

# Ethnic and Social Issues: A Study of the Social and Religious Life History of Manipur Hindus in India

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**Abstract:** *Manipur is situated in the North - Eastern corner of India. Manipur is the meeting place of the two civilizations of India and Burma and homeland of a large number of cultural and ethnic groups with different languages, religions and customs. She accepted the aspect of Indian culture and transmitted them to Burma, China and other Asiatic countries. The land is a meeting point of Tibeto - Burman tribal community, the Chins and the Kachin originating from South - China and the Indo - Aryan Hindus of the Indo - Gangetic plains. The state had distinct political status ruled by the powerful Ningthouja dynasty. The expansion of the Indian culture to the North - East part of India was mainly due to commercial activities and the visit of a large number of religious missionaries to spread the spiritual truth. In addition to these, the ambitious and discontented members of the royal families and nobility who were keen to regain their position went to neighboring countries to acquire help. The spread of Aryan culture in Manipur was largely due to the settlement of the Brahmins. The present study will highlight the changes of socio - religious life among Manipuri Hindus during the 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> Century.*

**Keywords:** Socio - religious, Social Life, Changes, Society etc.

## Objectives of the study:

- i) To study socio - religious life of Manipuri Hindus life during 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> Century;
- ii) To find out historical facts regarding the present topic scientifically.

## Research methodology

Early manuscripts and other literary sources are also used as important sources for this study. There are some other unpublished manuscripts and archival sources which are found useful materials. These documents are also considered a store house of information relating to social, religious life, art & architecture and political conditions of the people of India. Attempts have been made here to interpret those literary sources in the light of the information gathered from the inscription, coins, fields work and to compare and bring them together. Temples, images, religious rituals and literary sources provide very valuable information. In short, the present study will be used both the primary and secondary sources of information pertaining to the present topic.

## 1. Introduction

Manipur is situated in the North - Eastern corner of India. She is the meeting place of the two civilizations of India and Burma and homeland of a large number of cultural and ethnic groups with different languages, religions and customs. She accepted the aspect of Indian culture and transmitted them to Burma, China and other Asiatic countries. The land is a meeting point of Tibeto - Burman tribal community, the Chins and the Kachins originating from South - China and the Indo - Aryan Hindus of the Indo - Gangetic plains. The state had distinct political status ruled by the powerful Ningthouja dynasty. The expansion of the

Indian culture to the North - East part of India was mainly due to commercial activities and the visit of a large number of religious missionaries to spread the spiritual truth. In addition to these, the ambitious and discontented members of the royal families and nobility who were keen to regain their position went to neighboring countries to acquire help. The spread of Aryan culture in Manipur was largely due to the settlement of the Brahmins. The earliest evidence for the worship of Hindu gods and goddesses in Manipur was a copper plate inscription discovered by W. Yumjao Singh from the Chakpa village of Phayeng, about 9 miles to the west of Imphal, which was issued by King Khongtekcha Yoiremba (763 - 773 A. D.). Among the literary sources is the 'Bamon Khunthoklon' which deals with immigration of Brahmins mostly from Bengal, Uttra Pradesh, Orissa, Tripura and Assam. The Manipuri kings allowed to practice other religious sects particularly Vaishnavism and encouraged them by giving settlement and land grant to the immigrants. The first Manipuri king who formally initiated to Vaishnavism was Charairongba (1697 - 1709 A. D.). He worshipped Shri Krishna as the supreme deity. But the king followed the liberal policy in religious matters and did not force to establish Hinduism as the state religion. During the reign of Garibaniwaz (1709 - 1748 A. D.) son of king Charairongba, Hinduism attained its zenith of perfection and it became the state religion of Manipur.

Most of the rulers of the state like king Charairongba (1697 - 1709), king Garibaniwaz (1709 - 1748) and king Bhagyachandra (1763 - 1798) were staunch and devout Hindus. Their royal patronage helped in the spread of Brahmanism and Vaishnavism. They donated land to a large number of Brahmins and built Hindu temples and excavated tanks which led to the Aryanization of the state. In the 19<sup>th</sup>

century, Hinduism became the dominant religion of Manipur, largely through the support and patronage of the reigning monarchs.

Vaishnavism, one of the well-known Brahmanical sects, is a particular theistic religion of which Vishnu is the object of worship and devotion as the supreme god. An important feature of Vaishnavism in Manipur was the popular worship of the Avatars i. e., descents or incarnations of Vishnu. The two major forms of Hindu Vaishnavism were practiced in Manipur since 17<sup>th</sup> century A. D. One was Ramandi Vaishnavism and another was Gauriya vaishnavism. Ramananda, who flourished in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, was the first great Bhakti saint of north India. He propounded Ramandi cult. He opened the door of Bhakti to all without any distinction of birth, caste, creed or sex. He was a worshipper of Rama and believed in two great principles, viz, perfect love for god and human brotherhood. During the period of Garibaniwaz, the Brahmins preached Ramandi cult as the highest form of religion and the king declared it as the state religion with the instigation of Santidas, a Brahmin priest.

The Gauriya Vaishnavism was introduced during the reign of Maharaja Bhagyachandra. This sect was originated to Chaitanya (1486 - 1533), one of the greatest saint of North India. (R. C. Majumdar, H. C. Roychaudhuri & Kalikinkar Dutta; 1991, p.397) He preached the religion of intense faith in one Supreme Being whom he called Krishna or Hari. He was free from ritualism, and his worship consisted in love and devotion. He was a great exponent of Krishnite form of Vaishnavism. Chaitanya accepted that Krishna alone is the most perfect God. It was his followers and devoted disciples, who after the master's death, systematized his teachings and organised themselves into a sect called Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Maharaja Bhagyachandra successfully established this school of Vaishnavism in Manipur. This is one of the notable contributions of the Maharaja as a part of his religious reform policy. Many Vaishnava missionaries came to Manipur during the reign of Bhagyachandra and propagated Vaishnavism. It is said that a relative of Chaitanya, named Ram Narayan visited Manipur during the time of king Bhagyachandra. Vaisnavic cult from Bengal was spread into Manipur through the hard work and sense of dedication of a handful of religious teachers who hailed from Bengal. They brought with them the entire 'Vaisnab Padabali' of Bengal and taught the local singers to sing exactly in the Bengali fashion. (N. Tombi Singh; 1975, p.58 - 59)

The important religious institution of the period was the 'Brahma Sabha'. It was a committee of Brahmins who suggested the methods of Hindu rites and rituals and the mode of worship. The primary function of the Brahma Sabha was propagation of Vaishnavism, initiation of disciples, and holding of religious festivals. It was established during the reign of king Bhaigyachandra (1763 - 1798). The Brahma Sabha had the power to outcast any person or family if he or she had violated the rules and regulations of Hinduism. The Brahma Sabha was the highest authority on Hindu religious affairs in Manipur and the decision of the Sabha was the last word religious issues.

The Indian merchants and missionaries who settled down in the neighboring countries not only introduced and practice Indian customs, religion, literature, arts, philosophy, astronomy and astrology but also helped the original inhabited people in conversion into their belief and practice. In due course they intermarried with the local women and completely Indianised or sanskritized them. The local population adopted the Indian civilization and culture. The Hindu customs and manners also underwent certain changes as a result of contact with the local population. Subsequently a new culture emerged which contained elements of both the cultures.

There are two distinct phases of the growth of this culture. The first was from the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the other was from the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The main contribution of the first phase was made by king Garibaniwaz (1709 - 1748) and the second phase for the growth of the composite culture was under Maharaja Bhaigyachandra (1763 - 1798). The most important aspects of cultural developments during the period were: Meiteism/traditional cult was continued to be practiced side by side with Hinduism. Those who converted to Hinduism also continued to worship traditional deities. In the field of scholarship, literature and art also the two communities came under each other's influence. Meitei scholars began to study Hindu philosophy and sciences. They were attracted towards the study of Hindu sciences of medicine and astrology. The mutual linguistic exchange was reflected. Sanskrit language and Bengali scripts began to be used by the Manipuri scholars side by side with the Meitei scripts. King Garibaniwaz was the first Manipuri king who issued bell-metal coins in Nagari and Bengali script. Religious instruction was imparted in Sanskrit and Bengali. For the enhancement of the knowledge, the Sanskrit texts of, astrology, medicine, etc, were translated into Manipuri language. A number of Indian religious and secular works were translated into Manipuri language. During the period between king Bhaigyachandra (1763 - 1798) and king Chandrakirti (1850 - 1886) many religious books of Sanskrit and Bengali were translated into Manipuri language. Many Hindu sacred books like the Epics, the Bhagavata Purana, the Vishnu Purana, the Smriti Sastras, the Gitagovinda were translated during the reigns of Gambhir Singh, Nara Singh and Chandrakirti Singh.

The rulers of this kingdom were also great patrons of dance and music. The most notable ruler among them was Raja Bhaigyachandra. The Raja introduced the Nata - Sanskirtan (Anouba - pala) and also formulated a classical dance which is known as the Rasa Lila, The evolution of its distinct form was the result of an interaction between the earliest ritualistic dances and the Vaisnava Bhakti cult. The court offered patronage and livelihood to many musicians and dancers. The best musicians and dancers were collected and encouraged to choreograph dances for Vaishnavite rituals. Some Sanskrit and Bengali works on music or devotional song were translated into Manipuri language. The process of synthesis was continued in almost every walk of social and cultural life. The Manipuris particularly the Meiteis adopted a variety of Hindu traditions and customs in their day to day life.

Many Hindu festivals were also introduced i. e., Krishna Janna (the birth of Lord Krishna), Durga Puja (worship of goddess Durga), Saraswati Puja (worship of goddess Saraswati), Diwali (in honour of Lakshmi), Shiv - Ratri (in honour of Lord Shiva) and Holi (in honour of shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu) etc.

Some of the old traditional festivals were replaced by Hindu festivals. Such as Kongba - Leithong Phatpa was replaced by Bishnu Shangkranti (April - May), the festival of Ahong Khongchig (in July) was replaced by Ratha - Jatra, offering of foods to the ancestor (in September and October), was replace by Pritulok - Puja, Chanou Huichintu (in November) was replaced by Govardhan Puja etc. (O. Bhogeshwor; 1995, p.63 - 64)

The conversion of the Meiteis into Hinduism created a new social order. The introduction of caste system was another feature of Manipuri society. All the Meiteis were regarded themselves as kshatriyas. Later, the Brahmins, the Muslims, etc. were included within the framework of the Manipuri society. the Salais /clan changed to Gotras. The Brahmins were regarded as the highest among the varnas. They enjoyed certain social, economic, political, legal and religious privileges The Brahmins occupied the most respectable and prominent position in society, No ceremony could be performed without Brahmin priests and no important religious or social matter can be settled without referring to the Brahmin community.

The Hindu culture influence on the upper class Meitei society was reflected in dress, food and social manners. Sacrifices involving the killing of animals and drinking were stopped by the king. Their food habits were replaced by vegetarianism. On religious feasts, the Manipuri Brahmins mainly discharge cooking. Food offerings for the deity consisting of cooked and uncooked articles were also vegetarians. Women occupied a very honourable high position and freedom in Manipuri society. They attained temples for public worship without considering social classes and age groups. They moved freely, publicly attended feast, dances and even composed hymns. Women were well versed in dancing and music. Polygamy was in vogue but the Pardha system was not known.

We get a number of references of learned women who dedicated their lives for the service of the gods and goddesses.19<sup>th</sup> century was Sija Lairoibi, the daughter of king Bhaigyachandra. She looked after the Pujas of Govindaji. She used to dance before Govindaji playing the part of 'Raseswori'. She also composed some devotional songs in Bengali to sing for the pleasure of her beloved Lord Govindaji. She acted as the chief priestess of the temple and looked after the pujas of Lord Govindaji. During the reign of Maharaja Churachand (1891 - 1941), Maharani Dhanamanjari Devi, the chief queen, led the women dancers at the royal mandapa with superb skill and devotion. (Manjusri Chaki Sircar; 1984, p.108)

Art & architecture and crafts were developed which were influenced by Hindu philosophy. Many buildings, temples and other artistic monuments were erected. The structures were built according to the Hindu text 'Vastusastra', the

science of architecture. This led to the development of Nagara or Indo - Aryan type of architecture in Manipur. The best examples of Nagara type of architecture are the Krishna Temple at Brahmapur Guru Aribam Leikai, Imphal East, the Temple of Shri Shri Govindaji, Kangla, Imphal West and the Radha -Romon temple Langthabal, Imphal West etc.

With the introduction of Hinduism, the art of sculpture was highly developed. The Manipuri kings encouraged the craftsmen for making Hindu deities by granting land and money. The Manipuri sculptors used metal, wood, stone, clay and ivory as their raw materials for making sculptures of Lord Krishna and his incarnation. The finest example of sculpture is the image of Shri Govindaji, the royal deity. The images show the Hindu influence with admixture of Mongolian features. Images also showed some local characteristic in dress and ornaments of the deities.

The temple was the spiritual centre from which religious and social life was regulated. Temple going and places of daily public worship were introduced. All the religious rites and festivals connected with Vaishnavism were performed by the Manipuris with due ceremonies in front of the temples.

Worship of Hindu deities through games and sports were also practice in Manipur. It helped to develop indigenous sports in Manipur. Some of the important games and sports were played in front of the temple. The deity was the witness of the games. The important games as a part of religious festivals are Hiyang tanaba (Boat race) and Yubi - Lakpi (coconut Snatching). During the reign of Khagemba in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the king and the image of Vishnu also participate in boat race in order to amuse the people with game. (M. Kirti Singh; 1980, p.101) It is a religious festival, held during the month of September, where God is worshipped through boat race. Another indigenous game of Manipur is Yubi - Lakpi (snatching of coconut). "In the Vijaya Govindaji temple people put on the guise of gods and demons and play these games. It is symbolic of the old legend which tells the fight between gods and demons for the drug of immortality in the churning of ocean". (L. Iboongohal Singh; 1987, p.232) Thus, idols were regarded as the symbols of divine being and their worship through games & sports was also a common feature with all Manipuri Hindus.

The contribution of the Manipuri Vaishnavas to the music and dance through Kirtan and Rasa were widely recognised. Among the most important dance is Ras Dance. Devotion to the deity through dance is its main theme. The dance is religious and it is also a medium of worship. It is never exhibited as a show before any guest. To the vaishnavas of Manipur, the Sankirtan (which includes the Ras Lila) is really a Mahayajana - a great form of worship and prayer, associated closely with the life of the people". (Saryu Doshi; 1989, p.8)

Visit to the temple and pilgrimage and their performance of devotional dance and music were considered as meritorious acts and part of their cultural life. Temples were remain busy throughout the year with socio - religious activities such as scripture reading, devotional singing sessions, ritual, feasting, weddings and funeral ceremonies. The art of

storytelling (wari liba), narration and explanation of sacred texts (Lairik Thiba - Haiba) was introduced from the time of Bhaigyachandra reign. (E. Nilakanta Singh; 1993, p.60)

## 2. Review of Literature

Historians of Manipur are lagging behind in studying this field for better understanding of the society and religion of medieval Manipur. Even though some historians of medieval India have worked on the social and religious life of India for example Chopra, P. N., Puri, B. N., Das, M. N., attempts to trace in three volumes work entitle 'A Social Cultural and Economic History of India' (1990) the political, Economic, social and cultural aspect of India from early time to the present. A proper evaluation of the Indian way of life in all its aspects and in different periods has been made by the authors.

Sharma, R. S. discussed in 'Indian's Ancient Past' (2015) about the human evolution and its importance. He also highlights Socio - economic, religion and political condition of ancient period and cultural interaction with Asian countries. He also examines the process of transition from ancient to medieval India. His another work 'Material Culture & Social Formations in Ancient India' (1992) the author surveys theories of social change and underlines the key role of production techniques together with climatic conditions in shaping ancient social formations.

Some works on the society and religion of Manipur apart from the various political and administrative history of Manipur are found. It may be mentioned here that like "The Meitei Society" by N. Birchandra Singh, "Sanamahi Leikan" by O. Bhogeshwor; "Socio - economic change in Manipur" by N. Basanta, "The Manipur Administration" by N. Ibohi, "Agrarian Structure and Production Relation in Manipur" by Priyoranjan Ch., all have made good contribution in the field.

Kamei, Gangumei attempt to sketch the Evolution of the Meitei State, raised and fall of the regional principalities and expansion of kingdom before Pre - colonial periods. He also describes social formation and religion in his work 'History of Manipur' Vol.1. (2003). In another work 'A History of Modern Manipur' - 1826 - 1891, (2016) he discussed Feudal era, feudal polity and phase of British colonial rule and post Colonial rule in Manipur. In his works he gives more emphasis on political development than the role of economy and its importance which contributed for the growth of the state.

A careful study of such books, the social and religious history of Manipur can be reconstructed from these sources and may also supplemented by the British official accounts and travelogues. A number of British writers had also made valuable contribution in the history of Manipur. The most pioneering works in this respect were those of T. C. Hodson's, 'The Meitheis', and 'The Naga Tribes of Manipur', Dr. Brown's, 'Statistical Account of Manipur', captain R. B. Pemberton's 'Report on the eastern frontier of British India', Sir James Johnstone's, 'My experiences in Manipur and Naga Hill', and B. C. Allen 'Gazetteer of Naga Hills and Manipur'. These works is also considered a store

house of information relating to social, religious life, economic, culture and political conditions of the people of Manipur.

R. Brown (2001) gave valuable information on the economic, cultural, religious, social and political life of the Manipurians. He also discusses geographical locations, natural resources, cultivation, taxation system, grants of land etc. T. C. Hodson (1999, 2007) made an attempt to study the origin of the communities, dress and ornament, agriculture, tenure of land, religions, laws and domestic life, etc. captain R. Boileau Pemberton (1991) highlighted valuable information about the physical features of the North Eastern parts of India and neighbouring countries. He presented different occupations including agriculture, domestications of animals, political development, relations with Burma and Hill tribes. B. C. Allen (2015) works deals mainly with the physical features, agriculture, industries, economic condition of the people, jhum and terraced cultivation, forest product, taxation system etc. However these works suffered from defect inherent in the writings of foreigners, ignorant of the language, customs and traditions of the region. They did not mention clearly the socio - economic situation and religious life of Manipur during pre - British period. Their works are also not free from credulity and exaggerations. Therefore researcher must treat with great reserved or handle all data very carefully with scientific methods.

The archaeological remains are helpful for the study of the early people and their culture. Epigraphic records, coins and monuments of Ningthuoja dynasty provide very valuable information about the social and religious conditions of the kingdom. The royal chronicles of Ningthuoja dynasty recorded day to day events of the kings and kingdom including socio - economic, religious and political condition. Amongst the chronicles, Cheitharol Kumbaba, gives very valuable information about the political, religious, social, natural resources, art and culture. The chronicle is regarded as the most important sources for the treatment of this work; but it needs very careful handling because the records are not detailed.

Early manuscripts and other literary sources are also important for the study like Bamon khunthoklon, migration of Brahmins; Poireiton Khunthokpa, migration of Poireiton; Mayang Tekhaolon etc. may be mentioned. Beside this, many other archival sources may be treated as important historical records of Manipur of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Literary materials of the neighbouring state are also very helpful for the construction of the history of Manipur. The chronicles of Assam such as Ahom Buranji, Tungkhungia Buranji, also furnished us with valuable information on different aspect including diplomatic relation with Assam and Manipur. Due to the shortage of materials it has to work in this field with strong effort, putting the sources in historical perspectives facts and try to come to a conclusion about the prevalent socio - religious life in our past.

## 3. Conclusion

Manipur received various racial elements with different cultural groups of people. These new comers were gradually



assimilated with the people of Manipur. Their migration made a deep impact on the religious outlook and cultural life of the people of Manipur. They contributed for the growth of a composite culture and a new way of life. Due to the growth of the converted Meiteis and their mixing freely with the Hindu community, many important social changes took place and also witnessed a rapid cultural transformation. The development of new cultural traditions in Manipur was due to political stability, a good condition of peace, law & order and economic prosperity of the people. The investigation of the history of Indian society and religion is remains unsatisfactory without a thorough understanding of the socio - religious life of Manipuris. In this research a clear picture of many historical facts and new findings about the ingredients of social system, religious life, festival etc. will be highlighted. The research in this field may contribute a little about the particular socio - religious system prevailed in the medieval Manipur. The findings will provides baseline information to the future researchers who are working in this interesting field. Further the result of the research work will be able to help the young scholars to have a fair idea to do further research in this field.

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