Chapter 4

Rise of Brahmans as a Dominant Caste in Manipuri Society

The most fascinating aspect of Brahmans’ migration and their settlement was that they were incorporated into the larger Manipuri society by not only assigning tasks to help the political class in religious and ceremonial activities but also given state recognition by accommodating different surnames as well as marrying local women. Since the earliest time, most rulers were pleased with the Brahman migrants, as there was no king in the history of the kingdom who undertook the process of assimilation of the Brahmans vehemently. Instead, they were given enormous freedom to continue with their social and religious practices.

The Foundation of Hinduism in Manipur

The process of Sanskrization of Manipuri society was steady but quite progressive that ultimately Brahmans succeeded in rising to the highest status in the social hierarchy. Since fifteenth century CE, Vishnu worship had been patronized by the kings of Manipur. The Brahman scholars had started to exert their influence on Manipur’s court life first in the field of astrology then in religious affairs especially in the performance of rites and rituals. Finally, they exerted strong influence on administrative affairs of the state too. The records in the royal chronicle of Manipur, Cheitharol Kumbaba, show that from the very beginning the Brahmans and Hindu ascetics who came to Manipur at different periods were well received by the kings. It is important to note, however, that at the early stage of their migration and settlement in Manipur, Brahmans were not recognized as subjects of high caste. This was true especially during the reign of Meidingu Khagemba (1597-1652 CE), who treated them as part of the Lois (Hodson 2003: 53). They were regarded as the lowest caste in Manipuri society. Since then they gradually ascended up in the social hierarchy and most progressively after adoption of Hinduism by the state. It will be of little use to go into details of social environment of the early period of Brahmans’ settlement in
Manipur. Rather it would be much more sensible to start the enquiry with an understanding of political and social environment of the state from the reign of king Charairongba whose reign was considered as one of the important turning point for the Brahmans. It was because of the fact that he was the first Manipuri king to adopt Vaishnavite faith formally. His official acceptance of the Hinduism and the subsequent policies for the settlement of the Brahmans had brought a lot of changes not only in the socio-religious life of the society but politics, caste and ethnic relationships in the state also.

The Seeding of Hinduism and Period of Charairongba (1697-1709 CE)

The reign of king Pitambar Charairongba, the nephew of king Paikhomba was significant in the history of Brahmans and Hinduism in Manipur as it sawed the seed of Brahmans' cultural domination in Manipur. His reign started from Friday, the 10th March 1698 and he ascended the throne at the age of twenty-five years which marked the beginning of a new era in the history of Manipur. It was the transitional period not only from seventeenth century to the vigorous eighteenth century CE but also a transition from the traditional Meetei social life to a Hinduized Meetei society. It may be said that this period also witnessed the expansion of Hinduism in other parts of North-eastern region which happened particularly in the last part of the reign of Mughal emperor, Aurangazeb. As mentioned earlier, the king himself became the first person to adopt Vaishnavism formally thus marking the beginning of the 'familiarization of Hinduism' in the state. It was no doubt a turning point in the religious history of Manipur because it was during this period that Hinduism became a prominent religion in Manipur. Though he never attempt to establish Hinduism as a state religion and not did he overlook the worship of the traditional Meetei Gods and Goddesses. It was only under his patronage that people of Manipur in large could come to aware of Hindu religion for the first time.

However, it is not to argue that he was the first king to give patronage to Hinduism. This was started much before his rule. This can be easily inferred from the earlier enquiry in previous chapter. Thus, since fifteenth century CE, Vishnu worship had been patronized by the kings of Manipur such as Kyamba who built Bishnu temple at a place called Lamangdong which latter came to be known as Bishnupur. A Brahman named Bhanu Narayan who was also known as Suvi Narayan from Lairikyengbam
Leikai was entrusted to look after the temple (Kirti 1980: 56; Jhalajit 1992: 95). Since then with state patronage and proper provisions of social amenities in place, there had been regular flows of Brahman migrants into Manipur.

Nonetheless, it was after Charairongba accepted Hinduism as a religion that the Brahmins had started exerting their influence on Manipur’s court life especially in the field of astrology. Brahman scholars were employed by the king and his court for multifarious works in social, administrative and religious affairs particularly for the performance of rites and rituals. They were even appointed as envoys to outside the kingdom by Charairongba who was by temperament a deeply religious person and thus, drawn towards Vaishnavism. He was officially initiated into Vaishnavism by a Brahman named Krishnacharya alias Rai Vanamali who came from Shweta Ganga, Puri on Wednesday, the 5th of Sajibu, 1704 CE (which fall around March-April), (Jhalajit 1992: 115). Rai Vanamali accompanied by his wife Krishnamayi and a colleague named Balabhadra Brahmachari and two Shudra servants arrived in Manipur in the previous year, around October 1703. The royal chronicle, Cheitharol Kumbaba, recorded that the king and others who were to be converted into the new faith, observed a fast on Wednesday the 5th April, 1704 one day before their conversion and listened to the Bhagavata Gita recited in Manipuri by Bhaskar Brahman (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 2005: 56). Since then family and descendents of Vanamali were called Guru Aribam. The word Ariba (old) was added to their family to distinguish it from the descendents of the guru of the king, Bhaigyachandra who were simply called Gurumayum (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 2005: 56).

The School of Vaishnavism to which king Charairongba was converted, worshipped Shri Krishna as the supreme deity (Jhalajit 1992: 133). At the same time he also took interest in the worship of Kalika (Kali) and thus, a temple of Kali was also constructed in the year 1706 CE (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 2005: 68). King Charairongba was thus the first Hindu king of Manipur to accept a Sanskrit name, Pitambar Singh. His gratitude to his preceptor Rai Vanamali was shown by conferring to him and to his descendents a place of honour in festivals and ceremonies held in the palace as well as other places. Socially they lived as religious functionaries (Kirti 1980: 121). The king granted a village, a hill and hundred acres of rice field as guru dakshina to his guru. He also built a nine roomed brick house for his guru which was later
destroyed by the Burmese in the early part of nineteenth century CE (Jhalajit 1992: 133). Thus, the Guruaribam family begun to occupy a very distinguished place and enjoyed privileged position in the contemporary society.

Though the king had adopted this new religion he did not impose the same to the people. He happened to be quite a secular ruler. There are even records of how king Charairongba abused the Hindu priests who were not devoted to religious works. According to the royal chronicle, Cheitharol Kumbaba, he constructed several temples for both Meetei deities as well as Hindu deities. Among the temples he constructed for the Meetei deities mentioned may be made of the temple devoted to Goddess Panthoibi, and of deities like Sanamahi, Laiwahaiba, etc. He cast a bronze statue of Panthoibi. In another instance, a bronze statue of Sanamahi was also made. On the other hand, king Charairongba built a brick temple for Shri Krishna and Radha at Brahmapur Guru Aribam Leikai. The image of Shri Krishna and Radha worshipped by Rai Vanamali is still worshipped by his descendents, the Guru Aribam Brahmans. According to Cheitharol Kumbaba, the construction of the temple began on Friday, the 19th of May, 1707. It has been declared as protected monument by the state, and is still in good condition. It is said that some Burmese artisans and architects were employed in the construction of this temple.

The Recognition of Hinduism as State Religion

This trend of patronizing Brahmans continued further and in a much stronger form during successor Garibniwaj (1709-1748 CE) who was one of the famous Vaishnava kings of Manipur. Bamon Khunthoklon recorded that eleven more Brahmans including Santidas Gosain, who later became the guru (preceptor) of Garibniwaj, migrated during this period. Social status of the Brahmans during the reign of Garibniwaj changed considerably, and was moving upwards further in the social hierarchy. This can be confirmed from various sources including records of the royal chronicle, Cheitharol Kumbaba. All these social developments took place after he was converted into Vaishnavism initiated by one Gopal Das Guru in latter part of Mera (September/October) in 1717 (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 1989: 66). The proper information about Gopal Das is not available, but it could be ascertained that he did not settle permanently in Manipur as he returned back to his country in 1720 CE (Bhogeswor 1995: 48). A manuscript called Garibnawaj Laiming Louba written in the
contemporary time mentions that Garibniwaj was a follower of Goudiya Vaishnavism before shifting to Ramandi sect (Kirti 1980: 124). In another account, Sanamahi Laikan, it is mentioned that he was converted into Sakta dharma by a Brahman believed to be son of Rai Vanamali who initiated king Charairongba into Hinduism (Bogeshower 1995: 48). The school of Vaishnavism followed by the king appeared to have been partly influenced by the Assamese School of Vaishnavism (Kirti 1980: 125). It is noted that before the conversion, thirty nine mendicants (Bairagis) including the religious preceptors from Tekhao (Assam) arrived at the capital on Monday, 6th of Thawan (July-August), 1715 CE (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 1989: 64-65). Later, the king fell in the line of the argument that the worship of Shri Rama is the highest form of Hinduism. The king, though reluctant, finally changed to Ramandi sect through persuasive argument of the Santidas Gosain who came from Sylhet with two disciples, namely, Bhagavandas and Narandas (Khelchandra 1969: 35). He joined to Ramandi sect by investing sacred thread by the Mahapurusha after a holy bath at Lilong River on Wednesday, the full moon day of Wakching (December/ January) 1729 CE (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 2005: 90). Again on Tuesday, the full day of Mera (October/ November) the king along with three hundred followers was initiated with sacred thread. The conversion of the masses took place on Sunday, 5th of Ingel (June/ July) 1738 CE (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 2005: 99). After adoption of Ramanandi, the king in collusion with his preceptor Santidas Gosai, undertook a vigorous campaign of Sanskritisation with a view to transform the society altogether socially, culturally and politically.

Garibniwaj was the first Manipuri king who introduced the practice of burning of dead bodies according to the royal chronicle, Cheitharol Kumbaba. And the ‘bone gathering’ ceremony was also introduced after some days. On Sunday, the 20th of Fairen (February - March), 1724 CE, Garibniwaj performed the ceremony of burning the bones of his forefathers with great éclat on the bank of the Ningthi River (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 2005: 71-73). The daughter of king Garibniwaj was the first women of Manipur who have visited to Vrindavana (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 2005: 91). Afterwards, it became an established practice for the Vaishnavite Manipuri to undertake a journey to the Ganga. A person who could not go himself could entrust the bone of his death relatives to a pilgrim to be dropped into the Ganga (Kirti 1980: 125).
Sanamahi Laikan (Bhogeswar 1995: 59-60) clearly mentions that the process of Sanskritisation took place in a very systematic way. Even all the Salais (exogamous clans of the Meeteis) were converted into Gotra system follow in Hindu society. Each Salai is identified with a Gotra as follows:

Table 2: List of Yek/Salai converted to Hindu Gotra

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yek/Salai</th>
<th>Gotra</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ningthouja</td>
<td>Sandhilya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angom</td>
<td>Kaushik</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moirang</td>
<td>Atreya/Angiras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luwang</td>
<td>Kashyapa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Khuman</td>
<td>Madhugalya</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarang Laishanthem</td>
<td>Goutam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chenglei</td>
<td>Bhardwaj</td>
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Besides, they also took up various measures to incorporate everything related to traditional Meetei religion into Ramandi tradition in such a way that Hinduism could be shown as part and parcel of Meetei culture.

For the first time Garibniwaj legitimized his rule in Manipur by invoking 'Divine Kingship' theory (Lokendra 1998:3). In the court, the Hindu title of ministers known such as the Mantris were introduced and the king is referred to as 'Maharaja'. The Ningel stone inscription of the king (1735 CE) refers to the king 'Sri Garibniwaj a Maharaja' and his minister named 'Haobamcha Ibungo mantri' (Bahadur and Gunindra 1986: 9). Under the influence of the Brahman the authority of the Maibas and Maibis (priests and priestess) of the earlier traditional religion, who formerly enjoyed royal patronage, were challenged and antagonized. The Maibas and Maibis, therefore, resorted to collaborate with political groups who opposed the king. As a result, Garibniwaj persecuted many leaders of the traditional religion. Many of them were exiled to Loi villages¹ (Lokendra 1998: 4). Garibniwaj also persecuted many leaders of the rival Vaishnavite sects because they too were taking help from many of his political opponents. Cheitharol Kumbaba, the royal chronicle of Manipur. records that in 1742
CE he sent many leaders of Ramandi Vaishnavism to Loi villages as exile (Parratt 2005: 153). Along with it, Garibniwaj took up a number of measures to consolidate Vaishnavism in Manipur. He issued a decree forbidding eating meat. Offenders of Hindu dietary law which prescribed meat eating and using of intoxicating drinks were severely punished. Decrees were also passed forbidding the keeping of unclean animals (mostly pigs) in housing areas. He severely punished those who failed to comply with the orders of king (Parratt 2005: 164). With the great propagation of Vaishnavism by Santidas Gosai, the Manipuri wives started performing the self-immolation at the death of their husbands (Sati). The royal chronicle, Cheitharol Kumbaba, refers to many Sati performed by the wives of the princes, Brahmans and court nobles. The first case of Sati which is recorded by the chronicle of Manipur was in 1726 CE. When prince Murari died, his two wives performed the Sati by burning themselves to death in the funeral pyre of the death prince (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 2005: 81). In 1733 CE, Sapam Khwairakpa died and his wife died along with him (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 2005: 81). In 1735 CE, Wahengbam Nongthouba died and his two wives committed the Sati (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 2005: 83). In 1737 CE, Keirungba Thanogai died and his two wives also burnt themselves to death (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 2005: 86).

In fact, the Sanskritization campaign of Santidas Gosai and king Garibniwaj set the stage for Brahman’s supremacy in the Manipuri society. To talk of Sanskritization, in a single generation, the social, cultural and even the racial identity of the Meeteis was radically Sanskritized. Santidas Gosai was very keen to transform the whole social and political system of Manipur into a Hindu. The process started with the renaming of the country as ‘Manipur’ a name proposed by Santidas Gosai and accepted by the king and the Court, thus tried to make a relation with Manipur of the Mahabharata ruled by Babruvahana, son of the great Pandava hero Arjuna. The names of the ancient kingdom such as Meetei Leipak, Poireipak or Kangleipak were finally given an official name ‘Manipur’ (Bhogeshwor 1995: 50). And the king was also named as Manipureswar and Mekleswar hinting the name of the country as Mekle (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 1989: 61, 79). The name of the king was also given a Hindu name, Gopal Singh. The queen was renamed Gomati Devi. But, in the coins issued by the king, the name “Garibniwaj” occurred in the Nagari script. The name of queen Gomati also occurs in the coins issued by the king (Gunindra 1983: 14).
Besides, all the traditional abodes of the Meetei deities were destroyed in 1723 CE (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 2005: 83-84). The king engaged in a fanatic act of destroying images of Meetei religion including the Umanglais (village, clan and lineage presiding deities). He also destroyed images of other Hindu sects. He ordered a decree on Saturday, the 10th Kalen (April-May), 1726 to bury nine Umanglais under a big tree in Mongba Hanba. On Monday, the 10th Inga (May-June), 1726 he broke the images of seven Umanglais including Panthoibi, Sanamahi, Soraren, Moidon Pokpi, etc. He confiscated the sel tangas (ornaments) which adored these deities and swept away the temples (Kaomacha 1980: 87-89). These images after being broken were buried at Mongba Hanba where the temple of Hanuman was immediately constructed. According to a tradition which was often quoted by many historians that Santidas Gosai went to destroy the abode of the Goddess at Heibokching in south Imphal. The Goddess tried to kill him. Santidas Gosai was greatly frightened and he promised to preserve the temple of traditional Meetei Goddess Hiyangthang Lairemma (who was identified as Devi) to be protected and maintained by the king. However, at the same time the king in collusion with Santidas Gosai undertook quite robustly the act of force conversion into Hinduism. Those who opposed the force conversion or remained followers of other sects of Hinduism were also imposed fine or banished (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 2005: 92, 95, 96 and 106). Those who domesticate animals considered to be polluting were fined (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 2005: 85).

Not only the temples and images of traditional deities were destroyed, the king also undertook many suppressive measures including that of doing away with the Meetei script, songs and traditional prayers. At the insistence of Santidas Gosai, king Garibniwaj was against the use of Meetei script, songs and prayers. Instead the use of Bengali script and songs were given significance. Being a religious frenzy, he had collected rare manuscripts on traditional Meetei religion numbering one hundred twenty and burnt them down by the Ramandi preacher with the help of the then king Garibniwaj in 1723 CE (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 2005: 93). Among them six were proved to be put on fire. They were (1) Nonglon, (2) Pakhomba Naoyom, (3) Simkhal Naoyom, (4) Yambi Thiren, (5) Taoroindi Naoyom and (6) Sagok. Thus, Manipur has been deprived of many valuable religious and historical books through the fanaticism of Garibniwaj (Kaomacha 1980: 87-89).
As a part of Hinduisation, the Meetei festivals were given Hindu names or modified in Hindu form. So, the Annual Boat Race festival known as the Heigru Hitongba festival performed in the month of Hiyangei (September) was renamed Jal Yatra. The festival of Ayang Yoiren Iruppa (Bathing) in the month of Wakching (December/January) was converted into an Annual Snan (ritual bathing or ablution) at Lilong Sahonpat. The Waira Tenkap festival (archery) in the month of Phairen (January/February) was converted into a kirtan of Lord Rama. Then the Poirei Apakana of the month of Lamda (March) was converted to Loipam festival. The Kongba Leithong Phatpa ceremony-cum-festival of Sajibu (April) was changed to Vishnu Sankranti. The Ahong Khongching of Ingel (June) was equated or substituted by Ratha Jatra. The festival of Offerings to the Ancestors in the month of September was replaced by Tarpan (Offering to Prituwasllok). The Wakambung Chingnunng Nongombi was substituted by Dasana Kwaktanba of Durga Puja or Dusserah. And Govardhan Puja substituted Chanou Hui Chintu (New Harvest) (Bhogeshwor 1995: 63-64). All these were carried out under the guidance of Santidas Gosai. He was more than a preceptor to the king. He was gifted an orange garden at Wakha near Nongmaijing hill (a hillock near the Iril River) and a monastery was built for his guru. Besides, the king also offered his own daughter, Princess Champaklata to his guru Santidas Gosai (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 2005: 99).

All these acts certainly favoured the Brahmans. As their responsibilities expanded, the power and influence of the Brahmans in the society broadened. Such progress made lots of ritual compulsions which were imposed upon the public and on the other hand, the kings continued to extend patronage to them. This certainly helped the Brahmans to become a dominant caste in Manipuri society. Brahmans were entrusted with the work of even managing Meetei traditional deities and their temples. For example, in the year 1722 CE, the king assigned works of managing four important traditional deities namely, Lainingthou Nongshaba, Yimthei Lai, Panthoibi and Taibang Khaiba (Sanamahi) to Brahmans (Paratt 1980: 143). As a result of such process, the status of the Brahman community went up in the social hierarchy much higher during the reign of Garibniwaj. The king and the court around which the Meetei polity centered became greatly influenced by the Brahman priests, especially the royal preceptor, Santidas Gosai, who was involved in all spheres of the kingdom.
Hinduism Permeating the Social Fabric

With proper seeding in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries CE and recognizing as state religion in the eighteenth century CE, Hinduism was well set to thrive in the kingdom. By the second half of eighteenth century CE, Hinduism mainly its belief system and customaries permeates the entire social fabric. Society in Manipur was increasingly divided into distinct castes viz., Kshatriyas, Brahmans, Kanaka and Kayastha (Kriti 1980: 90). Gotra system introduced and enforced strictly in Hinduised Manipuri society. This means that one of the important features of the caste system in India i.e., civil and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections was observed. The ceremonial purity and institution of untouchability were also rigidly observed. As different castes were ranked in terms of ritual purity, the Brahmans or the priests, as happened in other caste societies represent purity, sanctity and holiness. They were also treated (or rather presented) as a source of learning and wisdom. Important religious ceremonies were to be performed under their authority only. It is also said that the hierarchy of prestige based on notions of ritual purity was mirrored by the hierarchy of power. As they were entrusted with most ‘sacred’ tasks namely, performance of Hindu rites and rituals, they were treated as most sacred caste in Manipuri society. On account of their “sacred status” combined with high state patronage, the Brahmans not only control the religious affairs of the kingdom but also could exert much political influence on the king. Therefore, important political decisions had to be taken after due consultation with the highest Brahmans in the kingdom.

The majority of the Meeteis, who were categorized as Kshatriya caste, confined to the works of administration and politics. At the bottom of the system there were Yaithibis, who were labeled as untouchables as well as considered as Mangba (unclean and impure). Accordingly, they must perform unclean and degrading tasks such as the disposal of dead animals. It was impinged in the minds of the Meeteis (by Brahmans) that Yaithibis were not good enough to serve the Meeteis. They were not allowed to enter villages or towns except to do scavenging work (Brown 1874: 2). Segregated from the members of the caste system, their presence is thought to be polluting to the extent that even their shadow fall across the food of a Brahman the food would be considered unclean.
As mentioned earlier, till the reign of Charairongba many forms of religion existed side by side. Within Hinduism there were many sects, viz., Vishnuwami sect, Madhava sect, Nimbarka sect and Saivism, which flourished in Manipur. At the same time worship of Sanamahi, Panthoibi and some other primitive deities continued in parallel with Vaishnavism in Manipur. There was no evidence of prosecution on the grounds of religious beliefs. Mutual tolerance was the norm. It is said that king Charairongba had respectful inclination towards indigenous faiths and culture and allowed their free growth. Therefore, the conversion to Hinduism was confined to the king and his nobles. However, during the late nineteenth century CE, socio-religious life of the people was drastically changed. This change favours the Brahman’s stronghold in Manipuri society. Since the declaration of Hinduism as the state religion, the values of Hindu social life permeated the entire social fabric in Manipur. Like other Hindu societies, Brahmans started controlling the society and politics of Manipur after the adoption of Hinduism as state religion in Manipur. The role of Brahman starts from performing household ceremonies to offering sacrifices for the ruler and to impart knowledge based on Hindu rite and rituals in Manipuri society. They allegedly performed the most sacred and important functions of the society in Manipur too. Therefore, they had been lifted to the highest position in the caste hierarchy. They represent purity, sanctity and holiness. They have been recognized as the source of learning and wisdom. All important religious and other social ceremonies are exclusively done by them only. This means that Brahmans had become crucial “institution” in the social life of the Meeteis.

**Image Construction and Popularizing Scriptures**

Images of deities and temples are often used to popularize system of belief and faiths. In Manipur too many images of several deities and temples dedicated to a number of Gods and Goddesses were constructed by kings in different periods. The construction of temples and images were well in practice even before the arrival of Hinduism in Manipur. In this regard it may be mentioned that the first Hindu temple (Vishnu temple) is believed to be constructed at Lamangdong (now Bishnupur) during the reign of Kyamba in fifteenth century CE (fig. 1). Moreover, as late as during the reign of king Charairongba several temples of Meetei deities like Goddess Panthoibi, Sanamahi and others were constructed. He cast a bronze statue of Panthoibi, and also a
bronze statue of Sanamahi was made by king Charairongba. However, after the adoption of this new religion kings of Manipur started building temples exclusively for Hindu deities. To mention the least, king Charairongba, one of the most secular rulers in the history of Manipur, was deeply involved in a spree of building temples dedicated to Hindu deities such as Lord Vishnu, Krishna, Kali and others after his conversion into Hinduism (Kabui 2003: 237).

The Vishnu image was installed in a masonry temple at Bishnupur (Lamangdong), eighteen miles to the south of Imphal. After installation of the image, Lamangdong come to be known as Bishnupur. Bhanu Narayan, a Brahman from Lairikyengbam Leikai who look after the temple and his descended come to be known as Phurailatpam; worshipper of masonry temple (Kirti 1980: 56). It is generally believed that the Vishnu temple was an attribute of king Kyamba (1467-1508 CE). However, there is no authentic record to prove that the temple was built by king Kyamba. The royal chronicle, Cheitharol Kumbaba, did not mention the presentation of Vishnu image and construction of Vishnu temple during the reign of Kyamba. Again, king Kyamba was the follower of the traditional Meetei religion, he never initiated to Vaishnavism. On the other hand, from the material remains and the literary evidences, it is proved that
the temple belongs to king Charairongba’s period (1697-1709 CE). Charairongba was initiated to Vaishnavism and worshipped Vishnu and its incarnations. The use of bricks was introduced first during his reign, and the style and size of the bricks of Vishnu temple were very similar to other bricks work of Charairongba’s period.

Though a number of Hindu temples were constructed prior to the adoption of Hinduism by the state since the reign of Kyamba, the number of such temples were very less. However, more recurrent construction of the Hindu temples as a part of the process of popularizing Hinduism was started from the reign of Garibniwaj. During his reign not only different Hindu temples were constructed and images installed at new places, even new temples were constructed at the places where images of traditional Gods and Goddesses were kept after demolishing the old structures and evacuating the images therein. King Garibniwaj built a temple for Kalika in 1716 CE and a temple of Krishna\(^2\) in 1722 CE (fig. 2). The Krishna temple which was constructed by him is still in good condition at Brahmapur, a Brahmam locality at Imphal (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 1989: 83).

Fig. 2: Brahmapur: Shri Krishna Temple
In 1725 CE, king Garibniwaj also ordered to dig a large tank known as Ningthem Pukhri at Wangkhei leikai. Images of Krishna and Kalika were kept in a temple near the tank. All these temples were kept under the authority and control of Brahmins only. Being an ardent Ramanandi follower, the king undertook aggressive policies to popularize the worship of Rama in the state. He installed the images of Rama, Laskmana, Bharata, Satrughana and Sita in the Ramji Prabhu (fig. 3) temple near Ningthem Pukhri in the place of earlier images. The image of these Hindu Gods and Goddess installed by him are still worshipped popularly in the same temple.

Fig. 3: Ningthem Pukhri Mapal, Wangkhei: Ramjee Prabhu

In addition to these temples and images, many other temples were constructed at various places in Manipur particularly in Imphal valley during his reign. Familiar among them is the brick temple of Hanumana\(^3\) (fig. 4) at Mahabali on the bank of Imphal River. It is said that this image of Hanumana was curved out of a big slab of stone. It was opened for public worship in 1729 CE. The surrounding forest was populated by monkeys as attendants to Hanumana (Ibungohak and Khelchandra 1989: 90).
In an adjacent locality known as Guru Aribam leikai a temple of Radha Krishna was installed. In 1734 CE, he prepared a boat out of a tree growing at the confluence of the Gvai River and the Tuiai River and sailed along the Gvai River alias Barak River in order to worship Rama and Laskmana in commemoration of his victory over the Takhels (the invaders from Tripura) (Kriti, interview: 20th December, 2010). Later, during the reign of Gambhir Singh (1825-1834 CE) the famous temple at Canchipur, which became the new capital of Manipur, was dedicated to Lord Govindaji temple. Again another temple of Lord Govindaji temple\(^4\) (fig. 5) was built by Maharaja Nar Singh (1844-1850 CE) in 1845 CE at Kangla, old palace, Imphal West, Manipur (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 1989: 274 and Kunjeswori 2003: 124).
Further during the reign of Churachand Maharaj, some Hindu temples such as Radha Romon temple (fig. 6) and new Govindaji Temple (fig. 7) was constructed (Dharmen 2004:160-165).
The temple was built by Maharaja Churachand Singh in 1909-1910 CE at modern palace compound, Wangkhei, Imphal east, Manipur.

This temple construction and installation of images intensified Hinduism certainly and this lay the foundation of the rise of Brahmans in Manipur. This process of Hinduisation resulted into the transformation of script, language and literature. The Brahmans who were migrated to Manipur brought with them several books written in Sanskrit and Bengali scripts. This resulted in the making of a more linguistically supple kind of literatures in the sense that the new literatures used not only diverse language but also drew on different cultural traditions. This trend of literatures started right from the beginning of fifteenth century CE when the Brahmans started migrating to Manipur. King Kyamba engaged some persons of Lairikyengbam family for the development of Manipuri literature in a new form and they were recognized as professional chroniclers and writers in the court. The closing decade of the sixteenth century CE could be marked with the increasing influence of the Sanskrit and Bengali literatures in Manipur. Leithak Leikharon, Thawanthaba khonjanglon and a number of other books during that period show the impact of Sanskrit and Bengali on Manipuri literature. Between 1717 CE and 1737 CE, some Parvas of the Mahabharata had been translated into Manipuri for the first time. Some cantos of the Ramayana were also translated during the period between 1727 CE and 1748 CE. Translations of different works are largely attributed to
Angom Gopi, a poet of considerable ability. Volumes of such translation beautifully copied were not only kept in the royal Loishang (office of the king) but were available to men who had a literary induced to read them (Ibungohal 1987: 58-59).

The Loishang, village Mandops (courtyard), and the house of the teacher were used as centre of diffusion of Bengali and Sanskrit knowledge. Person who know Sastras (or who pretend to be so) were employed for imparting knowledge. The curriculum included Sanskrit Grammar, Smirti, Kavyas, the Vedas and the Vaishnava literature about Chaitanya. The method involved recitation, repetition and discussion (Jhulon 1949: 80-81). These undoubtedly helped in promoting the rise of Brahmans in Manipur.

The works which was initiated by Garibniwaj was continued by Bhaigyachandra. From 1776 CE, king Bhaigyachandra started reorganizing the whole country including religious institutions. He also had his share of constructing temples and images of Hindu deities. The most remarkable contribution of Rajarsri Bhaigyachandra was the construction and installation of the wooden statue of Shri Govindaji. According to the chronicle, Cheitharol Kumbaba, and some other historical texts, in relation to the installation of Govindaji, king Bhaigyachandra was told in his dream by Lord Krishna to make a statue of Lord Krishna in the form revealed to him in his dream out of the Jackfruit tree of a small hillock called Kaina. He wanted to translate the dream vision into reality. The image of Govindaji was carved out by an artisan named Sapam Lokhon (Jhalajit 1992: 165-166). But according to other sources it is mentioned that the image was built by Pandit Gopiram and Sapam Lakhon (Bhogeswar 1968). Along with this image another image of Lord Krishna was also made. The images of Sri Govindaji, Madan Mohan and Gopinath were worshiped at Sagolband and Ningthoukhonghong respectively. The story goes that he had a vision of Sri Govindaji performing Rasila with the Gopies. He developed a Rasa dance form in association with the Pandits. He dedicated the first Manipuri Rasa to Sri Govindaji in 1779 CE on the occasion of installation ceremony of Sri Govindaji. After the ceremony, the king awarded a Brahman Pandit named Gopiram Pachahanba with seven gold bangles, seven paris of land, a couple of slaves, a buffalo and one horse in the name of honour.
During the reign of king Bhaigyachandra, Manipuri scholars started to adopt Bengali and Sanskrit words as a medium of their literary works in most cases (Ibungohal 1987: 68-69). The Puranas were expounded in Manipuri and heroic tales were created by the poets to fortify the converts psychologically. Many verses and books were attributed to Jay Singh alias Bhaigyachandra, Sija Lairiobi, Prince Nabananda, etc. (Khelchandra 1969: 154-186). So during this period translation and copying of scriptures became a great preoccupation of the people. An important work in Manipuri during this period was the Virata parva of the Mahabharata. In 1780 CE, Prince Nabananda had the honour of translating the Virata parva of Ramakrishnas. The language was improved by Mayengba Vrindavana and Wahengbam Madhobram in the style typical of this period (Khelchandra 1969: 154-186). Longjam Parsuram has written Asyamedha from the Mahabharata wherein we found the fight between Arjuna and Vrbruvahana. In the reign of king Jay Singh a Manipuri translation of Janmejaya Sarpa Yojna (king Janmejaya’s snake sacrifice) appeared. Yumkhaibam Chandra Singh produced Astakala Lila (Sri Krishna round the clock wise sports) which was later followed by Mathura Virah (lamentation of the Gopis on Krishna departure for Mathura) (Khelchandra 1969: 15).

A full translation of the Epics, the Bhagavata Purana, Vishnu Purana, Smriti Sastras, Gitagovinda was achieved during the reigns of Gambhir Singh and Chandrakirti Singh. The study and translation of Chaitanya Charitamantra, Vaishnava padavalis and lyrics from Bengali to Manipuri was the nineteenth century undertaking by Manipuri Vaishnavas (Ibungohal 1987: 14). They are popular throughout the Imphal valley. Practically, Vaishnavism had produced many Sanskrit and Bengali writers. A Sanskrit work on music and dance called Sri Krishna Rasa Sangit Sangraha is said to have been written by Thakur Bhakti Siddhanta during the reign of king Gambhir Singh. Another Sanskrit work enunciating Manipuri dance is the Govinda Sangit Lila Vilas believed to be a work of king Bhaigyachandra himself. Dharanti Samhita was written by a Manipuri scholar during the reign of king Gambhir Singh. It is an account of the valley as well as its inhabitants (Yumjao 1966: 20-22).
Yumjao Singh’s collection includes an Assamese translation of the twelfth book of the Bhagavata of about 1803 CE at which time king Bhaigyachandra was staying at the Ahom court in Assam (Yumjao 1966: 21-22). A Thakur who took along with him sixty people, twenty-nine horses, and five copies of the Bhagavata Skandha came to Manipur on Sunday, the 7th of Hiyangei (October/November), 1889. He came from Assam to preach the Bhagabata sect (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 1989: 42).

Cheitharol Kumbaba is said to be a recast of the earlier book in 1780 CE by an order of king Bhaigyachandra. It is considered to be the authoritative dairy of the kings of Manipur (Yumjao 1966: 144-145). Another book of note is Vijaya Panchali alias Garibniwaj Charita completed in 1782 CE. Prince Mantri Kritichandra Lairik-Yengba and Tulsi Narayana can be attributed this work during the time of king Bhaigyachandra (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 1989: 125). Other works connected with king Bhaigyachandra were books named Chingthangkhomba Vrindavana Chatpa and Chingthangkhomba Ganga Chatpa. Most of the words used in every sentence have Sanskrit and Manipuri mixture (Yumjao 1966: 27).

Panegyric of kings whom the people wished to eulogize includes Samuphaba, Khagi Ngamba (conquest of Khasi-Jaintia hills by king Gambhir Singh). Another work of great historical value is Mayangngamba (Grierson 1904: 22) wherein an unknown author has recounted the story of the fights between Manipur and Cachar. Through it, we could catch a glimpse of the personality of Gambhir Singh. The bards sang the exploits of the kings and worriers. There are books of historical ballads like Gobinda Nirupan (the making of Sri Govindaji) Chandrakirti Jilla Changba (king Chandrakriti’s meeting with the Viceroy on the bank of the Barak River) and Khongjom Parva (battle of Khongjom in 1891). The writers selected for their descriptions the patriotic deeds achieved mostly by kings like Bhaigyachandra, and prince Koireng alias Tikendrajit in this ballads. The Gita in archaic Manipuri language represented the philosophical tradition. It was composed by Gobinda Mishra in Bengali and translated into Manipuri by Oinamcha Prajananda in 1810 CE during the reign of king Chaurajit.

With the spread of Vaishnavism through royal support, various other activities like the reading of the Vaishnava texts, the system of Aniphabi (one for reciting and another for translating the verse), feeding the people and pilgrimage to the Ganges came to be in vogue. Gitagovinda was popularized throughout Manipur. King
Bhaigyachandra even dedicated three things which he love most to Lord Govindaji, “His kingdom, that is Manipur, his daughter who remained wedded to her Lord Krishna throughout her life, a Manipuri Mirabai, and Gitagovinda of Jayadeva” (Kirti 1980: 21).

There were a number of folk songs and devotional songs connected with every phase of life in the pre-Vaishnavite days which were full of devotional and lofty ideals. In the period covering from Charairongba to Garibniwaj and then the period from king Bhaigyachandra to Chandrakirti singers and musicians have been in the fore-front of the fine art. New trends of creative arts came in the wake of the Vaishnava movement enriched the realm of music. King Garibniwaj, by a royal proclamation, stopped the singing of vernacular songs. However, the latter kings seem to be less serious of this policy. Thus the singer and Ojas succeeded in applying the old tunes to the Vaishnavite songs and the Maibas and Maibis were allowed to employ Manipuri songs in the worship of Umanglais in spite of the exalted songs in Bengali (Ibungohal 1961: 55-60).

Medieval Manipur (1750-1900 CE) deserves special mention for its Sankirtan literature. Leaving apart the ballads (Pena and khulang Isei), most of the compositions were in Brajabali, Bengali, Sanskrit and Maithili as language of Bhakti. Lyrical compositions of Radha-Krishna by poets such as Chandidasa, Vidyapati and Jayadeva were as popular as they were in their own time in Bengal. Jayadeva’s Dasavatara in the Gita-Govinda has become part of the daily ritual of the temple of Jaganath in the Rath Jatra festival. The Padakalpataru, Padamriam Samudra, Lalsa and other compositions of Gobinda Das and Narottam too inspired lakhs of Manipuri Vaishnavas (Nayana Jhaveri 1967: 26-33).

King Charairongba patronized devotional singing or kirtana which was better known as Pala Ariba or Bangadesa. Bangades kirtan was developed for a devotional purpose by one Bengali teacher named Konthou oja (he became a member of Konthoujam family). It is called Bangades because the teacher came from Bengal. It may also mean that the theme of the song is drawn from Bengali Padavalis and Chaitanya’s lilas. The song is composed of seven letters, “Rama Krisna Govinda” arranged in order (Kirti 1980: 195). The Manipuris make Sankirtan part of their lives. King Chandrakirti had been munificent to musicians. Sixty-four Bhakti-rasa of Bengal School were sung and danced in sixty-four sessions at the palace (Nath 1943: 95).
Thus the above discussions make it clear that the construction of Hindu temples ultimately gave rise to the development and extend the role of Brahmans in Manipuri society. As mentioned earlier number of Brahmans namely Bhanu Narayan, a Brahman from Lairikyengbam Leikai who look after the temple of Bishnu installed at Lamangdong during the fifteenth century CE, had been assigned in various Hindu temples in order to worship Hindu Gods and Goddesses. On the other, the increasing number of Brahman migration in Manipur led to the development of Sanskrit and Bengali literature and later using or mixing of such languages become a trend in Manipur, also led to the rise of Brahman’s role in Manipuri society and thus influence Royal Court too. This is because Bengali and Sanskrit literature is familiar only to those migrants mostly the Brahmans.

Success of Vaishnavism and Domination over the Traditional Belief in Manipur

Various reasons have been assigned for the success of Vaishnavism in Manipur. Its development is to be understood in terms of the prevailing intellectual and social climate. Some of the important factors are discussed here.

Patronage of Vaishnavism

Vaishnavism spread rapidly in Manipur under the patronage of such powerful monarchs namely Garibniwaj, Bhaigyachandra, Gambhir Singh and Chandrakriti. They neutralized the antipathy of the people by assuming the title of Lainingthou (king of Gods), and posed as incarnation of Vishnu for the restoration of dharma (Yumjao 1966: 112-113). Their Vaishnavite leanings were presented as reasons for their glory and divinity which was best expressed by the invariable association of the image of Vishnu with the king. Manipur suffered from repeated Burmese invasion and thus, the political situations was extremely bad at certain point of time. Able and noble kings like Bhaigyachandra and Gambhir could restore the social order after overcoming the Burmese. They were respected by the people as the savior of their race. Many people were attracted to the Vaishnava fold by their pleading (persuasive) good examples and they converted many non Meetei people like the Lois and the tribal people into Hinduism (Hodson 1908: 84-85). Temples were constructed and images were placed in the temples with great ceremonies. Many manuscripts were prepared under their patronage.
The logic of popularizing Vaishnavism by different kings was partly the necessity to make good relationship with other Hindu states such as Bengal, Tripura and Assam. They realized that search for political relation must be circumscribed by religious considerations. For king Jai Singh this policy was not a sudden affair. He established his relation with the East India Company through Haridas Gosai. The Goswamis of Bengal helped him in many ways. These, at once, evoked his admiration for Vaishnavism. After coming to Manipur the king with his subjects accepted the Vaishnavism of Chatanya. Similarly, the Goswamis of Mursidabad helped king Chandrakriti and his mother in securing the throne of Manipur. It was for this reason that he had deep reverence for the Bengali Gosais as his gurus (Ibungohal 1961). Not only the kings but nobles also took an important part in the propagation of this sect. It is mentioned in the chronicle Cheitharol Kumbaba that they spent a large sum of money in the construction and consecration of temples and installation of images. Some of them gave liberal charities and fed the Brahmans and the Vaishnavas. The brick temples constructed by Anantasai (minister of king Jai singh) and General Thangal in 1879 CE are still exist in Manipur (fig. 8). General Thangal dedicated the temple to Lord Krishna (Kunjeswori 2003: 130). This shows their inclination to Vaishnavism. Thus, the royal institutions and other Hindu temples played an important role, so far as the spread of Vaishnavism was concerned.

Fig. 8: Radha-Krishna temple (1879 CE)
Tolerant Attitude towards the Pre-Vaishnavite Faiths and the Mode of Preaching

An important point that needs our attention is the amalgamation of Vaishnavism with local elements and other pre-Vaishnavite Gods and Goddesses. It was the policy of the kings of Manipur to unite the conflicting interests of ancient Meetei religion and Vaishnavism, in such a way that should be a mutual compromise and amalgamation between the Meetei Gods with the Hindu Gods. Different Meetei kings issued injunction, equating Kwak Tanba festival with Durga Puja festival, Heikru Hidongba with the boat festival of Radha and Krishna. Varuni festival was merged with the remembrance day of Nongmai Pitanga.

Moreover, some ancient rites and ceremonies were incorporated into the Vaishnavite faith. Such a policy promoted at least the nominal acceptance of Vaishnavism, by the Meeteis. It strengthens the reconciliation between the Meetei religion and Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Sanamahi was made a devotee of Krishna. Nongpok Ningthou and Nongpok Panthoibi were identified with Shiva and Durga respectively. Some of the Meetei Gods and Goddesses were respected by them as secondary deities.

With the popularity of Vaishnavism, a system of musical worship was developed in connection with Puja. This is in tune with Chaitanya Sankirtan which is a simple mode of musical worship of Radha and Krishna through hymns of praise and enactment of scenes from the divined spot, in the forest of Vrindavan. This Sankirtan was far more effective than a sermon, however eloquent or impressive the letter may be. Very few Vaishnavas delivered sermons. Chaitanya’s method of group singing in private homes added fresh active and vital links of communication to the masses. Kirtan is still popular in Manipur in spite of its disappearance even in Bengal.

In the name of the propagation of Vaishnavism, functions such as narration and hearing of religious parables as well as Kathas and debates were held at different places at the expenses of the state (Sarmah 1966: 22-24). Such functions lasted for several days, weeks and even months. As noted earlier, the Vaishnavite texts figured prominently in the discourses. These were attended by a number of people. Though the kings, nobles and the masses were living a frugal life, they spent their money in organizing Sankirtan and Mahotsaba ceremonies. On certain occasions the kings kept their gates open for many days to the poor and thousands used to throng at the palace.
They sit to eat in long rows without any distinction of caste and creed. Everyone was welcome to the kirtan. Sri Mahaprasadam was extensively distributed among them from mid day till evening, batch after batch. The tidings of the royal kirtan spread far and wide. The notable kirtans performed during this period were those of king Jai Singh and king Chandrakriti (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 1989: 127, 151, 329, 369). Apart from the royal feast there were other feasts prepared in individual households and this continued for fifteen days in the month of Langban. Throughout these fifteen days feast were arranged daily in the houses of different villages in and around Imphal. The elderly persons were supplied food gratuitously.

Receptiveness of the People Particularly the Brahmans

It is discussed earlier that many Brahmans came to Manipur over a period of time. They began to develop many social and religious festivities apart from the old ones. The credit for the spread of Vaishnavism in Manipur goes to them who conducted the Vaishnavite rites and rituals. They explained the importance of Hindu rites and philosophy of Gaudiya Vaishnavism to the king and the people (Mangi and Mani 1965: 225).

External Influence Intelligently Channelized through the Ruling Houses

The chronicles make frequent references to the missionaries who came to Manipur. Mendicants, Yogis and pilgrims belonging to different sects used to visit to Manipur. Some of them came alone and some others in groups. It is significant that the descendents of Advaita, Nityananda, and Nidharam Acharya promoted the Chaitanya School vigorously. Some of them induced the king to follow the doctrine of Ahimsa and Bhakti. It was because of their efforts that Manipur remains the stronghold of Vaishnavism from the eighteenth century CE.

It is interesting to note that people and places were named by using Vaishnavite terms. The words or names are memorials that ultimately justified the contact of Manipur with other parts of India. The root meanings of the terms like Sri, Devi, Singha implied that they are Vaishnavite Hindus. Using such titles signify the love of the people for their faith. Gouranga, Goura, Chaitanya, Nimai Bisambara, Nityai Haridas, Narottam and Radha have becomes common names in Manipur. The Brahmans were
addressed as Eigya as an honour. The descendants of the Maharaja and their royal sons which were called Ningthemchas or Rajkumars were also addressed as Sankhya. People had started using Bengali clothes- dhoties and kurtas. This shows that they not only followed Vaishnavism but also preserved the Sanskritic and Bengali culture as well.

**Introduction of Brahman Akhara**

The success of Vaishnavism is also indirectly connected with the Varna order which was introduced in Manipur. The ruling family and the majority of the Manipuris called themselves as Kshatriyas. The kings proclaimed themselves as upholders of Varnasrama system. The Brahmans performed the priestly functions. The people were urged to act in conformity with the Varna order. The merchants and traders were worshiper of Vishnu and other deities of Vaishnavism. Actuated by the desire of religious merit they constructed many temples in several villages. The king and some well to do families donated Hindu temples and Mandapas (hall) in many places. It was due to their religious leanings that every village had temples. The spread of Vaishnavism also led to the formation of Varna order in a lose form in Manipuri society. The members of the higher Varna thought that they could earn spiritual merit by performing religious work; and the members of the lower Varna could hope that they could better their condition in the next world by following the social order imposed upon them by a Brahmanical society.

**Institutionalizing the Domination**

The result of these forms of social differentiation with its attendant demarcation of groups (and of status of individuals) coupled with various policies of popularizing Hinduism is quite clear. The ‘demarcation of groups’ marks the prevalence of some kinds of ‘structured inequalities’ between different groups of people. The basic concern at the back of these inequalities is that individuals and groups enjoy differential access to rewards on the basis of their position, and consequently ascended forms of cultural predominance of one group over the other. One may well argue that systems and institutions had been evolved to legitimize, or at best rationalize cultural predominance. Again, with the pronouncement of Hinduism as the official religion of Manipur Brahmans had become essential part of the society and consequently, the kingdom was started to transform slowly into Hindu castes society in which the Brahmans constituted
the upper most groups. “The proselytisation of the Meeteis in Hinduism under the threat of ostracization not only marked the beginning of the socio-cultural rupture within the Meeteis but also happened to be a citron for hill-valley divide” (Bijen, in press).

With their serious involvement in the social affairs, and having the exclusive authority of regulating religious and cultural matters, the Brahmans emerged as the most powerful group in Manipuri society. It was during the reign of king Bhaigyachandra that Brahmans were settled in every village throughout the kingdom. The temples which were managed by these Brahman priests were supported and properly safeguarded by the people in the village. Thus the village temples were the centre of religious propagation and feudal control agencies. Brahmans being the privileged upper caste, they were exempted from cultivation and feudal services (Kabui 1991: 278). The royal patronage to Brahmans reached its height. It is to be remembered that the law of Manipur, prescribed capital punishment for murder (Jhalajit 1992: 204). However, the degree of royal patronage was so high that exemptions were always granted to the Brahmans. Bhaigyachandra would not favour such a punishment for a Brahman though he might have committed a criminal act of serious kind. The royal chronicle, Cheitharol Kumbaba, for instance, inform us of such an incident that the king himself stepped down from the throne of Manipur twice- first, in 1763 CE when one Brahman Brahmachari was killed by a servant and second, in 1798 CE when a young Brahman named Kokpei Sharma was executed without knowledge (Kabui 1991: 277).

Beside religious services the Brahmans extended their services in the field of politics, reconciliation between the rebellious members of the family, making matrimonial alliances for them and above all, looking after the foreign affairs of the country, etc. Common people could not even speak anything against them and their actions. In order to institutionalize their authority and legitimize castes hierarchy, the Brahmans, with a paramount support from the king, formed a council named “Brahma Sabha”. Brahma Sabha is a community or council of Brahmans, which was formed with the objectives to look after the affairs of religion, cultural and customary life of the whole Vaishnavite Manipuris and their society. The seed of the Brahma Sabha was sawed during the reign of Garibniwaj (1709-1748 CE) when one Brahman named Sarvananda was given the charges to look after the affairs of Bamon community and to be an envoy of this community.
Initially, five Brahmans who were given the title 'Pancharatna' meaning five gems or jewels comprised this Brahman institution (also known as Bamon Loisang). The names of the Pancharatnas with their profession are given as under:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names of the Pancharatna</th>
<th>Professions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vidyalankar</td>
<td>Ornament of knowledge learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vidyanidhi</td>
<td>Receptive of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vidyasunder</td>
<td>Righteousness of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vachaspati</td>
<td>Lord of speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vyabasthakari</td>
<td>Lord of the supervision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These Pancharatnas remained for quite a long time as the most authoritative and influential Brahmans in Manipur. They were the ones who formulated the entire rules and regulations of the socio-religious and cultural life of the Vaishnavite Hindus as well as Meetei society. It is often claimed that the primary objective of this Brahma Sabha was the subjugation and oppression of the masses in the name of religion. It won’t be an exaggeration to say that even if the Brahma Sabha was not a branch of state administration, this Sabha was very powerful and the followers of Hinduism were much depended on its policy and regulation (Chatradhari 1972). To say the least, its important duties were to collect various kinds of taxes from people in the name of religion, to regulate the principles of purity and impurity, and untouchability. The Sabha could declare a man Mangba (impure) anytime and had the exclusive authority to purify the impure person anytime. Time and again, the Brahmans even pronounced a village or entire locality unclean and therefore untouchable. In order to reclaim their ‘purity’ a sum of amount had to be paid to the Brahmans which were again fixed by the Brahmans only.

This certainly indicates the institutionalization of caste system and its attributes in Manipur. This also brought the issues of untouchability based on the principles of purity and impurity. Thus, with the change of the Salais into Gotras, Manipuri society was clearly divided into different hierarchically ordered groups which could now be termed as castes. The Brahmans or the priests represent purity, sanctity and holiness. They were also proclaimed as source of learning and wisdom. Important religious
ceremonies are to be performed by the Brahmans only. Next to them, the ruling class of the Meeteis was given the label Kshatriyas or ‘worrier’. Meeteis who did not accept Hinduism were given a decree that those who got purify by becoming Hindus through a ritual to be conducted by a Brahman (who should be paid handsomely) would be parts of the castes system and those who remained unconverted would face social ostracization. At the bottom of the system there are tribal communities and some group of people who were known as Lois. They constituted the bottom-line of the society i.e. untouchables and considered as Mangba (unclean and impure). According to the caste hierarchy of Hindu society, they must perform unclean and degrading tasks and virtually segregated from the other groups. Inter-caste mixing with the hill people, the Lois (outcaste) and Muslims were declared profane or polluting. Consequently, different castes were contrived, in fact ‘invented’. To put in different words, from amongst the traditional generic groups different castes were ‘invented’, and in order to sustain social differences or what could be termed as ‘structured inequalities’ between these ‘castes’ various principles of caste system were accommodated in Manipur. As has been said earlier, the invention of castes and its accommodation in Manipur’s cultural settings was an important product of social engineering by the Brahmans and their supporters for their own advantages.

Manipuri society succumbed to it and started conforming to the principles of caste system. One important principle strictly observed was that of endogamy. Inter-castes marriage especially between the Brahmans and the Meeteis; Meeteis and Lois and tribal communities were strictly restricted. Moreover, the Brahmans would never accept food prepared by a Meetei or other castes; Meetei did not accept foods prepared by Lois and other groups who were declared untouchables. Thus, with the introduction of Hinduism, important features of the caste system were introduced in Manipur. Privileges of different sections were specified. Segregation of individual castes or of groups of castes was the most obvious mark of civil privileges and disabilities in Manipur. Society was categorized in different hierarchically ordered ‘strata’ with more favoured at the top and less privileges nearer the bottom. These statuses are almost fixed and there was little an individual could do to change his assignment to particular social positions. Indeed, the Brahmans who were, in fact, unknown among the Manipuris finally become most powerful social group.

- Some practices which were taken to be profane or polluting were intermixing with the hill people, the Lois (outcaste), Muslims, etc. It was obligatory for a Vaishnavas to take bath if he happened to mix up with them as an act of ritual cleansing.

- The Gonok Brahmins were regarded to be of lower in ritual status, and kept in length and people did not take food at their hands and dinning with them was avoided.

- Keeping and touching dogs and pigs was also regarded to be polluting.

- Human waste was among the most polluting items and mere touch of it was polluting and going amidst human waste was also forbidden.

- Speaking English languages, wearing pants, water from tap, going to educational institution, etc. were considered to be profane and clothing used while marketing were not allowed to take inside the home but had to be left outside. One was required to wash them for the next use.

- Meeteis from outside the Manipur kingdom were looked down upon as they were not allowed to share hookah with local people.

- Chemical soaps were forbidden.

- Visiting hotels, drama and cinemas halls and government offices were also regarded as polluting. Clothes worn by people involving in such acts had to be washed properly.

- A Brahman usually did not touch Hookah used by Kshatriyas.

The state was also a conscious party to this social engineering. This was a conscious effort on the part of the kings as they also gained benefits from the reconstitution of the social groups in terms of caste hierarchy. For instance, the Brahmins popularized the “divine rights of king” according to which the king’s power comes directly from the God and thus, his authority had a religious origin and thus sanctioned. Consequently, this helped the monarchs not only in establishing autocracy very firmly but also provided opportunity to exploit the people economically. For instances, when all avenues of the state revenue was exhausted the Bamons, in collaboration with the state, rampantly declared the peasants of a particular village or
group of villages as Mangba (impure, and by connotation outcaste). The benefits of this was that anyone who was declared as Mangba could buy back his previous Sengba (pure) status by paying Rs. 80-100 to the Bamons of the village. The money would be shared between the Brahma Sabha and the Maharaja (Kirti 1981: 5-15). The Manipur State Durbar even went on to the extent that in its order in January 1914, the practice of collecting taxes from the public in the name of religion was rationalized. This included Chandan Senkhai (contributions collected by Brahmans for supplying Chandan slat to the Hindu population), and religious payment collected by the Brahmans on the occasion of Ram Mela and Shivaratri (Lokendra 1998: 4). Thus, the kings could enjoy unlimited authority over the populace. And therefore, the invention and accommodation of castes and the accompanying system were successful in this particular context of Manipur due to the collision of interests of migrant Brahmans and the local rulers.

One may, now, well argue that in Manipur the rationalization and institutionalization of ‘cultural predominance’ was progressed through the invention of ‘castes’ and accommodation of the system in which castes relationships function. This not only introduced a new set of social milieu but also legitimized political supremacy of the ruling class. The caste system served as an important instrument of order in a society in which mutual consent rather than compulsion ruled; where the ritual rights as well as the economic obligations of members of one caste or subcaste were strictly circumscribed in relation to those of any other caste or sub-caste; where one was born into one’s caste and retained one’s place in society for life. The caste system, observing from this perspective, might have helped the political class in consolidating their power in the society as it enforced the idea that they were the ones who are born to rule.

With the successful acceptance of Gaudiya Vaishnavism by the Meeteis, Hinduization of Manipuri society and its religious life was completed by the beginning of the eighteenth century CE. As mentioned earlier, the successive kings of Manipur even put efforts to unite the conflicting interest of ancient religion and Vaishnavism and consequently the traditional social customs, rituals and other religious values (including traditional Meetei gods) were amalgamated with Hindu rituals and customs. For instance, the kings issued injunction, equating Kwak Tanba festival with Durga Puja festival, Heikru Hidongba with the boat festival of Radha and Krishna. Varuni festival was merged with the remembrance day of Nongmai Pitanga. Such policies had not only
strengthened the reconciliation between the Meetei religion and Gaudiya Vaishnavism but also reinforced Bramanical power in the society. By the mid eighteenth century CE the role and authority of the Brahmans had been unquestionably accepted by the people in Manipur. There was no aspect of social life in Manipur which could be sustained without the Brahmanical rituals. From the maintenance of the temples and other religious places to the observance of basic ceremonies of individual persons, the authority of the Brahmans permeated the entire social fabric. At various stages of life people had to observe important rituals which would be done by Brahmans only. Thus, birth ceremony, name giving ceremony, food giving, hair cutting, ear piercing, initiation, marriage and allied ceremonies, death rite and other ceremonies had to be performed by a Brahman only. When a woman perceived labour pain, she was confined to *Chabogsang* (a hut or room set apart for child delivery). A Brahman had to cleanse her twice once in the third month and another in the fifth month. When a child was born it was customary to entertain the people by *kirtan* and reading of passages from sacred scriptures which was to be done again by Brahmans. The house or the family in which the child was born was considered unclean for twelve days. A Brahman had to conduct the purificatory discipline.

Thus, Brahmans were regarded as the custodian of tradition and social life in Manipur and they enjoyed the highest status in the society. It is even claimed that “Brahman Gurus have made the religious life dynamic. They provided the masses with some kind of background of religious culture. They are, therefore, as important as the kings and rulers in the religious life of the people” (Kirti 1980: 273). The functions of Brahmans were taken to be of utmost sacred and their authority moral and spiritual thus, compelled respects of the people. More importantly, persons who committed religious offences called *dosa* or *apradha* was condemned by the society and was treated as outcaste.

Having achieved the support of the rulers and being successful in refashioning of the Manipuri society into a hierarchically divided caste society in which they placed themselves at the apex of the ladder the Manipuri Brahmans have now made a very strong influence over the affairs of the state. Acting in nexus with the Brahmans the succeeding rulers made several attempts to replenish the king’s treasury as well as its
supporters, the Brahmans. This become especially pronounces in the first half of twentieth century when several odd taxes were collected from the peasants.

As mentioned earlier when all avenues of the state revenue was exhausted the Bamons, in collaboration with the state, have rampanty declared the Manipuri peasants Mangba (impure, and by connotation outcaste). The benefits of this is that anyone who are declared as Mangba can buy back their previous Sengba (pure) status by some payment of Rs. 80-100 to the Bamons of the village (every Manipuri villages got their Brahman priest for their spiritual needs who were directly linked up with the well organized Brahman organization Brahma Sabha of the state). All this money has to go to the Sabha who in turn, it was said, shared this with the Maharajah. The most painful and oppressive system however, was that of Mangba and Sengba (purity and pollution). The system became quite rampant after 1920’s when Maharaja Churachand Singh, in collusion with the Brahma Sabha strictly enforced it in Manipur. Administration Reports of Manipur 1939-40 recorded “...well to do Brahmans had gone round the village informing people that the Bramha Sabha had declared them Mangba or outcaste and they offered for a consideration to have them declared Sengba or purified” (Administration Report of Manipur 1939-40: 3). Similar methods were also used to persuade villagers to pay “...for recovery of cattle which the Brahmans had themselves stolen” (Administration Report of Manipur 1939-40: 4). Another significant development was that the Manipur State Dvu-bar in its order in January 1914 rationalized the practice of collection of certain taxes from the public. They included Chandan Senkhai (contribution collected by Brahmans for supplying Chandan slaves to the Hindu population) and religious payment collected by the Brahmans for the occasion of Ram Mela and Shivaratri (Lokendra 1998: 4). This also made the poor masses miserable. According to the system of Mangba and Sengba any person could be declared as Mangba or polluted by any of the religious authority in the state. The victim and his family then would become outcastes. The family not only be socially boycotted but would not also be allowed to perform any of the customary religious rites and rituals during the period. If the excommunicated person was to be taken into normal socio religious fold, he would have to pay the ‘renunciation fee’ of Rs. 81 to Rs. 84. The system became so misused that by 1940s any Brahman could exploit the people by using the power of excommunication and it has been generally understood that during the first half of the twentieth century, not less than a quarter of the people of the valley
suffered ostracism in some form or the other. In spite of such severe socio religious oppressions, the Manipuri masses could not rise against the king because the old habit of submission and loyalty inherited from generation to generation had frozen them to the reality. The effective state intelligence and police forces coupled with severe punishments forms had compelled the people to live always in a state of fear psychosis. The popular saying of the time was that, “ningthougi manadi faklangda palW” (the king could not be betrayed) (Lokendra 1998: 116). Because of the chronic socio-economic and religio-cultural problems, the Meetei educated middle class, an offshoot of the colonial education system, began to launch systemic campaigns against the various social problems.

From the above discussion it is therefore confirmed that due to the adoption of Ramanandi and the under the increasing influence of Brahmans brought the changes in the socio cultural life of the Meetei society as well as how well secured and dominated the society by the Brahmans.

Name of traditional Meetei festivals which were changed after the adoption of Hinduism by the Meetei kings are given in the following table.

Table 4: Meetei festivals converted into Hindu festivals names

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meetei Names</th>
<th>Hindu Names</th>
<th>Months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heigru Hitongba</td>
<td>Jal Yatra</td>
<td>Hiyangei (September)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayang Yoiren Irruppa</td>
<td>Annual Snan</td>
<td>Wakching (December/January)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waira Tenkap</td>
<td>Kirtan of Lord Rama</td>
<td>Phairen (January/Fabury)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poirei Apakana</td>
<td>Loipam</td>
<td>Lamda (March)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kongba Leithong Phatpa</td>
<td>Vishnu Sankranti</td>
<td>Sajibu (April)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A hong Khongching</td>
<td>Ratha Yatra</td>
<td>Ingel (June)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offerings to the ancestors</td>
<td>Tarpan</td>
<td>Hiyangei (September)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wakambung Chingnung</td>
<td>Dasana Kwaktanba of Durga Puja</td>
<td>Mera/ Hiyangei (October)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nongombi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chanou Hui Chintu</td>
<td>Govardhan Puja</td>
<td>Wakching/Phairen (December/January)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nongmai Pitanga</td>
<td>Varuni Festival</td>
<td>Lamda/Sajibu (March/April)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheiraoba</td>
<td>Charak Puja</td>
<td>Sajibu (April)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imoinu Iratpa</td>
<td>Dipawali Festival</td>
<td>Wakching (December/January)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1 R. Brown recorded in 1879 that Lois were the original inhabitants of the valley, who remained as non-Hindu animists during the nineteenth century and who were primarily involved in the occupations such as pottery, salt making and silk weaving. But with the passage of time, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they formed an economically and socially deprived group of people and they remain throughout as pockets of strongholds of traditional religion and also as centers of exile for criminals and political opponents of the king. Due to this reason these villages were gradually segregated from the Meetei masses.


3 Temple of Hanuman Thakur was built by Maharaja Garibniwaj (1709-1748 CE) at Mongba Hanba, Eastern bank of the Imphal River in the year 1729 CE.

4 The temple was originally built by Maharaja Nar Singh (1844-1850 CE) in 1845 CE at Kangla, old palace, Imphal West, Manipur. The temple was severally damaged and idol of Radha Govindaji, installed herein were also damaged in the great earthquake of 1868 CE during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti (1850-1886 CE). The temple was reconstructed in its original form by Maharaja Chandrakirti in 1869 CE.

5 The Manipuri translation of this book by Surchand Sharma was being published by Sri Sri Govindaji Nartalay, Imphal, 1968.

6 Vide A. Brajabihari Sharma’s translation with an English introduction by E. Nilkanta Singh published by Sri Sri Govindaji Nartalaya. Whether this is Jay Singh’s book or not, scholars of Manipur have different views on this question. We cannot settle this controversy.

7 *Khagi Ngamba* is written in verse by M. Chandra Singh and published by MSP, in 1968.

8 The point has been gathered from the ballad singers, like Late Bhagiratha Singh, Late Bholai Singh, etc. who enjoyed reputation in Manipur.

9 The institution of Pancha Rama was later on expanded slowly by adding four more Ratnas. For instance, during the reign of Maharaja Chaurajit (1803 CE) four more Ratnas were added come to known as Navaratna (nine jewels). However, it was under the leadership of Phurailatpam Atompapu Sharma that the institution known as Brahma Sabha as a religious council of the Brahmans come into its formal existence.