



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

**History**

**RECLAIMING THE TRADITIONAL MEITEI DEITIES (SANAMAHISM)**

**KEY WORDS:**

**Premabati Sharma**

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 planes. The state has a multicultural composition. The Meiteis along with the Nagas and Kukis and several other tribes are the dwellers of it. The Meiteis presently constitute a considerable portion of the total population in the state of Manipur. Their representations in the states of Assam and Tripura 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 part of the cultural and the religious tradition 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 Vaisnavite Hinduism too. The Meitei religious identity, at present, is seen to be an amalgamation of the belief systems of both the primitive animistic and the Vaisnavite cults. The Meiteis have their own system of religion which has its own myths and legends, gods and goddesses, priests and priestesses, rituals and festivals, etc.

In Manipuri (Meitei) language the word "Lai" means "Deity". It applies to both God and Goddess. It is the word which may be applied to the Hindu words "Deva" or "Devata", it is also used as the root word out of which such compound words as "Lainingthou" (literal meaning- king god) and "Lairembi" (literally Goddess) are formed. 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 antiquity and significance the claim of Sanamahi has been proved to be much stronger than the other deity. In view of the centrality exercised by the deity Sanamahi in the Meitei life the Pre-Hindu Meitei religion came to be known as Sanamahism (Laisram, 2009, pp. 100-101).

As earlier we have mentioned that the Meiteis worshipped a number of deities an addition to the three members of trinity, i.e., Pakhangba, Sanamahi and Leimaren Sidabi. The supreme god is Atiya Guru Sidaba or Sidaba Mapu. For purpose of the worship the deities can be divided into several groups, viz., Lamlai - gods of countryside; Umanglai - forest deities; Imunglai - the tutelary deity of each house and Apokpa - the ancestors of each clan.

While acknowledging the gods and goddesses the Meeteis believe that Sidaba Mapu or Atiya Guru Sidaba as the supreme. He is the high God assumed as existing prior to

anything. In the mythology of Manipur, Atiya Guru Sidaba is described as forefather of all gods, men, animals and planets and also the husband of Leimaren Sidabi, the goddess of earth. The name of Atiya Guru Sidaba means literally "Sky-guru-immortal", the sky was personified here and treated as the immortal Guru or sole breeder of all that bred. According to the myth regarding creations by Atiya Guru Sidaba as recorded in the Leithak Leikharol, when Atiya Guru Sidaba decided to create man, a deity called Kodin emanated from him. Kodin created seven frogs and seven apes, but Atiya Guru Sidaba was not pleased enough. Kodin accordingly created a new shape exactly like the shadow of Atiya and then Atiya gave it live. That is how man came into being. He let loose the frog into water and the apes into hills. Then Atiya Guru Sidaba created the Sun (Numit) and the Moon (Tha) in the form of man. The Sun obtained the name of Kanjin-tu-thokpa and the Moon Ashiba; afterwards Atiya Guru Sidaba vanished from the earth. Soraren or Sorarel came to be identified with Atiya Guru Sidaba. Soraren (Sora=god and ren=the chief or the highest) may originally have been a family god. Sorarel regarded as the "Lainingthou" or the king of all Gods. According to the myth of Manipur Sorarel killed the evil spirits with the help of his thunder-bolt. Some Manipuri scholars like Atombapu Sharma tried to trace Sorarel as a corrupted word of Surendra, who is described as Indra in Vedic scriptures.

Pakhangba means "one who knows his father"; it also means "to be youthful". Pakhangba is described as the destroyer of the universe in the mythology of Manipur. The Cheitharol Kumbaba mentions that Pakhangba was a man, the unifier of the people who is connected explicitly with the Ningthouja clan. According to this account of Pakhangba arrived in Manipur during the period of successive migrations associated with the name of Poireiton. The Ningthourol Lambubadescribes Pakhangba as "God by day but man by night". Another aspect of Pakhangba is in the form of a snake. The two most important of the myths make Pakhangba the brother of Sanamahi, and both sons of the supreme God Atiya Guru Sidaba. Atiya Guru Sidaba wanted to find out which of his sons recognize him not only as his father but also as his Guru. So to test their knowledge he took the form of a dead cow floated down a big river. Sanamahi (Kuptreng) dislikes the dead cow, but Pakhangba (Shentreng) realized it might be the god in disguise. Sanamahi asked how they could find whether this was so. For an answer Pakhangba argued that it is not fitting for a dead cow to move its tail. On hearing this Atiya Guru Sidaba, wishing to reveal himself to the full moved his tails. Then Atiya Guru Sidaba took his proper form and gave Shentreng the new name 'Pakhangba' ( pa=father, khangba=to know). Kuptreng came to be known as Sanamahi. This myth ascribes a divine origin to Pakhangba, as well as divine nature. The divine aspect is also shown in that worship is afforded him by the ruling house, although with considerable secrecy. It should be stressed that the worship of Pakhangba remains prerogative of the Ningthoujas and intimately associated with the throne, so no member of other yek is allowed to worship him. Pakhangba also known as "Pahangpa" to the Bishnupriya and regarded as the destroyer of the Manipuri trinity (i.e., Atiya Guru, Sanamahi & Pahangpa) whom they worship on many important occasions. However historical records regard Pakhangba as a human ancestor. According to Cheitharol Kumbaba he reigned for a period of 120 years with equality and justice, and established

a strong kingdom in Manipur. Varieties of bronze coins (of year 164 Samveda, i.e., 107 AD) discovered by archeologists bear Sanskrit legends in Devanagari script, claimed to be coins of Pakhangba. W. Yamjao Singh says "In the collection of coins there are a few pieces of the 2nd century A.D. of the Christian era, its legend is in the Devanagari scripts" (An Early History of Manipur, Page-127).

The most important of the household deities is Sanamahi. Literally Sanamahi means "Liquid gold". The Manipuri puranas make Sanamahi a son of Guru Sidaba and Leimaren Sidabi, and elder brother of Pakhangba. The myth related that he created the universe, moral beings, frogs, animals, etc. he created man in the image of the Almighty father. The Guru infused intelligence into it in order to adore him. It is most significant that the name "Sanamahi" does not occur in Cheitharol Kumbaba until the time of Garib Nawaz (1709-1748), by which time Vaishnavism has already a strong hold in the land. It is mostly likely that Sanamahi was formerly known under different names. Sanamahi is also regarded as an important household deity of the Bishnupriya Manipuris. Some of the people termed Sanamahi by the name Senamanik (Golden ruby). Sanamahi is molten gold in complexion like the Sun-god. Some scholars suggest that the name is derived from "Senmhya" of the Vedas. Also some of Manipuri writers have regarded him as sun god. This view seems to be influenced by the counterparts of Vedic deities in early Manipur. Every Meitei family has a Piba (chief) whose main function is to officiate as a priest in the Puja. He is propitiated on the last day of the year. The image of Sanamahi is ceremoniously washed in the morning. Rice offering of cake offering is made to him to the accompaniment of Mantra's. Sanamahi is worshipped together with his mother Leimaren, but seldom alone. He is also worshipped in every house and identical procedure is adopted. A particular place is set apart in the south-west corner, termed as Sanamahi Kachin, of the house. The people burn incense and wave lamp before Sanamahi and Leimaren. He is god of all those who desire life and energy. He is prayed for removal of disease. The festivals like Cheiraoba, Sanamahi Chemhomba etc. celebrate the glory of Sanamahi. Sanamahi, as the presiding deity of the every household, is very popular and widely worshipped by the Meiteis (Laisram, 2009, p.96). As a practicing cult of the community it has had a long history which could easily go back to the days of its origin. He is considered to be the creator of both the world and the human kingdom. During the reign of Khagemba (1597-1652) the formal deification of Sanamahi took place for the first time in the state though the practice of worshipping the deity was noticed to be an age-old one. Sanamahi is mainly worshipped as a household deity, but the deity is worshipped as well as a state or royal god (Lainingthou Sanamahi), as a Sun-God and as a God of destruction (Sanamahi Apoiba). The worship of God Sanamahi as a state Deity was introduced by King Kangba who was considered as the first king of Hayi Chak in the pre-historic period. Nongda Lairel Pakhangba who was the first king of the historical period in the 1st century A.D. celebrated Sanamahi Chenghongba with the chanting of Sanamahi Ahonglon (Hymn of Lord Sanamahi) for the health and longevity of the king and prosperity of the people as a whole.

Leimaren is the most important goddess worshipped by the Manipuri Meeteis. The earth goddess under the name of Leimaren or Leimarel (the great princess) is a fascinating one. Her worship and her place in the house explicitly connect her with Sanamahi.

According to the myth she was originally the wife of Atiya Guru Sidaba and was subsequently married to Sanamahi. This was the punishment to her for her partiality to Pakhangba in advising him to walk around the Gurus Throne and bow down in order to obtain the succession. The myth is concerned with the kingship. Atiya Sidaba announced that he would appoint as king the brother who returned first after circuiting the

whole world. Sanamahi started off from the southern side of the Royal Kangla. Pakhangba, on the advice of Leimaren, circumambulated his father's throne seven times regarding it equivalent to going round the world. Atiya Sidaba gave the throne to him. But when Sanamahi returned and found Pakhangba ascending the throne, burst into fire in anger and tried to kill him. The frightened Pakhangba took refuge among the Lairembi's (The Goddesses). But angry Sanamahi declared that if his brothers advisors were a man he would be killed and, and if a woman he would marry her. But the Lairembi's include his mother Leimaren too, thus the matter of Sanamahi marrying his mother Leimaren is explained. The place of Leimaren in the house explicitly connect her with Sanamahi. She is venerated at Tin-Lai-Thaba during the marriage ceremonies. She is also afforded public worship on the first day of Manipuri New Year.

The Apokpa, originated from the word 'pokpa' meaning "to beget or to give birth to". These domestic Lai's are the ancestors of the immediate family circle. They are deceased males of the previous three generations (the father, the grandfather and great-grandfather), who look after the interest of the family. Worship of Apokpa is carried out by each household as a closely knit group. The foods for the offering are mainly Kabok (puff rice), Larou (sweetened parched rice) and different kind of sweets and fruits. Also varieties of different offerings are set out, which consists of Thoiding (sesame), Nine grains of rice, An earthen pot, A beeswax lamp, A coin, usually represents the deity, Betel leaf, etc. Apokpa Khurumba (meaning 'bowing down to Apokpa') is observed in a detailed series of rituals. The various offerings to Apokpa buried in the house between the Phungga and the Lairu, and covered with seven layers of banana leaf. The offering includes three sets -The food offerings. A Khudei (Cloth), a Chang (containing an odd number of pairs) hand of bananas, a whole betel leaf and a betel kuwa (Nut). A Srang (a large edible fish), some vegetable and Dal. After arrival of the Maiba the raw food is first offered to Sanamahi, and then cooked by the Piba. Then the Maiba and Piba enter the house and utter Mantra's and bows (Khurumba) to Apokpa. Actually Apokpa Khurumba is the worship with appropriate food offerings of the ancestors who are conceivably within living memory. It needs mention that another cult of ancestor spirits termed as 'Kasalai', closely connected with the cult of Apokpa.

The domestic deities, which are the possession of particular clan or family groups. These are properly called Yamjao lai's. There are traditionally 445 Sagei's in Meetei community, each of which has own lai. Although these are regarded as the ancestors or ancestress of the sagei this is not be constructed as implying ancestor worship. Examples of such lai's are Soibam Lairema of Soibam sagei; Hijam leirema of Hijam sagei and so on.

Thangjing is one of the four popular Lai's associated with a particular geographic location, widely known by the Manipuri Meeteis as Maikai Ngakpa; i.e., "guardian of directions". Thangjing is specially associated with the Moirangs; he was the guardian of South-West of Manipur Valley. The love literature, legends and stories of Moirang clan attributed to him. In the later Puranic works Marjing is identified with the Aryan God Aswini Kumar. He has agricultural traits as he controls the vernal rain. There is a temple dedicated to Thangjing at Moirang.

Marjing is another deity regarded as the guardian of North-Eastern direction of Manipur. His main importance in the Manipuri myth is that he invented polo or Kang-jei, the national game of Manipur. According to the myth, Kang-jei played originally by the gods, grouping seven deities on each side. Cheitharol Kumbaba records that in the year 1618 there occurred the death of an infant prince, Mayamba.

Immediately following this Marjing was appeased by offering of domestic animals. The people invoke his name and worship him with polo stick and ball at the time of domestic animal epidemic.

Wangbaren is another tutelary deity associated with the South-East direction. Wangbaren had his shrine in the south of Shungu on the bank of Imphal River (40 miles to the south of Imphal). The worship of Wangbaren has been associated with the warding off of sickness and disaster. Wangbaren is black complexion, black garment and a black tiger as his carter. Koubru is believed to have his abode in the peak which bears his name, situated at the northern end of Manipur. He occupied the position of Kubera, does in the Vedic pantheon. His abode is Mount Koubru (900 ft.) named after him. On number of occasions, Cheitharol Kumbaba portrayed Koubru by the phrases, "Koubru fired a gun", "spreading a white cloth", "having a white cloth spread for him" etc. This deity, Koubru, is considered to be the god of country-side and he is worshipped annually. Temples dedicated to Koubru are to be found among the Loi villages (Sekmai, and Phayeng).

The cult of planets and stars was very popular in Manipur and the puranic stories testify to this. It is said that the seven Gods who came with Sidaba Mapu in human were identified with seven planets.

**They are -**

1. Nongmaijing (Sun)
2. Ningthoukaba (The Moon)
3. Leipokpokpa (Mars)
4. Yumsangkeisa (Mercury)
5. Sagolsen (Jupiter)
6. Irai (Venus)
7. Thamja (Saturn)

The planetary deities are regarded as animal headed. Mars has the head of a buffalo, Mercury that of an elephant, Jupiter of a stag and Venus of a tiger. According to another myth the Seven Goddess who was married to the seven Gods gave birth to the seven sons, who were the progenitors of the seven clans of Manipur.

The Meiteis believe that such deities as Sanamahi, Pakhangba, Soraren, Koubrug Wangbren, Marjing, Thangjing, etc., come under Guru Sidaba. Since He is the Creator of the Universe. The Meiteis worship a number of Lai or Deities belonging to different denominations with divergent backgrounds ranging from the spirit of the grand natural phenomena to the spirit of the ancestors and ultimately to the Supreme Almighty Lord "Atiya Guru Sidaba" who is the Creator and sustainer of the entire Universe, 'it may be observed that in their worship and the performance of religious rituals they exhibit the intricate matrix of Nature-Man, Soul(or Spirit). The intimate connection between man and nature is very much in the background of the act of worship. In the course of invocation of their gods and goddesses they eulogise the superhuman attributes of the deities. The metaphors and simile used to enumerate the fine attributes of the deities and their superhuman deeds are all derived from their daily commerce with nature and her fine qualities. What has been characteristic of the Meitei religion is that it exhibits sufficient amount of syncretism of conflicting values and ideals that conforms to the central character of the religious lives of north east India in general. Both in its practicing and the reflective cum deliberative aspects this religion has nurtured and promoted an adorable approach towards life and the world bearing deep significance for thorough philosophical considerations. The creation myth, the principal elements behind the creation or evolution of man and nature, the process of deification of the natural forces, the nature of (divine) worship and the ways of worshipping nature --- all speak of an integral philosophy of life, of cosmic life-harmony parallel to Hinduism (taken in the

narrowed sense) lived through in the past and is still being lived by a good number of populace of this Mongoloid origin. The consideration of parallel value-systems or living traditions of India is expected to throw light more upon the diversified character of Indian Culture, Religion and Philosophy along with causing an extension in their traditional frame of consideration. The religion of the Meiteis is founded upon a system of philosophical thoughts. It is based upon a cosmology and theory of creation. Manipuri Hinduism gradually became a synthesis of the old Meiteis religion with its gods and goddess and myths, its own legends and traditions, its social customs and usages and its priest and ceremonial and of Brahmanical Hinduism with its special worship of Radha and Krishna. Meiteis never gave up their culture and tradition. The worship of deities in the Meitei pantheon continued concurrently with that of the Hindu deities.