



## **Religious and Social Structure in Meitei Society: A philosophical Inquiry**

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### **Abstract**

This paper proposes a philosophical inquiry interrelationship between dharma and social structure in Meitei society. It examines how the indigenous moral-cosmic order rooted in Sanamahism shaped social institutions such as kinship, clan organization, marriage practices, and gender roles and rituals obligations in the pre-Vaishnavite period. The study further analyzes the transformation of Meitei social structure following the introduction of Vaishnavism, highlighting processes of ethical reinterpretation, ritual standardization, and normative synthesis rather than complete cultural disruption.. By situating Meitei dharma with broader philosophical discourses on social order, duty and moral legitimacy, the paper demonstrates how functioned as both a regulative principle and a dynamic moral framework responsive to historical change. The paper argues that Meitei social structure represents a distinctive model of ethical continuity and adaptation, offering valuable insights for contemporary discussions on pluralism, cultural identity and indigenous philosophies of social unity.

**Keywords:** Meitei, Pre-Vaishnavism, Sanamahism, Religion, Clan, Marriage, Indigenous.

The Meitei society is the indigenous social and cultural community of the Manipur valley in Northeast India. Its historical roots extend to ancient times, with references found in oral traditions, myths and royal chronicles known as the Cheitharol Kumbaba. Historically, Meitei society developed as a monarchical and clan-based system, organized around seven major clans (salai) –Ningthouja, Angom, Khuman, Moirang, Luwang, Khaba-Nganba and Sarang- Leisangthem. These clans structured social identity, marriage rules, and political organization.

The traditional Meitei worldview was shaped by Sanamahi religion, an indigenous belief system which emphasized household deities, ancestor worship and harmony between human, nature and the cosmos. Dharma in Meitei society functioned as a moral and social principle guiding duties, customs and social order rather than a established legal system.

During the 15<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially during the reign of King Pamheiba (Garibniwaz), Vaishnavism- particularly the Radha-Krishna cult- was introduced and gradually integrated into Meitei life. This led to a syncretic culture where indigenous practices coexisted with Hindu philosophical ideas.

From a social perspective, Meitei society maintained a stratified yet flexible structure, with institutions such as the Lallup system (a form of compulsory public service), village councils, and customary laws regulating social conduct. Women played a significant role in economic and social life, most visibly through institutions like the Ima Keithal (Mother's market).

Hence, Meitei society represents a dynamic synthesis of indigenous traditions, religious transformations and philosophical values, maintaining continuity while adapting to historical, cultural and political changes.

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In Meitei society, the concept of dharma functions as an indigenous moral and social principle rooted in customary law, religious belief and collective life. Dharma in Meitei society operates through lived practices, norms and institutions that sustain social unity and harmony.

### **Dharma as Ethical Foundation of Meitei Social Life**

Within Meitei society, dharma is shown in way of life (Meitei yumjao, sagei system and community obligations). It provides ethical legitimacy to social roles, kinship relations and village organizations, ensuring order and continuity. Meitei dharma emphasizes duty toward family, clan and community rather than individuals rights. Social philosophy finds relevance here in understanding how moral responsibility precedes personal autonomy and promotes collective well-being of all the Meitei's.

### **Justice, Customary Law and Social Harmony**

Justice in Meitei society is based on customary norms (loishang, khullakpa and traditional institutions). Dharma operates as a moral regulator that seeks reconciliation, balance and harmony rather than disciplinary justice. An indigenous religious practice (Sanamahi tradition) regulates dharma with everyday life. Traditional ritual practice is not merely religious but ethical, reinforcing social discipline, respect for nature and ancestral values. Meitei dharma has evolved through historical interactions- Vaishnavism, colonial influence and modern state ruling structures. This adaptability demonstrates dharma as a living concept responding to social transformation. Conceptually, dharma in Meitei society functions as a socio-ethical principle that integrates custom, religion and moral duty. From a socio-philosophical standpoint, it provides a contextual yet universal model of social harmony, justice and collective responsibility.

It explores the historical evolution of Meitei dharma through interactions with Vaishnavism, colonial administration and modern socio-political transformations.

### **Meitei Social Structure**

The four primary elements of clan, lineage, family, and marriage all played a significant role in the distinctive development of the Meitei social system.

#### **Clan**

Clans have been an integral part of Meitei society since ancient era . As mentioned earlier, the number of clans is seven and it is again subdivided into number of yumnāks (lineages) and the numbers of yumnāks differ from clan to clan . As is mentioned by N. Sanajaoba, Ningthouja has 116 yumnāks, Luwang has 45 yumnāks, Khuman has 100, Angom has 52, Moirang has 55 and Khaba –nganba has 47 yumnāks (201- 206). The head of the certain clan is named as Piba. In theological and social organizational functions, Piba represents the respective genetic identical of the particular clan. To be a Piba only the eldest son of the head of a family would be permitted. According to tradition, Piba must marry a female of higher position rather than one of lesser status. Piba's primary role now is to worship TaibangpanbaMapu, the ultimate god of the universe, for the welfare of his clan.



Previously, Piba was linked to the integration of societal sectors. Piba is therefore a very important social institution in both traditional and contemporary Meitei societal structure (Hodson 73–74).

### **Lineage**

In Meitei tradition, the father is the head of the family, and the lineage comes from the paternal line. Piba is the head of every home. Living with her parents is not a right for a married daughter. She would, however, be entitled to live in the natal home in the event that she is divorced, widowed, or abandoned by her in-laws. A woman enjoys complete ownership rights over any property she has earned via her own efforts, gifts, or will once she reaches the adulthood. She is free to do whatever she likes with these, can offer those for gifting, use for the purpose of sale, or transfer to somebody by will. The belongings of their deceased father are inherited by sons and unmarried daughters. Furthermore, when they pass away, their brothers usually get the part of the estate that belongs to their single sisters. Meitei people continue to uphold their lineage and cultural traditions through paternal line.

Both clans and lineage played a significant role not only in the constitution of the Meitei society but also have contributed enormously in development of the religious world-view of the Meitei.

### **Family**

The joint family structure of the Meitei exhibits patriarchal features. A number of generations, including the father, mother, sons, daughters-in-law, grandkids, and occasionally even distant cousins, live together under one roof. A son's distinct family system may occasionally be developed prior to the passing of his parents. If it is necessary, parents might also permit the concept of a distinct family. Yet, there is no established norm dictating that a married son must live apart from his parents and start a family of his own. More authority and importance falls upon the eldest son or the eldest brother of the patriarch. They are in charge of preserving ancestors' customs, ceremonies, and family traditions. Typically, families members take turns taking care of one other's needs and engage in social, cultural, and religious activities. Every Meitei family worships the Imung Lāis (household deiteis), Umanglais (forest deiteis) and Apokpa (ancestors). The two most important household deities of the Meitei are Sanamahi and Leimaren Sidabi. In every Meitei household Sanamahi is kept in a reserved place of the South-western corner of the house for worshipping. Meitei people also worship their ancestors known as Salai Pokpa or Apokpa. For the Ningthouja clan, these are the names of the Salai Pokpa: Ngangningsing for the Moirangs, Nungao yumthangba for the Chengleis, Khamdingon for the Khabanganba, Pureiromba for the Angoms, and Poreiton for the Luwangs (Hodson 99–100).

### **Marriage**

Marriage serves as a significant institution and plays a vital and formative role in the constitution of the community groups and the sustenance and continuation of cohesive bond among the inter-connected members. Matrimonial relation primarily aspires to establish companionship and a sense of belonging between the couples providing the ground for drawing emotional support from each other. The wedding rituals and traditions of a community speak of its cultural and religious affiliations. In the Meitei marriage practices the procedure followed at present exhibits the legacy of



the ancient code of conduct. Brides are supposed to dress up in the traditional way by putting on the Meitei headwear and sarongs called phanek and kajenglei. Furthermore, the religious chants will be performed entirely in Meitei classical language. As per convention, the bride would be carried to the groom's house by four people on a palanquin, or occasionally she would ride an elephant. These days, a well-decorated band party accompanies the groom.

The Meiteis are an endogamous group but in respect of clan relationship they are exogamous. There are strict guidelines about yek exogamy among the seven intermarrying clans. Men and women from the same salai are not supposed to marry each other; this is known as nāmungba. They are not permitted to get married, even if they are members of separate sages within a salai. In Hodson's account we get the evidence of the fact as stated. He mentions that although endogamy was known in ancient times, the Meiteis became primarily exogamous eventually. Of late, the endogamous arrangement has been officially forbidden in Meitei society, but their hill tribe co-dwellers still frequently engage in it. (Hodson75).

The forms of marriage prevailing in Meitei society are the following: i) Marriage by engagement ii) Marriage by elopement iii) Marriage by capture iv) Keinya Katpa v) Loukhatpa vi) Court marriage (few in number if necessary).

**Engagement marriage:** As the foundation of a typical Meitei marriage, this type of marriage is the purest and finest kind of union considered by the community. This type of marriage takes place through negotiation. The approval of the members of the two different families is necessary for the marriage to take place.

**Elopement marriage:** This is a love-based partnership in which a man and woman meet and fall in love, but no wedding ceremony is required beforehand.

**Marriage by capture:** During the period when intertribal warfare ruled Manipur and its surroundings, the convention of marrying women and taking them as prisoners by their captors was a common way to acquire a spouse. Manipur's chronicles and other literary works provide extensive details of this practice. Once a girl is eloped the parents do not object to send their daughters to their husbands' house.

**Loukhatpa:** Loukhatpa is a very basic ceremony used to acknowledge an unmarried couple's union.

Below are the preliminaries that need to be followed before the arrangement of the marriage ceremony. These are:

- i) Hainaba or Haina Singnaba (Go between): a custom in which parents of the male are supposed to approach female member's parents with marriage proposals.
- ii) Yathang thanaba (official order for marriage): Following the successful completion of the early stages both the couples will look for the ideal dates in the Almanac, which often occur in the early spring.
- iii) Wairoipot Puba (marital final decision): This signifies the consent to the union. The bride's family pays the bride's residence a visit on this day for a little ceremony. Sweets, fruits, nuts, and betel leaves would be brought by the groom's family, along with gifts for the bride.



- iv) Heijing Kharai Puba (publicly known imminent marriage): The dates for the luhongba and heijingpot will be decided upon after consulting the family's astrologers. Though it is held on a somewhat larger scale, the heijingpot and waroipot are fairly comparable. The seven varieties of fruits found in the heijing-kharai are a representation of the future bond in between the duos. This is for the benefit of couples' prosperous journey.
- v) Either the day before the luhongba or the day of the heijingpot is when the groom is invited (bor-barton). Nowadays, day of the wedding is when it is done. In this custom, the groom is invited to the wedding by a younger boy, ideally the bride's nephew. The invitation card, flowers, and a designated betel nut will be carried by the lad and given to the groom. The invitation is accepted, and the groom responds with a gift, or dakshina. The luhongba numit is the most crucial and elaborate celebration in the middle of the Meitei weddings.

The marriage ceremony as it is currently done is a mixture of Hindu and non-Hindu elements, even if all the preliminaries of marriage, with or without rites, have been carried out in pre Meitei traditional form. The groom and the bride will be formally proclaimed husband and wife on the day of the luhongba, in the presence of their friends, family, and other members of the community. Meitei marriages are arranged following to the fundamental Hindu rituals these days. This procedure has started among the Meiteis since their conversion to Hinduism in the 18th century, although they have kept the majority of their pre-Hindu components intact. Kirtans are typically performed during wedding ceremonies, during which appropriate religious songs are chanted. However, Sankirtan was not sung during the wedding ritual in pre-Hindu times as it is today. Many alterations were made to the traditional Meitei Society following the 18th-century acceptance of Hinduism. Since in the distant past, there have been marriages that are forbidden, such as Yekthoknaba, Shairuk tinnaba, Pentinnaba, and Mungnaba. As mentioned above, many of the preliminary steps in marriage are ancient Meitei practices. However, the modern wedding ritual combines aspects of Hinduism and traditionalism in equal manner.

## Results

Social institutions in Meitei society thus reflect continuity with adaptation, where indigenous structures survived but were reinterpreted through Vaishnavite ideology. This synthesis highlights Meitei society's capacity for cultural resilience, adaptation and ethical reinterpretation. To conclude, Sanamahism (indigenous Meitei religion) and Meitei Vaishnavite (Meitei adopted religion) together have played a decisive role in shaping the cultural, religious and social life of the community. An indigenous belief system Sanamahism presented the foundational worldview of the Meiteis—rooted in nature worship, ancestor reverence, clan solidarity and ethical harmony with the cosmos. It structured social norms, rituals and collective identity, ensuring continuity of indigenous values and community cohesion. The introduction of Vaishnavism in Meitei society brought significant transformation. It reshaped religious practices, moral ideals and cultural expressions by integrating Bhakti philosophy, Sanskrit rituals and new forms of devotion centered on Vishnu and Krishna. Vaishnavism contributed to the refinement of literature, music, dance (such as Ras Leela) and social ethics while also connecting Meitei society to the boarder



Indic religious tradition. Rather than resulting in complete replacement, the interaction between Sanamahism and Vaishnavism led to a process of synthesis and negotiation. Many indigenous rituals, festivals and social customs continued alongside Vaishnavite practices, providing a unique religious pluralism with Meitei society. This coexistence reflects the adaptive capacity of the Meitei community, where tradition and transformation operate simultaneously. Thus, the combined influence of Sanamahism and Vaisnavism has shaped a distinct Meitei identity—one that balances indigenous roots with assimilated Vaishnavite ideals, preserving cultural continuity while allowing Philosophical and religious development.

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