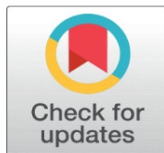


## THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE MEITEIS OF MANIPUR

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### ABSTRACT

The Meiteis of Manipur have experienced changes in their social organization due to forces coming from different directions. The cultural and social changes brought by the influence of exposure to different neighbouring communities and the impact of the same in the internal social structure has been described in this article with the aim to provide the reader a bird's eye view of the Meitei society and its social organization.

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The Meiteis have intra-community categories that have Manipuri/Meiteilon as their mother tongue – Common Meiteis, Loi/Chakpa, Yaithibi, Bamon (Brahman) and Bishnupriya.<sup>1</sup> The Manipur valley presents a pattern of inter-group stratification. It has been documented by many scholars that Meitei society does not follow caste system and is driven by the egalitarian principles. But in the contrary, it is hard to dismiss the presence of caste system though in vestigial form. Among the groups within the Meitei society the Brahmins are placed at the highest place in terms of ritual hierarchy, then the common Meiteis, then the Loies and Yaithibis. This hierarchy was consolidated with the adoption of the great Hindu tradition, through widespread circulation of scriptures like the Ramayana and Mahabharata through the story telling sessions called Wari Liba and Lairik Thiba-Haiba, in both spiritual and social system. With this the concept of Mangba-Sengba i.e. purity and pollution also came.

This development has its own history. During the early twentieth century the Raja of Manipur tried to reclaim his position in the field of religion and culture while he had been side-lined by the British. So, his despotic face was witnessed when he subjugated his people [ During this period there is no clear picture of the people, being either 'citizen' or 'subject' since there was parallel existence of the 'modern' and 'monarchical' structures, Manipur being indirectly ruled by the British. ] in alliance with the infamous Brahma Sabha, the committee of Brahmans and his army of devoted lieutenants. The traditional state cult, comprising the king, aristocrats and religious leaders, let itself alive, during the British time also, with the king as the religious head. There were irrational impositions of taxes and services on common Meiteis (the hill people were not fortunately part of this ordeal) who were not related to the king and his nobles. This was partly to meet the amount of tribute to be paid to the British annually and partly to assert his authoritarian legitimacy in the minds of

<sup>1</sup> Ranajit Kumar Saha (1994:3)

the people, which seemed to have waned, vis-à-vis the British power. These taxes included Chandan Senkhai (tax on using chandan, the sandalwood paste applied on forehead) which consolidated the practice of mangba-sengba (purity and pollution)<sup>2</sup>. Those who were declared by the Brahma Shaba as mangba (polluted) had to pay certain fines to the Sabha so that they could be again sengba (purified). If not they were outcast and sent to a specified village meant for them. This was also how the group Lois emerged within the Meitei society. Today the stratification between the common Meiteis and Lois is at the level of inter-village. Unlike in many parts of the caste India, in Manipur the two groups do not live in one village. On the other hand common Meiteis and Brahmans share social and geographical space of the same village. But the villagers are also aware of the other groups living in different ecological zones of the valley and refer them in terms of a notion of hierarchical relationship.

Historically, the whole of the valley people, under the rule of the Ningthouja king, were homogenized under the social, cultural and political systems of the Meiteis.<sup>3</sup> The last tribe or kingdom which was merged was Moirang after they were defeated by the Ningthoujas in 1432 AD.<sup>4</sup> The event which is of sociological interest and is recorded is the out-casting of those Meiteis who did not convert themselves to Vaisnavism. Having named them as Lois, they were banished to the fringes of the country. This shows the centrifugal atmosphere present within the Meiteis themselves.

Manipuri caste system is one particular case among numerous caste systems in the Hindu India, and also in Muslim, Christian and Sikh communities as influenced by Hindu systems. It is also discerned that three varnas are present in Manipur. Three varnas, Brahman, Kshatriya and Shudra (Lois) (though it has its own qualification) are present in Manipur. The common Meiteis claim to be Kshatriyas, though Meitei society has a particular lineage called Kshetrimayum (the house of Kshatriyas) whose members call themselves as the true Kshatriya.<sup>5</sup> In Manipur though Brahmans have ritual control over the rest of the Meitei society, they do not constitute a dominant caste or group. There is a network of power sharing among the people in the Meitei fold, including Brahmans and common Meiteis. But Lois still suffer social stigma due to the historical baggage.

## THE LOI/CHAKPA

The Loi/Chakpa constitutes the present day Scheduled castes among the Meiteis. They constitute the group of people who were banished by the king for their deeds which were considered anti-social and polluted and were made to settle down in far flung fringes of the kingdom. Their low status is also due to the occupations they indulge in, such as manufacturing of liquor, poultry farming, sericulture, swine rearing, pottery and so on which are considered to be impure. The term Loi is traced to the term *loibi* (hills) because most of them are settled in the foothills. They are also known as *Meitei Ariba* (old Meiteis). There are six Loi/Chakpa villages – Andro, Khurkhul, Sekmai and Phayeng in Imphal districts (West and East), Leimaram (Bishnupur), and Kwatha (Tengnoupal).<sup>6</sup> Despite the visible differences between them and other groups, the Loi/Chakpa are trying hard to uplift their social status vis-à-vis that of the other Meiteis. There is visibility of traces of Sanskritization amongst them when they try to modify their accented Manipuri to match the one spoken by other Meiteis. They continue to endeavour in performing various Hindu rituals at par with those of other Hindu Meiteis. In totality, in present day Manipur, Loi/Chakpa are considered as a dispensable part of the Meitei fold even by the common Meiteis because of their social, cultural and religious proximity to the Meiteis. There are increasing instances of intermarriage between them and the other Meiteis.

## THE YAITHIBI

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<sup>2</sup> Karam Manimohan Singh (1989:30- 31)

<sup>3</sup> Today Meitei society has seven clans which were different tribes before the Ningthoujas or the Meiteis subjugated them to form the present day Meitei society. These clans are Mangang (Ningthouja), Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, Khaba-Nganba and Chenglei.

<sup>4</sup> Gangmumei Kabui (1991:171)

<sup>5</sup> For different facets of Varna system on regional basis, see M. N. Srinivas – Varna and Caste. In M. N. Srinivas, 1962 – *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*. Bombay; Asia Publishing House. Excerpted in Dipankar Gupta, 2005. op. cit. pp. 28-31. Also see M.N. Srinivas, 2005 (originally 1966) – *Social Change in Modern India*. New Delhi: Orient Longman Private Limited. pp. 10-12; Andre Beteille, 1966 – *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> L. Bino Devi (2002:5-6)

Literally Yaithibi means bad luck (Yai=luck, thibi=bad) because they had been reduced to low status. Yaithibis are also under Meitei fold but are historical outcastes. The Meitei version of the ex-communication of the Yaithibi is that they were exiled because of their indulgence in socially tabooed traditions like marrying near relatives like sisters, step-mothers and other near kin. But their own version is that once upon a time, a few favoured people of a king had illicit relationship with the queen and infuriated, the king sent those people and their kith and kin in exile and reduced them as outcastes. These people were also pardoned criminals who were exiled in border areas so as not to have any social communication with the Meiteis. The story says that all the criminals who were to be executed were sent to the Sugnu Village. But such executions could be prevented if the wife of Sugnu Hanjaba, the headman of Sugnu village, wanted. So, those who were pardoned by her were sent to those Yaithibi villages so as not to have any social connection with their parent society. In this process they became untouchables and were settled in one village, Waithou, situated near their present village, Thoubal Khunou in Thoubal district. It is believed that they served as scavengers in the king's palace. Otherwise, they were not allowed to move freely in the Meitei Villages and even their shadows were considered impure. Whenever they ventured out of their village they wore blue coloured clothes and turbans so that other Meiteis could avoid them. Today there has been substantial improvement in the social condition of the Yaithibi and the past is being left buried. Culturally and socially they are like the other Meitei. It is also difficult to identify them as they hide their identity to pass as other ordinary Meiteis.

### **THE MEITEI BAMON (BRAHMIN)**

Bamon is the localized term for the sanskritized word Brahmin. They are an integral part of the religious life of Vaishnavite Meiteis. No life cycle ritual of a vaishnavite is performed without the Puja and the chanting of 'Shlokas' by them. Thus they are ritually higher in status than other Meiteis.<sup>7</sup> Originally, they were immigrants from different parts of the present India, who came as priests and scholars of Hinduism. From the reign of Kyamba (1467-1508) onwards small batches of Bamons started immigrating to Manipur.<sup>8</sup>

Some of these Bamons brought their wives along with them when they immigrated but others married Meitei women and settled down in the valley. In order to survive in this foreign land they accepted Manipuri customs, manners, food habits and even the pattern of naming. They have been assimilated to the Meitei way of life, for centuries in such a way that they cannot be pointed out as outsiders from the external characteristics, though they still carry the Indo-Aryan facial features. They are now Meiteis in all possible ways, so that they are called Meitei Bamons.

Priesthood and cooking for community feasts are the main traditional occupations of the Meitei Bamons. All the community feasts of the Gauriya (Vaishnavite) Meiteis must be cooked by them. Otherwise they are regarded as impure and any devout Vaishnavite will not attend such feasts. The Meiteis who follow the indigenous Meitei Dharma (Sanamahism) have their own cooks and do not regard Bamons as necessary. But in this process there is a parallelism between the professions of Bamon cooks and the Meitei Sanamahi cooks. The latter came up as a substitute to fill up the void created when they rejected Bamons as the sole ritual specialists. Nevertheless the structure is almost the same while the contents are different. In terms of other occupations Bamons are also involved in agriculture.

### **THE BISHNUPRIYA**

There are two contradictory versions of the origin of the Bishnupriya. The first one is by the Bishnupriyas themselves. According to this, they are the indigenous people of the valley, the autochthon Kshatriyas who are the descendants of Babhrubahan of Mahabharata. They claim to be the original worshippers of Vishnu god. But the Meiteis regard them as outsiders and late settlers of the valley who are of different gotras. Even their god Vishnu is not an original Meitei god. The Bishnupriyas have distinctive facial appearance, which is quite similar to that of North Indians. For this, the Meiteis even group them within the category of 'Mayang' (Non-Mongoloid People from outside). In the historical past they were insignificant till the king Rajarsi Bhagyachandra (1759-1762) married a maiden from this community, leading to the birth of a son named Kalaraj. The Rajkumar families in Ningthoukhong in present day Bishnupur district trace their origin to him. Most of the Bishnupriyas fled to Cachar district of Assam, Tripura and Sylhet (in present day Bangladesh) during Manipur-Burmese wars. The present day Bishnupriyas in Manipur have almost forgotten their original language and they speak only Manipuri/Meiteilon. They are in the villages of Ngaikhong, Nachou, Thamnapokpi and Ningthoukhong of Bishnupur district. Unlike them, the ones in Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh have different dialect, which is more like

<sup>7</sup> Some hardcore followers of Sanamahism, the indigenous religion of the Meiteis do not regard the Bamons as higher in status, ritual or otherwise, mostly after the 'revivalist' movement had started. But still general people have respect for them.

<sup>8</sup> R. K. Jhalajit Singh (1992:93)

a variant form of Bengali than Manipuri though it has quite a large number of Manipuri words. These Bishnupriyas from outside Manipur are the ones who are spearheading a movement to claim Manipuri language as their original language and not the one spoken in Manipur. This is out rightly rejected by the Meiteis and the latter regard it as the voice of a people who are groping for a losing identity which also is triggered by the politics of the places where they are presently settled down in considerably large numbers. Otherwise the Bishnupriyas of Manipur are not even aware of their Bishnupriya identity and are as Meitei as any other Meiteis. There is also increasing number of inter-marriage between them and other Meiteis.

## MEITEI KINSHIP SYSTEM

The Meitei Society is Patrilineal in descent and inheritance, Patrilocal in residence (though there is also a custom called Yaong-inba when the Son-in-law lives with his in-laws especially when the latter do not have any male progeny), and Patriarchal in authority. It is a segmentary system having units of differing genealogical distance. The largest unit or segment is called Salai (clan), the second one is yumnak (Maximal lineage), the third one - Sagei (Major lineage), the fourth Chagok (persons in 3 living generations), the fifth is Immung (family) which is the core social unit and then the last one is man. Ideally, it is believed that all the clans had the same origin from Shidaba mapu, the divine ancestor (Shidaba = immortal, mapu = father). The Meitei segmentary system has a time perspective. There is structural relationship among the segments. The whole structural relationship can be represented as the one between the last living person in the line of descent and the first person in the ascending line. This is what Evans Pritchard called 'structural distance'.<sup>9</sup> It can be shown as follows:

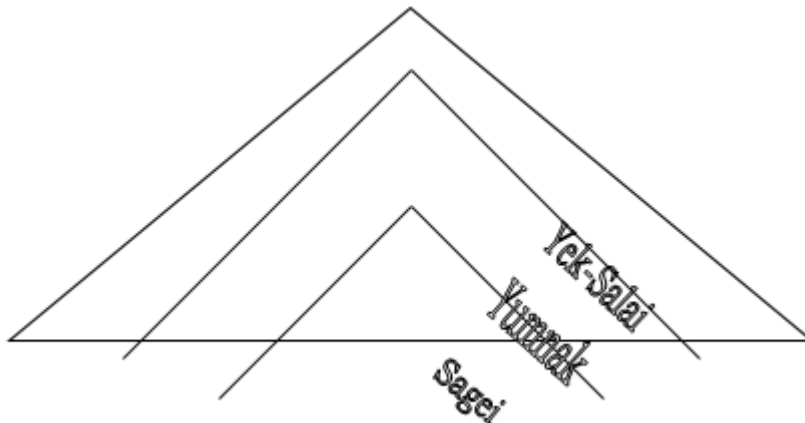


Fig. 1 Genealogical distance

In the above diagram the base line is represented by the living agnates and the pyramidal lines the dead agnates. The line depth is highest in case of Yek-Salai followed by Yumnak and Sagei respectively, measuring from the apex of the whole structure.

There are seven salais in the Meitei social structure. They are - (a) Ningthouja, (b) Angom, (c) Luwang, (d) Khuman, (e) Moirang, (f) Khaba-nganba and (g) Chenglei. The Salai can be aptly called clan rather than caste. So, the Meitei Salai can be equated with Gotra of Hindu caste system. Equating the Salai with Jati is not appropriate since the former is an exogamous group while the latter is an endogamous one. Caste or Jati is an in-marrying group with a defined ascribed status. Gotra, on the other hand, is an out-marrying subdivision of Jati. Gotra denotes descent from a common ancestor in the distant past. Kula (or Vansha) represents a lineage, with a five or six generation depth. Beyond this the line is blurred.<sup>10</sup> Like Gotra, the Salais also have their originators. These original ancestors whether they were God or Ningthou (chief) are called Salai-Apokpa. So, the founder of the Ningthouja Salai was 'Nongda Lairen Pakhangba'; the Angom 'Pureiromba'; the Moirang 'Ngang-hunthok' and 'Ngangning-shing'; the Khaba-Nganba 'Thongaren'; the Chenglei 'Nungou yumthangba'; and that of the Khuman and the Luwang was Poireiton. Since the time Vaishnavism came to this Meitei land, the Vaishnavite missionaries, mainly Brahmins, also juxtaposed Hindu names to these indigenous clan

<sup>9</sup> R. K. Saha. op. cit. p.113

<sup>10</sup> S. C. Dube (1990:48)

names.<sup>11</sup> Ningthouja became Sandilya; Angom, Goutam; Moirang, Atriya Angiras; Luwang, Kashyap; Khuman, Madhukalya; Khaba-nganba, Madhukalya and Bharadwaja; and Chenglei, Basistha. However this arrangement is more of the result of mythmaking to completely assimilate the Meitei world to the Hindu world. Despite this attempt this does not have much functional utility except that the officiating Brahman priests use these Gotra names during the life cycle rituals connected with birth, initiation, marriage and death of a Vaishnava Meitei. Outside this ritual sphere, no common Meitei knows these Hindu pseudonyms of the Salais. In common parlance the clan is addressed to as Yek-Salai. Every Yek-Salai has one Laigi-Yelhin, which is a totem, associated with the originator or Apokpa.<sup>12</sup> They are mostly plants. Though they do not have any practical use these days, they used to be significant in olden days. But technically there is a slight difference between Yek and Salai. Yek is addressed when it comes to conjugal relationship between Salais. Salai as such is more of political arrangement of the society.

Yumnak is the lineage in the Meitei segmentary system. A Yek-Salai has many Yumnaks. Atombapu Sharma,<sup>13</sup> a Vaishnava pundit, gives the list - the Ningthouja Salai has 116 Yumnaks; Angom, 52; Khuman, 100; Luwang, 46; Moirang, 55; Khaba-Nganba 20; and Chenglei, 44. But this list is not an exhaustive one. Many Yumnak members migrated to other places in Bangladesh, Tripura, Assam and Burma (Myanmar) and it is difficult to have a thorough account of all these people of different Yumnaks. Moreover, there are many Yumnaks, which are not included in the Salais. All the Yumnaks of the Bamons (around 40),<sup>14</sup> Kshetrimayum, Lairikyengbam are not included in the above list. Again the Meitei Pangans (Muslims) also adopt this typical Meitei lineage system and have many Yumnaks.

Sagei is the segment of a Yumnak. It is a corporate group, which observes Yummangba (birth and death pollution) which is also called Fukainaba (fu = Pitcher, Kainaba = to break) when the cooking earthen pitchers are broken in the case of any death or birth of any member of the Sagei and are replaced by new ones. A Sagei of a Yumnak can be formed by the members who go far away from their Yumnak members and also by members who are in conflict with other members of the same Yumnak. Generally Yumnak and Sagei are regarded as synonymous by the common people. But Sagei is within a Yumnak and is not named like Yumnak. Most of the works done by the Yumnak have been replaced by the Sagei.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None

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<sup>11</sup> R. K. Saha, op. cit. p. 107

<sup>12</sup> Emile Durkheim, 1976 (originally 1915) (translated by Joseph Ward Swain) – *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. See Book I, Chapter IV and Book II for discussions on totemism.

<sup>13</sup> R. K. Saha. op. cit. p. 98

<sup>14</sup> R. K. Jhalajit Singh. op. cit.

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