

**RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES AMONG THE MEITEI IN
MANIPUR**

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ABSTRACT

***Purpose**–The study taken up in this research work is mainly the cultural aspect of Manipur with particular reference to Religious beliefs/practices of Meitei (Vaishnavite) community. To study culture of the Meitei it is not possible to enter into all aspects of Meitei life. It has been attempted to focus only on a few Religious beliefs/practices. The study also aims to explore people's perception regarding their religious beliefs and practices of the Meitei community and the role of religion in society.*

***Method**–The study is conducted at one Meitei Leikai in Imphal West district. These Leikai is Pishumthong Oinam Leikai (my own locality) .Leikai is a Manipuri term for locality. It denotes a particular geographical area inhabited by members of particular clan group. For instance, Oinam Leikai would mean the area settled mainly by members or families of the Oinam clan where Oinam is the family clan name and leikai the area. Pishumthong Oinam Leikais is situated in ward no 13 of Imphal Municipality of Manipur. But during the process of performing a ritual the researcher as a non-participant observer interviewed the participants with interview guides.*

***Main Results**–The religious beliefs and practices related with the various spheres of life of Meitei in Manipur will be discussed in this paper.*

Key words: religious, beliefs, practices, culture, rituals.

Introduction

The Meiteis of Manipur valley are generally the followers of Vaishnavism who universally believe in the Radha-Krishna cult of the Bengal School of Vaishnavism. The contents of the Manipuri Vaishnavism are the combination of the little tradition represented by the Meitei culture and great traditional elements of the Hindu Vaishnava culture.

SarojNaliniParatt(a Manipuri woman writer) herself wrote “ Whatever their origin, the Manipuri’s have evolved a distinct culture of their own, which bears little relationship to those of any of the groups from which they are claimed to have originated.

Development of Meitei Religion

There had been growth of a collective feeling (though this feeling was not shared by a considerable section of the ruling classes), that the assertion of the identity of the Meitei would not be complete without the removal of the cultural imperialism of Hinduism which had deeply penetrated into the collective psyche of the Meitei people was rejected.

Hinduism which began in Manipur as a doctrine of liberation with personal devotion to the Lord had been found to be oppressive and subverting to a large mass of Meitei people. The revivalist movement of Naoria Phullo, an eminent follower of Meitei cult religion since the 1930, and the spread of the “Apopka Marup” were fallout from this cultural oppression of Hinduism.

On the other side of the movement however, a considerable section of the ruling opinion was that Hinduism was a synthesizing element. Hence, in the religious and social affairs of the Meitei people at present, there is much division and bitterness and problems of assertion of identity is clogged by muddled perspectives which reflect the crisis in culture in the contemporary era.

According to Tylor “ Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society. Belief in a certain series of myths was neither obligatory as a part of true religion, nor was it supposed that by believing, a man acquired religious merit and conciliated the favour of the gods”. A religious belief rests on faith in revelations.

A brief account on Meitei Religious beliefs/practices

One may at the first encounter, be impressed by the Vaishnavite life of the people expressed in terms of performing arts like dances of different forms which are the medium of the aesthetic expressions of the Hindu Vaishnava culture and socio religious activities.

Every Vaishnavite Meitei family has a sacred religious place locally known as Tulsibong, where a basil plant is planted in an earthen mound, in its courtyard. This place is cleaned by a woman after purifying herself ritually by taking a bath. As a sign of ritual purity the Vaishnavite Meitei men, women and children wear Sandal wood locally known as Chandan on their nose and forehead after taking bath. It is also worth mentioning here that all Vaishnavite rituals officiated by a Brahman priest are performed at this sacred place. Moreover, this is the place where the head of the family performs morning and evening prayer. The Vaishnavite Meitei do not keep any idol of Hindu gods and goddesses inside their home though they believe in a number of them.

The life of a Vaishnavite Meitei is, to some extent, controlled by a complex of Hindu religious beliefs. It is also strongly believed that a person after death goes either to heaven or to hell according to the merit and demerit of the activities he/she has done in his/her life time.

Selection of Respondents

Respondents are selected on a non-probability purposive sampling basis. From Pishumthong Oinam Leikai I have selected 20 respondents (8 males and 12 females). I have interviewed more female because females more frequently participated in religious activities and gathering of detailed information were more through them. The sample covers between the age group (30-85) yrs. It also covers a wide variety of people from different walks of life.

Tools Employed

The first part of the schedule used in this study contains questions regarding the general background of the respondent about religions. The questions in the second part dealt to find information on people attitudes and awareness (view) towards religious beliefs/practices. Finally, the last part tries to investigate the impact and changes of religion on their community life, socio-economic and cultural life of the people. Then there is utilization of secondary sources of data collected from libraries organizations, journals and other sources.

The Present Trend-Religious beliefs/practices

The Meitei community is divided into seven exogamous clans namely, Mangang (Ningthouja), Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, Khaba-Nganba and Salai Leishangthem (Chinglei). Every clan again consists of a number of lineages locally known as “yumnaks” (Surname). Intermarriage of clan ‘Yek’ to another ‘Yek’ is allowed in the Meitei community. But it is strictly restricted marriage within clan (“Yek”).

Manipur is a land of festivals. These festivals were categorized as the festivals which are indigenous to the traditional Meitei culture and the festival which are their origin to Vaishnavism. These socio-religious festivals comprise dance and worship often with mass participation. The two most important festivals celebrated are as follows:-

(i) **Ningol Chakouba**:- It is observed in the second day of the first fortnight of the local month of Hiyangei (October-November) is observed as “Ningol Chakouba”, which literally means feast for married daughters and sisters and offer gifts to them.

(ii) **Lai –Haraoba**:- The annual appeasement of the “Umang-lais”(Sylvan deities) is known as “Lai-Haraoba”. It is socio-ritual festival celebrated annually or biannually for a period ranging from five to fifteen days by almost all the urban and rural area of Meitei, to re-enact the creation of the universe and living beings by gods.

People’s effect towards religious beliefs/practices

The religious taboos of the Vaishnavite Meitei are the reflections of their concept of purity and impurity. For instance, a bath brings a person from the impure to the pure status. So, a man has to take a bath before taking part in religious activity. A woman cannot cook without taking a bath because cooking itself is regarded as a sacred act.

A woman is in the phase of pollution during her menstrual period and the period of three month after child delivery. However, a purificatory rite by a Brahmin priest restore the normal conditions of the women, who is being considered polluted because of child birth. Death also results in pollution of the members of the lineage to which the deceased was a member. The members of the deceased observe certain dietary restrictions till the performance of Sharda ceremony like salt, chilly, mustard oil and fish.

Meitei strongly believes in oracles and divination. A “maibi” (priestess), who is believed to have the ability of predicting the future and telling the hidden causes of different misfortunes by virtue of her rapport with the supernatural, which is unattainable by ordinary persons, is consulted in

matters concerning the cause of serious illness, recurrent misfortunes, etc. The “maibi” tells not only the causes but also the remedial, ritual measures to be performed to overcome the difficulty. The belief in witchcraft and evil spirits is also widespread among the Meiteis. The popularly known female spirits are Hingchabi(witch) and helloi(fairy). The former is believed to take shelter inside the body of some women, who are not aware of the possession, which the latter is considered a wandering spirit. A “hingchabi”, it is believed, causes illness, bad-luck, mental affliction to the victim. When a man becomes insane it is believed that he is possessed by helloi. People generally take services of village shaman (maiba) to protect themselves from the infliction of harm by “Hingchabi” and “Helloi”. The treatment of such diseases is outside the scope of modern medicine. Such a belief is shared by the majority of the people.

Main findings

The religious beliefs related with the various spheres of life of Meiteis are given below. It is gathered through observation and information from people.

- 1. Family :-** “Sajibu Cheiraoba” is the new year of the Meiteis of Manipur. The Sajibu Cheiraoba is a traditional festival celebrated on the first day of Sajibu month (equivalent of April) every year .Cheiraoba festival is performed to protect the members of the family from the evil spirits which are causal agents of various illness and misfortunes.
- 2. Birth: -** The ritual ceremony of the birth of a child is called Swastipujah. On the morning of the sixth day after delivery, a ritual ceremony known locally Ipan Thaba (Swastipujah) is performed for the welfare of the new born baby.
- 3. Death: -** Death is strongly believed by the Vaishnavite Meiteis as the plan of the Lord Narayana, the creator of the universe. It is generally said that a person dies when the ration of rice kept for him/her by God Narayan is finished. They believed in the transmigration of soul. It is believed that a mendicant is free from the cycle of birth and death.
- 4. Education:** For the enhancement of our knowledge Goddess Saraswati is worshipped. Saraswati puja is done in an auspicious day in the month of January.
- 5. Health:** The rituals of the Leishangthem Lairembi , the clan mother in early Meitei Society is carried out at proper day between February and April. This ritual is fertility rituals in order to prepare the women for health, procreation and vitality.

6. Adolescence: A Meitei girl undergoes an initiation ceremony locally called laiming louba (lai=god, ming=name: louba+ to take: to take the name of God) as a mark of entering puberty. It is believed that the parents will go to the hell after their death if they fail to perform the ritual. It is normally performed when a girl is between 11 and 13 years of age.

A brief description of the practices performed with reference to the above beliefs are given below:

1. Family:- On the morning of the “Sajibu Cheiraoba” the god, Sanamahi and the goddess, Leimaren are worshipped by offering the first seasonal vegetables, rice grains, and seasonal flowers by the members of the family. Dishes are prepared from such offerings as vegetables, fish, etc. The prepared dishes are offered to the deity Iputhou Hanuhanba at a place, ritually cleaned at the gateway of the family. Then the members of the family dine together.

2. Birth: - Offering is made to a female diety, Petaikhondaibi. The offerings consists of uncooked rice, vegetable like arum(*Alocasia indica*), roasted loach, chilly and salt. At night the ritual ceremony of Swastipujah is performed. It is officiated by a Brahmin priest and executed by the father of the child as directed by the priest. Fruits, sweets, beetal, arecanuts, books, pen, fan made of palm leaf and dresses of the child are offered to Swasti Devi for the welfare and longevity of the child.

3. Death:- A special ritual, called locally as bhek piba is formed by a Brahmin priest in case the dying person wishes to become a mendicant in order to get salvation in life. Bhek piba in short, is an initiation rite of a person into monkhood. Grains of rice are offered in a bowl placed near the death person by the near and dear ones and dress him like a monk

4. Education: - Young girls and women purified themselves by taking bath on the day of Saraswati Puja. In the evening they offered fruits to the goddess and do puja to get good blessings in the time of education and enhancement of knowledge.

5. Health: - The rituals of the diety Leishangthem Lairembi at present at Singzamei area at Impal – is performed for about five days which were completely dominated by married women. During these days rice flour, rice-brew and rice pop corn are prepared by the women and offered to the deity. Organization of women’s races, tug of war etc. were the activities carried out as part of the celebrations.

6. Adolescence: - As Meitei culture sanctions, this ritual should be performed before a girl experiences her first period. A Brahmin priest initiates the rite uttering the words Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Hare Rama Hare Rama to the left ear of the girl. From that day the Brahmin priest has become the Guru of the girl and she has to pray him for the blessing on all the important occasion of her life offering something to him. The night previous to the day of the ritual the girl ought to take fast.

Questionnaire:-

1. Name.
2. Occupation.
3. Designation.
4. Marital Status.
5. Sex.
6. What is religion?
7. Do you believe in the existence of God?
8. How religion influences you?
9. Which God/Goddesses do you worship?
10. Do you feel going to temple is a waste of time?
11. How long do you pray every day?
12. Do you perform daily religious activities?
13. Do you feel that praying to God is necessary to bring peace of mind?
14. Do you believe in spirits and ghosts?
15. Do you think that there is need in modification of religious rites and ceremonies?
16. What are the changes and impact of religion on the people?

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