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REVIVALISM, ETHNICITY AND MANIPURIS OF ASSAM

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Ng. Dayamay Singha

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Department of Cultural Studies
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Tezpur University
Napaam, Assam, India

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ABSTRACT

The Manipuris/Meiteis/Meeteis, who consider themselves as the original inhabitants of Manipur, are spread all over the North East and other parts of the Indian sub-continent due to various historical reasons. In the aftermath of the conversion of the community to Vaishnavism, a section of Hinduism propitiating Lord Vishnu, this relocation saw them, carrying their new found faith along with deep rooted traditional religious and cultural behaviour which persisted as embedded structures. Free from the diktats of a powerful clergy and monarchy of Manipur, the traditional religious and social mores started reasserting themselves and a revivalist movement of the old faith called *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism* started since 1930s amongst the Meitei population settled in Assam and the movement gradually found a way back to Manipur. This work delineates the historical tangents and cultural as well as political significance of religious revivalism amongst the Meiteis with a particular reference to Assam.

The thesis, consisting of five chapters dwells upon the above problem of research in detail as outlined below.

Chapter 1: Introduction; Historical Overview:

It depicts a historical overview of the Meiteis and their diasporic locales in the north eastern part of India. It also discusses the overall social set up of the Meiteis.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Parameters of the Study of Revivalist Movement, Ethnicity and Manipuris of Assam

This chapter studies the theoretical parameters involved with the study of the present problem including socio-religious movements, revivalism and ethnicity on various theories put forward by different social scientists to categorize the particular movement in question.

Chapter 3: Manipuris of Assam and Their Socio-Cultural Practices

This chapter aims at drawing perspectives on religion adhered by the Meiteis and social as well as cultural practices associated with it with special reference to the Meiteis of Assam.

Chapter 4: Revivalism; Rhetoric and Practice amongst the Manipuris of Assam

This chapter discusses the various aspects of the revivalist movement and its overall impact on the Meitei society and how the Meitei society absorbs and synthesizes the two distinct cultures produced by the religious practices of Vaishnavism and their age old traditional belief system. This chapter also describes the life and philosophy of Naoria Phulo, who pioneered the revivalist movement of the traditional religion of the Meiteis in 1930s, and looks at the movement gradually gaining its ground in Manipur where it has taken newer socio-political dynamics.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter draws a conclusion about the above discussions and also discusses how the movement that had started in the 1930s still remains abiding in the Meitei society in general and the Meitei of Assam in particular.

DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

The thesis entitled “Revivalism, Ethnicity and Manipuris of Assam” is being submitted to the Tezpur University in partial fulfillment for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Studies under the School of Humanities and Social Sciences is a record of bonafide research work accomplished by me under the supervision of Dr. Pradip Jyoti Mahanta and Dr. Sunil Kumar Dutta, Department of Cultural Studies, Tezpur University.

All helps received from various sources have been duly acknowledged.

No part of this thesis has been submitted elsewhere for award of any other degree.

Date: 07.02.2013

Place: Tezpur

Ng. Dayamay Singha
(Ng. Dayamay Singha)

Department of Cultural Studies

Tezpur University

Napaam 784 028

Assam, India.



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CERTIFICATE OF THE SUPERVISOR

This is to certify that the thesis entitled, “Revivalism, Ethnicity and Manipuris of Assam” submitted to the Tezpur University in the department of Cultural Studies under the School of Humanities and Social Sciences in partial fulfillment for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Studies is a record of research work carried out by Ng. Dayamay Singha under our supervision and guidance. He has complied with all the requirements as laid down in the regulations of Tezpur University for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Studies including course work.

All helps received by him from various sources have been duly acknowledged. No part of this thesis has been reproduced elsewhere for award of any other degree.

Signature of

Supervisor:


(Pradip Jyoti Mohanta)

Professor & Head,

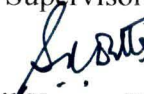
Department of Cultural Studies

Tezpur University

Napaam 784 028,

Assam, India

Co-Supervisor:


(Sunil Kumar Dutta)

Professor,

Department of Cultural Studies

Tezpur University

Napaam 784 028,

Assam, India

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Date: 07-02-13

Place: *Tezpur University*

Dr. Paragmani Sarma

A Tribute

*You've departed
But the sweet memories remain
Your invaluable suggestions
Still echo in my heart
But a place is vacant
That can never be filled
Your absence is felt
In every step of my life.*

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Ng. Dayamay Singha
Ng. Dayamay Singha

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Chapter I

Introduction: Historical Overview

Love for one's own culture and tradition, a priceless legacy left behind by the forefathers and handed down through the generations, is ingrained in the hearts of the people. This seems to be all the more evident from the life-styles and social mores of the Manipuris/Meiteis/Meeteis¹ who still retain the age-old customary practices of their forefathers, irrespective of their place of settlement. The Meiteis of Assam are no exception to this, with the people keeping alive the culture and tradition of their forefathers close to their hearts. Free from the diktats of a powerful clergy and monarchy of Manipur, the traditional religious and social mores started reasserting themselves and a revivalist movement of the old faith called *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism*² started since 1930s amongst the Meitei population settled in Assam and the movement gradually found a way back to Manipur.

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

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

² The revivalist movement started by Naoria Phulo in Assam terms the name of the Meitei religion as *Apokpa-ism*, worshippers of the Supreme Creator, and they follow the religion as *Apokpa* religion. However, the movement when reached the Manipur valley, it came to be termed as *Sanamahi* movement and the religion as *Sanamahi* religion, may be to have a wider support not only from the Meiteis but also from other non Meitei communities.

predominant tribal region, replete with protracted records of isolation, difficult terrain, and lack of intense inter-ethnic contacts, had witnessed formation of three types of society and polity such as 'tribe', 'chiefdom' and 'state' (Das, 1989).

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

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

Most of these groups, however, are identified with an original homeland, while some are found spread all over the north eastern region and cannot be linked with any particular space that can be designated as their

original homeland. The ethnic groups like the Garos and the Khasi-pnars, various Naga groups like the Jame Nagas, Rengmai Nagas, Zeliangrongs and the Meiteis are found in various parts of Assam, and they are linked with their own homelands. While the Garos and the Khasi-Pnars are from Meghalaya, the Naga tribes are associated with Nagaland, and the Meiteis with Manipur. The Meiteis have a considerable presence in southern Assam, central Assam and upper Assam. Other ethnic groups like the Hmars, Kukis, Paites and the Reangs are found in different parts of the north east, including Assam, but have no association with any particular state or territory. Although many religious missionary works have been carried out by the missionaries of Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, Hinduism remained the religion in of the royal families of the Kacharis, the Ahoms, the Jaintias, the Kochs, the Tripuris, and the Manipuris.

Manipur³ was known to the *Khagis* (Meitei word for the Chinese) as *Ka-se*, and to the *Ava* (Meitei word for the Burmese) as *Ka-the*; the Ahoms called them *Mekhali*, and the Kacharis called them *Mogli*, and the old Assamese name for them was *Moglu*, while the Bengali name of the state was *Moglai*. (Gait,1906.) The reconstruction of the history of Manipur in the early period was based on the chronicles of the Ningthouja dynasty supplemented by other clan genealogies and some literary sources (Kabui, 1991). There is, however, scarcity of source material to reconstruct the history of Manipur. This may be due to the burning of

³ Manipur, one of the eight states in India's North East, and lies between Latitude 23° 83' north and Longitude 93° 03' and 94° 78' east. The total landmass consists of about 22,327 sq km of which two third of the total land consists of hills and one third of the leveled country forming the broad valley which is about 790metres above the sea level with a total area of 700 sq miles approximately. Manipur is geographically bounded by Myanmar on the east, Nagaland on the north, Assam and Mizoram on the west and Mizoram and Myanmar on the south. Its unique location bordering Myanmar provides her the unique advantage of acting as the 'gateway to the east'. It has a population of 2721756 (according to the 2011 census report) of which about two thirds of the total population are Meiteis, who live in the valley and the rest of the population, mostly of Kuki and Naga stock, live in the hills.

historical records and religious scriptures (known as *puya*⁴ *meithaba*) in the event of religious conversion to Hinduism in the eighteenth century orchestrated by King Pamheiba (whose Hindu name was Garibniwaz, 1709–1748) under the guidance of the hosting priest Shantidas Goswami, a Hindu missionary of the Ramandi sect from Bengal. It is, however, agreed by majority of the scholars that “the Manipuris have been the politically, economically and socially dominant group in the known history of Manipur” (Dutta, 1994) and the Manipuri language or *Meiteilon* serves as the *lingua franca* for various tribal groups who otherwise speak different tribal languages.

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

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

puya is the religious scripture and royal chronicle of Manipur.

be known as *Kangleipak* (land of *Kanglas*⁵), *Meitrabak* or *Meiteileipak* (land of the Meiteis). The royal chronicles, folklore tradition and legends of Manipur trace their historical period fairly continuous from the 30th year of the Christian era. The recorded history of Manipur begins with the coronation of the first Meitei King, *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba* in 33 A.D.

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

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

⁵. *Kangla* is the seat of power of the Meitei kings. It is believed that in Manipur before they were merged into a single political unit under the *Ningthoujas*, all the seven *salais* had seven *Kanglas*, which were their respective seats of power.

peak. The Burmese kings and chiefs approached him to settle their disputes and beg the hands of Manipuri princesses. It was further improved and enlarged by king Garibaniwaz and after him by the successive kings of Manipur. Since the reign of Maharaja Bhagyachandra (1762 - 1798 A.D.), due to repeated invasion by the Burmese, the *Kangla* was deserted several times. The present state symbol *Kanglasha* (a three headed lion facing three directions) stands in front of the *Kangla* toward the west. The chronicle *Cheitharol Khumbaba* records the construction of the *Kanglasha* in Saka Era 1726 (1804 A.D) during the reign of Maharaja Chourjit. The Burmese destroyed the *Kanglasha* in 1844 which was reinstalled during the reign of Nara Singh, in the same year in 1844 (Khelchandra et al, 2006).

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

Joykumar observes that people look at the *Kangla* from different perspectives. The people who believe in the traditional religious practices regarded it as a sacred place. Therefore, they are trying to install images of their traditional deities inside the palace. On the other hand because of the construction of the Govindaji temple, after the en masse conversion to Vaishnavism, the people who believed in the new religion, thought it as their sacred religious place. The people who worked on culture took it as an important cultural site and historians took it as an important

historical monument. This is the significance and beauty of this palace. He further adds, “The *Kangla* is the history of the people of Manipur and the history of Manipur is the *Kangla*.” (Joykumar, 2006)

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

Constitution Act in 1947 before its merger with India was an important landmark in the history of Manipur.

1.1 Meitei Myth of Origin:

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

Bhattacharya (2006) observes that the Manipur mentioned in the *Mahabharata* was situated near Kalinga and its identification with modern Manipur is not justifiable. Similarly R.C Majumdar observes that the description of Manipur in the epic is located in Orissa coast (cited in Sanajaoba 1988). Prof Gangumei stated that after the conversion of the royal family to Hinduism, they claimed to be the descendents of Arjuna, as indicated by the royal genealogy, prepared after Hinduisation. But there was no mention of Babrubahana or Arjuna in the Pre-Garibniwaz chronicles and genealogies of the royal family which was founded by Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (Kabui 1988). H.D. Sankalia writes; “What we have to remember is that even the critical editions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* do not represent the original epics but their redactions in about the 5th century AD.” (Sankalia, 1974.)

The theory of Hindu origin of the Manipuris has been rejected by historians and authorities like Pemberton, B.H. Hudson, T.C. Hudson, G.A. Grierson, S.K. Chatterjee et al. Pemberton considers them to be the descendants of a Tartar colony from North West frontier of China (Pemberton, 1835). Hudson's theory of Tai ground that the Meiteis are Tibeto-Burman speakers while the Tai are of Siamese Chinese linguistic family (Hudson, 1908). G.A. Grierson put forward another theory that the Tibeto-Burman and other Mongolian groups inhabited the upper courses of Yangtze and the Hung-Ho rivers in China in pre-historic times. Their kinsmen migrated southward and settled in the Hukwang Valley of the present land of the Catnips in the upper Burma before they moved further down to the Manipur valley. (Grierson, 1904)

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

It is evident from the fact that the Meiteis belong to the Tibeto-Burman family, speak the Kuki-Chin group of languages. Whether they, like the other Tibeto-Burman(s), are the migrants to Manipur or the indigenous

people, is not at all finally pronounced. According to Meitei legends and folklore traditions the valley of Manipur was totally under water which was drained by them and established their settlements in the valley. Some scholars, in fact, majority of the scholars believe that they entered Manipur from Burma (the present Myanmar) and the Meitei culture, at least in the past, had been the elongation of the culture of the Mon-Khmer Region of South East Asia.

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

The Meitei pantheon and cosmology have their own myth of origin, which is known as *Leishem wari*⁶. *Atiya Maru Sidaba* or *Ipung-Loinaiba-Sidaba Mapu* is the supreme God of the Meitei traditional pantheon. He once wished to create the universe and its creatures. He brought forth seven gods or deities, drawn from different directions. They were – *Nongpok Ningthou*, *Awang Kaubru Asuppa*, *Thanjing Koirel Lai*, *Khanna Chouba Wangbarel*, *Ilai Pulinglai*, *Lainingthou Panganba*, and *Leiningthou Salailel Sidaba*. They were then assigned with different tasks. *Sidaba Mapu* then transformed Himself into a three days old baby. According to His wishes, *Salailel Sidaba* and his consort *Leimarel Sidabi* adopted the child.

⁶. *leishem* = origin of the universe, *wari* = legend.

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

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

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

⁷. *sana* = gold, *mahi* = liquid, in short essence of gold.

⁸. *taibang* = worldly, *mi* = man.

⁹. *paotak* = name of the river, but literal meaning is advice, *hidel* = river.

¹⁰. *pa* = father, *khangba* = to know, hence, one who knows ones father.

singing which is known as *ougri-hangel-chongba*¹¹. The present day Manipuri folk dance form *thabal chongba* is based on this dance performed by seven wives of *Pakhangba*.

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

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

¹¹. It is a dance form accompanied by the song; *ke kre ke mo mo, yangen shamba shao shao, keiga yenga tokpaga kambaga, yenkhong fate chasillo, leigi yenni chaphade*.

who occupies the other corner near the side wall of the last but one room of the traditional Meitei dwelling house.

1.2 Origin of the name Manipur:

As discussed earlier, in the ancient records, chronicles and archaic literatures such as *puyas*, various names of the land is found viz. *Meiteileipak*, *Meitrabak* and *kangleipak* in various phases of history, but the name 'Manipur' never occurred in the literatures written prior to the eighteenth century. In fact the name 'Manipur' was foreign to the natives till the adoption of Hinduism in the early 18th century. According to the *puya Sanamahi Laikan*, a Hindu missionary named Shantidas Goswami from Bengal entered *Meiteileipak* to propagate Ramandi sect of Hinduism during the reign of Pamheiba (1709-1748). Having been deeply influenced by the teachings of this missionary, the king converted himself into the new faith, assumed the Hindu name Garibniwaz and declared it as the state religion with a strong royal decree. All the indigenous literatures and historical records, religious scriptures and *puyas* were collected and burnt down to ashes under royal decree at the *Kangla*, the capital of *Meiteileipak* or *Kangleipak* and the land came to be known in the Sanskrit nomenclature as 'Manipur'. (Sanajaoba, 1997) This event is known as *puya mei-thaba*¹² in the history of Manipur. This view is also supported by the legends and folklore traditions of Manipur.

In fact many Sanskrit words appeared for the first time in the *Ningel Inscription* issued by Garibniwaz, which was recorded in the year 1736 AD. It opens with an invocatory line *Jaya Shree Garibniwaz Maharaja Simha Nongsagumba*¹³... and closes with the sentence of salutation as *Shree Ram Ram*. Use of Sanskrit terminology in religion or any other discipline is never to be found in the pre-Garibniwaz inscriptions, not even in the inscription of Charairongba, father of Garibniwaz. In post-

¹². *puya* = Chronicle and indigenous literature, *mei* = fire, *thaba* = set on.

¹³. *nongsa* = lion, *gumba* = like a

Garibniwaz inscriptions many Sanskrit words appear such as *Shreejut*, *Kripa*, *Madhararada Govinda Padaravindara*, *Shree Hari*, etc. (ibid)

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

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

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

his *Ningel* Inscription there is no instance of mentioning the name of the state as Manipur. (ibid)

1.3 Language and Literature:

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

The beginning of Manipuri literature may go back to 1500 – 2000 years from now. According to Suniti Kr. Chatterjee “... the literature which the Manipuris have given to India and the world in their own Language, the beginning of which unquestionably go back to some 1500 – 2000 years. But people who do not understand the history, culture and atmosphere of Manipur and who have no knowledge of the great things which one can find in Manipuri literature erroneously consider Manipuri to be one of

the backward languages of the *adivasi* or primitive people of India. But any superficial knowledge of the language and its literature would convince anyone of the great value of the literature in the Meithei or Manipuri language. Their literature is in the forefront of the advanced literature spoken by millions of people in the Indian union and it has some special quality and character of its own” (Chatterjee, 1951). He further summed up that the Meitheis or Manipuris are the most advanced section of Kuki-Chin people. (Ibid) In fact, Manipuri language, the state language of Manipur is the only important language in the Tibeto-Burman family (Manorama Year Book, 1882). The Meiteis had a strong sense of historicity and maintained chronicles and *puyas* and numerous records of their genealogy, society, religion, government, astrology, charms and mantras, lexicography, medicine, earth sciences etc. (Bhatt & Bhargava, 2006.) More than a thousand Meitei scriptures had been already existed before 18th century AD. Such a rich heritage could be developed and maintained because the Meiteis came into contact with the Chinese long back and the art of writing was spread extensively as a result of their historic association with the Chinese who were the first literate people on the earth and who invented paper and the art of writing. (Ibid)

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

1597 – 1652 AD. The epigraphic description of the eighteen basic alphabets is also depicted in the *puyas* like *Wakoklol Thilel Salai Amailon Pukok*.

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

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

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

The Meiteis have a unique social system of *salai*, which is an exogamous unit, each tracing their origin from a common mythical ancestor known as *Salailel Apokpa* who is the supreme deity of the Meitei divine pantheon. It is believed that *Salailel Apokpa* had seven wives through whom he had seven sons namely;

Mangang-pa,
Luwang-pa,
Khuman-pa,
Angom-pa,
Moirang-pa,
khaba-Nganba-pa,
Sarang-Leisangthem-pa.

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

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

T.C Hodson claims that there was ten *salai* in the Meitei Society. He refers to the Meitei mythology called *Numit Kappa*, according to which formerly there were ten sons representing ten *salai* and the other three have been extinguished in the inter-clan conflict. (Hudson, T.C. 1908) Various existing literatures and traditions also revealed that there were

seven *yeks* and nine *salai* and in this regard we may refer to the popular saying of *yek taret amasung salai mapal*, which means seven *yek* and nine *salai*. It is to be noted here that some scholars treated *yek* and *salai* are synonymous having same meaning and functions. They do not differentiate *yek* and *salai* from each other. (ibid, Sircar, 1984) However *yek* and *salai* have different connotations when it operates. When it's a Meitei rule of marriage it is not the *salai* but *yek* through which the preference of marriage mate is chosen. But when it for rites and rituals related to the group, they use the term *salai*.

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

Salai was originally having a territory, speaking a dialect and enjoying socio-political autonomy. Later on, it was reduced to social autonomy when it came under the Meitei rule. On the one hand, *yek* is an exogamous social group within which marriage is not permissible. It is believed that in order to enforce the rule of exogamy among the *salai*, the system of *yek* came into being. The rule of *yek* denotes that the marriage between two persons belonging to the same *salai* is forbidden. This

system somehow enforces the rule of *salai* exogamy in the society. Thus, it enforces the inter dependence among the members of different *salais*. The institution of *yek* is an important craft of the state that had been developed later in the Meitei society in order to cease out the possible tension and conflict between the *salais* that they had before the formation of the Meitei nation.

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

The *salai* is a patrilineal unit and it is assumed that all the members of a given *salai* are related through blood. Men and women belonging to same *salai* are called *yek-thoknaba* which means taboo against marriage. Any person marrying within the *salai* or from the prescribed *yek* is followed by a practice locally called *eenthokpa*, a sort of social ostracism which denies the individual from membership in any socio-economic association like *singlup* or *marup* and it is the biggest form of punishment given at the collective level. It thus functions as a powerful system of social control. The system also enforces the rule of exogamy

that the society needed when nine *salais* came together to form a Meitei community. In the pristine past such persons were even sentenced to death. (Manjusri, Chaki-Sircar, 1984)

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

The head of the *salai* is called *piba*, who requires performing certain rites and rituals of the *salai*. The role of the *piba* is to look after the welfare of the members of his *salai* and settle small disputes among them. All the *salai* also have strict prescribed day, month, modes and materials for worshipping their respective ancestors. For example, the *Mangang salai* offers red lotus, red *sareng* (*buwal* fish), *thamjet* (lotus fruit). Their special colour is reddish gold and special day is *Sagolsen* (Thursday). And month is *Inga* (June/July). *Luwang* day is *Eerai* (Friday), month is 12th lunar day of *Wakching* (January). They offer *mellei* (a kind of orchid), brown *sareng* (*Buwal* fish), *kihom* (pineapple) and their colour is bluish white. Every year all the *salai* perform the ceremony of *Salailel Apokpa khurumba*, which is a practice of offering of prescribed materials to their ancestors on the particular day as prescribed in the *puyas*. This particular ceremony is the means of reinforcing harmony and cooperation among the members of a *salai* whose members are now lived in different places. This is also a way how an individual identifies with his or her *salai* and differentiate him or her from the rest of the *salais*.

Each *salai* regard some objects of taboo as *namungba* or *laigi yenhen*. It may be considered as the totem of the respective *salai*. For example, the *Mangang salai* is forbidden to kill snake and so on and so forth. Likewise, each *salai* also observes and protects some objects whether it may be plant or animal. Thus *salais* have some totemic characters in regard to the taboo associated with it. The Meiteis in general believed that if any member of the clan even touches one of these objects intentionally he or his people will die mysteriously or suffer from some incurable disease (Hudson, 1908). This is the taboo associated with *Salailel Apokpa*. But now a days it exists in the memory of only a few members and majority of the younger generations go far away from this belief.

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

On the social level *yumnak* is a corporate body of the same lineage and observe *yum mangba* (birth and death pollution) i.e. if any member of a particular *yumnak* dies all of its members are informed. They change their earthen cooking pots to a new ones and clean metal pots. They

observe the death pollution for seven days in case of a child below three years and twelve days in case of the dead of adult member. . On the other hand, the followers of *Apokpa/Sanamahi* observe seven days for birth and dead pollution. This segmented lineage group is called *phukainaba sagei*. However, the members of the *yumnaks* spread to a large area, a problem arises in regard to the implementation of the practice. Hence, *yumnak* is again divided into closed groups known as *sageis*, inhabiting in a particular locality.

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

Yek/Salai	Gotra
<i>Ningthouja or Mangang</i>	Sandilya
<i>Luwang</i>	Kashyap
<i>Angom</i>	kaushika
<i>Khuman</i>	Madhugalya
<i>Moirang</i>	Aitereya
<i>Khaba-Nganba</i>	Gautam
<i>Sarang-Leishangthem</i> (Chenglei)	Bhardwaja

It is a fact that the traditional state had the policy to unify all the *salais* by controlling the territorial and social autonomy of each *salai*. The

institution of *yek* system enabled the state to reduce the degree of social and political autonomy of the *salais*. This was further accelerated by the division of *salais* into numerous *yumnaks*. However, the observance of the same socio-religious functions of their *salai* by the members of the *yumnak* indicates that the distinct identity of each *salai* is still maintained by the means of rituals and observance of *yum-mangba*.

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

1.5 Objectives of the Study:

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

The study has primarily focused on the Meiteis of Assam, and their overall role in the revivalist impetus in the Meitei society. Though the revivalist rhetoric takes its most vocal and assertive dimensions in the

Imphal valley of Manipur, nonetheless, the role of the Meiteis of Assam is of crucial importance in the contemporary resurgence.

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

1.6 Relevance of the Study:

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

1.7 Method of data collection:

The work has been undertaken mainly based on the empirical studies. Intended to be qualitative in nature, this research involves the following

techniques that allow for the study of special and unique aspects like what people think, what they do and what they really want to do. And the generalization emerges out of the specific details of what the researcher observes. For this purpose the use of the materials drawn from both primary and secondary sources is the basis of this research work.

1.7.1 Review of literature:

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

1.7.1.1 Traditional Accounts:

The Meiteis had mastered the art of writing from the very early times, which can be seen in the form of royal chronicles, clan genealogies and other works covering almost all aspects of the Meiteis. The royal

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

1.7.1.2 British accounts:

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

His work was followed by that of Lt. Col. McColloch, who served as Political Agent of Manipur from 1845 -67. His work, *An Account of the Valley of Manipur*, (1859), throws valuable light on the socio-religious aspects of the Meiteis. R. Brown provided similar view in his book

Statistical Account of Manipur (1873). He states that the hill and the valley people had a common origin.

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

1.7.1.3 Modern Writings:

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

Atombapu Sharma from 1889 to 1963 wrote around hundred papers and books. Among his writings, *Haree Mayee* (undated and first book),

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

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

Of these books mention may be made of *Meitei Hourakpham wari* (an account of the origin of the Meiteis), *Meitei Ishei* (Meitei religious songs), *Tengbanba amasung Lainingthou Laipao* (Verses of the Almighty), *Singtha Chaitharol* (a book on the Meitei rites and rituals), *Thayeen Nongyeen* (a book on Meitei socio-religious philosophy), *Ahal Yathang* (advice of the elders) among others. Many of these books

contain poems and hymns which are highly philosophical and some are critical notes on Hinduism and Brahmins. His hymns are highly powerful who influence thousands of people to make themselves aware of their pre-Vaishnava culture, belief and practices which are manifested by the activists of *Apokpa/Sanamahi* Revivalist movement.

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

Yet another new school of thought tried to explain the features of the present Meitei society as the force of reaction against Vaishnava cultural value. Manjusri Chaki Sircar, in her book *Feminism in Traditional Society: Women of Manipur Valley* (1984) views that the Meitei society as a field of conflict and compromise between the religious values of Hinduism and *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism*. She says that the growth of new political consciousness and a movement towards revivalism has been inspired by a sudden education explosion, closer contact with modern Indian society, abolition of native statehood and assimilation with India. Lucy Zehol, in her book, *Ethnicity in Manipur*, (1998) writes a glimpse about the revival of *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism* amongst the Meiteis and how it transformed as a platform of Meiteis for the quest of their ethnic identity.

Another modern historian Gangumei Kabui in his article *Socio-Religious Reform Movement* in Lal Dena's (ed.) *History of Modern Manipur* (1991) provides a comprehensive account of the nature, objectives and impacts of the revivalist movement among the Meiteis of Manipur. Sairem Nilbir's paper, *Revivalist Movement of Sanamahi* in the edited volume of Naorem Sanajaoba's *Manipur Past and Present*, Vol. II (1991) provides an account on how a radical group of *Apokpa/Sanamahi* movement takes over the ancient religious sites of Manipur. R. Constantine in his work *Manipur; Maid of the Mountains*, (1981), provides an account of the decline of Hinduism in Manipur. While giving this statement he used festivals as the indicator of the popularity of a religion and its values among the masses. He observes, "The Saraswati *puja* which was once a big and popular festival in schools of Manipur is no more celebrated now." Another writer M. Kirti Singh in his book *Religion and Culture of Manipur*, (1988), provides an account of the growing interest and popularity of the *lai haraoba* festival which is the prime Meitei ritual and centre of Meitei cultural life. He also views these changes as the result of the emergence of their pre-Vaishnava Meitei identity consciousness among the masses. While British ethnographers focused on the social aspects of the Manipuri religion and culture, Kirti Singh's focus is on the ritualistic aspect of the Meitei society. M. Tombi in his book *Manipur and Mainstream* (1975) views the Brahmins not continuing their social obligations and mentions many lapses, omissions and commissions in the Hindu rituals. (Bijoykumar, 2005)

1.7.2 Primary Data Collection:

Primary sources comprise data collected through empirical observation and interview technique. It starts with the use of the mixture of both non-probability and probability sampling methods at various levels. In view of this the study is also intended to use the snowball sampling to generate the sample. The person so selected is interviewed. The persons

interviewed include not only those members of the movement but also those from among the Brahmins and the Vaishnava Meiteis. This intensive technique enables the present writer to capture the response of the people to this movement.

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

1.7.3 Selection of Field Sites:

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

The main Pre-Vaishnava shrine in Imphal is the *Kangla* and the *Sanamahi* temple situated inside the compound of the 1st Manipur Rifle (MR). I have also visited the Govindaji temple which is the most important centre of the Vaishnava faith and the centre of the Hindu religious activities over the past two hundred years. Unlike Manipur valley we do not find prominent Vaishnavite Meitei religious centre like the Govindaji temple other than a small temple meant for a particular village, neither in Barak valley nor in Nagoan district. Side by side there

are a number of temples dedicated to *lairembis* (goddesses), village deities of *umanglai* which are exclusively worshipped by the Meiteis without the interference of Hinduism and the Brahmins. In the Hailakandi district there are thirty-three Meitei populated villages and in each of these Meitei villages there are 4/5 Brahmin households.

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

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

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

The main reason behind selecting the present Barak valley of Assam for this work is that the present movement of the revivalism of *Apokpa/Sanamahi* culture had its origin here. Anyone can identify Meiteis easily from the rest of the community because they still preserve their identity especially after the movement. Women can be easily identified by their *phanek* at their lower part of the body and *innaphi* at the upper part of the body. However, due to close contact with their immediate Bengali neighbours many Hindu Bengali customs have been embraced and thus adopted themselves entirely to new environment and way of life. Still they have managed to retain their age-old socio-cultural

traits which are seen in their behavior, language, dress, habitation and beliefs, values associated with their rituals of birth, marriage and death. Thus, in spite of various changes they still retain their own festivals such as *lai haraoba* and *thabal chongba* and the worship of *yum-lais*, *Lainingthou Sanamahi* and *Ima Leimaren Sidabi* in the south-western corner of every household is of utmost importance and indispensable part of every Meitei family. In this way Vaishnavism as well as *Meitei-ism* goes side by side and much of the traditional faith and rituals are retained.

1.7.4 Field Study:

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

The *lai haraoba* of the Meiteis may be said to represent the epitome of the cultural ethos of the Meitei society. It is indeed the core of the Meitei culture through which one can visualize the Meitei religious way of life. The essence of the rituals is that it is performed to gain the favour of the *lai* and is performed by the *maibas* and *maibis* as priests and priestesses,

not as representatives of gods. It embodies a composite concept of the whole story, concerning the creation of earth by the creator god, stable settlement of lives here and continuance of their ancestral rites. The *maibi* evokes the spirit or call out the supreme father and mother from the water, which then couple and gives birth to a baby, who is ceremoniously and ritually brought into the world. When the baby grew up with all rituals initiations, his house was constructed and marriage was solemnised following all ritual details. *Lai* is immortal hence his soul ceremonially sends back from where it came, that is, to water.

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

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

Chapter 2

Theoretical Parameters of the Study of Revivalist Movement, Ethnicity and Manipuris of Assam

A substantial amount of literatures for the study of social movements provides support in the study of this area which has also seen an ongoing process of many new social movements, and many new interpretations are put forward by many scholars in this regard. Earlier, the social scientists have shown much interest in the study of social movements particularly, on the issues of identity and community as because the identity and community constitute major issues of studies on the people and culture of the region. The north east India witnessed emergence of various forms of social movements and many scholars specialized in the study of the types and natures of such movements which have been greatly influenced by the tribal movements around the region. However, a number of non tribal social movements such as the Apokpa/Sanamahi movement of the Meiteis, deeply impacting the social and cultural streams of the Meitei community, has not found proper projection till today. This study is an attempt to make a critical analysis of the latter and the *Apokpa/Sanamahi* as a socio-religious and revivalist movement in particular, and its distinction from other social movements.

‘Culture’ describes the many ways in which human beings express themselves for the purpose of uniting the others, forming a group, defining an identity, and even for distinguishing themselves as unique. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is a conceptual parameter of looking at a group of population whose members identify each other, either on the basis of resumed common genealogy or ancestry or recognition by others as a distinct group, or by common cultural, linguistic, religious or territorial traits.

The term 'cultural revival' refers to the reconfiguration of a group identity around a perceived common culture, where a claim is laid to the effect that the aspects of culture with which the group identifies, have been recovered after losses due to colonization, forced or voluntary relocation, oppression, or modernization. Cultural revivalism is predominantly associated with minority populations and frequently underwrites demands for rights, restitution and political or legal recognition as an ethnic group (Campbell, 1994). Much scholarship on the subject has taken examples of cultural revival at face value, undertaking to document the strategies of such groups employ and analyze the cultural practices and materials they recover. According to Campbell, cultural revivalism is a tactic pursued consciously or unconsciously, by minority communities to consolidate political identity and gain recognition through an appeal to fundamentalist cultural logic, that is, the belief that authentic traditions are unchanging and ancient, unique too and defining of a given community, and properly transmitted only to members of that group through heredity and or ancestry.

Contemporary interpretation of cultural revivalism is that culture is a text, which like all texts, is an assemblage of signifiers from the sign systems of cultural discourse at large. While specific signifier becomes attached to specific groups by social convention, these relations are essentially arbitrary (MacCannel, 1994). MacCannel has gone further in suggesting that contemporary cultural revivals are not only semiotic constructions (like other cultural and ethnic identities) but they are uniquely a postmodern phenomenon that he calls 'reconstructed ethnicity', in which authenticity itself has taken on a commodity value as groups come to project and identify with a generalized and interchangeable image of 'traditional' values. Through the movement of *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism* the Meiteis may have sought to reshape traces and components in the areas of social values, custom, belief, structure and control or a combination of them. In this way the present movement

among the Meiteis also demands a change that is the complete replacement of Hindu (Vaishnavite) religious values with the Meitei socio-religious values which they call *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism*. Therefore, the present chapter attempts to highlight the conceptual and theoretical issues involved in a sociological study of revivalism and social movements.

Sociologists have developed a set of theories and concepts, which enable us to study the genesis and nature of movements, the formation and sources of ideologies, organizational structure, and types of leadership, strategies of mobilization, dynamics and the implication of the movement. However, a logical boundary of the movement requires to be drawn carefully and more appropriate concepts and methods need to be developed to analyze problems as every movement has its unique characteristics. Therefore, it is necessary to make a conceptual clarification of Revivalism and ethnicity as used in the title of this thesis, and its four crucial dimensions like 'socio-religious', movement and *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism*.

Revivalist movements have played a major role in history for thousands of years. While some members of a religious group find comfort in the status quo, others want change and a greater spiritual connection with their beliefs and deities. Often associated with a fundamentalist movement, revivalists seek to revitalize and reform or break away from their organization, attract new believers and gain influence in society. This often happens during times of cultural, economic and governmental upheaval as religious revivalists may see themselves as 'saviors of society.'

The word ‘revival’ is as familiar in our mouths as a household word. We are constantly speaking about and praying for a ‘revival’. Would it not be as well to know what we mean by it? Where does the word ‘revival’¹⁴, come from and how is it to be properly understood. Many assume the term, as popularly used in religious circles, comes from the *Bible*.

Arthur Wallis wrote, “We cannot go to the *Bible* to see how the word ‘revival’ is used, for it is not found there...The nearest equivalents are ‘revive’ (or quicken) and ‘reviving,’ but these may be applied to individual awakening, and are not always synonymous with what has been called, by common consent down the centuries, ‘religious revival’.(Wallis, 1956: 19-20)

Modern English usage of the word largely descends from the following:

1. The French word ‘revivre’
2. The Latin word ‘revivere’

Henry Blackaby and Claude King wrote, “The word ‘revive’ is made up of two parts: ‘re’ meaning ‘again’ and ‘vive’ meaning ‘to live.’ Thus ‘revive’ means ‘to live again, to come or be brought back to life, health, or vitality.’(Henry, et al, 1996: 21) Coming into general usage in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, ‘returning to life,’ became associated with God awaking and empowering a lethargic church.

¹⁴ Kathryn Teresa Long wrote, “In the nineteenth century, ‘revival’ commonly was used in two different ways, to refer to a local phenomenon and to a broad popular movement. In both cases, as I have already indicated, it meant an unusual increase in religious concern and of professed conversions that occurred in a communal setting. Revivals sometimes were described as ‘extraordinary seasons of religious interest’. Local revivals were periods of intense religious concern in a congregation, community, or other group such as a camp meeting. But “revival” also could refer to outbreaks of religious fervor throughout a particular denomination, region, nation, or group of countries over a prolonged period of time.” Long, Kathryn Teresa. *The Revival of 1857-58: Interpreting an American Religious Awakening*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998: 9.

This particular English usage emerged strongly in early Puritan works. The word 'revival' was first used in English by Cotton Mather in 1702 in his massive work *Magnalia Christi Americana*. The word 'revive' wears its meaning upon its forehead; it is from the Latin, and may be interpreted thus—to live again, to receive again a life which has almost expired; to rekindle into a flame the vital spark which was nearly extinguished.

When a person has been dragged out of a pond nearly drowned, the bystanders are afraid that he is dead, and are anxious to ascertain if life still lingers. The proper means are used to restore animation; the body is rubbed, stimulants are administered, and if by God's providence life still tarry in the poor clay, the rescued man opens his eyes, sits up, and speaks, and those around him rejoice that he has 'revived'. A young girl is in a fainting fit, but after a while she returns to consciousness, and we say, 'She revives'. The flickering lamp of life in dying men suddenly flames up with unusual brightness at intervals, and those who are watching around the sick bed say of the patient, 'he revives'.

A People Group is "a significantly large grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, residence, occupation, class or caste, situation, etc., or combinations of these." (Winter & Koch, 1999: 514). Analysis of revival movements in sociology has to do with social configurations, and the social origins of religion, as exemplified by Durkheim at the beginning of last century as he identified religion as primarily performing the vital social functions of social integration and solidarity that derive from a system of shared beliefs (Durkheim, 1965). It can only describe the phenomenology of movement growth, and interpret human or institutional elements within that. 'Revival' is not utilized by sociologists in the theological, but more generally as revitalization of religious institutions and/or belief systems not dissimilar

in use to revival of a cultural system, political ideas, or philosophy. (Wallace, 2003: 9-29).

Why do people join various types of social movements? Is it because, some people are highly vulnerable to such appeals due to their psychic make-up? Or, to ask in a crude way, does it mean that something is 'wrong' with some people? If individuals are not causing it, then, is it the society that is at the root of the movement? Is it true, that when something goes 'wrong' with the society, people try to change it through social movements? Questions like these come to our mind when we ponder over the motivating factor behind a social movement. But one thing is certain — that the reason for the emergence of a social movement need not be the same as the reason why people join it. Social movements arise because; social conditions create dissatisfaction with the existing arrangements. People join specific social movements for an almost infinite variety of reasons — including idealism, altruism, compassion, political considerations, practical benefits, religious fervour, as well as out of frustration.

It is indeed true that one of the main issues in the study of any movement, concerns its emergence. This point leads to three basic questions? What are structural conditions under which movements emerge? What are the motivational forces? What are the theories which conceptualize the beginning of a movement? According to M.S.A. Rao, there are three main theories concerning the emergence of social movements. They are: The Relative Deprivation Theory; The Strain Theory; and The Revitalization Theory.

2.1 The Relative Deprivation Theory:

'Relative Deprivation' is a concept developed by Stouffer (1949). "It holds that one 'feels' deprived according to the gap between expectations and realizations. The person who wants little and has little, feels less

deprived than the one who has much but expects still more”. “A point that is coincident by relative deprivation theorists is that a position of relative deprivation alone will not generate a movement. The structural conditions of relative deprivation provide only the necessary conditions. Sufficient conditions are provided by the perception of a situation and by the estimate of capabilities by certain leaders that they can do something to remedy the situations.” (Rao, 1978)

Relative deprivation is increasing throughout most of the underdeveloped countries. A weakening of the traditional and tribal controls generally leads to an enormous increase in desires. People long for so many things, better living conditions, facilities, luxury goods (like phone, T.V., Vehicles, electrical appliances, etc.) without knowing the difficulties involved in producing them and supplying them to all the people. Hence the recently established independent governments of Third World Countries have no hopes of keeping up with their peoples' expectations. The clouds of mass movements and revolutions seem to be widespread in these countries. “Revolutions seem most likely to occur not when people are most miserable, but after things have begun to improve, setting off a round of rising expectation” (Brinton. 1965).

Though this theory seems to be more acceptable, it is yet to be proved beyond doubts. Feelings of deprivation are easy to infer but difficult to measure. It is still more difficult to measure it over a period of time. This factor could be taken as only one among the many factors in social movements.

2.2 The Strain Theory:

The ‘Strain Theory’ of social movement has been propounded by Smelser in 1962. This theory considers structural strain as the underlying factor contributing to collective behaviour. Structural strain may occur at different levels such as norms, values, mobility, situational facilities, etc.

Because of these structural strains some generalized belief that seeks to provide an explanation for the strain, may emerge. Both strain and generalized belief require precipitating factors to trigger off a movement.

Smelser's analysis of the genesis of social movements is very much within the structural functional framework. Smelser considers strain as something that endangers the relationship among the parts of a system leading to its malfunctioning. It places stress on the feeling of deprivation also (Smelser, 1962). On the contrary, the "relative deprivation theory", though emphasizes the conflict element, which contributes to change, fails to consider it (conflict) as something that may contribute to the malfunctioning of the system.

2.3 The Theory of Revitalization:

The 'Relative Deprivation Theory' and the 'Strain Theory' give us an impression that social movements necessarily arise out of negative conditions such as 'deprivations' and 'strains'. In this context, Wallace has asserted "That social movement develops out of a deliberate, organized and conscious effort on the part of members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture for themselves" (Wallace, 2003: 9-29). Wallace who analyzed the dynamics of revitalization theory has mentioned about its four phases:

1. period of cultural stability,
2. period of increased individual stress,
3. period of cultural distortion and consequent disillusionment, and
4. period of revitalization.

The revitalization theory suggests that adaptive processes are employed to establish equilibrium situation. Social movements no doubt develop a programme of action. But these movements tend to be like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they express dissatisfaction, dissent, and

protest against existing conditions, and, on the other, they offer a positive programme of action to remedy the situation.

2.4 The Theory of Relative Deprivation is more acceptable; M.S. A. Rao:

According to M.S.A. Rao, the relative deprivation theory offers a more satisfactory explanation of the emergence of social movement. Its merit is that it is pivoted around conflict and cognitive change. It is motivating and mobilizing people around some issues and interests. It's another merit is that "it offers the best explanation for the change orientation of movements rather than looking at movements as adaptive mechanisms restoring functional unity and equilibrium" (Rao, 1978).

The theory of relative deprivation, as M.S.A. Rao opines, requires refinement in two directions:

Firstly, "it is necessary to make the concept sociologically more relevant by eschewing individual and psychic deprivations" such deprivation remains "personal, arbitrary and even frivolous";

Secondly, in considering areas of deprivation, it is necessary to include the areas such as religion, caste, etc. The area of religion, though some sociologists (like Aberle, Glock and others) have not included in the purview of this theory, M.S.A. Rao feels, is as important as those of economics, education and politics. (Rao, 1978).

The patterns of religious behaviour, like other patterns of social behaviour, are of great interest to sociologists, since they underscore the relationship between religion and society. Religious ritual is one of the dimensions of religious behaviour. The beliefs and ideals of different civilizations are often inscribed in their rituals more explicitly than in any other cultural trait, which gives the study of ritualism a greater

sociological significance. What is more significant here is the dynamics surrounding the ritual not only in terms of its ritualistic or mythological connotation but also in terms of other variables such as revivalism, identity formation and so on, which constitute important variables influencing its dynamics. The main argument that I would like to put forward in this study is that the rise in the number of religious rituals of *Lai Haraoba* is associated with the changing socio-cultural dynamics of the Meiteis of Assam.. This can be observed from two changing trends of religion and ritual. Firstly, the increase trend of *lai haraoba* in the Meitei society in general indicates the growing awareness of the pre-Hindu identity of the Meiteis. Secondly, the ritualization of the *lai haraoba* shows the basic urge of the Meitei to assert a distinct ethnic identity. Apart from this, there also exists certain social and political dynamics associated with the *lai haraoba* at micro level.

The ritual of *lai haraoba* is the most important tradition of the Meiteis. Its meaning can be analysed within a Durkheimian, functionalist framework, stressing the integrative force of such ritual, and the way in which it embodies and reflects, upholds and reinforces deeply rooted popular values. In another tradition, the same ritual can be seen, not as expressing a publicly articulated expression of consensus, but as embodying the ruling elite consolidating its ideological or political dominance (Otojit, 2011.). David Kertzer demonstrates that ritual has always been and will continue to be an essential part of political life, used to symbolize, simplify and enhance political messages. He shows how ritual helps to build political organizations, how it is employed to create political legitimacy, how it fosters solidarity in the absence of political consensus, and how effective it can be in both defusing and inciting political conflict (Kertzer, 1988). Thus, it can be arrived that in order to rediscover the meaning of *lai haraoba* in the contemporary period, it is necessary to relate it to the specific social, political, economic and cultural milieu within which it was actually performed.

Though revivalism in Manipur is very apparent today, this process had already been started even during the reign of King Garibniwaz (1709–48) when most of the Meitei culture and tradition had been destroyed and substituted by Hindu culture. Many people opposed the policy of the King. But the movement took a significant development in the 1930s. It was around 1930 that the Meiteis started discarding Vaishnavism and started reworshipping their ancient gods and practicing their traditional religion, which is called *Meiteism* or *Sanamahi* religion (Kabui 1990, 102). A Meitei from the present Hailakandi district of Assam named Naoria Phullo started this movement. In order to investigate the ancient religion and culture of the Meitei, he founded a socio-religious group called *Apokpa Marup* (Association in the name of a Meitei ancestor deity) in Cachar in 1930. After Phullo's death, his followers in the Manipur valley initiated *Sanamahi* movement in 1945 (Kangjia 1981: 18). Some of the important resolutions of this organization were as follows:

- 1) to revive the cultural heritage of the Meiteis
- 2) to do research the ancient Meitei history and other literatures of the Meiteis.
- 3) to revive the Meitei scripts
- 4) to worship and chant religious hymns in the mother tongue Manipuri/ *Meiteilon*.

The objective of the movement is to revive the *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism*, the indigenous religion of Meiteis. They believe in *Atiya Mapu Sidaba*, *Pakhangba*, *Leimarel*, *Sanamahi* and host of other 363 *umanglai*. However, the sentiment of the movement is indicative more of a political trend than a regeneration of the religious belief in the state of Manipur. Several educated Meiteis have also denied calling the *Sanamahi* movement as revivalist movement (Kabui, 1974: 53–75). They believed that Manipur has been a center of religious syncretism where the

Brahmins and the Meiteis worship Meitei gods and Hindu gods. The two religious systems always co-exist. On the other hand, the *Sanamahi* followers assert that they have stopped all Hindu customs and follow purely Meitei system (Kabui, 1990).

This movement was geared to an extremist attempt in Manipur towards the de-Sanskritization of Meitei culture and the revival of Meitei heritage, which strongly opposed the identification of the Meiteis with the *Kshatriya* caste and denied any link with the Indo-Aryan heritage claimed by the early promoters of Hinduism (Sirkar, 1984: 121). It is primarily trying to revive and practice what is considered purely indigenous Meitei religion, culture, custom and the way of life. They want *maiba* and *maibi* to perform all their rituals and the other socio-religious functions in Meitei language. Brahmins reciting prayers in Bengali and Sanskrit languages have no role and no place in their socio-religious life. The leaders of the movement assert that they are neither anti-Hindu nor against any other religious community (Kabui 1990: 103). The movement aims at bringing in unity among the Meiteis and a closer relationship with the Nagas and the Kukis (the hill tribes of Manipur). The branches of this organization are scattered all over the valley while actively involving in reviving and popularizing Meitei script, religion, language and other cultural activities. (Kabui 1990: 104).

The most profound impact of the revivalism is on the cultural sphere of the Meiteis and the general awakening of their identity. The first trend of revivalism in Manipur can be seen in the restoration of *Lainingthou Sanamahi* at Haying Khongbal. Even the Government of Manipur recognized the necessity of reviving Meitei culture, religion and tradition. The *Lainingthou* Sanamahi Temple Board published a brochure on the occasion of *Mera Chaorel Houba*, which fell on September 29, 1981. Irengbam Tompok, the then Deputy Chief Minister of Manipur sent a message referring to the need for revivalism. To quote his words:

“I am glad to know that Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board is organizing to bring out a brochure on the day of Mera Chaorel Houba. I hope, this will bring the original and due faith and worship of the Meitei people. I wish every success of the Board” (LSTB, 1981).

The Meiteis had neglected the worshipping of *Panthoibi* after Hinduism came to Manipur. In the last few years, the Meiteis have started establishing *Panthoibi* Temples and worshipping her in some of the Meitei concentrated areas in Lakhipur and Sonai in the Cachar district of Assam. From 1990s, the number of *Panthoibi* worshippers and the temporary *Panthoibi* worshipping places (during the Durga *puja* festival) has soared up. Revivalism of Meitei culture and religion can also be seen from 1990s that the devotional songs and prayers are performed in the archaic Meitei language which was otherwise performed in Bengali and Sanskrit languages.

In Manipur the trend of Meitei revivalism was seen around the year 1980, when Meitei gods and goddesses substituted the Hindu gods and goddesses shrines at Nongmaiching hill. Before Vaishnavism came to Manipur, Meiteis had an early practice of climbing the Nongmaiching hill on the 28th *Lamda* (name of a Manipuri month, around February) to worship *Nongpok Ningthou*. This practice was originally known as *chinggoi iruppa*. It was during the time of King Garibniwaz that this festival was renamed *Baruni Snan* and all the worshipping places on this hill, which were known by Meitei names were converted into Hindu names. But in 1980, the Meitei National Front made a hard effort and succeeded in reviving the past tradition. That year names like ‘Mahadeva Shrine’ came to be known as ‘*Nongpok Ningthou Chingu Panganba Shrine*’. The pond known as *Saraswati Kunda* came to be known by its original name ‘*Shileima Ikon*’. Revivalism of Meitei culture and religion can also be seen in the effort of the Meitei to worship the shrine of

Mongba-Hanba in lieu of Hanuman image in the *Mongba-Hanba* Forest, which is also known as Mahabali Forest. The Meiteis claim that the term ‘Mahabali’ and the ‘Temple of Hanuman’ was brought into practice only during the time of King Garibniwaz. Before this the Meiteis called this place as ‘*Mongba-Hanba Umang*’. *Mongba-Hanba* is one of the nine *Laipungthous* (mound God) (Otojit, 2011). The local newspaper *Janata* in its editorial column reviewed the situation.

“It is seen that in most of the temples, shrines and worshipping places of Manipur, *Meiteism* and Meitei form of worshipping have revived. The Meitei religion, which was about to disappear is showing its identity clearly” (*Janata, Imphal. 18th March, 1980*). (Cited in Bijoykumar, 2005)

Previously, there were a countable number of *umanglai* shrines in Meitei populated areas of Assam. The number of local deities, which the Meiteis believe to protect them from supernatural evil forces, was also limited. Today, almost every locality seems to have either an *umanglai* or a local deity in almost every village. One can hear the sound of *lai haraoba* from one corner or the other during the festival season especially from January to June. Such interest shown by the Meiteis in their ancient Gods and Goddesses indicate their sense of cultural and religious revivalism (Devi, 1991: 91–3). The socio-political nexus that it enjoyed during the monarchical times seem to be a characteristic feature even today, *although* in a different context. Revivalist movement has brought to the fore an awareness of the pre-Vaishnava culture. The space afforded by the festival continues to assume political significance in the reinstating of a pre-Vaishnava identity. However, its recent resurgence in Manipur on a much grander and stylized scale assumes more than a cultural or religious revival. The resurgence may not have much to do with a growing religiousness towards the indigenous faith or belief systems (Otojit, 2011). It, rather, reflects a consciousness of going back to and re-

establishing cultural rootedness against the cultural homogenization associated with national mainstream, which is seen as threatening to the interests of the smaller cultures.

2.5 Ethnicity and the Meiteis of Assam:

‘Ethnicity’ has been best defined within cultural anthropology, but it has been a debated topic and there is no single definition or theory of how ethnic groups are formed. According to John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (John, and Smith, 1996: 1–14.), the term ‘ethnicity’ is relatively new, first appearing in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1953, but its English origins are connected to the term ‘ethnic’. The true origins of ‘ethnic’ have been traced back to Greece and the term *ethnos*, which was used in reference to band, tribe, race, or a people. In short, one may be born poor and die rich but one’s ethnic group is fixed which is the ‘primordialist’ way of thinking about ethnic identity. According to it, each of us belongs to one and only one ethnic group that group membership remains fixed over a lifetime and it is passed down intact across generations.

In more recent colonial and immigrant history, the term ‘ethnic’ falls under the dichotomy of ‘us’ and ‘them’. The ‘us’, the majority, are viewed as non-ethnics and the ‘them’, new immigrants or minorities, as ethnic. Variations of the term have developed, including ethnic identity, ethnic origin, ethnocentrism, and ethnicism (John and Smith 1996: 4–5). Ethnic identity or origin refers to an individual’s ancestral heritage. Ethnocentrism is a belief that your cultural community or ancestry is superior to all others, resulting in dislike or hatred of any material, behavioral, or physical characteristics different than your own. Ethnicism is defined as a “movement of protest and resistance on behalf of [ethnics] against oppressive and exploitative outsiders” (John and Smith 1996: 5).

Overall, an ethnic group or ethnicity has been defined in numerous ways. John and Smith's (1996: 6–7) definition of an ethnic group, or *ethnie*, consists of six main features that include:

1. a common proper name, to identify and express the 'essence' of the community;
2. a myth of common ancestry that includes the idea of common origin in time and place and that gives an *ethnie* a sense of fictive kinship;
3. shared historical memories, or better, shared memories of a common past or pasts, including heroes, events, and their commemoration;
4. one or more elements of common culture, which need not be specified but normally include religion, customs, and language;
5. a link with a homeland, not necessarily its physical occupation by the *ethnie*, only its symbolic attachment to the ancestral land, as with diaspora peoples; and
6. a sense *of* solidarity on the part of at least some sections of the ethnic's population.

The work of Sian Jones contains one of the better summaries of anthropological theories concerning ethnicity and its application to archaeology. Overall, Jones outlines three major terms related to 'ethnic': ethnicity, ethnic identity, and ethnic group. Ethnicity is defined as "all those social and psychological phenomena associated with a culturally constructed group identity." Ethnic identity is defined as "that aspect of a person's self-conceptualization which results from identification with a broader group in opposition to others on the basis of perceived cultural differentiation and/or common descent." An ethnic group is classified as

“any group of people who set themselves apart and/or are set apart by others with whom they interact or co-exist on the basis of their perceptions of cultural differentiation and/or common ancestry.” (Jones, 1997).

Fredrik Barth’s work on ethnic group boundaries had a strong influence on both, anthropologists and sociologists. No discussion or theoretical formulation of ethnicity vis-a-vis ethnic boundaries is possible without first acknowledging the seminal contribution of Fredrik Barth. He examined the notion that culture develops distinctive characteristics of structure and content as the result of isolation from other groups. He claimed to have made two discoveries which show the inadequacy of that view.

Firstly, the observation that ethnic boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them showed that categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on absence of mobility, contact and information but do include social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing membership.

Secondly, stable, persisting, often vitally important social relations are maintained across such boundaries and frequently based precisely on the dichotomized ethnic statuses (Barth, 1969).

There is no space for doubt that ethnicity is a complex phenomenon. Overall, the underlying truth of ethnicity is that it is a product of self and group identity that is formed in extrinsic/intrinsic contexts and social interaction. Ethnicity is in part the symbolic representations of an individual or a group that are produced, reproduced, and transformed over time. Ethnic revivals are examples of culture change in a given society. The Meiteis society is presently undergoing changes in several aspects of their social structure with the revivalist wave across the society. They regard themselves, and are regarded by others, as having a

unique ethnic identity. This ethnic identity, or the ethnic 'boundary' that separates them from others, circumscribes a known assemblage of individuals. It is within this boundary that their ethnicity develops, to revive, to revitalize, mobilize and bolster them in their pursuit of shared goals. They are distinguished among small groups by their high degree of social organization and belief system. Their self-ascribed separateness of identity from other communities, and other Indian neighbors is regarded in anthropological terms as their ethnicity. Most Indian groups are able to maintain a high level of ethnic self consciousness by drawing from traditions of earlier forms.

'Culture' is the characteristics of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. The word culture has many different meanings. For some it refers to an appreciation of good literature, music, art, and food. For a biologist, it is likely to be a colony of bacteria or other microorganisms growing in a nutrient medium in a laboratory Petri dish. However, for anthropologists and other behavioral scientists, 'culture is the full range of learned human behavior patterns' (O'Neil, 2006). The term was first used in this way by the pioneer English Anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in his book, *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871. Tylor said that culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Of course, it is not limited to men. Women possess and create it as well. Since Tylor's time, the concept of culture has become the central focus of anthropology.

'Culture' has been defined in a number of ways, but most simply, as the learned and shared behavior of a community of interacting human beings. (Useem & Useem, 1963). Culture is a powerful human tool for survival, but it is a fragile phenomenon. It is constantly changing and easily lost because it exists only in our minds. Our written languages, governments,

buildings, and other man-made things are merely the products of culture. They are not culture in themselves. For this reason, archeologists cannot dig up culture directly in their excavations. The broken pots and other artifacts of ancient people that they uncover are only material remains that reflect cultural patterns they are things that were made and used through cultural knowledge and skills. Most obviously it is the body of cultural traditions that distinguish one's specific society.

The term 'socio' implies an attempt to rearrange society, its social values, custom belief and structure, which the Meiteis consider to be very unique and different from those of the other Hindu Societies. The *Apokpa/Sanamahi* movement among the Meiteis may have sought to reshape any one of these components or a combination of them. Every socio-religious movements also attempt to change the existing system ranging from the relatively limited change or reformation to a complete rejection of the existing system. In this regard the *Apokpa/Sanamahi* movement is an attempt to complete replacement of the Vaishnavite socio-religious values with the traditional Meitei socio-religious values which they call *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism*.

The term 'religious' refers to a type of authority that is used to legitimize a given ideology which is accompanied by its own programmes and actions. Such kind of authority is also based on scriptures that are no longer considered to be properly observed, on a reinterpretation of existing socio religious doctrines, or an a re-invention of the old scripture by new religious reader. Sometimes different types of authority are combined to legitimize a particular programme and action or the teaching of an individual, once adopted by his disciples, are standardized, codified and transformed into an ideology. Such ideology also promises to create a better future, either for a section of society or for the whole society. The leader initially, and later on the ideology, furnish the vehicle for an individual's participation in the particular movement. Moreover, it is also

the ideology of the leader that attracts a large number of participants in the movement. (Bijoykumar, 2005) Therefore, the term movement here may refer to an aggregate of individuals united by the message of a charismatic leader or the ideology derived from the message of the leader, who are involved in the translation of the leader's message or ideology into a collective action.

The type of movement carried forward by such charismatic leaders may be loosely organized in the early stage, especially during the lifetime of the leader, but if it needs to continue after his death, his followers need to establish it in a systematic formal organizational structure as max Weber called 'routinization of Charisma' (Weber, 1993). The *Apokpa/Sanamahi* movement which was started by Naoria Phulo in 1930s was initially small and loosely organized during the lifetime of the founding leader. This movement became highly routinized after his death in 1941 by his followers. In the proceeding years his disciples established Meitei traditional system in an organized way with elaborate functioning system by replacing Brahmins with the *pibas* to perform rites and rituals and brought a change within the Meitei society. In this process emergence of numerous organizations also witnessed along with the individual leaders to propagate the teachings and ideologies of Naoria Phulo. (Bijoykumar, 2005) In this way socio-religious movement needs modification in mode of action and organization and builds an organizational structure in order to sustain over time.

To understand *Apokpa/Sanamahi* movement and its nature and impact it is also necessary to define the particular process as a movement. Socio-religious movement essentially involves a collective and sustains movement which is different from an intermittent occurrence like move, episode situational like protests and strikes.

2.6 Ideology of the Movement

When one studies social movements there is yet another set of conceptual problems to understand the ideology of the leader and the type of identity the concerned group established. Clifford Geertz in his *Ideology as a Cultural System* writes, "Ideology is not only a structure of consciousness but also a source of legitimizing action" (Geertz, 1964). In order to direct the action of the movement, it is necessary to formulate a clear cut ideology that can stimulate the movement. The leaders work out different layouts by which the concerned people who take part in the movement make attempts to pronounce them into a systematic manner into proper programmes of the movement and direct actions towards the specific goal. Moreover, the said ideology also legitimizes new values as visualized by the leaders. The present movement of the *Apokpa* or *Sanamahi* is manifested with the ideology of glorifying the ancient tradition of the Meiteis with the rejection of Vaishnavism and its values.

Another important aspect of the ideology based on relative deprivation is that the concerned deprived group draws boundaries based on the ideology of the movement to establish identity. They attempt to take away privileges in economy, political and religious goods and services from the privileged group. In this regard the *Apokpa/Sanamahi* movement rejects the monopoly of the Brahmins in the rites and rituals of the Meiteis and instead *pibas*, *maibas* and *maibis* undertake the functions carried out by the Brahmins and introduce religious institutions with the non Brahmin functionaries. (Bijoykumar, 2005) They do not seek legitimacy from the Brahmins, rather they establish legitimacy drawn from the pre-Vaishnava scriptures.

Any social movement also tends to develop an event structure over a period of time. A part event influences the choice of strategy in the mobilization of people towards the movement. The selection of such part events draws the attention of the people to counter and challenge an

opposite reference group. As for the case, the leaders of *Apokpa/Sanamahi* movement observes the event of *puya meithaba* as a protest against the atrocities of king Garibniwaz and Hindu missionaries for their unbecoming act of burning ancient Meitei scriptures.

Chapter 3

Manipuris of Assam and Their Socio-Cultural Practices

3.1 The Meiteis of Assam; Migration and Habitats:

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

3.2 Meiteis in Barak Valley:

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

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

The exact date of the Meitei settlement in Barak valley of Assam is not known. However, it is a fact that the Meiteis had migrated to this valley in various waves at regular intervals. Tamradhvaj, an inhabitant of Barak valley in the 19th century described that the Manipuris of the valley have

been living here from time immemorial (cited in Manikchand, 2005). An early historical evidence of Manipur recorded that the first settlement of the Meiteis took place when one Chenjel Naral Pakhangba migrated to the Barak valley in the 5th century AD. (cited in *Wakat*, 1985: 28)

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

An official report of the British in 1832 showed that a large portion of the new settlers consisted of Manipuris, immigrants who were being adversed to the political unrest in their own country, had determined not to return to it and had, in consequence, obtained grants of land in Cachar. In fact, the Meiteis fled from their own country en-masse during the seven years devastation of Manipur during 1819 to 1826 as a result of the

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

3.3 Meiteis of Brahmaputra Valley:

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

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

3.4 Cultural Linkages with Manipur; Continuity and Change:

The adaptability of the Meiteis settled in different parts has, by and large, made them assimilate into the cultural mainstream and become a part of the cultural and social scape of the places where they settled. However, they maintained certain cultural markers that bridge their past with the present. According to Alexander Mackenzie, the Meiteis are of mixed Kuki and Naga descent, but after their conversion to Hinduism, they

became more 'Hindu than the Hindus', professing themselves to be *Kshatriyas* and accepting the caste hierarchy with special veneration (Mackenzie, 1999).

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

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

3.5 Socio-Cultural life of the Meiteis in Assam:

The Meiteis form one of the most important groups in the overall make up of the population especially of the Barak valley and it is the second largest community only next to Bengali. Though their settlement in the valley was contributed by various reasons, the basic ideas and institutions

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

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

The Meitei society was vertically structured (individuals were ruled by the king on top). There was no social class and caste hierarchy. However, the whole community was brought under the *Kshatriya varna* after their conversion to Vaishnavism. Equality in social and economic status was

shared among the Meiteis. They lived mostly in close-knit village communities with a dense social network.

3.6 Family:

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

Generally, separation amongst the brothers and distribution of parental property takes place on mutual understanding. In most cases parents stay with the youngest son and as such he enjoys a larger share of the parental property than others. Begging is discouraged and considered as unfair and shameful. Interestingly no Meitei beggar was found while conducting fieldwork. There is well defined division of work between the males and females. Besides their regular domestic chores, the females extend their help to their male counterparts such as planting and cutting of crops at the time of harvesting. Other hard works such as tilting of soil and other agricultural works are done exclusively by the male members. Earning through handicraft works and selling of some indigenous products in the market is a part and parcel of most of the Meitei women.

Handicrafts such as weaving cloths and other small scale domestic industrial works are mostly handled by girls and married women. Hence, Meitei women play a vital role in the overall economy of the family. Today, the Meiteis are not merely confined to traditional means of livelihood since educated people are absorbed in jobs both in government and private sector and several other professions. Most of the younger generations have shifted to towns and cities in search of suitable jobs. As such most of the Meitei families in the villages have given up cultivating their own lands due to shortage of labour. As such, cultivation is done with the help of landless cultivators on share basis and thus agriculture has become less productive. Earlier, most of the families used to sell surplus rice grains but now their agricultural products hardly meet the needs of their families.

3.7 Village Life:

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

instances of substituting the names of Meitei villages by Bengali names across the valley. *Konung Leikai* is also called as *Rajar Gram* by the Bengalis. (Information provided by Ng. Brajaraj Singha, aged 86, of Madaripar.)

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

the common people. They are also supposed to be fluent in rites and rituals and they occupy an important place in the society just below the *leipak mapu* in rank. (Information provided by Oinam Langbanjao, aged 67, a retired subject teacher in Political Science from *Bamon Leikai*)

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

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

Krishna *jugal milan* which symbolizes the assimilation of the *atma* with the *Paramatma*.

On this occasion the presence of all the dignitaries of the *leipak*, such as *leipak mapu*, *kirtan mapu*, the hosting priest, atleast one *muktier*, *sambhasa* (a person is designated to welcome the dignitaries and other guests), *arangbham* (stock manager, who also offers *lei chandan* means flower and *chandan* to the assembled guests) and *khonghambam* (gate keeper), is mandatory. The people participating in the *sankirtana* is not less than seven or in increasing odd numbers i.e 7, 9 or 11. They are; one *eshei sakpa*, one or two *khombangton*, one *duhar*, two *pung yeibas* and at least two *pala machas*. The lyrics of the *sankirtana* were earlier sung in *Brajabali*. But now-e-days they are sung in archaic Manipuri language. The *sankirtana* is accompanied by the musical instruments *pung* and *kartal* only. For the *shradha* ceremony the *khonghambam* ritualistically brings the spirit to the *arangbham* who takes it to the *kirtan mapu*, the hosting priest. The *kirtan mapu* takes the spirit inside the *sankirtana* and places it in the *ghot*, which is placed in the middle of it. The concept is to invite the soul (*pret-atma*) to listen the *jugal milan* for the eternal peace. When the *sankirtana* is about to end the *kirtan mapu* enters the *sankirtan* and he sends the soul back to the *Sri Charana* through the different sacred places of the Hindus like Nabadwipdham, Puri and Brindaban, Baikunthadham etc. He dictates the names of these sacred places and others shout victory on it. This is called *naam thingatpa*. (The researcher was a participant observer on the rituals following the dead of his uncle named Ng. Harkumar Singh, at Guwahati in December 2009.)

A marked difference could be observed in the performance of death ceremony among the *Apokpa/Sanamahi* Meiteis, who follow their traditional ways. In contrast to the thirteenth day ritual of the Vaishnavite Meiteis, the *Apokpa/Sanamahi* Meiteis observe it on the eighth day, following the cleaning and purifying the house on the seventh

day. The *maibaren* (head of *maibas*) performs the duties of the priest and 3 or 5 aged persons called *ahan*, who are the core members of the sect, use to sit to look after the affairs. In case of the *Apokpa/Sanamahi* Meiteis the soul is sent back for the heavenly abode and eternal peace through the holy places of Manipur. The *maibaren* chants the names of the holy places.

3.8 Religion of the Meiteis:

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

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

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

The Meiteis had their own elaborate religious tradition before they became the followers of Vaishnavism. They worshipped many gods in the form of natural objects and mythical gods. Hodson supports the idea that the Meiteis were animists when he says, “We are justified in holding them (Meiteis) to be still animists” (Hodson, 1908). A host of the pre-

Hindu deities are worshipped by the Meiteis. The term *lai* (god) is used generally to cover all the categories of god. The pre-Hindu deities are broadly divided into two, viz. *yum-lai* (household gods) and *umang-lai* (gods of the abode).

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

- (i) *Ancestors* which were believed to have had a human existence at some point in the past. Examples of these are *Pakhangba* and *Poireiton*.
- (ii) Important *lai* associated with one particular *yek*.
- (iii) The domestic deities known as *yumlai*, which are worshipped in every family.
- (iv) Tutelary deities, i.e. *lais* connected with particular places or areas. There are various places in Manipur which are regarded as sacred. These are often hills, which are associated with a particular deity. Examples are hills in Moirang and Nongmaiching hills are associated with *Ningok Ningthou* and later on identified with Siva after the advent of Vaishnavism.

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

- (a) *Wangburen* or *Wangpurel* resides in water. He is the guardian of the southern part of Manipur. He is depicted as a deity riding a

black tiger, whose anger and terror personified. He sends floods and creates havoc. He is worshipped with great care. Gold necklaces and sexual indulgence is strictly forbidden during his worship (*haraoba*). His main temple is at Sugnu on the bank of the Imphal River.

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

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

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

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

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

3.9 Vaishnavism and the Meitei Society:

The Hindu concept of 'Divine Kingship' was indeed what Pamheiba (Garibniwaz) needed to legitimize his rule in Manipur. Further, since Hinduism represented a more progressive ideology, it had attracted the

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

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

annual festival of the god *Nongpok Ningthou* was converted into Baruni Mahadev festival.

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

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

abandoned the ancient faith; rather, they accepted the Hindu pantheon in addition to the old gods of their own country.” (Shakespeare, 1913, op.cit.)

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

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

Similarly, the Meiteis, although most of them profess Vaishnavism and are strict in observing many of its customs.. Unlike the *nuts* the

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

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

In the similar pattern Brara observed that, even though the new religion succeeded in diluting, and sometimes even disintegrating, the rites and rituals pertaining to the traditional faith, a few Hindu rites and rituals were also adopted and incorporated. Yet in the event of bringing a child to this world, and sending the soul of the being back to heaven, the required rituals were and still are conducted by the *maibas* and *maibis*. All the other intermediate rites of passage are influenced by Vaishnavism, which nevertheless retained some of the traditional cultural characteristics. With new elements incorporated and old elements modified, the rites and rituals pertaining to this society evolved as '*Meitei-Hindu rituals*' rather than just Hindu rituals. (Brara, 1998, op.cit)

It can be observed from the above account that the traditional religion of the Meiteis could not be eroded in spite of the king's repressive measure to adopt Vaishnavism. So the king and his few wise men synthesized the new religion with the traditional religion. The concept of Vaishnavism has a different form when it came to Manipur as described by Lokendra Aramabam as *Meiteinisation of Hinduism* and *Meitei-Hindu rituals* by Brara. It is further supported by the fact that, in every Meitei household, a small area is reserved for their traditional god *Sanamahi* irrespective of their religion.

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

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

Aani was known to be existed mainly in two levels – *leikai* level and in *leipak* level. *Leikai* level *aani* basically refers to the village level. A village was generally divided into two or three groups such as *mamang leikai* (upper part of the village), *mayai leikai* (middle part of the village)

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

Aani often took the shape of a *leipak aani* when any quarrel, differences of opinions or ideas, supporting or not supporting on a particular issue happened in the village level. Interaction or development of any kind of relation with one another was prohibited. Even the relationship between the near and dear ones could not escape from its cruel hands. Even death could not bring the two groups in one platform. Any member who defied it was excommunicated from the concerned group. So he either lived on the fate or take refuge in other groups. However, this has a territorial limitation. *Aani* of a particular territory, as for instance, in Jaribon or the Meitei society in Hailakandi would not have its affect on the Meiteis living in other parts like Lakhipur, Sonai or in Silchar. However, *aani* within a particular *sagei* had its affect on the entire *sagei* irrespective of the place where he or she lived.

Meiteis have witnessed a number of *aani* in different periods due to different reasons, major or minor. In the early years of 1980s, the Meiteis of Jaribon had experienced one major *aani* which brought the entire Jaribon Meiteis into deadlock. A Brahmin named *Phurailatpam* Gojendra Sharma had eloped a Meitei girl who happened to be his *sevak* (a boy or a girl who takes *diksha* to Vaishnavism from a Brahmin is called *laiming lauba* and becomes the *sevak* of the Brahmin). This incident wrought havoc in the Meitei society of Jaribon. Such a relationship between Guru and *sevak* was not approved and accepted. Hence, he was excommunicated by his uncle *Phurailatpam* Chand Mohan Sharma. Many groups of people as supporters and opponents of the incident came up later on. On the other hand, Ramu Sharma, another uncle of Gojendra Sharma, who was also a close associate of the *Ningthem (leipak mapu)* Gulap Sana, stood in favour of his nephew Gojendra Sharma. As such *Phurailatpam* Brahman *sagei* was broken up into two *aani* groups and in no time, it took the form of *leipak aani* with their supporters and opponents and ultimately resulted into the division of the Jaribon *leipak* into two. The group formed by Chand Mohan Sharma came to be known as *Brahma sabha* and the other group under Ramu Sharma with the support of the *leipak mapu* Gulap Sana came to be known as *Kshetri sabha*. The villages of Mirirgul, Lawat, Nalubag, Larengkhun, Khatrikhun and a portion of Laishramkhun stood for *Brahma sabha*. On the other hand, Thingomkhun, Gwalipar, Bhatrigram, Jalampur, Konung Leikai, Bamon Leikai, Leihoupokpi, Madaripar, Vetlapar, Chengbil, Lala and a portion of laishramkhun had strongly become the supporters of *Kshetri sabha*. This *aani* was reported to be continued for seven years. (Information provided and narrated by Sri Nilabapu Sharma, aged 85, from Leihoupokpi in Hailakandi district).

It is very interesting to note that as a strict prohibition law was developed between the two groups, professional *kirtonias* (persons who profess for *sankirtana*) were confined only to their concerned group and hence the

new and the 'not so popular' ones also got a platform for exposure. In between the two groups the *Kshetri sabha* had a strong foothold since it had acquired the support of the *laipak mapu*. On the other hand the *Brahma sabha* nominated a well known *muktier* from Lawat, Sri Thambou Singha as *leipak mapu* and was made the nominal head of the *Brahma sabha*.

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

Another *aani* was witnessed in the same degree when one Nongthombam Naba Singha of Lala eloped a widow from the same *yek*. Since marriage between *yeks* is strictly prohibited in the Meitei society, it also brought chaos among the Meiteis of Jaribon in the form of *aani*. Initially the Nongthombam *sagei* was divided into two, one in support of Naba Singh

and the other opposed him which resulted into *leipak aani* and it continued for nearly 5 years. Finally the *aani* came to an end with the suicide of Naba Singha. (Information provided by N. Nityai Singha aged 76, B.T Road, Lala).

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

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

3.11 The Traditional Meitei dwelling House:

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

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

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

¹⁵. *yum* = house, *sha* = construct, *rol* = method.

¹⁶. *yum* = house, *jao* = big.

¹⁷. *mangon* = varandah.

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

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

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

¹⁸. *thong* = door, *jao* = big.

¹⁹. *pham* = bed, *jao* = big, *ka* = room.

²⁰. *chakhum* = *chak* + *chapham*, *chak* = rice, *chapham* = place to eat.

²¹. *kachin* = corner.

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

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

²². sang = house, kaba = entering.

3.12 The Meitei marriage *lu-hongba*

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

There are two types of marriages

1. The arranged marriage (*haina-singnaba*) and
2. Eloped marriage (*chenba*).

3.12.1 The arranged marriage (*haina-singnaba*):

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

1. *Mou yengba* is the informal proposal of a girl by the parents of a boy or any other representative. If the girl and her parents express willingness to the proposal it is followed by *mangon kaba*.
2. *Mangon kaba* is the formal visit by the mother of the boy with two or three of her companions to see the girl. It is the first contact of the parents of the boy and the girl formally to communicate relevant talks if it is acceptable according to their respective *yeks*.
3. Marriage is finalised in the family level through a formal visit by three or four male members from the boy's side. It is called *yathang-thaba*.

4. *Wa-roi-pot-puba* is the function in which the marriage agreement is made public. A group of people from the boy's side, consisting of a minimum of five to seven males and females formally visit with a large amount of fruits and sweets and is distributed to the friends, relatives and neighbours of the girl's side who are assembled there and chats exchanging thoughts and ideas. This is the first public interaction between the two sides.

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

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

sweet items and special items for the bride and her friends are brought as agreed upon before the function.

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

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

tangla, place it before the groom and bows down making a formal request to come to the ceremony.

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

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

1. *chengluk-nungshang phiruk* (mainly filled with raw rice),
2. *apok-asha phiruk* (another container filled different kinds of fruits),
3. *lam-lai/umanglai phiruk* (container with fruits and sweets made of rice),
4. *sagei-lai- phiruk* (container filled with fruits and vegetables for the family deity of the family of the bride),
5. *mitam nga phiruk* (container to carry a fish called *ngamu*)

After the procession has started three elderly men from the groom's side go ahead to inform about the arrival of the groom for the ceremony. Accordingly a *sankirtana* starts in the *mandali*. When the groom reaches the gate of the bride's house, he is welcome in a prescribed manner. Three long slender bamboo sticks are wrapped with cotton, up to a certain length from the top and are soaked in *ghee*. Holding the three sticks by three males in front of the groom, the tips are joined and lit with fire. The fire is supported by throwing *dhoop* powder upward to brighten the flame. In the meantime at least three female members including the mother of the bride throw flowers mixed with *kabok aphaba* (rice corn flower) for 3 times towards the groom's head when the groom still bows down. The significance of it is the driving off the evil spirits and purification of the groom with fire. The mother of the bride along with other near relatives offers the groom with pan which is called *kwa lanba*. This entire process is known as *bor/daman-okpa* (receiving the son-in-law).

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

The mother of the groom sits over a white cloth specially arranged for her, on the north-west corner just outside the *mandali*, facing straight to the groom when the ceremony takes place. She stays still in her seat and is not allowed to move. The father of the groom occupies the second place of the first row of the northern-side of the *mandap*. The women folk of the bride side sit on the southern side. By this time the bride is

dressed up inside the house by a trained person. In early days the bride used to wear the beautifully embroidered *phanek* called *maron naibi*. She wears special ornaments around the neck, arms, wrist and fingers and headwear called *kajenglei* and feathers of *langmei*, *nongningkhei* (kind of birds). When Vaishnavism was adopted the bride started wearing *potloi* (the dance costume worn by Radha during *Rasa Lila*) in addition to traditional ornaments like *marei heibei-mapal*, *khужи pok-chaobi* along with other regular ornaments.

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

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

The most important part of the ceremony is the entrance of the groom in the middle of the *mandali*. The *luhongphal* (the rectangular wooden elevated seat) for the groom is placed on the south western side of the *mandali*, facing east. Below the middle of the seat is engraved with *malem-paphal* or symbol of throne by the priest. It is important to note that this custom is followed by both the *Sanamahi* Meiteis and the *vaisnava* Meiteis.

A red *phirangji* (woollen cloth) covers the seat. When the time comes the guide leads the groom and makes him bow down to *Lainingthou Santhong* altar in the *sankirtan* and touch the depicted throne. The groom then sits on the prepared seat followed by the purification and sanctification with raw-rice, flower and water.

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

- (i) fine raw-rice filled the *pukham* (dish) with one good scented fruit (*hiejrang*)
- (ii) *chang thokpa laphoi* (banana counted in odd numbers),
- (iii) one whole coconut (*yubi*)
- (iv) one *pana tangla* (betal-nut)
- (v) three numbers of *langthrei mapop* (a kind of small herb which is a must in any Meitei ritual)

- (vi) one *pheijom* (dhoti)
- (vii) one stiched *inaphi* (*chadar*)
- (viii) two pairs of *sing* (gingers)
- (ix) two salt cakes and
- (x) *sendai* (money).

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

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

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

There is a convention of gifting money above the *dan*. Father of the bride or his representative will be the first man to offer it and all others follow

one by one from the side of the bride. When it is completed the *dan* is carried with much care by the *bor sennaba* and handed over to the mother of the groom who receives it with care by covering it with her *sawl*. When the wedding ceremony gets over it is put into a covered *phiruk* to be carried away to the house of the groom. This is called *dan jaba*.

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

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

After the whole ceremony is over it is followed by *mau thinba* (sending off the bride). There has been a convention of giving essential domestic articles for her daily use besides the weaving loom its accessories. These

things are called *aunpot*²³ (gift). The importance of weaving in the Meitei socio-cultural life is indicated by the fact that when a bride starts for her husband's house she is preceded by a woman with a *tareng* (spinning wheel) carrying on her head as the first and primary item of *aunpot*. The bride enters her husband's house also with the woman carrying it in the forefront. Giving *tareng* as *aunpot* is a tradition while the other costly and luxurious items are present day additions.

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

3.12.2 Eloped Marriage or *chenba*:

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

²³. The *aunpot* is not like dowry system which is found in other Indian societies. If the parent of the bride is unable to afford *aunpot*, the relatives of the bride extend help. In some cases only the basic things which the bride will need in her husband's house is given.

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

3.13 Marup System and The Meiteis participation in Economy:

The concept of *marup* is originated from Manipur. It is developed with a sense of extending help among the members of a group under certain rules imposed by the *marup*. It is not a profit making body. The word *marup*, meaning friendship, is more common among the women but even men do participate in it now a days. *Marup* is not just confined to the rural areas as many educated people in urban areas are also found to join into it. It is a group activity. *Marups* may evolve around birth, marriage or death ceremonies. Funds may be mobilized among *marups* for such

purposes. Likeminded people may form a *marup* and make monetary transactions. In some cases funds may be raised for marriage ceremonies by groups or else funds may be raised for purchasing commodities like refrigerator, motor cycle or for the construction of tin roofs for *kutcha* houses. In some cases a group of twelve or fifteen members can raise funds for a *marup* and lend the money to different needy people. In such cases the *marup* members just act as trustees. *Marup* differs from the government and other self-help groups because in a *marup* the people are bridged through self-generated resources, leading to a kind of self-managed society.

Meitei kinship networks are created across the society leading to a firm base for social solidarity. This social solidarity is further reinforced through the formation of the *marup* institution. In spite of the availability of the banking facilities, the Meiteis enter into the *marup* or self-help system that involves significant amount of cash transaction. *Marups* are of various kinds and the transactions vary accordingly. In the most common system of *marup*, a group of people come together and contribute an equal amount of money to generate a fund for a particular period of time. For instance, if twelve persons contribute an amount of Rs. 5000/- for a period of twelve months on monthly basis, the total contribution of Rs. 60000/- will be received by a member generally on the lottery basis. In the next month the person who receives the amount through lottery will get an addition of a fixed amount of interest as decided by the *marup* from the first recipient along with the total contribution. Again the third recipient will get interest from the first two who had already received. As such the last member will get interest from eleven persons along with the same total contribution. After the last member receives the fund, the *marup* is closed down to start a new one. In such *marups* usually there is an organizer who initiates the process to include different members and maintain the records and arrange periodic meetings.

Singh (2009) writes: “The practice of *marup* is very common in Manipur. More than 90 per cent of the population is involved in some way in this system. It has become a household name in the Manipuri society. People from different age-groups and from different walks of life participate in the *marup* system. Inaccessibility to the formal financial services, slow growth and development of economy, non-availability of any well-organized industrial structure, and the landlocked and inaccessible geographical location of the State might be the real cause of such a large scale practice of the *marup* system in Manipur.”

3.14 Weaving:

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

Weaving is also associated with the social and a ritualistic activity from very early times. Textiles’ weaving have played a pivotal role in the social and the economic life of the Meitei people throughout the ages. The art of weaving also has made the village community a self-contained one, which is a characteristic feature of the Meitei society too. The social functioning of the Meitei society is based on the code of personal relations and duties handed down from generation to generation. They do not take the execution of this craft as a compulsion but a sacred duty.

In Meitei lore, the weaving of textile appears as a replica of the cosmic process. During the dance of the creation, the male and female messengers of god (*maiba* and *maibi*) stimulate the sound of spinning and weaving. In other words, creation is a magnificent process of weaving to the cosmic being. It is a matter of great significance that in the traditional belief system of the Meiteis, the goddess of handicrafts (who is worshipped as *Leisembi*) taught the Meiteis the method of textile weaving as well as the mystique of the dance creation.

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

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

From the socio-cultural study of the various aspects of the Meitei people of Assam it is evident that they are a distinct group having their own socio-cultural identity. Almost in every aspect of their life, their indigenous tradition plays a pivotal role. It has been observed that every rites and rituals performed by the Vaishnavite Meiteis, although they are said to be performed in the Hindu way, may it be birth or death or else,

has got a marked difference from the ways which is performed by their other Hindu counterparts. Therefore a conclusion can rightly be drawn here that while the *Apokpa/Sanamahi* Meiteis perform every rites and rituals in their purely traditional way, the rites and rituals performed by the Vaishnavite Meiteis are also found to be their secret Meitei foundation embroidered with the newly found Vaishnavite ways.

Chapter 4

Revivalism; Rhetoric and Practice amongst the Manipuris of Assam:

The revival of *Apokpaim/Sanamahism* that started as a socio-religious movement had a greater implication on the socio-cultural identity of the Meitei community in Assam in particular and the whole of the community in general. This movement, no doubt, has led to the general awakening of their pre-Vaishnava Meitei religious and socio-cultural identity at present focusing also in the identity formation of the group in the line of their age old social, cultural and religious beliefs.

Deeply influenced by its religion and philosophy, the Meiteis have been practicing Vaishnavism over the last three centuries. However, the newly adopted culture could not root out the place of worship of the pre-Vaishnavite native deities viz. *Sanamahi*, *Ima Leimarel* and *Apokpa* from the Meitei hearts. Since time immemorial the Meiteis have been worshipping these household deities in simultaneity with the Vaishnava faith. These deities occupy different places inside the main living room of their dwelling houses. As such, every Meitei home is considered as the most sacred place of worship of these deities who are worshipped everyday by lighting of lamps at least for two times. So they maintain purity and cleanliness of themselves and their homes. Each and every adult member takes bath in the morning, generally after finishing their household chores. Their first duty of the day begins with the prayer of these household deities and ends with the prayer once again in the evening at the end of the day by lighting oil soaked cotton lamps fixed on a small bamboo strip called *pratit*. Having anything before taking bath in the morning is considered unholy and unclean. The Meiteis consider lavatory as dirty and unclean place. So anybody who has entered there must take a bath before entering into the house in order to maintain purity, which is found as a peculiar Meitei custom.

Therefore, there has always been a space for the worship of the pre-Vaishnava deities within the Meitei society which runs side by side with the practice of Vaishnava faith and culture. Hence, it can be safely said that the community still adheres to their ancient faith strictly, though they are officially the followers of Vaishnavism. Today owing to the revivalist movement the colour of the Meitei Vaishnavism is observed to be fading down and *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism*, the pre-Vaishnavite faith, which had been abandoned in the beginning of the eighteenth century, has grown up as a strong force to resist and replace the Vaishnava religion and culture that had been rooted in the Meitei society.

The adoption of Ramandi cult first and then Vaishnavism marked the transformation of the Meitei social and cultural life. The new religion could not uproot the ancient faith and belief from the minds of the Meiteis which again played significant role in the revival of their ancient faith. Adoption of the Bengal school of Vaishnavism and the replacement of Meitei script with Bengali script facilitated the overall influence of Vaishnavism over the life of the Meiteis. However, consciously or unconsciously the Meiteis never discarded their age old faith and belief system. Some way or the other the Meiteis in their individual and family life involved themselves in propitiating their own deities and respective belief system. The influence of Vaishnavism can be seen at social level in the domain of culture in the form of the observance of rites, rituals and festivals. In such rites, rituals and festivals, the role of the Brahmin priests has always been significant and they are performed under strict code and conduct of Vaishnavism. On the other hand, the role of the Meitei *maiba* and *maibi* is equally significant in the performance of the rites, rituals and festivals connected with their own deities in which the advice of the *maiba* and the *maibi* is always supreme. Hence, the Meitei society, when observed deeply, is a synthesis of the two viz. the inseparable age old belief and tradition and the new found religion in the form of Vaishnavism.

Apart from the Hinduisation, the Burmese invasion and the British colonialism, today, various other forces like modernization and globalization have deeply influenced every walk of life and such influences are inseparable in the present scenario. With more opening up to the outside world the more the Meiteis are more and more returning to their roots. The understanding of their culture and belief system also informs that such a return to the past could help them preserve their identity which is constantly threatened by the influence of the more dominant cultures (Bijay, 2005). This particular effort of reviving their past glories is also a part of their attempt to evade from the strain induced by various forces of modernization and globalization that constantly threatens their own culture and belief.

The distinct and unique cultural tradition of the Meiteis is retained in the *lai haraoba* festival which inspires them to the effect that the past could provide the way of solution to the problems that they are facing today. Hence, emotional attachment can be witnessed among the Meiteis regarding the pride in their traditional culture manifested in the *lai haraoba* festival. It encourages them to find a socio-cultural space in which they feel secure to preserve their tradition. The revivalist movement provided a boost not only in following their tradition but also trying to popularize their own rites, rituals and festivals and mobilize more and more participation to promote their pre-Vaishnava culture and tradition. Therefore, the main focus of this chapter is to relook at this trend of socio-religious changes in the Meitei society of Assam in particular and the whole Meitei community in general.

4.1 Revival of the Traditional Faith:

The genesis of the Meitei religious and cultural revivalism and the rejection of Vaishnavism by many Meiteis of Assam have an interesting trajectory over a wide period of time. It did not happen all of a sudden since their old belief and tradition had a strong presence in the life of the

people. It was inevitable but never singled out until 1930 when Naorem Phulo Singha, celebrated as a fountainhead of the revivalist movement and an apostle of the traditional faith today, formed a society called *Apokpa Marup* at Laishramkhun, from where he hailed, in the present Hailakandi district of Assam. This society created a virtual space for the study of the old Meitei religious philosophy. The society was, on the other hand, caused an alarm among the members of the Vaishnavite following Meiteis and was deemed to be an affront to the *Brahma sabha*. Following this Phulo along with seven of his followers was excommunicated by both the *Brahma sabha* and the *Kshatriya sabha* (Information provided by L. Wakching of Laishramkhun, Hailakandi, an activist of the revivalist movement, in the interview with the researcher on 23/4/2011). Till the early 1990s, even inter-marriages between the revivalists and the Vaishnavites were forbidden in the Meitei society of Assam. However, by the close of the 20th century, the conflicting situation got gradually ameliorated and with *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism* gaining a strong foothold, negotiations and mutual accommodations with the Vaishnavite path became inevitable.

4.2 Life and Philosophy of Naoria Phulo:

The birth of Naorem Phundrei, destined to be known in every Meitei household as Naoria Phulo, as believed by the Meiteis, is predicted well in advance. In many *puyas* including *Kaibarol*, it is stated:

“Man from the west will come to rediscover the Meitei religion and deities and Meiteis will return once again to their own religion... in *Thawan Langban* (August September) ... and all *sagei salai* will once again return to their origin...” (Khelchandra, 1969, 2004: 110-111)

(Translated by the researcher)

Phundrei was born to Naorem Chouba and Thambou at the dawn of Monday, the 28th September 1888 (the seventh day after full moon of the Meitei calendar month of *Thawan* and Meitei weekday *Ningthoukaba*) at Leishramkhun *mayai leikai* in the erstwhile Cachar district (present Hailakandi district) of Assam. He was the fifth son of his parents. On the sixth day of his birth (*Swasti puja* or *yupan thaba* as termed by the Meiteis) people gathered for the occasion were surprised to see and spelled with the beauty and complexion of the child as if it was carved by a turner (*phundrei*) and hence his grandfather Herando gave the name of the child as Phundrei. (Information provided by Naoria Phulo's son N. Amusana, aged 78, on 12/10/2010)

Since his childhood Phundrei was very intelligent and obedient as well. When he was admitted to the then newly established 34 No. Bengali Medium Rajyeswarpur L.P. School at the age of seven, the Bengali teachers found it very difficult to pronounce his name. However, his obedience, beauty and calm nature led them to call him lovingly as *Phul* which means as beautiful as a flower. Thereby he came to be known as Phulo which became his certificate name.

After completion of his primary education with scholarship he was admitted to the upper primary school at Lala. However, after upper primary he faced with real problems to continue his education. Moreover, there was no school nearby to continue further. Apart from that the English education was considered a taboo in the Meitei society. His family and relatives were not in favour of continuing his education. But his intelligence and curiosity to continue his study ultimately convinced his parents to take him to the Narasing Madhya Banga School at Silchar. It was during this period that Phulo started thinking about his own mother tongue as his school mates often questioned him for not having his own religion and medium of instruction. All these made him very

much curious to know about his own language as well as the religion of his community.

After completion of his education from Narshing Madhya Banga he returned to his village. At that time the Government Victoria Memorial High School was established at Hailakandi. In 1910, he was admitted to this school at the age of twenty-two. In the mean time his father died and a year after he was married to Sanarei Devi in 1912, the youngest daughter of Moirengjam Angou, in order to look after his mother, while he was studying in class IX. Amidst great amount of hardships he passed Entrance Examination in second division in 1914 at the age of twenty-six. Just after he passed out Entrance Examination he was appointed as a teacher in the same school with a monthly salary of Rs. 10/-. During his teaching days in Government Victoria Memorial High School also his Bengali friends asked him about his mother tongue, books written in his language, its script and its history were raised during the friendly talks with his non-Meitei counterparts. These points of discussions made him puzzled in his lone times and threw into deep thoughts to find out the reasons. (ibid)

It is worthy to note here that by the time the Meiteis settled in Assam in the mid 18th and 19th centuries, they were already Hindus and considered themselves as Vaishnavas. After the burning of innumerable Meitei *puyas* by Pamheiba (Garibniwaj), under the guidance of Santidas Goswami, a Vaishnava missionary from Bengal, mass conversion of the Meiteis took place through *nonkhreng irruppa* (ritual bathing ensuring to follow the new religion for the next seven births) under the royal orders. People with heavy hearts could not oppose the royal decree and had to carry out the unprecedented procedure of conversion. Many promised in their hearts to get reconverted to their indigenous religion on the very next day of their stipulated cycle of rebirth. In the later period during the reign of Chingthangkomba (Bhagyachandra) the Bengal School of

Vaishnavism was made popular and the philosophy of Vaishnavism overshadowed the life and culture of the Meiteis. It was during his reign that the famous *Rasa Lila* (fusion of traditional Meitei dance form and the newly adopted religious form) was introduced. His reign is also remarkable for changing the name of the land as Manipur and the Meiteis came to be known as Manipuris. Chaste Meitei script was replaced by Bengali script and the Meitei language (*Meiteilon*) came to be known as Manipuri language. From his reign many Sanskrit and Bengali books were translated to Manipuri to popularize the new religious thought and philosophy.

Phulo inherited all these historical developments that preceded his birth and was deeply disturbed by the questions asked by his colleagues and friends but could not find out any answers. However, these questions acted like showers of blessings upon him to open up a new chapter in his life for the search of the lost treasure. Initially he made some unsuccessful attempts to translate some of the Bengali and Sanskrit books to Manipuri Language. For about two years he taught in the Government Victoria Memorial High School and then was transferred to the newly established Lala M.E. School as Assistant Head Master. He remained there for about one year until he got a clerical job in the establishment of the Deputy Commissioner's office in Silchar. He worked there for eight months and got selected as Assistant Sub-Inspector in the police department in February 1918 and joined at Dibrugarh. As a police officer he served in the capacity of Second Officer and Officer in-charge in many places of Assam including Sibsagar, Tezpur, Golaghat, Bokakhat, Gauhati (present Guwahati), Nagoan, Shillong, Nalbari, Rangia and finally at Amingaon, where he took voluntary retirement from his service.

Soon after his transfer to Rangia, Phulo's life changed its own course. One evening in 1926, in the Meitei calendar month of *Lamda* (March/April), he was coming back from duties riding his bicycle. He had to cross a hill tract and tried to cross it before sunset. But as the sun sank slowly behind the hilltops, a long curtain fell upon the stage of day and the intervening hills cut short the time the light and shade mingle at sunset. He felt little scared and thought of increasing the pedal movement to cross the tract as soon as possible. Suddenly caught sight of a Meitei looking old man of giant physique and colourfully dressed who was sitting on a low growing branch of a tree just by the roadside of the way he was passing. He accumulated all his strength to pass by the way in a single breath thinking it to be a deceptive figure. When he was nearing it, the man with a calm voice asked, "Why are you in hurry, son? Come, sit near me. Let's talk for a while. I have many things to discuss with you." On hearing this, Phulo sighed with relief and being assured of his safety, stopped and sat near him. The man looked at him with his eyes and addressed him, "The duty of an able son is to know the origin of his forefathers. Quit your job and save your religion. The Meitei religion is in great trouble, all its essence is buried and we have forgotten all the holy doctrines and legacy of our own religion." On hearing this Phulo replied, "I am an innocent family man. How can I carry out such a tough task on my own? There are so many able and intelligent people around in the Meitei society, why me?" The man with a smile said, "It is you my son. You are the ablest son, save your religion for which you were born. Your religion is locked for a long period of time indiscriminately. Start your work immediately and if delayed your religion will be vanished once for all times to come." Phulo told him that the Meiteis were the followers of Vaishnavism which is an inseparable way of their life. The man then said, "Don't forget that you still worship *yumlais*, *Sanamahi*, *Ima Leimaren* and *Epudhou Pakhangba*. Remember that yours is yours and his is his. Never compare your religion with others and no religion is below or above one another." Phulo later asked the old man why he was

there. The man said that it was about 200 years that he had left the Meitei *leipak* (Manipur) and disappeared in the next moment. With a great surprise Phulo felt a thrill at heart – an excitement due for fear and curiosity. The site was also completely enveloped in darkness. With a heavy sweat and thousands of questions in mind Phulo reached his quarter (ibid). This idyllic incident transformed him completely and threw him into an ocean of thoughts to find out the meanings of the words spelt out by the old man.

Amingaon was the last police station where he served in the police service. In another incident on a Thursday, 26th April 1928, Phulo was studying a case in his chamber when he felt someone standing at the door. As he looked out, he saw a Meitei old man standing with his two hands holding the two borders of the door, looking at him as if he knew Phulo from years before. His whole body was bonded in shackles and holding an iron rod in his hands, with broad eyes, and was trying to say something. His appearance in this condition was symbolic and indicated that Meiteis were in chains and needed to be delivered. Phulo, in his deep inside, felt a similarity of the figure with the apparition of the man with whom he met the other day in Rangia. Before he could say anything, the man entered and sat on the chair on the other side of his table. The man stood instantly and took the cigar from him and with a somber voice said, “It has been a long time since I have not eaten Meitei food.” Phulo then offered to prepare something to eat for him. The old man with a smile thanked but refused his offer and calmly said, “My time is over and I have to go now. Come to the railway station after you finish your work. I will be waiting for you there. I have many things to convey to you.” And instantly the man got out of his chamber and disappeared out of vision. Phulo remained on his chair totally confused of whether it was an illusion or a reality. (ibid)

After his duty, Phulo went to the railway station as told by the man. He searched the entire railway station for the stranger but could not find him. He also asked the people around but no one in the platform could provide a clue of the man. With much disappointment Phulo decided to return to his quarter. When he looked around as he was returning, he saw a shackled hand hanging on the window of a train standing on the dock. He set his steps towards the train and got up in to the compartment. As he entered the compartment the stranger broke out into a big smile on his face as if he was welcoming him and blessed with the words, "My son, don't be suspicious, come near me. I know you can carry out the task. Save your mother tongue, save your religion. The Meiteis are in prison for long and become a living dead. Do it now or never." Phulo asked the man how he would start without knowing anything. "Whatever you do, whatever you say and whatever you set would be for others to follow. Remember I am always there wherever you go and whatever you do." The old man added. When Phulo showed his eagerness to know his identity the old man put his fingers crossed with a slight movement of the face on the sides blinked his eyes slowly suggesting him to leave silently. Phulo had to leave the place with full of curiosity without a word, with thousands of puzzles to be solved. (ibid, information furnished was cross examined by interviewing L. Wakching, of Laishramkhun, an activist of the movement, during his interview with the researcher on 12/6/2011)

On the same day in the evening Phulo along with some of his policemen went for duty in a far flung remote area. On their way back late at night Phulo was in hurry by riding his horse through the hills, towards the station. As time rolled on, the bright and dazzling Venus appeared and was gazing intently from miles and miles away from the morning sky indicating the day break. After sometime he caught sight of a short statured old man in the dim light by the hill side, who seemed to be a grass cutter. As they were approaching, the man raised his head with eager expectation to meet someone, stopped him and inquired

whereabouts of Daroga Phundrei. Phulo was astonished at the question and replied that it was he himself whom the old man was looking for. He requested the old man to tell him what he wanted. The man with a broad smile returned, “Well, its long time since I have been looking for you. Wait for a moment.” The man, then, rushed to a small cave like shelter and came out with an iron box²⁴ and handed over to Phulo saying, “Take this treasure and preserve with honour. Quit your job and start work.” The man then with a deep breath continued, “Today I have sown the seeds of seven *Ebudhou* (grandfathers of seven *salais*) and the rest is yours.” Saying thus, the man showered his blessings upon by rubbing his head. He then departed and disappeared out of vision amidst the hills. Phulo stood speechless like a statue looking towards the direction the man disappeared. It was the last blessing that Phulo received from the wise men which ultimately moulded his life towards the revival of the old Meitei religion and culture. Meiteis believed that the three old man with whom Phulo encountered with in the three different occasions were Lourembam Khongnangthaba, Langol Lukhoi and Konok Thengra respectively, the three great Meitei *maichous* (saints), who were believed to be disappeared from Manipur because of the misdeeds of the Meitei Kings leading to the annihilation of the Meitei tradition and origin. (ibid)

The above narrative taken from the family sources and believers in his ideology, which looks imaginary and unreal, is referred to this context to substantiate the argument of the gradual strength that *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism* is acquiring, supernatural cover being given to Phulo’s ordination and firm commitment of the revivalist forces in restoring and revalidating the pristine Meitei religion and faith. The narrative is

²⁴. The *Apokpa* Meiteis believe that the iron box which the old man handed over to Phulo contained the *puya Sakok Thiren Machak*, which is also believed to be the source of the *Meitei Yelhou Mayek* (script) consisting of 36 alphabets and claimed by them as the original script of the Meiteis. However, the said script is not accepted by the scholars in Manipur who otherwise suggest *Sana Konung Mayek* consisting 18 alphabets, which is recognized and introduced in the primary level of education in Manipur.

forming a part of popular perception as observed during fieldwork, among the fervent followers of *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism*.

The successive incidents made deep impact on Phulo's mind and set the process of transforming his mind and infusing sense of dedication towards the goal of what the wise men set before him. Phulo started studying old Meitei *puyas* and other religious treatises like the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Bible* and the *Quran*. For the next two years, he meditated and searched for the truth and finally he was blessed with a vision and developed his school of thought. Having blessed by the wise men and read all relevant scriptures and getting convinced of reviving as well as popularizing the ancient religion among his Meitei brethren, Phulo chanted his new faith with missionary zeal and conviction.

In 1929 Phulo started his work of revivalism aiming at rooting for the roots and negotiating with his own people. His new role in calling upon the people to have a relook at their past, their pristine faith and the heritage the Meitei language was understandably received with opposition by the Meitei Brahmins and the Vaishnavite Meiteis. Mounting an attack on his revivalist initiative, Phulo was excommunicated by Jaribond *leipak* by calling him *nastik* on August 10, 1929. Phulo's intelligence and tireless efforts fascinated number of followers. His closest followers namely Laorembam Tonjao and Naorem Kokngang were entrusted to carry out the task of propagating the traditional Meitei faith to the people of Jaribond. They convened a meetings at the residence Nepram Tonsana of Laishramkhun where they discussed on the ancient religion of the Meiteis and the new found ideal propounded by Naoria Phulo. People like Nepram Basna, Sanasam Chura, Loutonbam Dhana and Akoism Kirti took part in the discussion. They went to Thingomkhul near Kalacherra where they assembled in different places and started propagating Phulo's ideas of reviving the

ancient religion and philosophy. Two days later, Vaishnava Meiteis gathered in an assembly at Thingomkhun convened by *Ningthem* Lalasana (*ningthem* is the royal descendent from the *karta* line, descendants of king Bhagyachandra, who is the keeper and head of the Meitei society, also called *leipak mapu*) called Laurembam Tonjao, Bheiga, Meipak, Gopal, Laishram Makhe, Nabin and Atonyeima in the meeting and excommunicated all seven of them from the society for preaching an ideal against the established doctrine of Vaishnavism. In the next month Phulo's family and relatives were also excommunicated by the society. They were considered to be social outcasts. (Sources from the family of Naoria Phulo.)

Phulo took voluntary retirement from the police service in March 1930 and came back to his native place Jaribond and started preaching the *Apokpa* religion. He reconverted his followers on the last Saturday (the Meitei week day of *Thangja*) of the Meitei calendar month of *Lamda* (11th April, 1930) at 7° clock in the morning at his residence by observing all formalities of the ancient religion. Seven disciples, namely, Laurembam Tonjao, Naorem Kokngang, Maipak, Gopal, Laishram Atonyeima, Soram Khelo and Moirengjam Munan were first reconverted to the old Meitei faith. On the next day of the reconversion ceremony, on Sunday, the April 12, 1930, Phulo founded the *Apokpa Marup* to give a platform for the study of the old Meitei religious philosophy. Amidst hardships and obstacles Phulo propagated *Apokpa-ism* for twelve years became the beloved of God for the heavenly abode at a young age of 53 on Monday, the 30th June 1941 at 8°clock in the morning at his residence at Leishramkhun. (Information provided by Ashem *ahan* Megho, an *ahan*, who is one of the seven core members or *ahan taret* of the *Apokpa laming*)

Phulo did not reconvert other than the first seven disciples named earlier during his lifetime and had left the remaining task to be carried out on his

successors. Saints in every religion are adorned by the people for their highly valued wisdom and philosophical works. Phulo was no exception. During these twelve years he propagated *Apokpa-ism* and wrote many books on different aspects including the origin of the Meiteis, their religious beliefs, rites and rituals, customs and traditions and on culture. He also put his hands in literary pursuits and composing songs which are partly published. The books he wrote included *Meetei Houpham Wari*, *Tengbanba Amashung Lainingthou Laipao*, *Eigee wareng*, *Pamheiba*, *Thaeen Nong-eem*, *Ahal Yathang*, *Singthaa Cheitharol*, *Laining Khuda Nipal*, *Haunabung Amasung Lannabung*, among others. These books throw light on the origin of the Meiteis and development of the Meitei society, its cultural heritage, and religious philosophy. They also encapsulate the cosmogony and the relation between god, soul and body and the religious practices of the old Meitei religion, their deities. Any evaluation of his writings speaks volume to his literary beauty and style.

The news of the resurging of the old Meitei faith in Assam swept into Manipur and reached the Imphal valley. Soon a movement sprang up that found a positive echo in the minds of the young people, in their search for ethnic identity (Nilakanta, 1993). In 1935, Takhellambam Bokul (popularly known as *Sanamahi* Bokul), Surchand and Ibomacha from Manipur came to Cachar and stayed here for twenty-one months to study the religious philosophy of the old Meitei religion. They studied *Apokpa-ism* and were so impressed by the arguments given by Phulo that they denounced Vaishnavism and embraced *Apokpa-ism*. On their return, they tried to bring forth a new hope for the revival of the old Meitei religion. They initiated steps to form a religious organization and it was formed in the name of *Meitei Marup* on 14th May, 1945, consisting of seven members namely, Takhellambam Bokul, Pukhrambam Surchand, Pukhrambam Ibomacha, Angom Nungsirei, *Angom* Lila, Lukram Iboton and *Toism* Yaisna. These group of seven people played a major role in the beginning of a new era in the revival of the old Meitei religion which

they called *Sanamahism* (as narrated earlier, *Sanamahi* is the supreme household God of the Meiteis who is worshipped in every Meitei family irrespective of Vaishnava Meiteis or *Apokpa/Sanamahi* followers) in Manipur in the subsequent years. The formation of *Apokpa Marup* in the then Cachar and *Meitei Marup* in Manipur became a morale booster for those who were victims of the strict code and conduct of the *Brahma sabha*. Naoria Phulo came out strongly against the evil practices in the Meitei society. Thus the revival of *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism* by the establishment of *Apokpa Marup* by Naoria Phulo in Cachar and *Meitei Marup* under his influence in Manipur became a major force in bringing a new social order. This movement led to a conflict between the followers of *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism* and those of Vaishnavism. As a result, the followers and members of *Meitei Marup* were excommunicated by the *Brahma sabha*. Despite this, the movement gained momentum. Slowly but steadily the movement gained ground and greatly influenced the young minds. In the preceding years a marked change has been seen in the religious and socio-cultural life of the people at large.

In Manipur thirty-eight members of the *Meitei Marup* were excommunicated by the *Brahma sabha*, vide *Brahma sabha* Resolution no. 61, dated 31/10/1947. Not only those who were reconverted but also who were in touch with them in any social or religious function were also socially boycotted. They were not allowed to work together even in the paddy fields and inter-dinning as well as intermarriage between the two groups was prohibited. Neighbours belonging to opposing faiths raised high fencing to dissociate themselves from one another. Even death in the families could not bring them together in one platform. It is easily understandable that the deterioration of social relations in such a situation led to many cases of social boycott, excommunication and social conflicts between the Vaishnavite Meiteis and the followers of *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism* and also between the authorities sympathetic to both these opposing groups. There was also a sense of conflict, anxiety and

distrust in the social set up. Thus the religious history of the Meiteis in the 20th century is a history of continued conflict amongst the Meitei brethren divided by the two religions, Vaishnavism and *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism*.

In Assam till early 1990s intermarriage between them was prohibited. However, the close of the 20th century saw *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism* gaining strong foothold in the context of modern education, increasing sense of identity and many other social factors. Resultantly, the gap between the two groups has also seen a sharply declining movement. The impact of the teachings of Naoria Phulo became more and more embedded in the hearts and minds of the people at large. The arguments given by Phulo became acceptable to the masses. As a result, it instilled a new hope in the process of revivalist movement of the old Meitei religion. Old beliefs and religious practices paved to the broadening of the base of the emerging movement to take its righteous place.

Naoria Phulo started his movement for the revival of the old religion of the Meiteis and called for rooting for the roots. In one of his poems titled *Eigi Weireng* (written in Manipuri language, published by *Apokpa Marup*, Jafibond, Cachar, 1949) he writes:

Can't one pray in one's own language?

Isn't one's own religion the most natural way leading to God?

(16: 48-49)

He looked for the answers, after a process of search up held a vision for the rejuvenation and renaissance of his people. Phulo's philosophy was that of 'one fatherhood of god and universal brotherhood of human beings' like many other religious faiths. He stressed the way that an individual reaches God in consonance with his/her own way of life. In

1937 he was given the title *Laininghan* (meaning the greatest believer of God) by the then Rajkumar of Manipur R.K. Tikendradhwaj.

Subsequently, Mass conversion of the Meiteis by an oath taking process called *nongkhrang irrppua* (a ritual bathing ensuring to follow the new religion for the next seven births as stated earlier), under royal decree in the beginning of the 18th century, were reverted to *Sanamahism* on Wednesday, the 6th February 1974 by a declaration of the then Maharaja of Manipur, Okendrajit. It got its official recognition after eighteen years as the king declared on April 23, 1992 (21st of the Meitei calendar month of *Sajibu*) declared the religion as the state religion of Manipur.

4.3 Ideology of Naoria Phulo:

The establishment of *Apokpa Marup* in Jaribon was an effort to provide proper direction of the movement with a definite ideology. His main ideology is the de-Hinduisation of the Meitei socio-religious identity which is manifested in his action when he started strongly opposing the observance of Hindu festivals, use of Sanskrit and Bengali languages and the monopoly of Brahmins in the Socio-religious ceremonies of the Meiteis. His preaching was also the exposition of Meitei belief and their way of life so that their identity would not be threatened by a more dominant culture. He believed that the following of the traditional Meitei way of life is no sin. According to him the best way to liberate the society from the Brahmanical domination is to worship the Meitei deities with their own hymns of the Meitei language and not through Bengali or Sanskrit verses.

By doing this Naoria Phulo has also criticized the leaders of the Vaishnavite Meitei organizations. On one occasion, during the celebration of a *sankirtana*, the king of Manipur Maharaja Churachand along with his great Sanskrit scholar, Pandit Atombapu Sharma met Phulo at Lalang, a village near Lakhipur, Cachar, in 1935. The Maharaja

came to know about Phulo's arguments and denouncement of Vaishnavism. It is said that a public debate was arranged there between the members of *Apokpa Marup* and the Vaishnavite Meiteis. *Laininghan* is said to have defeated Pandit Atombapu Sharma in the said debate and the Maharaja himself was impressed by the arguments forwarded by Phulo. (Information provided by N. Amusana, the son of Naoria Phulo, of Laishramkhun.)

His greatest achievement was the development of a scientific theory of Meitei cosmic evolution in his unpublished book *Sakok Salai Thirel*. His books reflected the de-Hinduisation of Meiteis and the ancient philosophy about the creation of the universe, earth, God and the origin of the Meiteis. The ideology of the *Apokpa Marup* led by Naoria Phulo was to break off from Vaishnavism totally. This ideology is also clearly reflected in the books written by him which is his major effort to stop the Vaishnava influence on the Meitei culture and religion. His works on Vaishnava Meitei Kings and Hindu Missionaries awakened the Meitei minds to a sharp departure from the Vaishnavite elements.

For Naoria Phulo, Meitei's culture and religion which he called *Meitei-ism/Apokpa-ism* is not the offshoot of the tribal culture as propounded by European anthropologists like McCulloch, Pemberton, T.C. Hodson, Grierson and others. Neither it was a speculation based on Hindu myths of the Aryan origin as alleged by W. Yumjao Singh and Pandit Atombapu Sharma. Naoria Phulo in his theory held the view that the Meiteis are the descendents of *Lainingthou Sararel* (God of Heaven) and their religion is the worshiping of *Poklen Pokpa Satlen Satpa* (Supreme Creator) along with a host of pre-Vaishnavite Meitei deities. For his tireless effort and contribution in the revival of the Meitei religious life, his followers gave him the title of *Taibangfaoba Naoria Ahan* (Universal Leader Naoria, the Great). His ideology is to establish a distinct Meitei identity which is neither of tribal origin nor of Aryan origin. It is to be

noted that there is a sharp difference in the ideologies of the movement in Assam and the valley of Manipur. In Manipur, the movement has always been influenced by achieving various political goals. However in Assam the movement remained as a socio-cultural and religious movement aiming at establishing a distinct identity of its own free from the influence of dominant cultures. This is because of conditions prevailing in Assam differing from that of Manipur.

Therefore, many revivalist leaders in Manipur valley differ from the ideology of Naoria Phulo because Meiteis in Manipur felt the importance of maintaining a social harmony not only between the Meiteis and hill tribes but also between various ethnic communities in the valley. These leaders claim that the *Sanamahi* was the common God of both the Meiteis and hill tribes. Therefore, the leaders in Manipur valley named the movement as *Sanamahi* Movement instead of *Apokpa-ism*. The change of the name of the movement by the Meiteis in Manipur indicates the ideological shift of the leaders from an exclusivist Meitei identity to a broader identity of Manipur. Its aspect is to broaden the participation of social groups rather than confining to the Meiteis alone. At present there are many state level organizations in Manipur which work together to sustain the *Sanamahi* movement in a holistic way. Therefore the present *Sanamahi* movement in Manipur has developed a multiple leadership with varying interests on different issues of language, culture, religion and politics. (Bijoykumar, 2005)

4.4 Influence of Vaishnavism on the Meitei Social and Cultural Life:

It is a fact that Vaishnavism found a fertile ground in Manipur and established a deep rooted foundation in Meitei society. The Meiteis have assimilated the faith to their own tastes guided by their own brand of conservatism and orthodoxy. This can be seen from a variety of their religious functions and other ceremonies. The Meitei Vaishnavism remains unique for its society with a dual caste organization viz.

Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. It may also be added that Vaishnavism has let, first to the complete absorption of the immigrant Brahmins into the fold of Meitei society and second to the adoption of Bengali (in its one of the dialects *Brajabali*) and partly Sanskrit literature which undeniably provided fodder for the cultivation of Vaishnava faith in the Meitei society. (Kennedy, 1925)

As discussed earlier, Vaishnavism has had a great impact on the life of the Meiteis. It is not too much to say that Vaishnavism has become the culture of the Meiteis, or at least made them feel that way. Their worldview, way of life, dress, and food has been greatly influenced by Vaishnavism. As discussed before, there were not much difference between them and the hill people. But when they became Hindus they adopted the concept of 'touch me not' attitude. They treated the hill people as untouchables and called them *hab*, meaning 'uncivilized'. This led to the creation of a colossal barrier between the Meiteis and the hill people. Within the Meitei community, there are *Lois* and *Yaithibis* who were driven out of the Meitei community as untouchables for not accepting Vaishnavism. They live in the outskirts of the mainline Meitei people.

From 18th century onwards, the common Meitei thought has been identified with Hinduism in the form of Vaishnavism (*Gaudia*) which is associated with the school of Sri Chaitanya. Many scholars started to locate the Meiteis in the discursive episteme of a pan Indian social and cultural legacy and traced the roots of the Meiteis with that of *kiratas* of the ancient Indian literatures. Books and scriptures had been translated from Bengali and Sanskrit to Manipuri. *Brahma sabha* was formed. As a result, untouchability (*mangba shengba* or *amang asheng*) all of a sudden strictly became a part of Meitei social life. A law book called *Wayel* was written as Hindu Law Book of Manipur. It became a matter of pride for them to use Bengali and Sanskrit in their day to day lifestyle. All

religious functions were performed in Sanskrit in accordance with Hindu rituals. Brindavan, Nabadwip and Puri came to be considered more holy than the sacred places of Manipur.

All the rites and rituals and ceremonies of the Vaishnavite Meiteis related to birth, marriage and death were accompanied with *lairik thiba* (recitation and narration of Hindu religious scriptures and of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*), and *Sankirtana* (singing of the Vaishnava devotional song). *Sankirtana*, which is a form of worship of Krishna and Radha, through hymns and in praise of their lives in the garden of Brindavana. This was quite easily adopted by the Meiteis whose religion expresses itself in a synthesis of music, singing, dancing and drama (Bowers, 1953). The *sankirtana*, infused by the artistic movements of the Meiteis, creates an atmosphere where dance and music become dominant elements of their religion and life providing an emotional outlet for the people.

In *lairik thiba*, there are two men, one reciting the Hindu scripture and the other interpreted in the Meitei language, who are called *lairik thiba* and *lairik haiba* respectively. Sometimes the scripture is sung as a ballad or shown in performative art forms. These used to enthuse the audience and involve them emotionally. It entertains the audiences with different emotions. In this way the audiences were co-opted into Hindu religious philosophy and ethics.

In addition to these there are other forms of performing arts for the socio-cultural and religious orientation of the Meiteis into the Vaishnava religious core. They are *khubak eshei*, a kind of ritual singing only by female performers who sing in praise of Lord Krishna, *Natapala* and *Rasa Lila*.

Natapala is a devotional ensemble performance held on ritual occasions in the Meitei society of Manipur. The oldest form of *nata sankirtana* is *bangadesh pala* introduced in 1709 A.D, followed by *manoharshai pala*, in 1850; the other two variations of this genre being *dhrumel* and *dhap pala*. In a typical performance held in the courtyard of a house or a temple, it is held with audience sitting on three sides of the sacred performing space. The head of the function, who is called *kirtan mapu*, ritually begins and ends the function, with the sound of the conch-shell (*moibung*) marking every phase of the performance. Structured as an ensemble, the primary dynamics of the performance consists of a duet between the singer-cymbal player-dancers who may be male or female and the drum-dancers called *pung yeiba*, who are always male. The singers sing while standing, play cymbals to keep the rhythm of the song along with and enact the meaning of the song in expressive gestures. The drum-playing is accompanied with dancing with vigorous jumps and acrobatic turns called *pung cholom*. The lead singer often narrates parts of the theme in the form of theatrical dialogues. They are usually sung in *Brajabali* language about Vaishnavite themes along with Manipuri translations.

The *Rasa Lila* is the prime contribution of the Meiteis to Hinduism, which is the synthesis of the traditional Meitei dance form with that of the Vaishnava religious theme. There are two kinds of *Rasa Lila*;

the first is about the childhood stories that enact episodes relating Lord Krishna's childhood stories which is locally called *sansenba* (*rakhhal/raukhal/gauda lila*) which is largely performed by children.

the other is the *Rasa Lila* which is held at night and is mainly performed by adult women and those who perform in a *Rasa Lila* is believed to be an act of devotion in which stories from Lord Krishna's life are performed.

They are the most powerful socio-cultural media which were engaged for mass appropriation of the Meitei population at the grass root level towards Vaishnavite cultural values and religious philosophy. These efforts to popularize the new religion caused the indigenous religion to fade out from the life of the people. However, there has always been a basic Meitei philosophy in existence under the surface parallel to Hinduism. It leads to the fact that Vaishnavism practiced in Manipur consequently became a peculiar Manipuri Vaishnavism in form, a syncretism of traditional culture and the new faith (Zehol, 1998). The religious life of the people, even if they have come much under the influence of Hinduism, retained their traditional markers inherited from their ancestors. The essentials of the old religion remain recognizable till this day.

With the revival of the traditional religious beliefs and its values, a wide range of changes are witnessed in the content and context of the rituals and ceremonies related to births and deaths and the observance of social and cultural rituals and ceremonies as discussed above. Among the Meiteis who have got reconverted to *Apokpa/Sanamahi* faith, the employment and engagement of *pibas* (Meitei man) and *maibas* and *maibis* in place of Brahmins has altered the entire structure and content of these ceremonies and rituals which are being infused with new meanings. On the other hand, there has also been witnessed a sea change in the rituals and ceremonies of the Vaishnavite Meiteis. As mentioned above the external structures of the Hindu rituals remain the same, but the social purpose and content have undergone radical changes.

The tradition which they had inherited was their own thought and philosophy, gods and goddesses, priests, rituals and festivals which were rich in mythology and colourful in nature. The *yumlais* mentioned earlier are worshipped in every Manipuri household and their importance in social and cultural life of the people has never been reduced. However,

conflict between Meitei *lais* and Hindu gods was never felt as the religion of the Manipuris today managed to draw effectively from both the indigenous and Hindu traditions and fuse them into a workable synthesis. The Vaishnava faith could not erase the traditional *lais* from practice and belief of the people nor did it identify the *lais* with Hindu gods. The traditional *lais* continued to be an integral part of the Meitei life and are placed side by side with the lately adopted Radha-Krishna and host of other Hindu deities.

It is a relevant point here that the worship of *yumlais* and *umanglais* are performed not by the Hindu Brahmins but by the *maiba* or *maibi* only and the ritualistic prayers of Hindu deities are performed by the Brahmins under the *tulsi* tree which is planted in every house in the north east corner of the courtyard. *Prasada* of Hindu gods and goddesses are generally not taken inside the house. In fact, after having *prasada* they are to wash their hands and mouth before entering into the house. For more than three centuries Vaishnavism had its impact in orienting the religious and cultural life of the Meiteis. The Bhakti cult permeates the emotional being of the Meitei common people. Yet even today, despite the iron grip of Vaishnavism, *Sanamahi*, the highest pre-Vedic Meitei deity rules supreme (Zehol, 1998). On a closer look into the process discussed above, one finds a sense of uniqueness. While adopting the Vaishnavite frame of living, as an effect of Sanskritisation, the Meiteis never dissociated themselves from their innate indigenous sensibilities. So we find Vaishnavism taking a 'Meitei-turn' in Manipur as well as in Assam. The temptation is to say that the Meiteis are Hindus whose worship of *Sanamahi* is irresistible.

4.5 Socio-religious and Cultural Changes in the Meitei society in Assam:

Socio-religious movements are defined as collective actions either to initiate or to resist changes. In this chapter an attempt is made first to identify the nature of the *Sanamahi* movement and secondly, to study the overall changes in the Meitei society. Therefore, attempts have been made to examine the impact of the *Sanamahi* movement on various spheres such as social, cultural and religious life of the Meiteis with special reference to Assam. The present *Sanamahi* movement has passed through various stages in shaping its goals in different periods. The most vital area of exploration in this regard is the reasons for the continuity and sustainability of the movement that had started in 1930s till today. The movement for the revival of pre-Hindu Meitei identity seems to be more relevant in the present context than before. Therefore, the intensity of the movement as well as its impact today is greater than before.

One of the most significant impacts of the movement is the changes in the socio-economic relationship between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins. Earlier the Brahmins enjoyed a certain economic status legitimized by the notion of *mangba-sengba* (purity and pollution) corresponding to their ritualistic and social position in the society. (Bijoykumar, 2005) Because of this notion of purity associated with their ritual status, the Brahmins enjoyed certain amount of monopoly in both religious and social space. The income that came from the public charity for rituals and their role as cook in the community feast has considerably reduced in the changed situation. It is also witnessed that along with the deteriorating positions of the Brahmins in the society, the Vaishnavite festivals, which were once celebrated in a grand way, today, they are hardly observed except for formalities. The *Ratha Yatra* locally called *kang chingba* (pulling of chariot of Lord Jagannatha), which was once the longest festival celebrated for 9 days by the Meiteis, is no more

popular in the same degree. In the entire Jaribond (Meitei settlement in Hailakandi district of Assam) only Chengbil, a village near Lala town, *kang chingba* is witnessed with a few participants. Other ceremonial activities following the *kang chingba* like *joydev chongba* (*sankirtana*) and community feast are also observed in a very smaller scale. There are many Vaishnava Meiteis and temples that do not participate in and observe this festival publicly at present.

Today even in the state of Manipur this festival is witnessed only in the Govindaji temple in the *Kangla* palace compound, Bijoy Govindaji temple at Sagolband and Abdeitya temple at Bishnupur with very few participants. (Bijoykumar, 2005)

On the contrary there is a growing trend among the Meiteis towards their age old religious festivals like *lai haraoba*, *Mera wa yungba* (lighting of the holy light on the bamboo pole in the Meitei calendar month *Mera*), *thabal chongba* (Post-harvest dance by unmarried boys and girls), *Emoinu eratpa* (worship of the sacred fire), to mention a few. When Hinduism spread to Manipur most of the traditional festivals of the Meiteis have been influenced by Hinduism to a great extent. Many of the festivals were even replaced by the Hindu festivals. For instance, the *kwak tanba* (ritual to drive out evil spirits) ritual had become a part of the *Durga puja*. Such assimilation led to the neglect of important traditional rituals associated with *kwak tanba/kwak yatra* and led to the marginalization of the role and importance of *maiba* and *maibi*. With the revival of *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism*, their roles are being grounded fore again. It is observed that there is also a gradual increase in the popularity of traditional folk songs called *khunung eshei*, *Moirang parvah* and *Khongjom parva*. These are musical genres singing the epic love story of the legendary hero and heroine Khamba and Thoibi of Moirang. They promote the deep religious feeling of the people and provide the theme of the *Khamba-Thoibi* epic in archaic Meitei language. Another significant

change is the performing art forms in the socio-religious ceremonies of the Vaishnavite Meiteis which is also greatly influenced by the revivalist movement which can be clearly seen in their rituals and ceremonies particularly in the Meitei society of Assam.

It is pertinent to understand the dynamics of survival and existence of these indigenous traditions by defying the powerful force of Hinduisation. The subversion of the process of Hinduisation happened as these traditional forms subsumed themselves in the larger socio-religious Hindu fabric by taking in characteristics of the Vaishnavite faith. This is purely the 'logic of culture'²⁵ and that is how the indigenous traditions have survived till today in spite of powerful socio-political forces of Hinduisation, Burmese occupation, colonization, modernization and globalization. Today the *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahi* movement has been making efforts not only to revive the indigenous socio-religious traditions but also to sanctify these traditions which have been intermingled with the alien cultural elements. This is the greatest challenge that the *Apokpa/Sanamahi* movement has to face to make the Meiteis rediscover their age old culture as a unique and distinct from pan Indian Vaishnavite traditions.

4.6 Decline of Brahmanical institutions in the Meitei Society of Assam:

Majority of the Manipuri population in Assam live in villages. More importantly, these villages' center round a Vaishnavite temple along with a *mandap*, a gathering space, which serves as the village community

²⁵. Here the term 'logic of culture' refers to the conscious part of culture that always finds its ways of survival. It has a capacity for adoption, absorption and assimilation. In order to survive the indigenous culture at the same time to accept the Hindu culture among the masses, each of the culture – traditional religion and Vaishnavism, support each other. The Meiteis also understand their subjective and objective responses to the new Vaishnavite culture. First they lend their will to the king in the legitimization of the Vaishnavite culture with free consent and obedience at the same time they also assert themselves as different from the Hindu culture. Ray, William, *The Logic of Culture*, Blackwell Publishers, 2001 (Cited in Bijoykumar, 2005)

centers. More than twenty major Hindu festivals were observed by them with great importance till few decades ago. Mention may be made of *ratha yatra*, *Janmastami* (Krishna *janma*), *Radhastami* (*Thourani janma*), *Sri Panchami*, *Shivaratri*, *Akshaya Tritiya*, *Baruni*, *Dol Yatra*, among others. It is witnessed that at present these festivals are no longer observed publicly with pomp and gusto but these are observed only as a routine matter. On the other hand, many pre-Hindu traditional festivals are gaining its momentum. Till 1970s almost every child in the Meitei society used to participate in the children theatre called *raukhal/rakhal* (locally called *sansenba* or *gauda lila*), which was performed every year in almost every locality. Today it is no more played and such a festival is not even known to the younger generations. They can be only heard as stories from the nostalgic older generation.

The Vaishnavite temples in the Meitei villages are traditionally run by the Brahmins with the support from the villagers. Most of these temples are either established by a well to do person of the village or by the donation of the village population. The villagers provide their subscription for performing any Vaishnavite religious rites, rituals and festivals. However, today there is a marked change in the people's mindset and the earlier enthusiasm. Hence, the power and position enjoyed by the Brahmins in the Meitei society in earlier days seem to be reduced to a great extent. Moreover, there are very few Brahmins by profession now a days. Earlier it was the routine work for every Brahmin boy to help their parents in daily *puja* in the temples. However, today it is very hard to find a Brahmin boy going for the training for priesthood craft (Bijoykumar, 2005). Many lapses, omissions and commissions in the Hindu ritual formalities are witnessed in the conduct of rites and rituals of death, marriage and similar other ceremonies. This cultural and social degeneration in respect of the Meitei Brahmins has a great significance in the Meitei society in Assam in view of the present *Sanamahi* movement.

4.7 Revival of the indigenous rituals and festivals:

At present there is a new wave of popularizing traditional rituals and festivals in Assam. The term 'ritual' involves beliefs in religious power and therefore it is sacred. It also symbolizes the integrating force which is sometimes shared by the whole of the community. Rituals determine the social content and behaviour of a group which may also reflect the changing aspects of a society. Such changing aspects may signify the creation of a new aspect in the form of new tradition or redefinition of an old one. (Amal, 2010)

As discussed earlier, in the ongoing process of social change due to the modernization and globalization along with the revivalist movement of the Meiteis, which had started in the 1930s, today a change has been witnessed in the Vaishnavite Meitei social and cultural life also. When the *Apokpa/Sanamahi* Meiteis revived and retained their traditional culture and belief, rites and rituals, the Vaishnavite Meiteis at present are also found to have intended to change their course and conduct from the so called mainstream. Since the Meiteis had once dipped their whole body and mind into Vaishnavism with dedication, it remained to be a hard task to bring a change in their mindset in a U-turn. However, most of the rites and rituals of the Vaishnavite Meiteis are found to be performed at present with many cuts and modifications or additions, which indicates an interblending of the two to produce a new tradition or rather a revival of their age old tradition.

Most of the people including academicians to the common people assume it as a Renaissance in the Meitei society. The essence of the revivalist movement started by Phulo was its accent on old Meitei gods and goddesses like *Sanamahi*, *Pakhangba* and *Ima Leimaren* and host of other deities. It was a reaction to Vaishnavism initially and had an ethnic dimension as Sanskrit and Bengali were totally replaced by the chaste Meitei expression. Moreover, the modern education also has helped the

awakening multi-pronged and multi dimensional affair which has a great impact the community in various aspects. The change that resulted from this impact is clearly witnessed from the early 1980's. Today, the rites and rituals which had not been performed for years are started celebrating. The traditional rites and rituals became popular in almost every Meitei populated areas. In the Hailakandi district of Assam *lai haraoba* was performed only in the temple of *Lawat Lairembi* (Meitei goddess, also called *Kachaha Khouri* by the non-Meitei population of the area). However, today almost every *umanglai* deity in the Meitei village is also worshipped through *lai haraoba* festival with great enthusiasm. *Lai haraoba* festival is a lengthy process and is held in an esteemed way. There is an upward trend of this festival along with other traditional festivals in Assam.

There is no denying fact that old ritual values have considerably declined in almost in every society. It is also witnessed that there is a minimizing trend in the performance of such rituals may be due to busy and materialistic life style as a result of the globalization. As such the lengthy process of *lai haraoba* is shortened to save energy, time and space and obviously expenditure. However, the central theme remains the same and unchanging as lyrics in the hymns of the ritual are properly preserved. The *lai haraoba* festival was generally observed for at least for ten days (in Manipur it was ten days to thirty days). But today they are shortened to 9 days or 7 days or 5 days. In some cases *lai haraoba* is shortened to 3 days only in Assam. The details of the *lai haraoba* festival will be discussed at length in the proceeding pages.

4.8 The Worship of *Panthoibi* on Durga *Puja*:

The Durga *puja* festival as in the dominant cultures of Assam is celebrated by the Meiteis since their settlement here with great pomp and gusto. Almost in every Meitei concentrated areas this festival is celebrated. In almost all the villages the Vaishnavite Meiteis formed

committees for celebrating Durga *puja*. These committees closely cooperated with the Brahmins in observing the festival in their localities. However it is witnessed that there has been a peculiar change with the idol of the Goddess in its way of dressing. She wears the Meitei attire *phanek maronnaibi* and *inaphi* instead of *sari*. This may be due to the influence of *Sanamahi* movement in Manipur where revivalist Meiteis popularize this festival through the identification of Goddess Durga with the Meitei Goddess *Panthoibi*. The *Sanamahi* Meiteis in Manipur worship *Panthoibi* during the Durga *puja* festival which is an attempt to counter the Hindu religious festival and the number is ever increasing. This, however, does not make much change in the structure and formalities of the festival.

4.9 Yaosang (The Holi Festival):

This *holi* festival was known as *loipan* festival by the traditional Meiteis in early times. It was the festival of the merriment of gods and goddesses of creation from the time immemorial. In course of time the festival became synthesized with the Hindu festival of *holi* during the reign of king Gharibniwaz in 1709 and it became commonly known as *yaosang*. Among the Meiteis the *holi* festival is closely related to Shri Krishna and Shri Chaitanya *Mahaprabhu* as the observance of the festival starts with the birthday of Chaitanya *Mahaprabhu* that falls on the full-moon of *Lamda purnima* (March) and continues for five consecutive days. The first day of this festival starts with the construction of a small thatched temporary temple called *yaosang* at a suitable place in every village with prayers to Chaitanya *Mahaprabhu* as His idol is installed in that temporary temple or *sang* and offered fruits, flowers, sweets and long flags, particularly woven for the occasion called *yaosang phiran*, which are tied on full length bamboo poles (five such poles are mandatory). This bamboo poles serve as the poles of the *sang*. After performing *puja*, *sankartana* is sung by all men and women, old and young by revolving

round the *sang* at least for three times. When prayer is over the temporary *mandir* is set on fire. All people, young and old and children join together and enjoy the burning of the *sang*. After it the children in groups move around the locality from house to house for asking *vikhya* (alms) called *vikhya niba* from door to door in the name of Sri Chaitanya by shouting *Hari bolla, jai Hari* (shouting victory of Sri Hari). Such activities go on the next five days. From the next morning the little ones go for *vikhya* from house to house of the locality. The grown up boys and girls come out and move on the road sides for *vikhya* from the passers-by. mostly young people.

Till early 1990's people of all ages formed groups and used to go from door to door in the Meitei villages, which is called *holi-chatpa*. They sing devotional songs of Radha-Krishna and play *abir* (coloured powders) which is entertaining at the same times. Female folks also used to organize in such groups. Today there is a marked change witnessed in the observance of *yaosang* festival in the Meitei society of Assam. The importance of the festival is sharply declined. The trend of asking for alms has become very rare now a days. Most of the educated people are reluctant to such activities. They find it to be meaningless and do not even send their children. Hence, if these activities are carried out by some sections of people, it does not continue beyond a day since they find themselves embarrassed. Instead, *thabal-chongba* is organized in almost every locality. It is a post-harvest dance form of the unmarried boys and girls which is a derivation from the traditional Meitei folk dance form called *ougri hangel chongba*. However, playing of *abir* or colour is still witnessed in the Meitei society of Assam only for amusement.

4.10 *Cheiraoba*:

Cheiraoba or *Sajibu Cheiraoba* is an important Meitei ritual which is observed by each and every Meitei family irrespective of Vaishnavite or *Apokpa/Sanamahi* Meiteis uninterrupted from time immemorial. It is observed on the last day of the last Meitei calendar month of *Lamda*, which could never be overshadowed by the influence of Vaishnavism. In early days a man holding a bamboo stick with a bell on top of it and tied with a flag, used to go announcing the end of a year and beginning of a new year. *Cheiraoba* is a combination of two words i.e. *chei* means stick and *lauba* means announcement. Thus *Cheiraoba* literally means announcement of the end of the old and beginning of a new year. On this occasion every Meitei house is cleaned their respective houses. The ritual is carried out mainly to pray the *yumlais Sanamahi*, *Ima leimarel* and *Apokpa*. They offer fruits, vegetables and raw rice and some *sageis* offer a fish mainly a *ngamu* or a *porom* or a *sareng* fish to *Apokpa*.

They cook of these offerings and eat themselves after it has been offered to the *lam-lais* including the evil spirits seeking protection and safety of the family members. This is called *lai-chak thaba*. The male head of the family makes the offerings and in case his absence the eldest male member in the family takes his place. It is witnessed that the date of observation of this ritual is different between the people who follow the *Apokpa-ism* and Vaishnavite Meiteis. The Vaishnavite Meitei observes this festival in the month of April corresponding to the Bengali New Year and the *Apokpa* Meiteis observe according to the Meitei calendar which falls in the middle of March. This trend of following the Meitei calendar in case of *Cheiraoba* has started from 1980s in Assam and they termed it Meitei *Cheiraoba* (Information provided by L. Wakching). This trend is gaining ground even among the Vaishnavite Meiteis. In spite of the difference in the dates, the mode of observation of the ritual by both the groups remain the same.

Preliminary works for the celebration are done well ahead of the day of the festival - such as, the cleaning of the house, utensils of the kitchen etc. The ceremonial part starts early in the morning. Women of every household prepare *athenpot* containing fine raw rice, raw vegetables of different kinds, fruits and flowers of the new season. *Athenpot* is meant for offering to *Lainingthou Sanamahi* and *Ima Leimarel Sidabi* and *Apokpa* placed on the southwestern corner of the house. Prayers are offered by all the members of the family. After it the offering of foodstuffs such as rice and vegetables etc. are cooked and different varieties of dishes are made by female members of the family, which are placed on nicely round-cut plantain leaves and offered to *Emoinu* at the fire place of the house. This cooked food is then offered to the *lamlai* of the village²⁶. Food is also offered at the gate of the house to the spirits known as *Lamaba Tumaba*, and *Saroi Ngaroi* for the happiness and to protect the family from sorrows and difficulties in the coming year. After this ritual is getting over all the members of the family dine together. In the evening small boys and girls play *kang*, a kind of traditional game of the Meiteis in the village *mandap*. In the evening they prepare *tan bora* (typical Meitei *chapati* and *pakora*) and send it to their relatives and friends. *Sajibu Cheiraoba* carries great religious significance. It is believed that on the first day of *Sajibu* month *Lainingthou Sanamahi* waits for the offerings from his devotees and bless them for the wellbeing of the family. The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* mentions in details about *Sajibu Cheiraoba*, and it had been started from the time of *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba* (33 AD). In this month of *Sajibu* people start preparing their agricultural fields for cultivation. However, tilting of land and digging is prohibited during the first five days of the month.

²⁶. Each village has a different *lamlai* who are believed to be the first dead of the village. The Madaripar village in the Hailakandi district is Debjani, who is believed to be the first death of the village.

4.11 *Apokpa Khuramba*:

Apokpa khuramba or worship of Apokpa is another ritual that takes place among almost all the clans of the Meiteis. Sociologically ancestor worship creates mutual understanding among the clan members and brings a sense of togetherness among the members of the clan residing in different places. Secondly, it strengthens the institution of family, marriages and kingship system (Amal, 2010). The message of this ritual is sent through a messenger or various other means which is known as *sagei paojel* (invitation of sub-clan gathering). This ritual has a great impact in bringing the community together with a sense of identity.

4.12 Discursive Formation and *Lai Haraoba*:

This is an attempt to examine *lai haraoba*²⁷ within the context of the articulation of Meitei ethnic identity. It addresses two concerns. Firstly, *lai haraoba* as it figures in popular as well as academic discourses is contextualized within the Meitei 'lifeworld'²⁸ taking into account native categories of thought according to which the *lai haraoba* tradition embodies the very essence of what is truly Meitei. As such, it comes to occupy a position that can only be described as paradigmatic in the restating of a distinct ethnic identity. Secondly, at the physical level of space of the festival, it attempts at direct attention towards a secular culture within the sanctified 'non-ritual' space of the *lai haraoba*.²⁹

²⁷. *Haraoba* means rejoicing. J Shakespeare first translated the term '*lai haraoba*' as 'the Pleasing of god' see. Shakespeare, J. *The Pleasing of God Thangjing*, Manipur, vol. XIII, No. 1, 1913.

²⁸ Habermas's concept of 'lifeworld' refers to taken-for-granted the pre-theoretical stock of knowledge that is shared, yet constitutes a knowledge that forms and remains in the background, surviving so long as it exists in the background and is not brought to the foreground. Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and Rationalization of Society, Vol. 1*, London, Heiniman Publication, 1984.

²⁹. The ethnographic field of observation constitutes Barak valley of Assam; the variant of the *lai haraoba* observed here is both the *traditional and of the Hindu gods*.

The *lai haraoba* has been posited as the prime ritual, the ultimate source from which originates not only dance and music but also the birth of man and *lais*, the cosmos and the whole creation. The festival exemplifies the very essence of the community. An aspect that is constantly brought to the fore is its resilience to change under the impact of the eighteenth century religious conversion to Vaishnavism orchestrated by King Garibniwaz (1709–1748). The process of mass Sanskritization is something which remains associated with forced conversion in popular memory.³⁰ The emphasis on the resilience of the *lai haraoba* in the face of this impact could be seen as a statement in itself, a reflection of a growing consciousness and a struggle of a people to assert their identity by re-establishing/re-affirming their ethnic rooted-ness. As such it is also a struggle against cultural (and political) homogenization that is perceived as threatening to local interests.³¹

The *lai haraoba* celebrates the myth of the Meitei origin and the creation of the universe. The Meiteis believed that the sequence and the series of events, dance, songs and music, performed in the festival represent the concept of the origin of the universe. The belief system of the Meiteis starts with the Supreme Being, *Tengbanba Mapu*, who is the source of all manifestations and to whom all manifestations ultimately return. The emanation of different deities from him is the beginning of creation. His

³⁰ The term Sanskritization has been used loosely here. In Srinivas's use of the term, Sanskritization refers to the attempt at upward mobility by a lower caste through emulation of the culture of a higher caste as a reference point. M.N. Srinivas, *A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization*. *Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 15, 1956, pp. 481–96.

³¹ In the Meitei experience, the change in values and lifestyles in accordance with a 'Sanskritic' pattern is also associated with conversion to Hinduism (Vaishnavism). As such it need not necessarily be an attempt to upward mobility. However it remains that the imported religion was not open to everyone. The idea of 'mainstream' may be problematic but it cannot be refuted that such an idea exists in popular as well as national imagery. Instead of recognizing the multiplicity, a composite culture which implies homogenization is theorized (K.M. Chenoy, 'Nationalist Ideology, Militarism and Human Rights in Northeast', *Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 3, Issue I, April–June, 2005). Moreover, Hinduism as it emerged in the present century began to equate itself unequivocally to Indian tradition at large. V. Dalmia & H. von Steitencron (eds.), *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and Religious Identities*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995.

earliest manifestations are that of *Atingkok*, the infinite expanse and *Amamba*, the infinite darkness. The next three, *Atiya Kuru*³² *Sidaba*, *Apanba* and *Asheeba*, are the incarnations as the Creator, the Preserver and the Annihilator of the universe respectively³³. *Sanamahi*, *Pakhangba* and *Nongpok Ningthou* are the later incarnations, who play the role of male deities whereas *Leimarel Shidabi* and *Panthoibi* are the female deities in the Meitei belief system. Legends say that according to the will of the *Tengbanba Mapu*, these gods and goddesses were entrusted with various tasks to create the world of flora and fauna and to create a place fit for human habitation. On its completion the occasion was celebrated as *lai haraoba*.

Sociologically festivals constitute a break from the normal, the mundane everyday existence. It thus has a temporal dimension to it. As a festival of an agrarian society, it marks a break from the agricultural cycle—the closing in on the previous cycle before the commencement and the onset of the next monsoon. Therefore, it is celebrated during the agricultural slack season (Jan-June).

As a religious event, the *lai haraoba* marks the coming together of the world of *lais* and of humans. The rituals venerate not one particular deity but deities under the generic category of *umanglai*. These include certain ancestors, tutelary deities besides some deities of non-Meitei origin³⁴. Characteristically they are guardian deities of delimited areas which venerate them annually along with their spouse as a couple.

In the state of Manipur there are six major locations of *lai haraoba*, based on which distinctive features emerge: (1) *Kanglei haraoba*, (2) *Chakpa haraoba*, (3) *Andro haraoba*, (4) *Sekmai haraoba*, (5) *Moirang*

³². *Kuru* is the word later on corrupted with the Sanskrit word *guru* and after Hinduisation it has replaced the word *kuru* in writings as well as in spoken language.

³³. These three deities were later on tried to identify and incorporate with the Hindu Trinity Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar.

³⁴. After Hinduisation Lord Shiva also came to be worshipped as *umanglai*

haraoba and (6) *Kakching haraoba*. The differences in the six festivals are very wide and broad. This prompts the question—‘why is it that a common name has been allotted to something that exhibits distinct differences?’ As a mode of worship, the rituals follow a particular structure, which commences with descent of the deities (*lai eekouba*)³⁵ and concludes with their (*lais*) departure in *lairoi*³⁶. Daily rituals observed in between similarly follow a particular structure. This similarity in the structure of the festival also follows by the Meiteis of Assam.

The complete festival begins in the daytime of the second day. *Laiboula thaba* (a plantain leaf is placed on the specific place representing the unseen god manifesting the world sit) is the most important part of the beginning of the *laibou saba* (dance symbolizing the creation of the universe and the synthesis of the human body). The *maibi* with all the participants move round the plantain leaf three times symbolizing the manifestations of *Mangang Kuru Sidaba*, *Luwang Kuru Sidaba* and *Khuman Kuru Sidaba*³⁷. Thereafter the *maibas* and *maibis* stand erect before the deity and pray for the beginning of the *laibou* which is called *hoirou haya laoba*. During this prayer no one should move, speak or change his/her position. No one could come in or out of the *laibung* (temporary compound of the ritual). The *maibi* begins to move in the form of *khayom jagoi* (dance with hands at the level of the navel) along with the *hoirou haya* hymn. All the participants slowly begin to move their footsteps in a serene manner without dancing their hands and body. In the entire movement of the *laibou* dance the *maibi* narrates with hymns and dances, the creation of the universe; the sun, the stars, the planets, the moon, the earth, air and water. When the earth becomes inhabitable, the dance shows the creation of all beings including human beings. In the case of human beings, the different parts, the hands,

³⁵. *Eekouba* is the calling of the *lai* by the *maibi* from a nearby pond, lake or river

³⁶. *Lairoi* is the concluding part of the festival

³⁷. The first three *salais* representing the dawn, day and darkness respectively.

fingers, palms, arms, head, neck, eyes, the body, thigh, toes, feet and all other parts are shown to be developed through hymns and dance in different *khut-theks* (hand movements). Altogether, there are sixty-four important *khut-theks* for making the human body right from the development of the human body in the mother's womb; all are shown with very fine, attractive and meaningful dance movements. Then the building of houses, starting of agriculture and other stages of human development are played through dance. The last part of the dance is confined with the songs called *paosha eshei*, for the welfare of all the individuals. The control of lust, keeping strict discipline of celibacy and control of mind are very clearly and forcefully sung to remind the importance and the value of life in this human birth. This is followed by *lairen mathek koiba* (moving in the form of *Paphal*³⁸) which symbolizes the continuity of human life.

Thematically, the festival celebrates the essence of living—of life itself, fulfillment of the purpose of living and continued existence through procreation. Its rituals revolve firstly around the origin myths of enfolding within it the various manifestations that shape the Meitei cosmic universe. Secondly, any celebration of the ongoing process of living cannot do away without the idea of procreation. Thirdly, as a festival of an agrarian community, fertility, both human and agricultural, is a prominent aspect inherent within it.

4.12.1 Contesting discourses; the *Sanamahi* Roots and Post-Hindu ethos:

The distinctiveness of the Meitei cultural identity can be seen to get shaped through two contesting forces – the forces of Sanskritization on the one hand and indigenization on the other. In a way, it balances identification with the Indian mainstream culture and its indigenous

³⁸. Manifestations of *Pakhangba* is in the shapes of coiled and twisted forms of a dragon/snake like creature.

roots. The demarcation between the two elements can be located at the level of discourse, each speaking different language. (Parratt & Parratt, 1997). The Hindu discourse speaks in a language orienting itself to the tradition of the mainstream Indian culture positing historical origin within this context. But the non-Hindu discourse emphasizes the traditional Meitei roots in the pre-Hinduised state. It draws strength from oral history, native categories of thought and popular consciousness. However, at present, the only biggest festival performed without any contestation between the two religious groups is the *lai haraoba* festival.

In *lai haraoba* the myth of *Nongpok Ningthou* and *Panthoibi* makes recurrent appearances through the rituals. In fact, it is to *Nongpok Ningthou* that traces the origin of the festival. Another version, that is distinctly Hindu, is its orientation tracing itself to Lord Shiva and his consort Uma. According to this version they descended from Kailash to settle down in the land of Manipur for a brief sojourn. They first came to Nilakantha Hills (identified with the Nongmaiching hill) and selected certain hills for their residence. Here Shiva was given a new name *Poireiton* meaning 'he who has come to a new place'. They then stopped at Kumara hills (identified with Koubru hills). Another reason for their sojourn was the intention of organizing the *Rasa* dance for they had once acted as doorkeepers to the *Rasa* dance of Lord Krishna with the *gopis*. Delighted by the accompanying music, Uma wished to see the performance but was denied permission. Krishna suggested that they find a suitable site to organize one for themselves. This is how they came to Manipur; but the land was wet and moist. Shiva with his *trishul* made hole in the surrounding hills to draw water out of it. When the country was dried and purified, the *Rasa* dance of Shiva and Uma was arranged. Many gods and goddesses were invited to the dance of which Anantanag, the king of nags (identified with *Pakhangba*, who is also worshipped by the Meiteis in different forms of *Paphal*, typical manifestations of dragon/snake in different coiled forms). He lit up the site for the entire

duration of the dance with the magical jewel *mani* on his forehead. Henceforth, the place named 'Shiva-nagara' is after Shiva and 'Manipura' after the *Maha-Rasa* dance. (Chatterji, 1974)

The Meitei oral history starts with *Pakhangba*, the mythical and legendary hero from whom the Meiteis trace descent and to whom the establishment of Meitei state is accredited. He appears in three forms – as the son of *Salailal* (an incarnation of *Tengbanba Mapu*), as the Dragon/Serpent manifestation (*Paphal*) and as the first Meitei king. In the Hindu narrative he is traced to Babruvahana, the son of the epic hero Arjuna and Chitrangada. It accounts that a phase of 'non-Hindu' never existed so far as the Meiteis are concerned. It upholds the existence of Shaivism-Tantricism as evidenced in the veneration of serpents and the worship of mother goddess. The worship of *umanglai* hence comes to be relegated to Shiva and Devi.

In non-Hindu narratives the *lai haraoba* is perceived as the single greatest key to that remote tribal past. This is drawn in traditional techniques of rice cultivation, weaving, iron work, flower culture, boat culture and so on and so forth, not to mention the racial stock of the Meitei people. Further, in the search for history within its text and tradition, myths incorporated in the *lai haraoba* are interpreted as embodying certain facts of historical importance. Herein the theme of conflict occupies center stage – be it the conflicts in the origin myths or the antagonism interspersed within love lyrics in the rituals. It is a matter of research that how far myths can be read as history.³⁹ However, studying myths in terms of public domain could perhaps prove to be a fruitful sociological exercise.

³⁹. According to Levi-Strauss, myth does not attempt to tell us anything. It follows its own structure which is located at the level of sub-conscious and is ultimately linked to the innate mental capacity of the people. Hence he studies them as structures of transformation. In his lines there is no one true form of a particular myth but variations of the same may appear among different people. Levi-Strauss, C. *Structural Anthropology*, the Penguin Press, London, 1963.

4.12.2 Space:

As a religious event, the *lai haraoba* can only be grasped within the Meitei experience of *lai* as the ultimate reality, the rituals as intended to bring about an interaction between the other world and this world within the wholeness of a sacramental universe. It opens up a social space. For analytical purposes, the site can be demarcated into ritual and non-ritual on the basis of its usage. The ritual space represents the courtyard of the *laibung* and is manned by the ritual functionaries, viz. *maiba*, *maibi* and *pena player* (the player of an indigenous string instrument). The non-ritual space literally opens up as the ritual closes in. This is an aspect of the festival that has not merited much attention. While the ritual space is imbued with its richness of the ancient tradition, the non-ritual space is ensconced in the contemporary individual, social and political context. It is perhaps the increasing visibility of this space, used for entertainment that has lent the notion of the *lai haraoba* as being increasingly 'secularized' (Sirkar, 1984). However this is a much later addition to the festival.

The *lai haraoba* festival, the prime Meitei ritual and center of the Meitei cultural life, are celebrated entirely outside the non-Hindu framework and celebrated by both the Sanamahi Meiteis and Vaishnava Meiteis with the help of their pre-Hindu functionaries of *maiba*, *maibi* and *pena khongba*. The resurgence of the *lai haraoba* on a much larger scale cannot be treated as coincidental or be simplified as cultural and religious revival. It needs to be located within the wider social and political landscape. This presentation attempts to locate the religious festival within a broader articulation of the Meitei identity in particular and also towards contributing to a people's culture. On the other hand, it reflects unease within the politically demarcated landscape of the national stream within which the Meiteis as a part of the North East are constituted in the margins. Taking into account the socio-cultural and religious life of the

Meiteis, the specific ways in which the dynamics between the various discourses are acted out and perceived.

4.13 *Mera Wa Yungba:*

The cultural function of the *Mera wa yungba* which is celebrated in the month of October is an important function to remind the relationship between the people of hill and the valley. There is a belief that the people of the hill and the valley have originated from a small place in the hill while the younger brother went down to the valley in search of livelihood and the elder brother stay back at the hill. In order to commemorate the linkage, both the valley and the hill people celebrate in a particular way. In the valley a long bamboo post is erected with a light at the top of it in every household so that the people of the hill can see it. The belief is that, when the younger brother left the hill, he promised his brother that he would put up a light in the month of Mera (October) to show that all are fine and doing well in the valley. To reciprocate, the hill people burn a part of the hill which is called *langmei thaba* to show prosperity and well being. In Manipur, apart from *Mera wa yungba*, another ceremony called the *Mera hou chongba* is celebrated in the same month. The tribal chiefs and village headmen were invited to the palace at *Kangla* on this particular day. The tribal headmen as well as the village heads exchange gifts and wishes during this particular function. These promote greater amity between the hill people and the Meiteis. The Meiteis of Assam observe it through the whole month of Meitei calendar month of *Mera*.

4.14 *Ningol Chakouba:*

Ningol chakkouba is one among the most important traditional/indigenous festivals of The Meitei community. *Ningol* is the daughter of a family who is married to another family. It is a significant social event of the Meiteis, when the married women of the family, who were married off to distant places, come to their parental house along

with their children and are served with a lavish and extensive meal to enjoy. It is celebrated only once in a year in the month of *Hiyangei neeni panba* (November). The old historical record of Manipur shows that such a system of inviting for feast was introduced since the days of *Nongada Lairen Pakhangba*, the first king of Manipur in the year 33 A.D.

Before the present system of inviting *ningol*, the *pibas* (brothers) were invited by the *ningol* during this particular day. It is said that there used to be lots of difficulties to the *pibas* who have many sisters because he could not visit all of them at one time. Thus the festival was changed from *piba chakkouba* to *ningol chakkouba* (inviting sisters for feast by brothers) during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakriti. In fact, the basic logic of observing *ningol-chakkouba* is to enrich the close relationship, loving ties between the brothers and sisters who were at one time living together and dining together under the same roof. This festival is a form of a family get-together in order to revive the family affection.

4.15 Folk forms as Cultural Repository; The role of folk songs in the revival of traditional practices of the Meiteis:

The term 'Folk song', originated in the 19th century, is the extension of the term *folk lore*, which was coined in 1846 by the English antiquarian William John Thoms to describe "the traditions, customs, and superstitions of the uncultured classes" (Scholes, 1977). A folk song is defined as a song of the people of a culture or region that reflects their outlook and life. Usually, this refers to a song with no known composer or lyricist as music transmitted by word of mouth, as songs of the lower classes and one that exists in multiple versions developed as it spread, rather than a single, standard, copyrighted edition. However, there is still no certain definition of what folk song (or folklore, or the folk) is. Folk song may tend to have certain characteristics. One meaning often given is that of 'old songs, with no known composers'. (Ronald 2006). Another is that of music that has been handed down through an evolutionary

‘process of oral transmission.... the fashioning and re-fashioning of the music by the community that gives it its folk character.’⁴⁰

Folk song connotes the spontaneous outpouring of feelings, love and imaginations, sentiments of ancestors, moral and disciplines, beginning with the cradle and ending with funeral songs. The Meitei or Manipuri community has its distinct variety of folk songs and music commonly called *khunung eshei*⁴¹ also popularly known as *khullang eshei*⁴². *khullang eshei* was originally sung at the time of help in work in the fields or at the time of go for fishing. It has been in practice of the Meiteis to hire service of other people at the times of planting, seeding and reaping of crops to attain efficiency while at work. Initially the theme of the song was love. In course of time this work songs have been transmitted into a kind of expressive culture of the Meiteis. The literal meaning of the term *khullang eshei* is a type of song in the form of throw and bounce of words in rhythm between males and females or between two persons. There is no set system of words and sentences. The singer adjusts his/her words and stanzas of verses of his/her own to the tune.

Music of the Meiteis constitutes a major component of their folklife. In their music, one will find their hopes, aspirations and frustrations as well. The ups and downs of their voices and their tonal variations draw, in the listeners’ mind, the beautiful landscape, colourful and vivid, in nature. They also reflect the hardship of their agricultural activities. Music does not stand on its own. It accompanies dance movements or physical movements they perform while engaged in cultivation activities or ritualistic performances (Birendrakumar, 2008). Manipuri folk song and music is varied in form, genre and character. It is philosophical in content

⁴⁰. In the International Folk Music Council the definition (1954/5) is given in Lloyd, A.L. *Folk Song in England*, Panther Arts, 1969 and Scholes *The Oxford Companion to Music*, OUP 1977, article “Folk Song”

⁴¹. *Khunung* literally means remote village and *eshei* means song.

⁴². *Khullang eshei* means Songs while lending hands. *Khullang* also means throw and bounce of words between two persons.

and meaningful in nature. Different occasions has different songs. There are *naoshum eshei* or lullaby, *shikaplon* or funeral song, *nonglao eshei* or rain song, *kumdam eshei*, song for the commencement of new season, *tharon eshei* or songs on nature, *leiron eshei*, or songs of native flowers, *leipak ningba eshei* or patriotic songs, songs of children while at play and *paosha Ishei*, for the welfare of all the individuals. Some of the specimens are given below;

4.15.1 Songs of Marriage and Child Birth:

The ritual songs invariably accompany the ritual dance called *laibou jagoi*, a daily part of *lai haraoba*, are developed around the theme of child birth and the Meitei theory of origin. The theme of the song revolves round the love tale of *Nongpok Ningthou* and *Panthoibi*. Many sacred treatises such as *Panthoibi khongkul* and *Koubru Khongkul* have described the details of marriage, which govern the thought and conduct of the people. The details is already discussed in this chapter.

4.15.2 *Naoshum Eshei* or Lullaby:

One of the *naoshum eshei* is sung and addressed to the moon with the melodious tune of the mother. The song runs like ‘*hum hum hum, tha*⁴³ *tha thabungton...*’ The child is lulled to sleep with the melodious tune of ‘*hum*’.

4.15.3 *Shikaplon*:

Shikaplon is a type of song associated with the funeral practice. It was the *pena*⁴⁴ *shakpas* (*pena* singers) who popularized this variety with the help of *pena*. A specimen of the early Christian period is

⁴³. *Tha* literally means moon

⁴⁴. *Pena* is a typical indigenous stringed instrument. *Pena* was usually played by its player to invoke the gods and goddesses and other ritualistic performances. But today, this musical instrument is played in musical concerts and other performances also.

thongak makoi nungol ching...” means “*the plateau of death, where the pigeon looks with heavy eyes, the waiting place for hundred youth when hundred girls die and for hundred girls when hundred youth die, oh dear, wait a little for me if my voice reaches you, micha pokti pamuba (oh my love, son of another man)*” (Kirti, 1993).

It is the theme of lamentation for a dead lover by his beloved. It sings about the immortality of soul after death and love conquers death which makes them interesting and worth studying.

4.15.4 Nonglao Eshei or Rain song:

As agriculture is the mainstay of the community, rain plays an important role in the socio-economic life of the people. Being in the monsoon region, Manipur is blessed with sufficient rainfall. At the same time drought also visited it at times inflicting great hardship upon the people. The rural folk adopted many methods to invite rainfall. The priest called *maiba* performs a rite which was followed by songs sung by the people for rain. The song runs thus;

*Nong o chutharo;
Hanuba hanubi taotharo;
Langjing maton thumhatlo...*

The translation of the song is thus:

O rain! Shower down;
Float down old man and old woman;
Submerge the peak of Langjing hill...

This is a rain compelling song and only performed only in the midnight. Aged persons including both male and female participate in the performance. It is important to note that all the participants should not

wear anything while participating in the *nonglao eshei*. It is believed that everyone should enter their respective homes before rain comes. This is also refers in the sacred text of the Meiteis called *Chiglol Laihui*. Another rain compelling song is sung by *asheibas*⁴⁵ with the help of *Pena* thereby compelling rain to come through the prayer and singing called *hikkap*⁴⁶.

4.15.5 *Kumdam Eshei*:

Kumdam eshei or song for the commencement of new season is a type of song which describes the creation of the earth, sky, and human body, the end of the season and the arrival of spring. *Tharon eshei* is sung on the changing phases of nature, description of *Basanta* or spring on the occasion of *thabal chongba*.⁴⁷ *Leiron* is a kind of songs describing the wide variety of beautiful flowers of the land.

4.15.6 *Leipak Ningba Eshei* or Patriotic Song:

The Burmese were the traditional enemy of the Meiteis throughout the history of Manipur. These are the songs narrating the deeds of the Manipuri heroes especially the warriors against the Burmese and the British. One of the songs runs as;

Oh Meitei! Go ahead;
Enemy is in front of you;
If you retreat the Burmese will enslave you;
Don't you love your motherland;
Don't you love Manipur, the land of jewels;
Man born once will not die twice, (Kirti, 1993).

⁴⁵. A *Pena* player is also called *asheiba* for his knowledge and skill to adjust his words and stanzas of verses of his own to the tune.

⁴⁶. *Hikkap* is a way of prayer which means singing with heavy heart and tearful eyes to save the humankind from the clutches of draught

⁴⁷. *Thabal chongba* is the post-harvest dance festival.

Nahade (encouraging youths),
Yatrade (encouraging skillful fighting spirit),
Nipade (encouraging manhood).’

The culture of Manipuri martial art went hand in hand with the consolidation of their political suzerainty. (Kirti, 1993). They apply certain sound as ‘*ho hayo hei ha*’ followed by a chorus sound of ‘*hau ha*’, for the concentration of their physical and mental energy at times of lifting weight, pulling of logs, while playing *thouri chingba* (tug of war) or even in fighting. It gives the impression that body and mind must be combined in an attempt to execute an action. (Ibid)

4.15.7 Songs of children at play:

One of the songs of children at play is *mapi sabi* means playing mother. The song runs as;

Crow, crow, what kind of crow is that?
That is the mayang⁴⁸ crow.
What’s the news?
That is the news of mayang crow... (Kirti, 1993).

This is a play for children reflect the contradiction between their indigenous culture with that of the alien culture and to transmit the treasure of wisdom which has been subverted when the alien western culture in the form of Hinduism became increasingly popular through royal patronage.

A girl playing the role of *mapi* (mother) in this game has all her children behind her in a row each holding each other’s waist. Another girl plays the role of a *mayang* crow. There is an exchange of figurative words

⁴⁸. Anyone from the western side of the Manipur boundary is termed ‘*mayang*’ in a broad sense although there is a difference among scholars in regard to the origin of the term.

through song. The *mayang* crow who begs for food, water and shelter is denied by the *mapi*. The crow then pounces on the last child whom the *mapi*/mother tries her best to protect. The crow herein referred to is the Hindu missionary while the *mapi* represents the defender of indigenous culture.

Apart from these, there is a wide variety of folk songs in the ballad forms comprises *pena sapka* (song accompanied with the music produced through *pena*, a traditional musical instrument of the Meiteis), *thabal chongba eshei* or songs of post-harvest moonlight dance by unmarried boys and girls and *khongjom parva*⁴⁹.

4.15.8 *Pena Eshei*:

This song is accompanied with the music produced through *pena*. A *pena* is a musical instrument. It consists of two parts viz. the *pena masa* and *Pena cheijing*. A dry coconut shell is cut into half to make a circular opening and a slender bamboo rod is fixed at the middle of it. It is then covered with a thin skin to make a drum. A string made of horse tail is fastened from the top end of the bamboo rod to the drum. This is called *pena masa*. Another string is fastened to a curved iron rod called *Pena cheijing*. The *pena masa* is held in the left hand and the drum shell is pressed against the chest and the *pena cheijing* is held in the right hand. To produce music, the string on *pena cheijing* is rubbed with that on the *pena masa*. Earlier, *pena* was usually played by its player to invoke the gods and goddesses. It is the only and unavoidable instrument which plays the most vital role in *lai haraoba*. The theme of the song is the ancient love story of *Nongpok Ningthou* and *Panthoibi* and the epic love story of *Khamba-Thoibi* of *Moirang parba* and other ritualistic songs form an important part of this song.

⁴⁹. This style of singing started from 1890s after the Anglo-Manipur war at Khongjom.

4.15.9 *Thabal Chongba Eshei:*

It is a tuneful music sung during the *thabal chongba* dance, which is a post-harvest moonlight dance. The literal meaning of *thabal* is moonlight and *chongba* means dance, thus dancing in the moonlight. The youngsters particularly girls of each and every locality supported by their local brothers organise *thabal chongba* (dance in a circle) with the songs of creation of the universe led by well known persons for the purpose at early times. It is performed in every locality on all the six days of the festival.

4.15.10 *Lai Haraoba Eshei:*

As discussed earlier the *puya Panthoibi-Khongkul* gives a brief account of the religious and social festival of the *lai haraoba*. These songs are full of erotic mysticism but the real meaning is veiled by the use of innocent sounding words. The rhythm of the tune is its quality. It is sung on the ceremonial occasion at *lai haraoba* narrating the creation of the whole universe and Meitei theory of origin.

4.15.11 *Khongjom Parva:*

It is a musical narration of the Battle of Khongjom fought between the Manipuris and the British in April 1891. A man named Dhobi Leinou started singing *Khongjom parva* by beating his hands on the knee and sometimes beating an empty tin and roamed place to place. The *Khongjom parva* narrators glorify the Manipuri soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the sake of their motherland. Today the theme of singing *Khongjom Parva* includes the stories of Khamba and Thoibi and of the kings of Manipur. Today the singer uses only a *dholok* while singing. The *Khongjom parva*, which is sung as ballad is regularly performed till today.

From the light of the above discussion, it can be said that Manipuri folk songs and dances, in their beautiful tunes and movements, reflect the entire history, tradition and culture of the people. Having a historical and cultural heritage of several centuries, these myriad of human emotions are expressed through similar sounding tunes, blended together with rhythm and perfection. Manipuri folk songs express the natural beauty, incredible flora and fauna, the social and cultural life and religious belief of the Meiteis. Most of the literary production of Meitei today is more or less derived from the songs and tales handed down through oral tradition. However, many of the Meitei oral traditions have been reduced to writings today. For example, the *Moirang parva* with the theme of the love lore of Khamba and Thoibi is extant today in the oral form and is sung by the *pena* singers in the ballad form. This oral tradition has been contained in the written verse form of thirty four thousand lines by the great Manipuri poet Hijam Anganghal, who studied it for twelve years from the renowned twentieth century *pena* singer *Ojha* Manik Singh of Khurai, Imphal. This work has been hailed as the epic of the Manipuris by Suniti Kumar Chatterjee. It can be concluded that Folk songs are one of the most important and significant vehicles of communication through which the Meiteis perceive information about their age old cultural heritage.

To summarize the entire discussion, *Laininghal* Naoria Phulo's basic philosophy is his faith in reality, which he identifies as the path leading to God. After a long three century of orientation of Meitei society by the teachings of the Bengal school of Vaishnavism, Naoria phulo pioneered a systematic traditional Meitei theistic thought. His line of interpretation not only opposed to that of bigotry of Hinduism but also aimed at the revival of traditional Meitei religious faith and thought. His philosophy manifests the example of humanity which is readily accepted by the younger generation who are the product of science and reason. The establishment of *Apokpa Marup* is his greatest achievement which

influences the Meitei society at large and catalyses a Meitei renaissance at a time when the society was on the threshold of crisis.

Hinduism (in the form of first Ramandi and then Vaishnavism) spread to Manipur by burning down Meitei scriptures and the deities of the Meiteis being grinded to dust. These unbecoming and undreamt of acts were branded as *puya meithaba* and *kollu yeikheiba* respectively in the history of Manipur. However, it is said that the duplicates of the lost Puyas and chronicles and other religious texts were kept secret in the remote places of Manipur like Kakching, Khoibu, Kwatha and many other places and they have been recovered even today. There have been continuous efforts taken to interpret these old Meitei scriptures with fresh ideas and meanings are being infused. This made the old religion of the Meiteis along with its cultural heritage and customs more luminous because the literature and practices of Vaishnavism could not infiltrate into the ancient scriptures and practices of the Meiteis. It only makes their culture more precious and beautiful.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

An overall analysis of the Manipuri society shows that a transformation at both structural and functional levels had taken place in different periods of the history of Manipur after Hinduisation, colonization and independence. It is also observed that in all the stages of these transformations major changes occurred in the areas of culture and identity. Therefore, it is commonly felt that their tradition, religion, polity, territory and culture have been constantly threatened by various exogenous factors like Hinduism, Burmese invasion, British colonialism and later on by the unification of the state with the Indian Union. Thus, the origin of the *Sanamahi* movement among the Meiteis of Manipur was their feeling of safeguarding a distinct culture and belief that have been constantly threatened. Initially, the movement appeared to be a socio-religious movement but now it has assumed various political proportions. It is, therefore, an assertion of a political space defined by history and identity.

In the traditional society, the king used religion as a tool for asserting his legitimate control over his people and an instrument to exercise his power. On an analytical plane it is consensually inferred that the Manipur polity is strategically identified with *Sanamahi* and the associated Pakhangba as the repository of all cosmological and supernatural powers so as to substantiate the legitimacy of all Manipuri kings. As per tradition, the supernatural powers of *Sanamahi* were dispensed by Manipur kings to benefit their subjects. Thus from *Sanamahi* himself, as from the monarch, came the domain of prosperity (*ahong-achao*). Contact with the supernatural did enhance Meitei rulers' superior status and also legitimize the submission of adjacent population to the Meitei monarch.

When Garibniwaz adopted the new religion followed by his successors, the motive behind the strengthening of the Vaishnavite values through the institution of Brahma *sabha*, was to use socio-religious means by the native ruler to retain his power atleast in the socio-religious sphere along with political authority. This trend was followed during the last phase of the British rule and post independence period with the emergence of the movement for revival of the indigenous religion which is getting sustenance till today for a complete rejection of the alien culture and its values.

The reason for the rejection is derived from Manipur's new experience in the new socio-political system of the Indian Union especially after its merger with India in 1949 only to get a Part-C State of India in 1972. This kind of political status led many youths of the region to establish a political space defined by their history, tradition and cultural identity. As a result, a socio-cultural and religious revival took a sharp U turn to the level of a separatist movement in Manipur.

But the *Apokpa/Sanamahi* movement among the Meiteis of Assam originated and continued without an imagined political space. It still remains as a purely socio-religious movement which aims at reviving their age-old tradition, belief and culture of the Meiteis.

Thus the movement started as a socio-religious one has greater ramifications on the socio-cultural identity of the people. The most significant impact of the movement is the general awakening of their pre-Hindu identity. This has been observed through various socio-religious festivals observed by both *Apokpa/Sanamahi* and Vaishnavite Meiteis. In the festivals observed by Vaishnavite Meiteis till few decades ago, more emotional attachment was there to the *sankirtans* sung in Sanskrit or Bengali language. Today with the influence of the *Apokpa/Sanamahi*

movement these religious and devotional songs and prayers have been translated and sung in archaic Meitei Language. Though the Hindu religious festivals played an important role in the socio-religious life of the Meiteis, today in the absence of a monarchical system that had patronized Vaishnavism, there is a resurgence of the Pre-Hindu Meitei religion and observance of festivals associated with the creed. It is also observed that there has been a paradigm shift of people's interest from the Hindu religious life to their pre-Hindu socio-religious life and it has led to the gradual decline of the Hindu religious festivals in the Meitei society.

As has been observed earlier, the Meiteis had felt threatened by the near extinction of their original culture, language and religion. Therefore, the Meitei revivalist leaders (before the formal inclusion of Manipur-Meitei in the Eighth schedule to the Constitution of India in 1992), had demanded that their language be named *Meiteilon* instead of Manipuri.

Sanamahi as the first and foremost cult existed all through the ancient history of Manipur. Records cite that the reign of Khagemba (1597-1652) was marked by the formal deification in 1601 AD of the traditional Meitei deity, *Sanamahi* as royal cult or state religion—a landmark in the religious history of Manipur. Accordingly *Sanamahi* was to be seen worshipped in a monumental fashion at various tiers as:

1. State or Royal God (*Lainingthou Sanamahi* temple 1st Manipur Rifles and Wangoi),
2. Presiding deities at Thangjing, Marjing, Wangbren, Koubru etc.,
3. Companion god in various *umanglai* establishments,
4. Common household deity in every Meitei household,
5. Sun-god, and
6. God of destruction (*Sanamahi Apoiba*).

As per sacred Meitei scripture, *Sanamahi Laikan* (Account of *Sanamahi* as the Guardian and Protector), the divine *Sanamahi* is also the Destroyer, for which it has eulogized *Sanamahi Apoiba* (*Sanamahi*, the vagabond wanderer). During its decline particularly since 1714, (as discussed earlier, after the adoption of Ramandi sect of Hinduism by the then Meitei king Garibniwaz and its declaration as the state religion of Manipur) it did suffer losses in terms of whatever official status and the consequent following gained by it. In fact, *Sanamahi* had its slide-back even thereafter, though by way of reaction, the cult underwent a process of revival much later during the latter half of the twentieth century.

Even though *Sanamahi* religion lost its status as the State religion, it is extremely doubtful if any Meitei household inmate—including the king himself—ever stopped worshipping *Sanamahi* as divinity in the domestic or household chapels lodged in the southwest corner of every traditional Meitei house for daily propitiation by all inmates twice a day at sunrise and sunset; and very prominently in festivals and ceremonial occasions in the *Sanamahi* temple founded for the purpose by the king himself and as the companion god of the sylvan deities in *lai haraoba*.

As discussed above, *Apokpa-ism/Sanamahism* is an indigenous religion of the Meiteis, which is rich in mythology and colour as evident in the rituals. This kind of ancestor worship and animism, with the central focus on worship of *umanglai*, designated as ethnic governing deities takes place in sacred groves. Other gods include *Atiya Sidaba*, *Pakhangba*, *Sanamahi*, *Leimaren*, *Oknarel Panganba*, *Thangjing*, *Marjing*, *Wangbaren* and *Koubru* with a host of indigenous deities. The religious life of the people, even after adoption of Vaishnavism, retained many characteristics inherited from their pre-Vaishnavite traditions. The essentials of this religion remain recognizable to the present day. Over the last couple of decades there has been a revival of *Apokpa-*

ism/Sanamahi religion and this was evident in the significant growth of the 'non-mainstream' religion as categorized in the 2001 census and recorded 17% of the population as the followers of *Sanamahism* and Hinduism is identified with 47% of the population in Manipur.

It can be safely surmised that the *Apokpa/Sanamahi* movement is an effort to seek a legitimate space for the traditional path which is free from the influence of the Vaishnavite religion. However, the onlooker does not perceive any susceptible difference as the external manifestations of these forms are almost common to both *Apokpa/Sanamahi* and Vaishnavite Meiteis. Therefore, the effort of the *Apokpa/Sanamahi* Meiteis at present is to stop the process of Hinduisation through a subtle subversion of the overarching Vaishnavite social and religious values and a reassertion of Meitei cultural identity which cannot always resist and counter the Vaishnava cultural elements, but can bring in subtle changes by reviving their indigenous tradition and inflecting similar structures with similar meanings.

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Appendix i
Photographs



A Meitei groom

This is the moment when the groom takes his seat on the right side of the Meitei house for a brief ritual called *yatra tauba* which is performed by the hosting priest. At the end of the ritual the groom takes the blessing of his parents and starts for the ceremony.



Sankirtana of a marriage ceremony

The *sankirtana* starts when the bridal house is given information of the arrival of the groom. The Radha Krishna *jugol milon* is sung which symbolizes the physical and spiritual union of the bride and the groom.



Vaishnavite temple of Madaripar village

Every Meitei village has a Vaishnavite temple which is dedicated to Sri Chaitanya *Mahaprabhu*. The temple shown above was built by Ngangom Phaijao, a well known *jaminder* of the village .It is believed by the villagers that the temple was built around two hundred years ago..

A moment of *lai ekouba*



The *lai haraoba* festival starts with the ritual called *lai ekouba*.

This is the ritual to call the *Lainingthou* from water.

It is performed by *maibi* under the guidance of the *maibaren*, the hosting priest. The *lai* is then installed inside the *laibung* (sanctum sanctity) and the *maibaren* declares the commencement of the *haraoba* formally.



Maibi jagoi

In the evening the *maibis* perform *maibi jagoi* which starts the proceedings of the *haraoba* which is followed by other rituals. The dance is accompanied by *pena*, a traditional Meitei stringed instrument.



Maibaren Hazari Singha reciting



Pena

with *pena*

The first photograph shown above is the performance of awakening the *Lainingthou* in the morning by the *maibaren* which is called *lai yakaiba*. The other photograph on the right is the *pena* which is the most important traditional stringed instrument without which the *lai haraoba* cannot be performed.



Womenfolk participating in the *lai haraoba*

The above photograph shows the womenfolk of the village participating in the *pam yanba* event on the last day of *lai haraoba* in which they perform the act of cultivation by cleaning the field.



Hiru Hinao chingba

The *hiru hinao chingba* is the concluding ritual of the *lai haraoba*.

The villagers both male and female members participate the ritual in which they hold the sticks, used by the *pam yanbis*, joining the end of one to the other in the form of a rope which they consider sacred. The members participate in it cannot move and speak. The *maibaren* chants hymns requesting the almighty for the wellbeing of the villagers. The most important moment is *mingon thagonba* in which he recalls the soul which was away to the heaven, Manipur *Sana Leipak*, where the gods perform *lai haraoba*.

After it the *maibaren* formally close down the ritual.

Appendix ii

List of Informants

Sri. Nilabapu Sharma	Madhabpur, Lala
Ashem Ahan Megho	Madhabpur, Lala
N. Amusana	Laishramkhun, Lala
L. Wakching	Laishramkhun, Lala
O.Langbanjao Singha	Bamon Leikai, Lala
K. Bidyapati Singha	Vetlpar, Lala
K. Horendra Singha	Nalubak, Lala
K. Harkumar Singha	Nalubak, Lala
Bishnu Sharma	Madaripar, Lala
S. Joydev Singha	Boaljur, Silchar.
K.Komal Singha	Boaljur Silchar
K. Dhananjoy	Berakhal, Silchar
S. Jamini	Madaripar, Lala
Ng. Kishore Singha	Jugijan, Hojai
M. Amudham Singha	Baoljur, Silchar,
Sri Bolai Singha	Madhabpur, Lala
Sri Purnochand Singha	Jugijan, Hojai

Bhubalei Devi	Basti, Guwahati
Ahongsangbam Bacha Singh	Keinou, Manipur
M. Mangi Singh	Bishenpur, Manipur
P. Tombirei Devi	Boaljur, Silchar
Ingenjao Singha	Tinsukia
P. Basna Singha	Duliajan
Ng. Krishna Mohan Singha	Madaripar, Lala
