



RECLAIMING THE ANCIENT TRADITIONAL GODS AND REVIVING THE OLD TRADITION OF THE MEITEIS OF MANIPUR

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Abstract:

The discussion of neo- traditional innovation in Manipur is to examine a neo-traditional reaction against an increasingly oppressive state sponsored Hinduism in Manipur. The Meiteis have their own indigenous religion that centers on the deities (lai), and the rituals in their honor are carried out by the traditional priestesses (maibi) and priests (maiba.)

Sanamahism may be described as the de-sanskritization of Meitei religion. It seeks to reclaim the traditional deities and the return of the Meitei to their traditional religion. While it is not anti-Hindu as such, (it does not try to convert non Meitei Hindu) its agenda is to the Meitei people from what it sees as a foreign and exploitative religion, and to encourage Meitei's to renounce Hinduism for sanamahism. The Sanamahism may characterize as neo-traditional because it advocates a return to what is perceive as traditional to the Meitei. It does not present a new revelation, nor does it have prophets and charismatics who lay claim visions and divine voices. It is essentially an attempt at the recovery of national identity in the face of the threat of integration or absorption into the Indian sub-continent, and it focuses on religion as a way into the revival of Meitei traditional social and cultural values.

Key Words: Discarding Theories that Attempt to Sanskritize Meitei Religion; Reviving Traditional (Pre-Hindu) Meitei Religion, Culture, Language, Script and Literature & Accommodating the to the Modern Situation.

Reviving the Old Tradition:

Manipur is situated on the northeastern border of India with Myanmar and comprises 8500 square miles. Its population is around 1.8 million. It is surrounded on all four sides with nine ranges of mountains, and the heartland of this state is the fertile valley, which is the homeland of the Meiteis. The Meiteis have a highly developed culture with an extensive written literature in the ancient Meitei script dating back a thousand years or more.

The bulk of studies on non-western new religious protest movements have been concerned with the interface between traditional religions and Christianity, and this has broadly informed a good deal of the analysis and theory of such movements. Many of the discussion of neo- traditional innovation in north India has focused on tribal reactions against Christianity and colonialism. However, the situation in Manipur is different; it seeks to examine a neo- traditional reaction against an increasingly oppressive state sponsored Hinduism in Manipur.

The Meiteis have their own indigenous religion that centers on the deities (lai), and the rituals in their honor are carried out by the traditional priestesses (maibi) and priests (maiba). From around the 15th century Hindu Brahmins began to migrate into Manipur, most of them from Bengal, and during the reign of king Garibniwaz (1709-1748), Vaishnavite Hinduism became adopted as the state religion. There was good deal of opposition to the imposition of this foreign religion however (often centered on the maibas and maibis) and this became the feature of Meiteis history for the next two hundred years. Not infrequently religious opposition to Hinduism was aligned to

political protest against the rulers. Gradually a symbiosis emerged, most of the Meitei retaining their faith in and practice of the ancient religion, while at the same time accepting the rituals of Vaishnavite Hinduism. The hold of Hinduism was never very strong; however, caste was virtually non-existent (all Meiteis were regarded as Kshatriya) and the social status of the Brahmins was never very high. The more onerous aspects of Hindu practice were not adopted, and women in particular retained their traditional high economic and social profile.

By the time the British took over the de facto administration of the state in 1891, therefore, Meitei religion had become an amalgam, the worship of the ancient Meitei deities being super imposed by a loose structure of vaishnavite Hinduism. The reign of king Churachand witnessed a marked increase in the influence of the Brahmins. The reasons for this are complex, and as much political as religious. It is clear that King Churachand finding that his political authority was circumscribed by the continuing presence of the British saw in Hinduism an avenue through which he could assert his power. In particular he made use of the Brahma Sabha and the Rattans (as well as the state Durbar, which consisted largely of members appointed by the palace) to enact oppressive legislation. There is no doubt that King Churachand was an unpopular king with his people (and with most of the British officers serving in Manipur) and that he sought to enrich himself at the expense of the general population. All this contributed to an atmosphere of popular resentment that led to civil unrest against the abuses of the king and the Brahmins. This complex intertwining of political and religious protest was a precursor of the freedom movements in Manipur of the present day.

The attempt to assert Brahmanical control took place on two fronts i.e., the philosophical and the legal. On the philosophical level, a concerted effort was made to bring the Meiteis within the Aryan Hindu tradition. The traditional Meitei deities were explicitly identified with Hindu gods and goddesses. While the Hinduization of traditional deities is not uncommon in the spread of Hinduism, what were being attempted were the deliberate absorption of Meitei deities and thus the loss of their separate identity- in effect the forcible Sanskritization of Meitei traditions. A pseudo-historical basis for this (especially in the voluminous writings of Atombapu Sharma, one of the king's Brahmins) was found in the identification of the Manipura of Mahabharata with Manipur. There also seems to have been a process of the editing in the interests of the Hinduization of some of the ancient archaic Meitei writing. This attempt to provide a philosophical basis for the Hindu interpretation of Meitei religion, though deeply flawed, and now almost universally rejected by the Meitei scholars provided at the same time a pseudo-intellectual basis both for Hindu proselytizing and for the enactment of oppressive Brahmanical legislation.

This legislation rested upon the concept of "MANGBA" (unclean or untouchable) and the consequent excommunication and charges for re-admission into the Hindu community. It also introduced a number of taxes for religious rituals. Among these were charges for the use of Vaishnavite mark (chandan- senkhai) and for Sraddha. A payment for 'khainaba' (the temporary separation of the wife from the husband) was also imposed.

Declaration that a person, or group of persons, was 'mangba (unclean or untouchable) and the consequent out casting was used by the king and his Brahmins indiscriminately and often for trivial reasons. It was especially onerous as it effectively cut off the victims from both society and from family life. Payments for re-admission to the Hindu society were heavy and were appropriated by the king and his immediate family, or by the Rattans and the Brahma Sabha. Mangba (unclean or untouchable) was

effectively, thus a method of exercising control and more important, of milking the people (especially the poor) of money without accountability.

To their credit some of the British administrators sided with the common people in their resentment and protest, and did their best to restrain the worst excesses of this collusion between the palace and the Brahmins. Their room for positive action was however rather limited, though they did succeed in getting legislation passed to make extortion of money by threat of declaration of outcasting an indictable offence, and insisting upon a judicial inquiry before a person or village could be declared Mangba (unclean).

The Sanamahism:

Opposition erupted on two fronts, the socio-political and the religio-cultural. The first was at root a popular protest against the abuses feudalism. The religio-cultural protest itself had two aspects. On the one hand, there was a reaction from the Meitei Hindus, unused during two centuries of Hinduism in Manipur to such oppressive use of religious power. Thus begins the 'mangba-sengba' (unclean/untouchable or clean/touchable) controversy of the 1930s. On the other hand there arose also a conscious movement to cast off Hinduism altogether and revive the old Meitei tradition. This neo-traditionalist movement became as the Sanamahi movement or sanamahism, after the name of the traditional Meitei household deity "Ibudhou Sanamahi". Its origins may be traced to Naorem Phullo (Laininghal Naoria), a Meitei born in Cachar in 1888. Phullo had a varied career as police officer and teacher, and he travelled widely in Manipur. Tradition has it that while still at school in Cachar he was taunted that the Meitei had no culture and no written script, and that it was this that first decided him to study Meitei culture in depth. Around 1930 Phullo resigned from the government service and founded the Apokpa Marup in Cachar. By 1934, it had spread to the Manipur valley. Initial plans were made, under the leadership of Takhellambam Bokul (Sanamahi Bokul), to begin a branch of the movement in Imphal, though the formal establishment of this way delayed by the Japanese invasions on India. Phullo was strongly anti-Brahmin and involved in sharp controversy with Hindu leaders in Manipur. In 1936, he confronted the king and the palace pundit, Atombapu Sharma, and was excommunicated. He died in 1941, but his work continued to prosper. Four years after his death a branch of the Apokpa Marup was formed in Imphal, under the name of the Manipur state Meitei Marup, initially with eighteen members, with Bokul as its president. Its resolutions included decisions to revive Meitei culture, to reintroduce the archaic script, to study the ancient Manipuri literature, to use only the Manipuri language in worship. They further determined on a concerted effort to reclaim the ancient deities from Hinduism by getting rid of the Hindu names that had been applied to the traditional gods. As in the case, Phullo the Brahma Shaba opposed the movement violently. Exclusion was frequent, and in 1947 it formally outcasted a group of 38 members and refused others access to religious rites.

The Purpose of the Sanamahism:

The aim of the movement may be described as the de-sanskritization of Meitei religion. It seeks to reclaim the traditional deities and the return of the Meitei to their traditional religion. While it is not anti-Hindu as such, (it does not try to convert non Meitei Hindu) its agenda is to the Meitei people from what it sees as a foreign and exploitative religion, and to encourage Meitei's to renounce Hinduism for sanamahism. The favored method initially was by public and private debate rather than disruptive action. It is indeed as much a cultural as a religious movement, and as in many non-

western societies, these factors are inextricably twined together. Sairem Nilabir sums up the aims of the movements as follows:

- ❖ renouncing of Hinduism;
- ❖ discarding theories that attempt to Sanskritize Meitei religion;
- ❖ reviving traditional (pre-Hindu) Meitei religion, culture, language, script and literature and accommodating the to the modern situation;
- ❖ Strengthening unity between the Meiteis and the hill peoples of Manipur (Naga & Kuki);
- ❖ fostering unity between the Meiteis of Manipur and the Meitei Diaspora;
- ❖ Encouraging research into the history of Manipur;
- ❖ Publicizing the distinctiveness of ancient Meitei culture generally.

Recent Development of the Sanamahism:

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Sanamahism movement attracted a substantial number of educated students and became more activist. One aspect of this was the reclaiming or cleansing of the temples, the shrines of the traditional deities which had been appropriated by the Brahmins for Hindu worship, and in which worship was conducted according to Brahmin ritual. Especially significant in this regard was the reestablishment of the worship of goddess Panthoibi, one of the most important goddesses, who had been identified with Hindu goddess Durga. In some cases, where it was not possible to wrest complete control of the temples from the Hindus, compromise solutions were reached for dual usage. Some of these acts of reclaiming the shrines also involved nationalist political organizations, like the Manipur National Front and represent a partial politicizing of movement. Other significant public protests have included periodic ceremonial burnings of books and pamphlets that advocated Sanskritization of Meitei society, and effigies of Maharajah Garibniwaz and his Guru, Shanti Das (who first introduced Hinduism as state religion in the 18th century). Perhaps the most remarkable symbolic act of reversing the Hinduisation of Manipur was 'NONGKRANG PAREI HANBA' that took place in 1974. Almost 250 years earlier, in 1729, king Garibniwaz had forced Meiteis to adopt Hinduism by diving into Lilong River with branches of 'NONGKRANG' in their hands. This represented a solemn oath not to apostatize from Hinduism. In a symbolic reversal of this oath on behalf of the entire Meitei nation, a representative number of the Maibis and other Sanamahism devotees re-enacted the immersion in the river, but this time to represent commitment to the national deities. On this occasion Okendrajit, popularly regarded as the legal king of Manipur, read out a statement in support of the movement. Open protest of this kind, backed by political activists, seems to have declined recently. The presence of armed movements in Manipur, some advocating total independence from India, has rendered such acts susceptible to being misunderstood by the central Government of India. The Sanamahism movement is thus tending to take less confrontational forms, but which have had a wider impact upon Meitei society. One manifestation of this has been the decline in popularity of some of the Hindu deities and festivals. Saraswati puja, for example, once carried out by all the schools and colleges in Manipur – for which a fee was payable to the Brahmins was largely dropped out. Durga puja, imposed by Raja Chandrakriti at the beginning of the last century and previously carried out by each household and locality, has where still observed been replaced by the worship of the female deities Panthoibi. Similarly, Dipavali is now performed in honour of Imoinu Chaphongi, the deities of plentiful rice. Particularly significant is the case of the Mother Goddess Kamakhya whose shrine at Hiyangthang has now again reverted to 'Ireima Leirembi' the traditional goddess of the water.

Another striking result of the Sanamahi movement has been the resurgence of the most important of the traditional festivals; the Lai Haraoba (merrymaking of gods). there has also been a vibrant cultural revival, evidenced for example in the resuscitation of the archaic Manipuri script (Meitei Mayek), which is now being taught in schools and may in time replace the Bengali script for the writing of the Manipuri language. Meitei Mayek has already largely replaced the Bengali script in public notices.

Conclusion:

How then we may evaluate the Sanamahi movement concerning the general category of religious innovation. From one standpoint, it may be characterized as a protest movement, while the earlier sanamahi's movement leaders has no love for British interfere in Manipur politics, the political protest of the movement was directed within, against the abuse of power by the Maharajah and his civil and religious institutions. Therefore, it was at root a questioning of feudal structures. It never becomes a mass movement; its ideological under pinning was essentially supportive of the peasant classes and critical of the rich influential elites.

The early Sanamahi movement was thus the part of the complex of influences that issued in the widespread calls for responsible democratic government in the 1940s, and it actually put forward candidates in the state elections of 1948. At the same time Sanamahism was a protest against the social fragmentation in the splitting of families and villages that resulted from indiscriminate out casting. In old days, this type of sanction was not known in traditional Meitei society. The focus of the Sanamahi movement was essentially religious: it was leveled against the excessive legalism priest craft of a foreign religion.

The Sanamahi movement may characterize as neo-traditional because it advocates a return to what is perceive as traditional to the Meitei. It does not present a new revelation, nor does it have prophets and charismatics who lay claim visions and divine voices. It is essentially an attempt at the recovery of national identity in the face of the threat of integration or absorption into the Indian sub-continent, and it focuses on religion as a way into the revival of Meitei traditional social and cultural values. It is not simply looking backward; its aim is not just simply recovering past values and identity but to reclaim the Gods and also to reinvent to meet the crises of the present.

References:

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