

Religious and Cultural Symbols of the Meiteis

M. Kirti Singh

'In a symbol' as Carlyle pointed out, 'there is concealment and yet revelation'. It conceals partly the essence from the common person but partly reveals it by suggesting its symbology is true of every branch of learning although it is more in evidence in religion. The use of symbols helps us to understand the limitless bounty of god and various abstract concept and ideas of different religious systems. Material object as well as verbal signs are used as religious symbols. These are of a ritual character and depict god, secret texts in every religion and ethnic commandments. In early form of religion such as fetishism and totemism the dividing line between objects of veneration or social objects and their substitutes was virtually non-existent. Each clan has its close association with flora and fauna, species of birds, fish and plants are connected with the well being of some groups, viz the salais of Manipur. As for example, the Ningthouja do not take Ngaril (eel). The Pigeon is the symbol of the ancestor of the Chenglei Clan. Consequent on the development of society and refinement of religious symbols became more sophisticated in various cultures. Examples of religious symbols as found in Manipur are endless in view of the variety of the different communities who lived here. The nature of symbolism is a feature of painting, book illustration, building construction, etc. The inner metaphysical meaning of Meitei belief can be deciphered with the help of symbols. Some of the holy symbols and objects are given below.

Paphal —Like the virtual banner of the religions of the world, the *Paphal* i.e, the diagrammatic representation of the snake form of Pakhangba is the most important during the regime of the Maharajahs. It is the state emblem representing the royal insignia of the ruler. It is square in essence although it appears to the semi-circular within the square figure veneration of Paphal as the protector, guardian and founder of the Ningthouja dynasty in a factor within Meitei belief.

There are conflicting versions of the interpretation of *Paphal* symbol which reached out to such fields as the evolution and script of the Meitei, the mystical art of sword/spear dance movements and workmanship of the artists.

The origin of *Paphal* is traced to the destructive role of Haraba at the time of the creation of the Universe. The story goes that he broke Sanamahi's creation twice. The *Mapu*/immortal goddess of lighting who captivated him by dancing. In the meanwhile

the creation was completed by solidifying the earth with the help of 4 *Chuks*/pillars and thereby resisting the further move of Haraba's hood.

Another version states that Pakhangba had adverse relations with his elder brother for assuming the throne without the knowledge of his brother. When Sanamahi tried to destroy the whole earth with a revengeful motive to his younger brother, the *Mapu* god prevented him from doing so. The panick-stricken Pakhangba could not come out and hid in the form of *Paphal*.

There is still another version according to which this snake-form is the display of *Khoirin* (intestine) in human body. A particular type of dance known as *Lairel/Mathek* (Python Curve) is a part of Laiharaoba dance in which the dancers move in a circular pattern around the ground under the supervision of a priest (Maiba).

A specialist in sacred lore executes with a sword or spear a type of dance called *Thengkourol* on the Paphal of Pakhangba at the time of conquering a particular place or a tribe. This dance has its constructive and destructive aspects of the state. Certain spots in the diagram represent certain areas of the snake god.

There is belief that any error in the performance of the dance will lead to disastrous consequence. When the pattern is successfully accomplished, the king or the owner of a deity reward them with suitable presents.

Paphal forms designs on the cloths, paper, wood and various metal by the royal artisan and court scholars and flags constitute symbols of protection against any harm. Some wear the symbol figure on the necks and the earlobes.

We find as many as 180 (some say 384) designs of Paphal which are drawn in the form of various animals viz. tiger, dragon, duck, etc. Some forms symbolise evil, some auspicious signs. There are also underground tunnels relative to the coils of Pakhangba for rituals in the ancient capital of Kangla.

We also need speak of the inner meaning of the process of cycles of birth and death as indicated by the manner of biting its tail by the snake. Two lines, one below the other, have long been believed to represent the existence of men, woman, fertilisation and human birth - a law of the Universe.

Apokpa —The clans of the Meiteis had selected for their identity their sign (like the *Lepsumbal* / mortar), a clear testimony of the veneration of the forefathers. This is the hereditary possession of the *Pih* chief of a clan or a surname handed down from generation to generation. Gold and silver particles are put in the lower portion of this symbol. Such symbols of iron are to be found in *Thel* or *Thembung* (plateau) of the valley.

Fruits and flowers stand for and remind us of the massage of Apokpa/progenitor of clan.

Cheirong :—Branched horn possesses points of cultural interest. For instance it is well known to the people of the hills and plains of Manipur as the destructive feature of their common origin. This symbol is popular in the belief of the schedule caste groups schedule tribes and the Burmees used it as an ornament in the

coffin. Among the people of this part of India it represents general prosperity and well being. It was related by the Meiteis to the replica of the horn of snake god Pakhangba, the divine ancestor of the Ningthouja. It is also thought to be the symbol of unseen reality which bestows common good on all putting branched horns was the most usual, especially in the building of Kangla Utra, car of Lord Jaganath as well as in the temples of *Umanglais*/sylvan deities of the Meiteis.

Palandavi —A chakra or diagram/diagram having 6 rooms and six lines is often called *Palandavi* or *Ashungbi*. When two triangles are crosswised to bring their apex to a common centre we have arrived at the symbol. The texts (especially *Khamnung Ingal Leisaba*) speaks of this *Cakra* as the abode of goddess Leimarel (deity of good and evil). It is assigned to a place below the naval called *Humlong thel*. This is found to be similar to the star of David or Solomon's seal in some respects.

In the opinion of the western scholars its origin is to be traced to the symbols drawn on the doors in European countries especially London for purpose of protecting cattle against epidemics and calamities. It is thought to be the contribution of the Pythagoras of Greece. The same is contradicted by the discovery of a stone having this symbol from the royal gate of Mysore. The Meitei held the same as most significant since it was used in many practices of cremation in order to separate life from death and *Leitaiba* i.e. the driving of evil spirits. The symbol is frequently used in the myth of the cremation of the body of Guru Shidava/Almighty Guru, lore of the physicians, tantric practitioners and *thanglon* (science of sword and spear etc). The Manipuris were widely cultured in tantric Buddhist Sadhana. The Meitei *bards*/*Asheibas* explains this phenomenon with reference to the confinement of the soul of Kege Nongban. The vain of Moirang epic by Khamba, the hero within the enclosure of Palandabi chakra (so that he may be served) and himself entered the fighting arena for killing the tiger which had attacked his enemy, Nongban.

Anji :—Of special significance is the symbol of Anji which is known as the presiding deity of learning and letters. No writer of ancient Manipur could commence writing without the Anji sign in the beginning in Meitei manuscript whether on *agorbak* or any other material. Obsesance to the goddess of learning is obligatory for all. A text of the 18th cennutry called *Thirin Laijin* bears the stamp of Meitei genius for clarity on this symbol.

According to Late Ch. Birahari Singh Pandit the word first occurs in connection with prayers addressed to the most excellent guru and his first son Sanamahi. It was introduced to represent the beginning and end of the Universe. Meitei Scholars admit 2 kinds of Anji, i.e. *Khamnung Anji*, the formless one and *Ingal Leisaba Anji*, i.e. the indefinite in relation to the universe as its guide/source. Like the Hindu Vedantins, recourse is had to this symbol to represent the conditioned and unconditioned aspects. Late W. Yumjao Singh, a noted scholar is of the opinion that Anji has undergone Hindu influence of *Omji*. It is accepted by all that it is an

expression of the people of north-east for the Indian idea.

Kangla Sha (Dragon)— The symbol of dragon or lion like creature with one or two horns has been the property of the Meiteis. The mythical beast with mouth wide open is called Kangla Sha, animal of the capital of Manipur. The Meitei holy texts themselves are rich in the origin of this concept. It is called *Nongdamba Paphal* (Snake diagram from Heaven). Nongdamba/Ordainder mounted on this beast while coming to earth for giving merits and demerits to all according to the Law of Karma. One myth relates that 3 horses were said to have been assumed by 3 gurus. 3 horses appeared with 6 eyes, 12 feet 7 branched horns and 365 manes which were probably symbolical of astronomical figures. The horses became one and christened as Kangla Sha. The dragon culture was a typical structure, stretching over much of China, Burma and beyond into Mongoloid settlements in South East China. According to British writers in all probability the fashion of keeping lion like animal made of brick was introduced by king Marjit from Burma due to his imitation of Burmese royal court. The basis to comprehend this cult was the dragon which was beyond any scale of measurement. Its distinctive feature could be perceived through the myth of Lai Nongshaba (deity in the form of deer) in the temple of Moirang Thangjing. There was proof of installation of brick dragon at the gate of Kangla to be found during the reign of king Khagemba (1598-1652) in connection with the training of archery of Royal ladies. King Chourajit introduced the brick dragon in the Utra of Kangla before the time of king Marjit. The cult of Kangla sha predominated the Meitei worlds when the warriors of 1891 A. D. killed 5 British officers at the Utra wherein were kept the two brick dragons. They fancied that this act of killing the white *sahebs* and feeding the dragons with their blood had the sanction of one Holy *Puya*. This act must weaken the British power in a magical way. For this act Major Maxuall, the Political Agent had the dragon destroyed by firing gun powder after conquering Manipur. The manner in which they were constructed as a sign of authority of Manipuri king and destroyed by the British military authority brings into focus the Manipuri faith refusing the submission to the mighty British. Photos showing Manipuri army parading with Manipuri uniform and guns in front of the dragons were still preserved in London Record Office in London. The statues were of more than 12 or 13 feet whose height is more than that of a parading soldier in the gate. The Meitei armies were relatively low (about 6 feet in height). The photos were very clear and attractive to look at. This has been confirmed by the discovery of the ruins of lion (made of brick) lying on the gate of Langthabal capital said to be built during the time of Maharajah Gambhir Singh.

We shall be trading on a controversial ground in what I have just indicated this symbol as a lion or dragon or horse.

Sangai —Brow antlered deer is peculiar to Manipur only. It was held sacred in early Meitei belief and discharges the cultural

and religious symbolism similar to those of Kanglasi/dragon in importance and privileges. In *Hijan Hirao* the story is told of how Pudangkoi Khutkoiba, the elder brother of celebrated Luwang Punshiba (long lived chief of Luwang clan) sat idle and did not work in time, later transformed himself into Sangai Pudangoi by his own will, was killed by Senba Mimaba while out in hunting. Luwang Guru Punshiba, the originator of Polo and boat race, prescribed the head of Sangai to be carved at the prow of a big boat in memory of his elder brother. In illustrated mss and myths it is one of the most widely mentioned animals. Wild life conservationists accept it as a peace loving and rare species to be preserved in Keibul Lamjao National Park which is full of its natural food (Hup, Wainu chara, young sprouts of Tou, Ishing Kambong, Tingthou, etc). The symbol of Sangai form the crest on the Forest Department emblem, festoons and publications.

This rare species of animal have been destroyed by indiscriminate hunting and expansion of inhabited area. There are at present 12 Sangais in the national park of Keibul Lamjao according to the survey conducted by the Forest Department of Manipur. It is the hope of the conservationist, ecologists and the enlightened public to save this rare animal from total extinction.

Other symbols in later Manipuri thought

The sacred characters of number - 3, 7, 18, etc are visible in their belief. The sun/light is connected with strength, good and prosperity. The title of the king is known as *Meiding* which means the light which is as bright as the lump of fire. The holy *Puyas* enjoin the observance of pujas by the people of each Salai/clan with the leaves of Tairen (toon wood), Langthrei (a kind of sacred plant), pungphai grass etc. which first originated from the body of Almighty Guru at the time of the creation of the Universe. The sacred objects constitute a veritable deterrent against evil tendencies. By using them in the sacred acts the mind and spirit are aimed to be at *Mapu/Immortal Guru*. We are also inclined to believe that sacrifice of buffaloes, fowls and *Ngamu* (mudfish) fish in the pre-Hindu rituals indicates the substitution of a god or goddess for purposes of worship in lieu of the beast or bird or fish i.e. the concerned totems which were prevalent among the primitive tribes. Each *yek-salai/clan* had its design of colours and flags. The common Manipuri symbols such as Pakhangba flag, Manipuri anthem and emblem of Kanglasi sha have been accepted during the reign of Maharajah Chandrakirti Singh (1850-1886 A. D., 2nd time).

Some of the charms and mantras may be charged as barbaric and obscene. But the symbolic and psychological interpretation of them will remove the charges and will throw light on the cultural aspect as well as the national spirit during those times. *Phambal Lal/war* concerning the coronation is the representation of glory and royal power. Typical Manipuri houses and temples follow the pattern of human body with *Kayat/limbs*. In the Vaishnava period of Manipuri history respectable persons were welcome formally with plantain and ghata. pitchers of water and burning of

incense which are supposed to be harbinger of good fortune and success in life. One will see tulasi plants in the courtyard of every Meitei family as a sign to the householder to lead a righteous life. The first recorded expression of Hindu religious ideas through symbols was the offering of milched rice and tulasi leaves to the Saligram stone of Vishnu in Lamangdong brick temple by king Kyamba (1467-1508 A. D.). Hindu emblem and sound symbols such as mantras, Salagram, Linga, Yoni, Swastika, yantras and diagram, etc. have become as much the property of the Meiteis as of the orthodox Hindu since the 18th century. Maharajah Garibaniwaz made his people familiar with the Ramanandi sect mark on the forehead, idols, rosary and Hindu puranic stories of gods and goddesses.

Conclusion

I now conclude the paper with the following observations : A difficult task that confront a genuine Indologist is the search for an objective meaning of symbols appearing in the group mind. The same symbol may imply different view points and interpretations according different scholars. Our concern is what is the basic or primary meaning of a symbol. The frame of reference of this problem is a historical or a cultural one in the context of Manipur and its people. (2) One must be impressed by the continuity and synthesis of Manipuri tradition. They had the quality of renewing the same in response to the external influences which were brought to bear on its culture in the course of the centuries. How far the symbols, native and external, concrete and abstract, are a reminder of Manipur's cultural history which we hope will attract the attention of the scholars. It is also a fact that racial and geographical barriers are no obstacles to the cultural synthesis and that Manipur has played her part in this movement. (3). Proper understanding of the symbolic significance especially by the young scholars will help in seeing the various historical trends and creating a distinctive identity of the people. Our scholars and priests were never satisfied with looking at the outer meanings, but tried to give the inner message by their creative brain. The understanding of symbols will not undermine the people's devotion but must bring out a more intelligent kind of devotion.