

# **CHAPTER-1**

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Manipur, a small native state lies in the extreme north eastern corner of India, preserves a religion rich in mythology and colourful in rituals.<sup>1</sup> It lies between latitude 23.50° and 25.30° north and longitude 93.10° and 94.30° east. At present, the total geographical area of the state is 22,327 sq. kms. The state of Manipur is bounded on the north by Nagaland, on the west by Cachar district of Assam, on the east by Burma and on the South by Mizoram and Myanmar.<sup>2</sup> Geographically the land is divided into the hills and valley. Generally, the hilly areas are under the control of different tribes and the Meiteis occupied the valley.<sup>3</sup> In literary meaning, Manipur is called “the City or the land of gems”. Manipur is a sanskritized name given to the land when the Meiteis i.e., the people of the plains adopted Vaishnavism as a state religion in the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>4</sup> The Manipuri historical text *Sanamahi Laikan* reveals that the name Manipur was first officially introduced during the period of King Garibniwaz (1709-1748 CE).<sup>5</sup> According to Pemberton, Manipur was known by various names to her neighbours in the past, such as “*kathe*” to the Burmese, “*Moglie*” to the Cacharies, “*Monglai*” to the Bengalis, “*Meklee*” to the Assamese and “*Cassey*” to the Shans.<sup>6</sup> But the indigenous names of Manipur are “*Poireipak*” or “*Kangleipak*” or “*Meitrabak*”.

The valley people of Manipur ethnically known as the Meiteis, belong to the great Mongolian race covering the entire South East and Far East Asia and the great ancient Mongoloid civilizations popularly known as the *Kiratas* during the

Mahabharata period. The language of the Manipuri belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group of languages.<sup>7</sup> According to G.A. Grierson, the ancestors of the Meiteis were among the Tibeto-Burman speakers in south west China, eastern Tibet and upper Burma.<sup>8</sup> Physically the Manipuris are distinctively Mongoloid in appearance, which suggests that their origins should be sought further east.<sup>9</sup>

McCulloch stated that, Manipuris are a conglomeration of several distinct tribes. The valley of Manipur was occupied by the numerous ethnic groups who came from different directions.<sup>10</sup> Those ethnic groups were 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. The internal conflict arose themselves for their supremacy of power. However, all these ethnic groups were gradually merged or assimilated into seven principalities known as seven clans. They were named as *Ningthouja, Khaba-Nganba, Chenglei, Angom, Khuman, Luwang* and *Moirang*.<sup>11</sup> All these seven clans had an independent principality of its own in well-defined region in the valley, and each principality was headed by a chief. There was also a struggle for supremacy among these seven principalities for defending their respective territorial boundaries, and consequently, *Ningthouja* clan grasped the remaining clans.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the emergence of the Meitei kingdom was an outcome of the struggle between various ethnic groups and clan chiefdoms in the valley.<sup>13</sup> The word Meitei was then used when the *Ningthouja* dynasty was founded by Nongda Lairen Pakhangba and the remaining ethnic and social groups were fused mutually under the suzerainty power of this dynasty. After that, the name Meitei is invariably applied to all the seven clans who are the inhabitants of this valley.<sup>14</sup>

The development of Meitei state was followed by the incursion of immigrants from many parts of India who paved the way for the sanskritization process in Manipur. Such changing process which gave a great blow to the history and culture of Manipur was associated with the emergence of the term Manipur. Generally the Meiteis had their own distinctive culture, myths and legends, rites and ritual, etc.<sup>15</sup> The religious beliefs and practices of the early Meiteis had peculiar norms that all these were related to the well established and organized institutions and systems. There was a belief in polytheism. Natural phenomena were endowed with supernatural powers. Fire, water, sky, earth, air are important objects of worship. Sun was worshipped as a symbol of power that it represented the divinity of the king. Besides these, stones, trees, mountains, rivers, etc. were symbolized as gods and goddesses, and the ancestors were honored with ritualistic functions. All the human activities are inseparable parts from the religious institution as the people believed that their survival and prosperity depended upon the regular performance of rites and rituals. The ceremony rites of *Lai Haraoba*, a cultural festival and other ritualistic functions represented the process of the growth and development of Manipuri society through various activities. The influx of migrating groups from the rest of India in successive waves paved the way for making a strong hold position of Hindu cult on the soil of Manipur.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the growth and development of Hinduism in Manipur and how far its impact was imposed on Meitei culture is to be studied here. For the construction of the religious history of Manipur, many folktales, folk literature, myths, legends and the historical works of both the local and foreign scholars formulate a plenty sources. In Manipur, with the growth and development of Hinduisation process, the socio-religious and cultural life of the people of Manipur was gradually transformed into a Hindu way of life.

The present dissertation consists of seven chapters covering the period from 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century CE. The first chapter explicates with the introductory part and a brief outline of the six chapters. The second chapter deals with the historical geography, socio-religious background of Manipur. In historical geography, the study focuses on the land and people and their socio-religious background. The land is divided into two parts viz, the valley and the hill. The hill areas are inhabited by the different tribes, and the valley is bounded by the ranges of hills and exclusively occupied by the Meiteis. Prior to the establishment of *Ningthouja* dynasty by Nongda Lairen Pakgangba in Manipur, there were 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 each other and subsequently, the seven ethnic groups was formed in the Manipur valley.<sup>17</sup> The seven groups were namely, *Ningthouja, Angom, Khuman, Kha-Nganba, Moirang, Luwang, and Sarang-Leisangthem*. Later on, these groups were socially organized into clans.

Though these seven principalities or groups undertook an age long struggle amongst themselves for defending their respective territorial boundaries but ultimately *Ningthouja* subdued all the others. After their amalgamation, the name Meitei was applied to all the people who were settled in the 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 who paved the way for the unification of the kingdom.<sup>18</sup>

The growth of 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 also there were heads of the lineages and clans. Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, founder of *Ningthouja* clan, identified himself as the *Pibaren* (head) of the clan as well as of Kangla. In the course of time, the clan leader obtaining certain powers and privileges established a powerful territory which brought weaker groups under his suzerainty.<sup>19</sup> The Meiteis being a distinct ethnic group, formed socio-cultural identity in the valley of Manipur. They had their own distinct culture, language and religion in their society. Further, they had also availability of myths and legends concerning with Gods and Goddesses, priest and priestesses, festivals, etc.

Generally, the religion of Manipur is divided into two phases— Pre-Vaishnavite and Vaishnavite Phase. In the pre-Vaishnavite phase, the Meiteis worshipped the supreme god *Atiya Guru Sidaba* which means the immortal God. In the mythology of Manipur, *Atiya Guru Sidaba* existed before the creation of universe. The next important gods of the Meitei were *Sanamahi* and *Pakhangba*. Legend says that both are the sons of *Atiya Guru Sidaba*, the supreme God. The Meiteis were the worshipper of natural objects. They 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). So, 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 thereby the Meitei culture was gradually converted into a Vaishnavite culture.<sup>20</sup> The third chapter deals with the political history of Manipur

from earliest period up to 19<sup>th</sup> century. The study highlights the political relations of Manipur with the neighbouring states. The state of Manipur existed as an independent kingdom from the early period. According to royal chronicle, Cheitharol Kumbaba, Nongda Lairen Pakhangba was the first historical ruler of the Ningthouja dynasty who began to rule in Manipur from 33 CE at Kangla and then his successors ruled upto 19<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>21</sup> 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 totally dominated by the Meiteis and their monarchs. The repeated wars and conquests against the neighboring kingdoms particularly Burma which tried to eliminate the state and nation aroused a strong feeling of nationalism among the Meiteis. The Meitei is one of such social groups that comprised of the interactions of various ethnic groups but they were politically and socially fused within the suzerainty of the *Ningthouja*. With the foundation of the *Ningthouja* dynasty, the political position of the Meiteis was gradually developed.

The fourth chapter discusses the evolution of Radha-Krishna cult in Manipur under the royal patronage. Vaishnavism in the form of Radha-Krishna cult became one of the primary religions of Manipur. In fact, the word Vaishnavism is to embody the cult of Vishnu. In India, the history of growth and development of Vaishnavism is 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 Shiva 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 Lord Krishna. The teachings of Vaishnavism have been found in the Vedas, Upanishads, Epics and the Puranic text. Gradually the Vaishnava practices became popular due to the influence of Bhakti movement.

The growth and development of Vaishnavism in Manipur was manifested from the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE with the migration of various groups of people, especially the Brahmins. They came from different parts of India in successive waves, especially during the reign of king Kyamba.<sup>22</sup> The accounts of the arrival of a number of Brahmins are found in a book called *Bamon Khunthoklon* (migration of the Brahmins). The immigration of Brahmins in Manipur is considered as a root of developing Vaishnavism. Therefore, the period of Kyamba proved not only the immigration of Brahmins in Manipur but also the beginning of worship of Vishnu. Some scholars opine that Kyamba built a Vishnu temple at Vishnupur and the image was then installed in this temple. Thus, the period of 15<sup>th</sup> century CE is marked as the beginning of Vishnu worship in Manipur. The successive rulers of Kyamba continued the worship of Vishnu as royal deity. Although the worship of Vishnu was initiated yet the kings of Manipur were not converted into the fold of Vaishnavism till the reign of Charairongba (1697-1709 CE). Initially, the influence of Vaishnavism was limited but it was confined to a section of the royal family.<sup>23</sup> There are various stages for 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 namely, Nimandi, Ramanandi and Goudiya Vaishnavism entered Manipur in different phases each displacing its predecessor in the favour of the ruling monarch. With the adoption of Vaishnavism under the ruling monarch, the Radha-Krishna cult became the dominant form of religion in Manipur.<sup>24</sup>

The fifth chapter deals with the 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. Vaishnavism played a vital role in bringing about the socio-



cultural change in Manipur. As stated earlier, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE, Vishnu worship in Manipur was begun during the reign of king Kyamba. However, it is to be noted that the worship of Vishnu received under the royal patronage of king Kyamba, but the fact remains that it was confined only to the royal family. Of course, not a single Meitei king was formally initiated into the Vaishnavism till the rule of king Charairongba (1697-1709 CE) but they treated it considerately.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the influence of Vaishnavism in Meitei society occupied an important place under the successive rulers of Manipur.

With the dawn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, the religion of Manipur was totally converted into Vaishnavism, and in this religious transformation, the impact of which changed the whole social and cultural landscape of Manipur. The reign of king Charairongba (1697-1709 CE) was remarkable for a transitional period from traditional to Vaishnavite faith while he was formally initiated into Nimandi cult of Vaishnavism and then adopted the Sanskrit name Pitamber Singh. So, this was the first striking sign of converting Meitei culture into Hindu way of life.<sup>26</sup> The reign of Garibniwaz was a turning point in the history of Manipur which really marked the opening of a new era in socio-religious history of Manipur. When the Ramanandi cult was declared as a state religion, the Meiteis were declared as *Kshatriyas* during the reign of king Garibniwaz. Afterwards, the Meiteis began to worship Rama along with Sita, Lakshman and Hanuman. The seven clans of the Meiteis had been consigned the Hindu *gotras*. The Brahmin priests used these *gotras* during the life cycle rituals connected with birth, death and marriage which were conducted by them. The Meitei began to put *tilaka* mark on their forehead. Another change brought by the Vaishnavism was on the part of the rites and ritual ceremonies associated with the various stages of life. The fire cremation system was introduced during king

Garibniwaz's reign. In the birth ceremony, certain rites and rituals were greeted by the society. Besides this, the restrictions imposed on marriage between the same *gotra* or *Salai* was evidently the impact of Vaishnavism. The traditional festivals which were prevalent from olden days were given Hindu names.<sup>27</sup>

The impact of Vaishnavism reached its zenith during the reign of king Bheigyachandra. 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 as well as became one of the best known schools of dance forms of India. During his reign, a new inspiration was given to the artistic culture and tradition of Manipur.<sup>28</sup> Bheigyachandra also introduced a new style of *kirtan* singing popularly 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. It may be mentioned that during this period, the devotional songs were sung in archaic Bengali and Sanskrit. Manipur also made significant progress in the field of literature in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century CE. The influence of Bengali and Sanskrit on Manipuri literature was highly preponderant. The Bengali script replaced the ancient Meitei 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. 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, Janmasthami, Holi, Durga Puja, Diwali, etc.<sup>29</sup>

The sixth chapter focuses the Radha-Krishna cult and its changes of movement in the field of art and architecture. The study focuses on the development of temples in Manipur with the influence and popularity of Radha-Krishna cult. 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 was perishable materials like bamboo, wood, thatch, etc. The earliest Manipuri literature refers to the construction of numerous temples for the sylvan Gods (*Umanglais*). But, due to the influence of Hinduism, many icons of Hindu gods and goddesses were sculptured by different artists to promote the newly introduced state religion. To the Hindus, the temple is the abode of God who is the spirit eminent in the universe. It is thus known by the terms as *Devalayas*, *Shivalayas* and *Devayantana*. The classification of Indian temple architecture is generally based on regional variation, and their shape or styles are found in different forms, such as *Nagara*, *Dravida* and *Vesara* styles.<sup>30</sup>

The adoption of Vaishnavism in Manipur as a state religion opens a new chapter in the history of art and architecture. There is no record of construction of Hindu temples in Manipur before 15<sup>th</sup> century CE. Undoubtly, 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 occurred under the royal patronage of Manipuri kings. Temple usually played a conspicuous role in constructing the religious culture of the Manipuri society, which are in existence with its developed ritualistic aspects.

Manipur in the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE is noticeable as a period of advent of immigrants basically the group of Brahmins from the east and west, and their settlement in the valley. After that, they used to construct temples and practiced their own culture, religious belief, philosophy, astronomy and astrology. They also contributed to the growth of new styles of temple architecture in Manipur. The Vishnu temple is stands as a symbol of the remains of ancient times.<sup>31</sup> During the reign of king Charairongba, the temple of Lord Krishna was constructed in 1704 CE at

Brahmapur Guru Aribam Leikai. The architectural style of the temple is similarity with Bengal hut type.<sup>32</sup>

With the development of Ramanandi cult during the reign of king Garibniwaz, the popularity of *Ram*, *Sita* and *Hanuman* developed in Manipur. The temple of Ramji Prabhu was constructed along with a big tank called *Ningthem Pukhri* (*Ningthem* pond) at Wangkhei. He also constructed a temple of *Hanuman Thakur*, which is located on the eastern bank of Imphal River. The area where the temple is situated is known as *Mongba Hanba*. The architectural style of the temple is similarity with Bengal char chala hut type. Besides these, the temple of Shri Govindaji at Kangla was constructed during the reign of king Nara Singh in 1846 CE. Due to an earthquake, the temple was collapsed in 1868 CE, but it was reconstructed in 1869 CE by Maharaja Chandrakirti. The temple is not in use now but the image of Shri Govindaji has been shifted to the new Govindaji temple near the Manipur palace.<sup>33</sup> 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 was shifted from the old Govindaji temple of Kangla fort. The architectural style of this temple is the mixed styles of Nagara and Indo-Islamic architecture. The dome, the decoration of the railings and flower decoration on the surface of the exterior wall shows some influence of Islamic architecture of medieval period.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the coming of Vaishnavism in Manipur opens a new chapter in the history of temple architecture. All these temples still draw a huge crowd of devotees on religious festivals in every year for religious congregation. The last chapter contains conclusion which deals with the findings in this dissertation.

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