

Radha–Krishna Cult in Meitei Religion

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Abstract

Syncretism is the blending of different cultural or religious beliefs, practices or tradition into a new form. People use syncretism to navigate and adapt to new situations, but because various groups may perceive and respond to the process differently, it can also lead to conflict. In case of the *Meitei* religion also the process of synthesis was not of any unilinear dimension. We could see the elements of incorporation, amalgamation, absorption or conversion — all to be prevalent in the *Meitei* religio-cultural realm. Initially on the adoption of Vaishnavism indigenous gods of the *Meiteis* were transformed into the Vaishnava deities. This stage was followed by willful absorption of many deities from the Vaishnava pantheon. Today, Vaishnavism and the traditional beliefs of the *Meiteis* are largely interwoven in Meitei religious life. The notions that are derived from both traditions are applied to the worship of all the deities. Over the periods of Hindu influence, it is noticed that a unique *Meitei* philosophy is originated (following the periods of transition and transformation). Vaishnavism is internalized to such an extent that rooting it out completely from the community mind set is next to impossible a task. The fact that the Vaishnavism practiced in the *Meitei* homeland is in no way an identical clone of Bengal Vaishnavism is another significant element of the Manipur instance. It has established its own guidelines. In Manipur, a peculiar *Meitei* Vaishnavism that combines the new faith with practices from the past might be observed.

Keywords: Meitei, Radha-Krishna, Vaishnavism, bhakti, Hinduism, religion, syncretism

Background of the Study:

Manipur (also called the city or the land of gems) is a premier state in north-east India. The state is inhabited by several communities of people living both in the hills and the plains. The state has a multicultural composition. The *Meiteis* along with the Nagas and Kukis and a few other tribes are the dwellers of it. The *Meiteis* presently constitute a considerable portion of the entire inhabitants in the state Manipur. Their representations in the Assam and Tripura states are also equally significant. Not only they do exercise their claims upon a distinct religious identity both before and after the Hinduization of their state religion, but also treat themselves as owners of a distinct cultural and linguistic heritage. The *Meiteis* believe that an important

aspect of the cultural and the spiritual customs that they are following now has come down to them through a long ancestry. In their myths and legends, or the rites and rituals, the primitive form of the tradition is still prominently visible. But apart from its indigenous primitive character this religion is noticed to have accommodated within it different elements of the beliefs and practices of the Vaishnavite Hinduism too. The *Meitei* religious identity, at present, is seen to be an amalgamation of the indigenous belief systems with the Vaishnavite cults. The *Meitei* pantheon has number of ruling deities of the household (*Imung Lai*), of the outside spheres (*Lamhang Lai*) and the forestry (*Umang Lai*) who are regularly worshipped along with several other Hindu gods and goddesses. The belief in the reality of a Supreme Being named *Taibang Mapu Sidaba*, who is considered to be a formless divinity, is significant among the *Meiteis*. Myriads of his manifestations are described in the different oral narratives and the few preserved written documents or the *Puyas*. The two important progenies of him are God *Sanamahi* (household deity) and God *Pakhangba* (ancestral deity). While both of them are equally important deities for the *Meiteis* yet in terms of his ‘pervasive influence’ the claim of *Sanamahi* has been proved to be much stronger than the other deity (Laisram 2009, p. 101). As a creator of the world and the mankind (The Sakok Lamlen Ahanba Puya) and as a protecting deity of every household *Sanamahi* gained centrality in the cultural and the religious life of the *Meiteis*. Due to the reason the Pre-Hindu *Meitei* religion is considered as *Sanamahism* (Laisram, 2009, pp. 100–101). *Sanamahi* worship as a practicing cult of the community has had a long history which in all likelihood could go back to the days of its origin. During the reign of Khagemba (1597-1652) the formal deification of *Sanamahi* took place at first in the state though the practice of worshipping the deity is regarded to be an age-old one. Apart from being worshipped primarily as a household deity, *Sanamahi* is worshipped as a state or royal god (*Lainingthou Sanamahi*), as a Sun-God and as a God of destruction (*Sanamahi Apoiba*) as well.

The arrival of Brahmanic Vaishnavism in the state marked the beginning of the *Meitei*’s next phase of religious development. The reign of King Bhagyachandra (1749–1798) marked the turning point of the new variety’s religion. Pamheiba (1709-1748) was the initial ruler who was converted into Vaishnavite Hinduism in 1717 by Guru Gopal Das, also known as Shanti Das. Following his initiation Pamheiba adopted a Hindu name Garib Niwaz and attempted to forcibly convert the Manipuris into Vaishnava Hindus. Due to the influence of the Brahmins, the King issued an order to burn to ashes all versions of the ancient Holy Scriptures (*Puya*) and books that belonged to the local priests (*Maichous*) and the general population. This incident is still referred to as “*Puya Meithaba*” in Manipur history. In the process the *Meiteis* rendered a great loss of their early cultural and the religious history. *Puyas* was not your typical book. In actuality, they documented the precepts of the *Meitei* ancestors. Written largely by *Maichous* (priests), they also include historical narratives, regal records, events, social organizational setup, ritual knowledge, and religious festivals and activities.

As visible from the historical records, during the period of Bhagyachandra there was a change in the entire religious scenario of the state. As of the marked difference in the attitude of the latter King the state

religion took a turn toward willful absorption of Vaishnavism as a cult leaving aside the earlier fanatic mode of conversion. While Garib Niwaz embraced Hinduism and attempted to extend it by force and terror Bhagyachandra attempted to propagate the cult in a peaceful manner. The *Meiteis* were brought under the purview of Hinduism more through persuasion which came to have a long-lasting impact on the lives of the Manipuri Hindus. As a result of Manipur's conversion to Hinduism, the *Meitei* community began to speak for the state's majority. People of the *Meitei* community who refused to adopt Hinduism like the Lois preferred to stay away from the main land and got confined to the hilly region along with the other non-*Meitei* hill tribes. The two communities – the *Meitei* Hindus of the plain and the Lois of the Hills still bear a common ancestry (Hodson, 2010), worship similar deities (*Imung Lai*, *Umung Lai* and *Lamhang Lai*), share similar folks and legends, observe similar festivals like that of *Lai Haraoba* indicating their uniform cultural past.

The Rise of Radha-Krishna Cult:

The *Meitei/Meetei/Manipuri* is the largest ethnic community in Manipur. Hindu deities, Radha and Krishna, are the focal points of the Radha-Krishna cult, a religious movement. Followers of this sect hold that Radha and Krishna's holy love represents the highest level of spiritual connection and devotion. In order to achieve spiritual enlightenment and emancipation, the religion places a strong emphasis on the importance of unselfish love, devotion, and surrender to Radha and Krishna. Although adherents can be found all throughout the world, it is mainly practiced in India. The bhakti movement, a devotional branch of Hinduism that originated in medieval India, is frequently linked to the Radha-Krishna cult. Manipur can be divided into the hills and valleys and is the traditional home of the *Meitei* community. The history of kingly rule as well as the evolution of religious and ethnic changes is covered in *Cheitharol Kumbaba* of Manipur royal chronicle. It is filled with stories and traditions about how Radha-Krishna bhakti was subjugated or merged with *Meiteis* old *Sanamahi*. R.K. Jhalajit claims that King Charairongba was impacted by the Nimbarka School of Vaishnavism, which revered Shri Krishna as the supreme deity and regarded him as an incarnation of Vishnu (Jhaljit, 1965, pp. 116). Building a Krishna temple at Brahmapur Guru *Aribam Leikai*, Imphal, in 1707 CE, King *Charairongba* dedicated it to Shri Krishna as a devotee of Lord Krishna and to spread his beliefs. G.P Singh states that one of King Charairongba's most significant contributions to Manipuri culture was the construction of the Krishna temple. Hinduism acquired momentum during the reign of King *Charairongba*, owing to the spread of Vaishnavite teachings. The *Meitei* people of Manipur worship both Radha and Krishna together, rather than just Krishna (Singh, 2012, pp. 34-35).

K.B. Singh claims that the creation and growth of Radha-Krishna bhakti is the outcome of the "cross fertilization of the two religious forces- Vaishnavism and *Sanamahism*." The third quarter of the 18th century saw the introduction of Chaitanya Vaishnavism from Bengal into Manipur, which led to the worship of Krishna as Govinda becoming central to *Meitei* tradition (Singh, 1963, pp. 66-72). In a *Meitei* household, the eldest person usually has a wooden box with a little picture of Krishna or Shri Govinda, a mirror, a comb, pieces of

Chandan, a rosary made of tulsi beads, and chhapa to represent tilak. Following the death of King *Charairongba*, his son Garibniwaz assumed the throne and, at the direction of Shanti Das, began an offensive against the ancient *Meitei* faith. His fanatical religious doctrine is based on forcing its unwilling people to convert to the new religion. The *Meitei* people's socio cultural and religious systems saw significant transformation as a result of his initiatives. In the 18th century, Radha Krishna bhakti and Chaitanya Vaishnavism were prevalent throughout the Manipur valleys. During this time, Manipur was ruled by King Bhagyachandra. According to N. Joykumar Singh, the two most significant occasions that took place during Bhagyachandra's rule were the installation of the Govindaji image and the taming of the insane elephant in Assam in 1776 CE.

Rajarsi Bhagyachandra came to the throne in 1759, and his reign was characterized by the Burmese struggle with Manipur and his declaration of faith in Krishna as a source of protection and remedies to his troubles. Bhagyachandra escaped to the king of Ahom's court in 1762 when the Burmese invaded Manipur (Assam). It was common knowledge that Bhagyachandra was a devoted, pious, and skillful king. The true king of Manipur was endowed with magical abilities, therefore the king of Ahom, while taking refuge, received a letter from Bhagyachandra's uncle alerting him to the fact that the person seeking asylum was not Bhagyachandra. This message alarmed the Ahom monarch, who set up a challenge for Bhagyachandra wherein he had to trap and tame a wild elephant without any weapons. Bhagyachandra was worried and prayed to Lord Krishna, who then showed up in his dream and told him to enter the arena with the japa beads and garland to win. In addition, the tradition goes, Krishna made him swear that upon his return to his kingdom, he would erect a statue of Govinda composed of jackfruit trees. He even gave King Bhagyachandra access to his Rasleela. The wild elephant bowed before Bhagyachandra the following day after he followed Krishna's advice from his dream. The story goes that Krishna, like a mahout, sat on the elephant's head. On observing this, the Ahom king extended an offer to help Bhagyachandra reclaim his land. As was promised, Sapam Lakshman sculpted four exquisite statues from the jackfruit tree on the Kaina hill slopes, and Bhagyachandra gave his soldiers the task of finding it. Though exquisite, the initial sculpture of Sri Govindaji did not resemble the image of Krishna that Bhagyachandra had in his dream.

Thus, three more were cut till Govindaji, or Krishna, was finally formed. In 1776, it was installed on a day with a full moon. The king even went so far as to establish Govindam, the state religion, which is the worship of Radha Krishna. Bhagyachandra also promised to fulfill his royal duties as Lord Govind's servant and dedicated his throne to Lord Krishna. By formally handing up the crown to Krishna, *Meiteis* dominion was restored, and a spiritual bond with Vaishnavism was made. The love between Radha and Krishna is the central theme of the *Meitei* Ras Leela dance, which is a full manifestation of their devotion to Radha Krishna. Rasleela's connection to Sankirtana was a major component in the *Meiteis*' embrace of the Krishna faith. There was no goddess representing the lord's consort, Radha, even though the statue of Lord Govind acted as Krishna during Ras Leela. When Bhagyachandra engaged his daughter, prince Bimbavati, to Govindaji, or Krishna, the

need was satisfied. In folklore, the princess spent her whole life at Krishna-Bhakti. All was overcome by her devotion to Krishna. Princess Bimbavati gained disrepute in the past as “Sija Lairiobi,” or the princess who belonged to the lord. In the end, a golden goddess in the likeness of Radha was produced. In general, there is a syncretistic relationship between the Vaishnava and *Meitei* indigenous traditions.

It can be ascertained that the kind of Vaishnavism followed in Manipur was in no way confined to any single doctrinal structure or sect. On the contrary, the arrival of multiple types of Vaishnavite schools has enriched the *Meitei* religio-cultural world-view in a considerable manner. Although at times conflicts among the sects were not scarce yet in the long run they kept on influencing each other. The peaceful co-existence and assimilation of the various sects could take place during King Bhagyachandra’s time because of the empathic attitude of the emperor. The King contributed to the formation of many innovative ideas that facilitated cultural transformation. Fresh forms of creative arts were developed in his time. Hence, the ancient *Meitei* religion and culture adapted itself with the new facets of Hinduism. Following this process of Hinduization several *Meitei* gods and goddesses, rituals and festivals, myths and legends, the cultural history, genealogy etc. were re-conceptualized and reinterpreted.

The influence of Vaishnavism can be seen in the sphere of Manipuri art, dance, and music, which often revolves around the stories and teachings of Lord Vishnu and his avatars. However, it is significant to noting that the *Meitei* community has also preserved its pre-Hindu beliefs and practices. These changes are reflected in the modification of the socio-cultural norms and practices like marriage, in food-habits, dress, writing of scripts, in the art forms, in the forms of worship and so on. The worship of traditional ancestral deities continues to be an integral part of their religious customs. The *Meitei* community has successfully integrated Vaishnavite practice into their daily lives while retaining their distinctive cultural identity and traditional beliefs. Hinduism brought about remarkable changes in the socio-cultural life of the *Meiteis*. Both internal and external changes have been noticed to take place in the social strata, cultural gamut and the religious spheres.

Vaishnavism had a significant impact on *Meitei* society; it is important to note that it coexisted with the pre-existing indigenous beliefs and practices. Today, *Meitei* society retains a unique blend of indigenous and Vaishnavite traditions, forming a distinct religious and cultural identity. It can be stated thus that after the entry of Vaishnavism into *Meitei* community life, it gradually became a dominant force in shaping the culture, religion, and social fabric of the *Meitei* people. Vaishnavism brought about significant changes in *Meitei* society, leading to the adoption of Hindu practices, the introduction of Sanskrit as a sacred language, and the establishment of temples and rituals associated with Vaishnavism. Vaishnavism also influenced the *Meitei* worldview, with concepts such as karma, rebirth, and moksha becoming integral parts of their belief system. This resulted in a shift from the indigenous *Meitei* religion towards a syncretic blend of Hindu and *Meitei* beliefs. The introduction of Vaishnavism had a profound impact on *Meitei* social structure, as it led to the emergence of a hierarchical caste

system that mirrored the Hindu caste system. This resulted in social stratification and divisions based on birth and occupation.

The majority of the Meiteis becomes Hindus in their external outlook with traditional values, beliefs and customs in the core of their lives. They become occasional devotees of Hindu gods and goddesses while worshipping traditional deities inside their homes every single day. The worship Krishna, Radha, Durga, Shiva etc., when their occasions like Holi, Durga Puja, Shivaratri and Rathayatra comes but they are always in connection with traditional deities like Sanamahi, Leimarel Sidabi, Apokpa and Umang Lais etc. throughout the year of their lives. Thus, in this Vaishnavite period, after following a spiral path, Meiteis become Hindus in their external outlook with core elements of traditional religion inside them.

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