Chapter-I

INTRODUCTION

Manipur is situated in the north east corner of India sharing an international boundary with Burma (Myanmar) in the east and part of the south and with the other national states such as Nagaland in the north, in the west by Assam and, Mizoram in the south. The state is enveloped by 20°4´ N and 25°41´ N latitude and 93°10´E and 94°50´E longitude.

Manipur which literal meaning is land of gems had been referred by various names such as Kangleipak, Poireipak and Meitrabak. No one knows with pinpoint accuracy when and why the name Manipur came to be used. However it is believed that in the early eighteenth century with the Meitei conversion into Hinduism, the name Manipur came to exist. In this trend O. Bhogeshwor Singh writes that the name Manipur was first introduced during the reign of King Garibniwaza (1709-48). Other names of Manipur which had mentioned in historical works are Mekhela and Meckley. Mekhela was deduced from the coin with the encryption ‘Garibniwaza Mekhaleshwor’ which was discovered by Mutua Bahadur. Mekhaleshwor means Lord of Mekhala or Mekhale. Meckley is found to mention in the treaty which was first signed between East India Company and Jai Singh, Raja of Manipur in 1762.

The geography of Manipur divided into two as (a) the hilly areas and (b) the centrally situated valley areas. The centrally situated valley of Manipur holds a strategic place historically and geographically. It covers an area of 2,238 sq.km. and 2567 feet high above the sea level. The oval shaped valley is regarded to be birth place of human civilization. Geographically the soils of the valley contain high proportion of clay. Geological Survey of had confirmed, by testing the soils of different part of Manipur valley, that the soil contain fair amount of plant food ingredients although nitrogen and phosphoric contents are not high\(^6\).

The hills of Manipur cover about ninety percent of the total land of the state. They are the part of Assam Burma Tertiary which stretches from north east corner of Assam to Cape Negrais in Burma. The latitude if the mountains vary from 2500 feet to nearly 10,000 feet above the sea level\(^7\). The mountain ranges, which are nine in numbers, are characteristically higher in the north than on the south, some important mountains in Manipur are Koubru, Mt.Tenipu, Sirohi peaks, Mt. Iso etc. The highest peak in Manipur is Mt. Tenipu which scaled 9824 feet above the sea level.

Drainage and River

The state of Manipur lies in the catchment area of two river system namely the Ganga Brahmaputra and the Chindwin Irrawadi. Ganga Brahmaputra carries the drainage of western part of the state. Barak and its


\(^7\) Sultan Ahmad Ansari, op. cit., p.14.
tributaries are the important rivers in this river system. Barak which is the largest river in the state raises in the northern ranges about 16.09 kms east of Mao and follows a south westerly course. In its course, it flows through Cachar valley and Sylhet (in Bangladesh) finally falls into the old bed of Brahmaputra near Bhairab Bazar. The important tributaries of Barak are Jiri, Tipai, Makru, Irang (biggest Tributary of Barak).

The rivers of Manipur draining into Chindwin Irrawadi system carry the drainage of the eastern half of the state including the central plain. Important rivers in this system are Imphal, Iril, Thoubal, Nambul etc. Among these rivers Imphal River holds a strategic place as it ‘does not fall into Loktak lake, since its bed is lower than the level of the lake, rather it receives the excess water of the lake’ by this process, the lake’s salinity is kept check and thus posses the property of fresh water lake.

Manipur’s valley was once covered with water. Eventually when this was dried up, the lower spots which remain with water formed the lakes. Manipur has a large number of lakes namely, Loktak pat, Waithou pat etc. Not only were these main lakes vanished due to siltation. As the name suggests, Keishampat, Porompat, Akampat, Lamphelpat which are at the heart of Imphal are once a lake.

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9 Sultan Ahmad Ansari, op. cit. p.17.
10 Pat means lake, Loktak pat is the largest freshwater lake not in Manipur but in the entire north east India.
Climate

Graced by nature the valley of Manipur has the privilege of attaining air condition throughout the year. The climate in the valley is far from torrid because her elevation above the sea-level is great. In the hills it gets cooler as one approach the higher areas but exception is found in Jiribam and Moreh areas of Manipur where the climate is extremely hot. It varies with the contour of the land. After closed observation it may be concluded that the climate of Manipur stands mid-way between the warm countries viz. Surma and Brahmaputra valleys and the hill towns like Shillong, Simala etc. The rainfall varies, irregular and starts from the middle of April and continues to October.\(^\text{11}\)

The difference of temperature between the valley and surrounding hills created an unpleasant atmosphere, providing dust rising winds during the months of March and April. Sometimes in the odd seasons when the rainfall is irregular floods or droughts occurred in some particular places. However, in the average, even in the rainy season the wind is “Zephorous and mild” Manipur is quite fortunate for having the sun as the only warmer of man and the altitude for giving cool which keeps man fresh.

Soil

There are three important varieties of soil in Manipur viz, Residual soil, transported soil and peat soil, residual soils are those found in the surrounding hills of the Imphal valley which are developed by the decomposition of the parent rocks. Transported soils are those alluvial soils which are brought down

by rivers and deposited on both banks during flood days. Thus alluvial soils are found in the Imphal valley and the Barak valley, while peat soils are found in the swampy low lying areas, where they develop themselves with the accumulation of the decayed flora. Since the fertility of soil is high, agriculture is successful shifting cultivation is practiced in the hills. It is estimated that the state has fifteen lakhs of bighas (about 5,00,000 acres) out of which ten lakhs have been utilized for cultivation of rice, wheat, mustard, maize and potato. Captain B.R. Pemberton writes, “the fertility of the soil is so great that crops generally prove most abundant”.  

Forests

Manipur is a unique land of forest covering in about all the hills with variety of trees. The favourable climate, adequate rainfall (74 -100 ) was covered with forest and swamps, but now it is denuded. The forest provided sustenance for the people for centuries in both valley and hills. They are also hunting ground of the animals. Since the commercialization of forests during the colonial period, the forests have fallen to the axe of the shifting cultivators and the avarice of the commercial extractors, thereby resulting to the denudation of the forest of Manipur. The unique speciality of the forest of Manipur is its beautification with various sweet scented orchids blooming throughout the year. Over and above this floral paradise on earth, multiple species of rare fauna attract not only the natives but also outsiders.

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The whole forest area of Manipur are included in the Himalayan system, Altitude played a potent ecological factor while classifying the various zones of a region, namely, i) Sub-montane zone ii) Montane or temperate zone iii) Sub-alpine and iv) Alpine.

S.C. Sinha classifies forest of Manipur in the three major groups i.e. Tropical montane, Sub-Tropical, Montane temperate.¹³ The forests of Manipur are great natural resources of the region. R.B. Pemberton, (1835) in the early x nineteenth century was amazed by the richness of the Manipur forest. He writes, “I know no spot in India in which the products of forests are so varied and magnificent but their utility is entirely local, as the nature of the country precludes the possibility of transporting to foreign markets …… The valley itself is practically free of forest although every village is surrounded by a grove of forest trees”.¹⁴ After half a century (1886) E.W. Dun saw the same extraordinary forest and came to know the effects of the climatic change on forest, agricultural practices, village settlement pattern and housing technology. He writes, “The climate at once rainy and temperate cover the hills in the western portion with thick forests and induces the inhabitants to grow rice, causes numerous rivers, streams and marshes, and encourage aquatic and water loving plants. Forests in the east are not thick as in the west. Oak replaces bamboo, firs for Nageshwar, a drier climate produced a lighter and different

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¹³ R.B. Pemberton, op. cit., p. 27.
¹⁴ E.W. Dun, A gazetteer of Manipur, Section on the Hill tribes of Manipur, op.cit., p.27.
kind of jungle. The villages in the valley are situated on the banks of the river or edge of the lakes so that every household has some water near it.\textsuperscript{15}

The People

The people of Manipur can be broadly classified into two groups namely (i) the Meitei and (ii) the Hill man. The Meiteis which inhabit in the valley of Manipur consist of seven salai or clan namely Ningthouja, Angom, Khuman, Moirang, Luwang, Chenglei, and Khaba Nganba. Originally ‘Meitei was during the establishment of Ningthouja dynasty by Pakhangba, to mean this clan or Dynasty and the ethnic and social groups who were politically and socially integrated within the suzerainty of the Ningthouja’.\textsuperscript{16} Later on the word is also extended to the other clan and used as synonym for the combination of seven clan.\textsuperscript{16} Historically the relationship of clans were not harmonious, all the time fighting for supremacy to tale a stronghold over the fertile valley of Manipur. Though the seven salais present a keen contest in the politics of Manipur we can discern even among then in a common origin.\textsuperscript{17}

In respect of origin of Meitei, Gangmumei Kabui rightly viewed that it is shrouded in mystery. Different scholars have given different views. Some important views which have subject to analysis till date are mention henceforth.

Aryan origin: Brahmins, royals and nobles of eighteenth century advocated the Meiteis have root to Aryan. This Aryan connection was an outcome of the

\textsuperscript{15} Gangumei Kabui, op.cit. p.15.
\textsuperscript{16} Dr. M. Kirti Singh, ‘Religious Development in Manipur in 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries’Imphal, 1980.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. p.13.
adoption of Hinduism by the ruling family and the people of valley in the eighteenth century and resultant claim of descent of the ruling dynasty from Babhruvahan, a scion of the Pandava hero, Arjuna of the Mahabharata.\(^{18}\)

However this theory is rejected by many historian and scholars such as Kabui, Horam Thumra, Bhattacharya Roy etc. They view that the place Manipur mentioned in Mahabharata must have situated somewhere in the south of Orissa and north of Chennai. It was nowhere near the place of the same name in Assam.\(^{19}\)

Kabui further argue that according to Sanamahi Laikan the name Manipur was first introduced during the reign of Garibniwaza in eighteenth century. Clearly it contradicts with the place mentioned in Mahabharata.

Mongoloid Origin: Another theory which is widely held by historians, writers and scholars are that Meiteis are originated from Mongoloid race. Saroj Paratt comments, ‘Physically the Meitei are mongoloid in appearance which suggests that their origin should be sought east’.\(^{20}\) Following the line of Mongoloid origin, B.H. Hodgson thought that the ethnic name Meitei was a combine appellate of Siamese ‘Tai’ and Kochin Chineese ‘Moy’ (Moy Tai = Moytai= Maoitai= Meitei) and the Meitei belongs to the Moi section of great Tai race.\(^{21}\)

Another scholar Chongtham Budhi Singh, in different account held that Meitei is blending to two tribes of China ‘Mei’ and ‘Ti’. In his view the Mei people

\(^{18}\) Gangmumei Kabui, op.cit. p.15.


\(^{21}\) Gangmumei Kabui, op.cit.p.15.
and Ti tribe were integrated and collectively called Meitei: Meitei ethnic group. However he admitted that the Ethnic formation is yet to be historically ascertained.\textsuperscript{22}

African Origin: In the most recent twist of tale on regard to Meitei origin, Dr. I. Mohindro Singh, based in scientific genealogical aspect, propounded a hypothesis that Meiteis came from Africa. 50,000 years ago first human from Africa, after their exodus reach India and the north east India and they expanded through this long narrow corridor. He refuted the idea of origin of Meitei linked with the China and South East Asian countries because “the mere fact that such pebble tools\textsuperscript{23} of Neolithic age were found in Vietnam, Thailand, Burma and Philippines should not let us conclude that we come from Vietnam or somewhere….. There is no historical root.”\textsuperscript{24} Furthermore, there is genetic data that can be used to infer population, structure and assign individual to group such as Meiteis to the Tibeto-Burman groups than often correspond with the self-identified geographical ancestry. Till date there is no unanimously accepted theory about the origin of Meeteis.

Religion

The human belief and faith that the inanimate objects and natural phenomena have existence of powers superior to the human capabilities are

\textsuperscript{22} C. Budhi Singh, ‘Meetei Ethnonym’ Journal of Manipur University, Imphal, 1984, p.31

\textsuperscript{23} Artifact (discovered archeological stone/pebble bone tools animal remain by pioneering Manipur archeologist O. K. Singh and other.) from the hills caves of Kangkhui and Hundung in Ukhrul, Machi in Chandel, Tharon in Tamenglong believed to have been used by Meitei ancestors towards the end of Pleistocene Ice Age dating back 20,000 years.

assumed to be the religious thoughts. As the human being is the youngest son of the nature, who has no hard teeth like the carnivorous animal or sharp and long nail and long hair to cover his body to defend the attacks of other fierce animals and he felt panic of the unknown natural phenomena which is termed as natural calamities, he, the human being was to approach to some unseen animated power to subside his panic. Then he established the existence of some powerful supernatural beings who can defend the disturbances of natural calamities of feeling fearfulness. Thus the beliefs in such affairs are termed animism, cult and religious according to the developments of stage of faiths and beliefs. Thus these are defined as:

Animism: The belief that all objects, both animate and inanimate are permanently or temporarily inhabited by spirits or souls. The spirits are conceived of as beings with an existence distinct from and therefore capable of surviving the dead or destruction of the persons, animals, plants and objects they inhabit. Often all activity is believed to be caused by these spirits. Usually there is also a belief in the existence of other spirits beings with powers over the lives of men. The spirits inhabiting objects of nature as well as those in the spirit world may be worship or treated with fear or respect E.B. Tylor maintained that animism was man’s earliest form of religion. Now the concept of E.B. Taylor becomes a mistaken notion because it was quickly outgrown by the religious and spiritual development of the community concerned. Western observers including the anthropologists and sociologist describe that historically evolved religion is not animism.

25 William P. Scott, Dictionary of Sociology, Delhi, 1999, p.11.
A religion is a particular system or set of systems in which doctrines, myths, rituals, sentiments, institutions, and other similar elements are interconnected. In order to understand a given belief as it occurs in such a system, it is necessary to look at its particular context—that is at the other beliefs held in the system, at rituals, and at the other elements. Every religion has its unique properties, and elements to make comparisons between religions may obscure these unique aspects.26

Sources of Information

The sources on which the details of “The Religion of the Meiteis: A Historical Perspective” are primarily based on historical documents, ‘Puyas’ or Meitei-lairiks, the Meitei literature records of information, specially Manipur royal chronicle and annals and other scriptures as well as the British accounts. There are mainly two kinds of sources, primary and secondary for the information of future uses. One of the basic rules of research in history is always based on primary sources. A primary source is the original repository of an historical datum, like an original record kept for the important occasions, an eye witness description of the event, a photography etc. and a secondary source is an account or record of the historical events or circumstances or more steps extracted or drawn out from an original repository. Therefore, the sources concerned of this thesis may broadly be divided into the followings:

26 Merriam-Webster’s Encyclopedia of World Religions, p.1031.
Primary sources

1) Cheitharon Kumbaba- Detail notes of royal chronicle starting from 33 A.D. and general annals beginning from 1445 A.D. and recorded proceeding up to date until 1960.

2) Tharon- Book of traditional Meitei folkloric accounts describing the archaic names of the twelve months, reasons and causes of the naming of the months, accounts of the festivals, rejoices, religious observations etc. to be performed and worshipped during the month of the Meitei lunar year currenting still until now.

3) Khagemba Lamjei- Scripture recording the political history of Manipur and divine blessings and favours of Lord Sanamahi since Khagemba (1597-1652 A.D.) to the Raja Jaya Singh alias Meidingu Chingthangkhomba (1763-98 A.D.)

4) Ningthouron Lambuba- Scripture dealing in detail political history and martial activities of Meitei kings along with those of Meitei queens with special regards to arms expedition, conquest sub dual, etc. in the defence and offence of the territorial jurisdiction of the Meitei kingdom.

5) Nongshaba Laihui- This is a manuscript dealing with the reverential virtues, benevolences, qualities, etc. of divine Nongshaba who is supposed to be the manifestation of Divine Almighty in the Meitei pantheon. It also narrates the auspicious mythical/legendary history of origin of Lord Nongshaba and His Divinity’s meandering and
destinations to the Mantak hills (Kakching), Wangoi (Chajing Karam) and Kangla (Imphal).

6) Wangbren Khunkumlon-This is a manuscript treating in the taking of journey from the highland of Koubru hills to the lowland of the southern part of Manipur valley. It also describes the dispute of divine Wangbren and venerable Lokningthou and their reconciliation for ruling the said part of Manipur valley.

7) Angom Khonghou Khoira- This is a manuscript writing the accounts of the coming out two of the progenitors of Angom ethnic group or clan from the Khangkhui cave of Ukhrul district and their movements towards the central valley of Manipur by passing Kwathen, Lamlai, etc. It also describes the establishment of Angom settlements in the valley.

8) Leisemlon Ariba- This is a manuscript dealing with the mythical accounts of the creations of the universe, the different spheres of the earth, human being and other living and non-living inmates of the universe. It is a book of genesis or cosmogony of the universe.

9) Pudin- It is a manuscript of the same nature, ideas, etc. of the Leisemlon Ariba, under the type/category of the book of genesis/cosmogony of the universe but describes in different style, versions, commentaries, etc.

10) Sanamahi Laihui Achouba- It is a manuscript describing the auspicious virtues, benevolences, good qualities and reverential history
of divine Sanamahi, the central/axial deity of the core of Meitei cultic polytheism and pantheon. Divine Sanamahi is described as the eldest son of Meitei-king Khagemba (1597-1652 A.D.) who expired at his personal age of circa 8 years. This manuscript also narrates some historical accounts of crusade followed or rose up between the Meitei religious faith and adopted Hindu religious beliefs and renaissance of the Meitei cultic materials, objects, etc. at different phases and stages of the crusade and renaissance occurred in the reign of His Majesty Garibanawaza (1709-48 A.D.), etc.

11) Khamnung Eengal Leishaba- This is another manuscript of the genesis/cosmogony of the universe in the Meitei School of religious thought and philosophy. This book writes in simpler and easier language/dialect near to the modern speaking dialect.

12) Nongmaijeeng Cheenggoirol- It is a manuscript dealing with the geographical accounts and legendary or historical narrations of the different and various spots, localities, shrines, sites, etc. lying in the hilly areas of the hills of the Langmai or Nongmai, a section/sub-clan of the Angom ethnic group or clan. It also reveals various place-spots worth to be treated as the sites of /for pilgrimage or holy places along with the accounts of naming the particularities of different places.

13) Pakhangba Nonggarol- This is a manuscript dealing with the Meitei theological and theistic accounts flourished/ran through the different
reigns of variant kings/monarchs of Manipur since the commencement of the history of Manipur till the regime of Meitei king Cheengthangkhomba (1763-98 A.D.) and the Meitei kings are assumed to be the parts or partial personifications of divine Pakhangba, one of the axial deity of the heart core divinities in the Meitei polytheistic sphere and pantheon. This also reveals the virtues, characteristics, and qualities etc. of the Meitei monarchs with regards to their religious concepts and notions as well as the ways of retirements from their existence from the world.

14) Kangabam Shagei Puya (Kut-yi Lairik = Manuscript) - This manuscript is the genealogical book dealing specially and emphatically with the section of the family titled “Kangabam” of Meitei society. The account of genealogical feature is started from Meitei-lord Pakhangba and proceeded upto the regime of Meitei king Chandrakriti (1850-86 A.D.)

15) Konthoujam Nongaron- Scripture referring to the sub-clannish divinity of Konthoujam writing with mythological folk novel style dealing in the matrimonial relations with different surnames and descendent of the family linage.

Secondary sources

The secondary sources cover the published books, articles and journals.
Methodology

The problem of study is obviously an historical one. Therefore, I applied my work on historical method. This work is based on table work in the entire historical religious books collected from the libraries, Manipur state museum, Manipur state Archive and from elderly scholars of Manipur. As the work is primarily based on historical documents, therefore I used the sources from the ‘puyas’, the Meitei literatures and chronicles as well as the British accounts. The Historical method is a tool to answer the questions of history like what happens, how it happens and why it happens.

Chapterization

The work is organized under the following chapters:

Chapter - I Introduction
Chapter - II Ancestral Deities
Chapter - III Emergence of Sanamahi cult
Chapter - IV Religious observance and other sacraments
Chapter - V Advent of Ramandi and Gouriya Vaisnavism
Chapter- VI Conclusion

Objectives of the study

a) Clans of the Meiteis
b) Worship of the ancestors of the clans
c) Origin and development of Sanamahi cult
d) History of origin of the brahmanas in Manipur
e) Historical circumstances in which Hinduism got its footing in Meitei social soil
f) The localized picture of sanskritization