

CHAPTER III

Profile of Manipuri Society

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After the elucidation of framework of the study in the last chapter, this upcoming chapter will bring into focus entirety of Manipuri community at a glance. To comprehend the ins and outs of Manipuri society, one needs to gather a complete knowledge of regional topographical features of the state, its historical background and polity formation which are essential characteristic and distinctive framework of a particular society. Moreover societal configuration beset with family, marriage, clan to kinship and economic indicator present a picture of development cycle process the region and micro society underwent in course of time. Cultural issues are also equally vital which propel people of the region to construct their identity. In fact, all these issues unitedly act as a stream of existence for Manipuri identity and society at large. Hence, this chapter provides an insightful appraisal of all these features about the region and its people. In doing so, it makes an attempt to relate and throw light on other fields of study that are coming up in later parts of the work.

Ecological profile

Manipur is a small state in Northeast India with picturesque blue hills surrounded by a small fertile valley in centre. The state lies between latitude 23.83°N and 25.68°N and longitude 93.03°E and 94.78°E respectively. It is bounded by Nagaland in north, Mizoram in south and Assam in west. To its east lies Myanmar (or Burma in past). The state's natural boundaries were never authenticated as her territorial borders were subject to change during regimes of different rulers of the state. There was a time when its jurisdiction extended as far as to east of the Chindwin River. However, during reign of weaker rulers, its area was comparatively small, though somewhat larger than that of present Manipur. Hence there lies difficulty in drawing an authentic territory of Manipur of the past.¹ According to Colonel McCulloch, demarcated area of the state in eastern and southern borders was often porous and not well strategically carved out. Owing to this and in due course of time, government of Manipur may

have determined border of state in accordance with annexation of hilly areas by some powerful rulers of past. Also there is much veracity in the statement of McCulloch regarding border of state extending up to present Dimapur in north as well as localities of Chandrapur in Cachar district in west.²

Out of the state's total geographical area (22,327 sq. km. approx.), 90 percent is covered by six ranges of hills and remaining 10 percent is plain valley. The valley is around 2600 feet above sea level. Topography of the region is such that ranges of hills are situated in north and south of the valley with a naturally visible slope from northern to southern terrain. The peaks of hills, with no vegetation, seem to be like sharp uneven edges of a saw. There are deep gorges between steep hills that pose hindrance in trekking. The highest hill range is on the north-eastern horizon. Some peaks, the highest being Koubru, rise up to 8000 feet/ 790 m above sea level. Below is a table providing some quick important facts of the state of Manipur :

Table no. III.I: Manipur at a glance

Area	: 22,327 sq. km
Population	: 2,855,794
Capital	: Imphal
State Language	: Manipuri
State Emblem	: Kangla Shaa
State Bird	: Nongyeen
State Animal	: Sangai
State Game	: Manipuri Polo
State Flower	: Siroi Lily
Density of Population (per Sq Km.)	: 128
Literacy Rate	: 75.48 %
Altitude	: 790m above MSL (Imphal)
Latitude	: 23.83 ⁰ N to 25.68 ⁰ N
Longitude	: 93.03 ⁰ E to 94.78 ⁰ E
Rainfall	: 1467.5 mm (Avg.)
Rainy Season	: May to October
Scheduled Tribes	: 33 (Recognised by Government)
Assembly Constituencies	: 60 (40 General, 19 ST, 1 SC)
Parliamentary Constituencies	: 2 (One for Inner and One for Outer)
National Highways	: 3 (39-Indo-Myanmar road, 53-New Cachar Road, 150-Jessami-Tipaimukh Road)

(Source: <http://censusindia.gov.in>, accessed on 05/02/2016)

Districts

The hill area comprises of five districts namely (i) Senapati (ii) Tamenglong (iii) Churachandpur (iv) Chandel and (v) Ukhrul; while the valley consists of four districts namely (i) Imphal East (ii) Imphal West (iii) Bishnupur and (iv) Thoubal. The valley area of Manipur comprises of two parts, one of which is Imphal Valley in heart of the state and other is Jiri Valley in west beyond hill ranges bordering Cachar district of Assam. The districts are further sub-divided into 38 sub-divisions.

Below is a table showing district-wise distribution of the population of Manipur according to Census, 2011.

Table no. III.II: District-wise Population of Manipur, Census, 2011

District	Total Population			Decadal growth rate (2001-2011)	Sex ratio	Population Density per sq. km.	Proportion of District Population to State Total Population (%)	
	Males	Females	Total				Males	Females
Senapati	183,081	171,891	354,972	25.16	939	109	6.73	6.32
Tamenglong	71,762	68,381	140,143	25.69	953	32	2.64	2.51
Churachandpur	137,748	133,526	271,274	19.03	969	59	5.06	4.91
Bishnupur	120,185	120,178	240,363	15.36	1000	485	4.42	4.42
Thoubal	209,674	210,843	420,517	15.48	1006	818	7.70	7.75
Imphal West	253,628	261,055	514,683	15.82	1029	992	9.32	9.59
Imphal East	225,130	227,531	452,661	14.63	1011	638	8.27	8.36
Ukhrul	94,013	89,102	183,115	30.07	948	40	3.45	3.27
Chandel	74,543	69,485	144,028	21.72	932	43	2.74	2.55
Total	1,369,764	1,351,992	2,721,756					

Source: <http://censusindia.gov.in>, Accessed on 5/2/2016

The table also shows the decadal growth rate from Census 2001 to 2011, sex ratio, density of population per sq. km. and proportion of district population to state total population in percentage. From the table we gather that the number of female is equal to or outnumber the male figure in the plain districts of Bishnupur, Thoubal, Imphal West and Imphal East.

Valley and rivers

Manipur valley is exuberant with its pristine natural bamboo groves, shimmering lakes and rivers, several hamlets that spot the vast expanse of green paddy fields. Imphal River flows downstream from hills and plains of northern terrain. Several other rivers like Nambool, Iril, Thoubal also flow in land. These rivers do not get its source from snow. Therefore, these rivers usually dry up during winter season. But during monsoons, they are full to brims and often overflowed, though Manipur is never severely affected by floods as its neighbouring state Assam is. Natural canals provide adequate service in draining out excess flood waters to Loktak Lake and from thereafter to the Chindwin River. There are several rivers and streams in hills too that resemble more or less like elongated pools. They are usually 30 to 40 feet deep even in winter. These rivers flow through deep gorges between steep hills. Dense forests prevail along their courses. Rivers and their tributaries of hills like Barak, Jiri, Maku, Irang, Lokchau, etc., are worth mentioning. During monsoon, these rivers pose great impediment in travelling for people living in hills as well as plains; nevertheless in winter, same rivers became important for travellers on foot.³

Lakes

Several lakes of Manipur located far and wide across the land vary in size. Loktak lake, the largest in Manipur and also in Eastern India, has an area of 25 sq. miles which expands to more than 40 sq. miles in monsoon. There is an assumption supported by traditional belief in Manipur Puranas that the tract of Manipur was supposedly submerged in water. The earth from surrounding hills fell into water which later formed the valley. However, it has been vehemently refuted by Geological Survey of India considering recommendation of geological research of the land.⁴

Forest

Forest and vegetation of Manipur also vary according to the soil of hills and plains, difference in altitude of land and receipt of rainfall. High hills are covered with dense forests even today. However, deforestation has set in recent times to provide more land for cultivation and farming to support increasing population.

Forests in hill tracts of Manipur sustain a large distinctive variety of flora and fauna. Besides other pretty flowers, the region is home to various rare and exotic orchids

coveted world over. There are around 500 varieties of these precious orchids growing in their natural habitat, in soil or on trees and shrubs. Manipur boasts of rare *Shiroi* lily (*Lilium Macklinae Sealy*), a beautiful terrestrial lily found only on topmost part of Shiroi hills in Ukhrul district.

National Park

Keibul Lamjao is the only floating National Park on Loktak lake, unique of its kind for its floating mass of vegetation, the most threatened Cervid (known as *Phumdi*) in the world. The park is a natural habitat of the rare and endangered Brow-Antlered Deer (*Cervus eldi eldi*) locally known as *Sangai*, the dancing deer. In addition to this, other rare animals contribute to the rich natural fauna of Manipur.

Cultivation

Hill tract resorts to terrace cultivation while 80 percent of plain land is utilised under wet cultivation of rice which is mainly dependent on monsoon. The soil being fertile and climate being pleasant, varying from moderate to very cold in winter (36°C – 0°C), like European climate, the region favoured and attracted foreigners from adjoining regions.

Natural Beauty

The land of Manipur is profusely endowed with bountiful natural beauty and sylvan surroundings. People who visit this land are enthralled by its lush green fields, crystal-clear lakes, serpentine rivers and streams and pleasant weather. Truly speaking, Manipur is indeed nature's child, resplendent in exuberance; its picture-perfect panorama, is a soothing sight to sore eyes. This has led Lord Irwin, Governor General of India, to term Manipur as 'Switzerland of India' in admiration.

Routes

The land of Manipur with its distinctive geographical entity is situated exclusively girdled by its range of hills, set apart from neighbouring regions. Nevertheless, natural hill tracts and river courses serve as routes for plain and hill people alike, strengthening links and bonds between them for thousands of years. These routes were also used by foreign traders and merchants who passed through Manipur, invaders to this land and settlers in Manipur even before Christian era began.

Professor D. G. E. Hall mentions about river course by banks of Irrawady river and Chindwin river that provided a passage between India and Burma. Sir Arthur Phayre writes in his book, *History of Burma* that Kshatriya princes reached Burma via Manipur following river route of Irrawady river.⁵ There is also a route following downstream of Chindwin river with Manipur being a transit. Going by this route, traders from China could reach Afghanistan in three months travelling in caravans where they bartered gold from Europe with silk from China.⁶

During British rule in India, only two proper roads connected the British territory and the Manipur valley. One road leads from Assam on the north via Kohima district of Nagaland, which is far better in terms of movement of wheeled vehicles and camping grounds than the other one which proceeds from Cachar district of Assam on the west.

In course of time, the former road from Dimapur town of Nagaland to Imphal has been upgraded and named National Highway 39 which further extends in the south-east to the International border town of Moreh on Indo-Myanmar (formerly Burma) border. The latter road through Cachar district of Assam to Imphal is now known as National Highway 53. There is another route, National highway 150 which connects Mizoram and Nagaland passing through Imphal of Manipur. These roads are the main life links through which the state of Manipur maintains its transport and communication with rest of India. Besides, Manipur is also connected with Kolkata, New Delhi, Silchar, Guwahati and Aizawl by airways. Surprisingly, it has no navigable waterways and rail link has just touched its western border at Jiribam.⁷

Historical profile

In early ages, Manipur region was unfamiliar to neighbouring kingdoms by its present name. Whether it was called Manipur or not in very ancient period is not certain. Except that some enthusiastic writers claimed that the present state of Manipur maybe identified with the kingdom of Manipur referred to in the Mahabharata. According to the epic, first reference is available when Arjuna, the third Pandava visited the eastern region and married Chitrangada, a Manipur princess. Second reference is in connection with *Ashwamedha Yajna* when Arjuna was defeated by his son, Babrubahana, the king of Manipur. The Manipur Puranas also credit this theory of rulers of Manipur being descendants of Babrubahana.⁸ Though many historians and

writers have refuted such claim, yet no conclusive theory is available on the genesis of nomenclature.

Nomenclature

However, the name 'Manipur' became known to all only in modern age, that is, from 18th century onwards. References in early maps of India and early documents indicate several names, such as, 'Mecklay' in Rennel's *Memoirs*, 'Cassy' in the *Narratives of Symes*, 'Kase' to the Shans, 'Kathe' to Burmese (which happens to be a deviated form of the word 'Kase'), 'Mekeli' to the Ahoms, 'Maglei' to Cacharis, 'Moglan' to old Assamese and so on.⁹

Puranic Age

Early civilisation before 8th century CE, better known as Puranic Age, is veiled in obscurity. It is totally dependent on the tales of that period, which were both mythical as well as legendary. Some of the tales are associated with the creation of Earth, Shiva's Rasa Dance, advent of *Poreiton*, legends of *Pakhangba*, *Nongpok Ningthou* and *Panθοibi*, legends of *Khamba* and *Thoibi*, etc. These tales serve as a good source for literature and religion and even the origin of the society of this region. As for instance, from the legend of *Poreiton*, we come to know that a certain immigrant, *Poreiton* by name, lit a sacrificial fire in this land for the first time and got mingled with the local people. Legend of *Khamba* and *Thoibi* illustrates power and glory of *Moirang* tribe and its kingdom.¹⁰

Early history

Much of the early history of Manipur, that is, from 8th to 18th century is also unrecorded although it can be roughly reconstructed by historians, archaeologists and researchers through historical relies from archaeological excavations, from ancient manuscripts called '*Puyas*' dealing with legends and folklore, writings on different clans, writings on immigration and writings on incidents of historical value of this period. During this early stage of history, there is mention of the decline of *Moirang* Kingdom and the rise and supremacy of Meitei community. It so happened that there were seven tribes or clans, of which four of them, namely *Khuman*, *Luang*, *Moirang* and *Ningthouja* (Meitei) were more prominent than others. *Pakhangba*, ruler of *Ningthouja* clan defeated *Poreiton*, ruler of *Khamnung*, as well as *Khaba*, ruler of

Kangla and ushered in a new era in the history of Manipur. Other clan chieftains were either subdued or they accepted the supremacy of the *Ningthouja* clan. Thus *Ningthouja* dynasty flourished under the rule of Pakhangba who was influential in establishing the Meitei kingdom or formation of Meitei state. It was a significant landmark in the course of history of Manipur for it indicates the rise of the Meitei community. With formation of Meitei state, a process of administration was initiated by Pakhangba which involuntarily contributed in consolidating society as well as enhancing overall development of society.¹¹

The history of this period also mentions another immigrant from the west, second Poreiton, who again lit up a fire at *Andro* behind *Nongmaijing* Hill. Historians are of opinion that these Poreitons were maybe Indo-Aryan missionaries who came to Manipur before Christian era. Down through ages, there are references found in Ava and Shan Chronicles of various invasions by the Pong, the Shans and the Ava (Manipur term for Myanmar) on the small kingdom of Manipur. In 13th century, the Chinese invaded Manipur but faced defeat. The *Loi* community of Manipur is said to be the descendents of the Chinese prisoners of war of that invasion.

During the mid-15th century, one of the most prominent rulers of Manipur worth-mentioning was King Kyamba (1467-1508 CE). He could expand territories of the state upto Kabaw Valley and also bring victory over *Mayangs* (people from neighbouring regions). Besides, he reinvented revenue system, introduced maintenance of daily events of the state in the chronicle named *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. He also allowed influx of various types of people from neighbouring and even from far-off regions, gave them settlements and made them assimilate into the Meitei community. It was during this time that Brahmins from several neighbouring States made inroads into Manipur in batches to settle down in this land, as the rest of India came under the Muslim rule. The *Ahom Buranji* indicates a record of relationships between Assam and Manipur from 15th century onwards. The immigrant Brahmins began to mingle with the people of the Valley and attempted to coax the people into leaving their meat-eating habits and embracing strict Hindu faith instead. Of course, their influences were in vain.¹²

In 17th century, there is mention of the illustrious king Khagemba (1597-1652 CE) whose military prowess, administrative skills and nation-building acumen are

highlighted in the book *Ningthourol Lambuba*. Not only did he subdue the Chinese forces that entered Manipur, but also the Kacharis and the Muslims. He provided settlements for captives and assimilated them into the greater Meitei society. He was instrumental in bringing about a lot of social and political reforms including introduction of ‘*Lallup*’ or obligatory service by every able male subject under the ruler.¹³

Medieval History

The most popular king of Manipur, Pamheiba, better known as GaribNiwaz, ruled over the state from 1709CE to 1748 CE. His reign can be considered as the golden age in the history of Manipur.¹⁴ He could annex neighbouring territories and expand boundaries of Manipur. It was during his reign that social and cultural scenario of Manipur underwent a drastic makeover. Idea of Hinduism was manifested strongly and sanskritisation of the state under strict *Ramanandi* cult took place. Hinduism was declared the state religion and people were compelled to convert to the orthodox faith. To make it possible, *Puyas* (ancient literary texts) were burnt, shrines/ altars of indigenous Meitei deities (*Kolu Yaithiba*) were demolished; mountains, lakes and rivers were given Hindu names, orthodox Hindu way of life was forced upon on the people. Under the royal patronage of the Maharaja, the people, slowly yet surely, embraced orthodox Hindu faith with all its beliefs, customs and value-systems. In course of time, sanskritisation got strengthened during the reign of king Bhagyachandra (1749-1798 CE). He propagated Vaishnavite cult of Hindu faith, erected the image of Govindaji in 1776 CE and introduced Rasleela.¹⁵ Thus, transition from ancient Meitei religious and cultural tradition to new religious faith and way of life was almost complete. Nevertheless, indigenous religion, though sidelined, was not totally discarded by the people. Credit invariably goes to Meitei womenfolk who try to inculcate moral and socio-cultural values and virtues of both religious cults to the next generation as well. Their role in imbibing values of both faiths in harmonious synchronisation is worth-mentioning.

One historical event that shook very socio-political foundation of Manipur and thereby initiated establishment of British Imperialism in Manipur was the *Seven Years Devastation* (*Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*). It was the invasion and occupation of Manipur by the more powerful Burma (modern Myanmar) for seven years from 1819 to 1826

CE. The people of Manipur suffered great tortures and oppression under the Burmese rule that even compelled them to flee from their homesteads to neighbouring kingdoms for refuge, including princes of Manipur.¹⁶

To free Manipur from its devastation, princes had to rely on the assistance of British East India Company. Around the same time, British also declared war against Burma in 1824. This First Anglo-Burmese War ended with signing of Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 and simultaneously, Manipur also regained her sovereignty from the Burmese forces with valiant prince Gambhir Singh at the helm.¹⁷ The British established their office of political agency in Manipur in 1835, eventually.¹⁸ In due course, they started to interfere in the administration of the kingdom.

Modern History

By 1891, Anglo-Manipur War was inevitable and though Manipuri army fought bravely, they could not stand against the stronger British army and consequently got vanquished. This defeat established British colonial rule in Manipur which continued till 1947. Likewise, elsewhere in India, Manipur also experienced its share of oppression and discrimination under British Imperialism which brought about the two most memorable Women's Revolution (*Nupilan*) in 1904 and 1939 besides other rebellions.

Socio-religious organisation, *Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha* was established in 1934, which sowed the seed of political consciousness among the people of Manipur and later got transformed into a political party in 1938. With rest of India, Manipur too enjoyed her liberation from British on 15th August 1947 and its administration was handed over to Maharaja Buddhachandra Singh.¹⁹ He initiated a democratic form of government and, accordingly, general election was held in 1948. Maharaj Kumar Priyobrata Singh became Manipur's first elected Chief Minister of a non-Congress coalition democratic government and the state became a constitutional monarchy.²⁰

However by 1949, Congress Party of Manipur and Indian National Congress initiated a movement to merge independent Manipur into Indian Union which finally culminated on 15th October 1949 after the merger Agreement was signed on 21st September 1949 between the Maharaja of Manipur and the Indian government. With

this merger, the history of Manipur as an independent kingdom came to a close and began its journey as a part of India.

Political profile

Manipur claims to be a kingdom from way back 1445BC onwards. However, its history of that time is shrouded in vagueness and obscurity. There is mention of seven tribes or clans – namely, *Khuman*, *Luwang*, *Moirang*, *Ningthouja (Meitei)*, *Angom*, *Khaba-Nganba* and *Chenglei (Sarang Leisangthem)* inhabiting the valley. *Khuman* and *Moirang* were the most powerful of them all. Later, *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba*, ruler of the *Ningthouja* clan, defeated and subdued rulers of some clans. Other remaining clans readily accepted his supremacy.

Formation of Meitei Kingdom

As a consequence, *Ningthouja* dynasty absorbed and merged all other clan dynasties and formed the greater Meitei kingdom or Meitei state and named it ‘*Meitei-Leipak*’ or ‘*Meitrabak*’ (land of Meiteis).²¹ Thus, Nongda Lairen Pakhangba is generally regarded as the first king of the greater Meitei kingdom who ascended the throne in 33 CE. The Meitei state being formed, it gave rise to Meitei community further initiating a system of administration to enforce and enhance overall development of Meitei society.

Administrative system

Right from the beginning, Manipur had its own fundamental requisites to be called a kingdom. Its political system or its polity exhibited a territory demarcated, a kingship, a capital, an administrative system of laws and rules for good governance, justice, security, military power, status, trade and commerce, etc. besides other essential factors that go into making it a cohesive structure of a state.

The organisation and administration of various offices with respective office-bearers of kingship is formed and duly made operational within a systematic framework and in appropriation. Every office is headed by a ‘*Hanjaba*’ and assisted by a ‘*Hidang*’. There are public relation agents called ‘*Lakpas*’, military heads called *Pana Hazari*

and *Hazari*. The land revenue system is looked after by a '*Phunam Selungba*' who worked on behalf of king.²²

No office seemed to be overlooked or uncared for as far as necessity of administration is concerned. Over and above, several kings, down the generations, have added new posts and offices or modified old ones when found necessary as per the demand of situation. For instance, King Kyamba, during his reign, introduced two institutional bodies, namely *Ahallup* and *Naharup Sanglup* which served as dormitory for men and for boys respectively.²³ Maharaja Khagemba introduced the *Lallup* system which means obligatory service by every able male subject to the king. Maharaj Garib Niwaz added following posts or designations such as *Yuvaraj*, *Mantri*, *Senapati* and *Kotwal*. Maharaj Bhagyachandra added more posts like *Hazari*, *Kazi*, *Lourengha Parel*, etc. to already existing offices.²⁴

Change of administration

Tradition of such a kind of kingship organisation lasted till the Anglo-Manipur war of 1891. As early as 1835, the first British political agent was appointed to act as a go-between the Manipuri king and the British as regards payment of tributes and the like. When British paramount finally took over Manipur in 1891, political agents became even more powerful. They abolished *lallup* system and imposed land revenue and house tax. By 1908, to improve administration of the kingdom, a '*Durbar*' was constituted with the king (Maharaj Churachand) as president. The Vice-President was a British ICS officer. Other members of the Durbar were from Manipuri community. By 1916, however, an ICS officer was selected as the president of the durbar by the Governor of Assam. There were other changes brought into other spheres too. Earlier military system was re-organised. A system of forced labour known as the '*Pothang*' was also abolished in 1913.²⁵

Inspired by neighbouring kingdoms of Ahom, Cachar and Tripura, the kings of Manipur put forward administrative changes during their respective reigns to suit their will and power. The kingdom was organised into many villages each of which was administered by a headman. The king would communicate with village headman through *Khunthok Lakpa*. Over and above, the king also maintained his relationship

with his subjects through three categorical levels, i.e. through service, judiciary and religious system.

Service mechanism

Service system comprised of three classes or sections of society, namely, *Phamnaiba* (prestigious class/ noble class), *Lalupkaba* (essential class/ common class) and *Loipotkaba* (dishonourable class/ working class).

Phamnaiba

The *Phamnaibas* who were aristocratic upper section of society enjoyed various privileges and could forgo some of the levied tax. In addition to this, they were also exempted from performing heavy work or duty. The brahmins of Hindu cult were also allowed to entertain certain privileges; their main duty being conducting of religious services and worship of idol of Govindaji and Maharaja.²⁶

Lalupkaba

The *Lalupkabas* were those common Meiteis between the age of sixteen and sixty. They were supposed to perform certain obligatory service for the Maharaja for ten days out of every forty days. Society was generally classified into four *Panas* or divisions, namely, *Khabam*, *Laipham*, *Ahallup* and *Nahalup*. Members of these *Panas* were supposed to perform *lallup* on rotating basis. Their service being obligatory, no cash or kind was offered to them. In case, anybody desired to refrain from *lallup*, it was possible through the payment of regular tax in kind. Nature of work or function varied from light to heavy duty or from dignified to base work; as for instance, *Ningthou Senba* (Raja's bodyguard and house servants) to *Laikai* (house-builders).²⁷

Loipotkaba

The last kind of service called *Loipotkaba* entailed in performing heavy menial duties for the king along with paying of tributes to the king. This service was usually performed by *Lois/Chakpas*, *Bishnupriyas* and *Yaithibis* who were considered low class/subordinate class. Works assigned to them were heavy and tedious in nature. They served as blacksmiths, silkworm-rearers, spirit-distillers, potters, salt-manufacturers, fishermen, grass cutters for king's horses and ponies, boat makers, etc.

They paid their tributes in cash or in kind according to the services assigned to them.²⁸ The king, in this manner, received services from different classes of society and was able to accumulate surplus products or cash in form of tributes or taxes. He exercised his sovereignty over his subjects following a hierarchical pattern of offices and posts. Any breach of codes and conduct was dealt with judicially.

Judiciary system

The kingdom maintained a strong and strict judiciary system. Any breach of conduct and services concerning social, political, economic or religious matters is dealt with severity yet with good judgement. Punishment would range from paying penalty to extent of excommunication as the situation demanded. The headman of every village acted as an informer or a reporter of any important happenings or cases to *Lakpas* (public relation agents) in palace. There were different courts designated for different purposes. For instance, *Cheirap* is the court for civil and criminal cases, *Garot* for military purposes, *Paja/Pacha* is exclusively for women and *Mongalsang* is the court for Mohammedans. *Cheirap* is headed by *Angom Ningthou*, *Garot* by *Senapati* and *Paja/Pacha* by *Pajahanba/Pachahanba*. Most of these posts, along with that of its members, were hereditary by nature. Over and above, these posts could also be achieved with money.

The greatest crimes recorded in kingdom were treason and murder. Punishment meted out to subjects varied from expulsion from their respective posts, exposure in market with a shaved head, excommunication to forced hard degrading labour. The latter punishment is infamously known as ‘*Loithaba*’, where an aristocratic or a high class person was literally degraded to low status of *Lois* from where there was no return.²⁹ This sort of punishment was almost similar to the British way of sending convicts to *Kalapani* (Andamans) or Down Under (Australia/New Zealand). In this way, the king exercised his judicial power over his subjects where, in most cases, his word or will was the law.

Religious system

Before the advent of Hinduism, official religion of the kingdom was the indigenous cult generally known as Meiteism or *Sanamahism*. This religious cult was composed of three institutions – namely, *Maiba* and *Maibi Loisang* (institution of priests and

priestesses), *Maichou Loisang* (institution of scholars) and *Pena Loisang* (institution of musicians). *Maichous*(scholars) exercised greater power than others as they acted as guides and advisors to king as also to *Maibas* and Maibis. These *Maichous* were also called Pundits who were very influential in almost all activities of the palace. They were said to have maintained daily events of court and kingdom, i.e., the royal chronicle called *Cheitharol Kumbaba*.³⁰

It can be rightly said that political system of the kingdom of Manipur continued in this manner till the coming of British. They brought about some change when they slowly but steadily took over political administration of kingdom by 1891 with a dummy king on the throne of Manipur.

On 15 August, 1947, Manipur regained her freedom from British Imperialist as did India. Monarchy was restored with Maharaja Buddhachandra on the throne of Manipur. However, he opted for democracy on the strong foundation of a constitution. Thereby, the ‘Manipur State Constitution Act’ was passed and in compliance with election rules, general elections were conducted in 1948. The outcome of election presented no party gaining absolute majority. Hence the first democratic government of Manipur was established with a non-Congress coalition ministry and Maharaj Kumar Priyobrata Singh became its first elected Chief Minister. The state of Manipur, henceforth, was termed as a constitutional monarchy though this state was very short-lived.³¹

Very soon, by 1949 itself, the seed for a merger of the independent state of Manipur to the greater Indian Union was sown by the Indian National Congress with the assistance of the Congress party of Manipur. After a few deliberations, it ultimately became a reality when merger agreement was signed on 21 September, 1949 between the Maharaja of Manipur and the Government of India. On 15 October, 1949, the state of Manipur became a political unit of India as a union territory and by 21 January, 1972, Manipur became a full-fledged state under the Indian constitution.³²

The state, at present, is divided into nine districts. Four of the districts, namely, Imphal West, Imphal East, Thoubal and Bishnupur are in the valley. Rest of the five districts – Ukhrul, Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong and Churachandpur are in the hills. The valley is inhabited mainly by Meiteis, Pangals, or Manipuri Muslims and

Bishnupriyas; while the hills are home to Naga tribes and Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes. Naga tribes generally reside in districts of Ukhrul and Tamenglong and Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes in Churachandpur district. Chandel and Senapati districts are usually inhabited by both the group of tribes.

Assembly Election

From the time Manipur was conferred statehood in 1972, the state has held ten Assembly Elections. The State has 60 assembly constituencies of which 40 belong to general, 19 to Scheduled Tribes and 1 to Scheduled Caste. Apart from it, there are 6 autonomous district councils in the hills of Manipur. There are around 7 political parties active in Manipur – Indian National Congress (INC), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Manipur People’s Party (MPP), Samajwadi Party (SP), Communist Party of India (CPI) NCP, RJD, etc. However, in elections, none of the political parties could gain absolute majority. Hence, the state has always noticed coalition governments since its inception. Such governments, more often than not, could hardly complete a full term. The chief minister is, however, from the political party which usually gains majority. Out of 60 members of the legislative assembly, only 12% of them are allocated as ministers. General elections in Manipur are rather based on ethnic lines than on party’s objectives and policies.³³

Moreover, as a consequence of coalition alliance, there is absence of any strong political party which is an important component of and a vital necessity in a democracy. Coalition ministries are often plagued with inter-party and intra-party conflicts which led to, many a time, the imposition of President’s rule in the state. For that matter, the state has witnessed around 7 times president’s rule so far, which invariably projects a very grim picture of bad administration, poor governance and lack of integrity in the state.

Political problems

In fact, the state has been overwhelmed by decadent insurgency, armed conflicts, ethnic clashes, high-level corruption right from late 1970’s onwards which has practically corroded whole political system of the state and hindered process of overall development and growth of the state. Problem is, by far, aggravating with not

less than 30 militant groups within Manipur with their own myriad aims and demands. Rights of people to live in peace, dignity and security has been challenged and violated by both insurgency or non-state forces as well as by uniformed state forces due to their frequent combing operations and encounter shoot-outs, causing physical along with mental harassment of innocent public. Such cases have deliberated civilians to organise themselves to protect rights and justice of people in their society. The *Meira Paibi* is one such women organisation that has taken up the cudgels to fight against injustice and safeguard dignity and liberty of the people and enable them to live in peace.³⁴ Another lone human rights crusader is Irom Sharmila Chanu who has embarked on a 'fast unto death' since 2 November, 2000 demanding the repeal of Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA).

Manipur, even today, exhibits signs of lack of governance within the state, after all is said and done. Problems are many and varied. In olden times, continuous invasions from Awa (Burma), stronger neighbouring kingdom posed a great threat to the integration of Manipur kingdom, sometimes devastating the kingdom completely. Then, in-road of British forces slowly yet steadily took over administration of kingdom and spread injustice and oppression over the people in totality. Since its merger with the Indian Union, the state has been facing myriad problems ranging from insurgency to corruption, ethnic conflicts to human rights violation, large-scale drug abuse to HIV/AIDS afflicted cases, unemployment to economic underdevelopment, frequent bandhs and strikes to economic blockades.

A complete revamping and strengthening of political system and governance of state is the need of the hour. With new and innovative economic and social policies to change and improve the profile of the state may be an immediate necessity. Plans and strategies should thus be initiated so as to provide security, freedom and safeguard of human rights of people. Discrimination and social exclusion of small marginalised groups and communities should be checked and involvement of women in policy-making and decision-taking bodies must be encouraged to make the state be able to restore itself to its glorious past, when life was peaceful and everything was in abundance. The centre should also take initiatives to help the state come up in all fronts and be at par with the other developed states of India.

Economic profile

The economy of Manipur is primarily based on agriculture and forest products. Besides, weaving is considered to be the next most important economic activity. Industrial, mining and tourism sector, in modern times, also contribute to state economy to some extent. Economic indicators point to gross domestic product of state increasing but at a slow pace. Table below will throw some light on development indicators of the state of Manipur.

Table no. III.III: Basic Economic Indicators

Forest Coverage (2003)	:	78.01 percent
Major Industries	:	Agro and forest based industries
Natural resources	:	Limestone, Evaporites, Chromite, Asbestos and semi-precious stones
Per capita NSDP (2011-2012)	:	Rs. 32284
Population below poverty line (2009-2010)	:	47.1 percent
Employment in the organised sector as on 31.03.2010	:	0.79 percent
Number of Bank branches	:	83 (approx.)

(Source: Statistical Handbook Manipur, 2007, Invest in Manipur, 2013 and National Health Profile, 2011, accessed on 01/03/2016)

Agriculture

Traditionally, the society being agrarian, majority of people, especially in rural areas, fully depend on agriculture as their source of sustenance. But type of cultivation varies according to the topography. Normal wet land cultivation is usually practiced in the valley yielding greater produce than jhuming and terrace cultivation which is widely practiced in the hilly areas of the state. However, the state is recognised for its production of large scale agricultural products.

The main crop, paddy is abundantly grown in the state, rice invariably being the staple food of the people. The soil being fertile and innumerable streams providing ample

irrigation give bounty harvests since early times. A variety of rice, purple-coloured sticky rice, locally called ‘*chakhou*’ a crop indigenous to Manipur is popular all over the country. Besides paddy, wheat, maize and pulses are grown extensively in Manipur. The state also produces oilseeds like mustard, groundnut, soyabeans and sunflower. Food ingredients such as ginger and turmeric are also grown in abundance.³⁵

Moreover, Manipur produces a large amount of vegetables and fruits of which some of them are of European origin. Traditional vegetables found in the state are greens, pumpkin and other gourd variety, tree beans (*Yongchak*), bananas, sugarcane, egg-plant, etc. The British who ruled Manipur earlier were instrumental in introducing European variety of vegetables and fruits in the state. The climatic condition being conducive and fertile soil add to adaptability and high yield of farm produce of European variety. Vegetables that are grown in Manipur are potatoes, peas, tomato, cauliflower, cabbage, carrot, ladies’ finger, radish, beetroot, turnip, etc. Fruits available are pineapple, lemon, banana, orange, papaya, plum, apples, apricots, raspberries, guava, mangoes, jackfruit, etc. It is noticed that vegetable produce is of better quality than fruit produce. Besides, a number of varieties of green leaves and herbs which are consumed as food items or which serve for medicinal purpose are also available and grown in the state.³⁶

Agricultural sector contributes a great amount of revenue to economy of Manipur. More than three-quarters of the total working population of Manipur is engaged in agricultural sector, though area utilised in this sector is less than 10% of total geographical area of the state. The table beneath will present total workers, main workers, marginal workers, total cultivators, total agricultural labourers, total household industrial workers and total other workers of the state of Manipur available from the latest Census 2011.

Table no. III.IV: Distribution of working population of Manipur

Category	Total worker in %			Main worker in %			Marginal worker in %			Total Cultivator in %			Total Agricultural Labourer in %			Total Household Industrial Worker in %			Total Others Worker in %		
	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban
Person	45.1	46.1	41.4	73.8	73.1	75.5	26.2	27.0	24.5	39.5	50.0	14.6	9.6	10.7	7.0	7.7	6.8	9.8	43.2	32.4	68.6
Male	52.4	52.4	49.9	83.3	83.0	84.1	16.7	17.0	15.9	40.7	51.5	16.5	6.6	7.3	5.0	3.0	2.3	4.0	49.7	38.6	74.5
Female	38.6	41.2	33.2	60.9	60.1	62.8	39.1	39.9	37.2	37.9	48.2	11.8	13.6	15.0	10.0	14.1	12.4	18.3	34.5	24.4	

(Source: Manipur: Final Population of data of Census 2011: 05/06/2013)

From the table above, we come to see that though among the total workers, main workers and cultivators, the male percentage is higher than the female one, among the marginal, agricultural and household industrial workers female percentage is much higher than that of the male. It is indicative that women do not lag behind their male counterparts in their contribution to the economy of the state.

Over and above, half of the total cultivable area lies in the valley which is most of the times ever-decreasing subject to encroachment and expansion of urban population. Hence the state undergoes a lot of study and research in order to look for methods and processes to maximise and improve production of agricultural goods and thereby be not only self-sufficient but also export its products.

Fertile soil, adequate supply of water for irrigation purposes, and suitable moderate to cold climate are conducive for large-scale production of agriculture and agro-based products. In the hills, where jhuming and terrace-cultivation are widely practised, production of fruits and vegetables is maximum and commendable. There are some products like pineapple, passion fruit and mushroom which are grown naturally in the state. Their production is further enhanced with the help of commercial cultivation for export purposes. Besides these, food ingredients like ginger, turmeric, bamboo shoots are also exported in abundance. In recent times, it is noticed that the state has encouraged organic farming in the hilly areas.

It is found that there is potential for export in many horti-agricultural based commodities. For instance, agro-based industries which prove profitable in export market include several fruit preparations, juice concentrate plants, herbal plants, spices-processing, etc. A lot of pharmaceutical firms thrive on the medicinal herbs and other farm products from the state.³⁷

This sunny picture of agricultural economy is riddled with many problems and obstacles nevertheless. For instance, market and sales economy of agricultural and agro-based products is unorganised and also sans regulation in Manipur. Hence, large benefits evaded poor farmers and maximum profits are appropriated by middlemen and traders. Illiterate farmers lack information and knowledge in marketing sales and also fail to avail Government facilities and support. They also face problems of warehouse storage and patenting their products.

Industry

Industrial economy is not much developed in Manipur. Yet, around 7700 small scale industries including cottage, village and handloom as well as handicrafts industries have been set up all over the state. The state government is striving to improve its industries and thus boost this as a main revenue generator. One such industry which

plays second fiddle only to agriculture in generating the state's economy is handloom and weaving industry. This is the only sector which is solely controlled by women of Manipur from very ancient times to modern days.³⁸

Traditionally speaking, expertise in weaving is a pre-requisite attribute of every Manipuri girl or woman. During the time of marriage, a loom is a must-have among the items of dowry. In the past, women wove all family's clothing needs in her loom. The earliest loom was the loins loom which produced thick cloth. The Manipuri women would spin their own yarn, dye it with natural (vegetable) dyes and weave it on the loins loom.³⁹ The method was slow and tedious, and consequently, production was limited to meet even local demands.

The first technological modification of loom occurred with replacement of loins loom by throw-shuttle loom, the design adopted from other parts of India, way back in 19th century. Though it enhanced production of cloth, texture of cloth was not fine enough like those produced on loins loom.⁴⁰

Next modification which came around the time of Independence and has continued even in recent times was the adoption of fly shuttle loom. Though design of this loom was also adopted from elsewhere in India, it was again subsequently modified to suit operational requisites of the Manipuri women. This loom soon became popular as it was easier to handle and spare parts could be produced locally. Along with ready supply of imported yarns from rest of India through traders from outside Manipur, production increased considerably.⁴¹

The state now is among the top five ranks in terms of the number of looms in the country. Handlooms, naturally is the largest cottage industry of Manipur. The Manipuri women's ethnic attire, *phanek* (sarong-like wrapper) and *innaphi* (drape) woven in cotton as well as silk with intricate patterns and motifs are popular all over rest of India and abroad too. *Lashingphi* (cotton cloth) is a light blanket made with cotton sliver that has an international craze and market. Besides, other handloom products that have received a wider market are sarees, bedsheets, curtains, towels, tableclothes, fashion garments, scarves, shawls, etc.

Though handloom products are famed for its aesthetic and artistic designs, technology of Manipur is not advanced enough to produce them in mills and factories. Moreover,

onslaught of cheap imitations produced from mills outside Manipur is spoiling its market value.⁴² Traders and brokers of raw materials also add to the menace of industry and workers in varying degrees. Weavers and entrepreneurs of handloom industry of the state of Manipur should be alerted in order to patent their products and indigenous designs so as to protect and preserve their very own ethnicity and culture which is aesthetically woven in the fabrics they produce.

Handicrafts/Forest-based industry

Along with handloom, the handicrafts industry is a thriving one. Since the state is covered by forests extensively, a huge variety of forest resources are produced here. Various kinds of forest-based products manufactured in Manipur that has a market world-wide are bamboo, cane and wood crafts industry. Only bamboo production of the state crosses 10 lakh ton every year. Around 1.5 lakh artisans are employed in bamboo and cane craft industry. This forest-based industry has given a considerable boost to economy of Manipur as the state can boast for having the highest number of handicrafts units and the highest number of employed craftsmen in the whole of Northeast India.⁴³

Other industries

The government of Manipur is trying its level best to develop its industrial sector. Hence, small industrial units, factories, mills and companies have been set up in Manipur for producing drugs and pharmaceuticals, cement, steel, plastic and electronic goods. Mention may be made of a ghee factory, food processing plants, etc which are a few of several agro-based industrial plants that have come up in the state. A yarn spinning mill and other ancillary industrial units have also been added to the industrial sector. Besides, the state has established a lot of training institutes to produce skilled workers trained in the latest technologies so as to beef up industrial economy of the state and help it attain the height of sustainability.⁴⁴

Mining sector

The mining sector in Manipur also generates revenue to the state economy. There exists ample room for development if this sector is properly exploited. One of the state's major natural resources is limestone which if tapped properly, will generate greater revenue as well as employment.⁴⁵

Tourism sector

Tourism is another sector that has remained least tapped even today though it has huge potentials for revenue generation as the land is endowed with natural beauty, rich cultural heritage and pleasant climate and weather. But its geographical isolation and hilly terrain poses a hindrance to easy transport and communication which directly hamper the tourism industry in Manipur.⁴⁶

Lack of infrastructure, inaccessible terrain causing communication difficulties and internal political instability has posed as major hindrances to the growth of economy of the state. The state government should attempt to eradicate such obstacles and set up more industries in order to lead the state to the path of rapid economic development to be at par with other developed states of India in future.

Socio-cultural profile

Manipur is a state of multicultural diversity. Cultural heritage of the land, rich and aesthetic by all standards is the soul of Manipuri society. It has contributed towards and forms an indispensable part of our Indian culture. People of the state regard in high esteem every aspect of their culture and tradition and take all pains to protect and preserve the same as well. Each and every clan and tribe of Manipur have their own ethnic cultural identity, unique and vibrant in themselves. This cultural legacy and its social values are manifested in the life styles, conduct and manners, and role and activities in family and societal affairs of the people of Manipur.

The state of Manipur comprises of plains and hill settlements. There are around 33 tribes, belonging to two main tribal sections – Naga and Kuki-Chin, inhabiting hilly regions of Manipur. Maximum of them have adopted Christianity as their religion. All these tribes more or less exhibit their own indigenous identity through their language, dress, art and culture, each different from the other in form and character. We certainly notice a massive storehouse of diverse culture and tradition in the hill tribes of Manipur, prompting and inviting researchers and scholars to make in depth explorative studies.

Major inhabitants of the plains belong to the Manipuri community. The society, though traditional, is yet egalitarian in attitude right from earlier times. Social

stratification is not exactly based on Indian caste system. Nevertheless, class stratification cannot be totally ruled out. Meiteis (Manipuri) follow three different religious groups – Meitei who are Hindu Vaishnavite, Meitei who follow indigenous *Sanamahism*/ Meiteism and Pangans who are Meitei Muslim. Among Meitei Hindus, there are *Bamons* (Brahmins of Indian origin) and *Kshatriyas* (general Meiteis). There is another group called the *Lois* which is considered as social outcastes, of which some are descendants of war prisoners from China, Burma and India.

The table below deals with representation of major religious groups in the state of Manipur.

Table no. III.V: Manipur Religious Data

Types of Religion/faith	Population	Percentage
Hindu	1,181,876	41.39%
Christian	1,179,043	41.29%
Muslim	239,836	8.40%
Other Religion	233,767	8.19%

Source: Manipur Population Census Data 2011. Accessed on 23/01/2016

People who belong to Hindu Vaishnavite faith are maximum followed by those who belong to Christianity in close proximity. Islamic faith and other religious cult have almost same percentage of followers. Besides these religions mentioned above, there are small percentages of Jainism (0.06%), Sikhism (0.05%), and Buddhism (0.05%) residing in Manipur.

Meitei Kshatriya and Meitei following *Sanamahism* are a component of seven clans (*Yek/Salai*), who are exogamous by nature. The *Yeks* in Meitei society are – *Ningthouja*, *Angom*, *Luwang*, *Khuman*, *Moirang*, *Khaba-Nganba* and *Chenglei* (*Sarang-Leisangthem*). There are numerous lineage names or family names (*Yumnak/Sagei*) under each *Yek*. Over and above, Meitei Hindus also maintain the Hindu system of *Gotra*. Any religious event of *Bamons* and *Kshatriyas* are performed with mention of *Gotra*. Meitei community embraced Ramanandi cult of Hinduism in the beginning of 18th century. However, by second half of 18th century, during the reign of Maharaja Bhagyachandra, Vaishnavite cult of Hindu faith became the new acceptance which has remained till today. Moreover, what is unique about the society

is the assimilation and amalgamation of the new faith and the traditional Manipuri religion which was put into practice in every aspect of cultural significance. Similarly, Pangan (Manipuri Muslim) manifested a blend of Meitei traditions and Islamic faith in their cultural milieu, be it in food habits, attire, music, festivals, religious events, etc.⁴⁷

Food habit

The Manipuri are generally vegetarian with special inclination for fish. In ancient times, the community was non-vegetarian. With coming of Brahmin and conversion into Hinduism, they discarded meat-eating. Rice is the staple food with fish prepared in authentic Manipuri traditional cuisine, their main diet. Recipes prepared with bamboo shoots, desserts prepared with milk, sugar and sticky rice are some delicacies that Manipuris cannot do without. In traditional religious feasts, layout is purely vegetarian. Nowadays, young people again started consuming chicken and meat too. But green leaves and vegetable in simple dishes are normally liked by all.⁴⁸

Handloom and Handicraft

The people of Manipur project their rich culture and age-old tradition in their traditional attires they weave and wear. Handloom woven clothes with designs and patterns which are unique, intricate and beautifully artistic are loved by people in and outside Manipur. Handicrafts that Manipuri produce also represent their natural skill and artistic innovation out of the simple raw materials available in the state. Exquisite crafts of wood, bamboo, reed and textile are a major attraction for the tourists. Handloom and handicrafts of Manipur in markets of national and international level pave way as good revenue generators of the state as well as promoters of the multi-cultural heritage of the state.

Religion

Religion forms the basis of culture of any particular society. For the Meiteis, when in their tribal stage, it is said that animism was their religious faith. The worship of trees and spirits formed a part of their cultural lives in the very ancient times. The supreme Lord is *Atiya Guru Sidaba* or *Sidaba Mapu*.

Sanamahism or Meiteism

Old Meitei religion that still survives even today is better known as Sanamahism or Meiteism; *Sanamahi* being son of Atiya Guru Sidaba. This religious cult is one of the oldest of religions of South-East Asia. Meitei worshipped forces of nature like fire, water, mountain, etc. ancestor worship (*Apokpa*), *Lamlai* (Countryside Deities), *Yumlai* (Domestic Deities), *Umanglai* (Sylvan Deities) etc. This system of religion had its own myths and legends, gods and goddesses, priests (Maibas) and priestesses (Maibis), rituals and festivals (*Lai Haraoba*, *Sajibu Haraoba*), etc.⁴⁹

Traditional priests and priestesses of Sanamahism are Maibas and Maibis who perform ceremonial rites and rituals of this faith. There exists another type of maibas and maibis who are traditional healers/ mendicants. These traditional physicians use natural medicines and are highly respected by people. During festivals like *Lai Haraoba* and of *Umang Lai* temples, maibis take active participation in performance of rituals. They play a more substantial role than maibas. They are considered as chosen lot by 'Lais', ancient deities and so, frequently fall into a trance when possessed by 'Lais' and utter predictions.⁵⁰ Both maiba and maibi maintain certain restrictions in their social life style. Both of them dress in white attire. Their presence in ceremonial rituals and festivals is considered essential and indispensable as they ward off evil spirits.

Hinduism

Though Sanamahism is the original religion and followed till today in Manipur, the most prominent and popular religion of Manipuri is Hinduism. First stage of Hinduism which was not very successful was during the reign of Charai Rongba in 15th century. The Ramanandi cult was the first to be adopted with in-roads of Brahmin from west during 17th – 18th century. But Vaishnavite cult of Hinduism became more popular during 18th century when Maharaj Garib Niwaz himself got converted to it. Subsequently, mass people gradually embraced the new faith with its beliefs, customs and value-systems. They abstained themselves from eating meat and drinking strong spirits. They engaged themselves in the worship of Radha and Krishna through devotional musical songs and dances, showered their faith and belief in Hindu holy books of Gita, Ramayana and Mahabharata, and observed festivals like *Holi*, *Rathyatra*, *Durga Puja*, *Diwali*, *Ras Leela*, etc.⁵¹

Priests or *Purohits* of Hinduism are commonly termed as Bamons or Brahmans. They assert the highest class in their society. They perform ceremonial rites and rituals in Hindu temples and household of Meitei Hindus. Since they are brahmins of Indian origin who immigrated to Manipur, they easily assimilated with the Manipuri society by going into marriage alliance with Meitei women. They were also given free land but they hardly tilled the soil and are more engaged in preaching religion and performing religious rites. They maintain class distinction by not partaking food prepared by Meitei and prohibiting marriage of their brahmin daughters into Meitei families. In this manner they command respect and recognition in society as the Hindu religion was patronised by kings. They wear white attire and sacred thread (*Lugoon*) of Hindus, and apply sandalwood *tilak* on their foreheads.⁵²

Though Meitei embraced Vaishnavite Hinduism, they continued, on other hand, worship of their ancient deities, as well. What we find in Manipuri is a harmonious fusion of the two faiths. Beliefs and value-systems of both cults got completely integrated and are manifested in social custom and cultural tradition of the people of Manipur in their day-to-day lives. This assimilation is the essence of the religion of Manipur.

Islamic religion

Besides Sanamahism and Hinduism, there are other religions as well like Islam and Christianity. Islamic religion is practised by Pangans (Meitei Muslim) in Manipur. Pangans strictly adhere to their religious custom and practices and celebrate their festivals with full religious fervour.

Christianity

Christianity, a product of British missionaries who entered Manipur is practiced by tribes living in the hill area. Hill tribes embraced this new religion with complete faith and full acceptance as missionaries imparted modern education and better lifestyle. The new adopted faith easily assimilated with their custom and tradition. They celebrate religious festivals with zeal and enthusiasm. Nowadays, besides the tribes of Manipur, many Meitei have also embraced the religion too.

Festivals

Manipur is a land of festivals. Festivals are based on their religion, culture, and social aspirations. Festivals are celebrated with pomp, gaiety and passion. As for instance, *Lai Haraoba* (celebration of deities), *Umanglai Haraoba* (sylvan deities), *Cheiraoba* (Manipuri New Year) are some festivals which belong to ancient tradition and culture of Meitei religious faith. *Yaoshang* (Holi), *Sajibu Cheiraoba* (Last day of Hindu Year), *Kang* (Rathayatra), *Krishna Janma* (Janmastami), *Thourani Janma* (Radha's birth anniversary), *Durga Puja*, *Kwakjatra* (Dussehra), *Diwali*, etc. are particularly based on Vaishnavite faith. Moreover, social festival like *Ningol Chakouba* (celebration of family reunion), *Swasti Puja* (birth ceremony), *Chawumba* (*Annaprashan*), *Naahutpa* (Ear-piercing ceremony), *Churakaran* (tonsure or shaving head ceremony), *Lugoon Thangba* (wearing sacred thread ceremony), *Laiming Louba* (initiation ceremony), etc. have become major celebrations which the people of Manipur enjoy with mirth and religious fervour.⁵³

Music and Dance

Music and dance reflect creativity and cultural extravaganza of Manipuri society. Dancers and singers are respected and honoured greatly. Music and dances of Manipur mainly revolve around the two religious cults prevalent in the state and are an integral part of cultural festivals mentioned earlier. As for instance, *Lai Haraoba* festival of old Meitei religion is categorised with *Khamba-Thoibi* dance (Dance dedicated to ancient deities by Khamba and Thoibi), *Maibi* dance (Creation dance by Maibis), etc. with the accompaniment of music and songs which are distinctly representative of folk culture and tradition of Manipur. *Thang-Ta* (Martial arts), *Thabal Chongba* (moonlight dance), etc. may also be attributed to folk cultural tradition. Apart from it, music and songs with folk themes and instruments such as *Khulang Eshei* (Harvesting songs), *Khunung Eshei* (country songs), *Pena Eshei* (songs with *Pena*, a musical string instrument), *Moirang Parbas* (Ballads based on adventures of *Moirang* kingdom), *Khongjom Parbas* (Ballads on *Khongjom* War episodes), etc. still retain their cultural importance which has captivated the hearts of the people.⁵⁴

Other kind of performing arts are classical form of dances and songs which belong to purely Hindu Vaishnavite faith. Mention may be made of various forms of *Rasleelas*, *Pala Nat Sankirtans*, *Pung Cholom*, etc. *Pung Cholom*, a type of classical dance with *Mridanga* (drum) is performed to mark invocation of Nat Sankirtan and Rasleela. Rasleela is widely acclaimed as one of the first four classical dances of India for its ethereal beauty, grace, costumes and the deep religious devotion attached to its performance. Nat Sankirtans are devotional dance and song performed usually during marriage and death ceremonies by men (*Nupa Pala*) and even women (*Nupi Pala*). *Nupa Pala* performs with cymbals and *Mridanga* drum while *Nupi Pala* with small cymbals called *Mandila*. *Khubak Eshei* (Devotional song and dance with clapping of hands) is performed by female singers with a male drummer during the nine-day *Kang* festival (Rathjatra).⁵⁵

Wari Leeba is another cultural art form of story-telling introduced during the time of Maharaja Bhagyachandra in 18th century. Themes are based on Ramayana and Mahabharata and its interest lies in the creative and narrating prowess of the story-teller. Its popularity has not waned even in modern times.

Shumang Leela and Manipuri Theatre

People of Manipur love to enjoy and amuse themselves after a hard day's work. They are fond of watching *Shumang Leelas* (Proscenium plays) and more recent stage theatres. *Shumang Leela* is generally described as the theatre of the masses. Performed by a troupe of twelve to fifteen professional artistes, its main purpose is to entertain people and drive their daily anxieties to oblivion. However, it also aims to bring awareness to people on various issues ranging from local to international.

The other drama played on stage is more recent than *Shumang Leela* but has developed so much as to receive national and world acclaim due to the continued effort and perseverance of some great dramatists and artistes. These theatres provide entertainment as well as information on several social, economic and political issues.

Shumang Leela and theatre festivals are conducted annually in Manipur to cater to people's need for infotainment. Also both *Shumang Leela* and theatres have been regular features in festivals of national and international repute where they have

achieved numerous accolades adding every new feather to the cap of Manipuri culture and tradition.⁵⁶

Games and Sports

Manipuris have a penchant for games and sports which also form a part of their socio-cultural milieu. There are many indigenous games and sports of Manipur that have made the state proud of. Manipuri *Sagol Kangjei* or modern polo, a favourite game of kings and princes is a gift of Manipur to the world. *Puyas* (Manipuri chronicles) date the origin of the game as early as circa 3100 BC. According to an ancient treatise on *Sagol Kangjei* (Polo) called '*Kangjeirol*', king Kangba (1405-1359BC) first introduced *Sagol Kangjei* in its present modern form. Terms *sagol* (horse/pony), *kangjei* (stick), *kangdroom* (round ball), *kangjeibung* (playground) were derived from the name '*Kangba*', king. Royal chronicle of Manipur, *Cheitharol Kumbaba* holds that a polo match was played between the friends of *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba* who was the first king of Manipur. This indigenous game in course of its development received royal patronage as the game is denoted as 'king of games' for 'game of kings'.⁵⁷

Besides *Sagol Kangjei*, there are some more games, unique in character and form in Manipur. There is *Mukna* (Wrestling) which is different in form and attire from general wrestling, and *Mukna Kangjei* (Wrestling-Hockey), exquisite and unique as players wrestle and play hockey at the same time. *Yubi-Lakpi* is a type of rugby where the ball is a coconut (*yubi*) and need to be snatched (*lakpa*) from the opponent. *Khong Kangjei* (Manipuri Hockey), *Ootanbi* (Catch-catch), *Hiyang Tannaba* (Boat race), *Arambai Hunba* (Dart shooting), *Thang-Ta*, martial arts with swords (*thang*) and spears (*ta*) are some of the indigenous games of Manipur worth mentioning that have still not lost its popularity. Another indigenous game is the ancient traditional game of *Kang* (an indoor game played by two teams with a flat tortoise shell or a seed of a certain tree) which is played by both men and women combined. Tradition of this game is still maintained in Manipur and annual *Kang* competitions are held all over Manipur.⁵⁸

Literature and Language

Manipuri language and literature depict cultural ethos, intellect and emotion of the people of the community. It also reflects the level of development of civilisation of the society. From very ancient times Meiteis had their own language (*Meiteilon*), script (*Meiteimayek*), literature and scriptures.⁵⁹ Manipuri language (*Meiteilon*), the official language of the state, is included in the Eighth Schedule of Indian Constitution. It is also the lingua-franca of all the tribes and various other people living in the state of Manipur. The script of language remained defunct for a long period. But in recent years, its revival has been carried out in earnest by the effort of enthusiastic preservers of Manipuri culture and tradition. Letters in alphabet reflect high philosophical meanings. Ancient scriptures such as *Wakoklen Thilel Salai Amailon Pukok*, *Sakok Lamlen Ahanba*, *Leithak Leikharol*, *Pakhangba Yanbi*, etc. deal with existence of all creatures, obscurity of life and death, genesis of universe and so on. These scriptures also specify in detail religious practices of old Meitei faith. These scriptures also allot the highest status and place to female deities.⁶⁰

Furthermore, all these scriptures denote high development of Meitei literature from early stages of existence. Going through Meitei literature which reflects the society and its development, one can easily grasp cultural ethos and traditional heritage of Manipuri society. This literature is normally classified into three segments or period—namely, ancient period (from early period to 7th century), medieval era (from 8th century to first quarter of 20th century) and modern age (from second quarter of 20th century onwards).

The ancient period of Meitei literature relates to the history of civilisation that ensued in Manipur. Many texts are in verse form, like *Ougri* (dealing with creation of universe), *Numit Kappa* (shooting Sun), *Panθοibi Khongul* (Footprints of *Panθοibi*, story of *Panθοibi*, divine mother), *Hijan Hirao* (dealing with nature), *Poreiton Khunthokpa* (migration of *Poreiton*), *Cheitharol Kumbaba* (royal chronicle beginning from the reign of king *Pakhangba* in 33CE), *Khongjom Nubi Nonggarol* (legend of six girl), *Leithak Leikharol* (story of creation of world), etc. The Manipuri language used in these writings is archaic.⁶¹

Medieval period witnessed a sudden rise in literary activities as the society went through major transformation on account of coming into contact with neighbouring regions and inroads of immigrants into Manipur. This brought about a significant shift in literature of that period. Influence of Bengali language and Bengali literature was pre-dominant during this period due to efforts of immigrant brahmins who were instrumental in the spread of Hinduism in Manipur. They affected the use of Bengali script for Manipuri language discarding their very own script which was in vogue till then. Books written in Meitei script were demolished to augment spread of Bengali language and literature. Education in Bengali medium became prevalent. Many devotional books were written in Bengali. Songs of *Kirtans* were composed in Bengali. Several books were also written in Manipuri with Bengali script such as *Samjok Ngamba*, *Takhe Ngamba*, *Ava Ngamba*, *Khagi Ngamba*, etc. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were also translated into Manipuri during that period.⁶²

Modern age in Meitei literature ushered in with the coming of drama, short story, lyric, novel, etc. in Manipuri. Many scholars contributed to the tremendous flourish of Manipuri literature. Some of them were Khwairakpam Chaoba, Hijam Anganghal, Dr. Kamal Singh, A. Minaketan, E. Nilkanta Singh, Kalachand Shastri, Pandit Atombapu Sharma, L. Somorendra Singh, N. Khelchandra, N. Kunjamohan, R.K. Shitaljit, etc.⁶³ The period also witnessed the writing of female writers like M.K. Binodini, P. Promodini Devi and T. Thoibi Devi who were pioneers among women writers. Later on, it were Sanjenbam Bhanumati, Moirangthem Borkanya, Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi, Ibemhal, Kh. Subadani, Sabita Bachaspati and others who initiated the new era of feminist poetry from the 1980s onwards. This period witnessed the advent of western education with its new concepts, philosophies and theories and their influence on literature of Manipur. So Manipuri literature of late has come of age and can be put at par with any other literature of any region.

Family, Kinship and Marriage

To trace the identity of a particular community of a region, knowledge of the structure of the society beginning with family, social formation or organisation of kinship and marriage norms become features of utmost necessity. Organisation of family and kinship will embody social, political and economic profile of any community, while

marriage norms will highlight customary rules and cultural traditions prevalent in any community. Consequent outcome of sought knowledge will bring into focus the level of development and growth the community has come across in course of time. It will definitely highlight richness in cultural history and heritage of that community. In this regard, Manipuri exhibit such family, kinship and marriage rules that stood the test of time and not changed much in due course prompting rich culture and tradition of their community.

Family

The Meitei or Manipuri, the dominant group in Manipur, belong to patrilineal as well as patriarchal society. Family of past is normally an extended or joint. Elder sons, after years of marriage, discontinue living together with natal household, build independent residence in the same family compound and live with their own family members. Only the youngest son inherits the main house and lives with his old parents. Unmarried daughters live with their parents till marriage. Since the society is primarily agrarian, brothers along with their womenfolk work in family agricultural fields. When they separate themselves from their parents' natal family, they are provided their share of agricultural fields, ponds and livestock.

Gender roles are clearly distinct and defined in the family. The eldest son of a *yumnak* or a *sagei* (family lineage) is called a *piba*.⁶⁴ He plays the most important role in family rituals and ceremonies. For that matter, a male child is most coveted for his indispensability in family and societal affairs. The society attributes a lot of preference to a male child. A son's role and responsibility can be observed in family's social and religious practices. For instance, son conducts funeral rites and *Shraddha* of parents, performs annual ancestor worship called *Pitritarpan*.⁶⁵ It is the father who conducts *Swasti Puja* at birth of his child and offers *Kanyadaan* at marriage of his daughter or sister. In the worship of *Sagei Apokpa* (Meitei ancestral deities) of *Sanamahi* cult, male members of family along with *piba* conduct ritual secretly at midnight with total absence of female members of the family. Daughters or women do not feature in all the above mentioned social and religious practices of both the Hindu and Meitei faiths. Those parents who have no sons can adopt a son-in-law, who takes up the family's responsibility in farming and other related labour. But he is not given any sanctions to conduct family rituals.

Nevertheless, a woman or a daughter is not always deprived or neglected as it seems to be and seen in other communities. She holds a high social status compared to women of other communities. Social customary traditions of Manipuri provide some legal and social sanctions to unmarried, widowed and divorced daughters. Unmarried daughters live with their parents and are given a share of family property. Even daughters who got married receive a share of family property as dowry or affinal transaction at the time of marriage from rich parents who can afford. In case of daughters who became widows at a young age or who got divorced, they are welcomed back to their parental homes and live with their children (if any). Daughters also inherit their mother's property and her own dowry which is normally returned after a divorce. Women's wealth or *Stridhan* includes her inherited wealth, her dowry and her own savings. In her parental homestead, she is given a plot of land to construct her own house to live in with her children.

The Manipuri society being traditional in many respects, family and value are more or less the same as in modern times too.

Kinship

Unlike other societies, Meitei maintains strict observance of kinship for any kind of societal matters and observation. Kinship comprises of *yek/salai* and *yumnak/sagei*. It has been in vogue in the state from time immemorial when there were small principalities identified with their own *yek* and *salai*. Later, during the regime of Pakhangba, first king of Manipur, kinship was made a system of the society, under some specified *sagei* with their original *yek* still being retained. Since then Meitei community has strictly followed social stratification according to kinship. Below is provided a cursory glance at each of this kinship system existing in Meitei community and society.

Yek/Salai

Meitei are a community constituting of seven clans usually called *yek* or *salai*.⁶⁶ Each *salai*/clan had originated from same ancestor. Identifying and worshipping ancestors called *Apokpa Khurumba* is a practice performed by each clan which is unique in style and conveys a mark of respect and reverence to their forefathers. Seven *salai* are given *gotra* nomenclature after Meitei adopted Hinduism and the seven *salai* with

their corresponding clan (*gotra*) are *Angom – Gautam, Ningthouja – Shandilya, Luwang – Kashyap, Khuman – Madhugalya, Moirang – AttreyaAngira, Khaba-Nganba – Bharadhwaj (Naimisa) and Chenglei (Sarang-Leisangthem) – Vasistha*.⁶⁷

In religious rituals of old Meitei cult, names are referred to only whereas in case of any religious rituals of Hindu faith, *gotra* are mentioned besides *salai* names. In times of antiquity, Meitei names include their particular *salai* names e.g. Moirang Thoibi, Khuman Khamba, etc., a practice which has been revived in recent times e.g. Chaoba Luwang, Iboyaima Angom, etc. The table below shows the seven *yek/salai* or clans with the corresponding *gotra* given after the adoption of Hinduism.

Table no.III.VI: Seven *salai* with their corresponding *gotra*

Sl. No.	<i>Yek/Salai/Clan</i>	<i>Gotra</i>
1.	<i>Angom</i>	<i>Gautam</i>
2.	<i>Ningthouja</i>	<i>Shandilya</i>
3.	<i>Luwang</i>	<i>Kashyap</i>
4.	<i>Khuman</i>	<i>Madhugalya</i>
5.	<i>Moirang</i>	<i>AttreyaAngira</i>
6.	<i>Khaba-Nganba</i>	<i>Bharadhwaj (Naimisa)</i>
7.	<i>Chenglei (Sarang-Leisangthem)</i>	<i>Vasistha</i>

Yumnak/Sagei

The *salai* or clan is a composite of several *sagei* or *yumnak* (family lineage name or surname). In the past all members of a particular *yumnak/sagei*, living or dead, could be traced through geneology records called ‘*Yumchangba Puya*’ or ‘*Paripuri*’. Any new birth or adoption was added to ‘*Paripuri*’. Nowadays, ‘*Paripuri*’ is not maintained and is not much in vogue; but ‘*Apokpa Khurumba*’ (worship of ancestors) is performed annually by each *yumnak*.⁶⁸

It is said that *yumnak* are created or organised from seven *salai* during the reign of Maharaj Loiyumba (*Meitei Khuttek Thapalon* 1074 CE). The *yumnak* names were generally based on certain characteristics depending on name or residence or nature/occupation of creator of *yumnak*. It also depends on titles conferred on *yumnak* member by the king or services rendered to the king by a *yumnak* member. It is sometimes based on any peculiar mannerism or characteristics of the creator.

When members of a *yumnak* become large in number and get spread over great distances, it creates difficulties in communication between members or maintaining regular contact to disseminate information about *yumnak* rituals. In such cases, a particular *yumnak* maybe sub-divided into segments called *sagei*. A *sagei* can also be formed when there may occur an exodus of *yumnak* members to some faraway place or region. *Yumnak* can also break up into *sagei* due to difference of opinion or factional rivalry. Whatsoever may be the reasons, newly formed *sagei* should maintain certain rules and regulations of the parent *yumnak*. A separate *Apokpa Laipham* (altar of clan ancestors) should be established, a *piba* (eldest living person) should be selected from among its members, *Apokpa Khurumba* should be organised and performed, and ‘*Paripuri*’ be maintained by a Pundit and preserved by the *piba*.⁶⁹

Earlier, those immigrants who settled in Manipur are allowed to marry Manipuri women and even adopt *yumnak* and *sagei* names under a *yek/salai*. The ones who received such assimilation are especially immigrant brahmins under the patronage of the king.

During recent time, to a layman, *yumnak* and *sagei* have become similar terms, often meaning the same and even replacing one for other. Difference lies in fact that *sagei* is a smaller composition and is identified by observance of rituals by the respective *piba* while the whole *yumnak* is not bound to do so.

Meitei used to address each other’s names with their particular *yumnak* or *sagei*. For instance, Laishram Sororendra, Hijam Irabot, Maisnam Mani, etc. Consequent upon the advent of Hinduism, they began to add post-positional terms as last names or surnames like Singha or Singh for males, Devi for females and Sharma for brahmins. Descendents of king used pre-positional terms like R.K. for Raj Kumar/ Raj Kumari and M.K. for Maharaj Kumar/ Maharaj Kumari.

Piba, Pibaren and Ningthou

Piba is segmental head of a *sagei*. The eldest living person of that segment if he conforms to all requisites of a *piba* is selected as a *piba* of that segment. He is responsible head and also according to customs and traditions, rituals and ceremonies should be notified to him for his approval to be observed. *Apokpa Khurumba* (worship of ancestors), *Sareng Chanaba* (feast with consumption of *Sareng* fish), *Sagei Chak*

Chanaba (sagei feast), etc. are some ceremonies that are initiated by *piba* of that *sagei* annually. He is also entrusted with judicial powers to reprimand any member of *sagei* who breaches any social or religious norm or norms.

The eldest living person of a particular *yumnak* is designated as *Pibaren*. He is chief of all *piba* of several *sagei* of the same *yumnak*. He is vested with more powers than *piba* and the execution of those powers is through *piba* of respective *sagei*. He is the one who maintains '*Paripuri*'. Of late, the office of *Pibaren* is defunct.

In past, a *Ningthou* is chief of a particular clan (*yek/salai*). He is normally selected by the king from amongst the seniormost members of a *yek/salai*. He is vested with a lot of official and religious powers. He is supposed to organise the clan's *Lai Haraoba* (amusement of deities), *Sareng Chanaba*, *Sagei Lathaba* (feast given for affiliation of a new member with *sagei*), *Apokpa Khurumba*, etc. through assistance of *Pibaren* and *Piba*. This tradition ensures power and prestige of *Ningthou* over social administration of his lineage members. Nowadays of course, this post is also defunct and non-existent.⁷⁰

Marriage

Arrange and ceremonial marriages are most popular and accepted marriage alliance in the Manipuri society. Nevertheless, being exogamous, the society does not allow marriage between same *yek/salai* or *gotra*. This restriction which seems to have originated from Hindu influence is losing its importance and stigma in recent times. After marriage, a bride lives in her husband's home. Though bride price seemed to have been prevalent in ancient and medieval times in a few cases, it is not so in recent times. Groom price is unheard of in customary laws of Meitei marriage. Dowry, as such, is not demanded according to Manipuri tradition; yet the trend of giving a lot of gifts in marriage is widely practiced.

Apart from socially arranged marriages, another form of marriage, *Chenba* (elopement) is very common and accepted by society. After elopement, the boy and the girl are separated and chaperoned till their families are informed; and if at least one of the families (especially boy's family) agrees, marriage is conducted in an elaborate way or otherwise.

Rites de passage

Relevant rites of passage, that is, birth, marriage and death rites of a particular community exhibit social custom, tradition, culture and religious bearings of that community. Ceremonial rites and rituals of Meitei community/ Manipuri society are an exposure of a tremendous influence Hinduism of Vaishnavite cult has on it. Though, presence of ancient Meitei practices in rites of passage cannot be totally ruled out. Today, the two practices have intermingled so much in performance of those rites of Meitei Hindus that it has become rather difficult to identify one from the other to a layman. Of course, those who follow Meiteism strictly practice only age-old specific Meitei rites even to this day. All rituals are performed by a Maiba or a Maibi.

As such, in introspection, we notice that most birth, marriage and death rituals are more inclined to religious norms of Vaishnavite cult. In case of births and deaths in a family, whole *sagei* observes *yum mangba* (social defilement) for a certain period of time followed by *yum sengba* (social sanctification) to be conducted by a brahmin priest (*Purohit*). For birth of a child, a *yum mangba* is observed for eleven day, for death of a child, a seven day observance is maintained and for death of an adult, a twelve day is compulsory. During this defilement period, no worship of deities of both religious cults is sanctioned by the whole *sagei*. Only after *yum sengba* is performed, worship of deities and observance of religious rites in and outside *sagei* are permitted to *sagei* members. Sanctification is valid only after *Purohit/ Pundit* for Meitei Hindus or Maiba for *Sanamahi Apokpa* followers has conducted its appropriate rituals.⁷¹

Birth rituals

Birth rituals in Manipuri society are based on norms of Vaishnavite Hindus along with some rites of old pre-Hindu Meitei faith. Conception period of woman is devoid of any restrictions imposed on her in regard to her diet. Would-be parents are barred from doing any activity that might have an adverse effect on child. A normal delivery of child in house is conducted by a midwife, usually a Maibi. On the sixth day, *Ipanthaba* ritual is performed for well-being of the child with *yum sengba* by a Maiba according to Meitei Apokpa faith. For Meitei Hindus, a *Swasti Puja* is performed for child where gifts in form of food, fruits, clothes, jewellery, etc. are given from

parental home of the mother. A maternal uncle of the child will ward off evil spirits on this day by shooting arrows in all directions. A grand feast is always followed for all relative and friends in both cults. *Yum sengba* for Meitei Hindus is conducted on twelfth day of birth of a child where the head of the child is normally shaved.⁷²

According to Meitei Hindus, *Chawumba* or *Annaprashan* (first feeding of solid food to a child) is performed after three to six months of birth of a child. The infant is offered *kheer* (rice cooked in milk and sugar) by mother or father or any close relation of the child. A lot of gifts are presented to the child. Parents thus organise grand feast for family, kinsmen and friends who are invited for the occasion.

The Meitei Sanamahi (Apokpa) followers also conduct this event wherein mother cooks food, initially offers it to *Ipuhou Pakhangba* (Grandfather Pakhangba), *Salai* ancestor and grandfather descended from *Salai* ancestor. Thus the offered food is then fed to a child.

Naahutpa is another ceremony wherein a child irrespective of its gender has its ear pierced for wearing gold or silver rings. Boys can remove these rings when they reach their age of puberty. Parents again organise a grand feast to celebrate such occasion.

Lugoon Thangba or sacred thread ceremony is a sort of initiation especially for boys in Manipuri society which never existed in pre-Hindu times. Before initiation ceremony, children are not subjected to any food restrictions. The ceremony comprises of wearing sacred thread (*Lugoon Thangba*) and of taking name of God (*Laiming Louba*) i.e. officially embracing Vaishnavite Hindu faith, which is a ceremony almost similar to christening ceremony of Christianity. Initiation ritual for girls is only *Laiming Louba* normally conducted before she reaches her puberty. For a Meitei boy there is no age restriction for this initiation ritual except that he is barred from performing any religious rites, even his own marriage, without taking initiation.⁷³

Marriage rituals

Marriage ceremonies in Manipuri community are more biased towards Hindu faith with some traditional practices being retained. Before actual marriage (*Luhongba*), there are certain preparatory stages. First is *Hainaba* where a boy's parents go to meet a girl's counterparts for a formal proposal with accompaniment of gifts such as fruits

and sweetmeats. In case the girl's family are willing, boy and girl's horoscopes are compared to ascertain if they match each other. If everything goes fine, elders of both sides set another date to discuss matters. *Yathang Thanaba* is next meet where girl's parents give their consent for marriage. *Waroi pot Puba* is the following development wherein groom's family visits bride's home with several items of food and engagement for marriage is settled.

Fourth stage is *Heijingpot Puba*, an elaborate function where engagement is proclaimed amongst family, relations and friends of both sides in bride's residence. A lot of foodstuffs are taken from groom's side including fruits, sweatmeats, betel leaf and nut, etc. carried in indigenous bamboo baskets by women. Food is distributed amongst the gathering and partaken after declaration of marriage. Some special items of foodstuff are offered to household deities of the bride. Over and above, on this day, a good number of bridal fineries in form of clothes, ornaments, personal care items, etc. are gifted to the bride. A day before wedding, a formal invitation for the bridegroom to the wedding termed as *Bor Barton Toubá* arrives from bride's residence. Usually a younger brother of the bride performs the ceremony by offering a garland alongwith gifts to the groom.

Normally wedding (*Luhongba*) is arranged in bride's place. A lot of guests are invited on her side. Bridgroom's congregation is no less and arrives with a musical band. He is received at the gate by his mother-in-law and some elderly women. He wears *dhoti*, *kurta*, *chaddar* and *turban* – all in spotless white. Grooms-man who attends on him is called a *Bor Sennaba*.

Bridal dress is exquisite *Rasleela* costume. She looks more like a doll in her wedding finery. The ceremony takes place in the courtyard around the sacred *tulsi* plant amidst Sankirtan performance. Whole ceremony is conducted by a brahmin priest/*Purohit*. After the bride is led by a female relative to the *mandali*, the father of bride performs *Kanyadaan* (formal giving of his daughter's hand in marriage). Subsequently, she circles round the groom seven times. At the end of each round, she offers flowers on the head of the groom. On the seventh round, she carries two garlands which she offers both by garlanding the groom. After she is seated by his side, he takes out one of the garlands and puts it around her neck. Thus the entire process of wedding concludes with blessings of elders of both sides. The tail end of their attires is tied to

each other and they are led into the house of the bride where betel leaf and nut and also sweets are exchanged between the newly-wedded couple.

After the ceremony, the bride is escorted to the groom's residence by her family, friends and relations. She is received at the gate by her mother-in law who ushers her into her new house. Her dowry consists of essential items to start a new life.

On the sixth day (after five nights) of a wedding, bride and groom and his family and relatives are invited to a grand feast in bride's residence called *Chakouba*. The bride's family, too, invite a good many guests on this feast. Presentation and gifts are presented to bride, and groom's party. Introduction and greetings of family and relations of each side are conducted for future acquaintance.⁷⁴

Death rituals

Disposal of dead by cremation is a development of Hinduism. In pre-Hindu times, dead were buried according to *puya* and chronicles. It was during reign of Maharaj Garib Niwaz when he adopted Hinduism that he proclaimed cremation of dead bodies. Since then death rituals are more Hinduised and performed with monitoring of brahmins.

A dying person is carried out of his house to the open front room and then to *Khangenpham* (courtyard) with a *Maiba/ Vaidya* by his side. He checks heart beat by placing his hand at the navel of dying person till the last breath of the person when he is declared dead by him. Later dead body is bathed, dressed in clean clothes before it is placed in a coffin and taken for cremation. Usually cremation is done by the side of a river or lake or family pond. Some men go ahead to cremation ground to prepare funeral pyre. Firewood and fire are carried from the house of deceased person. Funeral procession is conducted by a *Purohit* amidst accompaniment of Kirtan songs and beating drums. Relations and friends of deceased join procession. A son or a nearest relative of the dead person lights the funeral pyre by first moving round the pyre five times before kindling it. Other people follow suit. Women and children get back as soon as cremation begins while menfolk remain till the end. Ashes or a piece of bone (*asthi*) of cremated body is collected from pyre for future rituals. All people who have attended funeral take a dip in waters of a river, lake or pond to sanctify

themselves and while they return to their respective homes, they are greeted with fire, cow dung, etc. to purify themselves before entering their homes.

The son who lit the funeral pyre becomes *Kirathangba* (knife-holder) for rest of the day till *Shraddha* to ward evil spirits during such times of calamity in the family. On the fifth day of death, *Asthi Sanchay* ceremony or ritual of worship for the deceased with its ashes or *asthi* is performed amidst *Sankirtan*, incantation and invitees. Death ceremony or *Shraddha* is performed on 13th day for Meitei Kshatriya and on 11th day for Brahmin. On this day, chanting hymns, an elaborate Sankirtan programme followed with a feast of vegetarian dishes are conducted inviting many relatives and friends. *Dakshina* are distributed to invited guests by family of deceased. All male invitees come in white *dhoti*, *kurta* and shawl while women folk dress in peach *phanek* and white *innaphi* to mourn the dead. Later, ashes or *asthi* is kept in a secured place in the open front room till it is taken to holy places of Nabadwip, Vrindavan, Triveni or Haridwar where it is immersed in waters of the Ganges for the soul of the dead person to rise to heaven. First death anniversary called *Phiroi* is very important and is conducted in almost the same manner as *shraddha* was arranged.

For Meitei who follow Sanamahism, death rituals are performed by a Maiba. In that case dead body is cremated like Meitei Hindus. Fifth day ritual, *Asthi Sanchay* is not undergone by Meitei Apokpas. And funeral ceremony, rite of *Chupsa Moithen* is performed on the seventh day after death. *Phiroi*, first death anniversary is usually observed after completion of twelve months as the last rite of the deceased.⁷⁵

The above references of rites of passage of Manipuri truly reflect pre-dominance of Hindu rites and practices with retention of certain custom, tradition and social norms. Continued practice of pre-Hindu rites are observed by Maibas and Maibis. In fact co-existence of both the religious faith in total harmony is a unique feature of the socio-cultural trend of Manipuri society.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the profile of Manipuri community has been highlighted so as to get acquainted with the basic aspects of the community as well as to be aware of the prevalence of trends and tradition of the society. Vital features of ecological, historical, political, economic, socio-cultural, family, kinship and marriage, and rites

de passage are elucidated keeping in mind their relevance to the study in concern. Next chapter will concentrate on requisite aspects of Manipuri women and their relation to the society at large.