriage. Most of the formalities are cut short in such marriages in the Meitei society of Assam while in Manipur all the formalities are observed. Generally such marriages take place in the groom’s house who arranges almost everything. The father of the girl does not go on the marriage if he disagrees with the elopement. In such cases he is represented by a near relative who performs the *kanyadan*. If no one is present from the girl’s side the parents of the groom then arrange a person generally from the boy’s maternal side to perform the *kanyadan*. After the marriage the parents of the bride invites the groom’s side for affiliation of the marriage. This is called *laukhatpa* and until this formality is observed the girl cannot visit her paternal house on any occasion. There is no fixed date for such formality. In case of disagreement by the girl’s parents on the elopement such formality may take years.

### 3.13 Marup System and The Meiteis participation in Economy:

The concept of *marup* is originated from Manipur. It is developed with a sense of extending help among the members of a group under certain rules imposed by the *marup*. It is not a profit making body. The word *marup*, meaning friendship, is more common among the women but even men do participate in it now a days. *Marup* is not just confined to the rural areas as many educated people in urban areas are also found to join into it. It is a group activity. *Marups* may evolve around birth, marriage or death ceremonies. Funds may be mobilized among *marups* for such
purposes. Likeminded people may form a marup and make monetary transactions. In some cases funds may be raised for marriage ceremonies by groups or else funds may be raised for purchasing commodities like refrigerator, motor cycle or for the construction of tin roofs for kutch houses. In some cases a group of twelve or fifteen members can raise funds for a marup and lend the money to different needy people. In such cases the marup members just act as trustees. Marup differs from the government and other self-help groups because in a marup the people are bridged through self-generated resources, leading to a kind of self-managed society.

Meitei kinship networks are created across the society leading to a firm base for social solidarity. This social solidarity is further reinforced through the formation of the marup institution. In spite of the availability of the banking facilities, the Meiteis enter into the marup or self-help system that involves significant amount of cash transaction. Marups are of various kinds and the transactions vary accordingly. In the most common system of marup, a group of people come together and contribute an equal amount of money to generate a fund for a particular period of time. For instance, it twelve persons contribute an amount of Rs. 5000/- for a period of twelve months on monthly basis, the total contribution of Rs. 60000/- will be received by a member generally on the lottery basis. In the next month the person who receives the amount through lottery will get an addition of a fixed amount of interest as decided by the marup from the first recipient along with the total contribution. Again the third recipient will get interest from the first two who had already received. As such the last member will get interest from eleven persons along with the same total contribution. After the last member receives the fund, the marup is closed down to start a new one. In such marups usually there is an organizer who initiates the process to include different members and maintain the records and arrange periodic meetings.
Singh (2009) writes: "The practice of marup is very common in Manipur. More than 90 per cent of the population is involved in some way in this system. It has become a household name in the Manipuri society. People from different age-groups and from different walks of life participate in the marup system. Inaccessibility to the formal financial services, slow growth and development of economy, non-availability of any well-organized industrial structure, and the landlocked and inaccessible geographical location of the State might be the real cause of such a large scale practice of the marup system in Manipur."

3.14 Weaving:

Meiteis are deeply sensitive and their unique pattern of life with inherent love of art is reflected in their festivals, dance and music. Their rich culture and tradition are also reflected in their costume, handloom textiles and in finer workmanship of handicrafts. Weaving in Meitei society is a time honoured occupation. Women undertake weaving as a part of their domestic chores. Traditionally, a loom is a part of each girl's aunpot. It is said that a Meitei woman grows up with weaving and she carries the weaving implements to her in-laws' house after marriage. Thus each Meitei house has at least one loom which is also a part of their basic household item.

Weaving is also associated with the social and a ritualistic activity from very early times. Textiles' weaving have played a pivotal role in the social and the economic life of the Meitei people throughout the ages. The art of weaving also has made the village community a self-contained one, which is a characteristic feature of the Meitei society too. The social functioning of the Meitei society is based on the code of personal relations and duties handed down from generation to generation. They do not take the execution of this craft as a compulsion but a sacred duty.
In Meitei lore, the weaving of textile appears as a replica of the cosmic process. During the dance of the creation, the male and female messengers of god (*maiba* and *maibi*) stimulate the sound of spinning and weaving. In other words, creation is a magnificent process of weaving to the cosmic being. It is a matter of great significance that in the traditional belief system of the Meiteis, the goddess of handicrafts (who is worshipped as *Leisembi*) taught the Meiteis the method of textile weaving as well as the mystique of the dance creation.

In the Meitei society weaving is exclusively the work of women, which is a part of their domestic chores. In fact, it is a primary qualification of every Meitei woman. This handloom industry is practically monopolized by women not only from the idea of economic necessity but also from the sense of their social custom. It is thus often said that Meitei women weave their dreams on their looms.

A Meitei girl is initiated with this art at a tender age, and throughout her life, she practices it. Not only she supplies clothing to her family members but also makes it a source of income of the family. It is said that the development of this industry by women is linked by the fact that the Meitei men were continuously engaged in wars, and women supplied them with uniforms and maintained their families from the income generated by selling hand woven products. Unfortunately, today due to the demands of modern society and living conditions, this traditional industry is facing a serious problem in terms of production, investment and market potential.

From the socio-cultural study of the various aspects of the Meitei people of Assam it is evident that they are a distinct group having their own socio-cultural identity. Almost in every aspect of their life, their indigenous tradition plays a pivotal role. It has been observed that every rites and rituals performed by the Vaishnavite Meiteis, although they are said to be performed in the Hindu way, may it be birth or death or else,
has got a marked difference from the ways which is performed by their other Hindu counterparts. Therefore a conclusion can rightly be drawn here that while the Apokpa/Sanamahi Meiteis perform every rites and rituals in their purely traditional way, the rites and rituals performed by the Vaishnavite Meiteis are also found to be their secret Meitei foundation embroidered with the newly found Vaishnavite ways.