

## **ABSTRACT**

### **RADHA-KRISHNA CULT IN MANIPUR**

#### **A Historical Study (15<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century CE)**

An abstract of the thesis submitted to Assam University in partial  
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# **Radha-Krishna Cult in Manipur**

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### **Introduction**

Radha-Krishna Cult is one of the primary religion of Manipur and an aspect of Vaishnavism. In Vaishnavism, Vishnu is regarded as the supreme God. All Vaishnava traditions recognize the worship of Vishnu or his avatars, mainly as Rama and Krishna, who are the supreme Gods. However the Hindus believe that all Gods are avatars or manifestations of Brahma, the Supreme Being. But their beliefs and practices signify that the concept of Bhakti and Bhakti Yoga are primarily based on the Upanishads, and are also associated with the Vedas and Puranic texts, such as the Bhagavad Gita, Vishnu Purana, Padma Purana, Bhagavata Purana, etc. According to Indian mythology, Shri Krishna incarnated in each *Yug* (every 1000 years) and played different roles that charmed even the devils as well as the living beings of the universe.

The development of Vaishnavism in Manipur was manifested from the fifteen century during the reign of king Kyamba (1467-1508 CE). The concept of Vaishnavism began in Manipur with the gradual penetration of Brahmins from the other areas of mainland India. The account of their arrival in Manipur was found in a book called *Bamon Khunthoklon* (migration of the Brahmins). They were given shelter and patronized by the kings of Manipur and began to play a major role in the socio-cultural life of the Meiteis. Their migration in Manipur was considered as a root of developing Vaishnavism in Manipur. The worship of Vishnu was begun in Manipur during the reign of king Kyamba, but he was not formally initiated into Vaishnavism. However, the reign of Kyamba was regarded as not only the immigration of Brahmins to Manipur but also the beginning of Vishnu worship. Initially the influence of Vaishnavism was limited and

confined to a section of the royal family. Although the worship of Vishnu was initiated, but the kings of Manipur were not converted Vaishnavism till the reign of Charairongba (1697-1709 CE). However, the beginning of the practice of worshipping Vishnu marked as a growth and development of Vaishnavism in Manipur. The successive rulers of Kyamba continued to worship of Vishnu or his incarnation viz., Rama and Krishna as royal deity.

### **Objectives**

The study of the topic aims to explore the evolution of Radha-Krishna Cult in Manipur, to bring into light the impact of Radha-Krishna Cult in the socio-cultural life of the Meiteis and to study the influence of Radha-Krishna Cult in art and architecture of Manipur.

### **Methodology**

The study is based on records of primary and secondary sources, field study and interviews. The primary sources are entirely dependent on the ancient literature such as, manuscripts and archival materials. The secondary sources mainly consist of relevant books, research papers and journals etc.

So far as the methodology that had been adopted in preparing the research work is concerned, both analytical and empirical method is basically followed and generally used.

### **ORGANISATION OF CHAPTERS**

The study is divided into following respective chapters-

**Chapter 1:** Introduction

**Chapter 2:** Historical Geography and Socio-Religious background of Manipur

**Chapter 3:** Political history of Manipur from earliest period upto 19<sup>th</sup> century

**Chapter 4:** Evolution of Radha-Krishna Cult in Manipur

**Chapter 5:** Impact of Radha-Krishna Cult in socio-cultural life of the Meiteis

**Chapter 6:** Radha-Krishna Cult and its changes of movement in the field of art  
and architecture

**Chapter 7:** Conclusion

## **Summary of the Chapters**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The small native state Manipur lies in the north eastern corner of India. It lies between latitude 23.50° and 25.30° north and longitude 93.10° and 94.30° east. The total geographical area of the state is 22,327sq.kms. The state of Manipur is bounded on the east by Burma, on the west by Assam, on the north by Nagaland and on the south by Burma. The literally meaning of Manipur is “city or the land of gems”. According to *Sanamahi Laikan* (a historical text of Manipur), reveals that the name Manipur was first introduced during the period of king Garibniwaz. According to Pemberton, in the past Manipur was known by various names to her neighbours, such as, “*kathe*” to the Burmese, “*Monglai*” to the Bengalees, “*Meklee*” to the Assamese, “*Monglie*” to the Cacharies, and “*Cassey*” to the Shans. But the indigenous names of Manipur are “*Poireipak*” or “*Kangleipak*” or “*Meitrabak*”. Geographically the land of Manipur is divided into two parts viz., the valley and the hill. The hills are occupied by the different tribes and the Meiteis inhabited in the valley surrounded by ranges of hills.

### **Chapter II: Historical Geography and Socio-Religious background of Manipur**

Manipur, the ancient kingdom of north eastern India which had enjoyed a rich and long historical tradition with her own distinctive cultural and separate political identity. In

Manipur, there are three major ethnic groups, namely the Meiteis, the Nagas and Kuki-Chins. The Meities are inhabitants of the valley, and the Nagas and Kuki-Chins dwell in the surrounding hills. According to McCulloch, Manipuris are a conglomeration of several distinct tribes. There are various ethnic groups inhabited in the valley and periphery areas of Manipur, namely *Mangang, Luwang, Moirang, Khabas, Nganbas, Sarang Leisangthem, Angom, Haorok Konthou, Heirem Khunjam, Lera Khonganang, Thanga Lambong, Urok Ushai, Haokha Lokha, Ningol Laiton, Phantek, Chakpa* etc. But all these ethnic groups were merged with each other and subsequently the seven ethnic groups were formed in the Manipur valley. These seven groups were namely, *Ningthouja, Angom, Khuman, Kha-Nganba, Moirang, Luwang, and Sarang-Leisangthem* and these groups were socially organized into clans.

These seven principalities or groups again underwent an age long struggle amongst themselves for protecting their respective territorial boundaries but ultimately Ningthouja subdued all the others. After that, the name Meitei is invariably applied to all the seven clans who are the inhabitants of Manipur valley Nongda Lairen Pakhangba of Ningthouja dynasty ascended the throne of Kangla in 33 CE marked the evolution of Meitei polity. Since the accession of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba to the throne of Kangla, the process of political and cultural absorption of other groups had been performed in successive periods. Nongda Lairen Pakhangba was the first king paved the way for the unification of the state.

The growth of the power and authority of a king was associated with the expansion of territory. The Meitei political system had the elements of clan structure in which father was the family head and there were heads of the lineages and clans. Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, founder of Ningthouja clan himself was the *Pibaren* (head) of the clan as well as of Kangla. The Meiteis as distinct social groups had formed their identity in the

Manipur valley. They had their own culture, language and religion, which have its own myths and legends, God and Goddesses, priest and priestesses, ritual and festivals etc.

As far as the religion of Manipur is concerned, generally it has two phases- Pre-Vaishnavite and Vaishnavite Phase. In the pre-Vaishnavite phase, the Meiteis followed their traditional religion throughout many centuries. In the mythology of Manipur, *Atiya Guru Sidaba* existed before the creation of universe. In their traditional religion, they worshiped their own indigenous gods and goddesses and natural objects. Their system of worship was ancestor worship and the cult of *Sanamahi* and *Pakhangba* (both are the descendents of *Atiya Guru Sidaba*). The Meiteis also worshipped many *Umanglais* (sylvan deities) and their ancestors. In the pre-Vaishnavite phase, the most important religious festival is *Lai Haraoba* (merry making of gods and goddesses). The community festival of *Lai Haraoba* is supposed to strengthen the gods and make him more capable of helping the worshippers. Mostly this festival is performed during the months of April/May. In the Vaishnavite phase, the Meiteis began to worship the Hindu Gods and Goddesses and gradually the Meitei culture was converted into a Vaishnavite culture. Thus, after the dawn of Vaishnavism, a new form of religion was gradually developed in Manipur.

### **Chapter III: Political history of Manipur from earliest period upto 19<sup>th</sup> century**

The state of Manipur existed as an independent kingdom. Nongda Lairen Pakhangba was the first historical ruler of the Ningthouja dynasty began to rule in Manipur from 33 CE at Kangla and his successors ruled upto 19<sup>th</sup> century CE. The military expansion of the Meitei state to the surrounding hills and the conquest of Kabaw valley in upper Burma in 1471 CE made the kingdom a multiethnic state dominated by the Meiteis and their monarchs. The repeated wars and conquests against the

neighbouring kingdoms particularly Burma which tried to eliminate the state and nation aroused a strong feeling of nationalism among the Meiteis. With the foundation of the Ningthouja dynasty, the political and social development of the Meiteis was centered on the ruling dynasty.

#### **Chapter 4: Evolution of Radha-Krishna Cult in Manipur**

Vaishnavism in the form of Radha-Krishna cult became one of the primary religion of Manipur. The word Vaishnavism is to embody the cult of Lord Vishnu. In India, the history of Vaishnavism can be traced right back to the Vedic period. Vaishnavism is a form of monotheism, for it sets aside the original triune equality of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar in favour of one God Vishnu. The main feature of Vaishnavism was the worship of all incarnations of Vishnu or his primary manifestation particularly Lord Rama and Krishna. In the post-Gupta period, the influence of Vaishnavism was very much developed in south India by the Vaishnava saints popularly known as Alvars. The Alvars devoted to the Vaishnava religion and composed several devotional songs in Tamil language mostly in the praise of either Lord Vishnu or his incarnations. In this way, Vaishnavism was flourished in Southern India due to the measures of Alvar saints who gave the messages of Vaishnavism to the native people through their devotional hymns. The temples where the Alvar saints made visits are known as *Divya Desams* and their hymns are collectively known as *Divya Prabandhas*. This task was done by the saints, namely Nathamuni, Ramanuja and Yamunacharya. It is stated that, from the South the flame of Bhakti movement reached to the north. North India had also move up the popularity of Vaishnavism through Vaishnava movements under the venerated luminaries, like, Nimbarka, Ramananda, Kabir, Vallabha, Nanak and Chaitanya from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century CE. The teachings of Vaishnavism have been found in the Vedas, Upanishads, Epics and the Puranic text. All these text contained the material

supporting the tenets of Vaishnavism. Gradually the practices of Vaishnava increased in popularity due to the influence of Bhakti movement.

In Manipur, the development of Vaishnavism was manifested from the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE with the migration of various groups of people, especially the Brahmins came from different parts of India in successive waves began during the reign of king Kyamba (1467-1508 CE). Under the support of the king, they were matrimonially and linguistically absorbed into the Meitei society. Then, gradually they played an important role in the religious affairs of the state especially in the performance of rites and rituals and they also began to build images of Hindu deities. They made efforts in explaining to the king and the people about the importance of the rites and philosophy of Vaishnavism. The period of Kyamba was considered not only the immigration of Brahmins in Manipur but also the beginning of worship of Vishnu. There is a story favourable with the beginning of Vishnu worship in Manipur. Thangwan Ningthouba, (erstwhile name of Kyamba) and Chaopha Khekhomba, king of Pong, conquered Kyang Kyambat (a Shan kingdom in Kabaw Valley) with a combine force and they became victory. As a part of their celebration of victory they exchanged presents and one of the presents received from the pong king was a little stone image of Vishnu. It is said that, king Kyamba built a Vishnu temple at Lammangdong and the image was installed in this temple. Thereafter, the Lammangdong came to be known as Bishnupur (abode of Vishnu). From that period the worship of Vishnu was began in Manipur. Although the worship of Vishnu was initiated, but the kings of Manipur were not converted Vaishnavism till the reign of reign of Charairongba (1697-1709 CE). Initially the influence of Vaishnavism was limited and confined to a section of the royal family.

There are various stages in the development of Vaishnavism in Manipur generally between the periods from 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century CE. Different schools of Vaishnavism viz,



Nimandi, Ramanandi and Goudiya Vaishnavism entered in different phases each displacing its predecessor in the favour of the ruling monarch. In the religious history of Manipur, Charairongba (1697-1709 CE), was the first king of Manipur who formally initiated into Nimandi cult of Vaishnavism by guru Krishnacharya. The school of Vaishnavism which the king baptized was the worship of Lord Krishna as the supreme deity along with Radha established by Nimbarka and the name of the cult was called Nimandi or Nimbarka School. Gangumei Kabui quoted that, “the reign of Charairongba is a turning point in the history of Manipur. Manipur’s contact with different parts of India became greatly strengthened after his conversion into Vaishnavism.” Charairongba and his family were initiated into this cult, but little progress was made among the common people.

After king Charairongba, the reign of Garibniwaz (1709 – 1748 CE) was marked as the arrival of Ramanandi cult (worship of Ram). During his reign, Shantidas Goswami, a Vaishnava preacher came to Manipur and he annihilated the king with his subjects into Ramanandi cult and accordingly king Garibniwaz was also initiated into this sect in the year 1728 CE and the Ramanandi cult replaced that of Nimbarka. Thus king Garibniwaz proclaimed the Ramanandi cult as the state religion and strong measures were taken to impose it upon the masses. He tried to suppress the primitive religion and strong measures were taken to promote the Ramanandi cult and punishment was given to those who refused to accept it. Apart from this, he made an attempt to destroy all the important sites and areas of traditional religion and replaced it by Hindu names.

Another event during the reign of Garibniwaz was the burning of *puyas* (the ancient text written in old Manipuri language) dealing with a miscellany of subjects. He was a religious frenzy and collected all those manuscripts called *puyas* burnt up by the king with the advice of Shantidas Goswami. During his reign, the images of Rama and

Sita were installed in a temple known as Ramji Prabhu temple built by king Garibniwaz near the big pond called Ningthem *Pukhri*. In 1729 CE, an image of Hanuman was carved out of a big slab of stone and installed in a temple constructed by him known as Mahabali temple.

Finally in the second quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, another school of Vaishnavism known as Gaudiya Vaishnavism (Krishna cult) percolated through Manipur under the patronage of king Bheigyachandra (1759-1798 CE). When Bheigyachandra adopted Gaudiya Vaishnavism as a state religion, its popularity extends to all over his kingdom. Owing to the gradual expansion of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Radha-Krishna cult became the dominant form of religion in Manipur. Thus, the three distinct schools of Vaishnavism appeared in Manipur during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, each displacing its predecessor in the support of the ruling monarch.

#### **Chapter 5: Impact of Radha-Krishna Cult in socio-cultural life of the Meiteis**

The main aspect of socio-cultural change in the history of Manipur was the influence of external forces i.e. the influence of Vaishnavism and sanskritisation process. Religion played a vital role in bringing about the socio-cultural change in Manipur. Manipur from the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE, worship of Vishnu was begun during the reign of king Kyamba by constructing a Vishnu temple at Bishnupur. However it should be noted that the worship of Vishnu received under the patronage of king Kyamba, but the fact remains that it was confined only to the royal family and no Meitei king was yet formally initiated into the Vaishnavism till we come across king Charairongba (1697-1709 CE). Though, the influence of Vaishnavism in Meitei society occupied a place under the successive rulers of Manipur.

The reign of king Charairongba (1697-1709 CE) was a transitional period from traditional to Vaishnavite faith. Charairongba was the first Manipuri king who was not only initiated into Vaishnavism but also given a Sanskrit name, Pitamber Singh, heralding the first significant evidence of Sanskritisation. In order to popularize the cult of Shri Krishna, he constructed a Krishna temple at Brahmapur Guru Aribam Leikai, Imphal in 1707 CE and dedicated to Lord Krishna.

The reign of king Garibniwaz was a turning point in the history of Manipur which really marked the opening of a new era in the socio-religious history of Manipur. After the declaration of Ramanandi cult as a state religion, the traditional religion was totally over lapsed by the newly adopted one. Major socio-religious changes took place during his reign. Therefore, the reign of king Garibniwaza was the most important period for two reasons. At first, his religious policy had produced a death-blow to the traditional religious practices and secondly, it laid the basic foundation for complete transformation of the social life of the people under the influence of the Hindu way of life. During his reign, the seven *salais*/clans of the Meiteis were identified into respective Hindu gotras. *Sanamahi Laikan*, a religious text of Manipur recorded the introduction of gotras and their identification with the *salais* in the Meitei society is mentioned below

<i>Yek/Salai</i>	Gotras
Ningthouja/Mangang	Shandilya
Luwang	Kashyap
Khuman	Madhugalya
Angom	Kaushika
Moirang	Atreya/Angiras
Kha-Nganba	Goutam
Sarang-leisangthem	Bhardwaj

The Brahmin priests used these gotra during the life cycle rites and rituals associated with the various stages of life like, birth, death and marriage ceremonies. In the birth ceremony of a newly born child was greeted by the society with certain rites and rituals. On the sixth day the solemn rites of *Tarukni Ipan Thaba* was held. But the traditional name of '*Tarukni Ipan Thaba*' was replaced by the Sanskrit word '*Swasthi Puja*'. Garibniwaz was the first king of Manipur who introduced the cremation system. It also became the symbol of social change in Meitei Society. In the marriage ceremonies, the restrictions imposed on marriage between the families of same gotra or *salai* was evidently the impact of Vaishnavism. In the reign of king Garibniwaz, a number of traditional Manipuri festivals were modified and identified with concurrent Hindu festivals. Moreover most of the traditional festivals were given Hindu names. The notable of which are the annual boat race festival, traditionally known as *Heigru-Hidongba* regularly held in the month of *Hiyangei* (November) was renamed as Jal-Yatra. The traditional festival of *Ayang Yoiren Iruppa* (mass holy dip in the *Lilong Sahoupat*) in the month of *Wakching* (January) was came to be known as Snan-Yatra. The festival of *Waira Tenkap*, traditionally held in the month of *Phairen* (February) was redesigned as "Kirtan of Lord Ram". *Kongba Leithong Phatpa*, another traditional festival usually held in the month of *Sajibu* (April) was reidentified with Vishnu Sankranti. The regular festival of *Ahong Khongching*, then usually held in the month of *Ingel* (June/July) was substituted by Ratha-Yatra The regular worship of *Nung-oibi* in the month of *Mera* (October) was substituted by Kwak-tanba or Dussereh. Tasting of newly harvested rice known as *Chanou Huichintu* held in the month of *Langban* (October) was replaced by Govardhan Puja.

The influence of Vaishnavism reached its zenith during the reign of king Bheigyachandra. In his reign building of separate temples for Lord Krishna and making it a place of sanctum-sanctorum was introduced. He introduced the famous Ras dance on

the occasion of the installation ceremony of Shri Govindaji at Langthabal capital. Ras dance has grown in stature and popularity throughout the country and became one of the best known schools of dance forms of India. Bheigyachandra also introduced a new style of *kirtan* singing known as the *Nata Sankirtana*. Since the time of king Bheigyachandra, *Nata Sankirtana* has become an integral part of the social and religious life of the Meiteis. During his reign a new inspiration was given to the artistic culture and tradition of Manipur. Therefore from the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards, the Manipuri culture was totally converted into a vaishnavite culture and many Hindu festivals began to observe in Manipur like, Janmashami, Ratha-Yatra, Durga Puja, Diwali etc.

## **Chapter 6: Radha-Krishna Cult and its changes of movement in the field of art and architecture**

The historical development of the temple in Manipur can be traced back from the early period with the help of archaeological evidence, literary sources, oral tradition etc. The temple constructed in the early period were perishable materials like bamboo, wood, thatch etc. these materials were easily destroyed by natural forces. The earliest Manipuri literature mentioned about the construction of numerous temples for the sylvan Gods (*Umanglais*). Accordingly those temples constructed in the early period with the help of these perishable materials were not able to survive for a long period. To the Hindu the temple is the abode of God who is the spirit eminent in the universe. The classification of Indian temple architecture is generally based on regional variation and the shape or stylistic differences as *Nagara*, *Dravida* and *Vesara* styles.

The adoption of Vaishnavism in Manipur as a state religion opens a new chapter in the history of temple architecture. There is no record of construction of Hindu temples in Manipur before 15<sup>th</sup> century CE. Though there are numerous temples for the sylvan

Gods (*Umanglais*). But from the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards, there was a proliferation of Hindu temples and all kings patronized temples. Temple played a conspicuous role in constructing the religious culture of the society, which existed generally in relation with its developed ritualistic aspects.

Manipur in the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE is noticeable for the arrival of a number of immigrants mostly the Brahmins and they began to settle in the valley of Manipur. Many lands were granted by the king for the construction and maintenance of temples (*Lairou*) known as *Devalaya*. The Brahmins used to construct temples in the granted land and began to practice their own culture. They contributed for the growth and development of new styles of temple architecture in Manipur. During the reign of king Kyamba, Vishnu temple was constructed at Bishnupur. So, it was during his reign that Vishnu worship was began in Manipur. The Vishnu temple occupies a symbol of the relics of ancient times. The architectural style of this temple is very much akin to that of style of the South East Asian temple architecture.

During the reign of king Charairongba, he constructed a temple known as the temple of Lord Krishna at Brahmaipur Guru Aribam Leikai, Imphal in honour of his guru Krishnacharya who formally initiated into Hinduism. In this temple different icon of Lord Krishna is depicting from his childhood to adult stage. The inflection of the icons is made in a very artistic way. The architectural style of the temple is similarity with Bengal hut type.

With the development of Ramanandi cult during the reign of king Garibniwaz, the popularity of Ram, Sita and Hanuman developed in Manipur. Temple of Ramji Prabhu was constructed near a pond called *Ningthem Pukhri* (*Ningthem* pond) at Wangkhei. He also constructed a temple of Hanuman Thakur, which is located on the eastern bank of the

Imphal river. The area where the temple is situated is known as *Mongbahanba*. The sculpture of Hanuman has been shown in human form in full size in dancing posture, wearing a dhoti in a typical Hindu priest style. The architectural style of the temple is similarity with Bengal hut type. These temples are in a very good shape and still draw a huge crowd of devotees on religious festivals like holi, Janmasthan and Radhashtami, etc.

Shri Govindajee temple of old palace Kangla, constructed during the reign of king Nara Singh in 1846 CE. The temple is situated in the old Kangla fort and collapsed in 1868 CE, due to an earthquake. Again, the temple was reconstructed in 1869 CE by Maharaja Chandrakirti. The temple is not in use now; the image of Shri Govindaji has been shifted to the new Govindaji temple near the Manipur palace. The temple is an amalgamation of Bengal architectural style and Indo-Islamic architecture. The flat roof and rounded pillars of the porch is a replica of late medieval temple style of Bengal. The dome, the decoration of the railings and flower decoration on the surface of the exterior wall show some influence of Islamic architecture of medieval period.

Shri Govindajee temple of new palace is the biggest, magnificent and most popular temple of Manipur constructed during the reign of Maharaj Churachand. It enshrined the royal deity Shri Govindajee which shifted from the old Govindaji temple of Kangla fort. The main deity of Govindajee with Radha is placed in the central chamber, Jaganath, Sibhadra and Balabhadra in the extreme northern chamber and Balabhadra and Krishna in the extreme southern chamber. The chambers are nicely maintained. The front arcades are provided with curtains. The architectural style of this temple is the mixed styles of Nagara and Indo-Islamic architecture. Therefore, the coming of Vaishnavism in Manipur opens a new chapter in the history of temple architecture. Thus all these temples

still draw a huge crowd of devotees on religious festivals in every year for religious congregation.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

Manipur, a small state lies in the north eastern part of India. During the reign of Garibniwaz, i.e, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, the name Manipur was first officially introduced. Manipuris are a conglomeration of several distinct tribes. Before the establishment of the Ningthouja dynasty at Kangla, there were various ethnic groups inhabited in the valley and periphery areas of Manipur. But all these ethnic groups were merged with each other and subsequently the seven ethnic groups were formed in the Manipur valley. These seven groups were namely, Ningthouja, Angom, Khuman, Kha-Nganba, Moirang, Luwang, and Sarang-Leisangthem and these groups were socially organized into clans. Nongda Lairen Pakhangba was the chief of the seven clans. Besides these every clan has their own chief. Generally the religion of Manipur has two phases- pre-Vaishnavite and Vaishnavite phase. In the period of pre-vaishnavite phase, the Manipuris worshiped their traditional gods and goddesses. They also worshipped the Natural objects also. In the Vaishnavite phase, they began to worship the Hindu gods and goddesses.

In Manipur, the growth and development of Vaishnava worship so called Vaishnavism was manifested from the 15<sup>th</sup> 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. The account of their arrival in Manipur was found in a book called *Bamon Khunthoklon* (migration of the Brahmins). In fact, the Brahmins played a very significant role in the religious life of the people of 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 said that the king Kyamba received a little stone image of Vishnu from the king of Pong after their victory over Kyang Kyambat. It is said that he built a temple at Lammangdong and the image of Vishnu was installed in this temple which is came to be known as Vishnu temple. Afterwards, the regular worship of Vishnu was begun in Manipur.

The successive rulers of Kyamba also continued to worship of Vishnu as royal deity. Regarding this, Gangumei Kabui quoted, “since the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE, Vishnu worship was patronized by the king of Manipur.” Initially the influence of Hindu ideas was limited and confined to a section of the royal family. Though, the influence of Vaishnavism adopted by the Meitei society occupied a place under the successive rulers of Manipur.

Different schools of Vaishnavism developed in Manipur from 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, viz., Nimandi, Ramanandi and Goudiya Vaishnavism in different phases. Nimandi School developed during king Charairongba’s reign. Charairongba (1697-1709 CE), was the first king of Manipur who formally initiated into Nimandi cult (worship of Krishna along with Radha) of Vaishnavism but also given a Sanskrit name Pitambar Singh. Despite his conversion to Vaishnavism, he did not totally break from the traditional religion and never attempted to impose the new religion upon his subjects. However, the traditional religion and the Meitei society were totally abolished during the period of king Garibniwaz. After initiation into Ramanandi cult, (worship of Ram) he declared it as a state religion. The declaration of Vaishnavism as the state religion by the king marked the opening of a new chapter in the religious history of Medieval Manipur. He destroyed the images and temples of many traditional deities, and buried in the forest of *Mongbahanba* (now called Mahabali). In pursuit of his religious orthodoxy, a number of local *puyas* (ancient text) were burnt to ashes. There was of course substantial progress in the field of

adoption of Vaishnavism but on the other hand, the king faced opposition from the votaries of indigenous religion. In fact, during the period of king Garibniwaz, the position of Vaishnavism in Manipur was very progressive.

During the reign of King Bheigyachandra, Goudiya Vaishnavism developed in Manipur. In the Goudiya Vaishnavism, Lord Krishna was regarded as the supreme God along with Radha. The zenith of Vaishnavite glory had been achieved during the reign of Bheigyachandra who constructed the sacred image of Govindaji in 1780 CE and through his dream he composed the Ras dance which is the highest spiritual expression of Krishna worship in the form of dance in the land of the aesthetic Meities. The religious system prevailing during his time was more or less a synthesis of religious beliefs of the Hindus and age-old traditional religious beliefs or a syncretism of old and new faiths. The system prevailing today in Manipur valley can be taken as a legacy of syncretized form of Hinduism that evolved during his time. Vaishnavism made further progress under the great kings like Gambhir Singh (1825-1835 CE) and his son Chandrakirti Singh who ruled upto 19th century CE.

The influence of Vaishnavism had far reaching consequence on the socio-religious life of the Meiteis. When the Ramanandi cult was declared as a state religion, during the reign of king Garibniwaz, Meiteis were declared as *Kshatriyas*. The Meitei dynasty was equated with the Shri Ramachandra's "*Surya Vansa*" or solar dynasty. The seven clans of the Meiteis had been consigned the Hindu gotras. In addition to this, the Meiteis began to observe those Hindu festivals like, Janmasthan, Holi, Ratha-Yatra, Diwali and Durga Puja etc. Many traditional festivals which were prevalent from olden days were given Hindu names. Along with the replacement of all the festivals, various other changes also appeared in the Meitei culture due to the cultural contact with the mainland India, which was regularly established through pilgrimages in the Hindu holy places. The practice of

merging the forehead bones/funeral ash of the cremated person in the river Ganga was also followed. So, the practice of Ganga pilgrimage among the Meiteis is still practiced.

With the acceptance of Vaishnavism, *Kirtan* singing became popular in Manipuri society. To the Manipuris, the *Kirtan* is neither an entertainment nor an art form, but the highest form of surrender, worship and ecstatic prayer enabling the devotees to have a direct association with Shri Krishna. Therefore, the *Nata Sankirtana* has become an integral part of the social and religious life of the Manipuris. It may be mentioned that Manipur made significant progress in the literary development in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century CE. The Meitei script was totally replaced by the Bengali script. Hence, the Meitei society was totally converted into a vaishnavite culture and the deep-rooted Vaishnavism still remain to be the major religion of this land.

With the rise and progress of Vaishnavism, provided an impetus to the construction of temples, a new Hindu style of architecture was adopted Manipur from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century, many temples were constructed i.e., Vishnu temple built during the reign of king Kyamba. This is one of the oldest Hindu temples in Manipur. During Charairongba's reign also, the Krishna temple was constructed. The architectural style of Krishna temple was quite similar with the Char Chala type of Bengal. The temples of Ramaji Prabhu and Mahabali were constructed during the period of king Garibniwaza. The Hanuman temple of Mahabali also bears the resemblance to hut type temples of contemporary Bengal. In the reign of king Bheigyachandra, idols worship became very popular in Manipur. The architectural style of Hindu temples in Manipur was greatly influenced by the Bengal hut type, Nagara style (north Indian style) and Indo-Islamic Style. Hence, all these temples are the main center of religious congregation existing today in Manipur valley.

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