



Meitei Society: A Historical and Socio-Cultural Exploration

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Abstract:

Every community has its own history and social structure. The Meiteis, being an indigenous ethnic group in Manipur possess a rich history and complex social structure that have significantly influenced its cultural landscape. This paper attempts to explore some of the historical findings and focus on the social structure also by analysing its social institutions and culture. It also highlights how historical events and social dynamics have shaped the identity and social norms of the Meiteis.

Keywords: Meiteis, history, social structure, Manipur.

I. Introduction:

The Meitei people of Manipur possess a rich history and complex social structures shaped by indigenous traditions and interactions with various groups. Meitei society is characterized by internal divisions and a hierarchical order within the community. Its social structure includes various clans (*Yek-Salai*), lineages, and sub-groups that reflect a blend of indigenous beliefs and Hindu influences.

History serves as a repository of knowledge that provides insights into the perspectives and identities of peoples. To fully understand the Meitei's past, we must examine historical records. Most of what is known about Meitei history comes from early manuscripts called the *Puyas*, along with other historical works. The *Puyas* trace their origins back to the 1st century CE, although there are no continuous records detailing how they have evolved. Today, around 4000 *Puyas* remain accessible.

The *Puyas* reveal some key history and social structure of *Meiteis*. *Puyas* such as *Leithak Leikharol* and *Sanamahi Laihui* describe *Sanamahi* as the creator of universe. These texts are played an

important role in the revival of the *Sanamahi* religion in the 1930s and 1940s. Further Manipuri dance, one of the six classical dance form of India, is believed to have its roots in *Sanamahi* traditions. Because of the *Sanamahi* roots, ancestor worship and *Sanamahi* veneration continues to the present day in many Meitei home, including some that have adopted *Vaishnavism*.

History:

Manipur is one of the earliest settled parts of north-east India. The state of Manipur was once the ancient Kingdom of the *Meiteis* and various Tribes. By the time the *Meiteis* became an ethnic group with great mixture of blood. Singh (2017) highlights that there is no such thing as a pure race now by illustrating that only a species of man called *Homo sapiens* exists in the world now. In general, the features of the *Meiteis* are Mongoloid. It is further stated that if the general feature of the Meitei is Mongoloid, there are some traces of Aryan features also. R. Brown suggested that although the general facial characteristics of the Manipuri are of the Mongoloid type, there is greatly diversity of features among them, some of them showing a regularity approaching the Aryan type. Among men and women the stature is very various, differing about as much as is found among the European. Dunn (1975) indicates that there can be no reasonable doubt that a great Aryan wave of very pure blood passed through Manipur into Burma in pre-historic time and he accounts the traces of these in the finally cut features which are seen now and then among the *Manipuris*.

Manipur, historically known as the Kingdom of *Meiteis*, is home to various ethnic group, with the Meitei forming the majority according to the 2011 census. Most Meitei practice Hinduism, accounting for approximately 41.39 percent of the population. The term 'Manipur'



which signifies the state today, emerged relatively recently, following the integration of Hinduism into Meitei society. Previously the Kingdom was known by various names with *Kangleipak* (The realm of *Kangla*) and the *Meitrabak* (The land of the *Meiteis*) being the most prominent. The names are continued to be used by the *Meiteis* assigned to an early British record as *Muneepon* and it was known by different names among neighbouring countries.

In *Rannell's* "Memoir and Maps of India", the state was called '*Meckley*', the Burmese and Shan people called it "*Kathe* or '*Ka-se*' (Abdul Ali, 1985: 15) and the *Ahoms* '*Mekhle*' and the old Assamese '*Moglau*' (E. Gaif, 1963: 321). It was then a Kingdom and *Kangla* in *Imphal* town was its capital. Among the *Meiteis*, the land is known as *Poirei Sanaleibak* and *Meitei Leibak* which means the land of the *Meiteis*. According to Manipuri historical work, "*Sanamahi Leikan*", the name '*Manipur*' was introduced in the early eighteenth century during the reign of *Hinduised Garibniwas* (*Bhogeswar*, 1972, pp.49-69).

Since the early days of the Christian Era, the kings and the local people were *Meiteis* who were the inhabitants of Manipur valley, while the hilly tracts were occupied by various hill tribes belonging to the ethnic group known as *Naga* and *Kuki* or Tibeto-Burman group of the great Mongoloid family. In the plains, it is inhabited by the *Meiteis* predominantly including the Meitei Brahmins (*Bamons*) and the Meitei *Mussalmans* (*Pangals*).

The Aryan migrated to Manipur in the late historic times when the political organization and cultural cohesiveness were already achieved by the *Austriacs* and *Mongoleans*. The Manipuri Chronicle "*Bamon Khunthok*" maintains the account of the coming of Brahmin immigrants from different parts of India during the period of 1467 and 1834. The majority of them were from Bengal. Having settled in the valley of Manipur, they popularized Hinduism among the *Meiteis*. The Brahmin priests were mostly males and they married local girls and they were given family names by the Meitei kings.

Similar is the case with the Meitei *Mussalmans* (*Pangals*). They began to appear in Manipur since 1606 after their defeat in war. They came as warriors of *Sanongba*, younger brother of king *Khagemba*. After his victory over his brother *Sanongba*, *Khagemba* rehabilitated them in Manipur

as war captives. There after gradually, Manipur experienced interbreeding of ethnic races.

In Manipur, stability and order were with the emergence of the Meitei confederacy which later on evolved the institutionalized early state, the constitutional edict division of *Panas* administration under legal norms installation of *Singloop* (a village level economic organization).

There was *Lalloop* system (a military institution equivalent to conscription of one able man from every household) and the administration of the country was on the advice of sixty-four *Phamdous* that was equivalent to cabinet including ministers like *Awapurel* who was the minister for foreign affairs, especially to conduct relations with the Burmese and above all, a standing army. The little civilization land possessed all the basic components of a nation state (Sanajaoba, 1988:X).

When India got independence from British rulers, Manipur, the princely state, was merged with the Indian Union on October 15, 1949 and became a Part 'C' state to be governed by a chief commissioner. With the abolition of Part 'C' state, the territory had been administered as a centrally administered Union Territory under State Recognition Act 1956. Manipur was made full-fledged state of India on January 21, 1972. Now, the population of Manipur is composed of the *Meiteis* and the tribal population of the *Nagas* and the *Kukis* with the Outcastes (*Lois*) comprising Scheduled Castes population and *Meitei Pangals*. *Meiteilon* known as Manipuri language is the only language of communication among the diverse population groups in Manipur.

Origin of the Meiteis:

The *Meiteis* are predominantly Mongoloid with strains of other Non-Mongloid elements, who from the pre-historic times till today speak Tibeto-Burman languages. In connection with the derivation of the word '*Meitei*', *Hodson* (1975) shows that it was derived from the creation of man by god in his image: *Mi* means image, *Tai* means modelled. Therefore, Meitei means modelled after God's image. *Budhi* (2015) states that this *ethnonym* is a blending of two tribes of ancient China: *Mei* and *Ti* which forms the word Meitei. However, it is well known that historically the word Meitei was used during the period of the establishment of the *Ningthouja* dynasty by '*Pakhangba*' to mean this clan or dynasty and those ethnic and social groups who were politically and socially integrated with the



suzerainty of the *Ningthouja* (Kabui, 1988: 12) He, furthermore, stated that the ethnonym, Meitei, whatsoever the genesis of its derivation was historically found to have been applied to the *Ningthouja* clan dynasty, founded by *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba* and other groups absorbed by his dynasty politically and integrated into the social structure.

These tribes, clans or social groups are *Mangang, Angom, Luwang, Khaba - Nganba, Khuman, Moirang, Salang-Leisangthem, Heiram Khunjam, Thanga Kambong, Haokha-Lokha, Ningol Laton, Phantak-Khuyon, Lera-Khongnang, Ulok-Ushoi, Chekpa, Haorok-Kontha* and so on. All these statements indicate that ethnologically and linguistically, the *Meiteis* are Tibeto-Burman Mongoloid with *Austroloid*, Aryan and Thai admixture including some *Negrito* and Dravidian elements. Initially, the word Meitei was applied to the *Ningthouja* clan alone, but it gradually became common terminology for the rest of clan after the 15th century (Parrat, 1980). Autonomous chief term and principalities that had previously existed were relegated to ethnic or clan status within the larger Manipur kingdom by the end of 15th century. However, they maintained socio cultural identity (Pemberton, 1835). Sociologically, *Meiteis* have absorbed many foreign elements that have now completely integrated into their social structure.

Social Structure of the Meiteis:

Religion and society:

The *Meiteis* worship a number of Lai or Deities belonging to different denominations with divergent backgrounds ranging from the spirit of the grand natural phenomena to the spirit of the ancestors and ultimately to the Supreme Almighty Lord "*Atiya Guru Sidaba*" who is the Creator and sustainer of the entire Universe. In Manipuri (Meitei) language the word "*Lai*" means "Deity". It applies to both God and Goddess. The Meitei pantheon has number of ruling deities of the household (*Imung Lai*), of the outside spheres (*Lamhang Lai*) and the forestry (*Umang Lai*) who are regularly worshipped along with several other Hindu gods and goddesses.

The concept of Yum Lai and Lam Lai guides the everyday life of the *Meiteis*. In *Meiteilon* the term "Yum" means house and Lai means deity. So it basically means household deities which are worshipped daily with reverence. Lam in *Meiteilon*, on the other hand, means something pertaining to a specific area or locality. Hence the term "Lam-Lai" denotes the guardian deity of a locality.

The worship of *Umang Lais* and the ritual that requires, referred to as the *Umang Lai Haraoba*, is one of the main religious festivals in *Sanamahism*. As part of the belief system, dedicating a separate patch of land to the local deities that presides over the area is a common practice. Usually a forestland is marked out as "sacred groove" with the belief that gods and goddesses reside in that particular area. The deities residing in the sacred grooves are referred to as "*Umang Lais*" by the *Meiteis*. *Umang* in *Meiteilon* means forest and *Lai* meaning God.

Sacred groves are protected by taboos, norms and belief systems in the traditional communities. As Barre et al., (2009:27) rightly notes, "Sacred groves are areas of vegetation preserved through local taboos and sanctions that express ecological and spiritual values." *Meiteis* too follow certain taboos connected with *Umang Lai* worship. *Meities* believed that *Khubam* or sites of *Umang Lai* cannot be altered nor destroyed. The *Laipham* (location of the deities) is fundamentally a sacred space where the ancestral deities are enshrined and the people regard the deities with fear and reverence.

Lai Haraoba signifies the creation of the universe by the Lord *Asiba*. The *Meities* through their worship and the performance of religious rituals, the intricate matrix of Nature-Man and Soul (or Spirit) is exhibited. The various act which were performed by the Almighty God for the creation of the universe are expressed in the form of dance, song etc in *Lai Haraoba* festival. The metaphors and similes used in the ritual performance of *Umang Lais*, the sacred groove indicate the symbiotic relations between man and nature.

These festivals perpetuate worshipping gods and goddesses to ensure that the entire humanity is well safeguarded against all evils both natural and man-made thereby, creates a balanced and congenial environment to provide sufficient materials of self-sustenance to the mankind including food grains and animal husbandry. They manifest the spiritual and ecological ethos of rural indigenous communities. The traditional worship practices show the symbiotic relation of human beings and nature (Devi et al., 2025).

The early eighteenth century marked a turning point of the Meitei society with the adoption of *Gaudiya Vaishnavism* under the *Ningthouja* ruler. This transformation introduced the profound changes in religious beliefs, social customs and cultural expression. However before the shift, Meitei society had developed a distinctive identity rooted in *Sanamahism*, a belief system that shaped its tradition, governance and the way of life.



Manipur's historical roots trace to 33 C.E., when *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba* unified various principalities establishing a confederacy that laid the foundation for a cohesive kingdom under the *Ningthouja dynasty*, during his reign the Meitei culture took its rudimentary root. Over time he was deified as a divine serpent, *symbolising* the secret connection between *rulership* and spirituality. The ritual of seeking divine approval before coronation, performed at *Kangla*, re-enforced the legitimacy of kinship and reflected the deeply ingrained spiritual framework of Meitei governance. Before the installation every ruler on the throne, they have to take a ceremonial or ritualistic permission of blessing their ear down a whole in the ground inside *Kangla* and asking for his approval from *Pakhangba* (Hodson, 1975)

In Manipur, Hinduism was formally accepted by King *Pamheiba* in 1714 as the state religion and since then the *Meiteis*, by and large, had been observing the Hindu rules of worship and other ceremonial rites (Lokendra, 1998: 2). After the conversion into Hinduism, the *Meiteis* have got of their original names changed into Hindu names with suffixed appellation 'Singh' (meaning lion) in the case of males and 'Devi' (a manifestation of a goddess) in case of females which denotes the *Kshetriya* status in Hindu caste hierarchy.

Macculloh (1980) found that the hold of Hinduism among the *Meiteis* was only at a superficial level, it was professed not from conviction but because it (was) a fashion. In fact, the brand of Hinduism that the Meitei practiced during 18th and 19th centuries had some unique local variations and it represented a blending of various elements of traditional Meitei religion and Hinduism. While there was an increasing popularity of the worship of many Hindu gods and goddesses, there was also an equally strong hold of the traditional gods of the Meitei worshippers. He further observed and wrote, "Children up to 10 or 12 years of age eat every sort of food without regard to Hindu notion of purity or impurity.... The very early marriage practice associated with the Hindus was not approved of and never took place among the *Meiteis*". He further stated, "Sati was unknown and widows were not treated as in Hindu society and they might marry again, eat such food and dress in such style as they please".

The Meitei community does not have a stratified caste system, which fosters a community life built on cooperative labour rather than rigid occupational hierarchies. However, the Lois, considered outcasts, are segregated from the Meitei population due to their failure to adhere to

Brahminical norms. This group is now classified as Scheduled Castes in Manipur and faces social prejudice, including restrictions on intermarriage with other communities.

Significant settlements of the Loi people can be found in various villages, including *Sekmai*, *Khrukhul*, *Phayeng*, *Andro*, *Leimaram*, and *Chairen*, as well as in other areas of *Kakching* and *Chandrakhong*. Historically, many *Loi* individuals were ostracized from mainstream society by the king for breaching established social customs and practices (Devi, 2020).

In recent years, a religion was formed known as *Sanamahi* by those who are worshippers of only the Meitei traditional deity. These people want to restore their original or traditional religion that was observed before the conversion of Hinduism and they oppose Hindu religion.

Occupation

Manipur is a land of agriculture. Both men and women engage in agriculture. In agriculture, men engage in hard jobs such as ploughing, threshing while women engage in soft jobs such as transplanting, weeding and winnowing. It was believed that engaging in hard jobs is taboo against women. Women work in paddy fields as a team called '*Khutlang*'. In addition to domestic work, women earn money by working extra hours. In the villages, households without kitchen gardening are rarely seen. It is done by women with the cooperation of other family members. The excess of vegetables from household consumption are sold at the market. Besides this, market oriented gardening is done in the villages with different responsibilities for men, women and children. It is almost done inside the home stead or at the paddy field after harvesting. In the rural areas, paddy, rice and vegetables are the cash crops whereas in urban areas petty business and other forms of business are done. Most of the households have shuttle-loom for weaving. Embroidery and knitting are also in the hands of women. In the rainy season women do fishing. Carpentry, house building, goldsmithing, mat and basket making are the main occupations of men in addition to agricultural activities. In Manipur, women are traders also. Both buying and selling in the market in day today life is almost done by women, men seldom do it.

Kinship:

The *Meiteis* maintain a close link with their affinal kin groups (*Charou- mourounabagee mari*) that is the bond of marriage and consanguineal kin groups (*Ee-mari*) that is the bond of blood. In a



village or within neighboring villages, people are broadly identified as relatives, persons belonging to a common lineage and clan. In a family, father is addressed *Baba* or *Paba* or *Pabung*, mother is addressed *Ima*. Any male younger than the father is addressed as *Khura*, and also the term is particularly used to call the father's younger brother. Father's elder brother is called *Eepal* or *Bajee*. Grandparents are called *Ibok* (female) and *Ibubok* (male). Elder brother is called *Tada* and elder sister is called *Iche*. Brother calls his younger sister as *Ichan*. Addressing of kin terms is common in some terms of paternal and maternal relationships, both paternal aunt's husband and mother's brother are called *Mamma*. Maternal uncle's wife and father's sister are called *Ine*. Father's younger brother's wife and mother's younger sister are called *Indomcha* while father's elder brother's wife and mother's elder sister are called *Imabok*. A woman calls her elder brother's wife *Inamma* and a man calls her *Iteima*. These are the important kinship terms of the *Meiteis*.

Family Life:

Family is made up of a father, a mother and their children. The Meitei family is patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocal, and virilocal, with the father heading the family. On him rests the responsibility of earning a livelihood for the family, managing the family assets and land, to educate and to marry off his children. He represents the family in almost all social gatherings. Culturally, women are not expected to address their husband by name while husbands have the freedom to call their wives by name (Capving, 1998: 251).

In Meitei society, '*Peeba*' plays a crucial role for a particular family clan (*Sagei*). The *Peeba* is the chief of Meitei siblings and he represents each sibling at social and religious gathering known as '*Sagei Apokpa Khurumba*' (worshiping ancestral deity of lineage). According to certain authors *Peeship* was never associated with surnames but rather with clan or siblings. However, this idea holds for both surnames and sibling (Das, 1945). The word *Peeba* denotes a *Ningthou* (king) of a particular lineage, his significant role is to worship the deity of particular clan that he belongs. *Peeba* cannot marry widow or divorcee. In doing so he is disqualified for the position. Similarly, a son of a widow or divorcee and his family lineage are not entitled to the position of the *Peeba* in the future.

Inheritance:

In Manipur, father is the head of the family and this being so, it is a patriarchal society. Properties are inherited through father's line and

children follow father's lineage. Land is inherited by sons in Meitei society. The youngest son lives with the parents. In case of parents without a son, the daughter inherits it and usually the practice is to adopt a son-in-law called *Yaong-inba*. Her husband assumes the male responsibility in the activities of the family but he does not have any legal or ritual rights upon that family. Meitei custom makes special provision for divorced and unmarried daughters by giving them a right to residence in their parents' home. They are allowed to stay at their father's *Ingkhol* (homestead).

Marriage:

Meiteis' institution of marriage is controlled by specific endogamic and exogamic law. It doesn't adhere to all traditional Hindu ceremony (Dunn, 1975). The forms of marriage that prevailed in Meitei society are marriage by engagement, marriage by elopement, marriage by captured, *Keina katpa*, *Loukhatpa* and Court marriage. The *Meiteis* believe that marriage is a sacrament. The formality of pre-marriage ceremonies such as *waroipot* and *heijingpot* are held. The bridegroom party arrived at the residence of the bride where sanskritan is being done to begin the marriage ritual, the mother of the bride meets the bridegroom with the idea of welcome at the gate when he reached at the gate of the bride. After the needful ritual ceremony of the marriage has been performed the bride is to be seen off to the bridegroom's house. Monogamy is common amongst Meitei community. Formal rituals of marriage are elaborately made at the residence of the bride.

Meitei society has rigid rules about *yek* (clan) exogamy as a form of marriage along with *yumnak* (lineage) exogamy. *Yumnaks* are sub-groups of seven *yeks* or clans: *Ningthouja*, *Khuman*, *Luwang*, *Angom*, *Moirang*, *Khabanganba* and *Chenglei*. Men and women belonging to the same clan are called *namungba* which means taboo against marriage.

A Brahmin male can marry a Meitei female in a hypergamic relationship but he follows the rules of Caste strictly and does not take any food cooked by his wife. Since a long time ago, polygyny has been accepted as the rule of marriage among the *Meiteis*. Traditional chronicles state that *Pakhangba* who was the first king of Manipur had seven wives who gave birth to seven sons. Although polyandry is mentioned to have existed in chronicles, it is not prevalent in real life among the *Meiteis*. In some cases polygyny is also visible.

Khainaba (Divorce) is allowed when the husband brings a second wife, the first wife may



decide to leave her husband. When *Khainaba* takes place, the woman comes back to her parental home with all her *Aaunpot* (dowry). After divorce she can remarry. It is also seen in Meitei society that if the wife is at fault, in some cases, the husband can demand *Khainaba* from his wife.

Meitei Women in Different Stages of Life:

Women play manifold roles in Meitei society. She is a daughter, a wife and a mother. She shares duties and responsibilities of maintaining the daily life of their families. In Meitei society, a girl, since her childhood, will help her mother in household work. Even a small girl of 3 to 4 years will do morning and evening Pooja of God and Goddess. The life span of a Meitei woman after puberty and until marriage is called *Leishabi* (Maiden). She follows strict rules during her menstrual period and is not allowed to do kitchen work for five days during this period. She takes the responsibility of domestic chores in addition to her school or college studies. She manages these tasks and also involves herself in income generation activities such as weaving, embroidery and agriculture. In Meitei society, a woman must obey her elders and her life is under strict control of the elders and is expected to meet the standard conduct set by them.

After getting married, the life style of a *Leishabi* changes, this stage is known as *Mou* (Married woman). Married women are not bound by any ritual obligation for ancestor worship and other rites to their natal home. They are more closer to that of their husband's than that of their natal home. They go to their natal home on calendrical rituals and community feasts. *Ningol-Chakouba* is the biggest festival for the married women. On this day they go to their natal home for lunch already invited by their natal family. In the husband's family, she shows some sense of avoidance and respect towards her father-in-law and elder brother-in-law. She must keep even a piece of cloth on her head whenever she faces elder brother-in-law and avoids direct relationship of give and take of things. She takes most responsibility of household chores and also earns money by weaving, embroidery, knitting, agriculture and so on. Only when her daughter has grown up, she becomes free from the household chores. As a mother, she scrutinises the conduct of her daughter to make her an efficient woman by the time of her marriage. A woman would be looked down upon if she fails to maintain a good reputation.

Older woman is known as *Hanubi*. At this stage, she is relieved from the domestic burden and

gradually expands her social life. She becomes emotionally closer to her children.

Cultural Practices:

The Meitei society has rich cultural practices which account festivals and dances. Festivals served as vital expression of collective joy, spirituality and tradition. Among these, *Lai Haraoba* as mentioned earlier stood out as a grand celebration of life involving elaborate rituals, storytelling and performance that reenacted the creation and myths associated with the *Meiteis*.

Another noteworthy event is *Mera Houchongba*, also known as *Mera Ukai Kappa*, which symbolizes unity and solidarity between the Meitei community and the various hill tribes in the region. Celebrated on the 10th day of the lunar month of Mera (typically in October or November), this festival is traditionally held under royal patronage. It sees participation from the king, nobles, and dignitaries, fostering inter-community ties and communal harmony (Sinha, 2017). The festivities include various cultural performances, traditional games, and communal feasts, emphasizing the essence of togetherness.

Heikru Hidongba, or the Boat Race festival, occurs on the 11th day of the lunar month of *Langban* (August/September). This festival showcases the local tradition of boat racing along the water of the Loktak Lake, considered a vital aspect of Meitei culture and livelihood. Participants engage in competitive races that not only entertain but also reinforce community bonds and reflect the region's close relationship with its waterways (Khuman, 2016).

Coinciding with the Hindu festival of Holi, *Yaoshang* is another vibrant celebration marking the arrival of spring. This festival features various activities including prayers, *kirtana* (devotional singing), and playful throwing of colors in temples. An important element of *Yaoshang* is the *Thabal Chaongba*, or Moonlight Dance, in which young people gather in the evenings to hold hands and dance in circles, celebrating love, friendship, and community spirit (Bhatta, 2019). Nowadays, *Yaoshang* sports are celebrated as a popular festival in every village of the *Meiteis*.

Celebrated in April, *Cheiraoba* is a festival rooted in the belief that climbing nearby hilltops on this day can lead to greater heights in life (*Ningshen*, 2021). Villagers clean their homes and prepare a variety of dishes, which are then offered to deities as an act of gratitude and reverence. This tradition reflects a deep-seated respect for nature and a connection to the community's agrarian lifestyle.



One of the most prestigious festivals celebrated by the Meitei Hindus is the *Kang*, or *Ratha Yatra*, which takes place over a period of ten days in the month of July. This festival honors Lord *Jagannatha*, who is revered as a form of Lord Krishna. During the *Ratha Yatra*, Lord *Jagannatha* is taken out of his temple in a magnificent chariot known as the *Kang*, which is pulled by a throng of devoted worshippers (Ningthoujam, 2018). The processional journey of the Lord through the streets is marked by fervent chanting of devotional songs and vibrant community participation, emphasizing the collective spirit and devotion of the Meitei people. The celebration underscores themes of faith, community bonding, and the divine grace of Lord *Jagannatha*, making it a significant event in the Meitei cultural calendar.

Ningol Chak-kouba is another remarkable festival celebrated primarily by the Meitei community, symbolizing familial love and social harmony. Observed on the second day of the new moon in the month of *Hiyangei* (November in the lunar calendar), this festival serves as a family reunion where married daughters return to their parental homes along with their children (Khuman, 2020). The parents host a sumptuous feast, offering a variety of traditional dishes, which signifies respect and affection for the daughters. This festival strengthens family bonds, reinforces social ties, and emphasizes the importance of the maternal lineage within Meitei culture. It is a time of joy, reunion, and cultural expression, reflecting the value placed on family and community relationships.

Dress and Ornaments:

Meiteis belonging to Mongolian race preserve its traditional dress or attire in all the religious ritual and ceremony. Since Hinduism was enforced by the king the entire valley with the conversion of religious faith, there became slightly changes and used dhoti by men. The unmarried girl known as *Leishabee* used to put on *Phanek* on the waist whereas married women put on *phanek* on the upper part of the chest. This is the specific remark for differentiation between unmarried women and married women which are seen especially in religious ceremony and rituals of the *Meiteis*.

The dress of young and old men are general and common. They used to put on *khudei* and *Pheijom*. In our society it is also found that different colours of *Phanek Mapan Naiba* (a clothe of stripe design used by the Meitei women to wrap around from waist to ankle) are used to wear by women for different clans. *Ningthouja* clan women used to wear lotus colour and *kuhikum* with red stripe,

angom wore *langhou phanek* (black and white stripe), *Luwang* wore blue and black stripe *phanek*, *Khuman* used to wear *Kumchingbee* which is fine white stripe and black while *Moirang* used yellow *phanek* with reddish stripe. The *Phanek Mapan Naiba* which is characterized by its distinct black stripe was worn by *Khaba Nganba* clan, *Chenglei* spotted the *Loirang Phanek*. The type of *Phanek Mapan Naiba* worn by the *Meitei* closely resembled those traditionally worn by the women of various tribal communities in Manipur. Significantly, during the era of king *Yanlou Keiphaba*, the introduction of embroidery on the borders of *Phanek Mapan Naiba* marked a pivotal cultural shift. This development can be regarded as not worthy cultural maker signifying the beginning of a distinct identity of the *Meiteis* in relation to the hill tribes (Devi, 1991:126).

According to royal chronicle, the first change in the matter of dress occurred in the *Chalumba* circa, 1550 having introduced the system of wearing decent coats made of wax cloth. In ancient time, some dresses were not permitted to put on by the common people of the *Meiteis* which were used to put on by the then King and Queen of *Meiteis* such as *Khamen Chatpa*, the Royal Dhoti which accounts dates from the reign of *Paikhomba*.

Restriction was imposed to use gold ornament also by the women in order to maintain social hierarchy in ancient time. Only royal family was allowed to wear gold ornament. The only ornament without restriction was earrings and other ornaments made of either gold or other metals were allowed to wear freely. However, in the contemporary Meitei society it is seen to be used widely to wear by the common people.

II. Conclusion:

It can be concluded that the present paper helps in understanding diverse perspective on the *Meiteis'* cultural dynamics and historical evolution. Moreover, it is also assumed that all the components of social structures are maintained by organizing social system and social order guiding human behavior. Additionally the *Meiteis* construct their identities through these influences as they interact with the complexities in the society.

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