

Contesting Meitei religious identities: Contemporary situations of Manipuri Vaishnavism and Sanamahism revivalism.

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Abstract

The main purpose in the paper has been to present the religious scenario of Manipur, a state in turbulence today. There appears to be a religious ethnic conflict between Hindus of Manipur and Meitei revivalist, with a new 'Old' religious order i.e., Sanamahism but in the same ethnicity. Specifically, the position of Vaishnavism in contemporary Manipur is to be stressed upon as a focal concern here. The points to be covered are- Emergence, maturation and contemporary position of Vaishnavism in Manipur.

Key-Words: Revivalism, Sanamahism, Ethnicity, Vaishnavism.

MANIPUR: A land in far east of India

Manipur, one of the states of Indian union is located in the extreme northeastern region of India bordered with Myanmar in the east and the south, Nagaland in the north, Mizoram in the northwest and Assam in the west.

The major religious components of population are – (i) Hinduism : 41.39% (ii) Christianity : 41.29% (iii) Islam : 8.40% (iv) Other religions : 8.9% (including Sanamahism – aprox. 235,000) of the population (according to 2011 census). The majority group of Manipur is the Meitei community who live in the valley and whose population is enumerated as Hindus in the census. But Meitei's religious identity remains disputed. A popular belief referring Hindu mythology is that it was the land of Hindus since the Mahabharata period around 5000 years ago and associated with son Bhadrabahu and wife Chitrangada of Pandava hero Arjuna.

But pro-Meiteism people and writers contest the thesis and substitute it with mythological presentation about their origin started long back in 33A.D. since when Pakhangba, considered to be divine king, consolidated the populace into a religio-cultural group. (N. Sanajaoba, 1988)

EMERGENCE OF VAISHNAVISM IN MANIPUR

The beginning of Vaishnavism in Manipur can be traced back since the 15th century during the regime of King Kyamba (1467-1508 A.D.) who for the first time began the worship of Visnu idol which was presented to him by Choupha Khekhomba, the Shan King of Pong of Burma in 1474 A.D. The King also dedicated a temple made of brick for the purpose of propitiating the image of Visnu. The temple still exists and the place has been known as "Bishnupur" till today. The worship of Visnu introduced by King Kyamba was continued by his successors.

During the regime of King Khagemba, (1597-1652) also, the Visnu worship was reportedly prevalent to some scale. This can be proved by two important events, which took place during his time, one was the introduction of a new feature in 1635 and that was an addition of Visnu idol in a boat at the boat race festival connected with Sanamahism. From that year onwards a boat carrying a Visnu idol was kept apart. According to the traditional belief, the deity (Visnu) was established to witness the boat race as an annual religious event. The other remarkable event was that a copy of Shrimad Bhagavatam was brought from Tripura, which shows the influence of the Bhagavata Cult. During this time (page 245, unpublished doctoral thesis by Pravabati, 1987, "The history of rise and Growth of Hinduism in Manipur"). But it is also true that the king Khagemba was himself not initiated to Vaishnavism (ibid). However on the basis of the meager evidence cited here, it can be safely presumed that the concept of Visnu worship was very much there in the early 17th century A.D. Actually, no other important development was witnessed regarding the Visnu worship before the time of king Charairongba (1697-1709 A.D.), the father of Garibaniwaj (Pamheiba).

The second quarter of the 18th century proves to be a blooming period for the efflorescence of Vaishnavism in Manipur. With the accession of Garibaniwaj to the throne in 1709 A.D., the history of Manipur took a significant turn by the influence of Hindu currents. Garibaniwaj's form of Vaishnavism was at first Chaitanya's form of Vaishnavism, second Nimandi' and third form, referred to as Ramanandi cult', authenticated by a preceptor named Shantidas Gosai from Naramshimha Tilla of Sylhet district of Bengal. On the full moon day, October 1737 A.D. the king along with 300 persons were initiated with sacred thread. During his regime, Vaishnavism was declared as the state religion. Under the guidance of his guru Shantidas Gosai, King Garibaniwaj forcefully imposed Vaishnavism upon the people. He tried to replace the old Meitei traditional culture and religion with new Vaishnava way of lifestyle. Some of the important action programmes taken up by Garibaniwaj under the influence of Shantidas were- conversion of the seven Yeks/ Salais (equivalent of clan) into seven gotras of the Hindus, burning of the Meitei old texts called 'Puyas', forbidden of meat eating destroying the temples of Umang Lais (local gods), cremating the skeletons of the dead bodies of his

forefathers (kings, queens, princes, etc.) by digging out from their graves and ashes were immersed in the Chindwin River, local gods and goddesses were identified with Hindu gods; name of places, rivers, mountains were converted into Hindu names etc. From the time of Charairongba to Garibaniwaj, the Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism virtually acquired more popularity than any other school of Vaishnavism. It is true that for some time Garibaniwaj shifted his allegiance from Chaitnya sect to Ramannadi sect of Vaishnavism, but in practice he always stood for Chaitnya Vaishnavism at heart and soul. The immediated successors of Gazribniwaj did not pay any attention to religious reforms.

DEVELOPMENT AND MATURATION PERIOD

The development of Manipuri Vaishnavism and its maturation may be counted from the period of the notable Manipuri Vaishnava kings like Bhagyachandra, Gambhir singh, Chandrakirti upto Churachand Maharaj.

Gambhir Singh (1825-34A.D) was also a devoted Vaishnava king. It was during his regime that the deities of Lord Jaganath, Balabhadra and Subhadra were installed for the first time in Manipur. His capital was at Canchipur which was famous for its Govindajii Temple constructed by his predecessor Bhagyachandra.

It is also said that during the time of king Chandrakirti(Ningthempishak) (1834-1844, 1852-1886 A.D) many sanskrit texts were translated, local scholars were sent to Nabadwip to learn Vaishnava philosophy, Raas Dance was popularized and many Hindu festivals were introduced.

Again during the reign of Churachand Maharaj (1891-1941 A.D) many temples of Lord Krishna were installed in Nabadwip and Brindavan. For example Gopaljiu Mandirs at Nabadwip and Radhakund were constructed and he made the pavement of Radhakunda Parikrama Marg with big red stones as a service to these pilgrimages. During his time many Vaishnavite sholars like Atom Bapu Sharma had contributed a lot of Vaishnava literatures even to the extent to consolidate again the Aryan theory of the origin of Manipur and Meiteis. By that time the Hindu-Meiteis, barring the tribal groups of Kuki and Naga Christians, considered themselves as descendants of Aryans. They ceremonised the passage of rites and rituals in Sanskrit language as performed in the mainbody of Hinduism in mainland India. However, these Hindus used Bengali as a popular language and script general way.

THE FEATURES OF CONTEMPORARY VAISHNAVISM

Contemporary vaishnavism in Manipur is not without strains despite the fact that it is a way of life of the Meiteis of Imphal valley. Some features that reflect the reality about the position of Hindu-Vaishnavism in the region are given hereunder-

1. Challenge from ascendant Meitei revivalism

A tremendous literature on Sanamahi history and religion is being produced. Books on Meitei identity, Sanamahism, Meitei philosophy, do's and don'ts to be followed by Sanamahi followers, Meitei Nationalism etc. are in the circulation. The seminars and conferences are held at possible opportunity to have promotive discourses pertaining to Sanamahism. Themes and topics of these

conferences are mostly on history, prehistorical status of Meitei society, Meitei past glories and the conflict arising out of Hindu connection etc. The revivalists are persuading academicians for producing, publishing revivalist literatures with a view to get legitimacy of their theses. Thus they are trying to build a platform for restoring strong Sanamahi religious order. They are erecting Sanamahi religious organization and institution for spreading and conveying the massage of Sanmahism. Such organization like MEELAL, MNF(Meitei National Front), UFO(Universal Friendship Organisation), etc. mobilize the people to participate in the revivalist movement in relation to Vaishnavism and more they recruit youths and train them to develop discipline and to lead a Meitei traditional way of life without Hindu-Vaishnavite ideology.

2. Vaishnavism is in resistance and conflict with Sanamahism

When Vaishnavism statedly came to the land at the time of king Garibaniwaj(1730's), face no significant resistance but now since the mid of 20th century both orders pose difficult conflict for each other. On one hand self preserving Vaishnavism is trying hard to remain intact with its identity and on the other Sanamahism is trying hard to recapture the statedly held old position.

3. Ideological embarrassment

Vaishnavism in Manipur is being embarrassed ideologically by the Sanamahi revivalism through later's activism of missionary zealous agents. Sanamahi revivalist movement is trying hard to defeat Manipuri Vaishnavism morally. The Sanamahists come forward with one ideology of Meitei religion and its revival. They say that Sanamahism is their indigenous, natural religion while Vaishnavism is an alien religious order for them. Through literary production and diffusion of Pro-Meitei literature through seminars and other distribution of propaganda materials, revivalist are working hard to highlight it that Vaishnavism in Manipur is creating lot of controversies regarding Meitei's cultural identity. The result is that the audience of Sanamahists enlarging with more and active participation in their project of fighting with the Vaishnavites.

4. Adjusting with Meitei Sanamahism.

The contemporary Vaishnavism in Manipur is found to be the synthesis of two faiths, viz, Sanamahism and Vaishnavism established earlier, which has taken place gradually over a fairly long period of time (S.N. Parratt, page 179, 1980) in this regard S.N. Parratt places the view of S.K. Chatterjee about the fusion of two religious traditions: "Manipur Hinduism gradually became a synthesis of the old Meitei religion with its god and goddess and myths, its own legends and traditions, its social customs and usages and its priests and ceremonials, and of Brahminical Hinduism with its special worship of Radha and Krishna" (1950; 288).

5. Vaishnavism reels under cultural dilemma

However, in Meitei population, residing mostly in the valley, a smaller part thereof joins Meitei revivalism but it stresses upon the common Meitei community, still Hindu. It stresses for archaic direction of cultural movement and the Vaishnavite hindu Meiteis are either indifferent or reject that silently, few times openly since they feel comfortable with modern currents and directions rather

than archaism of dress, script, rituals, mythology and preference for king as political authority system. The majority vaishnavites are tolerating patiently the archaic enthusiasts entered in Meitei revivalism.

Yet the vaishnavite hindus in toto are not smooth with modernity as such as coming to Manipur land in the form of westernization. But they choose to opt for modernity with some pains and disequilibrium. They are fighting in both directions, ie, first against Meitei archaism and second against modernity as a religious populace.

6. Loosing portion of enhanced religiosity

A provoked religiosity is also visible in contemporary Manipuri vaishnavism as a worldwide process of enhanced religiosity. More participation of youth generation in religious activities has been on rise but not at par with Sanamahist movement. The scale and frequency of people's visits to the temples are higher. Famous temples in the Imphal valley like Shri Govindajii Temple, ISKCON temple, Arambam Nityananda, Nrshimha Mandir at Kakwa, Shri vijay Govinda, Mahavalli Temple of Hunuman, Kalimai temple, Ramji Prabhu, etc. have now a larger number of daily visitors. Almost everyday there are feasting/utshav(in local term) sponsored by any family or organization for many purposes like charity, religious ceremony, festivals, etc. Performing religious ceremonies at home for god and goddess like Sani puja, Gopal-Sahasranam, etc, in order to bring wealth and prosperity, to solve family problems are very commonly seen. For the grand observation of religious festivals, construction of big temples, gathering and conferences, the Vaishnavite Meitei followers also do donations. But Vaishnavism is at a net loss of incremental change in the followership.

7. Self preservation of Vaishnavism

The contemporary Manipuri vaishnavism is responding two ways viz. (I) Retreat and (II) Self energizing, to resurging Sanamahist revivalism. Our first proposition i.e, of retreat in the vaishnavite faith can be supported by the fact that 1) vaishnavism has not been backed by king or state power in secular democracy now. So it is unsupported. 2) the youth participation in vaishnavite sponsored activities is declining. 3) The middle age audience is in confusion given the pro Meiteist propaganda results in growing indifference and non action from religious actors.

Secondly, simultaneously, the self energizing exercises are visible where ISKCON, the major engine of vaishnavism is organizing seminars, erecting new buildings (temples), publication of religious faith books and journals, ceremonising rituals collectively and harder preaching with stressing on Hinduism and collecting money for activities, besides special training in religious rituals and religious discourses.

These responses are conflicting each other and a crossroad is in evidence where both roads touch the same point of departures.

CONCLUSION

This impressionistic study based on researcher's close observation of Manipur and Meitei people facilitates to conclude the following-

- 1) Manipuri Vaishnavism is one specialized form of mainland Hindu bhakti 'dhara' (current) which entered in 18th century with authority support and became an independent order with larger covering.
- 2) Vaishnavism today is not without challenge from within. The Meitei revivalism has been posing a challenge which asserts to return back to archaic religious order, with the nativists insistence.
- 3) By and large Vaishnavite Meitei population feel comfortable with their current religious order i.e., Vaishnavite Hinduism but it receives little shocks from Meitei revivalist challenges.
- 4) Manipuri Vaishnavism is somewhat embarrassed ideologically vis-à-vis nativist religious ideology that leave vaishnavite hindus a little bit in cultural dilemma, dilemma in the sense that it has to pay some regard to Sanamahism and to adjust with modern ways and being a part of hindu populace of India.
- 5) Vaishnavite Hindus show some marginal religious adjustment that produces an interface between Sanamahism and Hindu Vaishnavism.



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