



## **POPULAR BELIEFS AND SUPERSTITIONS IN MEITEIS SOCIETY**

**Khongbantabam Naobi Devi**

Research Scholar, Department of English, Ethiraj College for Women, Chennai, Tamilnadu

### **Abstract:**

*The Meiteis perform a number of social and traditional practices since olden days that are mostly based on beliefs, customs and superstitions. The reasons of some practices are inexplicable but some are beliefs have values in imparting some kind of discipline to the people in the form of utilization of agricultural products and other things. The beliefs and superstitions are strongly embedded in the minds of the Meiteis even the modern scientific education cannot succeed in dispelling those beliefs and superstitions. Nevertheless, the rapid urbanization and the continuous blows of modern education through radio, television, newspapers and electronic media are gradually breaking the very foundation of such beliefs and superstitions. Mostly in rural area, there is still environment for survival of such superstitious beliefs and beliefs. This paper is an attempt to bring out some of the beliefs and superstitions performed in the Meiteis society. For the convenience of the discussion, the issue can be discussed under heads, e.g. (a) Beliefs and (b) Superstitions.*

### **Introduction:**

The Meiteis perform a number of social and traditional practices since olden days that are mostly based on beliefs, customs and superstitions. The reasons of some practices are inexplicable but some are beliefs have values in imparting some kind of discipline to the people in the form of utilization of agricultural products and other things. The beliefs and superstitions are strongly embedded in the minds of the Meiteis even the modern scientific education cannot succeed in dispelling those beliefs and superstitions. Nevertheless, the rapid urbanization and the continuous blows of modern education through radio, television, newspapers and electronic media are gradually breaking the very foundation of such beliefs and superstitions. Mostly in rural area, there is still environment for survival of such superstitious beliefs and beliefs. This paper is an attempt to bring out some of the beliefs and superstitions performed in the Meiteis society. For the convenience of the discussion, the issue can be discussed under heads, e.g. (a) Beliefs and (b) Superstitions.

The Meiteis of Manipur especially the ancient people were the abode of superstitious beliefs that were widespread in their everyday life. In a certain extent, the behavior of the Meiteis was shaped by these superstitious beliefs. The effects of these beliefs are so firm that modernization cannot loosen its hold among the people of Manipur. Due to the urbanization these superstitious beliefs are gradually losing this firm foundation.

To a certain extent, it seems that these beliefs and superstitions regulated their daily life. Even in the modern days, these superstitious beliefs have acted as a slow down to their free actions and thinking. Their thoughts are not still free from fear of the fallout when someone acted against the custom imposed by superstitious beliefs. Some of the beliefs have value in society mainly in the form of maintaining a discipline in utilizing their home home products. Some have their value in maintaining personal discipline.

**(a) Beliefs:** The beliefs that are going to be discussed here are not in system. The beliefs are found in the lives of the Meiteis that are lying scattered in everyday life of the people

of Manipur. Here the task is to arrange the beliefs into an order and there is no logical sequence applied in arranging them. The following are the some of the popular beliefs still found in the Meiteis community.

Earthquake is very rare in Manipur. Whenever earthquake is happened in Manipur, people shouts “Chak-Nga, Chak-Nga” (chak=rice, nga=fish). People beliefs that earthquake is an act of supernatural force that brings misfortune to earth. The shouting of the words “Chak-Nga” is an act of prayer to the supernatural force for prosperity for the family.

Rainstorms are abundant in Manipur mostly in March and April. It is believes that lightning increases the height of vegetables. If there is, rain accompanied with lightning in the night it is belief that next morning the vegetables will increases the height. Manipur is very cold in winter. Nevertheless, there is no snowfall, but there is plenty of frost. In the winter if there is excessive amount of frost, it is belief that a very heavy rain will follow in the rainy season i.e. June and July.

By watching the behaviours of birds, insects and animals people can forecast the weather of the coming season. If the birds and insects arrange their nest in the lower level of the trees it is believed that the coming season will be very stormy. The belief is that the nestling in the lower level will protect the nest from the strong wind. In Manipur fruits, bearing trees begins flowering from January and flowers fully bloom in the month of February. By observing, the natural phenomenon there is a tradition of forecasting the weather of the coming season. The observation is mainly done in Mango trees. If the Mango trees have, blooms, plenty of flowers the beliefs is that the coming season will be stormy.

In the olden days, Meiteis keep the salts in a small earthen pitcher called “Chafu” in the kitchen. In most of the season salts remain dry, but in the rainy season, it melts into water. It is believed that a flood will occur in the near future if the salts melt rapidly and if ants carry foods and climbs to a higher place. A young woman who is capable of delivering the babies cannot eat twin banana. It is believed that if the woman eats twin banana she will give birth twin babies.

In the night time cocks crow at definite intervals. Sometimes a cock’s crow breaking this time intervals, it is believed that the cock’s will bring misfortune to the family. Therefore, to avoid misfortune cock will be killed. If a hen or a duck lays their eggs or a cat give birth their babies inside the house, it is believed as a good omen and no one should disturb them. In the olden days, there is a belief that if a house is built in a land where a bamboo is not grown in the homestead, it is believed that the family living in that house will never be happy one.

In the past days, midwives known as Maibis in Manipuri word used “Wakthou” (bamboo blade) to cut the umbilical cord of a newborn baby. The reason for using bamboo blade is the beliefs that the baby will grow up healthy in uniform stages like those that the bamboo grows up in uniformity.

There is a custom of the Meiteis of using Paya as a waist belt while attending a funeral by the woman. The Paya is made from bamboo. The knot of the Paya is placed in the front of the body. The two protruding ends of the knot should point upwards. This is a tradition that has been followed for generations. After the funeral, they used the Paya for cleaning the tongue and later cast into the fire. Thereafter, the women will purify by dipping into the water and return home. It is beliefs that this act will keep away the evil spirits and prevent the death from happening twice in that particular family.

There is a popular belief regarding the number of canes splits used for tying the circular rim of winnower called Yangkok in Manipur. It is believed that the number of

cane splits should correspond to the count of "Chak-Nga or Chang-Shi" ( chak-rice, nga-fish, chang-living, shi- death). If the Yangkok which a count ends on the Chang or Chak is chosen for use. It is believed that a Yangkok which count ends on Chak or Chang is considered as auspicious and will bring fortune and prosperity to the family. The Yangkok (Winnower) should not keep outside the house when it is not used. It is believed that the Yangkok is a soul of the household and the soul should not separate from the body i.e. the house. Yangkok is used for husking the rice. In the birth ceremony of a new born baby known as Epan –Thaba, the baby is placed on a Yangkok by the Maibis (midwives). It is believed that the baby will have a bright future.

In a traditional Meitei's house, the verandah is divided into two sections by setting up of pillars at the verandah. The pillar on the right side of the verandah is known as phamen, and on the left side of the verandah is called Naktha. The phamen is reserved for the elders of the family, and Naktha is specifically for women to make cloth in loin-ooms or spinning the yarn etc. The gap between the Phamen and Naktha are laid down in the traditional meiteis beliefs. The belief is that if there is a wide gap in the phamen, it enhances the fertility and increases the number of living in the house. The narrow gap is maintained in the Naktha, it is said that it reduces the number of deaths in the house. There is also a belief that if a person leaves the house from Naktha, the left side of the verandah the person will face misfortune. The Naktha is considered as the passage of death.

In the tradition of the Meiteis, the house itself is a temple. Therefore, a secluded place is kept for worshipping. Therefore, a separate place is kept for feeding the cat in the kitchen near a pillar. It is considered inauspicious if someone inclined to the pillar and believes that the person will become slaves.

**(b) Superstitions:** The Meiteis of Manipur especially the ancient people were the abode of superstitious beliefs that were widespread in their everyday life. In a certain extent, the behavior of the Meiteis was shaped by these superstitious beliefs. The effects of these beliefs are so firm that modernization cannot loosen its hold among the people of Manipur. Due to the urbanization, these superstitious beliefs are gradually losing this firm foundation. Superstitious beliefs are found in the everyday lives of the Meiteis. The following are the some of the superstitious beliefs found in the Meiteis community.

In a traditional Meiteis household 'Polangkhhok' (bamboo poles for hanging clothes) is erected in the front courtyard or on the left of the courtyard for drying the clothes. It is believed that crossing below the 'Polangkhhok' is inauspicious to that person. Spoiling of foods and things by rats is very common in Manipur. People does not reprimand to the rats. It is believed that the reprimand to the rats will bring more misfortune to the family.

In the olden days, the toilet was built outside the house that is less far from the house. People believed that evil spirit overran the toilets. Therefore, before entering the toilet people used to clap three times, this would ward off the evil spirits. Moreover, people carried light in the nighttime, considered that without the fire it is unsafe. Giving money or lending money to somebody is not performed every day. Lending money on Thursday is considered inauspicious.

Traditionally Meiteis of Manipur followed lunar calendar. A married woman cannot enter into her parent's house on first, ninth and twentieth day of the month based on this lunar calendar. It is believed that on this particular day if the married woman enters into her parent's house, she will face difficulties in her life.

In a traditional Meiteis household, a barn for storing paddy is kept outside the house near the outhouse on the right side of the courtyard. People cannot take out the

paddy from the barn on any day. Paddy from the barn can be taken out only on the auspicious days of the month. Thursday is the restricted day, therefore, on this day, no one can withdraw the paddy from the barn. After harvesting, the paddy is stored in the barn in the month of November and December. Paddy can be withdrawn after performing a ritual called 'Kotlai-Thaba' in the month of January or in February or March.

In the olden days, every household has a small bamboo grove in their homestead. The bamboo that is growing in the homestead cannot be felled on any days especially on Saturdays. It is believed that someone felled the bamboo on inauspicious day, bad things will occur in that family.

If a person faces a broom while coming out of the house on a mission, it is considered as inauspicious. It is also considered as a bad omen. Therefore, if a person comes out of the house on a mission, the sweeping person will hide the broom. Facing a cat while coming out of the house on a mission is also considered as inauspicious. The person who faces cat will face difficulty in his mission. Facing a person who is brushing his teeth while coming out of the house on a mission is considered as a bad omen. A person who comes out of the house for a daring journey or for important works, he/she cannot re-enter the house. Re-entering the house is considered as inauspicious. Therefore, the person will ask another person to give the things that he/she forgets.

Man cannot eat some creeper vegetables as foods; it is believed that it will reduce the intellect, wit and agility. Moreover, it bears some sense regarding the incest taboo. It says that physical relationship with close relatives is harmful to the society and the person involving in the incest.

During a pregnancy of the woman in a family, building a house is considered as inauspicious. Pregnant woman are restricted from buying ornaments during the pregnancy.

Children are restricted to go out in the nighttime on the first and second Saturdays of 'Lamta' (March) month of the Meitei calendar. People believe that on these days evil spirits stalks in these lanes. On these days, a ritual called 'Sharoi-Khangba' is performed to drive out the evil- spirits from the lanes.

According to the Meitei calendar, there are some particular days on some months that are considered as inauspicious. These days are known as 'Tatnaba-Numit' in Manipur. Therefore, on these days important works or daring/risky journey is executed. The following are the inauspicious days:

- ❖ Shajibu (April), Thawan (August), Poinu(December)= Sunday and Monday are inauspicious days.
- ❖ Kalen(May), Langban(September), Wakching(January)= Friday and Wednesday are inauspicious day.
- ❖ Engnga (June), Mera(October), Fairen(February)= Tuesday is considered as inauspicious day.
- ❖ Engen (July), Hiyanggei (November), Lamta (March) = Thursday and Saturday are the inauspicious days.

In the olden days, a homestead was very big. Moreover, the traditional Meitei's house was built on the western side of the garden of the homestead, leaving more space on the eastern side. A number of vegetables, trees, plants and bamboos were planted in the homestead land. Therefore, many bees used to make hives. By observing the location of the bee hive some forecasts were made that was based on the traditional beliefs. Even in present days, this superstitious belief still exists in the Manipur society.

The following is the superstitious belief made by the people by observing the location of bee hive:

- ❖ Nongpok (East): If the beehive is located on the eastern side of the house, the family will be successful in their work.
- ❖ Meiram(South-East): If the beehive is located on the south-East of the house, the family member will fell sick.
- ❖ Kha (South): If the beehive is located on the south of the house. The family will face sorrow and suffering.
- ❖ Moiranglaji (North-West): If the beehive is located on the north-west side of the house, the family will fell sick.
- ❖ Nongchup( West): If the beehive is located on the west side of the house, the death of the wife or child may occur in the family.
- ❖ Koubrulaji(North-West): If the beehive is located on the North-west side of the house , the member of the family will have a long life.
- ❖ Awang (North): If the beehive is located on the north side of the house, the family will get a good harvest.
- ❖ Chingkhei (North-East): If the beehive is located on the North-East side of the house, the member of the family will get higher post in a job or work.

### **Conclusion:**

From the above discussion, we come to know that there is hardly any area in the life of the Meiteis where beliefs and superstitions have not penetrated. To a certain extent, it seems that these beliefs and superstitions regulated their daily life. Even in the modern days, these superstitious beliefs have acted as a slow down to their free actions and thinking. Their thoughts are not still free from fear of the fallout when someone acted against the custom imposed by superstitious beliefs. Moreover, here such unfounded beliefs posses a question mark on the present education that aims in cultivating scientific temper to the people. Some of the beliefs have value in society mainly in the form of maintaining a discipline in utilizing their home home products. Some have their value in maintaining personal discipline.

In the olden days, bamboo constituted the main plank of material culture of the Meiteis. Therefore, it is encircled the bamboo by an aura of beliefs. There is no wrong in imposing some kind of discipline in the form of beliefs in using bamboo in view of its extreme importance in their everyday life. Prohibition of felling bamboo on the Saturday in a week may be a means to prevent the felling of bamboo by greedy users. Imposing such discipline in the form of the beliefs is more pronounced in storing and withdrawing paddy from the barn.

The restriction has its moral standard when the paddy barn has been placed under the care of the goddess Phouoibi. In the present day the restriction has become a firm custom which no one can disobey this tradition. No one has withdrawn the new paddy from the barn until the ritual 'Kotlai-Thaba' is performed. The Yangkok (winnower) which, in view of its extreme utility in the lives of meiteis, is treated as a soul. A Yangkok is the soul of the house and cannot be separated even for a night, meaning it should be treated carefully and one should not keep throwing it outside the house after the use.

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