

## The Advent of Vaishnavism: A Turning Point in Manipuri Culture

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### Abstract:

*In the last 2000 years of the history of Manipur, the arrival of Vaishnavism in Manipur in the 18<sup>th</sup> century had a marked influence to the people. It made its everlasting hold on Manipuri culture, religion, literature and in fact almost everything for which Manipur is known to the world at present. Even though Vaishnavism started to make its inroads in Manipur in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, it was not before the reign of Garibniwaz (Pamheiba) that Hinduism in the form of Vaishnavism could have its sway over the Manipur valley. King Garibniwaz declared Vaishnavism as state religion in 1724 and it was followed by a rigorous imposition and adoption of the new religion in Manipur valley. The event is also remembered for its strong imposition resulting in the burning and destroying of old Manipuri literature (Puya Mei Thaaba). Interestingly, the new religion was not imposed/extended to the hills of Manipur thereby creating a line of division or separation between the people of the hills and the valley. Still, with the arrival of Vaishnavism, Manipur has made tremendous progress in its culture, dance and literature.*

**Key words:** Vaishnavism, Meitei, culture, Puya Mei Thaaba.

### Introduction

The earliest documented history of Manipur, a tiny state landlocked in the extreme northeast India, dates back to the

first century AD and it begins with the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (33 AD – 154 AD). Even though Manipuri history dates back long before that, there remains no authentic document except the remains and caves which are the signs of human habitation. Manipur had been known throughout its history with various names – Meitrabak, Kangleipak or Meiteileipak and more than twenty other names. It was in the eighteenth century during the reign of Pamheiba that Manipur received its present nomenclature (Singh 10). Studies suggest that the valley of Manipur was earlier submerged in water and the first inhabitants in the valley were descended from the hills when certain portions began to dry and became hospitable to human settlement. As the area of dry land increased, human settlement in the valley expanded so as the population. Then there began the rise of small chieftains and their clans viz. Ningthouja or Mangang, Angom, Luwang, Khuman, Kha-Nganba, Chenglei and Moirang (Singh N.T., 10) and finally the merger of them all under the rule of Phakhangba with the capital at Kangla (Imphal) and thereby the birth of the *Meiteis* or *Meetei* in the valley. Thus, the people living in the valley began to be known as *Meiteis/ Meeteis*. Here, it may be noted that the people of the hills were termed as ‘*Hao*’ and the term is still in use today though many prefer the term ‘tribal’.

As time passed, more and more people began to settle in the valley from all the surrounding areas through migration and as captives in war throughout the centuries. These people got merged with the *Meitei* in different clans and continued to grow in numbers. As such, some of the *Meiteis* might be the descendants of the Burmese, Chinese, Shans, Aryans, etc. In all, Manipur valley was a melting pot of many communities and the kingdom of Manipur became more powerful. In due course, it extended its principalities and jurisdiction to the hills surrounding the valley. It extended its reign as far as the Kabow valley in Burma to the east; Cachar and Tripura in the west; Kohima in the north. Here, it might be noted that the

area of Manipur fluctuated with each ruler from the 15<sup>th</sup> century to 1891 according to the ability of the ruler. A ruler worth mentioning during the pre-Vaishnavite era was King Khagemba (1597-1652). It was during his reign that the first settlement of the Aryan Muslims began in Manipur in 1606 as he patronized the Muslim war captives by giving them land, wives, family titles, etc. and allowing them to settle permanently as *Meitei Pangals* (Manipuri Muslims). It is said that the Muslims brought along with them advanced agricultural techniques. The period of Khagemba is known as the golden age of Manipuri literature. There were much advancement in the field of education and literature. He advocated the spread of education and promoted the Royal Chronicle of Manipur to include the month of the events, after King Kiyamba's (1467-1508) policy to record the year, in the Manipuri script (*Meitei Mayek*).

### **The Advent of Vaishnavism**

Even though the Vaishnavism started to enter Manipur since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, its real play began with King Charairongba (1697-1709) and reached its zenith during the reign of King Bhagyachandra (1749-1798). However, Pamheiba (1709-1748) was the one who turned the *Meiteis* into Vaishnavite Hindus. Manipur attained its full development in agriculture, economy and culture during the reign of Charairongba. He installed many temples dedicated to the *Meitei* gods and a few dedicated to Hindu gods as he took to Hinduism. He was the first Hindu king of Manipur. His period is marked for the transition of *Meiteis* to Hinduism. Yet, he was a tolerant ruler and did not impose the new religion to its people. However, things took a new turn with his death and the accession to the throne by Pamheiba (Garibniwaz) in 1709. King Pamheiba was one of the most powerful rulers Manipur had. He consolidated the hills of Manipur under him, waged wars with Burma and Tripura, and

was ruthless in his adoption of Vaishnavite Hinduism. Pamheiba was initiated into the Vaishnavism in 1717 by Guru Gopal Das and announced it as state religion in 1724. It was followed by a rigorous adoption and imposition throughout the valley of Manipur. Some scholars argue it was because of his dubious origin that Vaishnavism was actively followed by Pamheiba while others put it as a state politics to consolidate power in the name of religion. Interestingly, even though he destroyed many images of traditional deities, he did not destroy the traditional deities belonging to the royal families and instead, "Brahmins were given the task to worship these deities... the adoption of Hinduism by the king was another effort to seize the monopoly of the traditional religious authorities in the sphere of politics, which was greatly interfered by the latter as they used to be the advisors of the king (Kh. Bijoykumar Singh 77)". Whatever it was, many people converted to Hinduism for it presented a more progressive ideology; many others were forced to convert for fear of the atrocities of the ruthless king; while a few left for a safer place to hide and follow the traditional *Meitei* tradition of local deity worship (*Sanamahi worship*).

After his initiation into Vaishnavite Hinduism, Pamheiba changed his name to Garibniwaz and the Hindu theory of 'Divine Kinship' of the king was preached. It was what Garibniwaz needed to legitimize his suzerainty after Charairongba as he was not the former king's real son. At this time, one Vaishnavite Hindu from Sylhet in present Bangladesh by the name of Shantidas Goswami was his royal '*purohit*' and under his cunning instigation, Garibniwaz destroyed many traditional Manipuri temples and idols of the local deities. He ordered to immediately discontinue all forms of traditional deity worship and rituals, and they were being replaced with new forms of rituals and ceremonies under the new religion. Apart from these, the king ordered all forms of traditional Holy Scriptures (*Puya*) and books in possession of

the local priests (*Maichous*) as well as the general public to be brought and he consequently let them be burnt to ashes. This event is still known in the history of Manipur as '*Puya Meithaba*'. All these writings were in the original Manipuri script. With it, Garibniwaz destroyed the rich literary tradition of Manipur accumulated in over a thousand years and the later writings followed Bengali script. After *Puya Meithaba*, Garibniwaz made sure that most of the traditional deity worship was stopped at any cost and he threatened excommunication and expulsion to those who disobeyed. It was a strict royal verdict that none dared to challenge. Meanwhile, he installed the new breed of Hindu Gods in the temples and started to practice the new rituals and prayers under the guidance of Guru Shantidas Goswami. The traditional *Meitei* clans were assigned new *gotras* accordingly and were told that the *Meitei* were descendants of the Aryan Kshetriyas and henceforth, the kingdom was named 'Manipur'. Thus, the transition from traditional deity worship to Hinduism was complete within a very short span of time.

After the death of King Garibniwaz, Manipur had been in a chaos and turmoil for many years. His death was followed by many political intrigues and coups in the royal family. It was also followed by many recurrent attacks from the Burmese as retaliation to Garibniwaz's daring forays in Burma in the past. Finally, Chingthangkhomba or Jai Singh (Maharaj Bhagyachandra) was on the throne of Manipur (1759-1961 & 1763-1798) as another promoter of Vaishnavism. Garibniwaz promoted the Ramanandi sect of Vaishnavism while during the time of Chingthangkhomba, it was the Chaitanya sect of Vaishnavism popularized in Manipur. Chingthangkhomba's reign in Manipur was also an important event in the history of Manipur as it was for the first time that Manipur formally signed a treaty with the British India in 1762 as it was the only measure to drive the Burmese out of the state. Chingthangkhomba brought normalcy to the devastated

kingdom of Manipur and he tried his best to bring Manipur back to its days of glory. He was a very religious man and a devoted follower of the Chaitanya sect of Vaishnavism. His devotion earned him the title of Rajashri Bhagyachandra and he set out as an example of the devout Hindu ruler. He ruled the kingdom from the Langthabal palace and not from the ancestral palace at Kangla. He never set foot on the ancestral palace and it was only in later years that he moved his capital from Langthabal to *Konthoujam Yumpham* (present Raj Bhavan) in 1796 (*Cheitharol Kumbaba* 168).

After Garibniwaz, Bhagyachandra stands out as the sole king of Manipur who was a devout Hindu king in the history of the state. But there is a marked difference between the two in terms of their approach to the religion. The former is generally termed a religious fanatic while the latter is known as a pious ruler. Garibniwaz adopted Hinduism and spread it through terror and force while Bhagyachandra's propagation of Hinduism was through persuasion and peaceful means, and the latter proved more effective. A clever ruler, he did not make any foolhardy attack on the Burmese soil during his heydays and the Burmese also did not take any punitive action against Manipur during the last three decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As peace and normalcy restored, Bhagyachandra found time for work towards development and religious worship. At the onset of his kingship at Langthabal, *Raas Leela* was staged for five days for the first time with the installation ceremony of Shri Govindaji (*Cheitharol Kumbaba* 133). He is also said to have further promoted the traditional *Hiyang Tanaba* (boat race). Here it might be mentioned that Bhagyachandra himself was very fond of dance and drama, and he is credited to the introduction of *Raas Leela*, a new form of religious dance drama based on the traditional *Lai Haraoba* dance with graceful modifications under his instructions. He is also said "to have ordered the re-compiling of the lost *Cheitharol*" (Laishram 20). He initiated certain religious reforms and introduced religious

theatres to win the masses and popularize the Chaitanya sect of Vaishnavism. Various Hindu temples were constructed throughout the kingdom under the instruction of the king and they were put under the charge of the Brahmins. Many Brahmins migrated from Sylhet and Cachar, and they were patronized and settled by the Manipuri king. The trend initiated by Garibniwaz and Bhagyachandra was continued by its successive rulers and in due course of time, the kingdom of Manipur became a Hindu kingdom and the people still continue to lead a Hindu life – though a different type of Hindu compared to other Hindus in India.

### **Effect of Vaishnavism in Manipur**

Researchers generally argue that the people of Manipur have lost its real identity with the adoption of Indian Hinduism. It all started with the reign of Garibniwaz and his so called religious fanaticism. With it, Manipur lost an entire tradition of its rich literary culture and tradition. Though many *Puyas* had been re-written and revived later on, much had been lost. The traditional Manipuri script which was used to write *Puyas* is unknown to most Manipuris and the script is under a process of a new revival in the last three decades. Still, it would take a long time and it may never attain its former status in the days to come. Apart from the traditional script, the people have lost much of the traditional way of life and its tradition of deity worship. Hinduism has no history of violence in its adoption and propagation in India but the history of Manipur must be an exception in the case of Garibniwaz under the guidance of his Guru Shantidas Goswami.

Religion is supposed to bring peace and harmony to the people as no religion promotes violence and war, but history proves otherwise and the history of Manipur is no exception. Jyotirmoy Roy claims the advent of Vaishnavism during the reign of Garibniwaz as a positive sign and says:

The beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century saw the dawn of a new era in the history of Manipur... Though India has nothing to be proud of the new century, it has at least added a bright chapter of the history of Manipur to the history of India. (Roy 43)

On the contrary, there are claims that Hinduism has brought caste system and division of the people in the casteless society of Manipur. There was no notion of caste in pre-Hindu Manipur (Singh, K.B. 62) and it all changed with the coming of Hinduism. The king and all the *Meiteis* were declared as Kshetriyas. The *Meitei* became a single caste society. As such, “the casteless Manipuris who are Mongoloid was systematically assimilated to the Hindu social fold and accordingly a new social order of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’ was emerged into the region where there was strong notion of equality based on tribalism and egalitarianism” (Kh. Bijoy Singh 67). With the creation of a caste-based society in Manipur and the elevation of the *Meiteis* in the social strata, the Manipuri Hindus began to change their food habit and dress style. The traditional hunter and meat eater turned vegetarian but they consumed fish with relish as the introducers of the new religion were generally Bengalis, a fish loving community of India. It also alienated the tribes of Manipur from the *Meiteis* as Kh. Bijoykumar Singh says,

The process of Hinduisation brought about a sharp divide between the valley people and hill tribes in which Hindu Meiteis started feeling ritually and culturally superior while the hill tribes were branded as untouchables because of their impure habits and culture like eating meat, drinking wine and offering the same to their deities. (72)

It led to exclude the tribes of Manipur from the traditional *Lallup*, the military system of the time. The result is not a surprise. The *Meiteis* lost its former support of the tribes and became weaker as proved by the events of Burmese incursion

time and again. In terms of dress, the change was more towards a Bengali style of dressing.

Another weakness of Hinduism in Manipur was its policy of capital punishment in the form of *Loi* (exile) whereby the king exiled those who did not embrace Hinduism. The *Lois* of Manipur belongs to the same clan of *Meiteis*. There were two types of *Lois* – one who pays tribute to the king or one who is put into exile. They “continued to be *lois* even after they ceased to pay tribute because they did not embrace Hinduism” (Devi 19). This further divided the *meities* in the valley. Hinduism also brought the instance of *sati* (burning of widows) to Manipur and “the first recorded instance of *sati* occurred in 1726. When Sanahal Murari died, he was cremated and two of his wives leapt into the fire and died” (Laishram 54).

Here, it must be remembered that there were also some Muslim settlements in Manipur since 1606 from the time of King Khagemba. These Muslims were war captives of Khagemba and they had brought many crafts and improved means of cultivation in Manipur. They were given land and *Meitei* women as wives, and made to settle in the valley. Though the *meities* adopted Hinduism, there were no adoption of the new religion by the Muslims and they were never forced or asked to convert by the subsequent *Meitei* rulers. Even the most intolerant Garibniwaz did not include them into the fold of Hinduism. Here, one can at least see a tolerant side of the *Meitei* rulers. The Muslims had not been treated as untouchables but they were always the ‘other’. It might be because of their advanced culture and mode of life that they continued to live a normal course without interference from the Hindu kings and Brahmins.

Even though Hinduism brought many negative impacts on Manipuri society, it has also certain positive aspects. There had been a banning of the *Meitei* script during the reign of Garibniwaz but it could not wipe it out completely. The old literature was re-written in Bengali script and a new mode of

Brahminical literature was started. The Brahmins became the learned teachers or Gurus and established a new form of education. There were much cultural development seen in the new way of life and progress was also made in the field of literature, dance and music. Bhagyachandra's introduction of the *Raas Leela* is seen as one of the greatest contributions of Vaishnavite Hinduism in Manipuri culture. He introduced three forms of Manipuri dance drama (Raas Leela) – *Maha Raas*, *Vasanta Raas* and *Kunja Raas*. The tradition continued and Chandrakirti (1850-1886) introduced *Nitya Raas* while Churachand Maharaj (1891-1941) introduced *Diva Raas*. Manipuri *Raas Leela* is a very graceful form of dance resulted from modifications made in the traditional Lai Haraoba dance by King Bhagyachandra himself. Praising the beauty of this all-women dance drama, Khelena Gurumayum says:

Manipuri Raas Leela is not at all erotic in content. One has to bow down to it with great devotion. It represents a field of spiritual realisation on which only the devotees of the high order can grasp. (252)

Hinduism has brought Manipur closer to the Indian society and helped promote its new culture. Apart from *Raas Leela*, Vaishnavism has given Manipur its *Natya Sankritana*, *Goura Lila*, *Lairik Thiba-Haiba*, and a host of other religious and cultural events. It has also changed the hitherto *Meitei* hunters and eaters of meat into vegetarians. The development of Vaishnavism “paved the way to rapid cultural integration of Manipuris with the rest of India. Had the people of Manipur not received the guidance ... they could not probably have reached their present higher level of culture than those of backward communities around them” (Roy 43). Manipuri Vaishnavism, if observed closely, is not the same as their parent forms in Sulhet and other parts of India. In Manipur, it has developed a new form or rather a new hybrid form of Vaishnavism is developed. It made slight modifications and

absorbed much of the traditional culture in order to be accommodated in Manipuri society.

## Conclusion

To know oneself, one has to study the past but it is not possible to continue living in the past. History is not just a record of the past events for it mirrors the ethos of the people and helps study the mistakes for a better future. The coming of Vaishnavism destroyed the rich tradition of Manipuri worship and literature of *Puyas*. *Puyas* were not just ordinary literature. It recorded the teachings of the *Meitei* forefathers. They also contain narratives of history, the royal accounts, events, social organisational setup, rituals, ritual expertises, religious festivals and practices, written mostly by *Maichous* (priests). With the event of *Puya Meithaba*, Manipur has lost such a rich treasure in its literature and many rituals associated with it. The study has shown that Vaishnavism has done more damage than benefit the people of Manipur. It has divided the people of the hills from the people of the valley and it's the resultant conflict that is seen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century political crisis in the state. Still, all is not lost. As stated earlier, Manipuri Vaishnavism is a product of Indian Vaishnavism and Manipuri tradition. Manipuris still attend to their ancient deities and customs side by side with Vaishnavism. Even now the traditional deities of "Panthoibi, Nongshaba, Sanamahi, Imunglai and other deities of the old faith are enjoying due propitiation" (Roy 198). People continue to worship at the temple of *Thangjing* at Moirang, *Sanamahi* at Imphal and the traditional *Maibas* and *Maibis* (priests and priestesses) still exist in every village and at the same time, Hindu pilgrimages continue to be practiced. The festivals of *Cheiraoba*, *Heikru Hidongba* and *Lai Haraoba* are still celebrated in grandeur. The old faith is not dead. Rather, one can see a new regeneration of the *Sanamahi* cult in the last three decades.

The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* or the royal chronicle of Manipur has been re-written and published in Manipuri as well as English editions in the past few decades. Culture is an ever evolving entity and with time there is always a cultural change. It “embraces all changes occurring in any branch ... including art, science, technology, philosophy, etc. as well as changes in the forms and rules of social organization” (Davis 622). The change could be partial or whole and long lived or short lived. But change always occurs and it must be accepted.

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