

Origin of Caste System in Manipur: A Brief Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Before Manipur was merged into the Union of India on October 15, 1949, the state was a princely state having a long history of its own covering about two thousand years of existence as an independent kingdom. This kingdom did not follow Hinduism to its full swing till King Garibniwas (1707-48 A.D.) became the king of Manipur. He enforced the people to profess Hinduism against their wishes since there was no authority to pay heed to their emotional and passionate appeals and protests against the king. Later kings of Manipur especially King Bhagyachandra (1763-98 A.D.) popularized among the people of Manipur. The main theme of this paper is to trace how did some elements of caste system which were practiced in the mainland India was slowly creep into and accepted by the Manipuri society especially during the times of King Garibniwas and King Bhagyachandra.

Keywords: Caste, Clan, Loi, Meitei, Salai and Yek.

I. Introduction:

Caste as a system of social relations has been a central point in Hindu society for several centuries. (Sharma, 1987:87) It is one of the basic institutions, which is very deep rooted in Hindu society. Caste system as an institution of Hindu society is used to describe ranked groups within rigid systems of social stratification based on heredity that determines its members' prestige, occupation, place of residence and social relationships. (Berreman, 1972:333) Under this system, the entire Hindu community was divided into four groups, namely (1) Brahmins, (2) Kshatriyas, (3) Vaishyas and (4) Shudras. The first three caste enjoyed privileges which were denied to the Shudras, and at the same time, they treated the Shudras as outcaste section of the Hindu society. According to Bougle, a pioneer in the study caste system of India, "this system is based on the pervasive enactment of three principles. First, there is hereditary specialization of occupation. Second, the principle of hierarchy orders these groups in relation to the Brahmin who is indisputably the apex of the system (however much secular power the Kshatriya warriors might in the political sphere, they always came second in ritual rank to the Brahmins). Finally, the principle of repulsion ensured that each group maintained its distance from other groups within this hierarchy through restrictions on commensality, inter-marriage and other limits to social transactions". (Sharma, 2002:1)

Here, it must be noted that regarding the origin of caste system in Manipur, till date, there is no available literature which specifically dealt with caste system or related issue except two or three lines

mentioned in some books mostly written in Manipuri. The present paper is mainly to highlight how did elements of caste system which were practiced in mainland India was slowly entered, and later on, it was accepted by the Manipuri society during the native rule in Manipur.

II. Objectives of the present Paper:

The main objectives of the present paper are:

1. To trace the origin of caste elements in the Manipuri society.
2. To find out how the people of Manipur slowly professed into Hinduism.
3. To point out any contradictory features of caste system as it was prevailed in mainland India and as it was practiced in Manipur.

III. Methodology of the present Paper:

The methodology of the present paper is explorative, descriptive and analytical in nature. Secondary sources mainly books are the main materials for writing the present paper. Even though the present study is mainly based on secondary sources, it tries to make the presentation of the paper more empirical in its analysis. In this paper, the words Manipuri and Meitei are interchangeably used whenever the necessary arises and carry the same meaning.

IV. Results and Discussion:

1. Emergence of Caste System in Manipur:

There is no element of caste system in Manipur before Hinduism was professed by the Manipuri. It is very difficult to ascertain when the caste Hindus came to Manipur. It is true that many Brahmins and non-Brahmins came to Manipur. (Singh, 1987:31) But they were not strong enough to remain as caste Hindus as most of them came to Manipur as fugitives and seeking place for their refuge. At the same time, many Muhamedans/Muslims also came and settled in Manipur. Later on, they became part and parcel of Manipuri society and known as Meitei *Pangals*. There is no history that these minorities suffered in any way from the hands of the majority Meitei community. As a matter of fact, instead of being oppressed they were made Manipuri and given status and place amongst the Manipuri society. (Singh, 1987:17) They were made an integral part of Manipur society, though not part of the *salai*¹ (clan in Manipuri) structure. (Brara, 1988:12) However, one Brahmin named Gonok Maniram married a girl named Ngoubi of Haochongpan. He was allotted the family like Arambam, (it may be stated that the family like Arambam became at a later period as a non-Brahmin family). (Singh, 1986:576) Now these communities have been socialized into the Meitei fold with certain variations of cultural and religious tones. The Meitei attitude towards other communities is accommodative and receptive and hence cosmopolitanism. (Indrakumar, 2002:36)

Regarding accommodative and cosmopolitan nature of the Manipuri (or Meitei) social identity, since the earlier period, is characterized by moderation, liberalism and fraternity. It is not agreeable to social extremity due to disregard of human dignity and integrity. To a Meitei, there is no question of discrimination against Muslims, Hill peoples, and low-born people on the ground of creed, sex, race and caste. He can inter-dine with all these people. He can go hand in hand and mix them without any bias and prejudice. Love, friendship and fraternity prevailed in the society. (Indrakumar, 2002:99-100) The Meitei society is free from restricting intermarriage with other tribes and communities except inter-clan (of the same clan) marriage. (Indrakumar, 2002:37) So, marriage alliance between the Meiteis and the hill tribes

of Manipur was very usual in ancient times. (Singh, 1980:15) Thus, there was no clear-cut division of the hill people and plain people in Manipur as the ancient books tell us a mixing of them alike. Some of the people, who came with Poireiton, (a contemporary of Meidingu Pakhangba, the first recognized King of Manipur who reigned in the first and second centuries A.D.), became hill tribes. (Singh, 1980:18-19) However, it seems that there were certain features of superiority and inferiority complex in the Manipuri society. For example, *Khongjomnubi Nongaron*, an ancient book of the Meiteis which was written around the beginning of the 14th century A.D., says that six girls of *Luwang Salai* went to a lake to buy fish and they met six youth of *Haokhu*-tribe. They became lovers and stayed a night with them without the permission of their parents and brothers. When they returned home, their parents and brothers turned them out of their homes for their improper conduct and for spending a night with the six *Haokhu* youths who were considered as inferior in class. There is no reference of the question of purity and pollution and untouchability in relation to different communities settled in Manipur. (Ashokumar, 1992:106-108; Narendra, 1995:27-32 and Singh, 1987:54) However, we cannot trace any feature of caste distinction in the ancient Manipuri society.

In the medieval period, also, strict rules of caste were not traceable in the history texts of the Meiteis. It is also interesting to note that among the so-called Brahmins, there was low caste Hindus (pretending to be a Brahmin). For example, during the reign of King Kyamba (1476-1508 A.D.), one doom (fisherman), a sudra by caste named Patnigiri Gagaram came from Tripura and married a girl named Maimubi from Sekta. He was allotted the family title Sijagurumayum. Again during the reign of King Paikhomba (1666-97 A.D.), one dhobi (washerman), a sudra by caste named Motiram came from Nondagram and was absorbed in the family of Lailatpa Gurumayum who settled at Brahmapur. And many so-called Brahmins married many *Loi*², the outcaste section of Meitei Hindus and tribal girls (who were also regarded as outcaste groups by the Meitei Hindus). (*Bamon Meihoubaron Puya*) The division of the Meitei society into 7 strict *yek* or *salai* (clan) also blocked the penetration of Hinduism in the minds of the people. So when the caste Hindus came to Manipur before or at the beginning of the 14th century, they had no courage to introduce themselves as caste Hindus. It is for this reason that many Brahmins have been remaining as non-Brahmin viz., Kshetrimayum, Arambam etc. (Singh, 1987:16-17)

According to L. Iboongohal Singh (1987), a renowned scholar of Manipur, the caste Hindus were recognised in Manipur during the reign of King Kyamba (1467-1508 A.D.) in the 15th century. During his reign, there was an epoch-making influence of Hinduism in Manipuri society after the construction of the temple of Lord Vishnu at Lamadong (present Bishenpur). However, Hinduism in any form was not accepted by the people as a whole. But it was professed by the then Meitei Kings and his royal followers. But the situation came into a dramatic change during the reign of King Pamheiba (later known as Garibaniwaz who reigned from 1707 – 48 A.D.). During his reign, a Brahmin named Shantidas Goswami with his two disciples named Bhagwandas and Narayandas came to Manipur in 1717 (January/February) from Sylhet. (Chinglen, 2005:55) The main objective of his coming into Manipur was to change the Meiteis into Kshatriya caste. (Singh, 2005:54) With his skillful semantic encyclopedic knowledge, wisdom and etiquette, he won over the heart of the King. He became the Guru of the King and pressured the King to change the Meitei religion by converting the Meiteis to Ramanandi cult. However, people did not like to convert to the new cult, except a few courtiers and the king himself who had earlier converted through initiation. (Indrakumar, 2002:76) Then Garibaniwaz decided to spread Ramanandi Vaisnavism on a vast scale in Manipur. (Singh, 1980:128) There was use of force and imposition upon the subjects. The order of the King became the law of the land. People had to be obeyed

such order against their will and conscience since there was no authority to pay heed to their emotional and passionate appeals and protests. They could not demonstrate any individual or collective strength of wisdom as a mark of rightful demand. (Indrakumar, 2002:76) He punished his subjects by burning their religious books which were written in the archaic Meitei manuscripts and prohibition singing songs in the vernacular etc. and ordering them to sing songs in Bengali with curse. (Singh, 1987:32) In 1726 (May/June), all *Umang Lais* (Forest gods) of Manipur were collected under his order and buried at the foot of *Heibong Shidaba* (pipal tree) of Mahaballi forest. (Singh, 1969:37) All the seven *yeks/salais* had also been converted into Hindu gotras. (Indrakumar, 2002:83) During his reign, he prohibited rearing of pig in the Meitei household, and those who defied the order were strictly penalized. (Singh, 1969:35) Those who defied the new Ramanandi Vaisnavism by discarding Meitei religion were outcaste and sent them to *Loi* villages. (Hodson, 1989:9-10) Thus, the religious changes introduced by Garibniwaz were the occasion of wholesale deportations to *Loi* villages. Through such measures of Garibniwaz under the influence of Shantidas Goswami, Ramanandi Vaisnavism became the official religion of the State. (Hodson, 1989:95) All the Meiteis were forced to consider themselves as Kshatriyas. (Singh and Singh, 1966:126-27) The Hinduisation policy of King Garibniwaz was, further, consolidated during the reign of King Bhagyachandra (1763- 1798 A.D.). Propagation of Gouriya Vaisnavism, installation of the images of Govindajee in different parts of the Kingdom in the year 1776 and introduction of Ras Leela etc. were the important religious features of this period. And, it had brought a complete transformation in social and cultural life of the people of Manipur. Thus, the Hindu customs and religious practices were popularized and accepted in Manipur. He also sent many people who committed crimes like cow-eating etc. to *Loi* villages. Such acts of the Hinduised Meitei Kings, Hinduism became very popular in Manipur in those days, and those who defied Hinduism were treated as outcaste section *Lois* and sent them to *Loi* villages. (Singh, 1969:37) Thus, the elements of caste slowly entered into the Meitei society and consolidated in later period.

The Manipuri society in those days was distinctly divided into Kshatriyas, Brahmins and *Lois*. The Brahmins used to perform the Hindu rites and rituals. The majority of the Meiteis considered themselves to be Kshatriyas. The *Lois* was the outcaste section of the Meitei society. They were entitled to be considered as Kshatriyas after undergoing some ceremonies of an initiatory nature of purification process. (Singh, 1980:30) The first step to be taken up for purification to upgrade and admit to the rank of Meitei Hindus was to abandon the consumption of food and drink which was the proscribed to good Hindus; and then, after a period of probation, the next process of purification was to obtain the permission of the King to assume the sacred thread known as *Lugun* in Manipuri. After such purification the *Loi* people were allowed inter-dining and intermarriage with the Hinduised Meiteis. (Singh, 2013:12) Interestingly, Dun (1981) in his book *Gazetteer of Manipur* says “a strange custom prevails in Manipur by which a man of low caste marrying a women of high caste is adopted into her tribe, and the children are considered as full-blooded members of their mother caste. Cases of this kind are often seen where a man in favour with the King makes his way rapidly to the top of the tree.” For example, Cheksa Chakrapani who showed tremendous merit in the war against Burma, although he was low *sagei* (clan in Manipuri) by birth, married Tamphasana, King Garibniwaz’s daughter. (Singh, 1987:78) The Kshatriyas consisted of the people of seven *salais*, the Rajkumars, and the *Vishnupriyas*, a section of immigrants who later claimed as indigenous Manipuri. (Singh, 1980:88) They are assigned a privileged position in the hierarchy of Manipuri society. The custom with regard to royal marriages, was by the way, the exact

converse of that which prevails in Europe, as the Raja, far from being prohibited from marrying a commoner, is not allowed to marry a Rajkumari.(Allen,2002:57)

The Manipuri society, thus, became a Hinduised society. Caste system as though its division of four castes into Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra was not actually given their place in Manipuri society. However its substance 'untouchability' or 'pollution' or 'uneatability' remained intact. In the beginning, the process of traditionalisation with stratification was somewhat moderate in the sense that the Brahmin took Meitei (including the *Lois*) and tribal women to settle in Manipuri society. Again, even a Naga (a tribal community) can become a Kshatriya and adopt for a family life as a Meitei. It was only then the process of stratification became complicated when the Brahmins took advantage of Royal patronage to impose their cult through enforcement.(Indrakumar, 2002:75) Then, the inter-dining between a Manipuri and a Muslim was a religious offence. The Manipuri was converted to Islamic religion. Cohabitation between a male Manipuri and a tribal woman was also an offence in which the former was punished with degradation to the latter's caste.(Singh,1986:83-84) Inter-marriage between a Brahmin bridegroom and other castes was allowed provided the marriage was performed in the Gandharava form of marriage. But such marriage between a Brahmin bride and bridegroom of other castes was strictly prohibited. If done they were made outcastes.(Singh,1987:20) The Brahmins would not, as a rule, take water drawn by members of any other castes, though an exception was made in favour of a certain family of well-born Kshatriyas who acted as water-carriers for the King. (Allen,2002:62) The *Bamons* (Brahmins in Manipuri) were prohibited to eat food or meal cooked and served by the Meiteis. Even if the meal was prepared by their Chelas or Diksha women (those initiated women with rituals), the *Bamons* did not eat. This taboo was being extended to the *Bamon* family when a *Bamon* boy took in a love marriage a Meitei girl. The family did not eat cooked by the girl.(Indrakumar,2002:100)

The existence of such discriminatory treatments showed that there were some elements of caste system in Manipuri society after Hinduism became the religion of the Meiteis. At the same time, in the Manipuri society in those days, there was room for low castes becoming Meitei Hindus again if they strictly followed Meitei Hindus' way of life by abandoning their earlier social traditions and religion. So many low caste *Lois* became Meitei Hindus by professing Hinduism with royal permission.

2. Finding of the Present Paper:

The main findings of the present paper are:

- (1) There is no element of caste system in Manipur before Hinduism was professed by the Manipuris.
- (2) Many Brahmins came to Manipur, but they were not strong enough to remain as caste Hindus. Later, they became part and parcel of the existing Manipuri society by marrying local girls, and they were allotted suitable surnames accordingly by the king.
- (3) Among the immigrants coming to Manipur, some low caste Hindu origin were given title of Brahmins by the Meitei Kings.
- (4) Many immigrant Brahmins married many *Lois*, the outcaste section of the Manipuri society and tribal girls.
- (5) The king of Manipur, after Manipur embraced Hinduism, was the sole authority to make low caste origin person to a high caste Meitei Kshatriya if the person was a man of calibre or

excellent in warfare or the king was pleased. Even a Brahmin and his all family members could be out casted by the King.

- (6) Unlike the Hindu social order of strict observance of four caste systems, the Manipuri society in those days was loosely divided into Meitei Kshatriyas, Brahmin and *Lois*.

V. Conclusion:

From the above discussion, it is cleared that there was no element of caste system in Manipur before Hinduism was professed wholeheartedly by the Manipuri. The seed of spreading Hinduism was laid down by King Kyamba by installing Vishnu Temple at Lamadong (present Bishenpur). It was strengthened by King Garibniwaz by imposing heavy penalties to those who defied Hinduism by sending them to *Loi* villages by branding them as outcaste section of the Manipuri society. Finally, it was popularized by King Bhagyachandra by installing the images of Gobindajee in different parts of the State, introducing Ras Leela etc. He also sent many people who committed crimes like cow-eating etc. to *Loi* villages. Then, the Manipuri society during those days was distinctly divided into Brahmins, Meitei Kshatriyas and *Lois*. The Brahmins used to perform the Hindu rites and rituals. The majority of the Meiteis considered themselves to be Kshatriyas. The *Lois* were the outcaste section of the Manipuri society. Thus, the elements of caste slowly entered into the Manipuri society during this period i.e. King Kyamba to King Bhagyachandra, and consolidated in later period.

Endnotes:

Note 1. Generally *Salai/ yek* is something like clan, the members of which regard themselves as being descended from a common ancestor.

Note 2. The *Lois* were socially outcaste section whose social position was considered as lower in the Manipuri society.

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