

## **CHAPTER-2**

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Manipur was an ancient kingdom of north eastern part of India which had enjoyed a rich and long historical tradition with her own distinctive cultural and separate political identity. It has a cradle of human civilization and creativity which has come under the influence of many cultures of various ethnic groups who came at different phase and contributed to the development in this small state of India's north eastern frontier. Manipur was influenced by her geographical situation and ecology in the shaping of her history and cultural development.<sup>1</sup>

Manipur is a kingdom of blue mountains and green valleys. Therefore, the kingdom of Manipur is regarded as a treasure house of natural beauty. The natural beauty is further increased by the inartificial beauty of the valley area which is located at the center of the state. The long march of the historical development of Manipur beginning from the establishment of a clan principality at Kangla in the heart of Imphal to a powerful kingdom comprising the surrounding hills and territories in the Chindwin basin is reflected in the expansion of Manipur's territory.<sup>2</sup> R.B. Pemberton states that, the territories of Manipur have fluctuated at various times with the fortunes of their princes.<sup>3</sup> The hill areas cover about ninety percent of the total geographical area of the state. The central plain or the valley of Manipur is the most striking topographic feature. The geographical feature of Manipur is an oval shape and is slightly slanting towards the south. Due to this geographical structure, all the rivers flow from north to south. The plain areas are

extended upto the foot of the bordering range where the slope abruptly changes. The plain slopes from north to south. The lowest part of the plain is occupied by the Loktak lake.<sup>4</sup> Manipur is endowed with an immense number of rivers and streams which pass through her mountains and valleys. The Barak, the longest river and its tributaries namely the Irang, Makru, Jiri, etc, drain the western half of Manipur. The Manipur river and its tributaries, viz., the Thoubal, Iril, Nambul, run across the valley areas. Many small rivers carry the drainage of the Indo-Burma border of Chindwin river.<sup>5</sup> Manipur has a large number of lakes and the biggest one is the Loktak lake. All these lakes, river, streams and mountain peaks are interwoven in the life, culture and traditions of the people of Manipur.<sup>6</sup> The soil of Manipur is generally fertile but the soil of the valley is a little different from the soil of the hills. The soils of the central valley are contained high proportion of clay and the hill soils range from laterite to sandy loam with general red colour. In the view of R.B.Pemberton, “the fertility of the soil is so great that crops generally prove most abundant.”<sup>7</sup> The agricultural product of the kingdom principally consists of rice, which forms the staple article of food. The climate of Manipur is most enjoyable throughout the year. The climatic condition with its variation according to attitude is very healthy. The higher hills are cooler than the valley. In Manipur, the coldest month is January. The temperature rises initially from March and begins to drop from October.<sup>8</sup> The rain commences in April and continues up to September. There is considerable amount of premonsoon rain. The period from June to September accounts for a little over half of the annual rainfall. The rainfall in the state is high in quantity and is well distributed over both time and space.<sup>9</sup>

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. The Tangkhul, Mao, Maram, Anal Kabui, Maring, etc, are of the Naga group and the Hmar, Paite, Zou, Thadow, Gangte, Simte etc, belong to the Kuki-Chin group.<sup>10</sup> They are principally Mongiloid with some mixture of non-Mongoloid elements who speak Tibeto-Burman languages. However, the Meiteis are the most dominant and advanced nationality who ruled in Manipur.<sup>11</sup> The growth and development of these social groups took place with varying degrees of cultural advancement.

In the legendary period, the principality which centered at Kangla, the capital of the later Meitei kingdom was known by several names which are referred to both historical and literary works.<sup>12</sup> The name of the kingdom was recorded as Meckley, in the first treaty signed between East India Company and Jay Singh, king of Manipur in 1762 CE.<sup>13</sup> But, the coins issued by King Jay Singh and his successors suggest that they assumed the title of *Manipureshwar* (the Lord of Manipur) while *Meckley* was discarded.<sup>14</sup> Later on, a Sanskrit work, Dharani Samhita which was written in the reign of Gambhir Singh (1825-1834 CE) popularized the legends of the derivation of *Mekhala* and Manipur.<sup>15</sup> In another legend, the dead body of Siva's consort Sati was cut into pieces by the chakra of Lord Vishnu, and the trunk of Sati with *Mekhala* (female wrapper) fell down in the land of Manipur. After that, the land came to be known as *Mekhaladesh* (land of *Mekhala*).<sup>16</sup> These are the myths and legends created and popularized by the Brahmin scholars to give puranic derivation of Manipur. *Vijay Panchali*, a nineteenth century history of Manipur stated that the land was known by different names, viz., *Aranya Nagar*, *Mahendranagar*, *Mekhaladesh* and then Manipur.<sup>17</sup>

The Meiteis are the ruling community mainly inhabiting in the valley of Manipur from time immemorial. The formation of their culture and civilization

within this small land-locked valley is very remarkable.<sup>18</sup> In the history of Manipur, the first king who laid the foundation of Meitei kingdom was Pakhangba (33-154 CE). The contribution of Pakhangba was the foundation of a powerful and stable principality in Manipur valley.<sup>19</sup> With the dawn of history, the Meiteis developed a monarchical form of government and consequently, extended their superiority in the surrounding hill areas and other kingdoms that lay beyond the hills. Their political organization, social set-up, religion, language, literature, martial tradition, dance and music and other fine arts played a significant role in developing their identity.<sup>20</sup>

The origin of the Meiteis, a major ethnic group of Manipur is still in mystery as many scholars made different assumptions and conceptions. In the prehistoric period, there are many immigrant groups, such as Austriacs, Mongoloids, Tais, Tibeto-Burmans and Indo-Aryans, etc. who entered into Manipur in different phases.<sup>21</sup> Hence, it is believed that Manipur was the meeting point of numerous immigrant groups. The origin of Meiteis cannot be confined to a particular group. The fact is that the Meiteis were evolved through a long process of ethnic conflicts. Their unique position was established in later period through the process of political and cultural absorption of numerous ethnic groups.<sup>22</sup>

There were many theories and approaches which make speculations about the origin of the Meiteis. According to one mythological account which states that, the Meiteis were the descendants of supreme God. The supreme God of the Meiteis was known by different names, such as *Taibangpanba Mapu* (Lord of the Universe), *Taibirel Sidaba* (the greatest immortal soul) and *Atiya Guru Sidaba* (immortal Lord of the sky).<sup>23</sup>

About the origin of the Meiteis in Manipur, there are various assumptions given by different scholars. According to B.H. Hodgson, the ethnic name Meitei was a “combined appellation of Siamese “Tai” and Kochin Chinese “Moy” (Moy Tai = Moytai = Moitai = Meitei) and that the Meiteis belong to the Moi section of the great Tai race.<sup>24</sup> But, T.C. Hodson opposed the opinion of B.H. Hodgson and said that the term Meitei was the composite word of “Moytai”, a combination of two groups, Chinese “Moy” and Siamese “Tai”, but in linguistically, there is a great difference and a long gap between the Meiteis and the two groups. The absorption of some “Tais” into the Meitei fold in later period was inevitable. It is stated that in the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE, a group of hill men recognized as Ahoms, the descendants of the Tai or Shan race roam into the eastern boundary of Brahmaputra valley. Probably they passed through Manipur and some of them had intermixed with the local inhabitants.<sup>25</sup> According to royal chronicle Cheitharol Kumbaba, during the reign of king Naothingkhong (7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century CE), the Pong king Sukanpha’s younger brother Samlung, stayed about ten years near the capital of Kangla.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, it is assumed that they were also absorbed into the Meitei society. Ch. Budhi Singh remarks that the Meitei is a combination of two tribes *Mei* and *Ti* of ancient China.<sup>27</sup> However, it is very difficult to affirm that the origin of the Meiteis is associated with a particular group, but it is said that Meitei came into existence when the various ethnic groups were absorbed into the Ningthouja principality, founded by Nongda Lairen Pakhangba.<sup>28</sup>

As regards the origin and affinity of the Meiteis with the hill tribes, many scholars give different opinions. R. Brown affirmed that the separate original home place of Nagas, Meiteis and Kukis are in the North Cachar, Burma and South East respectively.<sup>29</sup> M. Horam also noted that the Kukis came from Burma,

the source of Chindwin, but they were not the same stock of Meiteis and Nagas. However, he asserts that the Meiteis held animistic belief similar to that of the Tangkhul tribes. The cultural and physical affinities of Meiteis and hill people is coincided i.e., both belong to the same stock.<sup>30</sup> Nandalal Sharma remarks that the language of Meiteis belongs to the Kuki Chin language from north western China who firstly settled in Manipur. In the viewpoint of G.A. Gierson, the Meiteis linguistically belong to the Tibeto Burman groups, originated from the upper courses of the Yangtse and Hoyang-Ho in China.<sup>31</sup> According to S.K.Chatterjee, the Meiteis of Manipur are the most advanced section of the Kuki-Chin people. But in linguistically, the Meiteis are close to the Burmese, Kachin or Singmois.<sup>32</sup> He further states that among the various Tibeto-Burman languages, the Meitei or Manipuri language is much greater importance than other languages in literature.<sup>33</sup>

According to another literary text, *Poireiton Khunthok* states that the Meiteis were the descendants of Poireiton, a leader of colonizing group move towards Manipur. But this view is not accepted as Poireiton was the key rival of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba for the establishment of supremacy at Kangla.<sup>34</sup> This colonizing group penetrated into Manipur in the search of their suitable land. Then, Poireiton determined to establish his supremacy at Kangla, but he was defeated by Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, the founder of the Ninghtouja dynasty of Manipur. After that, he made alliance with Pakhangba and gave his sister Laisna in marriage to Nongda Lairen Pakhangba.<sup>35</sup> However, it is believed that this colonizing group was gradually absorbed into the ethnic groups of Manipur.

Another theory reflects the view that, the Meiteis were of Aryan origin. E.W. Dun affirms that a great wave of Aryans conceded through Manipur into Burma in prehistoric times. According to his view, the Meiteis are the admixture

of the bloods of Hindus and surrounding hills. It is a fact that *Nongchup Haram* (immigrants from the west) came to Manipur in some later period after the foundation of the Meitei kingdom. They were culturally, linguistically and socially absorbed into the Meitei society. But, it cannot be traced that Aryan race being the origin of the Meiteis.<sup>36</sup> Supporting the view of E.W. Dun, Gangumei Kabui observes that “the Meiteis as a whole are not Aryan, but there are Aryan elements amongst them”. The Meiteis with Aryan association was an outcome of the acceptance of Hinduism by the royal family and the valley people of Manipur in the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE. But, the fact is that they were neither of Aryan stock nor of Indo-Aryan speakers. However, in historical view, the Meiteis had absorbed into the Aryan elements when many Aryan colonizers came to Manipur or passed through this land in the course of their colonization process.<sup>37</sup>

According to James Johnstone, the Meiteis were the descendants of Indo-Chinese stock with some admixture of Aryan blood.<sup>38</sup> However, opposing his view, R.B. Pemberton claimed that the Meiteis are the descendants of Tartar colony in China. They were immigrated to Manipur during the conflict for supremacy between the Chinese and the Tartar dynasties, in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, Manipur during the period from 13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century CE is marked as the suzerainty of Meiteis over many ethnic groups. But, there was no evidence of Tartar colonization of Meiteis.<sup>40</sup> Although they came yet perhaps they were absorbed into the Meitei fold. Thus, with the absorption of many ethnic groups the Meitei kingdom was developed as a powerful one.

Another view affirmed by McCulloch is that the Meiteis were the descendants of the hill tribes who came from different directions. Then, he came to this conclusion that on the basis of cultural and linguistic affinity between the



tribals and the Meiteis, the Meiteis are the offshoots of the hill tribes.<sup>41</sup> T.C. Hodson suggests that the term Meitei came into existence in the process of cultural and political absorption of numerous *salais* (clan principality) into the *Ningthouja* power which came to be known as Meitei power. He further refers to the Meiteis as homogeneity with the Nagas and Kukis of the hills.<sup>42</sup> In the view of George Watt, it is probably assumed that the present inhabitants of the plains and hills of Manipur have sprung from four great influences; the Kukis in the south, the Nagas in the north, the Shan and Burmese tribes on the east and certain hill tribes on the west more or less related to the great kachari family now distributed throughout the valley of Assam.<sup>43</sup>

According to the archaeological sources also, there are some cultural affinity between the inhabitants of early Manipur and that of South East Asia and China. The exploration work done by O.K. Singh in the caves of Kangkhui (Ukhrul district), Tharon (Tamenglong district), Machi (Chandel district), and found many Neolithic artifact. Those are small blade implements along with the heavy chopper tools which were associated with the findings of Upper Burma. The tripod leg potteries were similar with those found in the Neolithic culture of China and it was reported that this type was originated from North China.<sup>44</sup> On the basis of findings of the artifact, O.K. Singh further states that a group of people from the regions of South China equipped with fully ground and stone tools, corded tripod wares perhaps entered into Manipur following the courses of Irrawaddy river and its territories. The stone tools, like pebble, flake, edge ground, scrapers and flake found from Tharon cave are similar to the findings of Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and Philippines. The pebble tools indicated the existence of Haobinian culture in Manipur. The points, scrapers, chisels and

blunted black knife which are found from Kangkhui cave have some affinity with those found in China.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, it is believed that the immigrant groups of South East Asia entered into Manipur and gradually absorbed into Meitei culture.

As stated earlier, in the beginning the Manipur valley was occupied by the several ethnic groups came from different directions. Those immigrants who came from the eastern side were known as *Nongpok Haram* (eastern direction) and the immigrants from the west were known as *Nongchup Haram* (western direction). Later on, they were merged or fused into the clans or *salais* of the Meiteis. Therefore, the influx of assimilation of these different groups of people at different stages was the result of evolution of Meitei society. For this instance, both internal and external forces were responsible for the development of Meiteis.<sup>46</sup> But, no definite conclusion could be made so far.

However, in spite of many controversies existed about the origin of Meiteis, it can give the conclusion that a large number of ethnic groups, such as Tibeto-Burman of Mongolian race, Austroloids, Tai Siamese Shan and Aryans migrated to Manipur in successive periods. It led to the cultural and physical absorption of numerous groups into the fold of Meiteis.<sup>47</sup> Jyotirmoy Roy also asserts that at different periods, the Nagas, Kukis, Shans and Chinese came and merged into local communities but there are some Aryan and Dravidian features.<sup>48</sup> According to Ch. Manihar Singh, in prehistoric times, groups of people entered in Manipur in successive periods and settled both in the hills and valley.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, from the prospects of anthropology, linguistics, geography, folk literature, myths and archaeology based on cultural and physical aspects, make us to formulate that the Meiteis have absorbed with foreign elements and completely integrated them in social structure.<sup>50</sup> Thus, Manipur with her pluralistic social structure presents a

picture of homogeneity and heterogeneity with the multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-lingual base of culture and civilization. Therefore, the history of Manipur is the unending process of evolution of such a multi-cultural society.

The social structure of the Meitei was mainly based on the clan system. Clan means a number of families with a common ancestor under patriarchal control.<sup>51</sup> Clan among the Meitei was both a social and political institution. The clan or lineage is known as *Salai* which literally means the ancestor god of the lineage.<sup>52</sup> The Meitei society is a kinship and lineage based society. The Meiteis were a composite group of numerous *sageis* or *yumnaks* which were belonged to seven clans, i.e., *Ningthouja*, *Luwang*, *Angom*, *Khuman*, *Moirang*, *Kha-Nganba* and *Sarang-Leisangthem*.<sup>53</sup> The early Meitei society was an amalgamation of several different ethnic groups but was closely knit and allied principalities once settled in different parts of Manipur. Each principality had its own chief and fixed territory. However, they were constantly fought with each other for their supremacy of power.<sup>54</sup>

Regarding the origin and development of clan system in Manipur, there are several versions or accounts mentioned in the Meitei text. However, all the accounts could not be taken as historical, but used as a source of history. Many scholars presented their views based on the various account specified in ancient literally texts. A variety of *puyas* (ancient text written in archaic Meitei script) and myth traced the origin of clans from different track or view. According to one popular myth, it is believed that the man was created by god *Sorarel Sidaba* from his own image, which was followed by the creation of the *salais* or clans.<sup>55</sup> The genealogist of the *clans* illustrates that they were originated from the three sons of supreme god, namely *Ashiba*, *Konjing Tuthokpa* and *Atiya*. In the Meitei society,

*Ashiba* was known as *Khuman Guru*. *Atiya* and *Konjing Tuthokpa* were also called as *Luwang Guru* and *Mangang Guru* respectively.<sup>56</sup> Various *puyas*, like *Meihourol Pukok*, *Thiren Layat*, *Meihourol Thirel*, and *Leithak Leikharol* gave somewhat similar theories or views regarding the origin of the clans. The local chronicles illustrate the existence of clans (*salais*), their origin and number of the clans and the chronology of events. However, the myths and legends attempted to reveal the origin and inter-connection of the clans. According to a large number of *puyas* it is presumed that all the clans (*salais*) are the progeny of the same parents. Therefore, the main reason of the *puya* leads generally to the integration of the clans. Afterwards, myths and legends were created to explain the origin of the seven clans in order to strengthen the social and political confederacy. But, the versions of this mythological account vary slightly from one another.<sup>57</sup> However, all of them almost agreed that all the seven clans (*salais*) were descended from *Sidaba Mapu* (the Divine ancestor) and they were originated at the same period.

Many Meitei scholars of Manipur supposed that, the clan system was known from the period of pre-Pakhangba. Generally, the Meitei society is based on lineage system. The clan is known as *salai* which literally means the ancestor god of the lineage (*sa* = *sagei* = lineage and *lai* = god ancestor).<sup>58</sup> Ancient chronicles suggested that the major seven principalities were generally descended from the Supreme Being, *Taibang Mapu sidaba*, who was a formless divinity having various manifestations (the divine ancestor). In Manipur, the recorded history starts when *Pakhangba*, the first historical king of the Meitei kingdom ascended the throne of Kangla, the capital of Manipur in the first century of the Christian era.<sup>59</sup>

There is a great controversy about the origin of the clans. Many local historical documents, like *Sakok Lamlen* and *Ningthou Kangbalon* mentioned about the evolution of clan system before *Pakhangba*. Considering this view, a mythical tradition mentioned that the evolution of the seven clans which gives the reference that the clan system was introduced by *Atiya Guru Sidaba*, father of *Pakhangba*.<sup>60</sup> According to this tradition, the supreme god *Guru Sidaba* taking the form of a dead cow, floated down into a big river to test the wisdom and devotion of his two sons, *Kuptreng* and *Sentreng*. When they see the dead cow, *Kuptreng* thought it was a rotten thing. But *Sentreng* saw the wagging tail of the dead cow and he realized that it may be god in disguise. Then, *Atiya Guru Sidaba* had stirred his tail to allusion of his own identity, wishing to notify himself. *Kuptreng* and *Sentreng* dragged the carcass out of the water. *Atiya Guru Sidaba* was very content, resuming his original form and said to *Sentreng*, “you recognize your father, the guru, so let your name be *Pakhangba*” (*pa*= father, *khangba*= to know). After that, *Sentreng* was known as *Pakhangba*. This account states that the carcass of the dead cow was cut into seven pieces and was distributed among the founders of the seven clans. Different parts of the carcass shared by each group are as follows.<sup>61</sup>

Founder	<i>Salai</i>	Parts of the Carcass
Sentreng (Pakhangba)	Ningthouja	Eyes
Kuptreng (Sanamahi)	Angom	Neck
Pammaringba	Luwang	Head
Leisatao	Khuman	Knee
Konsuren	Moirang	Stripe belly
Asangba	Khaba	Left side of head
Tumanganba	Nganba	Heart

In another customary version, Thiren Meiram Leeba states that the seven clans were originated from the different organs of the Taibangpanba Mapu (Lord of the universe). *Angom* springs from the right eye of the Taibangpanba Mapu, *Ningthouja* springs from the left eye, *Luwang* springs from the right ear, *Khuman* springs from the left ear, *Sarang-Leishangthem* springs from the right nostril, *Khaba-Nganba* springs from the left nostril. *Moirang* springs from the teeth.<sup>62</sup>

The ancient text, *Meihouron Lathup Puya* also states the names of the *salais* and their progenitors.<sup>63</sup>

Name of the progenitors	Name of the <i>Salais</i>
Emiraba	Luwang
Engouraba	Khuman
Asunba	Sarang-Leisangthem
Aranba	Moirang
Khemanba	Kha-Nganba
Memamba	Angom
Anganba	Ningthem

According to another ancient text *Meihourol Pukok*, the *salais* were originated from the five divine kings namely, *Tari*, *Kangba*, *Sakuppa*, *Kangkhal*, *Kaksu Tenkonba*. *Tari* had two wives. His wife *Huimu Leima* gave birth to *Nungou Imthangba*, the progenitor of *Sarang-Leisangthem* and second wife *Khangkhal Leima Purang* got *Pureilomba*, the progenitor of *Angom* clan. The union of *Kangba* and *Tanu* got *Kangkhujam Toriya*, progenitor of *Mangang*. *Sakuppa* and *Leinung Keibi Tera* gave birth to *Moirang*. Besides this, *Kaksu Tonkonba* and *Leima Urum Khongjonbi* had two sons, *Luwang Nongdamlon*

*Ahanba* and *Khuman Nongdamlon Akhuba* respectively. *Khaba-Nganba* is born from *Kangkhal* and *Phurei Leima*.<sup>64</sup>

Another myth which was associated with Pakhangba affirms that he was the head of all the clans. His union with seven *Lainuras* (divine girls) produced seven sons, who became the founding head of each *salai*.<sup>65</sup> T.C. Hodson regarded that the seven clans is not only social unit but also political units which formed the Meitei confederacy. According to his view, the Meitei society was constituted under the seven clans in which a large number of lineages were assigned to each clan.<sup>66</sup> R.K. Jhalajit Singh also states that the seven clans have existed since the reign of king Pakhangba. According to Meitei tradition, there was a large scale assignment of clans to immigrant groups in the reign of Naophangba.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, from this point of view, the evolution of Meitei clan system was closely associated with the social, cultural and political policies of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba. Thus, Manipur valley in the historical time was a lineage based social system and lineage based political units which ultimately emerged as the principalities.<sup>68</sup>

Many local legends and folk stories trace about the origin and development of the history of Manipur, but authentic history becomes traceable from the first century CE, when Nongda Lairen Pakhangba ascended the throne of the *Ningthouja* dynasty. Before the establishment of *Ningthouja* dynasty in Manipur, numerous ethnic groups were inhabited in the valley. They are *Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Moirang, Khabas, Nganbas, Sarang, Leisangthem, Angom, Haorok Konthou, Heiram khunjam, Lera-Khongang, Thanga-Kambong, Urok Ushai, Ningol Laiton, Phantek, Chakpa, Khem, Lokha-Haokha*, etc.<sup>69</sup> There was an internal conflict taken place among the several ethnic groups for the supremacy of power. But, in finally they were amalgamated with each other and

subsequently, the seven ethnic groups formed in the Manipur valley. These seven groups were *Ningthouja*, *Luwang*, *Khuman*, *Angom*, *Moirang*, *Kha-Nganba* and *Sarang-Leisangthem*. Later on, these groups were socially organized into clans.<sup>70</sup> Among these seven clans, the *Ningthouja* became the most powerful one. In the course of subsequent years, the principality founded by Pakhangba absorbed all the peripheral principalities under his control.<sup>71</sup> Afterwards, all the ethnic and social groups were politically and socially incorporated within the suzerainty of the *Ningthouja*.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, the emergence of the Ningthouja kingdom was the upshot of the struggle between these ethnic groups who were engaged in continuous war for territorial expansion and supremacy.<sup>73</sup> In fact, the Meitei state came into existence as a result of continuous conflicts among the clan principalities. Nongda Lairen Pakhangba was the first king who paved the way for the unification of the kingdom.<sup>74</sup> According to N. Khelchandra, the word Meitei was referred to the people of the Manipur valley which was originally applied only to the Ningthoujas. But, after the formation of the confederacy of the *salais* and the subjugation by the Ningthoujas, the term Meitei was applicable to those people inhabiting in the Manipur valley.<sup>75</sup> Thus, Meitei confederacy was formed by the unification of seven clans and they were permanently settled in the Manipur valley and every clan had their own chief.<sup>76</sup> Gangumei Kabui opines that the *salai* or clan was originally an ethnic group or tribe speaking a distinct language or dialect, occupying a territory having an autonomous principality under a ruler who was both a political chieftain and social head of the clan.<sup>77</sup> Supporting the view of Gangumei Kabui, L. Birachandra Singh also believes that the names of the *salais* which indicated the ethnic groups.<sup>78</sup> In fact, the social



structure of Meitei was formulated on the basis of seven clans, i.e., *Ningthouja, Angom, Khaba-Nganba, Moirang, Khuman, Luwang* and *Sarang-Leisangthem*.

After Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, all the successive rulers of Manipur proudly traced that they were the descendants of divine king Pakhangba. His contribution led to the consolidation of all the clans under the single entity of Ningthouja principality in Manipur. He stands as the ruling deity of the royal family of Ningthouja principality. Therefore, the accession of Pakhangba to the throne of Manipur was a great landmark in the history of Manipur.<sup>79</sup> The unification of Meitei nation was processed with the social, cultural, physical and political absorption of numerous ethnic groups.<sup>80</sup> The present day Manipur is thus, the culmination of this bold process of consolidation.

With the development of Meitei state, a stable political situation was formed in the kingdom. The growth of population as well as the development of economic system based on private ownership led to the appearance of a social structure in the form of family, lineage and clan groups.<sup>81</sup> Each *salai* consists of a number of *sagei* or *yumnaks* which in turn consist of a number of families. Most of the *sageis* were named according to their occupation and place of habitation. Each of these *sageis* is descended from a common ancestor, the founder of the *salai* (*salai-apokpa*).<sup>82</sup> T.C. Hodson asserts that the clans were the descendants of a common ancestor by whose name in many cases, the clan was known. The clan system, being a nucleus part of Meitei social structure, played multi-role in strengthening and unifying Meitei power.<sup>83</sup> Several societies like Meiteis were structured in an established order where father was the head of the family and there were heads of the lineages and clans. In course of time, the clan leader attaining certain powers and privileges could establish authoritative territory

which brought the feeble groups under his suzerainty. The Meitei political system had the elements of clan structure. Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, founder of *Ningthouja* clan himself was the *Pibaren* (chief) of the clan as well as of Kangla. According to Romila Thapar, “A state is generally associated with political authority which functions within a territorial unit, delegates its power to functionaries is financed by revenues collected from those who contribute on an impersonal basis to its maintenance and acts as an instrument of integrating social segments identified not merely by ritual roles but also by economic function.” But her view is exactly carried out by the Meitei kingdom.<sup>84</sup> Since the accession of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba of Ningthouja to the throne of Kangla, the process of political and cultural absorption of other groups had been performed in successive periods upto 19<sup>th</sup> century CE. Therefore, the establishment of Ningthouja dynasty by Nongda Lairen Pakhangba to the throne of Kangla in 33 CE marked the evolution of Meitei polity.

Through the establishment of the Ningthouja dynasty, the system of development of the socio-political life of the Meiteis was centered on the ruling dynasty. The reconstruction of the early history of Manipur was totally based on the chronicles of Ningthouja dynasty complement by other clan genealogies and some literary sources. The Meitei clan system denotes both social and political organization.<sup>85</sup> Family is the unit of the Meitei social structure in which the father is the head of the family and in his subordinate male section dominated the family.<sup>86</sup> Women held considerable free position and there were sort of gender inequality. They were under the control of the male section that was the head of the family. In the social and political organizations, the women were not permitted to occupy the posts of heads. Their role in the society was nothing but that of a

mother and house wife supported their partners in sharing works, like collection of vegetables, firewood, cultivations, knitting weaving and fishing, etc. But, in some cases, women of ruling class, particularly the chief queen in the absence of the king indirectly took the states administration.<sup>87</sup> The male superiority in the Meitei society is best exemplified by the role that he plays in family rituals. The male member of the family performs the rites and ritual of the life circle ceremony. He conducts the rituals performed in honour of the respective *sagei*. The Meiteis are totally an endogenous group<sup>88</sup> Marriage is an integral part of the system of kinship and takes the unique role in social developments as well as in political functions. In the early Meitei society, the rule of marriage was associated with certain custom and practices. The practice of polygamous marriage was the symbol of male domination. There are restrictions on inter-marriage between the same clan. But, the inter-marriage with the other groups strengthened the political power as well as in social development of Meitei kingdom and hastened the process of the unification of Manipur.<sup>89</sup>

In the evolution of the state, the growth of power and authority of a king was associated with the expansion of territory. Hence, the process of the evolution and development of the state was possible through continuous wars among each other groups. The powerful one ultimately formed a state and established its supremacy in a definite territory. Gangumei Kabui observes that the emergence of state was the result of a gradual growth of human civilization and development of economic organization social order and steady livelihood.<sup>90</sup> Thus, the gradual development of human culture was associated with the evolution of state. It was a product of human efforts and activities.

As regards the evolution of state, Hindu Puran, ancient Egyptians, Persians, Chinese and other local myths advocated the theory of the Divine origin of state. According to this theory, god formed the state and enforced the state to abolish the disorder of law and peace created by anarchism. According to the view of famous philosophers like, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, the state was formed by the agreement of the individuals. According to the patriarchal and matriarchal theory, family was the primary organization of the state. The political institutions were organized on the basis of administrative system of the family. The historical or evolutionary theory states that the state was evolved as the gradual process and historical development of human society. Kinship, religion, force and politics are the essential aspects of the evolution of the state.<sup>91</sup> The historical development and change had transformed the human society from primitive to civilization. They were conscious of political organization and resulted on the formation of a state.

Religion also 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 definition of “religion” is a “set of beliefs regarding the universe specially when considered as the creation of a super human agency or agencies usually having a moral code for the conduct of human affairs.”<sup>92</sup> To define the term religion, numerous writers formulate an attempt from different direction. A few writers say that it is a principle in super human controlling power and others are of the opinion that it is a particular system of faith and worship. In fact, the term covers a wide ranging area of the concept of philosophy and it is very difficult to give a clear definition of the term ‘religion’. The term religion is derived from the Latin word *religo* or *religionis* which means

obligation, bond, and reverence. According to this account it is suggested that religion is a concept which binds the people to maintain social discipline.<sup>93</sup>

Religion embodies a system of beliefs and practices found in every culture. It represents the idea of a supernatural power and personified supernatural forces, ceremonies, rituals and observances-used to communicate with the supernatural by certain persons believed to have access to the personified forces. In fact, religion has organized a distinct group of its followers and binds all its members in a symbolic social order through codes of conduct (bonds of solidarity) and gives a broad band of social interaction. It authorizes opinion to express itself.<sup>94</sup>

According to Frederick Engel, religion as a ‘fantastic reflection in man’s mind of those exterior forces which control their daily life, an expression in which the worldly forces assume the form of supernatural forces’. Religion plays an important role not only in the process of proper maintaining in the social and moral behaviour among the people but also helped in the promotion of social equilibrium in the life of the society. In fact, religion is undoubtedly regarded as a life for the promotion of social discipline among the human beings. On the other hand, it can also be suggested that the concept and philosophy of religion is used as a driving force in the reform of social abuses.<sup>95</sup> Therefore, religion may be taken as a strong moving force in the developmental process of the human being. Every individual and society is moving through a religious platform of their own belief. From this aspect, it has rightly said that ‘there are no people without a religion.’<sup>96</sup> Thus, religion is observed as an essential integrating force which helps in bringing a social cohesiveness in a given society.

In Manipur, the religious history is generally divided into two parts – the first part covering the period preceding the entry of Hindu cult and the second one is the Hindu period. In the first part, the Meiteis followed their own indigenous religion. The indigenous religion of Manipur is based broadly on the two basic concepts, i.e. the concept of supreme God and concept of ancestor worship.<sup>97</sup> In this two religious association the people of Manipur were able to bring a social discipline in the state. At the same time, through this religious philosophy the people were able to promote and foster the cultural heritage and social solidarity. Whatever it may be the idea of the super natural elements is the basic concept of primary religion. This is the firm belief among the people that all the objectives were the creation of the super natural elements. The basic concept of the indigenous religion is focused on the creation of whole universe by the supreme power.<sup>98</sup>

The idea of the creation of universe by a supernatural power was the basic concept of the traditional religion of the indigenous people of this place. The people addressed *Tengbanba Mapu* (Supreme god of universe) as the immortal one. He was also known as *Guru Sidaba*. According to one mythological account which is concerned that Meitei were the descendants of supreme God. The supreme God of the Meiteis is known by different names, *Taibangpanba Mapu* (Lord of the Universe), *Taibirel Sidaba* (the greatest soul immortal), and *Atiya Guru Sidaba* (immortal Lord of the sky). Here, the associated episode explicates about the creation of living being is that– *Atiya Guru Sidaba*, the creator ordered his son *Ashiba* to create the earth. *Ashiba* completed the obligation, after that, *Atiya Guru Sidaba* again asked him to create man. According to the order of *Guru Sidaba*, *Ashiba* at first created *Ngamu* (latafish) which was not pleased. His

second creation of frog was also not accepted. Then he created monkey which did not satisfy him. Ultimately *Atiya Guru Sidaba* enlightens *Ashiba* to create man in his own image. Thus the compact form of man was created.<sup>99</sup> This mythological account refers to Meiteis as the descendants of *Atiya Guru Sidaba*. Then, *Atiya Guru Sidaba* created the Sun and the Moon in the form of man. The Sun gets the name of *Konjin-Tuthokpa* and the moon also obtained the name *Ashiba*, afterwards *Atiya Guru Sidaba* disappeared from the earth. Therefore from this mythological account, it is believed that the creation of this universe along with all living objects was the biggest contribution of the immortal god.<sup>100</sup> In the Meitei society, the concept of God and fire as a holy symbol are also unique and prevalent. The ancient Meiteis worshipped most of the Vedic natural deities, such as the sky, river, sun, moon, stars and the fire under non-sanskritic name.<sup>101</sup>

Another mythological version states that, in the indigenous Meitei society, the theory of creation has full of romantic and stimulating activities. It is mentioned that the *Tengbanba Mapu* after roaming in the space for quite long time have decided to create universe in order to have a place for living beings. Then, he produced three powers by using his divine power, namely *Atingkok Sidaba*, *Atiya Sidaba* and *Konjil Tingthokpa*. According to the advice of *Tengbanba Mapu*, the eldest son *Atingkok Sidaba* tried to create the universe with the help of his younger brother *Atiya Sidaba*. It is also mentioned that *Tengbanba Mapu* assisted his son *Atingkok Sidaba* by giving all the sacred elements to him. Thus, with all the ideas of his father *Atingkok Sidaba* was prepared to create all the natural objectives like water, air, fire including hills, rivers, etc.<sup>102</sup> Therefore, it is believed that the creation of this universe along with all living objects was the biggest contribution of this immortal one.

In the process of the creation of universe, there are full of disturbances and obstacles which were deliberately created by the youngest son *Konjin Tingthokpa*. To look this problem *Atiya Sidaba* however, reported the matter to their father *Tengbanba Mapu*. Since his son is in helpless position, *Tengbanba Mapu* tackles this problem very effectively. Then, he created a young lady from his ring finger. She was known as *Nongthang Leima* (deity of lightening and enchantment).<sup>103</sup> But she failed to stop the destructive nature of *Konjin Tuthokpa*. Then, *Tengbanba Mapu Sidaba* again created another young lady called *Tampha Awangbi*. She was able to divert the attention of *Konjin Tingthokpa* from his earlier behavior. In her successful attempt to win over the thought of *Konjin Tingthokpa*, a dialogue was taken place between them. The nature and style of the dialogue was regarded by many writers as a considerable one towards the enrichment in the field of the literature of this place. In this situation and in the absence of the destructive action of *Konjin Tingthokpa*, *Atiya Sidaba* was able to complete his mission successfully.<sup>104</sup> Thus, *Atiya Sidaba* was able to create the universe according to the desire of their father. According to this account, it is suggested that the creation of living and non-living objectives is an important component of the universe which was a great work of *Tengbanba Mapu*. This is the strongest point where the people believed in the concept of traditional religion. From this belief, the people always regarded him as a divine personality. Besides this, the people always thought that this personality is free from any type of natural order like decadence, death and disappearance. So, he was an omnipresent supernatural element. Accordingly they placed him in the highest order of the primordial religious concept of Manipur.<sup>105</sup>



In the pre-Hindu period, *Tengbanba Mapu* represents the highest God who is believed to be the soul of the universe. His two descendents were *Sanamahi* and *Pakhangba*.<sup>106</sup> *Sanamahi* was manifested as the authority and protector of every household of the Meiteis. The festival in honour of *Sanamahi* when the whole community venerates him is organized on *Cheiraoba* or the beginning of a new year in Manipur.<sup>107</sup> *Pakhangba* is the ancestral deity of the royal family of Meiteis and the political authority of the state.<sup>108</sup> It was under his rule that the seven clans which formed the Meitei confederacy came under the control of the *Ningthouja salai*. Therefore he was the head of the seven clans and the first ancestor of the Meitei kings.<sup>109</sup> In the performance of a number of traditional rites and rituals, *Pakhangba* is venerated and many festivals, like *Heikru Hitongba*, *Ukrong Hongba* and *Ukai Kappa* were organized in honour of him. In the festival of *Lai Haraoba*, *Pakhangba* is worshipped along with a number of other ancestral deities.<sup>110</sup>

Another category of the concept of primary religion of Manipur is the practice of ancestor worship. It is a kind of religious practice or activities which involved the worship or communication with the souls of a group's ancestors. It is one of the oldest forms of religious activities which were practiced by the people in various forms. According to William P. Scott, the ancestor worship is a religious cult based upon the belief that the spirit of the deceased ancestors can influence events in the lives of the living, culturally defied ceremonies or rituals are practiced to honour a family's ancestors or the ancestors of another designated group, such as clan, household, etc. Therefore, many writers formulate an attempt to give a philosophical interpretation on the concept of ancestor worship. It is also said that the idea of ancestor worship was developed mainly due to the constant

psychological communication between the spirit of death and living beings. It is further mentioned that the inner philosophy of this concept is “to detain the soul of the dying man by offering his favourite dishes, displaying his most cherished possession, praising his noble deeds.”<sup>111</sup> In fact, the concept of ancestor worship perhaps, was emerged after the flourishing of a settled life.

The term “ancestor worship” was known as “*Apokpa Khurumba*”. This religious ritual is also an important part of the primary religion of Manipur.<sup>112</sup> Ancestor worship among the Meiteis exposes formal expression in the performance of various rites and rituals which are observed for the numerous deities throughout the year. The Meiteis way of life is said to be full of prayers and other religious activities which revolve round a series of rituals. In the prescribed ways of touching on religious acts and events, ways of worshipping, chanting, sacrificing, making offerings, etc. are practiced in rituals.<sup>113</sup> In this ritualistic process, the people worshipped cosmology and forefathers.<sup>114</sup> Rituals may be said to implement beliefs. Ancestors are linked to their descendants by a chain of rituals, thus affirming the continuity of social relations through time.<sup>115</sup> It is believed that the people worship their forefathers for some specific reasons. The first reason is for getting offspring, the second is for getting wealth and the thirdly for good health. But, the nature of worship is varied according to the clan.<sup>116</sup> The seven clans of Manipur have their own distinctive nature of rites and ritual.<sup>117</sup> In the Meitei society *Taibangpanba Mapu*, the nine *Laibunghous* (divine youths), the seven *Lainuras* (divine girls) and the *Maigei Ngakpa lais* (god of the directions) are ancestors of all the Meiteis and are evoked at various public rituals, although they may also be worshipped along with the *Salai Apokpas* at home.<sup>118</sup>

Another religious concept practiced in the Meitei society was the worship of non-living objectives, like trees, plants, rivers, hills and other celestial elements like moon, planets, stars, etc. Such type of religious belief is also categorized by some writers as the true form of animism. According to them, it is a “doctrine which places the source of mental and even physical life of energy independent of or at least distinct from the body”. It is also believed that animism is a concept of thoughts in spiritual beings that are concerned with the human affairs and proficient of intervening in them. In the every stages of the developmental process of human beings need help from the natural objectives like trees, plants and animals and non-living objectives. Therefore, in order to get certain requirements from them people began to treat them with special care. These natural objectives were animated by the people and started to worship them as an incarnation or representatives of unseen divine elements. Their main objective was to make an alliance between human kind and natural objects to obtain supernatural ally against supernatural foes. Thus, under this spontaneous process, the people began to worship all sorts of natural objectives including sun, moon, sky, etc. which they always considered as an indispensable ally for the growth of meaningful transition from savagery to civilization. Such type of developmental process may be treated as a transition from natural to an artificial basis. The domestication of animals and cultivation of plants was indeed, an outcome of the establishment of alliance between nature and human beings. Thus the unions between nature and human beings have produced a strong impetus in the process of the growth of the society and ultimately this process of union became a part of the customary religion.<sup>119</sup>

The concept of Mother Goddess is also practiced in the Meitei society. Mother Goddess is known as *Lairembi*. She was worshipped under various local

names, such as *Nongpok-Panthoibi*, *Irai-Leima*, *Soubon-Lairema*, *Leinao-Tabi*, *Phauoibi*, *Leimarel*, *Yumjao-Lairembi*, *Konthoujam-Lairembi*, *Soubon-Lairembi* and *Heisnam-Lairembi*. The female deities of the Meitei pantheon are enumerated as the manifestation of Shakti worship in local tradition. When the Hinduisation process started in the valley of Manipur, *Panthoibi*, the supreme goddess of the Meitei pantheon was identified with *Kali* of the Hindu pantheon. Later on, she was identified with *Durga* or *Kali*.<sup>120</sup> The practice of worshipping this goddess became very helpful in the development of Shaktism in the local tradition of the Meiteis.<sup>121</sup>

Another important feature of Meitei beliefs was the worship of ancestral deities.<sup>122</sup> The deities which the Meiteis worship are nearly four hundred in number. All of them can be characterized as ancestor deities who encompass the entire Meitei pantheon. According to the Meiteis, there is no god greater than *Taibangpanba Mapu* or *Taibangmapu Sidaba*. The whole Meitei families trace their roots from this immortal father. In the Meitei society, the ancestral spirits, both divine and human are designated as *Umanglais* (sylvan deities). There are many interpretations regarding the proper term and concept of *Umanglais*.<sup>123</sup> Regarding this subject, scholars like Saroj Nalini Paratt and John Shakespeare mention the literal meaning of *Umanglai* as sylvan god or forest deity. In the primitive period, the abodes of these deities were in the groves which were believed to be holy sites free from abnormal things. It formulates the idea that the deities which were worshipped in the forest came to be known as *Umanglais*. But, the literal meaning cannot be considered as solid term. O. Bhogeshore compares the *Umanglais* with the unseen organisms of the human body. He remarks that the unseen supernatural power of the deities was so obscure that nobody could

understand it. Its obscurity was just like thick forest.<sup>124</sup> The functions of the organisms were shown in the form of ceremonial rites of *Lai Haraoba* (pleasing of the Gods and Goddesses). The art of performing *Lai Haraoba* as a social institution imparts knowledge of cosmogony and human activities. It was mainly to please the deities as well as to bring social unity. Originally there were nine *Umanglais* which was expanded upto more than three hundred *Lais*.<sup>125</sup> There are some interpretations about the figure of *Umanglais*. W. Lukhoi Singh observes that there were three hundred and seventy eight *Umanglais* in Meitei society. But, Pandit Ng. Kulachandra prepared a list of three hundred and sixty two *Umanglais*. A comparative study of these lists indicates that a number of *Umanglais* were incorporated into the Meitei pantheon during various stages of the history of Manipur.<sup>126</sup>

The first nine *Umanglais* were the nine *Laibungthous* (divine youths) who assisted the supreme Lord in leveling the newly created earth and making it habitable. According to *Lai Khunta Lon Puya* (an ancient text), *Lairen Taoroinai* extracted the nine *Umanglais* from *Laiwaikhong* in the present Senapati district. The numerous names of the *Umanglais* mention in the ancient text (*puya*) are *Muwa Ningthou Apanba*, *Laithou Ahanba*, *Chakhaba*, *Koubaren*, *Khamlangba*, *Luwang Ningthou*, *Marjing*, *Wangbaren* and *Thangjing*. All these deities guarded the strategic points of the earth from the evil spirits.<sup>127</sup>

The *Umanglais* are worshipped in the various festivals. The festivals of the Meiteis which were celebrated in honour of the ancestral *lais* (deities) are *Cheiraoba*, *Chingoi Iruppa*, *Heikru Hidongba*, *Mera Mentongba*, *Hiyang Tanaba*, *Kwak Tanba*, *Lai Keithel Kaba* and *Lai Haraoba*.<sup>128</sup> The worship of the deities with the help of music and dances to ensure the welfare of the community is a part

of their religious beliefs. The community festival of *Lai Haraoba* (pleasing of the Gods and Goddesses) is supposed to strengthen the God and make him more capable of helping the worshippers.<sup>129</sup> Therefore, *Lai Haraoba* became a part and parcel of the indigenous religion of the Meities of this valley.<sup>130</sup>

The *Lai Haraoba* festival of Manipur may be said the mirror of the rich indigenous beliefs of the Meiteis. The word *Lai Haraoba* literally interpret as, *lai*: god, and *haraoba* to rejoice. This traditional festival is performed to pleasing the gods and goddesses.<sup>131</sup> The essence of this ritual is that it is performed to call up the *lai* and to give him pleasure. In fact, this ritual was performed mainly for growth of population, economic prosperity and atmosphere of peace and calm in the society.<sup>132</sup> A popular myth traced the origin of the *Lai Haraoba*. According to this myth, the valley of Manipur remained submerged under water for a very long time. Nine *Laibunghous* (divine youth) and seven *Lainuras* (divine girls) in joint collaboration succeeded in making sixty four hillocks. Then, Lord Shiva is credited with making a hole through the hill with a trident thereby draining out all the water and making the land fit for habitation. To celebrate the happy event, Shiva along with a host of Gods and Goddesses performed a dance. This dance form is known as *Lai Haraoba* dance.<sup>133</sup>

The period of first historical king Nongda Lairen Pakhangba marked the emergence of seven *salais* and many lineages (*yumnaks*) were attached to the deities. Due to the expansion of the lineage the numbers of the deities came to be increased. The ceremonial rites of *Lai Haraoba* fostered the offerings to the deities. The *Maibas* and *Maibis* (priest and priestess) had played a very important role in the ritual of *Lai Haraoba*. Without the ritual service of the *Maibas* and the

*Maibis*, *Lai Haraoba* cannot be performed. In Manipur, there were different types of *Lai Haraoba*<sup>134</sup> –

- Kanglei Haraoba
- Chakpa Haraoba
- Andro Haraoba
- Sekmai Haraoba
- Moirang / Thangjing Haraoba
- Kakching Haraoba

However, the basic pattern of the various forms of *Lai Haraoba* is same everywhere, but there is slight variation. Some deities are worshipped annually while others are worshipped at the interval of some specific years.<sup>135</sup> In the festival of *Lai Haraoba*, the actual ritual starts with the calling up of the spirit from water (a pond or river) known as *Lai Ikouba*. The *Maibas* and *Maibis* prepared for *Lai Ikouba* (calling of Gods from water) in which *Maibi* asked men and women to stand into two rows for procession.<sup>136</sup> Two persons were selected as *Laipuba* to carry the deity on the *Ishaiphu* (earthen pitchers) containing *Leiyom*. The *Maibi* wraps up *Isaiphu* containing *Hiri* (a thread) in a *higaophi* (a kind of shawl) and tie them around the neck of the *Laipuba* (bearer of the Gods). Then, the *Maibi* begins the opening dance *Leihou Jagoi* (dance of creation of universe) to the tune of *Pena* (a musical instrument) along with the *Maibas* and *Pena* singers lead the procession to the river or pond. Gold and silver coins representing the sky were thrown into the water. Then, the *Maibas* and *Maibis* perform *Khayom Lakpa* offering two *Khayoms* (a package of rice, egg, and three buds of *langthrei* wrapped in plantain leaves) one for *Lainingthou* and another for *Leimarembi*. After the offering of *Khayom*, the *Maibi* took the two *Isaiphu* from

the bearers of *Lai* and danced holding the “*Isaiphu*” starting from the south-west direction dedicating her dance to the guardian gods of the four directions, namely “*Thangjing*” of the south east, “*Marjing*” of the north-east, “*Wangbaren*” of the south-east and “*Koubru*” of the north-west. After the dance the *Maibi* returns the *Isaiphu* to the *Laipubas*. Then, the whole procession enters the *Laibung* and the *Maiba* and the *Maibi* hold the *Hiri*. The *Maiba* holding the *Hiri* touches the naval of the *Lainingthou* and the *Maibi* holding the *Hiri* touches the navel of the *Lairembi*, thus the spirits are transmitted into the deities. The *Maibas* perform the purification rites known as *Anam Aha Kokpa* and the *Pena* singers play *Pena*.<sup>137</sup> After that, the *Maibis* wrapped the “*Leiyom*” in the thread and then placed it on the *Isaiphu*. The thread in the left hand was put in the *Lainingthou*’s *Isaiphu* and with it the ritual of *Ikouba* was over and *Lai* was brought to “*Laisang*” (temple). It is to be noted that on the way back, the *Maibis* performed a dance called “*Khunjao Leichao Jagoi*”. *Pena* players played *Pena* in the tune of *Higarol*. Then the *Maibis* kept the *Isaiphu* inside the temple and the threads were taken out of the *Isaiphu* and kept at the naval of images, which is called “*Hiri Punba*”. After that, the *Maibi* opened the *Leiyom* of the *Lainingthou*. The five buds of *Langthrei* which contained in the *Leiyom* were placed before the *Lainingthou*. In the *Leiyoms* of the *Leimarembi*, there were only seven buds of the *Langthrei* which were placed before her. The offering of *Langthrei* is known as “*Lei Hunba*”.<sup>138</sup> This was followed by “*Chaningthaba*” in which a plantain leave was placed in four corners of the bench of the *lais*. Nine small plantain leaves for the *Laibungthous* were placed on the right side of the *Luklen* and on the left seven leaves for *Leimarembi*. After that *Maibi* performed a rite called *Anam Athou* in order to keep away the influenced of the evils by sprinkling water that brought from the stream or lakes.



It followed *Laipao Chenba* (delivering oracle) and *Lai Haraoba* is then closed with “*Saroi Khangba*”.<sup>139</sup> The main object of this ritual is to ward off the attentions of the evil spirits who have been watching the festival. Then, the foods are offered at the four corners of the temples yard to appease the evil spirits. The *Lai Haraoba* is a one of the important ritual ceremony of the traditional religion of the Meiteis.<sup>140</sup> It is not only the most important of the traditional rituals but also a very valuable source of information about traditional Meitei religious rituals.

*Cheiraoba* is an important festival of the Meitei community. The new year of the Meiteis is popularly known as *Sajibu Cheiraoba* which is observed with a grand feast on the first day of the month of *Sajibu* (March-April).<sup>141</sup> This festival was originally celebrated under the name of *Poireigi Lakyen Taiba*. It is also known as *Khungi Lakyen Taiba* or *Sajibu Lakyen Taiba*.<sup>142</sup> This festival is closely associated with the worship of the household deities, *Sanamahi* and *Leimarel* and offer articles like cloth, fruits, flowers and vegetables.<sup>143</sup> According to S.N.Paratt, “The name *Cheiraoba* literally means to announce by means of stick.”<sup>144</sup> It is stated that, the head of the four *panas* (territorial divisions) carried a bamboo stick with a small flag and a bell at the top, proclaiming *Cheiraoba* with the stick. This practice carried on till the time of king Kyamba who introduced the system of *Cheithaba* in the year 1485 CE. *Cheithaba* literally means “the counting of sticks”.<sup>145</sup> According to the tradition of Meitei, a day was counted as one *shing*, i.e. stick. A complete month was represented by thirty sticks and one *shing* made twelve months. Therefore, a year was counted by using the symbol of sticks. The heads of the four *panas* was replaced by a *Cheithaba*. The *Cheithaba* person was intended to bear all the misfortunes that would befall the king and his subjects for the particular year he is announce as *Cheithaba*.<sup>146</sup> In the Meitei society, the

*Cheithaba* was let off from the *Lallup* duty (state service) and granted a *pari* of paddy field which is equivalent to 2.5 acres of the English and also an attendant who was also exempted from *Lallup* duty. The significant act of installation the *Cheithaba* took place on the eve of the new year (the last day of the month *Lamda*) before the king. As a custom, the outgoing *Cheithaba* is seated on the right side of the king and the *Cheithaba* for the coming year on the left side and they exchanged places. Then the *Cheithaba* for the previous year addressed the king as follows:

“Oh, my Lord, *Ibungo Lainingthou Ningthourel*, the great, let the country be more prosperous in the production of rice, fish and sales than the last year”.<sup>147</sup>

The festival of *Cheiraoba* had been observed with the sense of purity. On the day of *Cheiraoba* or before the day of *Cheiraoba* every family cleans their respective houses. In the royal palace, the ritual called “*Saroi Khangba*” is performed in all four directions in honour of the four guardian deities of Meiteis for the welfare and protection of the whole kingdom.

The significant feature of *Cheiraoba* is that, the *Maibi* went to “*Heibok Ching*” which is situated about 7 or 8 miles to the south of the *Kangla* and conducted a ritual with pieces of six inches long reed stick which is known as “*Singtek Singthaba*’ before the day of *Cheiraoba*. The another important ceremony which is performed one day before *Cheiraoba* was the “*Thouniba*” which may be interpreted as appeasement known as “*Sing Satpa*”. *Cheiraoba* festival is also associated with the worship of household deities *Sanamahi* and *Leimarel*. On the day of the *Cheiraoba*, every household offered rice, fish, vegetables, fruits, flowers, etc. to *Sanamahi* and *Leimarel* as well as prepared

meal which is offered to household deities. The *isaiphu* (earthen pot) of *Leimarel* is filled with fresh water on this new year day.<sup>148</sup> A small part of the cooked food was firstly offered to the deities, which is done at the gate of each house to seek their blessings, protection from any harmful events of the year and prays for the prosperity of the family. The same offerings were also made to *Sanamahi* and *Leimarel* and after that, the family members ate the food. Then, after taking the meal, the people irrespective of ages climbed the nearby hill to worship the gods whose abode was on the top hills. During these five days, all professional activities are suspended for five days from the date of *Cheiraoba*, which is known as *Silhenba*. The five days are spent their time in playing a traditional indoor game known as *Kang*.<sup>149</sup>

*Chingoi Irupa* is a popular festival of the Meiteis, which came to be closely connected with the belief of the traditional religion. “*Chingoi*” is a name of a small river flowing in the *Nongmaiching* hill situated about 12 kms to the East of the Manipur’s Capital Imphal. *Chingoi Irupa* may be interpreted as taking bath at the *Chingoi* river. *Chingoi Irupa* has been celebrating in Manipur every year on a particular day which falls three days before the New Moon. It is also stated that this festival is performed on the 28<sup>th</sup> of *Lamda* (March-April) of the Meitei calendar year. Before offering prayer to *Lainingthou Nongpok* (*Nongpok Ningthou*) and *Leimaren Panthoibi*, the people used to take bath in this *Chingoi Turel* (river).<sup>150</sup> The Meiteis believed that a holy dip in river purifies the person from all his sins. After that, they climb up to the abode of the deities and offer prayer which is known as “*Chingoi Iruppa*.” However, after the adoption of the Hindu religion as the state religion, the *Chingoi Iruppa* began to be known as *Chingoi Baruni* or *Baruni Khurumba*” which means to give salutation to *Baruni*.

On that day, the people of both male and female irrespective of the ages use to go the *Nongmaiching* hill to worship the deities which are located at different places in natural way.<sup>151</sup>

*Heikru Hidongba* is also a religious festival of Manipur. It is a kind of boat race performed only after the offering of *heikru* (emblic myrobalam in botanical term) a kind of fruit to the god.<sup>152</sup> This religious festival is enjoyed by the people as an important part of the cultural life of the state. The festival is held every year on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the month *Langban* (August/September).<sup>153</sup> It is performed at a moat which is situated near the temple of Bijoy Govinda, a deity of Hindu religion. In this festival, *Pakhangba* was worshipped and *Maiba* (priest) played an important role.<sup>154</sup> The main feature of this festival is boat race and accordingly, the two boats were ready for the boating race.<sup>155</sup> In this ritualistic festival, every sailor including the leader so called *Tengmai Leppa* puts the garland of *Heikru* on their neck. It is believed that this garland is prepared for this festival. Accordingly, a garland of one hundred and eight *Heikrus* (emblic myrobalam) is ready and a kind of leaf called *Hup* is put in between the two fruit, and another type of rice garland with a number of 108 is also prepared and offered to the God. This is followed by boat race.<sup>156</sup> According to *Sakok Lamlen*, this ritual ceremony of the Meiteis was started during the reign of king Irengba.<sup>157</sup> The significance of the festival is that, *Pakhangba* is recognized for the prosperity and welfare of the kingdom. The casting of *Konyai* (gold and silver pieces) in the ritual is to pray to the *lai* (deities) that the king may be able to extend his suzerainty over neighbouring kingdoms. Thus, this festival is described in the royal chronicle as a very big festival. In this connection, R. Brown observed that this festival was one of the important festival held in Manipur.<sup>158</sup>

*Mera Mentongba* is a ceremonial rite of the Meiteis which was held on the full moon of Lunar month of *Mera* (October). The worship of *Sanamahi* and *Pakhangba* was the main function of this ceremonial rite in which two thrones for the two deities and seven for the seven *salais* were arranged.<sup>159</sup> In front of the two thrones, an earthen pot was kept. They were surrounded by that of seven “*Lai Nuras*” and nine *Laibunghous*”. Seven colour flags were also associated with the seven clan deities. According to the text of Ningthourol Lambuba, “*Meitei Leima Hounuhan*”, the queen of “*Khui Ningomba*” participated in this “*Mera Mentongba*” festival. Another ancient Manipuri text, *Sakok Lamlen Ahanba puya* mentioned “*Mentongba*” and stated that king Irengba was advised by the *Maiba* (priest), to perform “*Mentongba*”.<sup>160</sup>

*Hiyang Tanaba* (boat race) is also one of the important festivals of the Meitei community which is associated with the religious practices. It was introduced during the period of king Koiremba (1507-1511CE) in the month of *Hiyangei* (November). It was during the period of king Khagemba (1597-1652 CE), that moats were dug on four sides of the king’s palace at Kangla and boat races were held annually. A long moat was also dug by king Khagemba at Langthabal from Thongju to Lilong. King Khagemba introduced “*Pana Hiyang*” (*Pana* boat race) for the first time in Manipur. This is one of the traditional festivals practicing in the Meitei society.<sup>161</sup>

*Kwak Tanba* is a traditional festival of the Meiteis of Manipur. The literally meaning of *Kwak Tanba* is “driving off the crows”. *Kwak* means crow and *Tanba*, to drive off. The main principle of this ritual is for divination of good or bad omen of the year for the king and the subjects which is determined by observing the direction of the fly of crows. This ritual is performed in every year

on the tenth day of the month of *Mera* (September/October) with great grandeur.<sup>162</sup> Before the performance of this ritual some food items, such as parched rice (*kabok apha*) and prawns (*Khajing*) are scattered at the selected site to entice the crows. On the day of *Kwak Jatra*, a loud sound of a gunshot disperses the crows. This particular day is known as *Kwak Tanba* day. The result is anticipated on the flying direction of crows, if they fly towards the direction of North (*Awang*), North-East (*Chingkhei*), East (*Nongpok*) and North-West (*Koubru*) then it is a good result. If the crows fly in other directions then bad omen is anticipated for the year.<sup>163</sup> According to N. Khelchandra, this festival was introduced during the reign of king Garibniwaz. But some scholars believe that the original ritual was called “*Ukai Kappa*.”<sup>164</sup>

This ritual is accompanied by amusements, like sword dancing, spear dancing, *Mukna* (Meitei style of wrestling), etc. Afterward, for the prosperity and welfare of the state, a ritual song called *Ougri* is chanted. The *Kwak Tanba* ritual is believed as foretell of omens. However, this ritual was a secret for the subjugation of enemies, neighboring rulers, native courtiers and nobles. The heads represented by betel nuts were buried at *Nungoibi* with due ritual. Although the Meitei ritual of *Kwak Tanba* has manifold significance yet the important source is political.<sup>165</sup>

*Lai Chaklon Katpa* is also one of the domestic festivals of Meitei community. This festival may be held in any month of the year except *Poinu* (November/December) and *Wakching* (December/January). This is the festival wherein the *sagei lai* (god of the *sagei* or lineage) is highly honoured. Most of the *sagei* have their own particular *lai* and *lairema* (god and goddesses), which they worship and bear the name of the clan. The *sagei lai* (the god of the clan or

extended family group) are male and female and are commonly considered as the progenitors of the *sagei*. The *sagei lai* are kept in the custody of *piba*, (head of the family group) and are represented by two bamboo tubes which are kept in a basket. The contents of these tubes are not displayed but are closely guarded secret.<sup>166</sup> The general view is that, they contain relics believed to have been preserved from the original *sagei pokpa* (clan ancestor). A further development has taken place among some *sagei* that the *sagei lai* is represented by a small doll (*lai fadibi*) which is wrapped into a cloth. It is the duty of the *maibi* (priestess) to dress the *lai fadibi*. In other cases, the *lai* (god) is represented at the *Lai Haraoba* by a brass mask with a cloth placed beneath in it to represent the body of the *lai* and a second cloth on it is to represent a turban. It is not clear when these developments took place, although it is evident that images came to be used more during the period of Hindu ascendancy under Garibniwaz. On the other hand, some scholars trace the use of the mask back to the time of Khagemba in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century CE. This festival is like a *Lai Haraoba* but smaller than it. Unlike this festival, it has to be completed in one day.<sup>167</sup> It is strictly confined to members of the particular *sagei* and the outsiders may not be admitted.

In Manipur, art and culture embodied neither mere entertainment nor decoration but they became the very part and parcel of life itself. Apart from happiness and merrymaking, these festivals represented significant facets of religious expression- a composite form of worship and prayer associated intimately with the life ways of the people themselves. This expression of art is a spiritual history of the people clearly seen in the dance and various other leelas and festivals which exhibit visibly the underlying spiritual forces that became the explicit foundation of Manipuri culture. The Meiteis were one of the small ethnic

groups inhabiting in the valley of Manipur. In spite of being a small number, they had their own traditional religion and culture. In the course of the evolution of Meitei society, the traditional religion and culture of the Meities had been further enriched with the absorption and assimilation of elements from other Hindu cultures.



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