

CHAPTER - 7

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Religion plays a great contributory role in the society by giving a concrete foundation in the process of the establishment of unity, cohesiveness and moral discipline among the people. The religion of Manipur has two phases, pre-Vaishnavite phase and the Vaishnavite phase. In the period of pre-Vaishnavite phase, the Meiteis worshiped their traditional gods and goddesses. Their traditional religion is associated with their belief in Supreme Being, duality of sky God, ancestral deities and natural phenomena. It also includes the cult of *Pakhangba* and *Sanamahi*. The Meiteis followed their traditional religion throughout many centuries, and the *Lai-Haraoba*, one of the famous religious festivals is performed in accordance with the doctrine of their traditional religion. But, after conversion into the fold of Hinduism, they began to worship Hindu gods and goddesses, which had influenced the concept of origin and polity in the Manipuri society.¹ According to one mythological account, the Meiteis were the descendants of *Taibangpanba Mapu* (the supreme God). In the pre-Hindu period, *Tengbanba Mapu* represents the highest God who is believed to be the soul of the universe. His two descendents are *Sanamahi* and *Pakhangba*. *Sanamahi* was manifested as the authority of every house and he is the protector of every Meitei household.² *Pakhangba* is the ancestral deity of the royal family of Meiteis and the political authority of the state.³ It was under his rule that the seven clans formed the Meitei confederacy under the subjugation of *Ningthouja salai*. Therefore, he was considered as the first ancestor of the Meitei kings and the head of seven clans (*Mayum Taretki Piba*).⁴ *Pakhangba* was also venerated with the performance of a

number of rituals. In the traditional festival of *Lai Haraoba*, *Pakhangba* is worshipped along with a number of other ancestral deities.⁵ But, after the emergence of Hinduism, a new form of religion of Vaishnava worship gradually developed in Manipur.

In Manipur, the growth and development of Vaishnava worship so called Vaishnavism was manifested from the 15th century CE during the reign of king Kyamba (1467-1508 CE). However, the concept of Vaishnavism was emerged in Manipur through the immigration of various groups of people, especially the Brahmins from different parts of India in successive waves. The account of their arrival in Manipur was found in a book called *Bamon Khunthoklon* (migration of the Brahmins).⁶ In fact, the Brahmins played a very significant role in the religious life of the people of Manipur. Under the patronage of the kings of Manipur, they began to settle in almost all the locality of the valley and were employed by the kings in various religious affairs. The kings of Manipur paid much attention towards the religious matters and granted extensive donation of lands for the construction and maintenance of temples. It was due to the influence of Brahmins that the construction of icons of the Hindu gods and goddesses begun gradually which caused to the development of temples in the valley of Manipur.⁷ Thus, the immigration of Brahmins during the period of Kyamba may be regarded as a great landmark in the history of the development of Vaishnavism in Manipur. Another notable aspect of his reigning period was the beginning of the worship of Vishnu. Regarding the beginning of Vishnu worship in Manipur, it is recorded that the king Kyamba received a little stone image of Vishnu from the king of Pong after their victory over Kyang Kyambat.⁸ It is said that he built a temple at Bishnupur and the image of Vishnu was then installed in

this temple which later on, came to be known as Vishnu temple.⁹ Afterwards, the regular worship of Vishnu was begun in Manipur.

It is generally believed that there were three distinct stages through which the development of Vaishnavism passed in Manipur. The three cults, namely the Nimandi, Ramanandi and Goudiya penetrated into Manipur in different periods. The Manipuri king Charairongba (1698-1709 CE) was the first who formally initiated into Nimandi cult (worship of Krishna) by a Brahmin guru called Krishnacharya alias Rai Banamali.¹⁰ After that, the Nimandi cult became popular in Manipur with the construction of a Krishna temple at Brahmapur Guru Aribam Leikai in Imphal, the capital of Manipur. However, during the reign of Charairongba, the conversion to Vaishnavism was firstly confined to royal family members, but the king never neglects the worship of traditional deities.¹¹ It was under the fervent patronage of the celebrated Meitei king Pamheiba, later known as Garibniwaz that Ramanandi cult (worship of Rama) of Vaishnavism became the state religion. As a part of his conversion, king Garibniwaz took the sacred thread and it was then followed by his subjects. Thus, the whole socio-cultural and religious system underwent profound changes during his time. For the popularization of Ramanandi cult, the icons of Rama and Sita were installed by him in a temple known as Ramji Prabhu. He also carved out an icon of Hanuman in relief on a big slab of stone in 1729 CE and the icon was installed in a temple known as Mahabali temple. All these temples still draw a huge crowd of devotees on religious festivals. It is to be noted that with the dawn of 18th century CE, Manipur had totally changed her culture and society under the influence of Hinduism. It was actually a revolutionary era in which the followers of traditional religion were converted into Hinduism. Thus, this religious transformation greatly affected in changing the whole social and cultural prospects of Manipur.

As a result of the expansion of Hindu culture, all the Meiteis including members of royal family were declared as a *Kshatriya* class. Hinduism had made a considerable effect upon the rites of the passage of the Meiteis. The traditional social customs, rites and rituals of birth, death and marriage ceremonies were performed in accordance with the Hindu elements. The clan system was converted into Hindu gotras. The method of cremation was adopted and the system of *Sati* was also followed. However, the evil practice of *Sati* did not continue for long time in Manipur.¹² Due to the transformation of these social structures, Meitei society took a massive change in their way of life.

The influence of Hinduism in Manipur had transformed the contemporary social and religious system of the Meiteis. It is also mentioned that a number of traditional festivals were identified with Hindu festivals. For instance, *Heikru Hidongba* was renamed as Jal Yatra, and *Kongba Leithong Phatpa* as Vishnu Sankranti. Besides this, *Ahong Khongchingba* was known as Ratha-Yatra and *Waira Tenkap* as Ram Navami. *Kwak Tanba* was then substituted by Dusserah as well as *Chanou Hui Chintu* was replaced by Govardhan Puja.¹³ In this way, the pre Hindu festivals were thoroughly sanskritised during the period under study and were also modified to bring within the inclusive of Hindu fold. Apart from these, the Hinduised Meitei started to celebrate many Hindu religious festivals, like Holi, Janmashami, Durga Puja, Ratha-Yatra, Shivaratri, Saraswati Puja, Diwali, etc.

The development of Hinduism in Manipur resulted in a great literary progress which had witnessed during the 18th and 19th centuries CE. The Bengali script was adopted in place of archaic Meitei script. The local writers were also attracted towards producing those kinds of literature which mainly focused on Hindu religion and culture. The primary objective behind such kind of activities was to create awareness

among the Manipuri people about the accomplishment of the Hindu culture and consciousness for preserving and promoting the newly introduced Vaishnava form of Hinduism.¹⁴ The Manipuri literature proved to be a potent force for the propagation and popularization of the Hindu religion and culture among the masses. It may be mentioned here that through the process of sanskritisation, the devotional songs were sung in archaic Bengali and Sanskrit. The social outlook of the Meiteis also underwent tremendous changes due to the influences of Bengali language and literature. As a result, the people started not only to adopt Hindu names (especially Sanskrit and Bengali) but also used it in the names of localities, hills, rivers, etc. Moreover, they liked to use Bengali cloths, such as *dhotis*, *kurtas* and even the royalty had almost adopted the Bengali style with minimum ritualistic dresses and costumes. The mode of their changes is basically due to the influence of Hinduism. It thus, indicates that the Meiteis were not only the followers of Hindu culture but also the preserver of Sanskrit and Bengali culture.

In Manipur, the introduction of Hinduism also marked the beginning of a new age in the history of coinage. The king Charairongba and his successors issued coins bearing the legends in Sanskrit either in Devanagiri or in Bengali script. In the coins of bell metal, gold and silver, Sanskrit and Bengali words are used, and it usually bears eloquent testimony to the impact of Hinduism, especially on the designs, patterns and styles of the coins.¹⁵

Hinduism gained a stronger hold and got consolidated under the hectic mobilization of king Bheigyachandra. During his reign in 1776 CE, he installed the image of Shri Govindaji which is made of a jackfruit tree. The reign of Bheigyachandra not only showed the emergence of a new syncretic religion but also introduced a new form of dance, music and song. It is important to note that the world

famous dance popularly known as Ras dance of Manipur was introduced during his reign. The concept of *Kirtan* usually sung by the followers of Vaishnavism was also developed extensively in the Manipuri society. All these developments generally took place in the course of expansion of Hindu culture in the valley of Manipur.

The adoption of Hinduism by the Manipuri people provided an impetus to the construction of many temples in Manipur. In the construction of temples, the Hindu style of architecture was adopted. Temples of Lord Rama, Hanuman, Radha-Krishna, Govindaji, Kali and other Hindu gods and goddesses were constructed in different styles of architecture alike to Bengal hut type, *Nagara* style, Indo-Islamic style, etc. All these temples however, became the main center of worship of Manipuri Vaishnavites. Therefore, the existence of these temples indicates that the rulers of Manipur were the devout of Hinduism.

In Manipur, Hinduism in the form of Vishnu worship had a far-reaching impact on the contemporary society, indigenous religion and culture of the Meities. With the adoption of Hindu religion, the socio-cultural and religious life of the Meiteis was totally adapted into the Hindu way of life. However, the popularity of Radha-Krishna cult in Manipur was the outcome of Hinduisation process. Thus, the worship of Radha-Krishna cult is widely prevalent in the valley of Manipur and it still upholds its popularity.

Notes and References

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