

Society of Manipur Through the Historical Paradigm

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Abstract: In this paper, I propose to examine the history and evolution of the society of Manipur in the past through the historical pattern. Manipuri society over the centuries has been subject to changes under which the people have had to adjust themselves to the new environment. The concept of society is dynamic. Manipuri society does not follow the classification of traditional Indian society. They follow a system of social division where the society is divided between the Meiteis, Brahmans, Pangals or the Muslims and the Lois. The early Manipuri society consisted of seven clans or *yek-salais* and they were merged into the Meitei community (major community). Over course of time, many people get influxes in Manipur from various corners of the world. With the coming of such people, a new period of the social history of Manipur has emerged. History also reveals to us that Manipur had relations with Burma and the rest of India as far as immigration is concerned. History credits King Ngophamba (426-518) A.D., with the organization of society and the basis of clan assignments of the newcomers. From the fifteenth century onwards, the immigrants did not lose their identity even though they became part and parcel of the Meitei society.

Keywords: Society, People, Influx, Manipur, Past.

INTRODUCTION

Family is the most significant social unit. At the moment, at least in the context of India, it continues to play a significant role in society. It was made up of a father, a mother and the unmarried children they had together. Regarding inheritance and division, it was discovered that most individuals adhere to the 'Dayabhaga School of Hindu Law' which recognizes heirs or heiresses as tenants-in-common when they receive property [1].

The *Panna* system served as the cornerstone of Manipuri society until the introduction of Hindu ideals of social stratification during the reign of Manipuri monarch Garibniwaz. When gotra, jati and sapinda were introduced to the Meiteis, *Panna* became the most closely guarded institution among them (sapinda is a term used in the context of cousin marriages in Hindu society) [2]. Manipur's society was divided into four *Pannas*: Meiteis, Brahmans, Pangals or Muslims and Lois. Other helot races found in the community are the Phunganai, Panna Khutmei, Tangkhul, Kei and Loi. The 'Hidakphanba' are those who attend to the hooka while the 'Potsangba' were watchmen. Tangkhul frequently served the king as a gardener and Kei community frequently pounded rice for Raja's household [3]. Because of how they were born, people in the *Pannas* were divided into distinct grades. While

some clans were forbidden from providing water to others, high class clans were permitted to serve all clans aside from the Brahmans as chefs. Several are among the top *Sageis* or surnames in Manipur. High *Sageis* contributed to Sri Govindaji's service by collecting water and offering it to the god [4]. In the Loisang, the next higher clans served as cooks in the palace [5].

There were seven *yek-salais* in Manipuri society. It refers to a clan, which by extension, refers to a tribe. It possesses the traits of a sibling (clan) [6]. Most of them belong to one or other of the seven clans. The clans were: Ningthoujas, Angoms, Khumans, Moirangs, Luwangs, Sarang Leishangthems and Khaba-Nganbas. Among these clans, Ningthoujas and Angoms trace descent from the Sun and the Moon respectively. Each of the seven clans had its separate usual place of abode. The Manipuri Society is patrilineal and patriarchal in nature [7].

In Manipuri society, 'piba' was a crucial idea. The piba was the chief of Manipur's siblings and he represents each sibling at social and religious gatherings. According to certain authors, pibaship was never associated with surnames but rather with clans or siblings. However, this idea holds for both surnames and siblings [8]. The word 'piba' denotes a king or Ningthou. His significant role was to worship

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Sanamahi, the tutelary deity of the Meiteis. Instead of any of the girls with lower statuses, he must wed a female with a higher status [9]. Numerous tedious laws that bind the Meiteis do not apply to piba descendants [10]. 'Leikaisangiaroi' used the second and fourth sons of a man as labourers whose job was to construct homes and acquire building supplies. The third son's sons were enlisted in the military. Phunganai, Kei, Lois and others are mandated to ponder the significance of menial tasks. The arrangement was quite popular with the populace and it is still brought up when carefully adhered religious and social duties are involved [11].

Slavery was a component of Manipur's former society even among the kings and nobles. It was intimately tied to the Phunganai institution, a fantastic narrative of the Manipur slaves. This was a status rather than a stigma. The word 'nai' refers to a royal servant. Following the Meitei code, the monarch was entitled to three of a man's sons. The first one must participate in hunting and combat with the king's troop, while the second one must carry out the king's lallup (ten days of compulsory labour to the king within forty days). The third son served as the king's personal attendant or domestic helper. They were delivered to the princess's bridegroom together with their dowry. As payment for their services, the king might give them away or mortgage them to the nobles [12].

There were 1200 or 1500 slaves owned by the Raja. In times of extreme need, a man has occasionally sold himself and his family either temporarily or permanently. In the past, conflicts between kingdoms and neighbours were common. Manipur frequently engaged in conflicts with Samjok or Burma. The majority of the women taken prisoner during these battles became the queen's maidservants or the wives of noble families. They were occasionally made concubines by the captor or the prince. They were given kind treatment and advanced to the rank of Rajamata or chief queen [13]. Till the start of British paramountcy, Manipur had a recognized system of slavery. The British put a stop to it through legislation [14].

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Manipuri society was segmented into Kshatriyas, Brahmans, Ganaka, Kayastha, etc. Hindu ceremonies and rites were once carried out by the Brahmans. In Manipur, they introduced *gotras*. Manipur's inhabitants identified with Kshatriyas. After going through several procedures of an initiatory character, members of the lower class known as Lois can also become Kshatriyas [15]. The Rajkumars and the Visnu-Priyas made up the entirety of the seven *yek-salais* that made up the Kshatriyas [16].

The descendants of Manipur kings are known as the Rajakumar or Maharajakumar. They are given a special place in Manipuri society's social order. No Rajakumar may wed someone from his class [17]. The

Kayasthas of Northern India, who were formerly categorized as Sudras did not assimilate into society and worked as writers in the past. However, they lack *yek* and *salai* [18]. The Meiteis did not even consider the Meheter or Hari worthy enough to serve them since they were outside of these groups. Except for scavenging, they were not allowed to enter towns or villages [19].

Village Organization

There was overall harmony and collaboration in the social life of Manipur. Every hamlet has a unique organization. 'Gopal Hanjaba' and 'Gopal Hidang' are the two senior guys that make up the institution [20]. This organization has the authority to resolve disputes including divorce, child support, adultery and religious activities. It has the authority to fine and exclude residents of the community. It serves the same purpose as Gram Panchayat [21]. Every village has a singlup or wood club that oversees the welfare of the residents in addition to its organizational structure. Other family members must be present at the home of the sick or deceased person until the sradha is conducted. Each member must contribute a certain amount of money known as *singyen* to purchase the firewood needed to cremate the deceased. They are in charge of handling the issue of levelling the ground and building the pavilion for the event. The families and singlup members cover the costs associated with *samskaras*. They divide the construction related furniture evenly. For the sole goal of giving the poor people opportunity, singlup occasionally went so far as to provide them with food and clothing. Such features are a sign of a relatively complex social structure [22]. This particular arrangement of singlup is also found to be in usage among the Pangal groups even today.

Traditional Manipuri Marriage and Other Related Ceremonies

Manipur's institution of marriage was controlled by specific endogamic and exogamic laws. In the instance of Meitei-Pangal, the marriage takes place between two people of distinct *yeks* or *gotras*. In the current situation, the system kept going. Another sort of marriage existed as well known which dealt with contracting a marriage between two people who follow different Harams. It was originally against the law (descendants of persons coming from the West or the East). But, it was possible for a Mayang Ningthouja (Westerners who have integrated with the Nimthouja *salai*) to wed a Meitei Ningthouja (pure Ningthouja). Later, this type of marriage gained popularity and continued to expand. However, most of the time, inter-caste marriage was discouraged. Both the kings and the pibas have followed societal conventions [24].

In more recent times, the endogamous attitude has been somewhat loosened and softened. The Gandharba form of marriage in which a Brahman bridegroom marries a Kshatriya, Vaisya, or Sudra is

accepted by society [25]. The Manipuri institution of marriage, according to Captain E. W. Dun, does not adhere to all traditional Hindu ceremonies [26]. It is forbidden for a widower to marry his sister-in-law. In other words, a marriage needed to be exogamous for the *yek-salai* or *gotra* and *sapinda* ties and endogamous for caste to be accepted by society. Ostracism is a serious offence that can result in expulsion from the family and society. Those who wed inside the forbidden degrees of kinship fled to other Loi villages in Manipur to live in exile [27].

The forms of marriage that prevailed in Meitei society are the following:

- a. Marriage by engagement.
- b. Marriage by elopement.
- c. Marriage by capture.
- d. Keinya Katpa.
- e. Loukhatpa.
- f. Court marriage (few in number if necessary).

Manipuris believe that marriage is a sacrament. Due to its connection to numerous ceremonial specifics, marriage is a complicated process. Earlier, the girls had no say in marriage; instead, they were led by their guardian's wishes. The girls who could get married could be any age. While some formalities, such as Paothanaba, Waroipot and Heijingpot are regarded as preliminary, rites like the performance of homa and the exchange of pana (betel leaf) make up the bulk of the programme. In Manipuri culture, a comparable ceremony is conducted magnificently. Heijingpot is the name of it [28]. Central rites include ceremonies like Ciruk Numsang Hangba (to open a basket containing rice and other items), Lubak Cengbon Kaiba, Tin Lai Thaba and feasting at the bridegroom's party. The performance schedule is meticulously followed. Yathang Thaba assumes the persona of a marriage proposal made by the bridegroom's group [29].

The bridegroom's party arrives at the mandap where sankirtan is being done to begin the actual marriage ritual. The mother of the bride meets the husband at the gate. The procedure includes lighting three lamps and throwing dried rice over the bridegroom. The priest then recites the mantras and the couple's lineage all the way back to their great-grandparents. Then, similar to a modern Hindu wedding, sapta-pradaksina occurs in which the bride circles the groom seven times while being accompanied by the mridanga but after each round, the bride throws flowers onto the husband's head. Then they sat next to each other on a bench in the middle of the wedding hall as garlands were exchanged around their necks. The bride's and the bridegroom's chaders are attached. Then appropriate songs are sung. The bride and groom then go inside the kitchen, sit on the same mat and give each other kangsubi, or sweets made with black mustard. All those in attendance are given gifts of pana and cash [30].

After the ceremony, the bride and her dowry are transported to her new house in a litter in front of the group. Manipur uses a dolai or wooden bed as part of the wedding procession. The dowry is kept in a box and many baskets are kept locked. The bridegroom's party visits the bride's parent's home on the morning of the fifth day to open the Cheiruk Numsang and offer prayers to the family god. This is known as a subsidiary ceremony. Then, in the afternoon, the Lubak-Cembon-Kaiba ritual takes place during which the bride's party visits the groom's home and breaks open the boxes and rice baskets. On the sixth day, a feast is held in the bride's home. In the seventh or eighth month after the bride is conceived, a maibi performs the Kokthok Camthokpa rite [31]. However, the above marriage ceremony was followed by one particular ethnic of Manipur only. The Meities followed the above rules. Other ethnic groups like Meitei-Pangal, Haos (Christians) and others followed their traditions.

Games and Sports

Games and Sports are the mirrors of any society and it enhances the values of society. The Manipuris led a simple existence and they enjoyed the same kinds of sports and pastimes as people in other parts of India. Young children engaged in activities that were once a part of the Lai-Haraoba rite. Outdoor games popular among seniors include Khong Kangjei (hockey), Sagol-Kangjei (polo), Hiyang (boat race) and wrestling. Kang Sanaba, Thabal Chongba and other indoor games were also played by the people. Chess (Chatrang), another indoor game for the upper class, was a distinctive aspect of their social life [32].

Outdoor Games

a. Sagol-Kangjei:

A form of horse-mounted hockey which was originated in Mnaipur is today now known as polo in the whole world. It was created and evolved in Manipur before spreading to other regions and became revered as the state's game. One story claims that God Marjing created it. According to another legend, it originated during the time of Pakhangba. It is stated that notable historical figures from Manipur, such as Luwanguru Punsiba, King Khagemba and King Garibniwaz occasionally enhanced this game. In this game, players utilize a white ball produced from the 'Kangdrum' (bamboo root) and a staff manufactured from either a long shaft of bamboo or a well-seasoned cane. The stick's head is positioned at an acute angle to the shaft. In most games, both parties consisted of seven players. It is well liked even by common peasants [33]. While participating in the game, the Sagol-kangjei participant wore unique outfits. The outfits consist of a well-tucked-in, skimpy dhoti, two bulky woollen goitres that span from the ankle to the knees and a whip held in the left hand. The bridle of the pony is decorated with large pretentious cotton flowers. There are curving leather shields on either side of the saddle. Manipur has made a noteworthy contribution to polo. British officers have

made commendable remarks in their accounts about the

skill of the horses and the zeal of the players [34].



Image: <https://istampgallery.com/sagol-kangjei/>

b. Khong-Kangjei:

On rural wasteland, young boys and adults play foot hockey which is traditionally known as 'Khong-Kangjei' in Manipuri. There are nine players using bamboo sticks that are slightly bent in this game. The fact that a player never leaves their opponent is a distinctive feature of this game. A player may pick up

the ball and advance towards the goal by running with it. Crossing and hitting hooking sticks have no restrictions. The ground's ends extend for a good distance. The game allows for high flying hockey hits on the Kangdrum. A player who is hurt can be replaced at any time by another [35].



Image: <http://www.e-pao.net/epGallery.asp?id=15&src=Sports/IndigenousGames/MuknaKangjei>

c. Mukna Sanaba:

Another significant game played in Manipur is Mukna Sanaba (wrestling), in which a man's balance is upset by using his legs against his legs. It is practiced by lifting the opponent to a height of about three feet

and then falling down the opponent utilizing either the raised right or left leg. Every Manipuri youth harbours the sweet dream of becoming the Yatra or the best wrestler of a certain community [36].



Image: <https://www.manipuroonline.in/about/sports>

d. **Hiyang Tannaba:**

In September, Hiyang Tannaba or the boat race takes place usually. *Pannas* frequently engage in competition with one another. According to a document titled 'Hijan Hirao' (a thesis on the history and development of boat races), Luwang Guru Punsiba built the first boat after observing a mouse cut and let float the dried stem of a certain grass in the Luwangli River. At one end of the boat, he places the symbol of the sangai, a two-horned deer found in Manipur. In honour of his victory over the latter, monarch Thawan Thaba later in the 16th century decorated the front portion with the head of Khuman Kwakpa (a king of the Khuman clan). As a result, the boat's two ends bear carvings of a deer head (with golden horns) at the prow and a giant's head at the back [37].

The biggest festival among the Manipuri clans is the game Hiyang Tannaba. Typically, two equal-sized royal boats are lavishly decorated and painted in the colours red and yellow. These boats were utilized by two *Pannas* competitors. A Manipuri proverb that describes someone's ignorance is "Mi ashi hiyang phaobda udre", which translates to "this man is not seen even in Hiyang festival". The number of citizens and

regular people who flocked to see the game was legendary. Two participants who were chosen for the competition donned traditional Manipuri attire. They enter the chariot amid the beating of trumpets and drums and are referred to as hidongba (the principal rower). The seventy-nine rowers are led by the hidongba, who is holding a paddle in front of the boat. When the competition begins, each chief gives his rowers a strong right foot stamp to motivate them. The rowers dress in their uniforms. In the game, they demonstrate their talent. Dedicated spectators from a certain *Panna* were enlisted to encourage, direct and cheer on the crowd. The two teams head back to their camp after the first race. The second race starts after a while. The competition is deemed to be over after the conclusion of the second round. According to some observers, there was a lot of crowd noise which caused major fights. To foul the other competitor and bore them into the bank is the goal of the race. But we are not confident in this estimate. Without any conflict, the king can split the parties apart. Its purpose is to teach the Manipuris the skills of navigation. God is worshipped throughout this religious event by watching boat racing. This game is played very cautiously [38].



Image: <http://www.traditionalsports.org/traditional-sports/asia/hiyang-tannaba-manipur-india.html>

Indoor Games:

The popular indoor game of Manipuris is 'kang Shanaba'. People have started playing kang during the spring season (from Cheiraoba to Rath-Yatra). It is a game with two teams, each with seven players, usually with a mix of men and women. It is connected to Manipur origin's myth and the seasonal transition. In this game, a round object called a kang the creeper (Uri) seed is utilized. It has a thickness of about 1/4 inches and a diameter of about 1 1/2 inches. A player

must make a shot from a predetermined place. Lamtha is adopted if the parties successfully hit the target twice with the kang. The right hand's middle finger is used to push the disc around the ground's surface when playing the Lamtha game. An exchange of directions occurs at the halfway point of the play. The winning side is the one that can score more points by using two chakpheis (shooting from a standing position) and one lamtha [39].



Image: <https://nenow.in/north-east-news/manipur-tribal-forum-opposes-inclusion-meitei-st-list.html>

Other Sports:

Other sports include caber tossing, stone putting, high kicking, swordplay and spear play. The Meiteis are skilled users of the sword and spear as offensive and defensive tools in battle. A monarch or

nobility must be skilled in this kind of combat. Fighting displays using swords, spears, shields and plumes reveal a high level of ability [40].

CONCLUSION

In Manipur, there are numerous ethnic groups. Various racial groups arrived in Manipur at various times. Mongoloid (the Shan, the Burman and the Chinese), Proto-Nordic (the Aryans-Kassites and Mitannis), Dravidian and Austric were the first four to arrive in Manipur [41]. Each group contributed to Manipuri society. Silk, terraced farming, betel nut cultivation and brick making were all contributions of the Mongol people to this civilization. The raising of cattle, the use of iron instruments, the variety of corn and beverages, the patriarchal institution as well as the sense of organized feeling were all Proto-Nordic contributions (customs and mannerisms). The language and script were the most significant contributions.

In addition to music, the Dravidian culture also contributed to water transportation, ceramics and religious ideas such as goddess worship. The worship of totemistic rites, exorcism, taboos and magical power were all practices that originated with the Austrics. Since the beginning of the 15th century, the idea of intrinsic Indianness has been prevalent in their thinking. These periods saw the beginning of cultural fusion. The geographical and economic structure of the population allowed for accommodations for the Kuki, Nagas and Muslims who moved to Manipur. In the Manipuri community, the main group had to make a place for the minorities. In this society, there was no inferiority complex among the minority people. To protect the Meiteis racial purity, however, sexual relations and inter-race dining were outlawed. Their status and codes served as their guidelines. People who violated the codes were excommunicated. Since the land became the worshipper of Vishnu and accepted Vaishanism, the Meiteis society has been organized and stratified and throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, efforts had to be taken to maintain its rigidity. The Hindu notion of Varna has been accepted for ages. Due to this propensity, the Meitei notion of *yek-salai* which thrives alongside the Hindu concepts of caste and sapinda comes into being.

¹ Singh, L. Ibungohal (1963). *An Introduction to Manipur*. Imphal, Manipur Sahitya Parisad, 91-93.

² Bhogeshar Singh, O. (1967). *Loyna Sinlon*. Imphal, pp. 5-26.

³ Dun, E. W. (1992). *Gazetteer of Manipur*. Delhi, Manas Publication, 29.

⁴ Singh, L. Ibungohal (1963). *An Introduction to Manipur*. p. 16.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Chatterji, S. K. (1967), *Religious and Cultural Integration of India*. Imphal, Manipur, p. 46.

⁷ Jhalajit Sing, R.K. (1965). *A Short History of Manipur*. Imphal, O.K Store, p. 22.

⁸ Das, T. C. (1945), *The Purums*. C.U., pp. 120-125.

⁹ Hodson, T. C. (1981). *The Meitheids*. Delhi., B.R. Publishing Corporation, pp. 73-74.

¹⁰ Singh, L. Ibungohal (1963). *An Introduction to Manipur*. p. 16.

¹¹ Hodson, T. C. (1981). *The Meitheids*. pp. 84-85.

¹² Sanahal Singh, R. K. (1947). *Manipr Itihas*. pp. 21-22; L. Ibungohal Singh. (1963). *An Introduction to Manipur*. pp. 16-17.

¹³ Cheitharol Khumbaba, the list of captives are given in details during the reigns of Khagemba, Mungyamba, etc. There are many stories where the princes married their maidservants in the tradition of Moirang.

¹⁴ Sanahal Singh, R. K. (1947). *Manipr Itihas*. p. 22.

¹⁵ Hodson, T. C. (1981). *The Meitheids*. p. 84-85.

¹⁶ Allen, B. C. (1905-7). *Assam District Gazetteer*. Vol. IX, Part I I, Shillong, 57; J. Roy. (1973). *History of Manipur*, p. 173.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Atombapu Sharma, (1942). *Manipur Etahas*. Imphal, Manipur, p. 286.

¹⁹ Brown, R. (1975). *Statistical Account of Munnipore*, p. 2; R. K. Sanahal Singh (1947). *Manipr Itihas*. pp. 7-8.

²⁰ Singh, L. Ibungohal (1963). *An Introduction to Manipur*. pp. 19-21, Nandalal Sharma, 27n- 27ng.

²¹ Dun, E.W. (1992). *Gazetteer of Manipur*. pp. 67.

²² Ibid.

²³ Singh, L. Ibungohal (1963). *An Introduction to Manipur*. pp. 90-91.

²⁴ Sanahal Singh, R. K (1947). *Manipr Itihas*. p. 7; L. Ibungohal Singh (1963). *An Introduction to Manipur*. pp. 81-83; The Cheitharol Khumbaba contains many references to such crimes in its pages. We cannot individually describe them.

²⁵ Sanahal Singh, R. K (1947). *Manipr Itihas*. pp. 16 - 17.

²⁶ Dun, E. W. (1992). *Gazetteer of Manipur*. Section on Caste.

²⁷ Sanahal Singh, R. K (1947). *Manipr Itihas*. p. 7; L. Ibungohal Singh (1963). *An Introduction to Manipur*. pp. 81-83; The Cheitharol Khumbaba contains many references to such crimes in its pages. We cannot individually describe them.

²⁸ Ibid. 17-18.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Binodini Devi, M. K. (1964). *Art in Manipuri Life*. SAI. XC, Imphal, pp. 26-27.

³¹ Singh, L. Ibungohal (1963). *An Introduction to Manipur*. pp. 17-18.

³² The playing of chess by Pakasana, son of King Chandrakirti was the beginning of the quarrel among the sons of his. Ultimately it led to the war between Manipur and the British Government in 1891.

³³ Hodson, T. C. (1981). *The Meitheids*. pp. 49-54; E. W. Dun. (1992). *Gazetteer of Manipur*. pp. 22-23; B. G. Allen., p. 67.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Dun, E. W. (1992). *Gazetteer of Manipur*. pp. 24-25.

³⁶ Dun, E. W. (1992). *Gazetteer of Manipur*. pp. 23-24; H. Kulabidhu Singh. (1954). *Manipuri Dances*, Imphal, p. 8.

³⁷ Singh, Mutum Jhulon. *Vijaya Panchali*, pp. 54-55; Ch. Pisak Singh, *A Phase in Meithei Culture*. L.M.S. Law College Magazine. It is edited by M. Kirti Singh in 1965.

³⁸ Dun, E.W. (1992). *Gazetteer of Manipur*. pp. 24-25; Faubion Bowers, *The Dance in India*, 147; M. Kirti Singh, (1962). *Boat race in Manipur*, University Law College Magazine, Gauhati.

³⁹ Hodson, T. C. (1981). *The Meitheis*. p. 55; N. Mani Singh and H. Kulabidhu Singh. (1965). *Meiteigi Kang Sanaba amasung Kanglon*.

⁴⁰ Sarma, Nandalal. *Meitrabak*. XXXIV-XXXV; W. Yumjao Singh, *R.A.S.M.*, Bulletin No.1, Ch.III, pp. 24-25. It is interesting to note that Manipuri cavalry was very famous in these centuries. They were armed with a long spear and a kind of dart called Arambai in making cavalry charges. They are thrown in front and behind by the cavalry against the Burmese in wars.

⁴¹ R. M. Nath. (1948). *The Background of Assamese Culture*. Shillong, pp. 86-87.