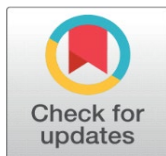


GOURIYA VAISHNAVISM, BRAHMANISM AND WOMEN IN MEITEI SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Religion affects the lives of women tremendously. This can be seen in all societies. In Meitei societies, with the arrival Vaishnava faith along with the establishment of Bengali Brahmins as the religious custodian, women's lives changed tremendously. The Vaishnava faith is based on devotion and submission to God. With the coming of Brahmins their ideals and ethos too came along. There are three main salient pillars of Brahmanical social order: maintenance of caste purity, lineage purity and family purity. Gradually women's mobility and sexuality became more confined and more strictly regulated.

Keywords: Hinduism, Meiteis, Religion, Women, Vaishnavism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The status, way of life and the sexuality of women in a society is inextricably linked with the religion around the world. Women frequently find it difficult, if not impossible, to speak up or take independent action due to long-standing customs and cultural or familial ties. No significant religion has ever permitted women to continue as agents of their own spiritual fate; instead, all of them have finally excluded women from leadership roles and activities, making them subject to men in the faith's formal institutions. However, the majority of adherents in all religions are women. Religions need to be organized as they grow in order to maintain their unity. According to ancient literature, men from all cultures—from Asia to Africa—generally feared women's fertility because they equated it with the earth's ability to create life and death. Men therefore tried to control the creative power of the universe by controlling the women who held it because they were afraid of what they themselves could not do. It was simple to associate evidence of this cosmic power to generate life and even death with women and to fear it in an agrarian culture where people cannot live if they cannot cultivate their own food and infants are born from women's bodies like crops are from the ground. Religions continue to try to regulate women's sexuality and reproduction in the modern era, from opposing abortion and contraception. In Manipur

also the arrival of Vaishnava faith heralded a new way of life and significantly changed the lives of women. This paper discusses the Vaishnava faith and the arrival of brahmins and its impact on women's body and consciousness.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGION IN A SOCIETY

Religion is an important factor which influences the arrangement and organization of human sexuality in general. Religion determines the sexual morality, ethics and norms to be followed both by men and women. Many religions regard sex as sacred and divine whereas other religions regard sex as profane and sinful. Women's sexuality is also a major concern in the doctrine, practices and beliefs of any religion which generates the norms for proper regulation of women's sexuality for social good. Religion and sexuality have long been in the domain of masculine preview, thereby influencing in discourses on what determines as natural, sacred, good, or healthy sexual behaviour (Jung et al. 2001). For example, most religions like Christianity, Islam or Hinduism support heteronormativity and confinement of women's sexuality. In such religions, therefore, the concept of virginity or chastity is expected to be maintained by unmarried women and women who are married are normalized to confine their sexual relations only with their spouses. Therefore, when Vaishnavite Hinduism seeped into the social fabric of Meitei society, it shaped and informed social and moral world in Meitei society.

3. A BRIEF HISTORY OF ARRIVAL OF VAISHNAVA FAITH

By the 17th century when king Khagemba (1597-1652) was coronated, he became the first king to acknowledge the concept of the God-King (*Lainingthou*), popular as the Deva Raja concept in Southeast Asia. Khagemba, though he himself was still a believer in the indigenous religion of Sanamahi worship, he accepted the God-king concept for increasing his legitimacy and power. In 1704 CE, he was converted into the Sakta sect of Hinduism. He accepted the sacred thread and began the personal worship of mother Kallika or Devi. Panthoibi, the civilization giving goddess of pre-Hindu Meitei religion was later fused with the eternal concept of Devi, or Parvati, the consort of Shiva. During his reign, Hinduism was still not a state religion. Yet different sects of Hinduism, like the Nimandi, the Ramandi and the Gouriya Sampradayas often vied with one another to secure the undivided royal patronage. It must also be noted that multiple religiosities and free mixing of religious principles were quite a phenomenon in the 18th century Meitei Society. It was also a time when the neighbouring kingdoms started taking notice of the growing power of Meitei kingdom with the martial arts skill of its people known to them. King Khagemba generated extensive reforms in religion, education and economic enterprises, establishment of markets and introduction of officials for diplomatic relations with neighbouring dynasties, etc. It was during his time that relations with Assam (Tekhao) and Burma was further strengthened with marriage alliances. New forms of worship of foreign divinities, especially the Sakta worship were introduced. Hindu iconography and sculpture were also introduced. Muslim invaders were defeated in battle and the captured armies were assimilated into Meitei society with marriage to Meitei women, with ascription of lineages and engagement with their inherited professions as carpenters, smiths, horticulturists, etc. The Meitei script in the indigenous alphabet was reformed and expanded, and indigenous manuscript production was enhanced. Saints and hermits from Assam were encouraged to be married with Chakpa women. Gradually the missionary minded Brahmin migrants of various schools of Hinduism managed to secure the fond ear of the royalty (Sanajaoba, 1988).

During the reign of Charairongba (1697 to 1706 CE), Hinduism as a religion became dominant in Meitei society but it was not imposed by the king nor was there an attempt to make it a state religion. By the time his son Garibniwaz (1709-48) also known as Pamheiba became the king, an extra-ordinary development took place, leading to a wholesome transformation of the socio-political life in Manipur. Garibniwaz introduced Hinduism as a state religion during the 18th Century. It was a violent process accompanying physical torture of those who resisted, burning of sacred manuscripts and also destruction and desecration of shrines of many sylvan deities. There were lots of opposition from the side of the people about the changes that were being affected. In fact, some 121 sacred manuscripts of the Meiteis were officially burnt in 1732. Later, during the reign of Bhagyachandra (1763-1798), Hinduism was consolidated in Meitei society (Parrat, 2013).

The advent of Gaura or Gouriya Vaishnavism brought intricate philosophies of Vaishnava faith which resulted in the further transformation of ritual systems of the Meitei society. The new faith also brought along avowed principles of men and women's conduct, establishment of hierarchies of status and privilege in society through the principles of birth and descent. That was the beginning of a new social and moral world order in Meitei society. There was a need to assert the power of kingship with stylization of forms of ceremonial acts in expressions of power and pomp to impress upon the

subjects as well as before the eyes of international visitors¹. Earlier norms of king-subordinate tribute relationship with tribal groups had to be re-structured to secure the sanctity and power relations represented by the new kingship. It necessitated change of its form, expression and image under altered circumstances. Here the principles underlying these currents of form, pageantry and spectacle would now be provided by Hindu concepts of royalty rapidly being assimilated with local beliefs of the Meitei society. The functionaries of rituals, scribes and advisors, literate Brahmins with knowledge of astrology and the auspiciousness of time, moments and hours in human activities now thronged the royal courts. Earlier Brahmin migrants who had suffered from Muslim oppression and forcible conversion and took refuge in Manipur now became great apostles of Hindu belief and rituals needed for the experiential world of the medieval kingdoms vying for visibility and legitimacy in rulership and ritual. In the recent times, radical movements to propagate a reversal to the pre-Hindu indigenous religion had emerged with strong physical presence in the public sphere. In such an environment of societal conflict and historical turmoil, to understand the nature of the regulatory regime on women's sexuality as a reflection of the societal image of the times would indeed be a challenging task. Yet, it would shed light to women's sexuality in contemporary society by analysing the character, morals and social ideologies of the Vaishnavite Hindu tradition.

4. CONCEPT OF VAISHNAVISM AND THE FORM OF MANIPURI VAISHNAVISM

Vaishnavism is a system of faith in which worshipping Vishnu as the supreme God is the central tenet. Out of the four main sects of Vaishnavism founded successively by Ramanuja, Madhava, Chaitanya and Vallabha, the main sect which penetrated in the veins of Meitei population is the Vaishnavite school of Chaitanya. Vaishnavism signifies the abolition of the trinity: Brahma, Siva and Vishnu in favour of Vishnu who got Himself manifested in human incarnation of Krishna and Rama (Monier-Williams 1882). Vaishnavism possesses the essential elements of a genuine religion for it provides the scope of a personal devotion to a personal God with absolute trust and love for him which resulted in the ultimate surrender of the devotees to the devoted. (Monier-Williams 1882) Some of the important features of Vaishnavism may be elaborated as follows:

- 1) The sacred texts of Vaishnavism are the Bhagavata Purana and the Bhagavata Gita. Vaishnavism propagates the worship of the dual symbolism of Vishnu: Krishna and Radha. There are others who worship other popular manifestation of Vishnu, the hero Rama who is the great Indian symbol of filial and marital virtue, the story of whose fidelity to his wife Sita is on every Hindu's lips. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are two other equally revered texts for the Vaishnavite Hinduism.
- 2) In Vaishnavite practice, the images of the gods worshipped needs human attention, like bathing clothing, feeding, nourishing, etc. Another marked feature of all the sects of Vaishnavism is the worship of the religious teachers of Vaishnava faith who were considered to be the embodiments of the divine wisdom and the very essence of divinity. For example, in Manipuri Vaishnavism Gouranga Mahaprabhu, the popular name of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the Bengali Vaishnavite revolutionary is also generally worshipped along with his principal disciples – Advaita, Nityanand and Haridas.
- 3) All the Vaishnava sects agree in the requirement of a special ceremony of initiation into their communion, accompanied by the repetition of a short formula of words, such as, "Reverence to Krishna" (Om Krishnayanamah), "Reverence to Rama" (Om Ramayanamah). In Manipuri Vaishnavite tradition this is known as *Laiming Louba* initiation to the faith.
- 4) Vaishnava faith upholds no caste distinction and discrimination. The faith preaches tenderness and non-violence toward animals. Consequently, most of the staunch Manipuri Vaishnavites were vegetarian. They apply tilak on forehead. The pattern of tilak differs from one sect of Vaishnavism to another.

These are four main tenets common to all the four sects of Vaishnavism as propounded by Ramanuja, Madhava, Chaitanya and Vallabha. Among these four sects, the sect founded by Chaitanya known as Gauriya Vaishnavism is the one prevailing among the Hindu Meiteis. Chaitanya was born in Navdeep in Bengal in 1485 CE. He was a man of great intellect and a scholar of Sanskrit grammar, literature and Bhagavata Purana. He had numerous followers from both higher and lower castes. Some of the basic principles of Vaishnavism as propounded by him were as follows:

- 1) The faithful worshippers of Krishna are to be treated equal thereby giving primacy to faith rather caste.
- 2) The concept of Bhakti to Vishnu is taken to be similar to human love and devotion toward her or his lover.

¹ For more idea on how state exist as pomp as show see Clifford Gertz (1980) Negara, The Theatre State In The Nineteenth Century Bali, Princeton University Press

- 3) An emphasis on devotional singing and dancing known as Sankirtana to achieve a communion characterised by heightened transcendental religious state of mind.

Gouriya Vaishnavism have remarkable influence on the lives of Meitei community in Manipur. It has also. A few generations ago, many devout Vaishnavite have been vegetarian. Although fish is a staple food in Manipur. But most of the meiteis and bamons which is a word derived from Brahmins, eat on fish as a form of meat and in many household still today meats are not allowed to be cooked inside the kitchen. It is mandatory for every adult members of the household to take bath every morning and women offer a plate of flower and water and incense to the sun god in the tulsi plant in the front courtyard. In many aspects like art and culture as well, there has been tremendous influence as well. Caste system is unknown in Manipur society before the advent of Brahmanical ideology. Naorem Sanajaoba (1988) in his seminal work Manipur: Past and Present, noted that a significant feature of Manipuri society is that caste discrimination was unknown to the Meitei society. But with the arrival of brahmins the concept of gotra seeped into the social fabric of Meitei society.

5. THE BRAHMANISM AND ITS ETHOS CONCERNING WOMEN:

Brahmanical influence became crucial in the state formation process in the 15th century when Brahmins from Bengal immigrated in Manipur in a considerable number. Subsequently, Vaishnavism became a popular religion in Manipur and this was followed by assimilation of the Brahmins into the Meitei society. They also became priests and preceptors. Subsequently the ecclesiastical authority moved into the hands of the Brahmins. The Brahmins associated with the ritual services in the palace were settled in Kangla, while others mostly settled in the fertile northern plains along with the Meiteis. Almost every village had a Brahmin family authorized for priestly functions. (Thokchom, 2011) However, ancestor worship and some other practices of the ancient Meitei religion never lost their significance. Therefore, the worship of Umang Lais or the Sylvan deities continued along with the practice of Vaishnavism, and it still continues at present. (Singh, 1963)

With the coming of Brahmins their ideals and ethos too came along. There are three main salient pillars of Brahmanical social order: maintenance of caste purity, lineage purity and family purity. Brahmanism can be defined as a holistic socio-religious and political ideology with its system of perception, arrangement and classification of society guided by Brahmanical ethics. Brahminism under certain circumstances requires the control of women's reproductive capacity to construct and consolidate its envisaged social and moral order. Brahmanism conceptualizes women as 'the other', the tool and a body to be regulated essential for the legitimization and sustenance of a caste-based society. For a society based on caste purity it can be achieved only by a close guarding of the sexuality of womenfolk especially of the women of higher caste. (Chakravarti, 1993)

There are two main hypotheses concerning women in Brahmanism as propounded in Dharmashastra and Manusmriti. The first is that women by nature are fickle, cunning, untrustworthy and sexually uncontrolled. Second assumption is that women's sexuality needs to be controlled if the society as Brahmanism envisioned had to maintain purity of caste, lineage and family. The regulatory regime of control over women's body was systematically constructed by the Brahmanical ideology. This regime is carried out by the fundamental categorisation of women as mothers and non-mothers. (Ray, 1999) This classification was based on their reproductive capabilities. Thus, a mother becomes the primary normative category among others. Woman as wife or daughter formed the secondary normative category. They have the potential of procreation, which is the primary biological function for a woman, and is yet to be realized. As a wife and daughter, therefore, a woman held an ambiguous kin position. She was regarded as sexually dangerous, which led to an emphasis on the wife's fidelity and the daughter's chastity. According to Brahmanism, a woman was defined by her reproductive abilities. A woman who was not (or could not be) a mother was by definition a 'deviant'. This category included the widows, the woman ascetics, spinsters and the Vesyas (commercial sex workers), women whose potential for procreation is either absent or not legitimate.

Nancy Bonvillian (1998) argues that in India and China, ideological constructs supporting male dominance were intensified during historical periods of consolidation of state power. She asserts that the 'systematic codification of Hindu laws' in the post-Vedic period was responsible for giving 'official sanction to strengthened patriarchal rights' and the decline in woman's status. Nur Yalman (1963) in an influential ethnographic study points out that even today there is an important relationship between female purity and purity of caste. Whenever the caste system has proliferated there has been a parallel development of institutions concerned with the control of female sexuality. He continues that in India, where purity is the principal idiom of status differentiation, there is a major preoccupation with the maintenance of female chastity. For the purity of the caste is directly dependant on the purity of its womenfolk. The male members of

the caste are in large measure dependent for their status rating on the purity of their women – primarily on that of their sisters and daughters whom they give in marriage, and secondarily on that of the women they take in as wives. Hence, there is a rigorous control of female sexuality. (Chakravarti, 1993).

6. CONCLUSION

Manipuri mind and women did not experience acute gender discrimination unlike in many other social systems. Therefore, although the Brahmanical regime of regulation and control of women's sexuality began to apply in the daily lives of Meitei society women enjoyed many aspects of economic freedom. Yet, the notion of pollution and purity in the lives of women become more pronounced. For example, every married women is expected to take bath every morning otherwise she is not to cook in the kitchen. And women's menstruation was also termed as 'mangba' literally meaning 'polluted.' And at the same time, women's sexuality becomes more confined and regulated. Therefore, in Meitei society, a woman who has eloped but whose marriage didn't materialised was once considered as a deviant. In many aspects of women's lives there were tremendous changes which we still see today. Though one notices that with the advent of modernity and Information Technology revolution, Meitei society is becoming more liberal yet there are many aspects of women's life which still are trapped in the Brahmanical ethos.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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