

A Brief Mythology on the Origin of Meitei in Manipur

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Abstract

The Meiteis of Manipur are dominantly inhabited in the valley region known as the Imphal valley which is surrounded by ranges of hills. Manipur is a state of Indian subcontinent which is bounded in the east and south by Myanmar (Burma), in the north by the state of Nagaland, Assam (Cachar) in the west and Mizoram in the south-west. The origin of the Meitei have been elaborated in many Meitei Puyas or sacred religious texts such as *Leithak Leikharon*, *Leishemlol*, *Wakoklon Hilel Salai Amailon Puya*, *Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Amailon Puya*, *Sanamahi Laikan*, *Pakhangba Phambal*, *Panthoipee Khongkul* etc. Moreover, *Ningthourol Sheireng* (1967) written by eminent Meitei scholar, O. Bhogeshwar which is described as a classic par excellence by N. Sanajaoba (1991: 26), *Langlol* (1924) edited by Maichou W. Madhav Ram Singh etc. also deal with the theory of creation of Meitei.

Keyword: Meitei, Manipur, Puyas, Tengbanba Mapu

Introduction

The myth of origins of the Meiteis begins with the creation of the universe. It describes how the impulse to create the Universe originates in the mind of the Supreme 'Lord of the Universe', known as *Tengbanba Mapu*. The ancient religion sees the '*Tengbanba Mapu*' as the source of everything and the soul in all beings. He is the source and end of all beings. He is the source of all manifestations and creations, and everything returns to him. The *Leithak Leikhalon Puya* describes him as omnipresent, embracing all as a boundless envelop, free of the cycles of death and decadence, transcendental of the world yet immanent in everything, the principle of life, and the emanation of various deities from him is the beginning of creation. To continue the process of creation, various deities are formed, one of the most important being the Lord, later known as *Sanamahi*, to whom the Supreme Lord assigns the responsibility of building the universe. As a result, Lord *Sanamahi* is also known as 'Asiba' (one who has been assigned the responsibility of creation). According to one version, Lord *Sanamahi* is the son of the Supreme Lord, *Tengbanba Mapu*, and his spouse *Leimarel Sidabi* (Supreme divine mother), both of whom were created by the Supreme Lord himself.

According to this story, the divine marriage had two further sons besides Lord *Sanamahi*, the eldest son, also known as Atingkok Sidaba: Atiya Sidaba and Konjil Tingthokpa. The Supreme Lord, *Tengbanba Mapu* asks Atingkok Sidaba to demolish Atiya Sidaba and construct the sky and earth, naming Atingkok as Asiba because he is the one assigned the job. *Tengbanba Mapu* instructed Atingkok to first create the levels of heavens and celestial bodies, after which he began to create earth out of water. However, the youngest son, Konjil Tingthokpa, repeatedly demolished the creation, causing Atingkok to get

enraged. As a result, *Tengbangba Mapu* created a Goddess named Nongthangleima to prevent his youngest son from interfering with the creation of the Universe. While the Goddess diverts Konjil Tingthokpa's attention, Atingkok completes the creation of the earth with the help of four deities he made to guard it. When *Tengbanba Mapu* examined the ground formed by Atingkok, he saw a dry plain and chose to begin playing out the events of life. As per his instructions, Atingkok began to level the soil and hills to make it suitable for habitation, accompanied by nine deities (Laibunghous) and seven divine females (lainurahs or nymphs) made from his own body. Kanglei becomes flawless while the dry soil is being flattened, hence the name Kangleipung.

Following the formation of each of the earth's basic elements, *Tengbangba Mapu* gave Atingkok the order to disperse his unbridled power. Thus, Atingkok spoke the word "HungShet," burst into flames, and submerged himself in all layers of the sky and the ground. Atingkok, the eldest son of *Tengbangba Mapu*, became known as *Sanamahi* (Sanna meaning spread or exist everywhere and endless; Mahi= his signifying his boundless supernatural ability) as a result of the way he spread everywhere. Atingkok gained the title Mahirel (biggest power) because of his supreme and unparalleled power.

Tengbanba Mapu then set up a test to see how capable his sons were. He gave them seven orders to circle the cosmos, and he said that the first to arrive would be crowned king. While Konjil Tingthokpa, the youngest son, walked around the throne seven times, his mother informed him that it was identical to the trek his elder brothers had embarked on, *Sanamahi* and Atiya Sidaba set off on their voyage. *Tengbangba Mapu*, the throne of the Supreme Lord, is compared to the entire universe in this passage. Thus, the youngest son succeeded his father as King *Pakhangba* (from *pa* meaning father and *khangba* meaning he who knows the father). Also returned were the two boys who had gone. *Sanamahi* considered destroying his own creation, Earth, after being enraged upon witnessing *Pakhangba* ascend to the throne. *Sanamahi* received consolation from *Tengbangba Mapu* and *Leimarel Sidabi*. After *Tengbangba Mapu* revealed to him that *Sanamahi* was the Supreme Lord himself, he stated that *Sanamahi* would rule over all other gods, be the Lord of heaven and earth, and rule over every family when human habitation began. He said, "I myself am you, and you are me, there is no greater God than you." Give the humans a hug in the early hours of the night and unfold them in the morning. Every life cycle event is planned by you. I pray that the one who worships you finds me contentment. You are my soul, my oldest son. *Leimarel Sidabi*, commonly known as the Supreme Mother, also pledged to remain by his side and look after him. *Tengbangba Mapu*, the Supreme Lord, asked his second son Atiya Sidaba to join him in heaven and his youngest son *Pakhangba* to rule over all human eras.

Tengbangba Mapu begged *Sanamahi* to make humans in order to commence the human inhabitation, and then to start playing the Taibang Kumhei (festivals of life). *Sanamahi* created six different kinds of creatures, and the Supreme Lord gave each of these animals a soul to bring them to life. But he was not content with these creatures, so he set them all free. Seeing his own reflection, he gave *Sanamahi* the order to create humanity. *Sanamahi* created humanity in the likeness of the Supreme Lord and presented them to him as a result. Now feeling happy, *Tengbangba Mapu* breathed life into the human and brought him to consciousness. The Lord let humans into the earth to start their colonization. According to the directive of the Almighty, *Pakhangba* assumed the role of the land's ruler, *Sanamahi* assumed the role of the king in each household, and *Leimarel Sidabi* remained in each household to care for her son, *Sanamahi*. The Supreme Lord remained in heaven along with Atiya Sidaba, his second son.

Another version holds that the *Tengbangba Mapu*, also known as the Lord of the Universe, formed two primordial creatures from his own body to serve as the Supreme Parents of the entire planet and to

encourage future procreation. *Leimarel Sidabi* (Divine Mother) and *Salailael Sidaba* (Divine Father) were created from his left and right, respectively. This account states that *Tengbangba Mapu* took on the form of Lord *Sanamahi*, who was discovered at the home of the holy couple *Salailael Sidaba* and *Leimarel Sidabi* as a three-day-old infant resting within an earthen pot filled with water (Singh, L.B. 1991:29; Singh, M.N. 2015:27-28). The child was named *Sanamahi* because of his hue, which was discovered to be like pure gold (*Sana Ahingba*) while he was submerged in liquid water within an earthen pot (Singh, M.N. 2015:28). In other words, this interpretation clarifies *Sanamahi* as the divine couple's adopted son. Interestingly, this version does not mention a third son and instead presents Lord *Pakhangba*, the youngest son of *Tengbangba Mapu* and *Leimarel Sidabi* in the previous version, as the biological son of *Salailael Sidaba* and *Leimarel Sidabi*.

Furthermore, according to this version, *Tengbangba Mapu* took on the form of *Sanamahi* in order to assist *Salailael Sidaba*, the Divine Father, in creating the various living creatures that inhabit the planet. The earth, which was thought to be submerged, was raised by *Sanamahi*, also known as *Asiba*. He was also responsible for creating the nine orders of heaven, with humans emerging last among all his creations. In *Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Amailon Puya*, *Konsen Tulei Henba* or *Phuhingsana Pibarel* is described as the divine incarnation of *Tengbanaba Mapu*, adopted by *Salailael Sidaba* and *Leimarel Sidabi*. Singh, L.B. (1991a:29) clarifies that this is none other than the deity *Asiba* in *Leithak Leikhalon Puya*, who later becomes *Lainingthou Sanamahi*.

The rivalry between *Sanamahi*, the divine couple's adopted son, and *Pakhangba*, their real son, to inherit their father's throne, is a significant feature of the second interpretation. The competition is solely between the two sons because there isn't a third son, who is represented by *Atiya Sidaba* in the alternative interpretation. The elder son followed the rules of the competition by circumnavigating the cosmos seven times, whereas the younger son sat on the father's throne and experienced a comparable experience to circumnavigating the universe, as disclosed by the mother. These elements are shared by both versions of the myth. In this instance as well, the elder son was placated by the Supreme Parents by being made the presiding god in each Meitei home, while the younger son, known as *Pakhangba* (he who understands his father), became the King. "*Salailael Sidaba*" pledged to stay and defend *Sanamahi* in every household in order to appease him and demonstrate that he is just as important to him as his own son. In order to demonstrate to the next generation that *Sanamahi* was much more important to *Leimarel Sidabi* than her own son *Pakhangba*, she also made the decision to live with *Sanamahi* in every home (Singh, M. N. 2015: 85–86).

There were some intriguing similarities between the Puranic account about the fight between *Ganesha* and *Kartikeye* and the legendary story about the throne's ascension (Lokendra, A. 1991: 65). *Jhalajit, R. K.* (1985:48) concurs with this viewpoint. He claims that there are many similarities between this portion of the narrative and the *Shiva Purana's* story of *Ganesh* and *Kartikeye*. He goes on to say that in the race between his younger brother *Ganesha* and his older brother *Kartikeye*, the former actually completed a full circumnavigation of the globe, while *Ganesha*, acting on his mother's counsel, only completed a partial circumnavigation by circling his father's seat.

Significance of the mythology in the light of current religious practices

From the aforementioned perspectives, it can be concluded that the creation tale or myth exposes us to the major deities of traditional religion and explains their significance. It reveals that *Tengbanba Mapu*, the Supreme God revered by the Meiteis, is the beginning and the end of everything. The myth begins in

a state of emptiness and concludes at a stage at which everything in the cosmos is produced, with humans being the final and most significant element. By now, God had prepared the planet for human settlement, and the process of human evolution was about to begin. As in Khasis' conception of the Supreme Being, an abstract entity who manifests himself through his creatures, the Supreme Lord choose to remain in an abstract realm in both interpretations (Nongbri, T. 2011: 200/201). Man is not directly connected to the Supreme Lord of the Meiteis; rather, he is mediated through his creations.

This section of the myth explains why the general public does not think highly of *Tengbanba Mapu*, despite the fact that he is the Supreme Lord. In contrast to the other prominent traditional deities that remain in their own designated areas at every Meitei family to this day, the Supreme Lord does not require a place of devotion from his devotees, nor is he regularly worshipped by them. With a few exceptions that are also not without contradictions, literature on the pre-Vaishnava religious life of the Meiteis does not go into great detail regarding the Meiteis' everyday worship of this Lord at home.

The myth's other key component is that *Tengbangba Mapu* is the creator of all the significant traditional deities, which is how he is related to humans. *Salail el Sidaba* is referred to as the Divine Father in the second version of the myth, which was created by *Tengbangba Mapu*. According to some academics, this deity was among those worshipped in Meitei houses during the pre-Vaishnava era (Singh, L.B. 1991a:47). According to Kangjia Mangang (1993/2009: 91), *Salail el Sidaba* is said to reside at the Men Urep, the first built Meitei house pillar, which is situated on the right side of the east-facing home, in accordance with traditional religious beliefs.

Given that it was the first pillar to be built during the construction of a house, the Meitei Hindus still see this pillar as a highly significant space, despite the fact that there is not much evidence to back his theory. This pillar is also revered by many families because it is typically seen to be in charge of all that happens to them, both good and bad. A house's foundation pillar is still considered to be a very significant and serious event, and it is built using ceremonies performed by professionals on auspicious days. But these days, the pillar is revered as Jatra, which means the first, rather than as *Salail el Sidaba*. Since the space is in the same place, it's probable that the name was altered as a result of the effects of Vaishnava domination among the Meiteis.

This myth's veracity is attested to by the Meiteis' modern religious activity. Despite almost 200 years of Vaishnava rule over the Meiteis, *Leimarel Sidabi* is still highly respected as the Supreme Mother and is thought to be the most significant female divinity who presided over each Meitei home. Every Meitei Hindu house has a sacred area set aside for *Leimarel Sidabi*, which is often located next to Lord *Sanamahi*'s dwelling at the southwest corner. The place that is typically recognized as being dedicated to the Goddess now differs from the one that is typically portrayed in the literature on Meitei society or pre-Vaishnava religious life. These texts (Singh, L.B. 1991, Laishram Reena 2009, etc.) frequently spoke of the Goddess' sacred area close to the Meitei house's northern wall rather than close to *Sanamahi*'s residence in the southwest corner of the building. It is unclear if the alteration of *Leimarel Sidabi*'s sacred area is the result of Vaishnavism's aftereffects or is just the result of time passing and the dwellings becoming less roomy. However, the latter theory appears more likely. The custom of representing the Goddess with an earthen pot filled with water hasn't altered.

The Goddess is still symbolised in the specified area today by a water-filled clay pot. The pot has a lid and is referred to as Eshaipu in the community. The pot is stored on a wooden bench and is held up by a coil of fabric. The pot is exquisitely decorated with feminine attire and accessories that represent the

deity's gender. According to S.N. Parrat (2013:26), however, the water-filled earthen pot representing the Goddess emphasises the value of water, which is among the most important household components. While Meiteis typically depict the Goddess in this way, other families would rather leave the sacred area unoccupied and use nothing at all to represent the Goddess. Still, this very room is highly esteemed as the dwelling of the Goddess and is worshipped as a matter of course, just like the other families. This method of keeping the area vacant is frequently justified by the need to keep it tidy. The Meiteis believe that because the Goddess' garments are only traditionally changed once a year, the sanctuary is not adequately cleaned since the garments get dusty and unclean. These households think they could maintain the area cleaner if they leave it empty. Furthermore, they believe it is preferable to keep the area empty because there are a number of stringent guidelines for caring for the earthen pot, such as only adding water on designated days and worrying that it would dry up—yet another bad omen. Every Meitei home has a specific area set aside for *Leimarel Sidabi*, which is regularly worshipped by family members, whether or not there are objects there that symbolize the Goddess. In addition to being worshipped every day, the Goddess is also honored as the primary female deity on Cheiraoba, or New Year's Day, one of the most important festivals for the Meiteis.

Lord *Pakhangba* is another divinity with an intriguing position, in addition to the Supreme Mother. Every single version of the narrative tells us that Lord *Pakhangba* was the one who eventually took over as the kingdom's ruler. He is portrayed as the one with political authority, the one who ascended to the throne. He developed a stronger association with the Kings and the ruling clans as a result of his affiliation with the governing authority in the public sphere. As a matter of fact, it is thought that Lord *Pakhangba* took on the form of every significant monarch who ruled over the former kingdom at any given time period of the Chaks. As Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in Langba or Konna Chak; as Sendrenglolang in Khunung Chak; as Pakhangyoirel Tompokpa in Hayi Chak; as Tangjalilha Pakhangba in Haya Chak (Sairem, N.2002/2015:9). The final incarnation was that of the first recorded King of Manipur, who came to the throne at Kangla, the erstwhile capital of Manipur, in 33 A.D. The myth's depiction of Lord *Pakhangba* explains why the private domain also does not see much popularity for Lord *Pakhangba*. In contrast to *Leimarel Sidabi*, he is not revered in every Meitei home. As the Meiteis have a tradition of considering their great Kings as an incarnation of their Lord *Pakhangba*, he is instead frequently treated as a God of the Royal family or the Kings (Singh, E. Nilakanta, 1991:253). Lord *Pakhangba* is therefore more well-liked in the public sphere since he is more closely linked to government.

It is noteworthy to mention that in the Meitei philosophy, *Tengbangba Mapu*, the Supreme Lord of the Universe, is perceived as having two aspects, namely Lord *Pakhangba* and Lord *Sanamahi*. *Sanamahi* is the inner essence of all beings, and *Pakhangba* is the manifest aspect of the Supreme Lord, according to the Leithak Leikhalon Puya (Singh, L.B 1991a:54–56). In other words, *Sanamahi* is the inner essence, and *Pakhangba* is the externalisation of that inner essence. According to Sairem (2002) and 2015:12, *Sanamahi* is considered the Sun, while *Pakhangba* is the Moon. This implies that the latter can only shine through the rays of the former. *Sanamahi* is also considered the soul, while *Pakhangba* is the body. It is believed that the former is eternal, while the latter is not.

The story most intriguingly informs us that Lord *Sanamahi* is the most significant of *Tengbanba Mapu's* manifestations. He is unquestionably portrayed as the hero in both of the myths, either as *Salailel Sidaba's* adopted son or as *Tengbangba Mapu's* eldest son. Stated differently, Lord *Sanamahi* is the one tasked with the primary responsibility of creating the cosmos and all of its constituents, including

humans, regardless of whether he is the product of the divine union between *Tengbangba Mapu* and his divine consort or he is the adoptive son of *Salailel Sidaba* and *Leimarel Sidabi*. Once more, he is depicted in both versions as the most significant of all *TengbanbaMapu's* incarnations, who was fortunate enough to become the Lord of Private Domain or the presiding deity of every Meitei household. *Tengbangba Mapu* has identified him as himself, and man might approach the Supreme Lord by adoring him.

Thus, the legend explains why Lord *Sanamahi* is regarded as the most significant Meitei divinity, a belief that persists to this day. His status as the primary object of worship in each Meitei home logically adds to his prominence. This is most likely the cause of the idea that Lord *Sanamahi* is the most revered deity in the traditional religion, the most significant incarnation of the Almighty, and the head of every household. This god is still worshipped by Meitei Hindus in the southwest corner of their homes. In contrast to *Leimarel Sidabi*, this specific area is thought to be the deity's dwelling, and it has not undergone any alterations in order to preserve its holy status. Since ancient times, the most revered deity of the Meitei has had a special place in every one of their houses. The sacred space could not have been disrupted or displaced by the forces of Vaishnavism in the eighteenth century, nor by forces of modernity where people live in smaller places. This alone demonstrates the Meiteis' abiding reverence for their Lord *Sanamahi*. He continues to be seen as the one who sustains human life and directs them on the proper path.

These days, a wooden bench with a canopy over it is preserved facing north in the Lord's home. A set of male clothes represents the Lord, who can be found either directly on the throne or within a bamboo basket. Curiously, a second set of feminine clothes is preserved on the left side of the attires; these are thought to represent the insignia of his wife, *Santhong Apanbi*. After that, a second tiny fabric is wrapped around the two sets of clothes. The fact that both outfits are kept indicates that Lord *Sanamahi* resides with his wife. Nevertheless, neither the myth nor the devotees' knowledge of the Lord's bride pertain to her in any significant way. The majority of people are unaware of her existence, and it is unknown why she is so despised. The hallowed area is commonly referred to be *Sanamahi's* dwelling rather than the two of them together. While the representation of Lord *Sanamahi* in the above style is widely used, houses that choose to keep their *Leimarel Sidabi* holy space vacant also typically maintain cleanliness in their sacred space in a similar way. However, as it is thought to be the residence of their most revered deity, Lord *Sanamahi*, the southwest corner of every home is revered as the most sacred area there. In addition to being worshipped as the primary deity with *Leimarel Sidabi* on New Year's Day, the Meitei Hindus also worship the Lord every day at every residence under strict obligation. It's also noteworthy that it's the name of Lord *Sanamahi*, whose name is used to refer to traditional religion in modern times.

Furthermore, the tale deftly illustrates the *Tengbangba Mapu's* limitless power over everything, even while assigning the highest significance to *Sanamahi* as the creator. He alone possesses the ability to infuse souls into all the beings *Sanamahi* created. Put another way, the only force capable of bringing a being to life is the Supreme Lord. The Supreme Lord gives the body life; Lord *Sanamahi* merely produces the body.

CONCLUSION:

The significance of the Meiteis' traditional deities is thus justified by their genesis narrative. It conceptualizes all of these deities' functions and positions in their pre-Vaishnava belief system with

great detail. The myths' stories teach us how the universe and everything in it came into being and carefully assign each of these gods a specific role. The interesting thing about the exercise is that each of the storylines shows how each person has a distinct place in their belief system. *Leimarel Sidabi*, *Salailal Sidaba*, and Lord *Sanamahi* are portrayed as the home deities at the private realm, whereas Lord *Pakhangba* is portrayed as the King, the political authority, and the administrator who is connected to the public domain. The stories position Lord *Sanamahi* as the most significant of all these gods. The tale also explains why Lord *Sanamahi* is considered the most important Meitei god: either he is the Supreme Lord's incarnation or he is the path to approach the Supreme Lord. This explanation very deftly demonstrates that *Tengbangba Mapu* is supreme. Despite remaining in an intangible world, he maintains a connection to humanity through his creations, the most significant of which is Lord *Sanamahi*. Therefore, reexamining the narrative and its characters has aided in comprehending the core meaning of the significance attributed to these pre-Vaishnava deities, who constitute an essential component of Meitei Hindus' modern religious life.

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