

EARLY MEITEI HISTORY

Religion, Society & The Manipur *Puyas*



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Rena Laisram

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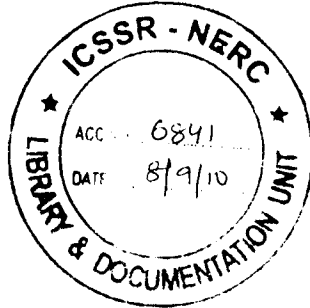
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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	xv
1. Introduction	1
2. Social Organization	31
3. The Meitei Pantheon	66
4. Rituals and Ritual Specialists	124
5. <i>Lai Haraoba</i> and other Festivals	156
6. Conclusion	196
<i>Maps/Illustrations</i>	205
<i>Appendices</i>	211
<i>Glossary of Meitei Word(s)/ Term(s)</i>	228
<i>Bibliography</i>	235
<i>Index</i>	253

1

Introduction

Manipur, situated in the extreme East of India, preserves a religion rich in mythology and colourful in rituals. Manipur, meaning 'the land of the gems' is a Sanskritized name given to the land when the Meiteis i.e., the people of the plains adopted Vaisnavism as a state religion in the 18th century A.D. *Sanamahi Laikan* records the official naming of the land as Manipur during the reign of King Garibniwaz (1709-1748 A.D.).¹ Previous to this, Manipur, the land has been recorded by other names in the *Puyas*.² The earliest names by which it was known include Meitei Leipak and Poireinamthak Saron Pung. This land acquired different names in the four human ages of Meitei history viz; Tilli Kokton Ahanba in *Hayi Chak*, Mirai Pongthoklam in *Khunung Chak*, Hana Semba Konna Loiba in *Langba Chak* and Muwapalli in *Konna Chak*.³

Located between longitudes 93°6' E and 94°48' E and latitudes 23°47' N and 25°41' N, Manipur formed an important link, culturally and otherwise between India on one side and South-East Asia on the other.

Manipur borders Myanmar (formerly Burma) to its East and South-East. To the North lies Nagaland and to the West lies Assam, while in the South-West it borders Mizoram.

Manipur is called Kathe by the Burmese, a variant of Kase of the Shans, Mekle by the Assamese while according to Col. McCulloch, the Bengali name for the state is Moglai.⁴

The importance of tracing the origin of the Meitei peoples in a study of their religion and society can hardly be overemphasized. To find the kinsmen of the ancestors of the Meiteis, we must look to the present neighbouring tribes many of whom show affinity in areas such as dialect, customs, beliefs and appearances.

The kingdom of Manipur first emerges from obscurity as a neighbour and ally of the Shan kingdom of Pong, which had its capital at Mogaung.⁵ The earliest reliable information of the country comes from a Shan account, quoted by Pemberton, dated 777 A.D., describing the visit of Samlong, a brother of the King of Pong.⁶

Attempts have been made in the past to locate the Meitei group of people in the map of the mass of Mongoloid tribes. Grierson tries to seek the relationship of the Meitei language and the language spoken by the hill tribes in the state and beyond it. He suggested that the Meitei language falls into the Tibeto-Burman group but expressed some doubt in placing it in the Kuki-Chin sub-division.⁷

It will be worthwhile to examine some of the theories put forward by various scholars. B.C. Allen suggests that "North West China between the upper waters of the Yang-tse Kiang and the Hoang-Ho was the cradle of the Indo-Chinese race, and that from the starting point successive waves of emigrants entered Assam and India. The first to arrive were the Mon Annam, who are found in Annam and Cambodia, but who have left a colony in Assam in the shape of the Khasis. A second wave of emigration brought the Tibeto-Burmans, the ancestors of the Bodo tribe, who colonized the valley of the Brahmaputra and occupied the Garo, Tippera and a portion of the Naga Hills. Another branch came southwards down

the Chindwin, settled in the Chin Hills, and were compelled by the pressure of population to move northwards into Cachar, Manipur and even into the Assam range".⁸ The Tai or Siamese branch of the Indo-Chinese peoples, called Shan by the Burmese, according to Max Muller were the first to migrate from their original seat in Central Asia towards the south and to settle along the rivers Mekong, Menam, Irawadi and Brahmaputra.⁹

'It was Samlongpha, the brother of Sinkhampha, the King of Pong who conquered and subdued the surrounding countries of Kachar, Tippera, Manipur and Assam'.¹⁰ For B. H. Hodgson "in the Moitai of Manipur, we have the combined appellations of the Siamese Tai and the Kochin Chinese Moy".¹¹

Luce studying the Meitei language notes that the Sak language once spread over the whole of North Burma from Manipur perhaps to Northern Yunnan. Luce further states that this area was possibly the fabled 'kingdom of Pong' of the later Shan and Manipur manuscripts.¹² Phayre believes that the term 'Pong' is not known to the Burmese. It appears, according to him, to be the name by which the country of the Upper Irawadi is still called in Manipur.¹³ Dun writes that the 'Shan Kingdom' of Pong was formerly bounded on the North by the range of hills dividing Burma from Assam. It extended to Khampat in the South, Yoma range in the West and Yunnan in the East. This kingdom had its capital at Mogaung and after varying fortunes it was annexed to Burma in 1752 A.D.¹⁴ In another theory establishing link between Manipur and the neighbouring kingdoms then, P. Gogoi quoting W. Shaw states that in the year 707 A.D., the King of Thailand defeated the King of Manipur, Naothingkhong and thereafter Manipur is said to have been ruled by the Thais for ten years.¹⁵ It may be mentioned here that Samlung, the younger brother of Sukhanpha, the King

of Pong stayed in Manipur for ten years at Apong Engkhol, a place situated East of the then royal palace.¹⁶

Since there was no independent Thai kingdom of Thailand in that early period, it is assumed that the reference is apparently Samlung's conquest of Upper Burma and Assam including Manipur in the 8th century A.D.¹⁷ S.K. Chatterjee believes that the Meiteis of Manipur are the most advanced section of the Kuki-Chin people. Linguistically close to the Burmese, Kachin or Singmois, they agree more with Nagas and Bodos. According to him, the Meiteis are known as Kukis in India and Chins in Burma.¹⁸ To quote George Watt, "It is perhaps not far from truth to assume that the present inhabitants of the plains and hills of Manipur have sprung from four great influences: the Kukies in the South, the Nagas in the North, the Shan and Burmese tribes on the East and certain hill tribes on the West more or less related to the great Kachari family now distributed throughout the valley of Assam".¹⁹

There is another school of thought which attempts to trace the roots of the Meitei peoples to the Aryans. While accepting the fact that the general facial characteristics of the Manipuris are Mongolian, B.C. Allen, E.A. Gait, C.G.H. Allen and H.F. Howard in their work *Gazetteer of Bengal and North East India* observes that there is a great diversity of feature among them some showing a regularity approaching the Aryan type.²⁰ The Burmese chronicles repeating an ancient tradition assert that the royal *Kshatriya* tribes of Northern India migrated to Upper Irawadi though no cause of the movement is assigned.²¹ Manipur, which lies within the basin of the Irawadi lay in the route of the *Kshatriya* princes. To support the theory, the tradition states that the northern part of the Kubo valley, which is the direct route from Manipur towards Burma is still called Mauriya or Maurira, said to be the name of the tribe to which King Asoka belonged.²² The Manipuris quote the

Mahabharata in support of their statement that they were originally Hindus. Although there is very little evidence saving the mention of Arjun's coming to Manipur, his stay for three years and marrying Chitrangada, a daughter of the Manipuri king Chitrabahan, there is nothing further bearing on the point. The earliest name Manipur appears in the *Adi-parva* of the epic *Mahabharata*.²³ The oldest name was Manlurpur with which name Arjun's visit to the eastern region and his reaching Manipur via Anga and Kalinga is connected. Pravabati understands that the route by which Arjuna came to Manipur was the hill route which connected Manipur valley with Surma or Barak valley. This is believed to be the same route taken by *Brahmanas* and other Aryan immigrants which led to their settlements in large numbers in Manipur in historical times.²⁴

There is a popular myth connected with the origin of the land and the naming of the same as Manipur. Claiming Hindu descent, the myth makes us believe that the valley of Manipur remained submerged under water for a very long time. Nine *Laibunghous* (divine youth) and seven *Lainuras* (divine girls) in joint collaboration succeeded in making sixty-four hillocks. Lord Siva is credited with making a hole through the hill with a trident thereby draining out all the water and making the land fit for habitation. To celebrate the happy event, Siva along with a host of gods and goddesses performed a dance, believed to have been the *Lai Haraoba* form still popular in Manipur. Ananta on watching the dance and overwhelmed by it and the beauty of the place brought jewels to the land. Henceforth, the land came to be known as Manipur (*mani* : jewels) or 'The Land of the Jewels'.²⁵

The various hypotheses worked out by the scholars show that there are broadly two linkages between the Meiteis and the outside groups of people viz; the Indo-Chinese in general and the Tais in particular and the Aryans' origin. The theory of Aryan origin hold no water due to the lack of evidence to

substantiate the proposition. There has not been any conclusive proof that the Manipur of the *Mahabharata* is the same as the present place of the same name. On the other hand, the theory of the Tai origin of the Meiteis which is based among others on language, movement of groups of people in the region and the racial similarities appear more scientific. Grierson and Luce studying the languages of the neighbouring tribes of the then kingdom of Manipur suggests affinity with the Kuki-Chin of Tibeto-Burman group of languages. According to Sagermano, the Tai people and its different branches, is, perhaps the most widely spread of any 'race' in the Indo-Chinese peninsula. Believing that there is a 'racial' connection between the Tais and the Meiteis on facial and language aspects, Sagermano says that these tribes had their home ages ago in Yunnan. He mentions two Shan kingdoms, one in the North of Burma with its capital at Mongmaw on the Sheveli river and another Shan kingdom of Tali which fell under the conquering hands of Kublai Khan in the year 1253 A.D.²⁶ That the Meiteis, perhaps, are the descendants of the Tai 'race' is also accounted for in sources such as the Burmese and Manipuri chronicles.

The valley of Manipur appears originally to have been occupied by several tribes which came from different directions. Although it is difficult to come to any conclusive statement on the origin of the Meitei people due to lack of enough historical material on the subject, comparative ethnographic studies suggest that it is fairly certain that the Meities might have belonged to the Tai 'race' of the Indo-Chinese group of Mongoloids. Having situated the Meiteis among the larger Chinese group of people, it is tempting to draw a parallel between the ancestor worship prevalent in Manipur and in China where it appears in the highest vigour.

The erstwhile kingdom of Manipur was formed as a result of the amalgamation of independent principalities under Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (33-154 A.D.), who belonged to

the Ningthouja *salai* (clan). The confederacy was formed by the union of seven clans viz; Ningthouja, Angom, Khuman, Luwang, Khaba-nganba, Moirang and Sarang-Leishangthem.²⁷ Gangmumei Kabui states that a *salai* (clan) was originally an ethnic group or tribe speaking a distinct language or dialect, occupying a territory and having an autonomous principality under a ruler who was both a political chieftain and social head of the clan.²⁸ Pandit N. Khelchandra Singh reveals that the word Meitei which has come to be referred to the people of the Manipur valley was originally applied only to the Ningthoujas. After the formation of the confederacy of the *salais* and the subjugation by the Ningthoujas, the word Meitei became the common nomenclature for all the people of the valley of Manipur.²⁹

The people inhabiting the valley of Manipur have been referred to by various names by the scholars dealing on the subject. The Meitheis by T.C. Hodson, Mithais by E.W. Dun and Moitai by B.H. Hodgson is generally considered by local scholars to have been the result of the British writers' inability to correctly pronounce the word. However, the difficulty lies in the debate on whether the word Meetei or Meitei is the correct nomenclature for these group of people. Local scholars have used either of the two words in their works depending on their preference. This present work will refer to the people of the valley as the Meiteis as this is the same used in *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the royal chronicle, a very important source for the study.

It should be mentioned at the very outset that the terms 'ancient' and 'medieval' in the context of the history of Manipur have different connotation than those of Indian History as such. Manipur remained aloof from the main political trends of the country. We do not have evidence of ancient empires reaching Manipur. Even the Mughals did not conquer Manipur. The change in the mode of relations of productions beginning around the 9th-10th centuries in India,

termed feudalism is also not applicable. This accounts for a different treatment for the periodisation of this region. The ancient and medieval periods of Manipur history overlap each other, the ancient merging into the medieval.

The study is an attempt at a reconstruction of the religion and society of early Meitei history, focusing on ancestor worship, the core of Meitei religion and upon which the society is founded. It primarily covers the period from the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (33-154 A.D.) to the reign of King Kyamba (1457-1508 A.D.) i.e. the period from the reign of the first 'historical' king to the time when the first reliable record of *Brahmana* migration to Manipur is available. The study also includes forms of ancestor worship even after the 16th century A.D. so as to trace the historical link between the earlier period and the contemporary period.

The *Brahmanas* came from Tripura, Assam, West Bengal and even far off places such as Mathura. The learned *Brahmanas* slowly but surely penetrated the age old customs and traditions of the people. However, the fact remains that the ancestor form of worship practiced by the Meiteis from very early times could not be wiped out by the outsiders who by the early part of the 18th century A.D. had settled down and even inter-married with the local people. Therefore, even till today when the Meiteis call themselves Hindus, the cult of ancestor worship runs as a lively undercurrent with a harmonious synthesis of *tulsi* veneration and Sanamahi reverence in every Meitei home. This feature of the religious tradition of the Meiteis have made Ghosh to remark that "the Meiteis are probably the sole exception in the history of the world to follow two religions at the same home".³⁰ The task is to distinguish and emphasize the ideas that are Meitei, original and divorced from Hindu influence. To accomplish this, therefore, this work is based mainly on the *Puyas*.

To be able to produce written literature, the people must have a certain level of economic, political and cultural

development. It has already been mentioned that the people of Manipur were in close contact with a branch of the Shans of Upper Burma called the Pong. It is widely believed that the Meiteis learnt the art of record-keeping from the Pongs, with whom they had a long and close contact over the centuries. S.K. Chatterjee is of the view that among the Tibeto-Burman languages, the most important and in literature certainly much greater importance than the others is the Meitei or Manipuri language. He further states that the Meiteis possessed the art of writing although, a primitive and unsophisticated sort, from some centuries ago which even their kinsmen outside India viz; the Burmese, the Siamese and the Chinese have not produced in such heroic scale in literature.³¹

The reign of King Kyamba is a watershed in the history of Manipur. Although the first reliable recorded *Brahmana* migration began from the 15th century A.D., earlier migration of the *Brahmanas* to Manipur cannot be wholly discarded. If there were any, perhaps, they were absorbed with the indigenous population leaving no trace. But, from the time of Kyamba regular inflow of *Brahmanas* started and along with it inter-marriage with local women, allotting clan names and finally finding a place in the local population. In the political scene, King Ningthoukhomba (1432-1467 A.D.) succeeded the Moirangs into accepting the suzerainty of the Ningthoujas.³² The constant threat posed by the once independent principalities was now followed by a period of political stability which must have facilitated the development of social and cultural life of the people. By the time of King Khagemba (1597-1652 A.D.), literary culture started to develop. The royal chronicle records the king's endeavour to spread education and that manuscripts came to be produced from the year 1616 A.D.³³

The Meiteis use two writing systems. Before the 19th century, Manipuri was written in a script called the Meitei

mayek. When exactly this script came in use has been a subject of controversy. The earliest reference to writing is that recorded in *Ningthourol Lambuba* where King Irengba (984-1074 A.D.) is described as a person who was very fond of reading and writing even in his old age.³⁴ A study of the epigraphical sources reveal that the Phayeng Copper Plate, written in Meitei *mayek* has been assigned to the year 799 A.D. by W. Yumjao Singh, one of the pioneers in the field of archaeology in Manipur. The plate now available in English translated form refers to three hundred and sixty-three gods, where Siva, Ganesa, Durga and Hari are clearly mentioned.³⁵ If this date is taken to be correct, the earliest writing of the Meiteis will go back as far as the 8th century A.D. However, scholars like S.N. Parratt have raised strong doubts on the validity of the dating. She takes the date to as late as the first half of the 19th century A.D.³⁶ The use of the non-Manipuri and Sanskrit words tend to make 8th century A.D. a difficult date to accept for the Phayeng Plate. There is an inscription written in Meitei *mayek* which is assigned to the 15th century A.D. during the reign of King Kyamba. This is the earliest recorded inscription in Meitei *mayek*.³⁷

It is possible that the *Brahmanas* who came and settled in Manipur from the 15th century A.D. onwards began writing using their own scripts. Those *Brahmanas* from Nadia and Sylhet must have used Bengali script while those from Gujarat and Kanpur used Devanagiri or some other local script. Keeping in mind the Shans, Tibetans, Burmese and perhaps Chinese influence, it must have created a chaos whereby there arose the need to invent a script acceptable to scholars and common men alike.

Manipuri manuscripts were originally written on small, thin, rectangular boards of the sapwood of a tree called *agaru* or *agar* (*aquilaria agallocha*). The ink used was made of lampblack and gall and the pen was made of small pieces of fully matured and seasoned bamboo.³⁸ Modern Manipuri is

written in Bengali script which was introduced in the wake of Vaisnavism influence as late as the 18th century A.D. The archaic Manipuri and modern Manipuri basically differ in script. One has to admit, however, that there has been a gradual change in the language and therefore there are numerous archaic words and modes of addresses which are still found in ancient manuscripts but no longer in use today. Majority of the manuscripts in archaic Manipuri are now rendered into modern Manipuri.

The sources for the study of ancestor cult of the Meiteis will be the local level texts in vernacular which will be substantiated by field observations. Unlike many North Eastern states, Manipur is fortunate in having a mass of manuscripts called *Puyas*. The main task of manuscript writing was done by learned *Maichous* (*Pandits*) who were employed by the royal court. Most of the manuscripts were in the possession of the kings and writing was done under their guidance. These manuscripts were preserved sandwiched between wood and sometimes wrapped by a thin piece of cloth, to be tied securely by a string. Manuscripts were also kept inside a *lubak* (a bamboo basket) and kept on a *lap* (a bamboo rack) to prevent exposure to moisture. The *lap* was made high up on the *phungga* (hearth).³⁹ Therefore, having understood that the Meiteis had the tradition of preserving *Puyas*, the main task lies in choosing, arranging and analysing the data available within the thematic framework of the study.

The *Puyas* may be defined as written records handed down to posterity by the forefathers of the Meiteis. They are a particular kind of old narratives which form a definite class in Manipuri literature. The *Puyas* are in the possession of various individuals and organizations. The State Kala Academy library itself has collected more than a thousand such manuscripts covering various aspects of Manipuri culture.⁴⁰ *A Catalogue of Manipuri Manuscripts* published

by Manipuri Sahitya Parishad shows that the *Puyas* covered a number of human disciplines.⁴¹ The list is as follows:

Subject	Number of <i>Puyas</i>
Administration	48
Arts and Culture	42
Charms and Mantras	94
Creation Stories	3
Fine Arts	1
Geography	31
Geology	3
Health and Hygiene	6
Genealogy	90
Poetry	40
Prediction	11
Prose	29
Religious Philosophy	72
Scripts	2
Supernatural Stories	8
<i>Yek, salai</i>	42
Miscellaneous	64

It should be mentioned that the *Puyas* are encyclopaedic in nature although many of them have a particular subject as the central theme. A *Puya* with the central theme on creation myths may also contain other subjects like genealogy, charms and *mantras*, religious philosophy etc. Therefore, under such circumstances a source as important as *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the royal chronicle which is categorized under

genealogy is not to be strictly followed in that sense. The *Puyas* are treated as sacred texts and for this reason they were kept at a place in the home where they could be kept untouched, except on auspicious days when they were brought out. Every owner of a *Puya* treats the text with great respect and fear since the *Puyas* themselves mention that an individual who leads a dishonest and sinful life should not even touch a *Puya*. Only a sincere and upright individual after bath, change into fresh clothes and burning of incense lamp can read the *Puyas*. This superstitious belief is one of the reasons why the owners of *Puyas* are not willing to part with the *Puyas*. The result is that the availability of the *Puyas* tends to get restricted. However, the most unfortunate event regarding the *Puya* availability is the infamous '*Puran Meithaba*'. The royal chronicle records as thus: "On the 17th day Sunday, in the year 1654 *saka* (1732 A.D.) at the instigation of the Guru Santidas, King Garibniwaz after sending message on horseback to all the corners of his kingdom, collected the old manuscripts in front of Kangla Utra of the royal palace and destroyed by burning them".⁴² Another reason for the disappearance of the *Puyas* is the consequence of the seven years war fought between 1741 and 1747 *saka* (1819-1825 A.D.). This war with the Burmese resulted in the taking away of many Meitei captives to Burma who were later absorbed into the Burmese community. They took away the *Puyas* which had been worshipped reverently by them.⁴³ The fear of oppression of the custodians of the *Puyas* by the Meitei kings must have led to keeping these materials in secret places for a very long time.

Manipuri literature prior to 18th century appears as an uncharted thick forest of undated anonymous books. The reason for this is the fact that the *Amaiba Loisang*, the department in charge of the Royal Archives and Record built up and encouraged among the *Amaibas* (scholars) and *Wakmas* (poets) a literary tradition of not disclosing

authorship of their works. This tradition was applied to in the case of *Cheitharol Kumbaba* and *Ningthourol Lambuba*, both royal chronicles of the state. There are works whose authorship was dedicated by the writers to their royal patrons. Towards the 17th century A.D., there are particulars of the authors given in the works.⁴⁴ While it is true that it is a laborious and difficult task to fix dates of the literature in a chronological order, the problem does not defy solution. The work by R.K. Jhalajit Singh called *A History of Manipuri Literature* in three volumes is a pioneer in the field of dating the mass of anonymous undated manuscripts.⁴⁵ The method used to determine the date of the *Puyas* is the language, style of composition and historical allusion to events mentioned in the texts. Ch. Manihar Singh believes that all the manuscripts, a few like those of astrology, medicine and genealogy excepted were meant to be sung or recited.⁴⁶ We may, therefore, surmise that the floating mass of oral literature began to be codified from about the 15th century A.D., when initial period of Brahmanical influence is seen. Perhaps, the coming of the institutional religion had a role to play in the codification process.

A study of the *Puyas* at hand encounters the vexing problem of separating the myths from facts and locating the historical in the myriad of legends, traditions, folklore and narratives. Nevertheless, a comparative study of the various *Puyas* helps us in analysing the data objectively and within the historical framework.

Attempts have been made in the past for a study of the Meitei religion. However, ancestor worship, wherever it was dealt with, formed only a part of the general study of the religion of Manipur. The reason for the lack of work on this subject could be largely due to the unavailability of the *Puyas* for a very long time, which has come out of various custodians' hands only in the recent past. The encouragement of revealing the concealed *Puyas* has been due to the revival

spirit of the old faith among a large section of the population in the recent past. Many of the *Puyas*, therefore, came to be collected by the State Kala Academy, Manipur State Archives, libraries and related organizations, the publishing of which also added to the opportunity to study the materials. The most important factor for inadequate handling of the *Puyas*, perhaps, was the fact that the initial contributors to Meitei history were the non-Meitei writers who were not in a position to handle the *Puyas*. The anthropological studies conducted by the British writers although significantly enriched the history of Manipur, was the result of second hand information and observation from the view of an outsider to the local setup. Nevertheless, accounts of these British political agents, written in English formed the major source of early Manipur history. Of particular importance are the works of Brown,⁴⁷ Dun⁴⁸ McCulloch⁴⁹ and Pemberton.⁵⁰ *The Meitheids* by T.C. Hodson⁵¹ is the first attempt of a full scale ethnography of the Meiteis. However, the book lacks accuracy due to it being based mainly on second hand information.

Local scholars such as Iboongohal,⁵² Jhalajit,⁵³ Sanahal⁵⁴ and Yumjao⁵⁵ have written in English on the general history of Manipur. Manjusri Chaki-Sircar,⁵⁶ studying the women of Manipur has produced in her work an overall picture of the position of Meitei women in the patriarchal society. However, her work is based on field observations and there is no handling of *Puyas* and hence reflects at best the traditional society in the eyes of the modern observer. Gangmumei Kabui⁵⁷ in the book *History of Manipur (Pre-Colonial Period)* has tried to work out a systematic account of the political, social and cultural history of Manipur from the earliest times up to the 18th century A.D. M. Kirti Singh's⁵⁸ work on the religion and culture of Manipur has limited focus on the traditional religion of Manipur. Research in Manipur University has produced some useful works. Some of them

relating to political and cultural history are those of N. Pramodini Devi,⁵⁹ P. Pravabati Devi,⁶⁰ L. Basanti Devi⁶¹ and L. Sanajaobi Devi.⁶² These works deal with ancestor worship only in the periphery and therefore is of not much significance in my study. The thesis on archaeology by L. Kunjeswori Devi⁶³ has brought to light the fact that this subject is almost absent in 'Pre-Hindu period and that architecture, epigraphs, icons and sculptors emerged in Manipur only about the time when Hindu influence made intrusion in the religious life of the people'. The various aspects dealing with the life of the traditional priestesses (*Maibis*) in the Meitei society can be known from the work of Ng. Ekasini Devi.⁶⁴ Saroj N. Arambam Parratt and John Parratt's work entitled *The Pleasing of the Gods: Meitei Lai Haraoba*⁶⁵ seeks to examine the festival within the totality of Meitei culture. Some focus on ancestor worship of the Meiteis is given as background to the socio-religious life in Manipur in the 18th century in the thesis worked out by N. Birachandra Singh.⁶⁶ A book of some importance is that of L. Bhagyachandra Singh.⁶⁷ Although his work relates to the religion of Manipur before the coming of Vaisnavism, it is dealt with as a subject of philosophy and therefore differs much from the historical view point. Perhaps, the most systematic work on the religion of Manipur is that of S.N. Parratt.⁶⁸ This book serves as a good base for a study of the traditional religion of Manipur. However, the work covers the entire period upto modern times, a good portion of the book being dedicated to the period of Brahmanical influence in the modern period of Manipur. Further, her handling of the *Puyas* is not adequate and she has relied more on the secondary sources and field study. It leaves much scope in dealing with the mass of information available from *Puyas*.

Local scholars have contributed much to the enrichment of Manipur history by their works in vernacular. R.K. Sanahal

Singh,⁶⁹ W. Yumjao Singh⁷⁰ and Mutua Jhulan Singh⁷¹ are some of the scholars who were the pioneers in the field of history writing in Manipur. N. Khelchandra Singh's book titled *Ariba Manipuri Sahityagi Itihas* gives an account of the early history of Manipur.⁷² The voluminous works of Atombapu Sharma may also be mentioned here. The works are oriented towards finding an Aryan root for the Meiteis. While the author's deep knowledge of Sanskrit and the *Puyas* is much to be appreciated, the parallel he draws at every stage of his hypothesis becomes too far-fetched. Some of his works include *Pakhangba* and *Meitei Meihourol*.⁷³

The *Puyas* are the only major source for the study of this aspect of Meitei history. As has been already stated, archaeological sources for the study is almost negligible, as archaeology in Manipur developed at a late stage. The few archaeological material available on the subject may be mentioned here. The epigraphs form the most important section and they are mostly engraved on stones, copper plates and iron plates. Most of them contain few lines and are dedicated to some deity and relate historical events and incidents of war etc.⁷⁴ The list of inscriptions are as follows:

1. Phayeng Copper Plate assigned to 8th century A.D.⁷⁵
2. Stone inscription of King Kyamba of 15th century A.D.⁷⁶
3. Konthoujam Lairemma inscriptions No.1 and 2. : These are two records of different dates on the same slab, one of which is of the time of King Khagemba (1597-1652 A.D.) and another of the time of King Charairongba (1697-1709 A.D.). Inscribed in archaic Meitei script, the content is about Konthoujam Lairemma and the Konthoujam clan.⁷⁷
4. Ningel Inscription of Garibniwaz (1709-1748 A.D.) : Inscribed in archaic Meitei script, the king is described here as Simha Nongshakumba. It records the details

of many high ranking officials, their names along with the village chiefs and their respective villages. The inscription closes with the word Rama, thereby indicating Brahmanical influence at that period of Meitei history.⁷⁸

Nothing definite is known regarding the origin of sculpture in Manipur. O.K. Singh informs us that the earliest available record of casting idols in Manipur is that of Panthoibi and Sanamahi of the early 17th century A.D.⁷⁹ The royal chronicle, however, gives the dates for the casting of the idols of the two *lais* as 1621 *saka* (1699 A.D.) and 1622 *saka* (1700 A.D.) respectively.⁸⁰

In Manipur, the concept of temple emerged in the late centuries.⁸¹ It is unfortunate that not a single monument erected before 15th century A.D. have survived. O.K. Singh suggests that, perhaps, early historical monuments in Manipur may have been constructed with wood, bamboo, reed or other like available materials which are easily weathered when exposed to tropical or sub-tropical climate.⁸² The art of making brick was probably introduced very late in Manipur. The earliest available record of brick-making in Manipur was during the time of King Khagemba (1597-1652 A.D.).⁸³ It may be mentioned here that the frequent Burmese invasions to Manipur must have also contributed to the destruction of the early monuments.

The antiquity of coinage in Manipur is not definitely known yet. The ancient coins of Manipur were made of bell metal and were known as *sels*.⁸⁴ The material used for minting the coins is believed to have been imported from Burma since bell metal was not locally produced in Manipur.⁸⁵ The *Numit Kappa Puya* refers to an inscribed coin called Taret-mayimaiba which was used for worshipping the sun god.⁸⁶ Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (33-154 A.D.) is also said to have introduced coins. Since archaeological evidence so far have

not supported these theories, it is difficult to come to any valid conclusion.

The *Puyas* available and referred for the present study may be classified into five groups. In the first category are included the *Puyas* which are written in Meitei *mayek* viz; *Khununglon*.⁸⁷ The original *Puyas* in Meitei *mayek* are transliterated in Bengali script and in this category we have *Sanggai Phammang*.⁸⁸ The mass of *Puyas* which are translated into the spoken language of today and written in Bengali script form a good section of the sources for study viz; *Leithak Leikharon*.⁸⁹ Another group of *Puyas* are the compiled and edited *Puyas* written in Bengali script in transliterated form viz; *Panthoibi Naherol Anasung Aman Sikumlon*⁹⁰ and *Sanamahi Puya*.⁹¹ The last group of *Puyas* are those which are extracts of the original *Puyas* written in Bengali script viz; *Parishadki Ariba Manipuri Wareng Lairik*.⁹²

The five forms in which the *Puyas* are available to us and the subjects covered have been already dealt with. It is important to briefly analyze the *Puyas* in order to understand the foundation on which the study is based. The ancestor cult of the Meiteis must have necessitated the recording of lineage and descent of each clan. There has been a tradition of recording the pedigree of each *sagei* by the head of the sub-clan. *Langthabalon*⁹³ and *Sanggai Phammang*⁹⁴ are *Puyas* which are classified strictly under the group of genealogy. *Leithak Leikharon*,⁹⁵ *Khamlangba Erengba Puwari*⁹⁶ and *Pudin*⁹⁷ are *Puyas* which deal with creation and cosmology in general as the central theme. It is also a compendium of historical accounts on the origin of clans in Manipur. Since the religious belief of the people are expressed through rituals, Meiteis perform rituals on all occasions when they venerate their ancestors. *Thalloi Nongkhailon*⁹⁸ and *Erat Thounirol*⁹⁹ deal with various details of rituals. There are a class of *Puyas* which deal exclusively with a particular

deity. *Puyas* such as *Sanamahi Puya*¹⁰⁰ and *Pakhangba Laihui*¹⁰¹ help us to gather information on the parentage, myths associated, names by which the deity is known, rituals to be performed for them, items of food or flowers to be offered etc. *Panthoibi Khongul*¹⁰² is another *Puya* which deals with a particular deity. Here, the life of goddess Panthoibi is narrated, her transformation from an ordinary village girl to the level of a deity by her association with Nongpok after which the two came to be worshipped as Nongpok Panthoibi.

By far the most important source for the study of Meitei history is the royal chronicle called *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. These state chronicles were recorded in Meitei *mayek* in the courts by the learned *Maichous*. *Cheitharol Kumbaba* records the historical events of nearly two thousand years covering the reign of seventy eight kings from Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (33-154 A.D.) to Bodhachandra Singh (1941-1955 A.D.). This chronicle which runs to about eight hundred pages is a voluminous one. When exactly this chronicle began to be recorded has been debated by many scholars. The chronicle itself mentions that it was King Kyamba who introduced the system of *cheithaba* or counting of years in the year 1485 A.D.¹⁰³ The accounts before this is sketchy and scholars believe that it must have been constructed out of available source materials. E. Nilakanta quoting the chronicle brings out the event of 1780 A.D. when the king Bhagyachandra is said to have ordered the re-compiling of the lost *Cheitharol*. The incident implies that the chronicle was already in existence before the reign of this king. The language and style of the text has made scholars to conclude that the chronicle must have started the recording of historical events from the 15th century A.D.¹⁰⁴ The contents of the chronicle are varied and almost all embracing. Taking at random, it records the accession of ruler on the throne, military expedition, royal excursion, pleasure trips to lakes and pilgrimage to the abode of deities, major religious and

social events, visits of holy men to Manipur, migrations of *Brahmanas* and Muslims to Manipur, religious conversions, natural calamities and a hosts of other information. The significance of *Cheitharol Kumbaba* lies in the fact that this is the only chronicle which record dates, days and year of the historical events. Of particular value to researchers not well versed in Meitei script and language is the translated version of this *Puya* by Saroj Nalini Arambam Parratt¹⁰⁵ entitled *The Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur: The Cheitharol Kumpapa*, which also includes the original text and notes.

*Ningthourol Lambuba*¹⁰⁶ is another chronicle which is a mine of information on various happenings in the kingdom from 1st century to 18th century A.D. Unfortunately, the years in which the recorded events took place are not mentioned. However, the events are recorded according to the reign of each king and therefore, read along-side *Cheitharol Kumbaba* it is possible to find out the time of most of the events. Apart from the accounts of royal tours, *Ningthourol Lambuba* pays special attention to explaining the place names of the military expedition. The narrative and the myth explained helps us to trace the meaning of numerous words and dialects no longer used. R.K. Jhalajit places the writing of this book towards the end of the 17th century.¹⁰⁷ The Meitei philosophy and thoughts are dealt with in the *Sakok Lamlen Ahanba Puya*.¹⁰⁸ It tells the reader about the gods to be worshipped, the ways to worship them, certain myths associated with, the codes to follow in order to attain *mukti* etc. This *Puya* also informs us about the social customs of the early Meiteis.

As already been stated, Manipur history witnessed migrations of various people from different directions from early times. The learned *Maichous* kept accounts of the migration of the people to the Meitei land. *Nongpok Haram*¹⁰⁹ describes the inflow of different people like Burmese, Chinese etc. from the Eastern direction. *Nongchup Haram*¹¹⁰ deals

with the people who migrated from the West. Another *Puya* on migration is that of *Poireiton Khunthokpa*.¹¹¹ This book gives an account of the long journey undertaken by Poireiton and a horde of men on their coming to Manipur. The book initially seems more like a mythology. However, there are certain historical facts of people and place names in the book. Further, Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, the first historical king of Manipur is recorded as having married Laisna, the sister of Poireiton. *Poireiton Khunthokpa* is also mentioned in *Cheitharol Kumbaba*.¹¹² That the *Brahmanas* came and settled in Manipur is known from the *Bamon Khunthoklon Puya*.¹¹³ The *Brahmanas* who came from Tripura, West Bengal, Mathura, Orissa etc. arrived in Manipur at least by the 15th century A.D. They were allotted clan names and some of them married local women and settled down in the valley. The migration of the *Brahmanas* is important in understanding the gradual transformation of the religious history of the Meiteis from ancestor worship to Brahmanical faith.

Apart from the *Puyas* mentioned above there are a mass of other *Puyas* which serve as good source for various aspects of the subject under study. The *Puyas* being encyclopaedic in nature, many of them fall under this group. Taking at random, mention may be made of *Puyas* such as *Thiren Layat*,¹¹⁴ *Wakok Hilel Thilel Amailon Pukok Puya*,¹¹⁵ *Khamoi Yamgoi Sekning*,¹¹⁶ *Sakok Wakok*,¹¹⁷ *Loiyamba Shinyen*,¹¹⁸ *Chingoiron*,¹¹⁹ *Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba*¹²⁰ etc.

It is important to note that various organizations have been trying to unearth the numerous *Puyas* which are in the custody of individuals. In an attempt to encourage the study of the past, seminars have been organized and new information is added to the existing knowledge. These seminars help to continue the process of unravelling the mass of *Puyas* still trapped in many homes. The seminar papers made use of in this study include those which have been

organized by The Cultural Forum, International Society for Cultural Studies, S.R. Institute of Manipuri Studies, Manipur Folklore Society, Manipur State Kala Academy and Universal Literary Association.

Among the journals which have been made use of in this study are *Umanglai Khunda* and *Journal of Manipuri Sahitya Parishad* in Manipuri. Those in English include *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, *Man in India*, *Transactions of the Folklore Society*, and *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*. *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, *Knowledge in Depth* and *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* have also been consulted for this study.

The study of *Puyas* has been aided greatly by the dictionaries compiled by N. Dinachandra Singh and N. Khelchandra Singh. Since the archaic words are no longer in use today, *Khununglongi Aartha* and *Ariba Manipuri Longei* which gives the meanings of archaic Manipuri words to modern Manipuri have proved to be very handy. Two other dictionaries which have helped in the writing of this work are *A Vocabulary Manipuri to English Dictionary* and *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*.

Salient aspects of tribal religion such as ancestor worship, role of the priest and magical rituals find parallel in most tribal religions of the world. Anthropologists studied them in detail to find out their significance in the overall religious structure. In many primitive tribal societies, ancestral spirits co-exist with the living influencing and even determining the fortunes of the people. They have also shown that no matter how complicated the socio-economic structure of the tribe is, the everyday affairs of man are still dominated by priesthood and magic. This work will make use of anthropological insights for an understanding of the Meitei

ancestor cult. An important difference between the anthropologists and the historians is that they study their material directly in the field while the historians primarily depend on written records. However, many anthropologists and sociologists are becoming sensitive to the need of using what they call local level texts in vernacular which substantiate their field observations. The methodology used is the critical study of the *Puyas* which is supplemented by field survey, observations of the rites and rituals at first hand, information recorded from local scholars and interview of the *Pandits* and other members of the community. The historical approach will be aided by anthropological insights and sociological analysis to understand the subject from a wider perspective.

It must be admitted here that the *Puyas* referred to for the study are only a fragment of the mass of them which are believed to be still remaining in the custody of individuals, families and various organizations. However, the available data throw a flood of light on the traditional religion and society of the Meiteis from the earliest times to the 15th century A.D. when regular migration of *Brahmanas* to Manipur is recorded in the *Puyas*. It is hoped that through an intensive study of the materials at hand a more meaningful understanding of the religion and society prevailing in early Manipur will emerge.

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